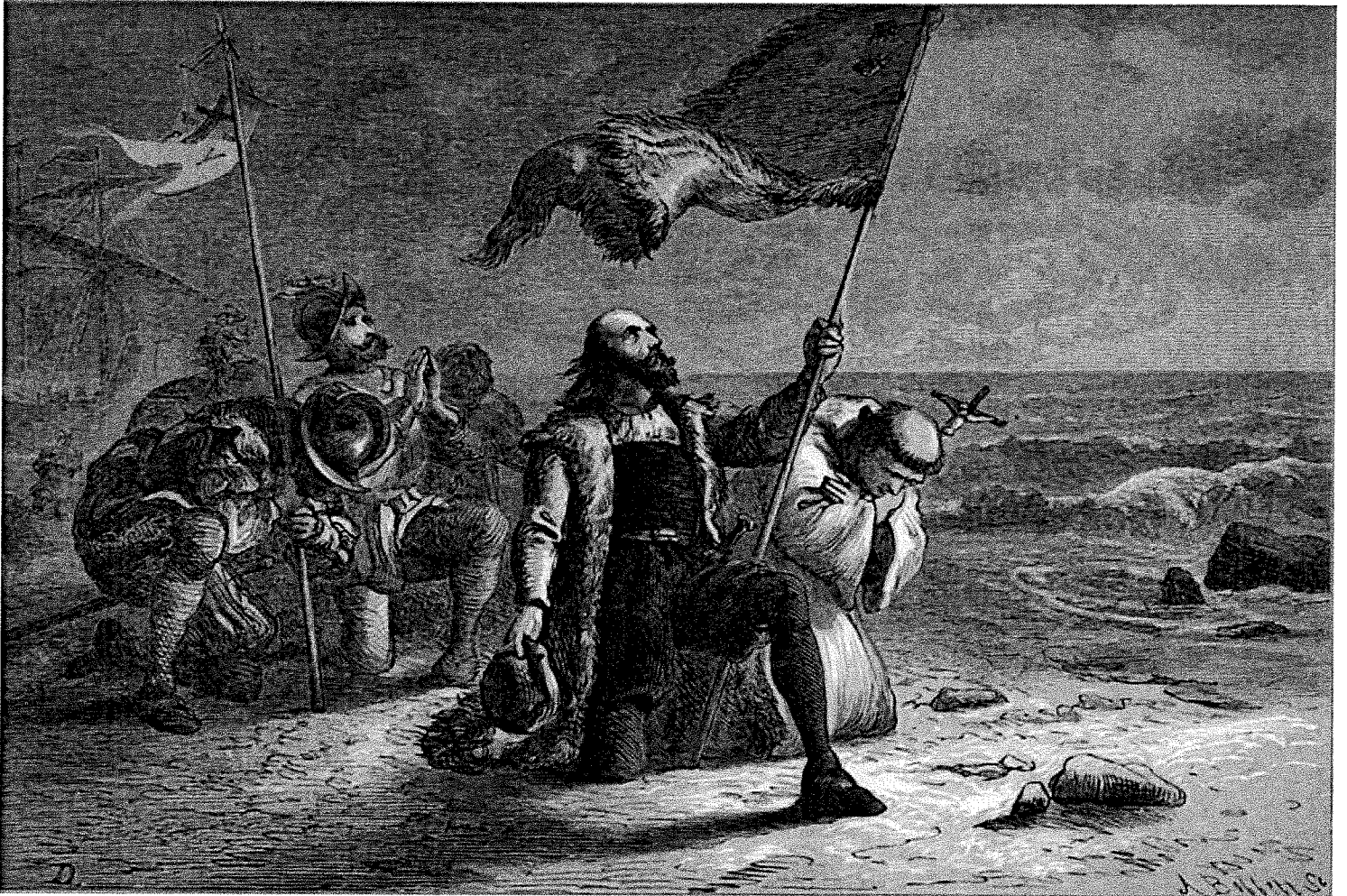


## The Roots of Christian Nationalism Go Back Further Than You Think



A painting entitled, "The Landing of Columbus," by Albert Bobbett (1877) of Christopher Columbus arriving in the Americas. Sponsored by Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, Italian navigator and colonist Columbus set out to discover a westward route to Asia. He landed on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, claiming it for Spain. The priests who accompanied him forcibly converted large numbers of the indigenous population to Christianity. The Print Collector—Getty Images

