THEOLOGICAL RACISM:
White Supremacism and White Christianity in American History and Contemporary Politics

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In a famous paper, written in 1971, the Nobel-Prize winning economist, Thomas Schelling, presented what he called a "dynamic model of segregation." Imagine a grid, if you will, much like a checker board, except that the squares are not colored; and also pieces, like checkers, but colored either black or white. Each white piece has what economists call a "preference", in this case, about the maximum number of black pieces it ideally wants on adjacent squares; black pieces also have preferences of their own about white pieces. These preferences can be expressed as a percentage, ranging from zero to one hundred. Each piece, white or black, also has complete freedom of movement. Over time, as the "game" is played, each piece can move from one square to another in pursuit of its own "preferred" neighborhood of black and white pieces. Schelling shows that if some of the pieces have even a mild preference for pieces of the same color, then the board will become "segregated" by color, and in relatively short order. In fact, the resulting level of segregation will end up being significantly greater than most of the pieces would actually prefer. It is a clever elegant model. The key assumption is that racial segregation in the US is ultimately driven by individual preferences and choices.

That assumption is flat wrong.

In *The Color of Law,* the legal historian, Richard Rothstein, shows that black-white residential segregation was not the result of individual preferences and choices so much as of government action and inaction. On the one hand, federal, state and local governments actively encouraged residential segregation by various means. For example, local governments used zoning ordinances to create enclaves of single-family homes; and federal agencies provided loans for these homes to whites, while denying them to blacks. Meanwhile, federal anti-discrimination laws were only rarely enforced; and local law enforcement often looked the other way when black homeowners were terrorized by white neighbors. One important result of all this government action and inaction was that Black Americans were unable to accumulate home equity during the great real estate boom that followed World War II. And this is the main reason why the wealth gap between blacks and white persists even between blacks and whites in the same income bracket: many whites have been able to accumulate and transfer wealth from parents to children; few blacks have been able to. Even after the legal barriers to black home ownership were gradually removed, the financial barriers remained in place. All the more so, because the neighborhoods themselves were not the unmarked and empty spaces of Schelling's model. They were – and often still are -- clearly marked as "white" or "black", with the one deemed more valuable than the other. And because many Americans equate economic success with moral virtue, it follows that the residents of black ghettos with low real estate values must also be lacking other kinds of values, too. To put it plainly: "bad neighborhoods" must be the result of "bad choices" and "bad culture"; and "good neighborhoods the result of "good choices" and "good culture." And for "bad" read "black", and for "good" read "white." Few say this out

loud of course, certainly not in public, and maybe not even to themselves. In this way, the anti-black racism of the past lives on as the color-blind racism of the present. As William Faulkner famously quipped: "The past is not dead. It's not even past."

This is what sociologists call "structural racism." The subject of this essay is the religious dimension of structural racism: *theological racism*.

FROM "STRUCTURAL RACISM" TO THEOLOGICAL RACISM

In his landmark study, *Racism Without Racists*, the sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva developed a theory of "structural racism." The development of structural racism can be divided into two phases. In the first, white supremacists build racist structures, such as slavery and Jim Crow. In other words: racism *with* racists. In the second, white supremacism declines; but its effects endure. They live on in the form of wealth inequality and residential segregation. This is racism without racists" or "color blind racism."

To many, "color blind racism" may sound like a contradiction in terms. If you don't "see" race, it might be objected, then how can you possibly be a racist? This is missing the point. Structural racism is not the same thing as "racial prejudice" in the narrow sense of "negative feelings towards other races." Instead, structural racism refers to systemic inequalities that are rooted in the historical past. To be "color blind" is to be blind to the enduring effects of history on present-day people of color. Nor does colorblindness immunize a person against racism. On the contrary, colorblindness can actually lead to subtler forms of color prejudice. If blacks are still lagging behind whites, the reasoning goes, then it must be because they are making poor choices or because their culture is impoverished. Color blind racism is not so much a blindness to race as it is a blindness to the social origins of racial inequality.

