
We're All Under Attack: Looking at Christian Dominance

Sometimes these days it seems like just about everybody is under attack. That only rich white heterosexual, able-bodied men have any kind of security. If that seems true to you perhaps it is because it is true. In fact, this is the same white male Christian property-owning ruling class that established our country in the late eighteenth century. Even earlier this small segment of the European population set up the capitalist structure and dominant Christian worldview that determined that only they had legitimacy in God's eyes and the authority to rule over all others. I want to look specifically at the dominant Christian part of this history because it helps to explain so much of what is going on today.

Within a Christian framework we have witnessed 1700 years of crusades against "evil" non-Christians, those branded as primitives, savages or terrorists, with results most currently manifesting in the US's participation in attacks on 7 Muslim countries and large-scale state-sanctioned violence against people of color, immigrants, women, people who are queer and trans, Jews, Muslims and people with disabilities. Within this framework all those labeled Other have been marginalized and are vulnerable to violence.

I define *Christian hegemony* as the everyday, systematic set of Christian values, individuals and institutions that dominate all aspects of US society. Nothing is unaffected. Christian dominance is a complex and shifting system that benefits all Christians, those raised Christian and those passing as Christian. However, the concentration of power and wealth accumulates to a predominantly Christian ruling elite. All Others experience exploitation and constant vulnerability to violence.

This dominance operates on several levels. First is the subtle internalization of Christian beliefs by individuals. The behavior and voting patterns of millions of people in the United States are influenced by concepts such as original sin, manifest destiny, the existence of "the one truth" contained within Christianity and the notion that humans were given dominion over the earth.

There is also the social, political and economic (as opposed to spiritual) power that individual clergy exert on people's lives.

Another level is reflected in the very significant power some denominations wield in the US.

In addition, there is a vast network of tens of thousands of well-funded, tax-exempt and powerful parachurch organizations.



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Another level of Christian dominance comes from the power elite, those who control the largest and most powerful institutions in the US.

Finally there is the level that provides the foundation for all the others: the deep legacy of ideas, values and practices produced within dominant western Christianity over the centuries. That legacy continues to shape our culture and frame public policies.

The original Christians, of course, were West Asian and North African Jews, predominately Arab. Jesus, Mary, the Apostles and all of the early leaders in the church were Jewish Arabs of varying ethnic and cultural identities, and with diverse but certainly not white skin tones. The bulk of early Christian churches, monasteries and other religious centers were in the Middle East. The center of the early church was in Constantinople, in present-day Turkey. It wasn't until the rise of Islam, the weakening of the Eastern Church and the consolidation of its power that the Roman church emerged as a powerful international force. During this process western Christianity was Europeanized and whitened, its roots whitewashed.

Women, people of color and many others could become Christians of a sort, but they were considered inferior imitations of the real thing because they were contaminated by their difference from the white male physically and the morally perfect images of God, Adam, Jesus, the Apostles, Calvin, Luther, and a long line of church leaders continuing into the current day. A person from any of these groups was considered more likely to revert to non-Christian ways, succumbing to evil and becoming a subversive element.

"Original" white male Christians feared the destruction of the Christian community and God's work on earth. From this perspective, if Christian hierarchies were disordered, then God's kingdom was in disarray and Christianity would fail. White Christian men had to be willing to sacrifice their lives as soldiers of Christ - knights, gunslingers or superheroes - to save Christian civilization.¹⁹ Male behavior based on control, obedience and the ability to commit violence in the name of God was essential to fulfilling this role. Terror of being out of control, (losing it), fear of disorder and a sense of constant danger were key components of this personality and social framework.

At the same time, because of ongoing Christian violence, all others experienced terror based on fear for their very existence. Widespread media images of danger -*demonization* - and everyday forms of attack that non-original Christians and non-Christians experience produce a constant sense of insecurity, leading to an onslaught of aggression against self and others in all those labeled Other by dominant Christianity.



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The Other

Compared to original (white, male) Christians, all other people have been defined in some sense as Other. The most prominent groups of others include:

- * Jews. Accused of killing God, Jews have long been the Other who resides inside Christian societies and is forever reviled and persecuted for rejecting Jesus.
- * Pagans. When Christianity became the only acceptable religion of the Roman Empire at the end of the fourth century pagans were attacked and all pagan culture was destroyed.
- * Muslims. Muslims are the infidel and exterior enemy, who since the Crusades have resisted the expansion of Christianity throughout the world.
- * White Christian women. Portrayed as causing the fall of humanity from paradise, tempting men sexually and interacting with the devil, women are seen as weak and needing protection, but also treacherous and powerful, needing to be controlled by men.
- * Heretics. Those who disagree with orthodox Christian beliefs, either defined by the Catholic Church or Protestant denominations, are seen as misled and dangerous to society.
- * Homosexuals. All those who are gender variant and engage in sexuality that is not heterosexual within a formal married relationship are portrayed as flaunting God's will and as subversive to dominant Christian values.
- * Heathens. Those who had not yet been exposed to Christianity, such as the Indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere and of Africa, including those who were enslaved or who immigrated to colonizing countries were considered blameless. But once exposed to Christianity, they were essentially offered the choice to convert or die. If they willfully rejected Christianity they were considered unredeemable and therefore expendable.
- * People who were lepers, people with disabilities and those with other physical conditions. These groups were usually considered to have rejected and/or to have been rejected by God. They could become healed if they had strong enough faith; otherwise they were condemned to suffer for their lack of belief.
- *The Poor. The Church decided that only those who were rich and gave their money to the Church were "deserving" poor and entitled to public support. All others were undeserving poor





because they must have done something sinful or evil to be punished by the benevolent Christian god and therefore deserved nothing.

Behind all of these groups was the devil, the enemy in the cosmic battle between good and evil, inspiring these groups to seek the destruction of God's order. Jews and Muslims, African slaves and Native Americans could convert to Christianity to be accepted in Christian society and avoid persecution. But the price of conversion was the abandonment of their cultures, languages and often their very families and communities. And still, conversion was always suspect. No matter how thoroughly they assimilated, members of these groups are often, even today, considered untrustworthy—exploited, marginalized, and scapegoated by society.

To paraphrase scholar Steven Salaita, the notion that the Crusades, the Inquisition, Witch Burnings, the Trail of Tears, Lynchings, My Lai, Haditha or Abu Ghraib were merely anomalies undertaken by isolated groups of rogue warriors, or were isolated historical events no longer relevant to our lives, is an insult to our moral integrity.¹⁹ These events were part of a centuries-long process that included the dehumanization of anyone perceived as dangerous from a Christian perspective. Literally hundreds of millions of people have been killed over the centuries to protect Christianity and its white male elites, including the list from above and additionally:

Indigenous and people of color—including immigrants of color
People who are queer, trans, gender non-conforming
People with physical or mental disabilities
People who are poor

Some Questions to Ask...

Who is currently marginalized and under attack in our society?
Who is most exploited?
Which groups are you part of?

The vast majority of us are under attack by the ruling class and we have a tremendous amount to gain from defending each other and joining together to build the kind of society we would like to live in and pass on to coming generations. If we don't then, in James Baldwin's prophetic words, *"If they come for you in the morning, then they will be coming for us at night."*



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