

Introduction

A pervasive *Christian privilege* prevails in the United States today. The United States is recognized as the most religiously diverse country in the world; yet, at the same time, Christianity—particularly Protestantism—has been integral to US national identity. Christian beliefs, norms, and practices, and indeed, a Christian way of looking at the world, infuse our society, enjoying countless legal, structural, and cultural supports whose roots reach back to the arrival of Europeans and the founding of the country. Protestant perspectives have become the “truths” at the bedrock of American society. Christianity dominates by setting the tone and establishing the rules and assumptions about who belongs or does not belong, about what is acceptable and not acceptable in public discourse. It is embedded in our institutions and dictates the structure of our weekend, from Sunday closings for the Christian Sabbath to alcohol sales laws. As a result, the “freedom of religion” enshrined in the pages of the Constitution does not always translate into everyday life. Christian prayer often opens public meetings and graduations all over the US, and the US Congress and state legislatures have always employed chaplains. Christianity has become bound up with US nationalism, with the inscription “In God We Trust” on our currency and our pledge to a nation “under God.” This Christian privilege, which undergirds our country’s institutions and cultural practices, offers advantages to Christians as they lead their lives, and disadvantages for members of minority religious groups.

This book explains how the effects of this privilege are acted out in our society and provides a historical and contemporary overview of how Christian privilege was created and why it has persisted. It demonstrates that Christian privilege in the United States has always been entangled with notions of White supremacy. Indeed, throughout US history, *Christian, English, free, and White* have been superimposed to form mutually supporting advantages based on the co-construction of religion, race, and national origin. These advantages—and corresponding disadvantages, for religious and racial minorities as well as for the nonreligious—persist at both the institutional and individual levels of society, and stand in the way of fulfilment of the promises of equality that were made in the nation’s founding documents and more recent laws. Yet, unlike racism, gender discrimination, or homophobia, Christian privilege often flies under the radar. It is so ingrained in our societal dynamics, it continues to be taken as “normal.” By shining a light on Christian privilege and its entwinement with White privilege, this book aims to equip readers with tools and ideas regarding how they can recognize it operating in our society and foster a more equitable environment for all.

Today’s religious and racial diversity requires that we do far more than just appreciate and embrace it or consider the ways individual experiences shape us. A social justice approach, in which we create change and mitigate bias, requires us first to recognize present circumstances as the product of history—of long and deeply-ingrained patterns and structures of advantage and disadvantage. This book sets out to examine the cultural, institutional, and legal infrastructure on which the experiences of Christians and religious minorities today have been built. Ultimately, it offers a historically informed road map of how Christian privilege developed and has influenced the American experiment from colonial times to the present. Drawing on interviews and personal narratives, it illuminates the impact of White Christian privilege in our workplaces, classrooms, and broader society, and offers strategies to expose and overcome its dynamics.

The book takes a hard look at three specific, related, and mutually supporting phenomena in the US: Christian privilege, Christian normativity, and Christian hegemony. *Christian privilege* is experienced at the individual level, in the everyday; it is manifest in unearned advantages that Christians receive and in the corresponding disadvantages religious minorities, atheists, and agnostics must deal with on an everyday basis. Many people think about bias and discrimination as dynamics that happen between two people. It can be easy to recognize a religious slur like “kike” or “dothead” as bias. We are conditioned to see bias most easily at the individual and interpersonal level, which makes it easy to think that if we all were to treat people with respect and kindness, bias would stop being a problem.

But there’s far more to it than individual cruelty. At the level of our society and culture, Christian privilege is structural. It has afforded the Christian majority the historic and contemporary power to shape social norms. This *Christian normativity* makes Christian values intrinsic to our national identity, conveys the status of truth and rightness on Christian culture, and makes Christian language and metaphors and their underlying theology the national standard. Christian normativity imbues Christianity with a unique power, situating it as ordinary and expected. As a result, atheists and religious minorities who embrace different practices, belief systems, and world views are disadvantaged relative to their Christian peers.¹ Very real everyday consequences result from a situation in which the Christian way of doing something comes to be understood as the normal way of living.