BY **ROBERT P. JONES** AUGUST 31, 2023 7:00 AM EDT

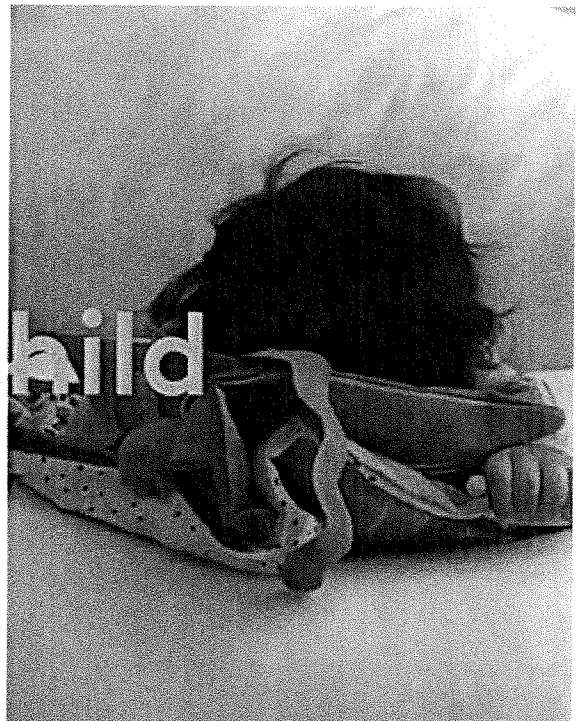
Robert P. Jones is the president and founder of PRRI and the author of *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*, which won a 2021 American Book Award. He writes weekly at [robertpjones.substack.com](https://robertpjones.substack.com). His forthcoming book is *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and the Path to a Shared American Future* (9/5/2023)

**IDEAS**

**A**cross the last few decades in the U.S., we have experienced widespread debates and even violent conflicts over American history. Battles like these typically erupt during times of social change, when cultural convulsions shake the foundations of old ways of knowing and living. Identity, rather than policy, drives divisions. History becomes the new front line in the culture wars, as claims about who we are as a nation inevitably turn on competing narratives about when and how we arrived at this place.

The term “white Christian nationalism” has recently emerged in the social sciences and the media as a way of describing the worldview that has burst onto the public stage with Trumpism and the “Make America Great Again” movement. The toxic blend of ethno-religious identity politics was reflected in the prayers and religious symbols participants carried at the U.S. Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021, and it has become central to the trajectory of the contemporary Republican Party, two thirds of whom identify as white and Christian.

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But if we see these recent trends against the long backdrop of western history, we can see that the phenomenon this term describes has far deeper roots than the post-Obama MAGA backlash. Our two political parties are increasingly animated by two starkly conflicting moral visions that have struggled for

ascendancy since the first Europeans landed on these shores five centuries ago. Is America a divinely ordained promised land for European Christians, or is America a pluralistic democracy where all stand on equal footing as citizens? Most Americans embrace the latter vision. But a desperate, defensive, mostly white Christian minority continue to cling to the former.

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To fully understand the deep roots of today's white Christian nationalism, we need to go back at least to 1493—not the year Christopher Columbus “sailed the ocean blue,” but the year in which he returned to a hero's welcome in Spain, bringing with him gold, brightly colored parrots, and nearly a dozen captive Indigenous people. It was also the year he was commissioned to return to the Americas with a much larger fleet of 17 ships, nearly 1,500 men, and more than

a dozen priests to speed the conversion of Indigenous people who inhabited what he, along with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, still believed were Asian shores.

The return of Columbus in 1493 also precipitated one of the most fateful but unacknowledged theological developments in the history of the western Christian Church: the creation of what has come to be known as the Doctrine of Discovery. Established in a series of 15th-century papal bulls (official edicts that carry the full weight of church and papal authority), the Doctrine claims that European civilization and western Christianity are superior to all other cultures, races, and religions. From this premise, it follows that domination and colonial conquest were merely the means of improving, if not the temporal, then the eternal lot of Indigenous peoples. So conceived, no earthly atrocities could possibly tilt the scales of justice against these immeasurable goods.

The Doctrine of Discovery merged the interests of European imperialism, including the African slave trade, with Christian missionary zeal. *Dum Diversas*, the initial edict that laid the theological and political foundations for the Doctrine, was issued by Pope Nicholas V on June 18, 1452. It explicitly granted Portuguese king Alfonso V the following rights:

“To invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens [Muslims] and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery.”

This papal decree, and others that extended and developed its principles, provided the moral and religious justification for an unfettered European colonial race for “undiscovered lands” and fertilized the blossoming African slave trade. The most relevant papal edict for the American context was the bull *Inter Caetera*, issued by Pope Alexander VI in May 1493, with the express purpose of validating Spain’s ownership rights of lands in the Americas following the voyages of Columbus the year before. It praised Columbus and again affirmed the church’s blessing of and interest in political conquest, “that

in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.”

