

Robert P. Jones says it's past time to reckon with Christianity's role in White supremacy

***White Too Long* envisions the hope that could follow recognition and repentance.**

by [Aaron Klink](#) in the [December 30, 2020](#) issue

In Review



White Too Long

The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity

By Robert P. Jones

Simon & Schuster

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In his 2016 book *The End of White Christian America*, Robert P. Jones argued that changing demographics would transform religion and politics in the United States. In his new book, Jones explores one of the greatest forces preventing an acceptance of that reality: White supremacy. *White Too Long* weaves together memoir, theological reflection, and careful statistical analysis to show how White supremacy has long infected American Christianity—and continues to do so.

Jones begins with a chronicle of his childhood and education in the American South, from growing up in Georgia and Mississippi to attending graduate school in Texas and Georgia. After completing his doctorate in Christian ethics, Jones founded the Public Religion Research Institute, which conducts sophisticated survey research on religion's impact on American political attitudes.

This book's power is in the way Jones combines self-reflective memoir with detailed social scientific analysis, demonstrating that the things he remembers are also borne out by statistics. The reality that he recalls and measures is White supremacy's indelible imprint on churches both Protestant and Catholic, in the South and elsewhere.

Jones names the legacy of White supremacy in his own story, beginning with the genealogy written in his family Bible. There he finds the names of farmers who received their land after the displacement of Georgia's Native American tribes, as well as of slaveholders. He revisits the churches, schools, and other built landscapes that shaped his childhood and youth. He notes that it was only during graduate school that he began to realize how deeply these institutions were implicated in racism.

These personal reflections set a good example for White readers to follow, especially those who may find it difficult to accept the ways they have profited from White supremacy. But while Jones's analysis locates White supremacy in all geographic regions of the church, the book doesn't elaborate the multiple forms that it can take. I grew up in the rural Midwest, where Confederate statutes did not exist, in a town

with a 95 percent White population. Some readers may struggle to connect with Jones's story precisely because it is so rooted in the American South.

Jones notes that many Christians like to talk about Christianity's prophetic role in the civil rights movement. Far fewer seek to explore how Christian theologies and institutions supported slavery and later segregation. *White Too Long* excels in telling those stories.

Jones shows how one of the founders of the Southern Baptist Church, Basil Manly, justified White supremacy. He writes about the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, who recounted how Christian texts were used by slaveholders to justify the horrific treatment of slaves. He explores the development of a Christian theology around the Lost Cause narrative, created after the Civil War to cast the prewar South as a noble society. Churches have been deeply involved in celebrations of that construction of history.

He also addresses the issue of Confederate monuments, very few of which were erected in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. The majority were built much later to help solidify White supremacy in American communities. This discussion struck home for me, since a Confederate monument I used to drive by on my way to a weekly meeting in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, was removed a few months ago in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests.

Jones shows how some structures of evangelical Christian thought make it difficult for evangelicals to address White supremacy. For instance, most negative actions are blamed on individuals acting sinfully rather than on structural and economic forces that shape how Christians live.

The book includes a statistical analysis of PRRI's surveys on race and religion. Jones is to be commended for presenting this information in a way general readers can follow, relegating the technical aspects of his analytic methods and survey design to an appendix that will appeal to specialists. The results are clear. Christians in former slaveholding states tend to have higher racial resentment, be more politically conservative, and oppose affirmative action and other programs that seek to benefit members of minority groups. But there is also plenty of evidence of the impact of White supremacy on Christians outside the South.

Jones does not leave his readers without hope. A chapter called "Telling" recounts the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum's efforts to narrate the story of White supremacy

so its visitors can learn from the past. Jones also tells the story of two different Macon, Georgia, congregations named First Baptist, one White and one Black. Together they are attempting to build understanding and tell the truth about how their own histories are intertwined with the histories of slavery and segregation. “These congregations are signs of hope in this fractured time,” writes Jones, “and witnesses to the truth that racial healing and reconciliation, while possible, can only be realized as the mature fruits of repentance and reparative justice.”

White Too Long is more than a searing exposé of how White supremacy infects American Christianity. It’s also a call for Christians to reflect on this legacy, repent of it, and find a way to move past it.