Consciously or unconsciously, we may perceive practices outside the Christian norm as exotic or illegitimate. “God,” for example, is most often depicted in nonreligious settings, in line with Christian imaginings, as an old White man with a flowing beard. We might also see Christian figures like Jesus and the Virgin Mary representing the divine. Yet it is exceedingly unlikely that in a setting that is not explicitly Hindu, for example, we will encounter a representation of “God” as the Hindu God Krishna, with his blue skin, or as the four-armed Saraswati, Goddess of knowledge, wisdom and learning, or as other Hindu Gods with their colorful clothing and multiarmed bodies. Christianity’s images of God are perceived as “normal” images of God because of Christianity’s cultural sway. The God images of other faiths may be regarded as idols—“weird” or cultic in comparison.

It is impossible to overestimate the ways Christian normativity influences the dialogue that goes on in America’s public square—from the traditional news media to the 24-hour churn of online social media. In fact, it is so pervasive, and often so subtle, that we often may not notice it. While Christianity makes frequent appearances in the media, it appears even more often in the subtext—the impressions implicit in the words and images selected. Consider, for example, the images and associations that come into your mind when you read the word “terrorism.” At a meta level, the institutions and legal standards established in the United States over the past 400 years reflect the accretion of Christian privilege and Christian normativity into an infrastructure of Christian hegemony. *Hegemony* refers to a society’s unacknowledged and/or unconscious adherence to a dominant worldview. Hegemonic ideologies are perpetuated through the cultural norms, policies, and practices which set those ideologies up as “business as usual.” *Christian hegemony* thus refers to the predominance and endorsement at the national level of Christian observances, beliefs, scriptures, and manners of worship.² Christianity is embedded in our national laws, mores, and expectations as “regimes of truth,” and endures there with legal and social power that has spanned the length, breadth, and entire history of the country.³

Christian Privilege and White Supremacy

Any discussion of religion in the US that does not explore its intersections with race and racism is incomplete. This book takes an *intersectional* approach, not only grappling with Christian

privilege as a single phenomenon, but also attending to the way it interacts with other structures of social, economic, and legal privilege. The advantages Christians receive are not experienced in isolation; every Christian, and every religious minority, also holds other social identities. Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Middle-Eastern Christians thus experience Christianity in America differently from the way White Christians do. Their various origins and histories in the US have given these groups different experiences. While they share many of the advantages of being Christian in America, those advantages may be harder to recognize or acknowledge, especially because of the racial discrimination and violence some groups have also faced. In this respect, their Christianity is often “othered,” just as racial minorities as such are “othered.” They may be targets of violence, a problem that Black churches, for example, have faced throughout history and continue to face. In some cases, it can be difficult for individuals to distinguish religious identity from cultural identity. The identities of Filipino Catholics, Black Protestants, and others, for example, interweave religion and culture in ways that make them virtually impossible to separate. This intimate connection between an advantaged identity (Christian) and a disadvantaged identity (racial minority) can make it difficult for Christians of color to recognize and acknowledge the advantages they do possess.

White Christian supremacy in America is the product of a centuries-long project in which notions of White racial superiority and Christian religious superiority have augmented and magnified each other. White Christian supremacy is an ideology that developed before the European “Age of Discovery” and European colonization of Africa, Arabia, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. Born from theologies that positioned White Christians at the top of a global social and economic order, White Christian supremacy looked to the Bible for rationales that supported the subjugation and genocide of Indigenous peoples, Black slavery, and a view of Asians as threatening, exotic, and heathen.⁴

These principles coalesced in a series of fifteenth-century Papal Bulls (edicts) that permitted the Portuguese monarchy to seize West Africa by deeming any land not inhabited by Christians as available to be “discovered,” claimed, and exploited by Christian rulers, and permitting the enslavement of Muslims, pagans, and other “unbelievers.” This “Doctrine of Discovery” became the basis of all European claims in the Americas as well as the foundation for the United States’ western expansion.⁵ Christianity thus permeated colonial enterprises around the world, both before and after the colonization of North America. In all of these projects, non-Christians were denied the rights to land, sovereignty, and self-determination enjoyed by Christians.

