

Three Key Moves toward White Extremism

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Christian extremism, a.k.a. “white extremism” is widespread in our society. It comes in two forms. On the one hand, white Christian extremism is of the thuggish popular variety that tilts toward and is tempted by violence (with the rhetoric of anger and hate). This variety was on full exhibit in the capitol on January 6. On the other hand, it is of a legal variety that operates by regressive measures concerning voting rights and immigration policy (with the rhetoric of “The Constitution.”) Both forms of Christian extremism aim at protecting white Christian privilege and excluding non-whites (non-Christians) by circumscribing rights, privileges, and entitlements of US citizenship. Mythic propulsion of this extremism is the imagined threat of being “replaced.” Both forms of Christian white extremism have long depended on white supremacy that requires exclusion by both *legal means* and by *means of thuggish intimidation*.¹ It happens that such Christian white extremism is currently aimed at African Americans, Islam (“radical Islam”), and Asian-Americans, but it is the same force and energy that have been directed toward other populations that constitute a threat of “the other.” The combination of thuggish and legal action has served to protect and maintain or recover white Christian monopoly. It is my judgment that we cannot fully understand white Christian extremism if we do not consider white Christian supremacy, that is, white Christian superiority. Here I will consider three important historical moments in the long-term emergence of superiority and supremacy that regularly issue in extremism.

I.

At the outset, the early Christian movement was a Jewish sect within Judaism. The early highly contested decision to open the Christian community to Gentiles opened the way for growth and expansion beyond the confines of a Jewish sect (Acts 15). The transport of Christian faith and Christian community west from Jerusalem to Rome is laid out in the career and epistles of the apostle Paul, in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles (see Acts 28:11-14), and in the legends of St. Peter. It was inevitable that this early movement would be transposed into a Gentile phenomenon.

Even given the rapid expansion and growth of the movement, the Christian Church remained an illicit, subversive movement in the Roman Empire that was subject to abuse by imperial authorities.² All of that was changed by the “Edict of Milan” in 313 CE. The exact details of that historical turn are unclear; what is clear is that in these years, Emperor Constantine encouraged a policy and practice of toleration toward the Christian movement that was confirmed and sealed by Licinius, emperor in the East. While the “Edict of Milan” in 313 was of a general confirmation of religious freedom, its clear intent was to make space for the Christian movement to which Emperor Constantine became an adherent.

While the “Edict of Milan” only gave “toleration” for the freedom of the Christian movement, it did not of itself confirm Christianity as the religion of the empire. But it did not, on the other hand, preclude the political effect whereby the “religion of the

Emperor Constantine” became “the religion of the empire.” That is, making space for its *legitimacy* promptly led to the *establishment* of Christianity as the imperial religion in the West. Thus a ready case can be made that this moment of legitimation established Christian domination that took a long while to implement in practice. The effect was to join *power* to *chosenness*, this replicating the practice of ancient Israel that joined *chosenness* to *power* in the Davidic-Solomonic dynasty, a joining that was only terminated by the end of the dynasty with the destruction of Jerusalem. In Jewish tradition the convergence of *chosenness* and *power* has come to belated expression in the Zionist doctrine of the state of Israel. From the outset, the Christian movement understood itself as “the chosen of God,” but that chosenness did not until now convert to power (see John 15:16; I Corinthians 1:27-28; I Peter 2:9-10). When chosenness is linked to power, however, it is predictable that a sense of superiority and supremacy will soon follow.³ Christians (white Christians in the west) were on their way to being both supreme and superior.

II.

The long term development of the new Christian West solidified into the domination of the Roman Church through the authority of the Pope, coupled with the establishment of a variety of “Christian princes.” While the relationship between and interaction among the Vatican and these several princes were complex and endlessly contested, the growing assumption of dominant Christian tradition, Christian authority, and Christian power was settled, established, and unquestioned. The tacit assumption is that these established powers (church and states) by right and by obligation should extend their authority to the entire known world so that Christendom should be coterminous with the known world. The ground for such a claim is that Christian truth was without challenge or rival, and that truth could be extended and expanded by Christian governance and the combination of business expansion, missionary effort, and where necessary, coercive military action.

