

Reading and Discussion Guide

The End  
of  
White  
Christian  
America

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STUDY GUIDE

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# The End of White Christian America

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AN OBITUARY FOR  
WHITE CHRISTIAN  
AMERICA

Jones provocatively begins the book with an obituary for White Christian America (pp. 1-3).

1. What was your reaction to this opening of the book? Did you find yourself, for example, feeling defensive, angry, neutral, happy, relieved, or some other emotion?
2. Did you take this preface to be tongue-in-cheek or more serious?
3. What do you think the tone of this section foreshadows about the approach of the book?

## CHAPTER 1

# Who Is White Christian America?

1. Jones writes that across America, “churches are now eclipsed architecturally and culturally by commercial centers” (pg. 6). What are the most noteworthy buildings in your town or area, and why? What can architecture tell us about a community’s priorities? Is it important to you for churches or other religious buildings to be prominent and visible in your community?
2. According to Jones, over the course of the twentieth century, white mainline Protestants and white evangelical Protestants developed two opposing worldviews. What were their worldviews, and in what ways did they differ? Do you think the divide still persists among white American Protestants today?
3. Jones notes that white Catholics were never fully part of what he calls “White Christian America.” What is Jones suggesting by making this distinction? Why do you think there is less Protestant-Catholic conflict today compared to the past?
4. In this chapter, Jones describes a world where, until recently, White Christian America was “the cultural pivot around which the country turned.” Today, he writes, “it’s no longer possible to believe that White Christian America sets the tone for the country’s culture as a whole” (pg. 39). Do you believe the United States is a Christian nation? Do you believe it was ever a Christian nation?

5. According to Jones, “And where do you go to church?” was a commonly asked question in the old White Christian America (pg. 38). Do you know if your friends or coworkers are religious, or where they attend religious services? Would you feel comfortable asking them? If not, would you ever have felt comfortable asking that question?

## CHAPTER 2

# Vital Signs: A Divided and Dying White Christian America

1. At the beginning of the chapter, Jones describes a series of visceral, angry responses to Coca Cola’s “It’s Beautiful” advertisements (pp. 45-46). Watch the ad together on YouTube [[www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4BC8zUfNhU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4BC8zUfNhU)]. How do advertisements such as this, which highlight America’s growing diversity, make you feel? Why do you think this ad made so many people upset?
2. Were you surprised by the graph on page 53 that showed a steep national decline in the number of white Protestants since the 1980s? Why or why not? Why do you think so many young people are leaving mainline Protestant and evangelical Protestant churches?
3. On page 47, Jones notes that even if you add all white Christians together - including Protestants, Catholics, and others - they only comprise 47 percent of the US population, according to 2014 data. Since the book’s publication, that number has slipped to 43 percent in 2016. How surprising is this statistic to you? Do you live in a place where many people are white Protestants? If so, have you seen new signs of

religious diversity in your community? What are some examples, and what responses have these changes generated?

4. Nearly all of the country's presidents have been white Protestants, and as recently as the 2012 presidential campaign, Mitt Romney's Mormon faith was the subject of controversy and discussion. Until recently, the vast majority of the U.S. Supreme Court justices were white Protestants; but since 2010 the court has been comprised entirely of Catholic and Jewish judges. Do you think it's important to have religious diversity among our leaders and political decision-makers? Is it important for our leaders and political decision-makers to be religious at all?
5. Jones describes the widespread religious discrimination that both Catholics and Mormons faced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Which religious groups seem to face the most discrimination today? Have you seen tension between religious groups in your community? If so, give an example.

### CHAPTER 3

## Politics: The End of the White Christian Strategy

1. On pages 83-85, Jones describes an email he received from the Christian Coalition in November 2012, which he argues "cut to the heart of the massive cultural divide facing the country today." What was your reaction to the picture in the email? Do you see a connection between the imagery in the email and the reelection of Barack Obama? If there is a connection, what is it?

2. In this chapter, Jones highlights a poll question about changes in American culture since the 1950s (pg. 86). The question reads, “Since the 1950s, do you think American culture and way of life has mostly changed for the better, or has it mostly changed for the worse?” How would you respond to this question? Share some examples of why you feel the country has changed for the better or for the worse.
3. How much influence do you think white Christian leaders have on American politics today? Do you agree with Jones that conservative Christians have lost much of their influence over the political process?
4. The final text of *The End of White Christian America* was written before Donald Trump was elected president, and he is not mentioned in the book. However, Jones penned an op-ed for *The New York Times* following the book’s publication arguing that evangelical support for Trump could be explained by understanding evangelical voters as “nostalgia voters” rather than “values voters.” Read the op-ed [<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/11/opinion/campaign-stops/the-evangelicals-and-the-great-trump-hope.html>]. Do you agree with Jones’ assessment of evangelical voters or not?
5. In today’s polarized political climate, how do you think the Republican Party could reach out beyond older white Christian voters? Are there voters the Democratic Party should be trying to reach that it has not? What do you think the outlook is for each of the two political parties based on the demographic and religious changes described in the book? Do you envision the rise of a third party and, if so, will religion play a role in shaping this new political party?