In what would become the United States, White Christian supremacy was developed, rationalized, and spread by theologians, philosophers, and scientists. At the time of the nation’s founding, most of its major universities were affiliated with the church, from Puritan Harvard and Calvinist Yale to Anglican Columbia, Presbyterian Princeton, and Baptist Brown. “Scholarship” in these institutions of higher learning helped to create and perpetuate White Christian supremacy. By reproducing and amplifying scientific theories of racial hierarchy and religious destiny, these institutions promoted theologies that rationalized land theft from native non-Christians and enslavement of Black non-Christians.⁶ Far from an anomaly in the theological discipline, Whiteness has been a dominant theological outlook by which non-White, non-Christian persons have been assessed along a hierarchy of humanity. The conquest of the US was a colonial endeavor that combined taking land with spreading the gospel of Christ. In the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Our nation was born in genocide.... Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade.”⁷

Over the centuries, Christianity has justified race-based segregation of Whites and Blacks within the same Protestant denominations, be they Baptists or Methodists or Pentecostals. In the present day, Christian normativity perpetuates the societal exclusion of Buddhists, Hindus,

Muslims, and Sikhs through public resistance to mosques, synagogues, temples, and gurdwaras being built in their neighborhoods, among other means.⁸ The same resistance to sharing space with people of color that characterized segregation is reflected in the rejection of sharing public space with religious minorities. Both are born of the desire not to see, touch, or encounter those who are different. Today's version directs a "NIMBY" (not in my backyard) attitude toward entire religious communities.

The Immigration Reform Act of 1965 opened the nation's doors to immigrants of a variety of faiths who had not been permitted to enter the country for many decades. In the period since then, many members of religious minorities have arrived who trace their heritage to Asia, Africa, and the Arab world. To understand their religious experiences, we must also consider their racial minority status. My experience of growing up Hindu in the South, for example, cannot be separated from my experience of growing up brown.

Examining our history and the present day, we can see legal, historical, and everyday moments that illustrate the persistent connection and conflation of race and religion. For example, ideas of Black inferiority during slavery drew on not only notions of racial hierarchy but also on the idea that as non-Christians, Africans were depraved and barbaric. More recently, religion has become a powerful method of classifying the "enemy" or "other" in national life, in ways that affect primarily non-Christian people of color. Muslims, for example, have become particularly demonized in the US. The vicious acts of a miniscule handful of their co-religionists shaped their image in popular culture long before the events of September 11, 2001. Since that date, narratives around "terrorism" and the "war on terror" continue to associate an entire global religion, Islam, with violent, nihilistic movements. Looking more closely at many incidents, we discover that anti-Muslim bias is manifested racially. When Islam is associated with particular physical characteristics—that is, when it is racialized—South Asian Americans like me find ourselves being "randomly" selected for heightened screening at the airport because we look like we might be Muslim. South Asian American Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians, and even Hispanics have been targets of post-9/11 backlash attacks—suffering injury, and sometimes death, because of their brown skin, beards, clothing, or turbans. Their racial and cultural markers are associated with Islam in the popular mind, even though they are not Muslim.

Critical Conversations

Despite contemporary rhetoric predicting the "decline of White Christian America,"⁹ the power of Whiteness and Christianity is deeply dyed in the nation's wool, and omnipresent in American rules and structures. Indeed, those three terms—"White," "Christian," and "American"—have been used interchangeably so often that in many contexts, including in the lexicon of non-White, non-Christian immigrant communities, they remain synonyms for one another. When members of White Christian America react defensively against the nation's growing diversity, it is because they fail to understand the hegemony on which their power is built and to see how normative and privileged their faith and their race still are. They feel they are "losing" and need to fight to preserve their vision of a White Christian America, not realizing how the legal and social deck is still stacked dramatically in their favor. They see existential threats in issues like Sharia law or the "War on Christmas" that are trivial in comparison with the benefits Christians enjoy.

