Featured Review Essay

White Christian America in the Age of Donald Trump

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In 2016, a number of crossover books attracted public attention for their insights on how contemporary white American experience(s) are impacting our current socio-political moment. Nancy Isenberg’s *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* made scores of “Best of 2016” lists, while Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* was a *New York Times* bestseller and a National Book Award Finalist. With *The End of White Christian America*, Robert P. Jones has achieved something similar on the topic of white Christians facing the loss of a cultural and political hegemony they enjoyed for most of the nation’s history.

Jones is a well-published scholar of religious sociology and ethics (Ph. D., Emory University) who is still active in academic organizations, but his public star has risen through his work as founding Chief Executive Officer of the Washington D.C.-based think tank Public Religion Research Institute. Public Religion Research Institute has produced influential national and regional surveys on religious demographics and the cultural and political landscape since 2009 and curates public forums with scholars and religious leaders (which, it bears mentioning, are often useful for teaching). *The End of White Christian America* and a slew of related essays in popular journals like *The Atlantic* were promoted under its auspices.

Jones seeks to explain and contextualize what he describes as the “death” — basically, the fall from unquestioned cultural dominance —
of the two-pronged tradition of white mainline and evangelical Protestantism in the United States, which he labels White Christian America (WCA). (He excludes Catholics, about which more below.) With survey data, rich historical detail, representative anecdotes, and a studied sympathy, he tracks the “psychic discomfort” currently felt by its members, especially the older cohorts, and considers WCA’s future relevance, and communities’ willingness to evolve in some key areas or risk disappearing altogether.

The sources of WCA’s decline are familiar to those who teach topics in American religion: the rapid rise of the unaffiliated or “nones;” the decreasing religiosity and liberalization of even the church-affiliated, especially among younger cohorts; the influx of people of color, especially Latinos, into denominational groupings that were once predominantly white; and the modest rise in non-Christian religions. But, appropriately, Jones does not leave the story of WCA decline at inevitable demographic shifts. He highlights racial histories and attitudes as contributors to WCA’s cultural lags, blind spots, and difficulties connecting with an increasingly heterogeneous society.

Among evangelicals, he argues, the Southern Strategy worked hand-in-glove with the “White Christian Strategy” to leverage religious values and organizations to build a wedge between white religious voters and progressive movements. Thus, the rise of the Christian Right was propelled as much by backlash against the sexual revolution as by white evangelicals’ resistance to civil rights reforms — and that racial legacy continues to impact white evangelicals’ ability to comprehend structural and systemic inequalities like police violence. Mainline Protestants, for their part, were generally more progressive and proactive on race matters, yet they have not been much better than their evangelical counterparts at building racially integrated churches. Jones argues that the survival of both communities, even as more modest actors in American life, requires cultivating authentic racial diversity.

Despite his keen attention to racial dynamics in WCA, there is a hand-wringing sympathy in Jones’s prose (echoed in other recent instances of the white-people-losing-status genre), which I find off-putting. Jones, who wrote a great, earlier book on American religious progressives (Progressive & Religious: How Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist Leaders Are Moving beyond the Culture Wars and Transforming American Public Life), bends over backwards to demonstrate that he understands WCA to be experiencing a painful crisis of loss as white Protestantism moves from the dominant religious influence
on the American nation to two declining traditions in competition with other religions and the massive wave of unaffiliated citizens. He spills plenty of ink explaining how WCA feels isolated, alienated, and discomfited about no longer being the “default faith” that sculpted the “national mythos” (49). Jones is clear that in many ways WCA brought its decline on itself through theological rigidity, social intolerance, or poor church growth models. But to suggest that, “More than anything else, the death of White Christian America has *robbed* its descendants of their security of their place and beliefs” (228, my italics) implies a presumed cultural status inheritance that we would be better not to legitimate, and inscribes religious (and non-religious) diversity as some kind of thief. If we are being historically honest, many White Christians wielded their religious and racial identity to justify their professed superiority over the nation’s original inhabitants, to force Christianization, endorse slavery, and restrict women’s and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people’s legal rights for two centuries. Jones agrees, but his empathic-lament language can inadvertently signal otherwise. We should be able to recognize loss experience without reinforcing a mythos that was always paired with power — and at a great cost to many non-white and non-Christian Americans.

There is much of value in *The End of Christian America*, especially as a guide to the predicaments facing white evangelical and mainline Protestants at the end of the Obama era, and a review of how each tradition got there. But, strikingly, political context has perhaps shifted which notes ring clearest in the analysis, since midsummer 2016 when it was released. Ahead of a presumed Clinton presidency, the “end of WCA” framework would help explain one subset of the (losing) white nostalgia voter as a presence likely to remain on the political horizon and perhaps enact some limited policy and regional damage before drawing its final breaths. Translation: liberal feminist multiculturalism triumphantly beat back an atavistic WCA.

