

RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND STRUCTURAL BIGOTRY IN THE U.S.

John Corrigan, Ph.D. and Amanda Tyler, Esq.¹

Monotheistic religion is the oldest and most encompassing framework for bigotry in the West. Its Manichean binaries of good and evil, pure and impure, superior and inferior, us and them have been leveraged over centuries to justify bigotry. That ideology of stark division and uncompromising difference has survived in spite of the powerful prophetic traditions of those same Abrahamic religions urging social justice, compassion, and peace. Bigotry has been installed in religious institutions in the West for millennia, but at the same time, those institutions have authorized power to undermine bigotry. They have contributed crucially to the fashioning of counter-ideologies aimed at liberation from narrow views of human subjectivity and social life that engendered suffering. The problem of religious bigotry then, is a complex one, tied to spatial and temporal contexts, and frequently admitting a measure of ambiguity. In other words, it is like bigotry in some other areas of American life, including race, gender, sexuality, and disability, but it differs from those because of its exceptional deep-rootedness in institutions. The appearance of permanence and impeccable authority cultivated by religious institutions, and the leveraging of those seeming assets in violent litigations of factional differences, has served in turn as a template for other kinds of structural bigotry.

Structural bigotry denotes a broad range of acts and policies of social injustice/domination typically grounded in transgenerational claims of entitlement; legitimated by institutions, ideologies, policies, media, and custom; and driven by expressions of animus, including shared symbolism and hateful vocabulary, verbal and physical assaults including hate crimes, and exclusion which serves to entrench power in privileged insiders, in which all members of a society can be implicated subjects/beneficiaries. Religious bigotry, like all structural bigotry, is exercised in order to hold power. Groups perceived as competitors for the resources claimed by religion are assessed as impure, dangerous, and an imminent threat to the very existence of the religious community.

Religious intolerance is perhaps the earliest example of structural bigotry. Many early societies were configured around religious identity and religious group membership. Religious identity or lack thereof provided a ready proxy for exclusion, discrimination, persecution, oppression, and violence. Religious intolerance remains a strong driver of structural bigotry in the modern United States. Targets of religious intolerance are often those who practice or are perceived to practice faiths other than mainstream Christianity and those who are secular or otherwise reject religious practice or affiliation.

¹John Corrigan is the Lucius Moody Bristol Distinguished Professor of Religion, a Professor of History, and a Distinguished Research Professor at Florida State University. Amanda Tyler is the Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC).

In addition to interreligious bigotry, there also are examples of intrareligious bigotry among various denominations, sects, and branches of religions.

Inflammatory religious rhetoric and the violence marshalled to its cause have been present through the national history, including the earliest colonial settlements of North America. The American history of religious intolerance as a record of violence between religious groups is replete with generations of conflict among every religious group, large and small. Protestants of all stripes, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witness, Quakers, Shakers, Amish, indigenous religions, Afro-Caribbean religions - all of these and more have experienced religious intolerance and many have perpetrated it.

One national narrative says that, with the framing of the U.S. Constitution and the establishment of the United States, our country rejected religious intolerance and that the history of the nation has been a showcase for the peaceful flourishing of many different kinds of religion alongside each other. Many Americans are keenly aware of language in the First Amendment to the Constitution that promises that the nation will dedicate itself to religious freedom. President George Washington famously wrote to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island in 1790: "For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support."² The truth is more complicated.

For Thomas Jefferson, the very man who authored the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom (1786), which was the model for the guarantee subsequently iterated in the First Amendment, was himself clear-eyed about the problem of religious bigotry. Referring to the "religious intolerance inherent in every sect," Jefferson observed that "our laws have applied the only antidote to this vice, protecting our religious as they do our civil rights." But, said Jefferson, "more remains to be done, for although we are free by the law, we are not so in practice; public opinion erects itself into an inquisition, and exercises its office with as much fanaticism as fans the flames of an *auto-da-fe*."³ Religious freedom has proven an ideal that is very hard to implement in the United States, despite robust legal protections.

