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Much has been made in the press over the past few years of a couple of demographic trends in the United States: Church attendance is down for all Christian denominations, and the nation is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Here are a couple of books that take both of these trends head on.

## Book One

***White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity***  
**by Robert P. Jones**

Simon & Schuster, 2020  
 ISBN 9781982122867

Robert P. Jones has made his career by combining theology and social science. The CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, Jones looks back at his upbringing in the Protestant southern United States and sees

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Christianity as playing an equal role to government in creating the racist attitudes of the nation. Jones seeks to connect his family background—highlighting his family Bible dated to 1815 that was handed down from slave owners—with the larger role of Christianity as a whole.

Much of *White Too Long* details the formation of American Christian theology for the preservation of slavery, and later the status quo of white supremacy. The term white supremacy is used here, not as a reference to the KKK and other such groups, but as a system which gives privilege to the dominant white citizenry at the expense of people of color. So while the story starts in antebellum America, it continues to modern times. Jones book divulges what white Christians actually believe, what motivates their behavior, and how they perceive their core identity.

The bulk of the book focuses on mainstream Protestantism, especially of the South, but the Catholic Church does not get a free pass. The church's role in colonialism throughout Africa and the Americas is brought up along with the fact that approximately 20 percent of Catholics in Maryland in the 18th Century were slaves. Resistance to integrating Catholic parishes lasted well into the 20th Century.

Jones felt naïve growing up in the Southern Baptist church and gave little thought his denomination's troubled racist past. Instead, he describes the protection and purity of his upbringing in the church. It was an all-encompassing environment that provided support for church members through all life's ups and downs (protection). But the congregations did not see the harm the status quo brought on those on the outside, particularly African Americans. They also tend to view Christianity



as solely a positive force in history and tend to disregard negative acts done in the name of the religion as not truly Christian (purity).

Jones finds examples of slave owners in his own family tree—going back multiple generations. Partly driven by guilt, Jones also expresses a hope for a reckoning that goes beyond reconciliation and forgiveness, seeking true change regardless how uncomfortable the process is.

## Book Two

### **I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness** **by Austin Channing Brown**

Convergent Books , 2018

ISBN 978-1-5247-6085-4

Austin Channing Brown was fortunate to not have grown up in an environment of extreme racial oppression. She did—and still does—however, deal with discrimination on a daily basis. Most of it comes in the form of macroaggressions, smaller examples of disrespect or distrust that accumulate and take their toll on a person's health and well-being. Thus, we have the title of her first chapter, *White People Are Exhausting*, where Brown describes how often white America expects everyone else to conform to their norms and beliefs.

The book takes us through her childhood and college but really focuses on her life in Church, both as an employee and as a congregant

telling us “I can’t let go of my belief in Church—in a universal body of belonging, in a community that reaches toward love in a world so often filled with hate.”

Brown spent most of her childhood in the relatively small town of Toledo, Ohio, attending school and church in a white majority environment. It was only after spending more time with her father’s family in Cleveland, a much larger city, did she become immersed in Black culture—including the Church.

She recalls no major racial incidents growing up, but issues of race were rarely addressed in her Catholic high school. A focus on harmony was valued, but this often left deeper complications untouched in order to avoid conflict.

Brown recalls the few Black college professors she had fondly. She also notes how rare this is in American society, and touches on how most white people have never been led by a Black teacher, pastor, professor or supervisor.

Brown envisions dismantling racial injustice by white Americans being more curious about its origins and less worried about their comfort. Brown looks to Black female leaders for guidance, including Audre Lord, who writes that anger is not a shortcoming but can be a creative force, reminding Brown of one of her favorite Scripture passages—Jesus upending the Temple in anger.

Brown ends her book asking for justice before reconciliation. She sees too many white churches staging moments of racial harmony, and not digging deeper into the structural change that will bring about a truly inclusive church.

