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Reactions to the End of White Christian America

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9 October 2016

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How many of you have seen the 1976 film, *Network*? There's a famous scene in which a network anchor looks into the camera and tells the viewers at home:

I want you to get up now. I want all of you to get up out of your chairs. I want you to get up right now and go to the window. Open it, and stick your head out, and yell, "**I'M AS MAD AS HELL, AND I'M NOT GOING TO TAKE THIS ANYMORE!**" Things have got to change. But first, you've gotta get mad!.... Then we'll figure out what to do.... But first get up out of your chairs, open the window, stick your head out, and yell, and say it: "**I'M AS MAD AS HELL, AND I'M NOT GOING TO TAKE THIS ANYMORE!**"

This rant earned that anchor the nickname, "The Mad Prophet of the Airwaves." There are a lot of people in the United States today on all sides of the political spectrum who are mad as hell and don't want to take it anymore. Not everyone, however, is angry about the same things. I would like to begin by inviting us to reflect on one particular cause of anger and anxiety in our country today; then I will widen our focus to consider other underlying conditions.

There are a lot of theories trying to explain the cultural moment in which we find ourselves, but one of the most helpful I've found recently is a book titled **The End of White Christian America** by **Robert P. Jones**. What interests me most about Jones's approach is that he offers more than merely his opinion. He writes from an academic, data-driven perspective, based on his experience as the CEO of PRRI (the Public Religion Research Institute), a

nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to conducting high-quality public opinion research. Looking back over the last few decades, Jones invites us to trace the reactions in our country to the fading influence of White Christian America.

Even before the founding of our nation, White Protestant Christianity was the dominant norm — and anything else was considered inferior at best and deviant at worst. But as Dylan said, “The Times They Are A-Changin’.” After almost two centuries of White Christian dominance in America, **in the 1960s, we saw serious threats to White Christian America from many different countercultural fronts:** the youth movement of the hippies, the sexual revolution, the Anti-War movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the Hispanic and Chicano movement, Second-wave feminism, and the Gay rights movement.

With the rise of the Christian Right in the 1980s, there was a resurgence of White Christian America. But now decades later from our vantage point here in the year 2016, we know that major demographic changes, which include an increasing religious disaffiliation of younger generations, have pushed White Christian America to a tipping point of losing its once unquestioned dominance (1).

I should be clear that I do not want to overly demonize White Christian America. Beyond giving our nation “a shared aesthetic, a historical framework, and a moral vocabulary,” **White Christian America also produced a “a dizzying array of institutions from churches to hospitals, social service organizations, and civic organizations** such as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and the YMCA” (2). At the same time, we should be honest about the many ways that **White Christian America was a major force in this country’s history, arguing that the Bible should be interpreted not only to support slavery, but also to prevent women’s rights, Civil Rights, and equal rights for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender citizens** of this country (3).

In reflecting on the norm of White Christian America, Robert Jones writes:

Questions like “**And where do you go to church?**” felt appropriate in casual social interactions or even business exchanges.... Few gave a second thought to saying “Merry Christmas!” to strangers in the street.... Sunday blue laws shuttered Main Street for the Sabbath. In its heyday, a set of linked institutions

reinforced White Christian America's worldview across generations: the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Boy Scouts, the Masonic Lodge, and the local country club with limits or even outright bans on membership for Catholics, Jews, and ethnic minorities. White Christian America had its golden age in the 1950s, after the hardships and victories of World War II and before the cultural upheavals of the 1960s. **June Cleaver was its mother, Andy Griffith was its sheriff, Norman Rockwell was its artist, and Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale were its ministers.** (38-39)

We are now, however, more than halfway through the second decade of the *twenty-first* century. And in contrast to the dominant monoculture of White Christian America, we are well into an age that increasingly demands recognition of diversity, pluralism, and multiculturalism.

I've taken the time to paint a picture of White Christian America to help better understand the cultural moment in which we find ourselves. To use one of the most blatant examples, the relentless rumors that President Obama is secretly a Kenyan and secretly a Muslim are all dog whistles, trying to "other-ize" him as not part of White Christian America. **These conspiracy theories play on fears within *White Christian American* that our nation's first *black* president is not really one of "us" — he's not really a Christian and he wasn't really born here:**

- In 2010, a CNN poll found that more than one quarter (27 percent) of the country harbored some doubts about the legitimacy of Obama's citizenship.
- In 2012, just before he was reelected, a PRRI survey found that nearly four in ten (39 percent) voters did not know the president's religious affiliation, and approximately one in six (16 percent) reported that they thought Obama was a Muslim.
- Among white evangelical Protestant voters, the number saying Obama was a Muslim rose to nearly one in four (24 percent). (80-81)

The first African-American president, even one who is a Christian, is a highly visible symbol that *White Christian America's* dominance is waning. And there are other less noticeable signs. In 2010, when Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens (a white Protestant Christian) retired and was replaced by Elena Kagan (who is Jewish), **we saw a shift to a U.S. Supreme Court that**

has no Protestant justices. The current U.S. Supreme Court has five Catholics and three Jews, and Merrick Garland, the nominee in the wings, is Jewish. “To put that into perspective, there have only been twelve Catholics in the 225-year history of the court, half of whom occupy seats on the bench today. Similarly, only eight Jews have ever served on the Court, three of whom are sitting justices today” (41).