Theological racism is just the religious side of structural racism. It can also be divided into two main phases. In the first, racist theologians develop racist theologies, that is, religious defenses of white supremacism. Nor were Black Americans the only targets. White theologians also developed "Biblical" defenses, not only of slavery and Jim Crow, but also of "Indian removal", "Asian exclusion", the Mexican-American War, and "the war on terror", to name just a few key episodes. To fully understand theological racism, one must look, not only at anti-black racism, but also at how white supremacist theologians legitimized the violent oppression of other groups as well.

In the second phase, the racist theologies live on in "color blind" forms. Explicitly racist claims about the cultural superiority of "White Anglo-Saxon Protestants" have not disappeared altogether. Within mainstream conservative discourse, they have been replaced by, and relabeled as, "American exceptionalism." The religious variant of American exceptionalism loudly asserts that America is "exceptional" because it was founded by "orthodox Christians" based on "Biblical principles." And it silently presumes that the founders were white Christians and the principles were taken from White Protestantism. Likewise, explicitly racist claims about the biological inferiority of Black Americans are replaced by implicitly racist arguments

concerning the moral defects of poor people. It goes without saying that the poor people in question are not white.

TWO FORMS OF THEOLOGICAL RACISM

The American tradition of theological racism comes in two main forms: White Christian Nationalism (WCN) and White Christian Individualism (WCI). WCN is best understood as a "deep story" (Hochschild 2016) about American history that undergirds a collective identity and a political ideology. In the WCN narrative, the United States was founded on "Biblical" (i.e., Protestant) principles by "traditional" (i.e., white and native-born). WCN was once a Protestant monopoly. Today, however, it is shared by many conservative white Christians, Protestant as well as Catholic, and also in a broader "Judeo-Christian" rendering, by some conservative Jews, . This identity is strongly correlated with political views about such seemingly disparate matters as racial inequality in policing, immigration policy, and "radical Islam."

WCI is best conceptualized as a tacit picture of the social world -- what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (2004) calls a "social imaginary" -- that undergirds a certain form of personal identity and morality. In this imaginary, the social world is exclusively composed of autonomous individuals. And how a particular person fares in this life -- and the next -- is solely a result of the choices they make. Social context plays no role. Neither does history. A person's fate is determined solely by their own decisions, and it is important the people enjoy or suffer the consequences of their decisions, good and bad. It follows that notions like "collective guilt" and "social justice" are oxymorons. There can be no collective guilt; and social justice is nothing but organized theft.

Conceptually, WCN and WCI can be pried apart. Politically, however, they often work in concert. Consider one of the most perplexing developments of recent years: the rise of the "libertarian" Tea Party following the 2008 election, followed by the triumph of right wing "populism" during the 2016 election, and the central role of white evangelicals in both movements. How could the same people support such logically divergent ideologies? The answer is that the two political movements are simply two sides of the same theological coin: WCI and WCN. And that they were originally stamped from the same raw material: white supremacism. The Tea Party mobilized WCI to justify opposition to social reforms that might benefit "undeserving" people, who upon greater scrutiny turn out to mean not so much the poor – there is plenty of sympathy for downtrodden members of the white working-class – as those who are non-white and non-native. In other words, it was a cloaked form of racial animus. Trump then channeled WCN to articulate the grievances of "real" (i.e., white, native-born) Americans. Trumpian populism is thinly-veiled white identity politics.

Note, too, that both movements were grounded in the same nostalgic vision of the United States as a white nation. WCI is invoked to refuse any collective guilt for America's "original sins" of Indian extermination, chattel slavery, despoiling of Mexican territory, and Asian peonage. At the same time, WCN is invoked to refuse these self-same groups any role in America's rise to power and prosperity, and to give all credit to the nation's white Christian "founders" and "pioneers" who leveled mountain and foe with principled faith and rugged determination. Correspondingly, the nation's original sins are dismissed as adolescent growing pains for an otherwise noble nation built on the foundation of Biblical principles and Protestant work ethic.