The legal framework in Article VI of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits religious tests for public office, and the First Amendment's dual protections for religious freedom for all ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof"), is an important tool to combat structural bigotry. But as is the case with many other constitutional protections, liberation from bigotry requires a commitment from each generation.

One of the reasons that religious intolerance has remained part of the practice of Christianity in America is because Christian theologies since the early settlement of the North American British colonies have claimed biblical justifications for it. One such example from colonial times through much of the nineteenth century was the Old Testament story of the Amalekites, which Christian theologians in America drew upon as inspiration for their violent campaigns against those whom

²"Washington's Reply to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island," in Lewis Abraham, "Correspondence between Washington and Jewish Citizens," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 3 (1895), 91.

³Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to Mordecai Noah, May 28, 1818" in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Retirement Series, Volume 13, 22 April 1818 to 31 January 1819* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 65.

they considered their enemies. The Amalekites were identified in the Old Testament as enemies of the Jews who attacked the Jews as they made their way in the desert after having escaped Egypt. A divine command eventually came to Moses to exterminate the Amalekites, man, woman, child, and livestock. The Jews were, as storied in Deuteronomy, even instructed to “blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.” The Jews followed that command, perpetrating genocide on the Amalekites. Christian theologians for centuries subsequently deployed that story in justifying mass violence against their opponents. Protestants made use of it in justifying violence against Catholics, and Christians of all stripes appealed to it in their campaigns against Native Americans, Mormons, African American religious groups, Muslims, and others.

America over time coalesced as a nation with strong Protestant leanings. When the informal Protestant establishment sensed a threat to their power, they responded not merely with bigotry but with violence. In the 1840s, as part of the Bible Wars, Protestants battled Catholics in Pennsylvania, in bloody encounters involving rifles, bombs, and cannon. In Massachusetts, and elsewhere, they burned down Catholic Church buildings, physically oppressed Catholics, and reinforced the structures of bigotry that excluded Catholics from resources and status. Non-Mormons treated Mormons similarly during the Mormon Wars in the mid-nineteenth century (and Mormons responded in kind). But religious bigotry was most violently and consistently displayed in campaigns against Native Americans, whom Christians often described as pagan devils whose very existence on the frontiers was a threat to Christianity. From the 1630’s onward, genocidal campaigns against Indigenous peoples were undertaken through appeals to the story of the Amalekites, that is, to the divine command to utterly annihilate one’s religious enemies.

Such religiously-inspired and justified violence set the frame for the long-term problem of religious bigotry in America. Violence against Jews, Quakers, Shakers, Methodists, African American congregations, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims, and other groups, has marked the religious history of the U.S. Such violence contributed substantially to the normalization of religious bigotry. Even when mass violence had diminished, other forms of hate and oppression endured in its shadow. In other words, many Americans remain comfortable with religious bigotry partly because they do not recognize it as such. For those Americans, it often does not stand out as it might because it is so deeply etched in the bones of American culture. It is structured into society and operates at times under the radar of Americans. As such it remains deeply problematic. For many, it is hard to see, and even when glimpsed it is dismissed because the reality of bigotry does not fit with the belief that the First Amendment disallows any such bigotry. Americans look away from religious bigotry and toward a Constitution that they believe offers assurance that it is not occurring.

Bigotry is installed in religious institutions. It is found not only in Christian institutions but in many others as well. And it exists as structural bigotry within government institutions. Many state constitutions even today bear the proof of such bigotry in the form of language restricting public office holding to those who profess belief in God - and sometimes other Christian religious doctrines. That animus against nonbelievers can be measured in another way: historically, it is all but impossible to be elected to Congress without professing belief in God. Moreover, if that God is not Christian or Jewish, one might still be suspect, as anti-Muslim rhetoric, and anti-Asian complaint that sometimes focuses on religions that originated in Asia, are a standard feature of the current political landscape.

