



# Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism (SUNY series, Philosophy and Race)

*Shannon Sullivan*

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*Argues for the necessity of a new ethos for middle-class white anti-racism.*

Building on her book *Revealing Whiteness*, Shannon Sullivan identifies a constellation of attitudes common among well-meaning white liberals that she sums up as “white middle-class goodness,” an orientation she critiques for being more concerned with establishing anti-racist bona fides than with confronting systematic racism and privilege. Sullivan untangles the complex relationships between class and race in contemporary white identity and outlines four ways this orientation is expressed, each serving to establish one’s lack of racism: the denigration of lower-class white people as responsible for ongoing white racism, the demonization of antebellum slaveholders, an emphasis on colorblindness—especially in the context of white childrearing—and the cultivation of attitudes of white guilt, shame, and betrayal. To move beyond these distancing strategies, Sullivan argues, white people need a new ethos that acknowledges and transforms their whiteness in the pursuit of racial justice rather than seeking a self-righteous distance from it.

“...Sullivan posits that it is white liberals’ own ‘anti-racism’ that actually perpetuates racism by shutting down frank or nuanced discussions not only of race, but of white privilege, which created racial problems and still sustains them ... In advising white liberals how to honestly live their whiteness, rather than disown it or pretend it doesn’t exist, Sullivan expertly deconstructs the familiar defenses ... Like W.E.B. DuBois and James Baldwin before her, Sullivan sees white domination as a spiritual problem that afflicts one group in particular but that touches us all.” — *Ms. Magazine*

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