

# White Christian Privilege

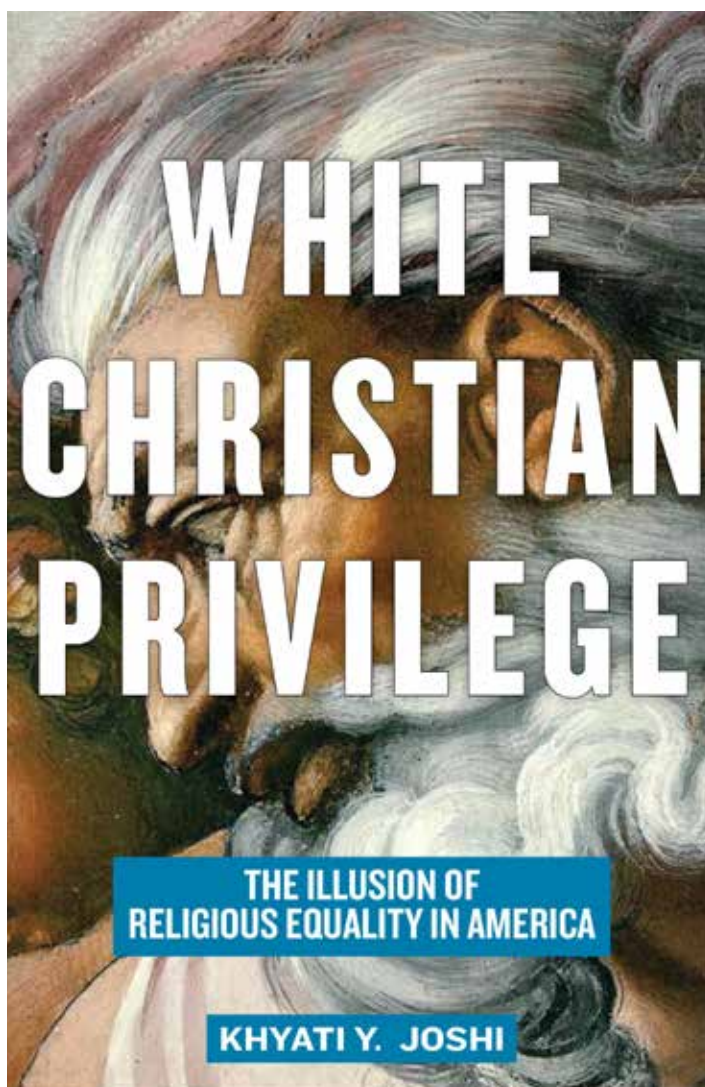
The Illusion of Religious  
Equality in America

BY KHYATI Y. JOSHI

Discussion Guide for Religious  
Studies and Ethnic Studies

DEVELOPED BY CHRISTOPHER TRAUTMAN  
and KHYATI Y. JOSHI

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# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND ETHNIC STUDIES

Developed by Christopher Trautman and Khyati Y. Joshi

***White Christian Privilege : The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* exposes the invisible ways in which White Christian privilege disadvantages racial and religious minorities in America.**

The United States is recognized as the most religiously diverse country in the world, and yet its laws and customs, which many have come to see as normal features of American life, actually keep the Constitutional ideal of “religious freedom for all” from becoming a reality. Christian beliefs, norms, and practices infuse our society; they are embedded in our institutions, creating the structures and expectations that define the idea of “Americanness.” Religious minorities still struggle for recognition and for the opportunity to be treated as fully and equally legitimate members of American society. From the courtroom to the classroom, their scriptures and practices are viewed with suspicion, and bias embedded in centuries of Supreme Court rulings create structural disadvantages that endure today.

In *White Christian Privilege*, Khyati Y. Joshi traces Christianity’s influence on the American experiment from before the founding of the Republic to the social movements of today. Mapping the way through centuries of slavery, westward expansion, immigration, and citizenship laws, she also reveals the ways Christian privilege in the United States has always been entangled with notions of White supremacy.

Through the voices of Christians and religious minorities, Joshi explores how Christian privilege and White racial norms affect the lives of all Americans, often in subtle ways that society overlooks. By shining a light on the inequalities these privileges create, Joshi points the way forward, urging readers to help remake America as a diverse democracy with a commitment to true religious freedom.

## NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS

Grappling with the topics in *White Christian Privilege* is not just an intellectual exercise; it also involves a **strong and inevitable affective component.**

Studying *White Christian Privilege*, you and your students will react not only as scholars but also as people with emotional responses to the subject matter. For your exploration of the text to be meaningful, you must be prepared to engage not just with the intellectual but also the emotional. Few faculty are accustomed to asking their students: "How does this make you feel?" But it is critical to check the emotional pulse of our students during these conversations. If Christians, or students in any agent group, are defensive about their privileged identities, they will be blind to the larger structural

components of systemic discrimination, as well as the specific ways they benefit from these systems. If they respond with guilt, they may be paralyzed to real change and instead seek absolution from you or their peers with disadvantaged identities. Students in target groups also need to feel safe to share in these conversations and feel that they have a full voice and a seat at the table. Finally, you as the discussion leader need to regularly check your own feelings to ensure that you are in the right intellectual and emotional space to be present for this work and for the conversations it will prompt.

# CHAPTER 1

## Christianity and American National Identity

The optical illusion of American religious freedom begins with the idea that just writing it down makes it real. The illusion is fed by one of the United States' grand narratives: that the nation was founded as a haven for those fleeing religious persecution, where all can worship freely and equally. The facts behind the illusion are very different.

### Discussion Questions

- What is Christian normativity? How is White Christian identity linked to ideas of what it means to be an American?
  - Dr. Joshi describes the separation of church and state as a “popular but unfulfilled” idea. Why? In what ways does America fall short of this stated value of American democratic life?
  - The phrase “church and state” is itself an example of Christian hegemony, by using the word “church” to describe religion in America. Can you think of other examples of Christian hegemony enshrined in the language of American civic and cultural life – either historically or in the present day?
  - If someone were to tell you they were a Christian, what, if any, assumptions would you make about them and their beliefs?
- What questions would you have about them? What about someone who told you they were an atheist?
- Why does it matter that the Supreme Court found that the free exercise clause of the Constitution protects religious belief and not religious practice? How does this interpretation impact Christians versus other religious groups?
  - Dr. Joshi takes issue with the idea that legal bans on certain practices – polygamy in *Reynolds* or peyote use in *Smith* – are done with a hand toward neutrality. The courts call these bans “facially neutral,” but Joshi writes: “we must recognize Christianity as the ‘face’ against which other traditions are being compared.” What does this mean to you? Give an example of a “facially neutral” policy that actually provides advantage to a group with social power.

# CHAPTER 1

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- Courts often look to precedent – decisions in prior cases – to decide current cases. They also often look to original intent, considering how the Constitution was interpreted by the framers by reference to 18<sup>th</sup> century vocabulary and social mores. On their face, these seem like reasonable, fair criteria to use in deliberation. But do they, in fact, further embed Christian practice and belief in current law? Why or why not? Are there alternative modes of thought that judges could apply, to avoid perpetuating historic biases?
- If you could re-write the religion clauses of the First Amendment for 21<sup>st</sup> century America, what would they say? Why?
- What is the racialization of religion? How does it impact different groups in American society?
- What damage can be done when minority religions are commodified through the sale of decontextualized religious symbols and images?
- Why do you think anti-Muslim rhetoric, specifically from lawmakers, is more acceptable in public discourse (insofar as it is not universally condemned) than other discriminatory language?
- Find examples of Christian normativity in the word choices and underlying assumptions of the questions above.

## CHAPTER 2

### Christianity and the Construction of White Identity

It takes an understanding of Whiteness's role in US history and its collusion with Christianity in the construction of American identity for us to trace how laws, court decisions, public policies, and social movements perpetuate White Christian privilege despite the optical illusion of religious freedom for all.

#### Discussion Questions

- Explain the ways that race and religion have been linked throughout history. Why do you think "blood purity" was used as a basis to differentiate between people who identified themselves as Christians?
- Near the end of the chapter, Dr. Joshi observes that "for those who imagine an American 'blood purity' that interweaves Christianity and Whiteness, current immigration trends represent not just demographic change but a loss of national identity." What do you think about this statement? What are the elements of American "national identity" that Christians might fear being lost due to immigration? How have we seen anxiety over demographic trends play out in the US?
- How has "science" historically been weaponized to justify violence against religious and ethnic groups? How does scientific racism continue to affect our cultural discourse today?
- Through more than a century of the Supreme Court rulings, as well as the role of Manifest Destiny in westward expansion and American empire-building, we see the accumulation or maintaining of wealth as inextricably tied to White Christian dominance. In what ways do all of these systems support each other?
- Do you see a link between the exclusion of "Indians not taxed," the fractional diminishment of Black identity and representation in the Constitution (through the 3/5 Clause), and the Trump administration's efforts to include a citizenship question in the United States Census in 2020? Discuss.