There is adage that says, **“It’s not paranoid if they really are after you.” But here’s the twist: white culture is actually not endangered, but *White Supremacy* is endangered. Christianity too is not endangered, but *Christian Supremacy* is.** Losing this pride of place can cause resentment and a false sense of disenfranchisement, but as you’ve heard me say before “Loss of privilege is *not* the same as reverse discrimination.”

To consider some data on the *loss of white privilege*, the U.S. Census Bureau predicts that **by 2042 (twenty-six years from now) the United States will no longer be a majority-white nation.** Relatedly, “population experts forecast that by 2060, whites will see their numbers decline for the first time in American history, while the number of people who identify as multiracial will nearly triple and the number of Hispanics and Asians will more than double” (41).

To relatedly consider some data on the *loss of Christian privilege*, **while white Christians remain by far the largest single segment of the American religious landscape, they have “slipped below a majority to 47 percent (47).** Moreover, “By 2051, if current trends continue, religiously unaffiliated Americans could comprise as large a percentage of the population as Protestants — a thought that would have been unimaginable just a few decades ago” (51).

Now, for a variety of reasons, some of you may be eager to dance on the grave of White Christian America: “Ding, dong, the supremacy of White Christian America is dead.” But to others of our fellow citizens, the end of White Christian America feels like a cause for lament and the loss of “real America.” **“The question of whether American culture has gone downhill since the 1950s divides Americans overall,** with a majority (53 percent) saying it has changed mostly for the worse, compared to 46 percent who say it has changed mostly for the better. But we can see stark cleavages by race and religion” (87).

As we noted earlier, the 1950s were a time that White Christian America retained cultural dominance — due, among other factors, to Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation. But despite that dominance, even then, there was anxiety about existential threats from “others.” At that time, the fear was communism and the chief fear monger and demagogue was Senator Joseph McCarthy. **These fears led White Christian America to make “In God We Trust” the official motto of the United States, which was done not in 1776, but in 1956.** “In God We Trust” was not added onto our currency until the next year, 1957. **Similarly, “under God” was not added to the Pledge of Allegiance until 1954.** But with demographic shifts, White Christian America no longer has the power to easily make such changes, especially at the federal level (211).

Part of my intention has been to trace some important historical inflection points that help explain the cultural moment in which we find ourselves, undergirded with demographic data. But before I conclude, I also want to invite us to take the risk of turning the mirror back on ourselves. On one hand, it is true that many Unitarian Universalists both historically and today have been at the forefront of “standing on the side of love,” of making personal sacrifices to be on the right side of history, and of helping bend the arc of the universe toward justice. On the other hand, we too need to acknowledge the ways that **both Unitarianism and Universalism emerged out of White Christian America. And today Unitarian Universalism — despite our best intentions — remains in many ways a White European monoculture.**

There is much to celebrate about the ways that we as a larger UU movement are more aware than we have been in decades about racial injustice; we are increasingly showing up to dismantle racism and white supremacy. But we must continue to be intentional about building a diverse, multicultural congregation if we are to be part of turning Dr. King’s dream of a beloved community into a reality. We must continue to practice what is sometimes called **Intercultural Competency**: the ability to move “in and out of different cultural worldviews,” to build bridges between cultures, and to integrate cross-cultural perspectives. **That doesn’t mean getting rid of white European culture, but it does mean embracing a multicultural pluralism in which European culture is *one among many* cultures that is celebrated.**

There's one other major piece that seems essential to me to mention. I've already laid out the ways in which I am unsympathetic to the racist, sexist, and homophobic reactions to the End of White Christian America. But as I reflect on the state of our country today, it seems to me that **economic anxieties related to wealth inequality and income inequality are massively amplifying the racist, sexist, and homophobic reactions to the End of White Christian America.** If you think about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, it's hard to go to those top levels of the pyramid in which we are inclined to self-actualize, be our best selves, and welcome those who are different — when one is worried about meeting the basic needs for one's self and one's family of having enough food, clean water, security, safety, and a simple, decent place to live.

We live in a time in which tremendous shifts are happening all around us. And our Universalist heritage challenges us to find ways of **rising above the partisan divide — to do more than win in a way that leaves half of the country behind.** In Dr. King's words: "We will not only win freedom for ourselves; **we will appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.**" There is cause for fear, but also reasons to hope. In the words of the UU activist [Chris Crass](#), may we each do our part within our spheres of influence for **"the building up of multiracial democracy with economic, gender, and racial justice for all** and a world where the inherent worth and dignity of all people and the interconnection of life are at the heart of our cultures, institutions, and policies."