

Essay

# White Christian Privilege in 2020: A Review Essay

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**Abstract:** This review essay examines Khyati Y. Joshi's new book, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America*. With attention to relevant historiography on religion and race, as well as reflection on contemporary white Christian nationalism, this review essay argues that Joshi's book is an important contribution to the field and will be particularly instructive in classrooms and other educational settings.

**Keywords:** white supremacy; white Christianity; religion and politics; white privilege; Christian privilege; religion and race

"Have not the Americans the Bible in their hands? Do they believe it? Surely they do not. See how they treat us in open violation of the Bible!!" (Walker 1830, p. 41) Written in 1829, *David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, is a powerful text. Walker, a free Black man living in Boston at the time, argued, with rage and passion, that white Christian Americans refused to recognize the humanity of the nation's Black population and that all Africans and African-descended peoples should work together for freedom and liberation. Nearly two-hundred years later, this particular line on how white Christian Americans treated Black Americans in violation of the Bible's core teachings feels beyond prescient. On Monday, 1 June 2020, after the forced dispersal of peaceful protestors using riot-control measures, the forty-fifth president of the United States walked across Lafayette Park to stand in front of St. John's Episcopal Church for a photo. The protestors were part of a sweeping national movement, crying "Black Lives Matter" and demanding racial justice. In the photo, President Donald J. Trump holds a Bible in his right hand above his shoulder, and afterwards, he and his all-white staff entourage immediately returned to the White House. A number of religious leaders in the Washington, D.C. area, including the bishop of the local Episcopal Diocese, denounced the president's actions (Forgey 2020; Montague 2020). The White House's aggressive response to peaceful protestors, the president's Bible photo, and the intense backlash all stem from the nation's painful and complicated history of Christianity and white supremacy.

Khyati Y. Joshi's *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* offers a productive historical framework for understanding the nation's contemporary challenges and struggles, as well as providing a guide for readers who want to see change. "By shining a light on Christian privilege and its entwinement with White privilege," Joshi argues in the introduction, "this book aims to equip readers with tools and ideas regarding how they can recognize it operating in our society and foster a more equitable environment for all" (Joshi 2020, p. 2). The categories of free, white, and Christian "have been superimposed to form mutually supporting advantages based on the co-construction of religion, race, and national origin" (Joshi 2020, p. 2). This results in the assumed and accepted normativity of Christianity in the United States, which enables structural Christian privilege and power. The book's focus, however, is not just Christian privilege. Joshi takes an intersectional approach with attention to white Christian supremacy because "White racial superiority and Christian religious superiority have augmented and magnified each other" (Joshi 2020, p. 5). As a result of these two forces, religious freedom in the United States is an "optical illusion," and Joshi's sharp analysis throughout the book provides the reader with 20/20 vision. To fully appreciate the timeliness of Joshi's

book and its significance in the field, I first focus on the book's historiographical and contemporary context. *White Christian Privilege* is part of a small wave of scholarship challenging the field and seeking a corrective in dominant narratives on religion in America.

## 1. Scholarship on Religion and Race in America

Historians of American religion have analyzed the physical and ideological violence in the "Christianizing of the American people," especially when it comes to white Americans, African Americans, and, increasingly, Native Americans (Butler 1992; Johnson 2004; Deloria 1992; Graber 2018). However, the field of American religious studies has been slow to include the religious lives and experiences of Asian Americans.<sup>1</sup> Joshi's book offers an overdue and vital correction to our understandings of American religion in general, and race and religion in particular.

"Religious studies has a race problem" (McTighe 2020, p. 299). This is how Laura McTighe began a recently published forum in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. It's a seemingly simple statement that identifies a long-standing, complex problem in the field. While Religious Studies has been slow to engage with Critical Race Theory and Ethnic Studies, those same disciplines are often weak in their interrogations of religion. Avoiding disciplinary silos, *White Christian Privilege* is shaped by academic theory from Ethnic Studies, Critical Race Theory, and Religious Studies, while still being incredibly accessible for undergraduate students and general readers. This is perhaps one of the book's greatest strengths: it synthesizes so much in history, cultural formation, and law into a book that is framed by theory but not beleaguered by academic jargon. Through this synthesis, it brings together a variety of important works across multiple disciplines, namely History, Religious Studies, and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies.