This is not to say that Christian people of faith do not face hostility in certain quarters. There is discrimination against and even hostility toward religion in general from some quarters. Some popular and academic authors have railed against Christianity in particular, and we can find bias against religion more generally in higher education and social justice or progressive circles.

Religion is the last topic some of my progressive colleagues in ethnic and Asian American studies want to discuss. While some scholars are comfortable teaching about the sociocultural aspects of religion, they nevertheless keep their distance from matters of faith.¹⁰

Unfortunately, the bias against religion in ethnic studies is a longstanding tradition.¹¹ In some cases, it is the product of scholars' own unease with religion; in others it springs from the perception of religion as mere superstition and Karl Marx' influential trivialization of religion as the opiate of the masses. Meanwhile, the study of religion and its role in society and individuals' lives is mostly relegated to departments of religion and seminaries. In those spaces, on the other hand, many of my colleagues are uneasy discussing race and racism. This untenable dichotomy—ethnic studies' unease with religion, and religious studies' unease with race—makes integrative works like this one difficult, but all the more necessary.

Many social justice activists are likewise uncomfortable talking about faith. Some have left organized religion because of its role in the oppression of marginalized communities; others are unable to find congruencies between religious participation and political progressivism. People who are ready to talk about homophobia, classism, or racism are ill at ease including religious discrimination in the conversation. The anti-religious perspective of certain scholars and progressives can—sometimes legitimately—come across as bias against Christianity.¹²

Even if some Christians may have personally faced real obstacles, criticism, or discrimination related to their faith, such experiences do not negate the power of Christian privilege. This book does not deny the existence of anti-Christian bias; rather, it aims to show that White Christian norms nonetheless remain entrenched in our institutions, laws, and civic culture in ways that set up an uneven playing field in everyday public, social, and work life to the disadvantage of many religious minorities. Moreover, none of the strategies presented here to ameliorate this problem aim to diminish Christianity, but rather to ensure equal opportunity for all religious traditions and for those who embrace no religion.

Religious Oppression Today

There are many different types of *religious oppression* in our society, of which the most well-known are probably antisemitism and the anti-Muslim sentiment sometimes referred to as “Islamophobia.” Atheists, agnostics, practitioners of Native Americans traditions, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and others also frequently face religious oppression in various forms. From the Jew whose synagogue was vandalized to the Sikh man killed in a post-9/11 “backlash” attack, to the Muslim woman who doesn't get a job because she wears a hijab, religious oppression is present wherever we find privilege: in legal policies and structures, in social designs and cultural practices, and at the level of individual discrimination.¹³

Long before September 11, 2001, and even more so since then, discussions about terrorism and depictions of terrorists have tended to invoke Islam and Muslim Americans—even though, both in the US and globally, most terrorists are not Muslim.¹⁴ Consider the experience of a young Muslim man growing up in Metro Atlanta in the 1980s and 1990s. Salim was a second-generation Indian American Muslim whose religious identity was a source of conflict for him. In addition to disparaging remarks about Muslims from peers, he dealt with anti-Muslim sentiment—disguised as comedy—from teachers. His ninth grade homeroom teacher “always joked” and said to him: “‘You don't have a bomb in that backpack, [do you]?’ And he would duck and make a big joke in front of all the other kids.... We all kind of laughed and made a big joke out of it but it made me really uncomfortable.”¹⁵ For Salim, his teacher's statements and actions legitimized the association of Islam with terrorism in the eyes of an entire classroom; Salim felt vilified by a popular authority figure. His teacher was magnifying a contemporary American cultural perception, of Muslims as terrorists, and placing his own student in that frame in front of all of his peers. Salim's experience

took place long before 9/11, in the early 1990s, during the time of the First Gulf War. Unfortunately, even today students who are Muslim or perceived as Muslim (such as South Asian Americans of various religious affiliations) confront harassment, discrimination, and assaults in school, college, and beyond.¹⁶