Critical scholarship on whiteness has thus far paid too little attention to religion, and that white supremacism and white Protestantism are inextricably linked in the American context. This connection exists because white supremacy's maintenance depends on what sociologists have called "epistemologies of ignorance" (Mueller 2020); that is, cognitive and discursive techniques that whites can use to deny that covertly racist beliefs, policies, and actions have any connection to race at all. Christian (and specifically Protestant) theology and language has historically aided white supremacy in at least three ways: 1) by substituting ethnoracial identities for religious ones, or vice versa, as the occasion demands; 2) by baptizing fundamentally racist ideas as "Christian" values and "biblical" principles; and 3) by attributing white power and success to the virtues of heroic individuals and non-white oppression and poverty to the depravity of minority "culture." White Christians have agency; non-whites and non-Christians only have "culture."

One way of combating this epistemology of ignorance is via a historical reconstruction of the influence of white supremacism on White Christianity. Another is via the recovery of anti-racist voices from within the history of White Christianity itself.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WCN

Red: Puritan New England. Leading Puritan theologians such as Cotton Mather interpreted their followers' increasingly violent conflicts with the native peoples and their European allies in terms of three Biblical tropes: the conquest of Canaan, the Babylonian Captivity and John's Revelations. The natives are cast as the Canaanites, the Catholic French as the Whore of Babylon, and their conflicts as part of an eschatological struggle between the forces of good and evil, with the Puritans in the role of the protagonist. By the early 20th century, the apocalyptic script had become the dominant orthodoxy amongst American evangelicals. By the early 21st century, it had permeated secular culture as well. Today, it finds virulent expression in the QAnon conspiracy theory, which links the Puritan themes of captivity (human trafficking), violation (sex slavery), blood magic ("adrenochrome") and apocalyptic showdowns ("the Storm"). Throughout American history, the apocalyptic storyline has facilitated the (often literal) demonization of ethno-cultural others and politically-legitimated violence (whether the military, police, border patrol, or "good guys with guns") as the preferred remedy for problem populations.

Some of Mather's contemporaries, however, took a different path. John Elliott imagined a multiracial Christianity that would include English colonists and native peoples. And Roger Williams imagined a society free from religious coercion and a democratically-minded Christianity that would cooperate with non-Christians for the sake of the common good. But it was the Mathers of the era that won the day.

Black: Colonial Virginia. Many of this colony's leaders had been involved in the violent subjugation of Ireland and the establishment of English "plantations" there. They brought with them a racist theology that legitimated the enslavement of non-Christians. But their failure to effectively enslave or convert many of the natives and their success in enslaving and converting thousands of captured Africans created a troubling contradiction: Christian slavery and non-Christian freedom. By the early 18th century, this theological problem had been "solved" via a racist theology, which drew on the Old Testament story of Noah's three sons, and the "Curse of Ham." The Noachic legitimation of racial slavery would later be re-cast in secular form, first the

"polygenetic" theories of 19th century "race scientists" and then in the "genetic difference" theories of 20th century social scientists.

In Colonial Virginia, theological argument was twisted to legitimate white supremacy and racial exploitation -- and not for the last time. Yet just as in New England, this was not the only path that was open to white Christians. Some Anglican and Quaker theologians were already articulating a theory of human equality premised on the notion that all people were created "in the image of God." Black and white abolitionists would develop this argument further, as would Christian civil rights activists.

Brown: The "Frontier" The Mexican-American War resulted in the forced incorporation of (Catholic) Mexican citizens and ("heathen") native peoples into the US territory and polity, fundamentally challenging the dominant understanding of America as a white Protestant nation founded on white racial supremacy. This theological problem was "solved" via a postmillennialist political eschatology ("Manifest Destiny") in which "White Anglo-Saxon Protestants" were tasked with constructing the Kingdom of God on earth by subjugating and converting the "uncivilized" and "non-Christian" -- or, in radical versions, expelling or exterminating them from American territory. In the late 19th century, this solution was extended from America's "frontier" to its nascent but "hidden" empire (Immerwahr 2019). By the late 20th century, it had evolved into a semi-secularized ideology of "American exceptionalism" in which American arms were always and only ever employed for the sake of "spreading freedom" and never for the purpose of subjugating or exploiting.

