

Anxious white Protestants

By [Gay Clark Jennings](#)

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Religious people have been their own worst enemies in recent weeks.

First came [a study from the journal *Current Biology*](#) showing that children from religious families are less generous and more punitive than their peers, and that the more exposure to religion they received, the worse they behaved.

It gets worse, especially for white Protestants, of which I am one. Two weeks ago, the Public Religion Research Institute released its [2015 American Values Survey](#), “Anxiety, Nostalgia, and Mistrust.” In it, we learn that more than half of white Protestants agree that “America’s best days are behind us,” while more than half of black Protestants, Catholics, people who aren’t Christian, and people who aren’t religious think that America’s best days are ahead of us.

What’s more, a whopping 73 percent of white evangelical Protestants and 63 percent of white mainline Protestants believe that the values of Islam “are at odds with American values and way of life,” and more than seven in ten white Protestants believe that the “killings of African American men by police are isolated incidents.”

Meanwhile, more than half of U.S. governors—most of them white Protestants—have declared their desire to block Syrian refugees who are fleeing the same religious extremism that resulted in the recent horror in Paris and Beirut.

If we white Protestants are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that the seismic demographic changes underway in American life are rocking our world and many of us are reeling instead of responding. White Protestants, once a dominant majority in the United States, now make up less than half the population, and the numbers continue to fall. Too many of us believe that if we could bring back the good old days when everyone went to church and aspired to be like us, things would be better. And we believe this even though history, reason, and common sense all tell us that the good old days were terrible for many, many people.

Our desire to make the white Christian experience and identity normative is dangerous for our sisters and brothers who must drive while black, immigrate while Muslim, and live at the mercy of systemic racism that many of us don't even acknowledge, much less work to eradicate. It can also be just plain absurd.

My son was born in South America, and we adopted him when he was four months old. When I was enrolling him in kindergarten, I came to the list of racial and ethnic groups and checked "Hispanic." When I handed the form to the school secretary, she asked, "Why did you check Hispanic?" When I explained the situation, she replied with some agitation, "Well you can't do that. He lives with you now, so you have to check white."

Like more than half of our nation's governors, that secretary wanted to make sure that white identity remained the norm despite obvious evidence that the world was changing around her. She was willing to ignore the reality of a brown-skinned five-year-old boy standing in front of her; the governors are willing to ignore what the United Nations High Commission on Refugees has called "the world's single largest refugee crisis for almost a quarter of a century."

Recently, Brant Lee, an Episcopalian and professor at the University of Akron School of Law, [wrote in a Facebook post](#): "Most of us like to think that we would have been the ones sheltering Jews fleeing the Holocaust, that we would not have joined the crowds on the town square watching the lynchings of Black people, that we would not have cheered the internment of Japanese Americans and then purchased their farms for pennies on the dollar. . . . But most people don't think of themselves as monsters; they think their fears are justified."

We may be afraid of the kind of terror that befell Paris and Beirut, and we may be afraid of what will become of us if we are no longer the dominant cultural and religious force in American life. But neither our fears nor our privilege are justified in the face of our scriptures, which command us to welcome the stranger as we would welcome Jesus. We will be held accountable, both by history and by God, for how we respond to Syrian refugees who are crying out for help.