The association between terrorism and Islam, and between Islam and Arabs, became the subtext of many other public disputes, like the debate in 2015 and 2016 over the admission of Syrian war refugees to the United States. In the absence of any evidence connecting Syrian refugees with any anti-American terror plot, and in willful ignorance of the 14-step security vetting refugees receive, state governors and presidential candidates nevertheless assumed a connection. The winning candidate in the 2016 presidential contest promised a “Muslim Ban”¹⁷ and ultimately saw the executive order he signed in fulfillment of that promise upheld by the US Supreme Court. By contrast, between 2012 and 2018, White Christian men murdered three Muslim college students in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, shot up a synagogue in Pittsburgh, a gurdwara in Wisconsin, a church in South Carolina, and a concert in Arizona, and yet the words “terrorist” or “terrorism” were rarely used by the media or the politicians to describe these men or their actions.¹⁸ Nor were there many references to the perpetrators’ race or religion. By contrast, when the media identifies an act as “terrorist,” attention is given to the perpetrators’ national and ethnic origins and religion.¹⁹

A Social Justice Approach

This book takes a social justice approach to religion in American society. This approach sets out to acknowledge, explore, and value religious diversity; to recognize the unequal treatment of specific religions in our society; and to identify solutions that can increase equity and justice for all. Examining the numerous historical moments in which Christianity has been used to establish and maintain political, social and cultural dominance leads us to recognize the long presence of White Christian supremacy in the US. We can use these historical legacies to analyze contemporary religious oppression in our country and show how society often ignores or trivializes the experiences of religious minorities and atheists. This lens enables us to understand how Protestant Christianity interacts with Whiteness and national identity and the ways religious groups are admitted to or denied access to citizenship, housing, schooling, legal protections, and political representation. It also allows us to see how Christianity has been used to maintain, justify, and reproduce patterns of domination and subordination—even as many Christian individuals and communities have been part of the fight against oppression.

Often, topics related to religion are discussed through the lens of *pluralism*, which acknowledges religious diversity in the US and how various faiths are part of the national landscape. A *social justice* approach goes further. It illuminates the systemic inequalities faced by religious minorities and the nonreligious and the underlying White Christian supremacist laws and culture that produced those inequalities. Thus it considers not just diversity, but the structural inequities that generate social hierarchies. White Christians’ access to social power, in the form of privilege and normativity, sets them apart from religious minorities and atheists to whom those privileges are denied. Social justice thinking also takes an *intersectional* approach, acknowledging that various religious minority communities are racial minorities also, and taking into account dynamics of class, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities that shape individual and collective experiences. Social justice is a process: it engages in analysis of the contradictions in US history, between aspirations to religious pluralism and the recurring and resurging Christian hegemony that often undermines those aspirations. Social justice is also a goal: we approach and examine legal structures and historical events not just to understand them—though that is an important first step—but to identify the ways in which we can create more just structures to ameliorate historic injustice. Acknowledging how and why religious minorities suffer structural

disadvantages helps us to find ways to create a society that takes all kinds of diversities into account and affords opportunities for all kinds of people to lead fulfilling lives.

A social justice approach focuses beyond individual experiences to recognize the structural dynamics of both advantage and disadvantage. More succinctly, examining society with a social justice mindset means acknowledging that for every “down,” there must be an “up.” To truly understand dynamics of oppression, we have to see the “up”: the advantaged group or identity. It took decades for the scholarship and popular dialogue on racism to go beyond looking at how Blacks and others are targeted for racial discrimination, and to focus on Whiteness and White privilege—the “built-in” advantages that members of the nation’s historic majority enjoy whether they want them or not. Similarly, in matters of sexism, we have long focused on the challenges women face rather on than the structural advantages men enjoy as a result of history and culture. Along similar lines, to effectively unpack and understand religious bias and discrimination in America, we must understand that the “down”—discrimination against US religious minorities—has a corresponding “up”—the rules of society that have been constructed to benefit Christians.

