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**'We have to come to grips with history': Robert P Jones on  
The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy**

*David Smith in Washington*

**The US scholar finds the source of Trump's racist appeal - and current culture wars over the teaching of the American past - in papal doctrine and deadly Christian certainties**



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How did Donald Trump win the 2016 presidential election despite the Access Hollywood tape? How did he gain even more votes in 2020 despite an administration of chaos, lies and pandemic

**H** blunders? How can he be running neck and neck with Joe Biden for 2024 despite four indictments and 91 criminal charges?

Future historians will surely debate such questions and why so many Americans saw themselves in a tawdry tycoon and carnival barker. One of the most persuasive theories is captured in a single word: race.

Trump won white voters without a college degree by 32 points in 2020. A glance at his rallies shows the lack of diversity in his notorious “base”. His signature slogan, “Make America great again”, is a thinly disguised appeal to nostalgia for postwar suburbia.

In his books *The End of White Christian America* and *White Too Long*, Robert P Jones has steadily built the argument that this movement is animated by shifting demographics. He points out that in 2008, when Barack Obama, the first Black president, was elected, 54% of Americans identified as white and Christian. By the end of Obama’s second term, that share had fallen to 47%. Today it is 42%.

“It’s just a continued slide,” says Jones, 55, sitting at his desk at the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), where he is founder and president, in downtown Washington. “Most importantly, moving from majority to decisively non-majority white and Christian has set off a kind of ‘freak out’ moment among many white Christians.”

In *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and the Path to a Shared American Future*, effectively the third book in an unofficial trilogy, Jones traces the roots of Trumpism back more than 500 years.

He explains: “Go back and understand they really do believe that this country was divinely ordained to be a promised land for European Christians.

“That idea is so old and so deep it explains in many ways the visceral reactivity. Why are we fighting today about AP African American history? Arkansas’s banned it, Florida’s been fighting it, and it’s because it tells this alternative story about the country that’s not just settlers, pioneers - a naive mythology of innocence.”

Jones examines that mythological origin story and its promised land. He spotlights the “Doctrine of Discovery”, a little-known or understood series of 15th-century papal edicts asserting that European civilisation and western Christianity are superior to all other cultures, races and religions. For Jones, it is “a kind of Rosetta Stone for understanding the deep structure of the European political and religious worldviews we have inherited in this country”.

The initial edict, issued by Nicholas V in 1452, granted the Portuguese king Alfonso V the right 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”.

Jones says: “Then there’s a series of these documents that get issued between 1452 and 1493, each of which build on this idea but essentially all say the same thing: that if the land is not occupied by Christian people - and that Christian identity is the thing that determines whether you have

your own human rights or not - then the Christian kings and queens have the right to conquer those lands and take possession of everything that they can in the name of the state and the church.”

This provided convenient theological justification for the first European powers that came into contact with Native Americans to seize lands and exploit resources. Spreading the gospel by the sword was married with huge economic incentives.

From this perspective, the enslavement of Africans was not America’s original sin but a continuation of genocide and dispossession justified by papal doctrine. The New York Times’s 1619 Project was a long-overdue corrective to established narratives but it was not the final word.



📷 Marcus Jones, Shoshana Guy, Nikole Hannah-Jones and Roger Ross Williams discuss The 1619 Project, in Los Angeles in June. Photograph: Frank Micelotta/PictureGroup for Disney Television/Shutterstock

Jones reflects: “The 1619 Project was very important culturally in the US because it at least did move us out of this room with white people gathered around a table like you see on the postage stamp or the paintings of the beginning of the country and took us back to a different story: the story of enslaved people in the country.

“But if we really want to understand our present we have to go back and tell the whole story and that’s European contact with Indigenous people before it is enslavement and the transatlantic slave trade. That all comes from the same source. It is this cultural idea that there is a kind of superiority to European culture that’s justified by Christianity that sets up, in the Doctrine of Discovery, this entire project.”

**J**ones sees connections between the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in the Mississippi Delta in 1955 and the killing and expulsion of Choctaws forced to walk the Trail of Tears, starting in 1831; between the lynching of three Black circus workers in Duluth in 1920 and the mass execution of 38 Dakota men in Minnesota in 1862.

When history is put in silos, he contends, such threads are missed. “You don’t get a society that tortures and kills a 14-year-old boy in Mississippi on the basis of whistling at a white woman without this sense of entitlement, of superiority and permissive violence stemming from the Doctrine of Discovery. That was the thing that pushed people into the Mississippi territory, forcibly removing Choctaw Creek Native Americans from their lands, killing many, forcibly removing the others.

“If you don’t understand that history, you end up with this shocking, ‘Well, how could a society be this way that this would happen, and then they [Roy Bryant and JW Milam, the white men who killed Till] would get acquitted by their peers, who deliberated for only an hour after the trial?’ But when you understand this longer history, that becomes a little bit less of a mystery.”

When Jones visited these sites of trauma, he found communities working across racial lines to seek the truth, build memorials and museums and commemorate their histories in ways unthinkable in the last century. The US is currently in a great “Age of Re-evaluation”, according to Scott Ellsworth, a scholar of the Tulsa race massacre.

Jones comments: “For all of these what I thought was fairly remarkable is how recent these moves are in the US to try to tell a different story, a more inclusive story about what happened. In none of these cases do they predate 2000. It’s all in the last 20 years that any of these movements have happened.

“If you had driven down through the Delta in Mississippi in 2000, you would not have come across any signs or anything. Even though the whole world knows the story of Emmett Till, you would not have known that it happened in Tallahatchie county, in the Delta. There was nothing there on the ground. A group of citizens about 20 years ago got together and said, ‘No, we should change this, and we should try to tell the truth about the story.’”