As in the past, white theologians deftly twisted Christian doctrine to accommodate the ambitions of land-hungry whites. But as in Puritan England, some white missionaries allied with people of color and articulated an ecumenical vision that would gradually evolve into the multiculturalism of the present-day. Theirs, alas, was the road less traveled.

White: Whiteness and Protestantism. By the late 19th century, the WASP variant of WCN was being called into question by the arrival of large numbers of Catholics and Jews from Central and Eastern Europe and continuing immigration from Ireland. Because religion and race were so tightly intertwined in WCN, the fact that the "new immigrants" were not Protestant raised questions about whether they could be white. Sociologically, this problem was quickly resolved through the immigrants vehement refusal of blackness and their often violent enforcement of the color line, especially vis-a-vis Black Americans. Theologically, it was eventually resolved via the invention of the "Judaeo-Christian tradition," which culminates in Protestantism -- but excludes Black Americans. In this way, Jews and Catholics became "white," WASP hegemony was maintained, and the color line defended.

But the idea of a Judaeo-Christian tradition was a double-edged sword. It could be, and was, used by liberal Jews, Catholics, and Protestants to articulate an inclusive political theology of the American "melting-pot." Though not religiously inclusive -- it excluded those outside the Abrahamic fold -- it was nonetheless racially inclusive.

Yellow: From "Chinese Exclusion" to "Model Minority" The history of Asian Americans illustrates the changing dynamics of American Christianity. In the Reconstruction Era, Asian Americans were often regarded as more culturally alien than black freedmen. But a century later, they were well on their way to honorary whiteness. This remarkable turnabout was partly due to the changing composition of Asian immigration, which grew increasingly affluent and Christian

over time. But it was also due to the changing politics of liberal Protestantism, which was evolving towards secular multiculturalism. Asian Americans became "honorary whites" whose economic success allowed privileged whites to blame non-whites for their own poverty, a recurring strategy within WCI that is explored in Chapter 3.

In another recurring theme, it was white theologians who supplied white elites with a theological justification for racial exploitation, and white missionaries and their Asian allies who articulated an alternative. While their vision of religious conversion was often entwined with imperatives of cultural assimilation to a white ideal, they were nonetheless committed to social and political equality.

The War on Terror – And the Racializion of Islam. During the Cold War, WCN had (re)defined itself in opposition to "godless communism" and Southern white evangelicals replaced Northern liberal Protestants as its main public proponents. The delegitimation of anti-black racism and the end of the Cold War threatened to strip WCN of its raison d'être. 9/11 "solved" this problem by supplying a new religious "other" who could be slotted into the existing apocalyptic threat. And because religion is always imbricated with race for adherents of WCN, the Christian/Muslim divide has increasingly become a racialized divide as well.

Of course, secular progressives and religious liberals have consistently challenged the demonization and racialization of Muslim Americans. So did some conservative white evangelicals, including George W. Bush, himself. To be sure, Bush drew on the myth of American exceptionalism to justify his War on Iraq. But he also rejected claims that Islam was an "ideology" rather than a religion, and that it was inherently violent, claims defended by a number of evangelical leaders.

Writing in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that Christianity and democracy reinforced one another in the United States. Almost two centuries since, it is not clear that this is the case. While WCN may have facilitated the consolidation of a white male republic in the early national era, today it stands in the way of an inclusive multicultural democracy. Indeed, contemporary adherents of WCN seem increasingly prepared to sacrifice democracy itself on the altar of white supremacy.

WCI: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

The central protagonist in WCI is, of course, the white, Protestant man, distinguished by his self-discipline, work ethic, and restless activity. Though both WCN and WCI seek to answer the question "Who are *real* Americans?" WCN answers the question by stating, "Those who look like us; think like us; were born here; and share our blood." WCI, in contrast, answers the question: "Only those who have earned their place."

