

The church's one identity

White Christians have an obligation to face white nationalism head-on.

By [Daniel Schultz](#)

November 14, 2016

We've been reading about the Mexican conquest in the theology course I teach, the better to understand the context of La Virgen de Guadalupe. More than one student has expressed puzzlement at Spanish imperialism. "I don't get it," one wrote in a reflection paper. "Why would you want to smash someone's culture and religion?"

Because, my dear students, some people are just born assholes.

That's a gloss, of course. The Spanish program of cultural genocide against the Nahuatl had much to do with the insecurity of the Spaniards' own identity. Columbus famously sailed in the same year the *Reconquista* of Spain ended with Muslims and Jews being expelled from the reclaimed kingdom. There was a terror within Spanish culture of anything foreign, especially religions other than Christianity. By the time Guadalupe showed herself to Juan Diego, the Protestant Reformation was in full swing, and the Spanish doubled down on a rigid Catholic puritanism. The Aztec Empire and culture were founded on pagan beliefs, which had to be destroyed as literal works of the devil.

Christian supremacism was accompanied by an inability to see native peoples as human. The church, to its shame, split the difference between a full defense of native human rights and exploitation: it declared natives human but childlike, in need of firm guidance and conversion to the one true faith. This limited the worst of the abuses but also provided a moral cover for the ongoing colonial project.

Today's situation is nowhere near as dire as early Mexico, but it's plenty bad. Since last Tuesday, a wave of ugly racist and xenophobic incidents has rippled across the nation (300, by one estimate); suddenly more people enjoy painting the swastika on a wall or singing racial taunts at black and Mexican children. All that has been

sponsored by Donald Trump himself, who spat bigotry, misogyny, and Islamophobia throughout the campaign without apparent self-control or regret.

Trump, of course, isn't the fountainhead of American hate, only someone who's been able to take advantage of social undercurrents. The ugliness brought out by this election is firmly rooted in American insecurities: economic, yes, but also panic at foreign threats and an inability to come to terms with the racism at the center of our identity. And all of this has been abetted by the church—at least the parts of it that have allowed themselves to be subsumed into a white nationalist identity.

Things could be worse, which is more of a warning than a comfort. The official policies of the Trump administration will be bad enough. The social reality—the hateful bigotry that's been unleashed—is even more frightening. I fear people are going to get killed.

How *do* Christians respond to this? I phrase that question as a general one, but really it's about white, relatively privileged Christians who would like to think of themselves as allies in the struggle of oppressed people.

I'm seeing calls for reconciliation and healing from Catholic and mainline Protestant groups, as though this situation were simply the result of a political argument that got out of hand. Nonsense. Our national politics now center on racial identity, not economics or different views on a strong national defense or the proper size of government. The president-elect has appointed a promoter of white supremacist voices as his senior advisor, while barely bothering to ask his supporters please, if they wouldn't mind, not to commit hate crimes in his name. Christians of all varieties need to deal with this new reality. No faithful response to social Trumpism that fails to wrestle with the American legacy of race—and the bitter partisanship this legacy drives—can be adequate.

The church—again, in particular the white church—has an obligation to face white nationalism head-on: for the protection of the vulnerable most of all, but also in order to preserve and secure its own identity in Christ, which relativizes every other identity. Christians have no business becoming the religious wing of the Republican or Democratic party, much less joining Team White or Team Black.

White Christians need to step up and make anti-identity politics a core part of their own identity. The Christ who fills all in all must be proclaimed.

Some have been trying to do exactly this (my own denomination recently released a curriculum studying white privilege), but it's long past time to step up the work and set it over and against the outright hate appearing on our streets. Attempts at reconciliation—especially the breezy ones unconcerned with justice—can be worse than doing nothing, because true reconciliation cannot take place until the conditions that create divisions are changed. Bridging partisan divides without addressing race isn't reconciliation. At best, it's a call for empowered people to paper over differences about how they treat the oppressed.

At worst, it's a demand that the victims of hate smile sweetly at those who trespass against them. This is not where moderate-to-liberal, majority-white denominations want to be.

The point here isn't to wage partisan battles, much less win them. Nor is it to score sectarian points against other traditions. It's to teach our children and grandchildren to stand up for the right, actively, with the knowledge that the full church stands behind them. It is also to hear—and to extend—la Virgen's words to Juan Diego:

Listen and hear well in your heart, my most abandoned son: that which scares you and troubles you is nothing...do not fear this sickness or any other sickness or anxiety. Am I not here, your mother? Who else do you need?

Only God, Mother Mary. If Christians are half as brave as they claim to be, they'll take on the sickness of racism, intolerance, and bigotry directly.