# CHAPTER 3

## Immigration, Citizenship and White Christian Supremacy

The United States' racial and religious hierarchy is not a result of coincidence. The demographics of every era, whether the idealized 1950s or the present day, are a consequence of public policies, intentionally adopted and implemented by government officials and approved by the courts over the course of centuries.

### Discussion Questions

- Was Trump's 2017 executive order, also known as the Muslim Ban, "business as usual" for the United States, or a departure from historical trends?
- The National Origins Act of 1924 tied immigration quotas to the 1890 US census, even though more current demographic information was available through contemporaneous Census data. Why did Congress select the 1890 census?
- For centuries, the United States has incentivized, encouraged, or imported (as slaves) populations that would satisfy US economic needs. How does this contribute to social inequities among different racial and religious groups? Compare and contrast this reality with Emma Lazarus' famed words on the Statue of Liberty: "...give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free."
- Differences in race are often more visible than differences in religious belief. Discuss other identities which are either visible or invisible. What might the impact of that visibility/invisibility be for people who hold those identities?
- Late in the chapter, Dr. Joshi recounts a debate question then-candidate Hilary Clinton answered during the 2016 presidential election. "In a 2016 presidential debate, a Muslim woman asked Hillary Clinton "with Islamophobia on the rise, how will you help people like me deal with the consequences of being labeled as a threat to the country...?" Clinton's response repeated Islamophobic tropes: "We need American Muslims to be part of our eyes and ears on our front lines ... part of our homeland security." Discuss Secretary Clinton's response and Joshi's characterization of it. Do you support or take issue with what Clinton said? Do you see Joshi's characterization as fair or unfair to Clinton? Why?



# CHAPTER 4

## Everyday Christian Privilege

When your beliefs simply are, while mine are represented as “myths” and “legends,” you enjoy an implied legitimacy that I can never match.

### Discussion Questions

- Have you ever attended an office or school “holiday party” in December?
  - a. What holidays were you celebrating?
  - b. Was there a “holiday” tree or other themed decorations? Colors? What were they?
  - c. How did you respond to the party and the themes or colors that were present? What does that say about your religious identity? What response might a person with a different religious identity have to what you saw and heard?
  - d. Who was really included or excluded by the “holiday” party?
- When schools or workplaces adopt policies meant to respond to students’ or workers’ religious identities (sometimes called “accommodations”), what needs do those policies satisfy? What needs do they fall short of satisfying?
- In your area, if a candidate for public office visited a synagogue or gurdwara or a mosque during a campaign, how do you think that would be perceived by voters? How would it be treated by the media? Why? What feelings would you have about them? If a candidate, after being elected, swore their oath on a Quran, Torah, or other holy book other than the Christian Bible, how would that be perceived and discussed?
- We recognize nuance in how Christians practice their faith selectively (that is, observing some tenets and requirements while ignoring others). Why don’t we generally do the same for members of other religious traditions? Why does a religious minority’s selective religious practice seem worthy of comment or challenge?
- What are your reflections on the examples of everyday Christian privilege presented in the book? Did they resonate with you? Did you agree or disagree with Joshi’s identifying any of these experiences or phenomena as “Christian privilege”?
- Take a moment to think about other examples of Christian privilege. What did you come up with? (Remember that your statements may be broadly true, even though they are not true for, or do not reflect, every individual’s experience.)
- Of the privileges Joshi identifies, or that you identified in response to the previous question, are there some that Christians of color experience differently? Which ones, and why? What role does race play in these experiences?

# CHAPTER 5

## Voices of Christian Privilege

Christianity is deep in the legal and social infrastructure of America, and for many Christians it is deeply held as truth and moral structure, not just personal choice. The voices here illuminate those structures, and the modes of thought they form in all of us.