But, as it turns out, rumors of the death of the WCA may indeed have been premature. Alas, Donald Trump — hardly a paragon of the Christian virtues long advocated by WCA leaders — won the presidency with the support of over 80% of the evangelicals who voted for president (more than the Republican Party candidate received in the previous two presidential elections), while President Barack Obama — well-versed in Christian theology and practice — was ushered out with their overwhelming disapproval. White evangelicals wanted Trump, so nostalgia won, and the candidate’s overt racism, sexism, and seeming anti-democratic policy positions barely dented the Republican Party coalition. (Certainly this
was due in part to evangelicals viewing Hillary Clinton very unfavorably.)
In close electoral contests, as many of the states were, the outcome would
have been very different if even a small slice of evangelicals had defected.
How do you like WCA now?

Seeming contradictions aside, it behooves us to know what the victorious
right wing of WCA is expecting and how, especially with Mike Pence
and Paul Ryan at the helm, it plans to make use of (or challenge) its party
leaders, having earned a bit more time.

Especially with a potentially chaotic Trump presidency in view, wherein Republican Christians are potentially both in bed with and embattled within a Trump administration, I wonder whether Jones’s central categorization of WCA is the most useful framework for understanding the near future. I appreciate that separating Protestant Christians from Catholics and people of color from whites to patch together the umbrella “WCA” enables Jones to discuss the distinct influence of whiteness in evangelical and mainstream Protestant traditions and to trace the theological, cultural, and political tensions, and overlap, between these two major streams of American religious history. But when parsed differently, American religious demographics reveal a messier and perhaps more interesting picture of American racial-religious cultures in flux. For instance, Public Religion Research Institute’s own numbers suggest that nearly 40% of both white mainliners and white Catholics did not line up with evangelicals to support Trump. What does the concept of White Christian America mean in this context?

To take one piece of that problem, cleaving off white Catholics, which Jones spends little space justifying, prevents a deeper discussion of two aspects of American racial-religious history that affect contemporary culture and politics. These are: (1) the fact that most white ethnic Catholics struggled for access to whiteness in a nation that marked them “other” through racial construction and religious difference simultaneously, which influenced their political preferences over time, especially as they gained entry to the category of whiteness; and (2) the reality that the recent influx of Latinos and others of color has produced a much more politically diverse and complex American Catholicism. One slice of that Catholicism would fit in the WCA label — and Jones does selectively annex it for analytical purposes — but the other white Catholics and their counterparts of color bring a fascinating range of perspectives and partnerships to America’s current debates.

A framework such as John C. Green’s American religious landscape spectrum (for Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life), in which beliefs
and behavior measures sort groups across orthodox, moderate, and modernist categories, might offer richer analytical traction than consolidating only part of White Christian America into a distinct entity. A spectrum framework makes visible the internal fracture within almost all American religious groups, with the more traditionalist practitioners sitting on the conservative end, the more modernist on the progressive, and the rest battling it out in the moderate middle. This renders much more visible groups like left-progressive evangelicals (perhaps the slim fifth of evangelicals who did not vote for Trump), who all but disappear in Jones’s political account of the WCA and, to our detriment, in mainstream media’s religion coverage. It also brings the political splits within WCA, especially in 2016, into view: Trump won majorities of WCA, but lost significant minorities among some cohorts.

Even as we recognize the decline of WCA’s cultural reign (though 2016 was hardly the election that proved it), we must keep in view that there are White Christian Americas on the right, in the center, and on the left — all with distinct cultural values and political preferences. To different degrees, this spread also exists among Latinos (some Protestant, some Catholic, and spread across the spectrum), African Americans, Jews, Muslims, and even the so-called Nones. I am with Jones that it is good for the United States if the “white” in WCA continues to decline, that members are compelled to consider their applied theology in the context of a culturally diverse society, and that more white Protestants begin to really know their neighbors as friends.

In the meantime, white evangelicals and white mainline Protestants aren’t going anywhere; they’ll just be advocating their interests from their respective points on the spectrum — but in each case they’ll have to partner (as they have been doing) with allies across other racial and religious groups, an incentive Jones recognizes but mainly frames in terms of how the whole WCA has to change. But perhaps widespread dispersion and emergent new groupings is the better option. Trump’s presidency will surely amplify these lively fractures within American religion for some time to come, and Jones’s The End of White Christian America will continue to be an important resource for making sense of it all.