A further complication of the problem of religious bigotry in the U.S. is that, ironically, those who practice bigotry claim as their “right” under the Constitution a freedom to do so. Such a view rests on a misguided interpretation of the principle of religious freedom as a warrant to have legal protections for all manifestations of religious belief, no matter the impact on the rights and liberties of others who do not share the same beliefs. Put another way, the historical and ongoing enmeshment of Christianity with politics in America has eventuated in political performances of bigotry undergirded by claims of sacrosanct religious faith, thereby setting bigotry “outside” criticism for some who practice it. Often, political claims, such as, for example, opposition to gay marriage, abortion, and evolution theory in public schools, as well as claims for the right to boldly seek social justice and equality, often rest their cases on religious faith. Bigotry and anti-bigotry thus both are grounded, for some groups, in religious belief. This fact presents challenges to any project that would seek to oppose bigotry, because that project must protect religious freedom while at the same time rejecting policy claims based on religious arguments for bigoted behavior.

White Christian nationalism is a driver of structural bigotry as it relates to religious intolerance, as well as many other categories (anti-Asian/Asian American racism, anti-Black racism, anti-Latinx racism, anti-Indigenous bigotry, antisemitism, heterosexism and transphobia, sexism, Islamophobia and linguisticism). White Christian nationalism is a political ideology and cultural formation that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life. White Christian nationalism relies heavily on a mythical history of the country as founded by Christians to privilege Christianity, as ordained by God in order to fulfill a divine purpose in the past, present, and future. White Christian nationalism intersects with other ideologies like the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny. Because the past and present are replete with examples of racial subjugation and white supremacist violence against indigenous, Black, communities of color, and other marginalized groups, white Christian nationalism undergirds and provides divine justification for ongoing oppression. Symbols of white Christian nationalism tend to merge patriotic and religious imagery, such as a star-spangled cross or the Christian flag.

White Christian nationalism in the hands of violent extremists can turn violent, as it did at the January 6 insurrection, at the Tree of Life synagogue, and at Mother Emanuel AME Church.

Not all instances of white Christian nationalism are violent. Examples of non-violent structural bigotry related to religious intolerance include attempts to pass state laws requiring the posting of “In God We Trust” in public schools, led by the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation, and attempts to promote the teaching of the Bible in public schools.

White Christian nationalism permeates American society and impacts all Americans, whether we fully embrace it or even recognize or name it. Like racism, its history, which can be traced to the colonial period and the early days of the republic, is so long standing and intertwined with American history that to live in the United States can be all but to breathe white Christian nationalism.

Religious bigotry is redolent in American institutions of government at every level. From the near-impossibility of professed nonbelievers holding major elected office to the select lack of enforcement of protections from religious intolerance for some groups, government institutions have struggled to implement the ideal of religious freedom that is affirmed in the First Amendment.

Dismantling white Christian nationalism is necessary to addressing structural bigotry as it relates to religious intolerance, as well as other kinds of intolerance. Because of how pervasive and deeply-rooted the ideology and cultural framework is in American society, this task is daunting and will require many generations of commitment and reform.

A first step is increasing awareness around white Christian nationalism – what it is and how it appears in our society. Disciplined questioning of deeply seeded narratives regarding the founding of the United States as a “Christian nation” and repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny can contribute to deauthorizing white Christian nationalism. State legislative efforts to perpetuate Christian nationalism should be stopped, while both symbolic and substantive legislative efforts to further ideals of religious freedom for all should be encouraged. Given the misuse and misunderstanding of vestiges of civil religion, exemplified in language such as “In God We Trust” as a national motto and “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, we should critically weigh the enduring value versus harm of such symbols.

Community-led interventions will be necessary to the campaign, including work within Christian communities. Repudiating white Christian nationalism does not mean rejecting or oppressing mainstream Christianity, though we can expect such claims to be raised. Our democratic task should not be viewed as eradicating bigotry from religion. Rather, our task should be ensuring that the institutions of religion and government remain sufficiently separated and distinct so that the bigotry inherent in religion not be enforced and perpetuated by the state.

The practice of religious bigotry, which has been increasing in the early twenty-first century, is a signal that a democracy of rights and liberties is not working as it should, and that authoritarianism is entrenched, and possibly advancing. It forecasts loss of rights in other areas - a lesson obvious from the twentieth-century history of Europe that culminated in the Holocaust. It is crucial that Americans forcefully address it by recognizing first of all its systemic nature, and its embeddedness in institutions.