Race and power are intimately related in American culture and history because religion and race are co-constituting identities.<sup>2</sup> Scholars of American religion have questioned the meaning of religion and Christianity across history. Tracy Fessenden's 2007 book, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*, revealed how a stealth Protestantism has set the terms for normative American culture, democracy, and religion in the guise of secularism. As Richard Newton argued in a 2017 essay, "Americans are bound in a Christian nation," not because the population is solely Christian, but rather because the famous line "separation of church and state" is "not about whether but how the one may operate in the other" (Newton 2017, p. 222). Kathryn Gin Lum's recent work on the category of "heathen" in American history demonstrates how white, American Christians in the nineteenth century denied Native Hawai'ians' and Chinese immigrants' capacity for social progress due to their "pagan" or non-Christian identity (Lum 2018). Christianity established its power in the United States from the beginning of the nation's history. *White Christian Privilege* examines that historical past, its influence on the present, and the necessity of dismantling Christianity's unearned authority in contemporary America.

Much work has been done on the social, cultural, and political constructions of race in America, and the field of American religious history has incorporated this insight, especially in recent years. The lion's share of this scholarship considers religion and people of color, whereas whiteness's ability to render itself as neutral in American culture and history is mirrored in the historiography of American religion. In 2009, *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* published a forum on whiteness, and in her contribution, Judith Weisenfeld noted that in much of American religious history, African Americans seem to be "the only group burdened with race" (Blum et al. 2009, p. 28). Whiteness often remains unseen and uninterrogated, though some recent books have attended to this. In her 2018 book *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World*, Katherine Gerbner reveals

<sup>1</sup> That does not mean that the field lacks scholarly contributions on Asian Americans. Scholars like Rudy Busto, Jane Hong, Jane Iwamura, and more have been publishing important work on this topic.

<sup>2</sup> This is not only the case in America. For example, for a more global take on the co-constitution of religion and race, see (Meer 2013).

how the work of Christian missionaries shifted the legal and social language of freedom in the Atlantic world from one of “Christian” to “white” (Gerbner 2018). Both categories intended to draw legal boundaries between enslaved and free, and both categories centered the importance of Christianity and whiteness. Paul Harvey’s 2016 book, *Bounds of Their Habitation: Race and Religion in American History*, examined how assumptions and ideas about religion have “imposed race upon individual human bodies” and likewise, as people make sense of “otherness,” they often look to religious texts, practices, and stereotypes (Harvey 2016, p. 4). The power of whiteness is the authority behind these assumptions, stereotypes, and prejudices. Joshi’s *White Christian Privilege* explores why white Christianity has that power and how white Christians, intentionally or not, wield that power.

Critical race theorist and legal scholar Cheryl Harris argued in 1993 that whiteness is property. This claim prompts scholars to recognize how “whiteness became the basis of racialized privilege” and the ways in which social forces and the law protect white identity and its privileges (Harris 1993, p. 1709). Race, then, is a system of control that empowers some and suppresses others, and frequently this control is supported by state power (Johnson 2015). Religious identity was/is created in tandem with racial identity in America. Following the lead of Critical Race Theory and Ethnic Studies, Joshi’s *White Christian Privilege* interrogates assumed normativity of whiteness and Christianity. Like Critical Race theorists, Joshi analyzes legal decisions to unveil how these identities possess unearned power and privilege and does so in a manner that does not require readers to have previous expertise in any of these fields. The book blends together readability with theoretical insights—a difficult task for any scholar. This allows the book to reach a wide audience, including students, scholars, and the general public. Additionally, the book mirrors the author’s identity as a scholar-activist and educator. The book takes a social justice approach in order “to acknowledge, explore, and value religious diversity; to recognize the unequal treatment of specific religions in our society; and to identify solutions that can increase equity and justice for all” (Joshi 2020, p. 12). Academic work that merges scholarship with activism offers both descriptive diagnosis and prescription, and in this way, Joshi identifies and analyzes white Christian privilege and maps out a path forward for dismantling it. With this historiographical framework in mind, I now turn to the book’s content in more detail.