**CHAPTER 4**

**Family: Gay Marriage and  
White Christian America**

1. At the beginning of the chapter, Jones describes a song about gay marriage that was performed at the Grammy Awards in 2014, inspired by the performers' negative experiences with religion (pp. 111-116). Watch the performance on YouTube [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVb9mG\\_Gf4Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVb9mG_Gf4Y)]. Why do you think the performers chose to include a line from the New Testament in their song (pg. 113)? What does this say about their attitude toward religion? Were you surprised that CBS broadcasted a live wedding ceremony that included the marriages of gay and lesbian couples in prime time?
2. Why do you think views about same-sex marriage shifted so quickly between 2003 - when Massachusetts legalized gay marriage - and 2014 when the Supreme Court issued its decision on the issue, as shown by a graph on page 123? Did your perspective change on gay marriage during that time? If so, how?
3. In your own experience, are religious groups and leaders mostly supportive of same-sex marriage, or not? Have you noticed a change in how religious leaders have talked about gay marriage over the past few years? If so, give some examples.
4. On page 133, Jones discusses responses to a poll question about whether religious groups are estranging younger people by being too judgmental about gay and lesbian issues. Do you agree or

disagree with the question? Should religious institutions be willing to shift or evolve theologically to be more inclusive of gay and lesbian people?

5. What do you think of Russell Moore's call for white evangelical Protestants to stop pretending they are the moral majority (pg. 143)? Should Christians work to embrace their status as "strangers"? How could they do so? What do you think this means for the future of white evangelicals in this country?

## CHAPTER 5

# Race: Desegregating White Christian America

1. In this chapter, Jones explores the history and effects of residential, religious, and social segregation. Do you regularly discuss important issues with a person of another race? Do you live in a community with people of another race? What impact does segregation have on your life?
2. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., often noted that 11:00 on Sunday morning was the most segregated hour in the country. Jones observes, "Today's churches continue to be remarkably segregated" (pg. 165). Is this true of your religious community, or religious congregations in your area? Has your church or place of worship remained in an otherwise demographically changing neighborhood or did it move at some point in its history because of these changes? How would your congregation be different if it were more racially diverse?



3. Responses to the #BlackLivesMatter movement and recent shootings of African Americans by police have varied greatly among white Americans. Notably, religiously unaffiliated white Americans are more likely than white Christians to share African Americans' concerns about these issues (pg. 154). What do you make of this divide?
4. Christian churches, Jones writes, "are supposed to be sacred places where the social distinctions that structure politics or the workplace melt away" (pg. 163). Do you agree with his assessment? Is it especially important for Christian religious communities to work toward greater inclusivity? Why or why not?
5. Jones warns white churches not to move too quickly toward "reconciliation" without sufficiently attending to "repair" (pg. 190). Do you agree that the work of repair is a precondition to reconciliation between white and black Americans? What might that work look like?

## CHAPTER 6

### A Eulogy for White Christian America

1. Jones asserts that attempts in states like Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee to make the Bible the official state book "betray...cultural insecurity about the declining status of White Christian America" (pg. 211). Do you think it's appropriate for the Bible to be the official book in any state? Is an attempt to make the Bible the official state book a sign of power, weakness,

or both? How would you feel if your state legislators introduced a similar bill?

2. How does Stanley Hauerwas's 1980s call for Christians to become "resident aliens" in America (pg. 213) compare with Russell Moore's more recent call for evangelical Christians to embrace their "freakishness" (pg. 217)? Do you think these terms describe the way Christians ought to engage with American culture and society?
3. Jones uses Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's stages of grief as a framework for portraying how different groups of white Christians are processing the death of White Christian America. Using this framework, at what stage would you locate yourself? Are you close to anyone who is at a different stage? Do you think the death of White Christian America will make the country more or less divided? Do you think it will change the country for the better or for the worse?
4. Jones points to the spirit of Abraham Lincoln's famous second inaugural address, "with malice toward none, with charity for all," as a helpful attitude for White Christian America's critics (pg. 232). Should liberals find places to compromise with conservatives in the area of LGBT rights? What would a reasonable compromise look like?
5. Some are celebrating the death of White Christian America, but Jones argues that these critics are not offering their own alternatives (pg. 226). What positive contributions do you think White Christian America has made to the country's social and cultural

fabric? What could replace White Christian America, as the country becomes more religiously and demographically diverse? What do you see as your role in that process of transformation?

## Looking Back

Reread the obituary at the beginning of the book and reconsider your answers to the questions related to it. Do you react to the obituary differently after having read the book and discussed it? Overall, what effect do you think the death of White Christian America will have on American politics and culture?

### **A note from the author:**

I hope this study guide has enriched your reading of the book. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux for developing this study guide and to Tim Duffy for design and layout. If you would like to inquire about the possibility of my coming to speak at your congregation, community, or university, please send an email to [info@prri.org](mailto:info@prri.org). You can check out my current speaking schedule here: <http://www.prri.org/end-white-christian-america/>.

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