It was of course inevitable that such universal claims would collide with other theo-political claims, notably those of Islam in the East. Alexius, emperor in Constantinople, appealed at the end of the eleventh century to Rome for assistance and relief from Islamic political pressure. In 1095, Pope Urban II responded to that urgent appeal for help by proclaiming a crusade that would mobilize a political military force of Christian powers in the West against Muslim power in the East, and specifically in the context of Jerusalem:

Urban now proclaimed the Crusade in an appeal of almost unexampled consequence. The enterprise had magnified in his conception from that of aid to the hard-pressed Alexius to a general rescue of the holy places from Moslem hands....The real work of the First Crusade was accomplished by the feudal nobility of Europe....The complete defeat of an Egyptian relieving army near Ascalon on August 12, 1099, crowned the success of the Crusade.⁴

Thus the barbaric assignment of the First Crusade consisted in a military assault on Muslims in the East propelled by the religious authorization of the Pope as the final authority of Christendom. While the venture played out in political military ways,

it implied at every step the duty and obligation of Christendom to extend its reach to the East and the right to eliminate Islamic power. It is highly ironic that Saladin, Islamic ruler in Syria and Egypt, a primary adversary for the Crusaders, conducted himself with generosity that was in sharp contrast to the ruthlessness of the Christian crusaders.

For our purpose, it is sufficient to notice that the Pope and the Christian princes simply assumed the legitimacy of Christian military force to extend the presence, influence, and political power of Christendom to the East. Those who opposed the Crusaders, on religious grounds, were dismissed as illegitimate agents who were rightly eliminated by whatever means necessary. Thus the superiority of the Christian West, the primacy of Christian theological claims, and the propriety of Christian power were all treated as settled legitimacies.

Remarkably the great historian Williston Walker can celebrate the gains of the Crusades as contributing to the “highest theological development,” yielding “great popular religious movements,” and evoking “great artistic development,” that for him allow the verdict: “Admitting that the Crusades were but one factor in this result, they were worth all their cost.”⁵

Such a remarkably myopic verdict is fully contained within the rights and privileges of white Western Christians without any notice of the blatant dismissal of the claims of Islam or the residue of resentment that would continue to fester for foreseeable futures. That verdict is an example of the sheer disregard of the “other” when evaluating and appreciating the gains made for the “superior” historical reality of Christendom.

The Crusades performed white Western Christian superiority toward the external “other” of Islam. Within a century of the proclamation of the First Crusade (1095), the same performance of superiority was offered toward the internal “other” by the Synod of Toulouse in 1229. That Synod initiated an investigative Inquisition into a variety of “heterodoxies” that departed from the teaching of the Catholic Church and that challenged the monopoly of faith taught by the Roman Church. Thus *the Inquisition* can be seen as the internal expression of the same impulse to which *the Crusades* gave external expression. Both externally in the Crusades and internally in the Inquisition, the unquestioned authority of the church provided the warrant for aggressive action. In order to maintain that unchallenged authority, the church via the Inquisition did not hesitate to enact harsh violent measures against heterodox tendencies.

The history of the Crusades and the Inquisition is, to be sure, enormously complicated. It is not complicated, however, to discern the singular claim that is championed through all of the complexity, namely, that Christian faith of a particular kind, codified in a particular form, deserves to be dominant and justifies the use of violence to enforce and maintain that claim. We have here come a very long way from the “Edict of Milan” in 313. That edict only *allowed* Christian faith; it did not *establish* it. From the first, however, that “toleration” was tied to the power of the empire. As a result, what was allowed at Milan was de facto established and soon placed beyond question or challenge. When tied to power as it was in the horizon of the Christian princes, it was an easy step toward exclusive legitimacy that would not and could not tolerate the “other,” not the “other” of Islam and not the “other” of heterodox Christian teaching.

III.

The modern world arrived with the theological revolution of Martin Luther and the scientific reasoning of Rene Descartes. In that same moment, with the work of Columbus, Balboa, Magellan, Pizarro, de Soto, and Cortez, the princes of the Christian empire readily “deserved” a whole new world of the Western hemisphere that was filled with both compelling resources and a population of the “other” who fit none of the categories of imperial Christendom. That “discovery” of the New World by these daring explorers, backed by the rights, greed, and legitimacy of nations states, led to enormous energy in the claim and occupation of western lands and, not surprisingly, to intense competition for control among the European powers.

In order to adjudicate such competing claims and in order to assert the authoritative reach of Christendom into “the new lands,” the Vatican in 1493 issued its decree, “The Doctrine of Discovery.”⁶ It is impossible to overstate the importance and long-term impact of this papal edict. It declared, in tight and comprehensive legal reasoning, the right and duty of the Spanish king to control and administer vast lands in “the new world,” the freedom to occupy the land, to possess its rich resources, and to convert or eliminate its indigenous populations. While the decree was to the immense advantage of the Spanish state that was closely allied with the papacy, we should not miss the astonishing assumption of authority by the pope and the high-handed reasoning that the “new lands” are waiting to be “discovered,” occupied, and exploited by European princes. The entire project smacks of an assumption of cultural-political superiority and of religious supremacy.

