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Stumbling blocks to building a non-racial society

We all need to be able to tolerate, embrace and cherish our diversity as South Africans

COMMENT



NICO KOOPMAN

AS WE celebrate our rich and varied cultural heritage on Sunday, we also should remind one another that we are not there yet. What could help us get there is non-racialism.

It would be fair to say that almost all South Africans share the vision of non-racialism and hunger for the day when it is fully materialised.

But how should we understand non-racialism within the context of heritage?

Non-racialism means we accept that there is only one human race with a rich diversity of classes, colours, cultures, creeds, confessions, genders, orientations and ability. Non-racialism means we respect and revere, acknowledge and accept, celebrate and enjoy every human being as a member of one human family.

Non-racialism implies we acknowledge that the term "race" was created by societies to distinguish and discriminate, and that the term does not reflect profound, inherent biological, intellectual, ethical, aesthetical and spiritual qualities and capacities.

Non-racialism means we do not measure one another's dignity, worth and value in terms of categories like colour. Instead, we tolerate, embrace and cherish our diversity as South Africans.

I must admit that on an existential level, I struggle to use the term "race", since, at heart, it seems to betray and threaten the notion that we are one human family.

The term, as such, has become contaminated. I prefer notions like colour, although they also have their limitations. In this sense, non-racialism would then mean that the term "race" would disappear from our vocabulary.

The quest to overcome racism should be accompanied by attempts to overcome evils like classism, sexism, discrimination in terms of orientation, ableism and xenophobia.



SUNNYSIDE Primary School pupils celebrate Heritage Day. We need to mobilise all our resources to build individuals and institutions that contribute to a united, non-racial, non-classist, non-sexist, democratic South Africa where dignity, healing, justice, freedom and equality for all reign supreme, says the writer. | African News Agency (ANA) archives

We need to overcome various stumbling blocks to materialise non-racialism in our personal, professional, and public lives.

Some people struggle to accept that excellent performance can be harmonised with a diversity of colours, classes, cultures, creeds, confessions, genders, orientations, ability, backgrounds, perspectives, ideas, opinions and knowledge.

They do not accept that to flourish in a diversified and complex world, we need a diversity of participants and perspectives. They do not accept that in such a world, excellence is not possible without a rich diversity; that excellence thrives where there is a rich diversity.

But what they fail to realise is that excellence and diversity are not in a duel. In fact, excellence and diversity sing a duet. Mathematicians teach us that as diversity increases on the y-axis of the graph, excellence increases on the x-axis. So, the curve of the graph runs in a north-east direction. The richer we are in the diversity of people and perspectives, the richer we are in excellence in a diverse and complex world.

Another stumbling block to non-racialism is the fact that in some quests to diversify such as selections for a team and appointments in positions, merit is not taken into account.

In these type of situations we are setting a person up for failure. Such incidences provide fuel for people who argue that diversity and excellence are mutually exclusive.

Such instances of diversifying without merit hamper the materialisation of non-racialism.

Using categories like race as a scapegoat is also a stumbling block to materialising non-racialism. In a few instances we attribute failure to a factor like race, while the failure might rather be attributed to a poor work ethic.

The ideal of non-racialism is also frustrated by attributing race to what might be a specific characteristic of a person. Unfriendly and unkind conduct of a person is sometimes viewed as racism, while that person might be unfriendly to persons of their same colour group as well.

A major stumbling block to non-racialism is the reality that although most of us agree that inequalities

developed along racial lines, we do not agree that we unavoidably need to employ racial categories to achieve higher levels of equilibrium in our society.

There is some merit in the argument that in using racial categories we re-racialise society; we cement racial discrimination; and we contaminate new generations with racial vocabulary and racial discrimination.

In the light of historic and current inequalities that run mostly along racial categories, we need to talk about employing such categories on an interim basis to bring about equilibrium in our society.

The hope is that racial categories will disappear when higher levels of equilibrium are achieved.

On the other hand, avoiding racial language amid the reality of socio-economic inequality and pain that run, not exclusively, but mainly along colour lines, might cement racism without the hope of true liberation and freedom.

Attempts by some institutions to use only socio-economic position as indicator for redress proved unsuccessful because many disadvantaged colour groups continue to be excluded.

A less recognisable stumbling block to non-racialism is the reality of, mostly subconscious, racist preferences, presuppositions and prejudices of superiority and inferiority.

On a conscious level, we can be against racism, but on a subconscious level, we might harbour discriminatory prejudices. The prejudices are often embodied in our institutional and societal structures, customs, practices, policies, identities and collective character. To be liberated from the prejudices and accompanying structures, we need to conscientise one another about them.

We need to organise and make plans to get rid of them. And we need to mobilise all our resources to build individuals and institutions that contribute to a united, non-racial, non-classist, non-sexist, democratic South Africa where dignity, healing, justice, freedom and equality for all reign supreme. Let's also keep this in mind when we celebrate our rich diversity on Heritage Day.

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