

RESEARCH NOTES*

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In “The Idea of a Christian Society,” T.S. Eliot writes “[m]y point of departure has been the suspicion that the current terms in which we discuss international affairs and political theory may only tend to conceal from us the real issues of contemporary civilization.”¹ It is from this perspective that I seek to explore the relationship between Christianity and culture: are the actions representing Christianity in the United States domestic political environment indicative of Christianity in American culture? I will explore the relationship between Christianity and social justice, and how this relationship has affected American culture.² My dissertation focused on themes of poverty and complicity in the punk rock band Bad Religion’s lyrics and the Bible.³ What I found is that much of what Bad Religion had to say about social justice is similar to Jesus’s preaching of social justice. There are even parallels in the prophets and Psalms and their criticisms of excess wealth and greed. This aids my current project in demonstrating significant themes of social justice in the Bible.

Social justice is a common theme in many progressive white Christian churches in America. The specific facet of social justice I am exploring in this project is the systemic racism towards African Americans, focusing on “flashpoints” in American history as indicators of its changing nature. These flashpoints are key points in race relations in America and include enslavement⁴ and the Civil War, Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement, and political and social policies that came from the Reagan administration. These time periods were crucial in weaving racism into the structure of American culture. Many churches openly seek more diversity in their

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¹ T(homas) S(tearns) Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, 1948), 3.

² My timeframe, based on the specific focus of the article, will be mid-19th century until the 1980.

³ “Is Bad Religion Good Religion? An Interpretation of Acts 17 as a Basis for Engagement with Secular Culture Seen through the Lens of Bad Religion” (MLitt dissertation, University of St Andrews, 2014).

⁴ See Kay Waldman, “[Slave or Enslaved Person?](https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/05/historians-debate-whether-to-use-the-term-slave-or-enslaved-person.html)” *Slate Magazine*, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/05/historians-debate-whether-to-use-the-term-slave-or-enslaved-person.html> (accessed 2 December 2019).

congregations,⁵ but research shows that this isn't happening⁶. Is there a distinct difference between the Christianity in the white church and black church that keeps them separate? As I look for answers, I will ask:

- What is the difference between the white church and the black church?⁷ Are these cultural or theological differences?
- What preachers or churches played a role in the development of these differences?
- What impact did these differences have on racism via enslavement, Jim Crowe, and public policies of the Reagan era?
- How did the relationship between the white church and racism influence American politics?

The Color of Change documents the birth of a new type of Christianity that developed around the Civil War as tensions between slaveowner Christians and abolitionist Christians grew.⁸ I intend to research the specific churches and preachers that adapted their theology for the sake of slaveowners. Tisby documents the trajectory of Christianity from these adaptations through divisions within the churches while comparing it to the growth of Christianity among enslaved people. He then traces the churches' relationship with Jim Crow laws and the politicians who supported and opposed them, and those who rose to power in the following decades.

In *The Queen: The Forgotten Life of an American Myth*, Josh Levin documents the rise and fall of Linda Taylor, most famously known as the "welfare queen," who became a popular campaign trope during Ronald Reagan's bid for presidency. Reagan was known for his Christianity and was extremely popular among the nation's mostly white evangelicals.⁹ In 2019, a review of

⁵ See also Brandon D. Smith, "[Cultivating Racial Diversity in the Local Church](https://factsandtrends.net/2019/03/05/cultivating-racial-diversity-in-the-local-church/)," <https://factsandtrends.net/2019/03/05/cultivating-racial-diversity-in-the-local-church/>, (Accessed 10 November 2019), and Aaron Earls, "[America's Churches Are Becoming More Diverse](https://factsandtrends.net/2018/06/27/americas-churches-are-becoming-more-diverse/)," <https://factsandtrends.net/2018/06/27/americas-churches-are-becoming-more-diverse/>, (Accessed 10 November 2019).

⁶ Bob Smietana, "[Research: Racial Diversity at Church More Dream Than Reality](https://lifewayresearch.com/2014/01/17/research-racial-diversity-at-church-more-dream-than-reality/)," <https://lifewayresearch.com/2014/01/17/research-racial-diversity-at-church-more-dream-than-reality/>, (accessed 10 November 2019)

⁷ Michael Crumpler, "[Black Believer in a White Church](https://www.religioussocialism.org/black_believer_in_a_white_church)," https://www.religioussocialism.org/black_believer_in_a_white_church (Accessed 10 November 2019). Crumpler describes his experience saying "As soon as I entered, I knew it was The White Church. There were no black people. I had never been to a church where there were no black people... It taught me that my Black Church experience was the anomaly and The White Church the norm." It is in this spirit that I differentiate between the Black Church and the White Church or Black Christianity and White Christianity. The origins of this division go back to Antebellum evangelism, and I will explore this further in my article.

⁸ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Change: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 2019.

⁹ Ted Olsen, "[Remembering Ronald Reagan](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/juneweb-only/6-7-12.0.html)," *Christianity Today*, June 1, 2004, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/juneweb-only/6-7-12.0.html> (accessed 10 November 2019).

the Nixon tapes revealed a racist conversation between then-president Richard Nixon and future president Ronald Reagan. Tim Naftali writes in *The Atlantic*, “These new tapes are a stark reminder of the racism that often lay behind the public rhetoric of American presidents.”¹⁰ The United Nations had just recognized The People’s Republic of China, and an angry Reagan (governor of California at the time) called the President to complain about the vote. During the conversation, Reagan directed slurs at delegates from African nations. Nixon then used this conversation as Reagan speaking for “racist Americans, and they needed to be listened to,” and this sentiment was further demonstrated in Reagan’s defense of apartheid states.¹¹

To make sense of this complex web of power and politics, I will compare the different teaching of the Bible and the different understandings and interpretations regarding race. I will trace these teachings and their growth from their origin to what, if any, role they play within Christianity today. I will analyze the most prominent theologians and preachers who played a role in creating and spreading these teachings to determine their influence among prominent political positions, particularly those who publicly state their Christianity. Taking the analysis to a presidential level is important to see the white church’s role in shaping systemic racism in America from the perspective of the policy makers, particularly since all but one of the forty-five presidents have been white, and most identify as Christian.¹²

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¹⁰ Tim Naftali, “[Ronald Reagan’s Long-Hidden Racist Conversation With Richard Nixon.](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/07/ronald-reagans-racist-conversation-richard-nixon/595102/)” *The Atlantic*, 30 July 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/07/ronald-reagans-racist-conversation-richard-nixon/595102/> (accessed 10 November 2019)

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² David Masci, “[Almost all U.S. Presidents, including Trump, have been Christians.](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/20/almost-all-presidents-have-been-christians/)” Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/20/almost-all-presidents-have-been-christians/> (accessed 10 November 2019)