A social justice approach is also reflective, and looks past easy answers. It asks, for example, why we so rarely recognize the religious facet of oppression against religious minorities who are also people of color. We recognize antisemitism as religious oppression, in part because of its central role in twentieth-century history but also in large part because most American Jews are now considered White; as a result, when they are targeted for discrimination, we see that it is directed at their religious identity. By contrast, headlines about violence against Sikh men, or about the “dotbuster” attacks on New Jersey Hindus in the 1980s, often describe “racial violence.” For so many of the reasons described in this book, race is allowed to eclipse what would otherwise be seen as a *religious* attack. Recognizing intersectionality, and situating the disadvantages that racial and religious minorities face in the context of the structural advantages Christians possess, will let us delve into deeper truths.

Contemporary American Religious Diversity

The story of American religious diversity is not a new one. The religions with the longest history on this continent are Native American, but Islam, native African beliefs, and other traditions have coexisted with Christianity on these shores for centuries. The nation grew more diverse with waves of immigration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which brought Catholics, Jews, Orthodox Christians, and members of other faiths, including Sikhs and Buddhists.

However, demographic changes over the past half century have made it particularly urgent to understand the impact of White Christian privilege and envision approaches to respond to it. The United States has been experiencing increases in the number and diversity of religious minorities that are unprecedented. Since 1965, when immigration reforms reopened the nation’s doors to immigrants from beyond northern Europe, the country has experienced a rapid flourishing of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. We have had a larger-than-ever influx of followers of the Baha’i faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Islam, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and more. These religious groups are building communities and houses of worship in places that have never seen anything like them. Contemporary workplaces, classrooms, and the very “public square” of American social and political dialogue are more religiously diverse than they have ever been, and are growing more so.²⁰

How many followers of these faiths are in the US? Answering this question is more difficult than accessing almost any other type of demographic data, such as race, national origin, or gender, because the US Census—the most comprehensive count of American residents—does not collect information on religious self-identification.²¹ We therefore rely mostly on non-governmental surveys that collect data on religion based on voluntary responses as well as on self-reporting from

organized religious congregations. But since Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Native American religious practices are not necessarily congregational or documented by official listings, it becomes all the more difficult to gather demographic data on the numbers of their adherents. Many of these religions' beliefs and practices are individual and highly personal; often, worship will be done at home and through individual actions and choices rather than in a group setting. Thus, individuals may or may not affiliate with houses of worship, and the congregational bias of surveys and scholarship likely results in undercounts of these populations.

TABLE I.1. Current US Religious Affiliation

Group	Pew ²² 327,167,434	PRRI ²³ 322,762,018	Other Sources
Unaffiliated, who might identify as Secular, Atheists or Agnostics	26% 85.1 million	24% 77.5 million	
Buddhist	.07% ²⁴ 2.3 million	1% 2.49 million	
Christian	65% 212.7 million	67% ²⁵ 216.3 million	
Hindu	1% 3.3 million	1% 3.2 million	
Jewish	2% 6.6 million	2% 6.4 million	7.5 Million (Steinhardt Social Science Institute, 2019)
Muslim	3.45 million ²⁶	1% 3.2 million	
Native American spiritualities			
Sikh	200,000 ²⁷		500,000 (Sikh Coalition) ²⁸

Overall, a substantial majority of Americans today are still Christian, a cohort that includes a growing proportion of Black and Hispanic Christians. At the same time, the Pew Research Forum reported in 2012 that White Protestants are no longer a religious majority in the US, a status they held for more than two centuries. The Pew Research Center in 2015 and the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) in 2016 found that 43% of Americans identify as White and Christian, and 30% as White and specifically Protestant. While still the largest single racial/religious cohort by far, this is a substantial change since 1976, when roughly eight in ten (81%) Americans identified as White and Christian, and a clear majority (55%) were White Protestants. The decline in the number of people identifying as Christian is attributable to both the increasing religious diversity in the country and the growing numbers of people who identify as religiously unaffiliated. Minority religions are growing, but still represent fewer than one in ten Americans: Jewish Americans constitute 2% of the public while Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus each make up about 1% of the US population.²⁹ Among racial groups, Asian Pacific Americans have a significantly different religious profile and are much more likely to be non-Christians.