The Doctrine of Discovery served to dispossess native peoples of their lands and resources, and was especially important in the colonial practices of the English-speaking world. The doctrine illuminates our theme of superiority and supremacy, for as Ruru, Lindberg, and Miller can assert,

The Doctrine of Discovery has its origin in the notion of superiority. The Doctrine is built upon this largely racialized philosophy: those who were superior had superior rights to those who were inferior. “Infidel” inferiority was predicated upon notions of correspondence with the imperialist defined notions of humanity. Finding the basis in religious theology, the Old World was understood to exist by virtue of the theology which defined colonizing nation inhabitants as possessing direct relationship to the Supreme Power through his representatives on earth. Those who were unrelated to the representatives were understood to be opposed to and conflicting with the authority. They were also understood to possess less humanity. This understanding led, further, to the supremacist understanding that those who did not share imperialist religious beliefs and who did act in accordance with those beliefs, were lesser humans. Lesser humans had, as well, lesser rights: to liberty, to property, to life. This list of infidels included Indigenous peoples within the “New World.”⁷

As we draw our attentions closer to the superiority and supremacy in the United States, we are able to see how the “doctrine of ‘discovery’” has come to serve white supremacy. Thus Lindsay Robertson has traced the way in which the Doctrine was incorporated into US law by Chief Justice John Marshall, and how the Doctrine be-

came the basis for Andrew Jackson's displacement of the Cherokee Indians in order that whites in Georgia could secure the land as their own.⁸ Thus the land is claimed not by conquest but by "discovery."

A recent echo of possession "by discovery" is narrated by Patrick Phillips (*Blood at the Root*), who reports on the way in which African-Americans were forcibly dispatched out of Forsythe County, Georgia, in the twentieth century.⁹ The displacement of the black population of the county featured a combination of white extremism in both thuggish and legal types. The thuggish way consists in forcibly removing all blacks under pain of death. The legal aspect was that when blacks had abandoned their homes and property in fear, whites paid tax on the property for seven years and thereby became the new owners. The dramatic expulsion from Forsythe County is only a recent example of the long term enactment of Christian white superiority and supremacy that eventuates in extremism in both thuggish and legal modes. It takes no imagination at all to see the linkage between this displacement and the ancient displacement of the Canaanites by the chosen who were entitled to the land.

We come now, in the wake of Donald Trump, to the mantra "Make America Great Again." The phrase is shot through with racist nostalgia for the occupation of the land by those who are superior and supreme. I am bound to conclude that President Trump himself is only the point person and means of expression of that misguided sense of supremacy and superiority. That sense of superiority now receives legal expression in immigration restrictions, voter repression, and militarization of police authority, all of which aim to delegitimize the "other" that embodies threat and alternative to white domination. Thus the adrenalin behind the mantra is yet another expression of a superiority and supremacy that is deep and long-standing in white Western Christendom. Trump's own deep and defining commitment to this ideology is evident, for example, in his dismissal of congresswomen with whom he disagrees, that they should all "go back to where they belong," even though they are all and each US citizens!

IV.

The matter is much more complex than this simple enumeration. I suggest, however, that when we read backward, we are able to see the long line of development that has eventuated in Christian white extremism. One recent articulation of such extremism, of course, is the current anti-Muslim fad that concerns both a new "crusade" against Islam and an exclusion of Muslims from the United States on religious grounds. That anti-Muslim white extremism is of a piece with long-term, anti-black extremism that yields harsh reaction against any black gain in politics or economics.¹⁰

But behind that extremism toward blacks and toward Muslims and Asian-Americans (or toward any other challenging group) is the deeply rooted "doctrine of discovery" that assumes the legitimacy of white Western European control over native peoples who are incapable of self-governance. The action of "discovery" has given ground for endless land appropriation. But that "doctrine" would not have been possible had not the authority of the church and its administration of all Christendom been articulated and performed in the Crusades and the Inquisition. That enormous ecclesial assumption of authority, in turn, would not have been possible without the establishment of Christian faith as the true religion of imperial Europe and of the entire known world. The thuggish and legal means of extremism are only possible because of the long term claim of supremacy and superiority that has no capacity for

positive engagement with “the other.”