While the Doctrine of Discovery has escaped scrutiny by most white scholars and theologians, Indigenous people and scholars of color have long been testifying to these Christian roots of white supremacy, while dying from and living with their damaging effects. Indigenous scholars such as the late Vine Deloria Jr. (Lakota, Standing Rock Sioux), Robert J. Miller (Eastern Shawnee of Oklahoma), and Steven T. Newcomb (Shawnee/Lenape) have been highlighting, for over 50 years now, the centrality of this critical theological and political turn.

As I've continued my own reeducation journey over the last 10 years, I have come to consider the Doctrine of Discovery as a kind of Rosetta Stone for understanding the deep structure of the European political and religious worldviews we have inherited in this country. The Doctrine of Discovery furnished the foundational lie that America was “discovered” and enshrined the noble innocence of “pioneers” in the story we, white Christian Americans, have told about ourselves. Ideas such as Manifest Destiny, America as a city on a hill, or America as a new Zion all sprouted from the seed that was planted in 1493. This sense of divine entitlement, of European Christian chosenness, has shaped the worldview of most white Americans and thereby influenced key events, policies, and laws throughout American history.

The contemporary currency of this worldview is reflected in the telling results of a 2023 Christian Nationalism Survey, conducted by PRRI in partnership with the Brookings Institution: Do you agree or disagree that “God intended America to be a new promised land where European Christians could create a society that could be an example to the rest of the world.” The survey found that while only 3 in 10 Americans agreed with this statement, majorities of Republicans (52%) and white evangelical Protestants (56%) affirmed it.

Moreover, the survey found that among white Americans today, this belief in America as a divinely ordained white Christian nation—one that has blessed so

much brutality in our history—is strongly linked to denials of structural racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, antisemitism, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, support for patriarchal gender roles, and even support for political violence.

The contemporary white Christian nationalist movement flows directly from a cultural stream that has run through this continent since the first Europeans arrived five centuries ago. The photographs of the insurrectionists storming the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, bear an uncanny resemblance to the painting of Hernando de Soto marshaling Christian symbols to claim Indigenous lands for Spain on May 8, 1541, which still hangs prominently in the Rotunda of that same building. On the Capitol steps, a massive wooden cross was erected, standards emblazoned with the name of Jesus were flown, and Biblical passages were read. Hands were raised in both prayer and violence. Seen in this light, the symbols brandished by the insurrectionists were not incidental; they were the centuries-old ritual implements of the Doctrine of Discovery, summoned to do the work they have always done.

Our current conflicts and contradictions are clear signs that we are experiencing a significant new moment in our nation's history. If we are to get our collective bearings, we must be able to see that the histories of oppression in our country flow from the same source. The compartmentalization of history focused on the plight of specific oppressed groups—the genocide and displacement of Native Americans or the enslavement and lynching of African Americans—has some advantages for specific people groups, insofar as it centers their struggle for justice. But the real beneficiaries of such siloed history are white Christian people. These stories, told in isolation, fracture the historical gaze among the victims of violence, theft, slavery, and oppression. Even well-intentioned accounts, told in this way, encourage a partial reckoning. These fragmented narratives demarcate America's so-called "Indian problem" and so-called "Negro problem"—as even well-meaning whites historically referred to them—as distant islands, neither one visible from the shores of the other. But if we do the hard work of pushing upriver, we find, at the headwaters, the white Christian problem.

In many ways, this truth has always been glaringly apparent. But for those of us who are white and Christian, our precarious position has historically required that we remain vigilantly ignorant of our own origin story while demanding the acquiescence of others in this conspiracy. Every map of every U.S. state is a living witness to our massive land theft and occupation. Yet, up until very recently, history books have been full of the lies necessary to defend an impossibly innocent and glorious past. The crimes were so monstrous and the evidence so near at hand that we desperately built theologies, philosophies, and entire cultural worlds designed to obscure the facts and to produce, propagate, and protect these mythic origins. This worldview washed over our churches and seeped into our sermons, liturgies, and hymnals. It created its own grammar that renders the most clarion testimonies of our accusers silent. Euphemisms like “explorer,” “pioneer,” and “homesteader” created a respectable veneer that smoothed over the jagged valence of terms like “invader,” “occupier,” and “colonizer.” The ubiquitous use of the passive voice in our histories protected responsible subjects. We were so successful in masking the truth that even one of our most enlightened artists could sing to us, without a pang of conscience, “This Land Is Your Land.”