Some white evangelicals might object that Protestantism is inherently individualistic. In truth, it has always contained strongly communitarian strands as well. In the American context, this communitarian strand was already visible in the Puritans' vision of a "city on a hill" in which Christian citizens had a moral obligation to bear one another's burdens. It was also visible in subsequent Protestant-led social reform movements, from abolition through Prohibition to civil rights. But the ethical contradictions of slavery and growing confrontations with white Christian

abolitionists and Christian slaves in the mid-1800s forced white Protestant theologians to disentangle the two strands from one another so as to free their white followers from Biblical demands for social justice and racial inclusion. Though the disentangling commenced in the antebellum South as a means of defending Black slavery, it was later completed in the industrial North as a means of resisting the Social Gospel and then carried forth in the battle against "godless Communism." The result was a social imaginary comprising autonomous individuals and a moral imaginary focused on individual salvation and personal responsibility. Within this worldview, collective guilt and social justice became un-Christian -- where they were not rendered unimaginable.

Against History: The Racist Roots of Biblical Literalism.
As evangelical historian Mark Noll has shown, literalist readings of Christian Scripture initially emerged amongst pro-slavery theologians in the antebellum South. Abolitionist theologians invoked the "spirit" of the Bible, as found in the words of the Hebrew Prophets or Jesus' Sermon the Mount. Pro-slavery theologians countered with the "letter" of the Bible, which attested to the existence of slavery in Ancient Israel and Christian Rome. Biblical literalism is most often understood as a response to "historical criticism" and "Darwinian evolution." But it was also a means of defending white supremacism and rejecting social reform. One of the unintended consequences of the literalist turn was a turn away from history and, more generally, a reflexive anti-intellectualism that Noll famously referred to as "the scandal of the evangelical mind."Even today, a century and a half later, these consequences can be readily detected in public opinion data (Whitehead and Perry).

Against Society. Religious historians have written a great deal about the cooptation of conservative white Protestants by Northern business elites and Republican political operatives. They paint evangelical theologians and pastors as tools and dupes who were used and discarded by the wealthy and powerful. But this is too simple. Some of the most influential evangelical theologians of the mid-20th century, including John Rousas Rushdoony and Jerry Falwell Sr, held avowedly racist views that deeply informed their theologies. They gravitated towards libertarian economic policy, not only as a means of securing the support of conservative businessmen, but also as a veil for their racism. The goal of this libertarian economic theology was not simply to defend "free enterprise"; it was also to defend the racial order, in the North as well as the South, without having to publicly appeal to race. Decrying "government regulation" and "welfare handouts" in the name of "individual freedom" and "personal morality" was at least as much about preserving white privilege as it was about protecting property rights.

*Against Institutions: Religion and "Foreign Alliances."*After World War I, conservative white Protestants vehemently opposed Woodrow Wilson's plan for a League of Nations, and on two main grounds. One was properly theological: in a fallen world, efforts at melioration are bound to fail. Another was essentially racist: creating international institutions meant sharing power with religious (and racial) others. Like the American man, the American state must defend its rugged individualism. For the American state was the American man writ large.

The Anti-Political Theology of White Evangelicalism: WCI and Contemporary Social Policy.
One of the most puzzling facts about conservative white Protestants -- especially for secular white progressives -- is their love-affair with laissez-faire economics, not least because it leads them to oppose social reform projects that are crucial to achieving racial justice. The usual

explanation for this state of affairs is stupidity and expediency: evangelical laypeople are being "duped" and their leaders are "selling out." But the story is more complex than this. White evangelical theologians constructed a coherent ethos of "personal accountability" that links worldly success, otherworldly salvation and political ideology in a coherent fashion, and they did so in defense of the racial order, and not just the economic order.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Civic community and cooperation requires "true myths." These are intersubjective "fictions" (in the sense that they are not concretely observable but exist in our shared understandings) that have always enabled human beings to band together and communicate using common values, stories, heroes, and symbols. Americans need "truth myths" in the form of collective narratives that articulate the highest aspirations of the community, and memorialize people and movements that pursued them. In the short-term this requires an acknowledgment and dismantling of both the covert and overt elements of white supremacy within white conservative Christianity, while exchanging these entities for the more pro-social, civic-minded, and communitarian elements within their own tradition. It does not mean abandoning American patriotism or American individualism altogether. But it does mean reimagining the nation and the obligations of citizens towards one another