I may add a coda that will indicate that such extremism is not simply the work of thuggery but in fact is a compelling conviction of much of the intellectual class as well. Tomoko Masuzawa has detailed the way in which “world religions” developed as a nineteenth century project in Europe.¹¹ While the project was concerned with the five world religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism), the hidden but powerful agenda was to exhibit the superiority of Western Christianity. Masuzawa shows that for all of its urbane scholarship, in fact “world religions” was shot through with racist assumptions. Davis Hankins and I, moreover, have shown how this assertion of white European superiority was bootlegged into our discipline of Old Testament study in the form of “the Documentary Hypothesis” that purported to trace “religious evolution” in the Bible from “primitive Semitism” to the sophistication that culminated in Western categories of faith.¹²

I cite this remarkable insight from Masuzawa to indicate how racist proclivity has permeated into the domain of critical scholarship that makes a pretence of objectivity. The current fruit of this long-term trajectory of racial superiority is the war on “radical Islam” that is readily taken to be characteristic of all Islam. This articulation of cultural reality has been given classic and effective formulation by Samuel Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations*.¹³ That model of cultural reality now appeals with great weight not only in popular US opinion but in the high councils of learned experts. It is clear enough, in my judgment, that this current preoccupation with “radical Islam” is simply another manifestation of Western white supremacy that has shown up in opposition to Muslims in the Crusades and more broadly in the Doctrine of Discovery with the extravagance of colonial exploitation.

It is of immense importance that Huntington’s well-known thesis has been effectively answered by Martha Nussbaum who has shown that it is the inability to honor the other that is the key issue in Huntington’s formulation and in the doctrine of discovery.¹⁴ (Nussbaum offers a close reading of the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India as a case study for her compelling thesis.) It is clear that “the other”—non-Christian, non-white, non-Westerner—does not need to be honored if and when Christian white Westerners are in all cases and circumstances superior. The entire trajectory of superiority serves to diminish and dismiss “the other” as an important and defining presence in the world.¹⁵ Nussbaum has proposed, to the contrary, that the “clash” of which Huntington writes is in fact a “clash within.” She sees that in each of us there is a clash between *fear of the other* and *welcome of the other*. How we work that clash is decisive for our common human future. Because the clash is “within,” it is clear that pastors have important and quite distinctive work to do in making that clash available to our own awareness and then providing processes and venues in which the clash can be appropriately dealt with. Without such processing, it is no wonder that demagogues find it easy to mobilize that great fear of the “other” in popular, violent, and dangerous ways. It is not likely that there is much thuggish supremacy among our church constituency. But it is for sure that there is much legal, polite white supremacy within the confines of the church. For that reason this is an urgent task for pastors. We will do well to let people in on this long term history of supremacy and how we ourselves are on the receiving end of that trajectory, much to the betrayal of evangelical faith.

There is, I judge, a straight line from the Edit of Milan through the Crusades,

through the Doctrine of Discovery to the violence of January 6 that sought to block the proper functioning of our multi-racial democracy. All of this cannot be blamed on or credited to President Trump, because it is thick, deep, and systemic among us. There is no doubt, nevertheless, that Donald Trump has served to legitimate that long lingering destructive sentiment. It is evident, of course, that the gospel contradicts this trajectory of fear. But the undoing of its power among us will require careful, intentional, sustained teaching in order to unlearn our dominant historical-political-theological tradition.

Notes

1. See James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011) and the astonishing work of Ida B. Wells in Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Amistad, 2008).
2. See Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: Harper One, 2011).
3. Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). This work has traced the dramatic altering of Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries when wealthy persons joined and came to dominate the church.
4. Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, Revised edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), 220-221.
5. Walker, 224.
6. For a contemporary critical assessment of the doctrine of discovery (*Inter Caetera*), see *Yours, Mine, Ours: Unravelling the Doctrine of Discovery*, a special edition of *Intotmak* edited by Cheryl Woelk & Steve Heinrichs, published by the Mennonite Church Canada (2016).
7. Jacinta Ruru, Tracey Lindberg, and Robert J. Miller, *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 94.
8. See Lindsay G. Robertson, *Conquest by Law: How the Discovery of America Disposessed Indigenous Peoples of Their Lands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), and Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2008).
9. Patrick Phillips, *Blood at the Root: A Racial Cleansing in America* (New York: Norton, 2016).
10. See Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2016).
11. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
12. Walter Brueggemann and Davis Hankins, "The Invention and Persistence of Wellhausen's World," *CBQ* 75 (2013) 15-31.
13. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).
14. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence and India's Future* (Cambridge: Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
15. Even in the Edict of Milan, the language was only the rhetoric of "tolerance" that regularly turns out to be patronizing and condescending. Significant honoring of the "other" requires much more engagement than what is indicated by "tolerance."