When we speak of “religion,” we must remember that it is not merely a category—a checkbox on a form, a line of one’s personal biography, or an aggregation of thousands or millions of people. Religion has many functions, and is lived by each person in unique and individual ways. Religion is a belief system that helps adherents to make sense of this world and beyond. Religion (including the identity of “nonreligious”) crosscuts every other identity category. Sometimes religious groups function like ethnicities, linking people by a common place of origin (real or imagined), or a common language; in other cases, they do not. Either way, religion is a source of personal identity, and of connection to some larger group identity; it may be a vehicle for

membership, affiliation, and solidarity. It is a common source of identity and community for immigrant groups. Religion may also be the basis for exclusion, competition, adversarial status, discrimination, or exploitation.

A Hierarchy of Christian Denominations

Members of White Protestant denominations tend to enjoy Christian privilege at its most expansive, while Christian communities of color may enjoy it in different and more constrained ways. Racism has inhibited the social power of African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latinx churches.

In addition to understanding how identities like race, gender, and sexual orientation affect experiences of Christian privilege, it is important to recognize that there are numerous Christian denominations and that a hierarchy or continuum of Christian privilege has been manifest among them. In colonial America and the early United States, for example, discrimination against Christians whose theology was at odds with Protestantism, including Anabaptist Christians (such as the Amish and Mennonites), Mormons (adherents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), Quakers, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and believers in Christian Science, placed those Christians in a relatively disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the mainstream Protestant majority. Indeed, the question of whether these groups were "Christian" was—and to some degree remains—contested. For other Christian groups, particularly Catholics but also adherents of the many eastern Orthodox traditions, it was their immigration in large numbers and the resulting sense of insecurity among White American Protestants that led to religious discrimination and positioned these non-Protestants as lower in the social hierarchy.

The Path Forward

As long as we treat our foundational ideals of freedom of religion and "all men are created equal" as if they are realities rather than aspirations, the dominance of Protestant Christianity and Whiteness over the political and social institutions of the United States will remain invisible.

The fact that religious freedom is nominally enshrined in the First Amendment, and is applied to the states by the Fourteenth, does not mean that we have religious equality. This book debunks the fallacy of American religious freedom and offers ways to acknowledge the harder truth of White Christian supremacy, in hopes of helping to create a society with institutions and cultural practices in which all can more equitably coexist. It does so by listening to the voices and highlighting the experiences of members of religious minorities in our diverse nation, and by placing early twenty-first-century American politics and society in a long historical context. By considering the changes in thought and approach that could direct us toward a more just coexistence, this book aims to amplify the dialogue on national identity and put forward a social justice approach to religion in the US that may finally unshackle us from the legacies described in the next few chapters.

This book is not an exercise in political correctness. Its aim is to illuminate how Christianity in the US has served the needs of the dominant religious, ethnic, racialized majorities with historically greater access to institutional and cultural power than other groups. This exploration challenges deeply held myths and beliefs about American religious freedom and opportunity. Open and honest conversations are messy and difficult, but they are necessary if we are to advance as a nation. US society is highly segregated, not only by race and religion but also by socioeconomic class and political outlook; most of us socialize with others who not only look like us but also think like us.³⁰ Casual conversations with those not in our in-group around religion often become contentious, leaving many feeling uncomfortable.

In many parts of our society, difference is seen as a deficit and dialogue as weakness; diversity, even when touted as a benefit, is given mere lip service. But in order to address the inequalities in our midst, we have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. This conversation will not be easy, but it is essential. This book seeks to offer a guide toward that introspection and to grapple maturely with the challenges and paradoxes of White Christian supremacy in the United States.