Here is the question that must illuminate the path forward for us and our children: How can we meaningfully respond to being beneficiaries of a crime so plain it cannot be denied, and so large it can never be fully righted?

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Indeed, the challenge before us is formidable. To account for the lives, land, and labor that have been stolen, we will need to relinquish the ethno-religious hierarchies embedded in the Doctrine of Discovery. And we’ll need a moral imagination that is not amnesic, one that will hold on to the memory of the systemic injustices that have accrued to Black and Indigenous people and their forebears.

We’ll also need to expand our vocabulary. For example, while reparations may be the right term to describe what justice looks like for African Americans who

are descendants of enslaved people and who have experienced generations of disenfranchisement by discriminatory U.S. laws, this term may not capture what Native Americans want and deserve. Here, restitution may be a more apt response. As the American Indian Movement and more recently the #LandBack movement have insisted, at root, justice toward Native Americans cannot be met simply with monetary payments; it must be worked out in the context of honoring the promises in U.S. government treaties regarding land and sovereignty.

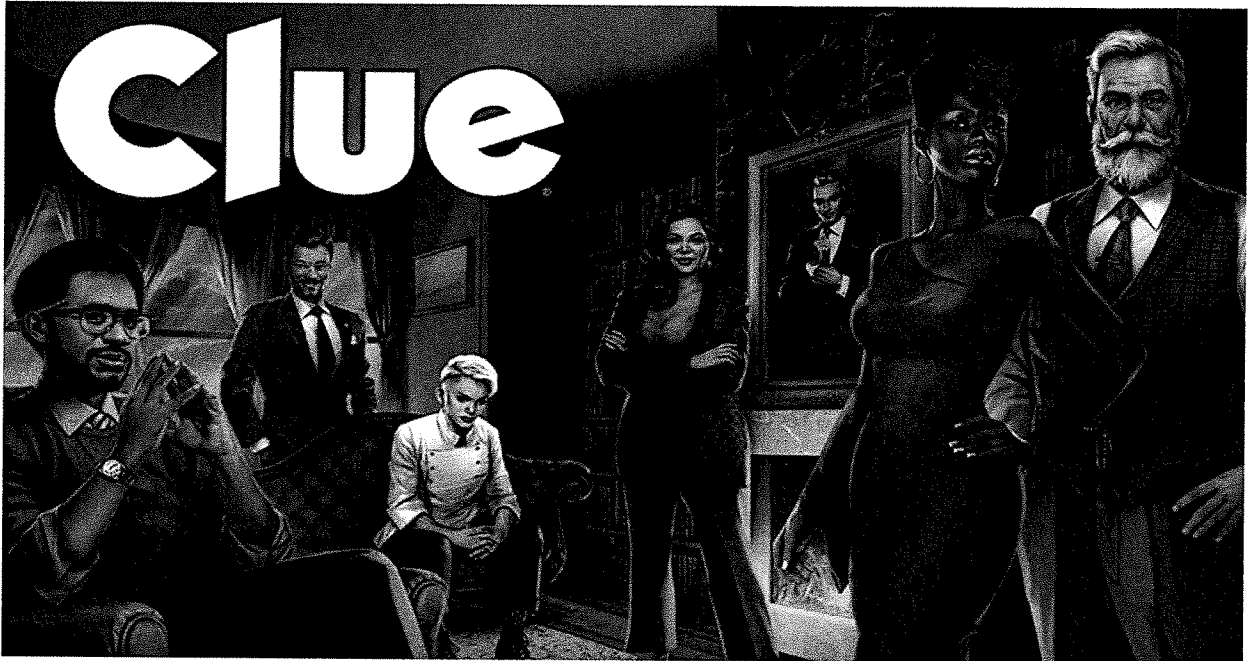
We white Christians no longer represent the majority of Americans. We are no longer capable of setting the nation's course by sheer cultural and political dominance. But there are still more than enough of us to decisively derail the future of democracy in America. If we wish to do otherwise, we can no longer disingenuously pretend that democracy and the Doctrine of Discovery are, or ever were, compatible. We can no longer pay tribute to one while benefiting from the other. We must choose. And if we choose democracy, it will require more than just confession by an unflinching few. It will require joining the work already underway to repair the damage done by this malignant cultural legacy. Through that transformative engagement, we might finally illuminate the path that leads to a shared American future.

*Excerpt adapted from The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and a Path to a Shared American Future by Robert P. Jones, published by Simon & Schuster on September 5, 2023. Copyright © 2023 by Robert P. Jones.*

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Middle & senior high youth team up to solve the mystery  
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