Till’s casket is displayed at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture; his story was told in the 2022 film *Till*; and in July, Joe Biden signed a proclamation designating an Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley national monument in Illinois and Mississippi.



📷 Joe Biden signs a proclamation to establish the Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley national monument, at the White House in July. Photograph: Evan Vucci/AP

The 46th president urged America to face its history with all its peaks and troughs, blessings and blemishes. He told an audience in the White House grounds: “We can’t just choose to learn what we want to know. We have to learn what we should know. We should know about our country. We should know everything: the good, the bad, the truth of who we are as a nation. That’s what great nations do, and we are a great nation.”

Biden added, a little bleakly: “We got a hell of a long way to go.”

Jones believes that Biden gets it. “He’s been fairly remarkable on these issues of racial justice. He, for example, has been one of the only presidents who has used the words ‘white supremacy’ consistently in addresses - and not just before Black audiences. If you look at Biden’s speeches and you search for ‘white supremacy’, he’s not just talking about that in Tulsa during the commemoration speech.

“He’s using it, and understands it as one of the deep problems of American history that we currently have to wrestle with. He’s been very clear and seems very genuine about that being something that he’s leaving as part of his legacy. It’s also part of why he made the pronouncement about the Emmett Till national monument, so this becomes a permanent part of the story that we tell about ourselves.”

Trump, however, has a polar opposite worldview that Jones says explains why history has become the new frontline in the culture wars. Just over a third of self-identified Democrats are white and Christian; about 70% of self-identified Republicans are. PRRI polling finds that two-thirds of Democrats say America’s culture and way of life has changed for the better since the 1950s; two-thirds of Republicans believe it has changed for the worse.

Jones writes how white Christians can “sense the tectonic plates moving” in the demographics of their neighbourhoods, the food in their grocery store, the appearance of Spanish-language local radio and roadside billboards, and the class photos on the walls of their public schools.

He says: “I’ve always thought that, in Trump’s Maga slogan, the most powerful word is not about America being great; it’s the ‘again’ part. It’s this nostalgia tinged with loss. What have we lost and who’s the ‘we’ that have lost something? If you just ask those questions, it’s pretty clear. It’s the formerly dominant white Christians who were culturally dominant, demographically dominant, politically dominant and are no longer.

“It’s that sense of loss and grievance that Trump has been so homed in on and so astute at fuelling and setting himself up. You hear him say things like, ‘I am your voice’, ‘I alone can fix it’, ‘If you don’t elect somebody like me, we’re not going to have a country any more’. Those kinds of phrases tell you what he’s appealing to.

“If we look at the insurrection at the Capitol, it’s so chilling the last frame that the January 6 House select committee showed in their video has two people - it looks like something out of Les Mis - up on a barricade and they’ve got two flags. One is a Trump flag and the other is a Christian flag that they’re flying on the barricades.”

**J**ones has skin in the game. Growing up a Southern Baptist in Jackson, Mississippi, he went to church five times a week and earned a divinity degree. His family Bible, printed in 1815, has generations of births and deaths and marriages handwritten between the Old and New Testaments. Some online genealogical research revealed slave-owners among his ancestors.

“My grandfather was a deacon at a church in Macon, Georgia, and one of his jobs on Sunday morning was to make sure no Black people entered the sanctuary. He was literally a bouncer on the outside of the church to keep non-white people out. That was an official role as a deacon in the church. It wasn’t like some wink, wink, nod, nod - that was his assignment for Sunday morning.

“It’s been tough, but, on the other hand, one of the things you hear often with these anti- so-called critical race theory bills and with ‘woke’ is ‘not making white people uncomfortable’. But I would rather know the truth, even if it’s an uncomfortable truth, than be ignorant and comfortable.”



📷 James Baldwin at his home in southern France, in November 1979. Photograph: Ralph Gatti/AFP/Getty Images

He quotes [James Baldwin](#), the transcendent and trenchant African American writer: “All that can save you now is your confrontation with your own history ... which is not your past, but your present. Your history has led you to this moment, and you can only begin to change yourself by looking at what you are doing in the name of your history.”

Jones comments: “There’s a kind of liberation, freedom and growth that can come from facing this history and moving somewhere better together. That’s the invitation, and the reason for doing the work isn’t at all just to feel bad or beat yourself up over what your family did or whatever.

“If we really want to live up to this promise of being a truly pluralistic, multi-religious, multiracial democracy, it’s going to take us coming to terms with that history and putting into place something different than we’ve had in the past. There’s no way we can do that if we don’t even understand why we’re in the dilemmas we’re currently in.”

Another of his favourite [Baldwin quotations](#) describes “white people as the slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing”.

Jones continues: “Such a great line, and if you think about this impossibly innocent history that we have told ourselves, that we were always upstanding, that we always treated other peoples with dignity and respect, it just isn’t true. In order, again, to right the ship and come to a new place together, we have to have to come to grips with that history.”

Only then, Jones says, can America, a nation that likes to claim exceptionalism, be sincere about its unique experiment.

“Our current generation is the first that has been asked whether we truly believe what we often claim: that we are a pluralistic democracy.

“Before, many white Christian Americans who are part of the dominant culture could pay lip service to that, knowing that they had enough numbers at the ballot box, knowing that they had enough control on business, enough control of local institutions, that they still had a lock on power. This is the first generation where that’s not true.

“The question is called in a way that’s new and that’s why there’s so much visceral reaction, because there’s a way in which we’ve never honestly had to answer the question. But now it’s being put in a way that we’re going to have to answer it.”

*The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy: And the Path to a Shared American Future is published in the US by Simon & Schuster*

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