

BOOK REVIEW

***White Christian Privilege:
The Illusion of Religious Equality in America***

by Khyati Y. Joshi

New York: New York University Press, 2020, 256 pages.

In the wake of ongoing conversations about inequality, Khyati Joshi's *White Christian Privilege* highlights the role of religion, an oft overlooked but persistent aspect of American identity. Joshi makes a straightforward, compelling case for how Christianity continues to wield influence despite demographic trends indicating decreases in both white and Christian populations. She employs a critical perspective by problematizing "deeply-ingrained patterns and structures of advantage and disadvantage" (2), blending sociopolitical history with minority voices, and suggesting social justice strategies for an equitable social order (12-14). The readable language along with clearly explained scholarly references and practical takeaways make the book accessible to a wide audience. Readers will understand more about how Christian privilege operates and interacts with race, from individual experiences to national politics.

The book's strength lies in how it challenges notions about the existence of religious equality both historically and presently. In chapter one, Joshi casts this ideal as "an optical illusion" (26). She traces a line from the First Amendment – designed originally to exempt state governments – to Supreme court rulings of the last decade. One example is the willingness of the court to protect Christian Hobby Lobby workers' objections to birth control, but not the controlled use of Peyote for Native American spiritual practices (37). Former President Trump provides the strongest fodder for her argument. As a figurehead advancing "anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant" sentiment and policy while also refusing to condemn antisemitic, white nationalists at Charlottesville (59), he exemplifies how the vision of America as primarily white and Christian still holds sway.

Chapter two elaborates on the origins of the relationship between "Whiteness and Christianity... two sides of a wide ribbon," conjoined since the colonial era (76). It is not news that the motivation to spread Christianity to "heathen" peoples informed colonization, but Joshi carries this narrative further in chapter three, explaining how the nation continued to restrict citizenship along racial and religious lines into the 21st century (e.g. Chinese Exclusion Act, Trump's Muslim Ban). One strong illustration of the subtle but powerful influence of white Christian privilege appears in the history of naturalization, which was limited to "free white persons" of "good character" until 1952. This allowed shifting scientific and religious arguments

for whiteness and morality to justify denying citizenship to non-white and non-Protestant immigrants (112). Such biased criteria were explicitly overturned with President Johnson's 1965 Immigration Reform Act, but the explication of America's history with immigration reveals how deeply Christianity runs alongside the vision of a white America.

In chapters four and five, the narrative turns to how privilege and disadvantage affect life today. Though more non-white and non-Christian immigrants have become citizens, they still run up against white Christian privilege in different spheres of life. The lists of means by which Christian normativity privileges adherents (e.g., not having one's credibility challenged in court for swearing on one's holy book) reads much like Peggy McIntosh's list of white privileges (McIntosh [2009] 2020). In addition to citing interview data from white Christian teachers and recounting their reactions to the concept of privilege (denial, internalized superiority, recognition – 163), Joshi also presents common minority experiences of wrestling with narratives of inferiority. The examples invite perspective-taking of students excluded from functions like team sports prayers, non-Christian professionals who miss work for religious holidays, or religious adherents who are denied a building permit for a temple or mosque but are surrounded by churches. These real-life stories reveal a pattern of persistent discrimination and "othering" which Joshi brings to light before discussing how such patterns can be challenged.

In the concluding chapter, Joshi provides guidelines for positive change organized around five components – the *language* used about religion and morality, the *questions* we ask our neighbors and the way we frame debates on religious equality, the *focus* on race more than religion and tolerance more than real interfaith work, and the erroneous *foundational assumptions* that religious differences do not matter or that removing religion altogether is the solution. She closes with a short invitation for readers to help "replace the very notion of privilege with a fulfillment of the ideals of equality" (225).

Overall, Joshi effectively supports her thesis with an informative historical analysis and relevant anecdotes. She could further emphasize to academic readers the need for research on this topic given how often religion itself is neglected (15-17). In a few places, her argument could benefit from a more careful, thorough presentation. For instance, she would simultaneously strengthen her argument and point Christian audiences to more resources by incorporating literature on racial divisions and efforts towards reconciliation within the church itself, given key change efforts would likely start here. Additionally, her recommendations for changing the language on morality do not accurately portray how Christians tend to approach morality, nor does it provide a sufficiently clear, unifying recommendation. Though she appropriately addresses how white Christians have the influence to dictate issues on the political agenda (e.g., abortion), suggesting instead "a morality of increasing rights" misrepresents nuanced Christian perspectives and casts Christians as "insistent on restricting the rights of individuals: women, LGBTQ people, and so forth" (214). Here, she misses an

opportunity to highlight the need for shared values that transcend religion. Lastly, as with related critical approaches, the book lacks a concept of the state which provides a clear picture of what specific policy changes would need to happen to make our democratic republic one that takes religious equality seriously (Bracey 2014). Other scholars can pick up this work, but I expect readers would more readily support the cause if provided with a more precise vision that delineates between policy and cultural problems where possible.

White Christian Privilege leaves readers with fruitful, relevant questions, even if Joshi does not raise them explicitly. For Christian and non-Christian audiences alike, the book provides a chance for reflection on the role of religion in everyday life and politics. Such a pause is timely for citizens of all stations amid an age of identity politics, shifting population demographics, and the changing place of religion in American society.

References

- Bracey, Glenn E. 2014. "Toward a Critical Race Theory of State." *Critical Sociology* 41(3):553-572.
- McIntosh, Peggy. 2020. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work." *Privilege and Prejudice: Twenty Years with the Invisible Knapsack*. United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Whitney Hoermann
University of Georgia

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