### Discussion Questions

- It is often difficult for individuals to connect everyday experiences of religious oppression with the larger structures of institutional religious oppression. Why is this true? Is your answer different for Christians vs. religious minorities and atheists?
- While the First Amendment bars Congress and the states from instituting laws that prohibit or interfere with religious practice, religious minorities may still struggle with fully practicing and living their faith. How might this impact religious minorities spiritually? Professionally? In their relationships with family, friends, and colleagues?
- Why do we conflate religiosity and morality? If someone told you s/he was an atheist, what assumptions would you make about her/him?
- In Chapter 1, Dr. Joshi wrote “nothing feels so imbalanced as a level playing field, when for as long as you can remember the field has been tilted in your favor.”
  - a. How does this statement make you feel?
  - b. Can you find examples of this idea in the voices of Christians presented in Chapter 5? In the voices of religious minorities?
  - c. Describe some examples of this idea found in current events.
- Have you ever had your own “a-ha” moment regarding your life experience and how it has been shaped by a privileged or non-privileged identity you hold? Describe it.

## CHAPTER 5

### continued

- We see examples in this chapter of Muslims who fault other Muslims for the prejudice they encountered post 9/11, and of a Native American woman being asked why some Native people were offended by a particular mural while others were not.
  - a. Does it matter if not every member of a group agrees about that group's (mis) treatment? Why or why not?
  - b. If one member of a group sees a particular phenomenon as religious oppression (mistreatment, discrimination, structural disadvantage, etc.) or as Christian privilege, does it matter that another member of the group does not see it the same way? Why or why not?
  - c. How might these differing views affect a group's ability to self-advocate? How might they affect an individual's ability to see the structural or systemic inequality behind an experience?

# CHAPTER 6

## Making Meaning and Making Change

How do we find escape from ordinary patterns of thought, even as we exist within them? How do we identify, and help others to identify, the changes that will free us from legacies of injustice and enable us to create “a more perfect union”?

### Discussion Questions

- Why is it important to understand the historical context framing social injustice?
- Dr. Joshi compares ignoring religious identity and diversity to the harm caused by “color-blind racism.” What are some effects of being “faith blind,” for a Christian exhibiting that characteristic? What are some of the effects for the religious minorities around him or her?
- Think about one of your dominant identities. How can you get proximate to the challenges facing members of the minority community opposite your dominant identity? For example: if you are a Christian, how can you get proximate to the challenges (both daily and structural) faced by religious minorities?
- In Chapter 1, Dr. Joshi wrote that public school teachers can discuss religion in a way that “teaches” rather than “preaches”? What are the risks inherent in trying to do so? How would you apply the five changes Dr. Joshi prescribes in Chapter 6 to the task of teaching about religion?
- Why does true equity necessitate a paradigm shift? Why isn’t it enough that we band together in the face of adversity?
- Do you currently know the “ABCDE’s” of a faith different from your own? If not, what is one faith you would like to learn the “ABCDE’s” of? What steps will you take to pursue that knowledge?
- Why do conversations about feelings matter in a dialogue around social justice? What “feelings journeys” might people of dominant identities go on during these conversations? What about people with minority identities?
- Acknowledging the impact of race and religion in American life does no good if we don’t also discuss what actions we can take to effect positive change. Brainstorm ways that you can:
  - a. change the language
  - b. change the questions
  - c. change the focus
  - d. change the foundational assumptions
  - e. change the paradigm

## RECOMMENDED PROJECTS & INTERGRATIVE WORK

“A seat at the table” only helps produce real change when the person in that seat holds a real voice – even, and especially, when that voice may make you uncomfortable.

**Autobiographical Assignment:** Have your students prepare a Reflective Essay early in the course.

**Integrative Historical Essay:** Have students prepare an essay or timeline that relates the little-known historical milestones described in Chapters 2 and 3 to the history of that period that students learned in US high school or college history classes. What connections can students find between, for example, immigration and naturalization policies and the wars, social trends, or economic dislocations of

the same period? Alternatively, can students identify the role of Christianity, as a national norm or standard, in the social, military, or economic milestones of 19th and 20th century history?

Consult *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (Routledge, 2016), 3rd edition for in-class activities and assignments on the topic of religion oppression and Christian Privilege, see Chapter 8 and for in-class activities and assignments on the topic of racism and White Privilege, see Chapter 5.



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