## 2. White Christian Privilege’s Contribution

After a strong introduction in which she outlines key terms and concepts, Joshi moves into a chapter on “Christianity and American National Identity.” A main reason why “the civil religion of American patriotism” is dangerous is “that it masks Christian normativity” and “can result in nationalism and ethnocentrism” (Joshi 2020, p. 24). This has historical roots; it matters that the phrase is “separation of church and state” and not religion and state. With a broad look at legal decisions, such as *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* and *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, as well as Islamophobia after 9/11 and the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, the chapter has a wide lens when it comes to American Christian nationalism. For example, in the Supreme Court’s decision in the Hobby Lobby case, their use of “sincerely held belief” allows Joshi to reveal that what is seen as religiously neutral changes depending on the party involved. While in this case the Affordable Care Act is deemed not religiously neutral, in the *Greece* decision, a chaplain delivering an ecumenical prayer was considered neutral. This privileging of Christianity becomes increasingly clear when Joshi moves to the example of a Hindu priest offered the prayer during a 2007 opening of the U.S. Senate and extremist agitators shouted from the gallery about the “wicked” prayer, calling it an abomination. Additionally, in her analysis of the “Unite the Right” rally, an important element to remember is the anti-Semitism of the chants. “It is clear,” Joshi argues, “that this was not just White supremacy but White Christian supremacy in action” (Joshi 2020, p. 59). The protests against across the nation for racial equity and an end to police brutality happening in the summer of 2020 raise additional questions about the militant nature of white Christian nationalism, for which *White Christian Privilege* provides a useful starting point.

The second chapter of the book, “Christianity and the Construction of White Supremacy” provides sharp analysis on the co-constitution of racial identity and religious identity in the United States over history. As Joshi explains, “Whiteness is not a free-standing idea; its shifting definition is given contour by other factors such as culture, geography, and religion” (Joshi 2020, p. 63). She examines the role of early modern Spanish ideas of blood purity as part of a larger European project to demonize Muslims and Jews, as well as how ideas like those shaped European interactions with Native Americans and Africans. The result was the use of Christianity and European civilization as a measuring stick to rank others, and her narration of this process includes attention to colonization in the Americas as well as Western colonial constructs of the East, like orientalism. In the context of the United States, Manifest Destiny, the concept of the Americas as the Protestant “New Jerusalem,” and pro-slavery and pro-segregation Christian theology, worked together to centralize power in Christianity and whiteness. “Religious difference,” thus, “became ‘biologized’ so as to justify the idea that racial difference reflected a hierarchy of social evolution and to support the idea of the binary of civilization and ‘barbarity’” (Joshi 2020, p. 69). The articulation of the co-constitution of religion and race in the creation of white Christian identity and power is quite effective in this chapter. This chapter in particular should find its way immediately on a number of undergraduate course syllabi for classes on religion in America, and white Christian clergy would do well to engage closely with this section of the book. One of the most striking stories from the chapter is about Joshi’s father, an Indian Hindu immigrant, obstetrician, and gynecologist in Georgia, and the discrimination he faced by local members of a Southern Baptist church. Joshi’s book unpacks why this community initially did not trust her father, and the personal anecdote helps readers clearly see the consequences of white Christian nationalism’s power.

The following chapter continues this trajectory with added attention to immigration and citizenship. Joshi explains how the “association between Whiteness, Christianity, and American national identity has been established and reproduced through naturalization and immigration policies since the time the First Congress convened in New York” (Joshi 2020, p. 86). The surge of anti-Catholicism in the wake of nineteenth-century immigration shows the dedication to a *certain* idealized white Christian identity. Along with anti-Catholicism, the displacement of Jewish Americans during the Civil War, the vocal anti-Semitism of Henry Ford, and the recent shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania all reveal the significance of the boundaries around the identity of “white” and “Christian.” The state historically denied citizenship to immigrants and American-born citizens who don’t fit the current mold of white Christian. As Joshi demonstrates, “the evolution of American laws on citizenship illustrates the strong relationship of Whiteness and Christianity in national identity and legal interpretations of who we *are* and who we *aren’t*” (Joshi 2020, p. 100). The racist birther movement against President Barack Obama is a recent example of this, but it is part of a long historical trajectory. In the 1790s, citizenship was legally bound to whiteness and “good moral character.” Immigrants, especially Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans, have pushed these boundaries to become more inclusive, even as some white Christians see them as mutually exclusive religious and/or racial others. Perhaps nothing has made that second point clearer than President Trump’s recent “Muslim ban.”

Toggling between categories of whiteness and non-whiteness, Christian and “heathen,” readers see how power remained and remains exclusionary. One of the central strengths of *White Christian Privilege* is its pedagogical value, in the classroom and beyond. I teach at a private, Catholic, Jesuit university in the Pacific Northwest. The majority of my students come from the Pacific or Rocky Mountain region and they are dominantly Christian and white. They are keen to learn, and with the institution’s social justice-focused mission, many of them hope to be productive citizens. They eagerly read and discuss documents like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, but when it comes to pro-slavery theology, Christian settler colonialism, or the Chinese Exclusion Act, there is a disconnect for many of them. “This is not *real* Christianity,” they reply, “this is an abusive manipulation of the tradition.” I’m sure this is a classroom experience familiar to many in Religious Studies. Recently, when teaching a first-year seminar course on religion and race in America, we spent extra time on



white Christian nationalism in the Pacific Northwest. We worked through library archives on the activities of the Ku Klux Klan in the region, studied the theology of the Aryan Nations, and, briefly, Washington state representative Matt Shea's "Biblical Basis for War." In the 1920s, the Oregon Ku Klux Klan lobbied aggressively for the state's new Compulsory Education Bill, which targeted Catholic schools. The para-military actions of the Aryan Nations, headquartered in Hayden, Idaho in the late twentieth century, reflected their prayers' emphasis on obedience to God's vision for the white world, their openness for violence (battling for the cause), and their desire for purity of blood (Clark and Stoddard 2019, pp. 147–58). Washington state representative Shea's "Biblical Basis for War" document married white Christian nationalism with militant rationale and language (Sokol 2018). While many students still distanced their Christianity from white nationalist Christianity, their attention increasingly shifted to seeing patterns. They could trace connections between anti-Catholicism, white supremacist Christianity, and militant nationalism across these three examples, but they needed more scaffolding to build their interpretations. Joshi's *White Christian Privilege* not only provides the historical background and theoretical language for students to better conceptualize white Christian nationalism, but it also walks them through their defensive responses to it. In this regard, the last three chapters of the book shift from a descriptive narration to an applied educational map.

Chapter Four, "Everyday Christian Privilege," is an educational gift. Joshi examines how Christian privilege allows for benefits and advantages and the ways in which Christian normativity puts additional burden on religious minorities. Following Peggy McIntosh in her germinal essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Knapsack" with its list of examples of white privilege, Joshi offers a catalog that helps identify similar forms of Christian privilege. From recognizing what kind of prayer is reflected in popular culture, to that culture's dominant religious language, to whether or not your elected officials worship like you, this list is thought-provoking and encourages the reader to reflect on what they might have taken for granted as religious normativity. Chapter Five continues the applied educational value of *White Christian Privilege* through imagined responses from Christians and religious minorities to the idea of Christian privilege. Joshi breaks down responses from people who deny it, react with aggression, or with shame and helplessness, and shifts the conversation in productive ways. Then, because a social justice-grounded approach to Christian privilege requires action, she highlights effective ways to respond to Christian privilege when encountered in everyday life. She offers a list of questions that help people locate Christian privilege in various parts of daily life and sample statements that "interrupt Christian hegemony" (Joshi 2020, pp. 197–98).

In the final chapter, Joshi's work as a social justice educator positions her well for advocating for change. Her prescription necessitates, as she puts it, the head (knowledge), the heart (the emotional component of learning and working), and the hands (anti-racist action). To recognize the need for change, people need knowledge and history, not just anecdotes. The heart will get a workout because dismantling white Christian supremacy will not be a neutral process. It will prompt emotions and reactions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it will take action because "merely being better people in our heads and hearts may feel good but it will do nothing to challenge White Christian supremacy" (Joshi 2020, p. 209). America will have to change if we are to combat white Christian normativity, and Joshi encourages readers to change the language we use about religion and morality, change the questions we ask to understand someone else's religion, change our focus, especially what we see and don't see, change our foundational assumptions about religion and better appreciate the differences, and change our paradigm to one that better conceptualizes complexity and difference. The changes Joshi outlines and the path she describes ranges from the simple, like questions to ask of religious neighbors, to the more complex, such as rethinking how we approach difference. With that expansive approach, there is much to take away for any reader, whether they are a scholar or not.

It almost feels trite and obvious to say that *White Christian Privilege* enables readers to better understand the power of white Christian nationalism and power in 2020, but it is true. Books that unpack problems in and questions about religion and race always feel timely in America; however, Joshi's intersectional and social justice-grounded approach makes this a necessary read for those who desire a

more just America. The book's accessibility for students and the general public make its contribution all the stronger and more important. Near the end of the book, in her section on necessary changes, Joshi explains why many Americans need to change the paradigm through which they understand religious difference, their religious selves, and the public sphere. A monotheistic, evangelical religion like Christianity presupposes that it is *the* true religion, which can make interreligious dialogue difficult. Accepting and exploring the possibility of difference, especially "when we are conditioned to expect only one answer is both cognitively and emotionally unsettling." But, she writes, "it is also vital to embrace complexity and difference" (Joshi 2020, p. 224). Establishing a more perfect union is not a one-and-done exercise. It takes effort and labor, and Joshi makes a case for the necessity of that work as well as providing guidance on how to begin it. It lies with readers to act.

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