

Reckoning with History

*Settler Colonialism, Slavery, and the
Making of American Christianity*

WILLIAM YOO

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“Reckoning with History traces the ways in which territorial displacement and racial violence shaped American Christianity from its inception. William Yoo’s incisive exploration details how settler colonialism and slavery have distorted theological doctrines and ecclesial practices throughout the centuries. By centering the voices of Black, Indigenous, and dissenting Christians, this book challenges readers to confront the uncomfortable truths about how a colonial animus constrains the way contemporary Christians in the United States relate to the earth and to one other. Profound and timely, Yoo’s narrative invites us to reckon with our colonial legacy so that, together, we might design a future that enables us to become the beloved community God desires.”

—Ángel J. Gallardo, Assistant Professor of Church History,
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“Yoo offers an invaluable account of Christian hypocrisy during settlement and enslavement. He combines the professorial and the prophetic to challenge facile recollections of our common history. I pray this book inspires an honest assessment of what it means for the church to be a witness to God’s reconciliation in Christ.”

—Joseph Scrivner, Dean of Chapel, Stillman College

“Reckoning with History is a courageous book that outlines how majority sectors of the white church in the United States were deliberately invested in using Christianity to legitimize settler colonialism, war crimes, land theft, and slavery. Yoo issues an important call for Christians to honestly confront the dark legacy that underpins much of US history—and the church’s complicity in it. Without forgetting the long history of resistance against the powerful forces that (de)formed US Christianity in the image of a colonial state, *Reckoning with History* challenges readers to embrace hard truths as an indispensable step toward fashioning a collective identity rooted in justice, humility, and love.”

—João B. Chaves, Assistant Professor of the History of Religion
in the Américas, Baylor University, and author of
*The Global Mission of the Jim Crow South: Southern Baptist
Missionaries and the Shaping of Latin American Evangelicalism*

“Yoo’s Reckoning with History: Settler Colonialism, Slavery, and the Making of American Christianity is a transformative exploration of the intertwined histories of faith, power, and oppression. With meticulous research and unflinching honesty, Yoo confronts the often-overlooked legacies of settler colonialism and slavery that have shaped American Christianity. His work challenges readers to move

beyond sanitized narratives of religious history, offering instead a profound reckoning with the systems of exploitation and racial injustice that continue to influence Christian theology and practice today. What sets Yoo's scholarship apart is his ability to weave historical analysis with a call to action. He invites majority faith communities to grapple with the moral and ethical implications of their history, urging a collective commitment to repair, repentance, and reconciliation. His compelling prose and careful scholarship make this book an essential resource for theologians, clergy, and lay leaders seeking to understand the deeper roots of their faith traditions. *Reckoning with History* is not merely a book; it's a moral imperative. Yoo's work is a must-read for anyone committed to justice and truth."

—Damon P. Williams, Senior Pastor,
Providence Missionary Baptist Church, Atlanta

"At a time when too many American Christians believe too many smug and untruthful stories about their history and therefore call for Christian dominion, Yoo tells a truthful story and suggests that repentance might be more appropriate. He reveals the extent to which the white Christian churches have embodied some of the worst impulses in American history: They supported the settler colonialism that destroyed vast Indigenous cultures, and they defended or passively accepted two centuries of enslavement and a further century of racial subjugation. This is a powerful rejoinder to a triumphalist reading of Christian history. It should be read wherever Christians gather."

—E. Brooks Holifield, Charles Howard Candler Professor Emeritus
of American Church History, Emory University, and author of
Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War

"In addition to providing much-needed pastoral guidance for the church's critical shift to the responsible repair of historic harms—and away from trendy and counterproductive institutional habits of privilege-shaming and guilt-mongering—*Reckoning with History* ultimately issues an invitation to practicing Christians in the United States to become the twenty-first century's extension of trans-ethnic decolonial cooperation among Christian people of the United States until this collective decolonial mission is complete.

I highly recommend Yoo's thoroughly researched and story-filled, clarifying and convicting, *Reckoning with History* for students of church history, social ethicists, and religious studies courses as well as faith formation ministries and church discussion groups."

—Jermaine Ross-Allam, Ministry Director,
Center for the Repair of Historic Harms,
Interim Unified Agency of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

*For my mother, Sook-ja Yoo,
my father, Kon-soo Yoo,
my mother-in-law, Jung-ja Choi,
and in memory of my father-in-law,
Bok-kyu Choi*

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The Church with the Soul of a Nation

In 1849, Ebenezer Davies published an account of his recent travel in the United States. Davies was a British pastor in Guyana. His father-in-law, John Wray, founded Mission Chapel as a pastor with the London Missionary Society several years after his arrival in Guyana in 1808. Mission Chapel was the first church in Guyana to welcome enslaved persons, and the initial building was constructed in 1819. It was enlarged three years later to accommodate the growing number of worshipers, but it was destroyed by arson in 1823. A second building was completed in 1825. During Davies's ministry, Mission Chapel began plans in 1841 to erect a third building because of the continuing increase in church attendance.

Davies also rejoiced in the abolition of British slavery in the Caribbean and South America. In Guyana, only enslaved children under six years of age were initially declared free after the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 took effect on August 1, 1834. Four years later, all enslaved persons in Guyana were emancipated. Davies surmised that his experience as the pastor "of a large congregation, of whom a great number were but a few years ago held in cruel bondage," would grant him "keener eyes and feelings more acute" toward slavery in the United States.¹

Davies arrived by ship to New Orleans eager to attend worship services there, because he was "curious to know how people did really pray and preach, with slavery and slave-trading in their vilest forms around them."² Davies visited a myriad of congregations belonging to different Protestant denominations across the country, beginning in Louisiana and ending in New York. But the churches he frequented most were Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian. This fact about Davies's trip was not surprising. Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians were the three largest Protestant traditions in

the United States. In 1820, Baptists and Methodists each reported roughly 2,700 churches, and Presbyterians counted 1,700 churches. The only other tradition with over 1,000 churches was the Congregationalists (1,100), and the fifth and sixth largest traditions were Lutherans (800 churches) and Episcopalians (600 churches).³ *The American Almanac* for 1850 compiled various denominational records and estimates to determine the following numbers: 1,230,069 Methodists, 952,693 Baptists, 435,377 Presbyterians, 227,196 Congregationalists, 163,000 Lutherans, and 67,550 Episcopalians.⁴ In 1850, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians accounted for 94 percent of all the churches within the eleven Southern states that would form the Confederacy eleven years later.⁵

Several components of American churches startled Davies. The first surprise occurred when Davies looked down at the floors of the sanctuaries he visited. As he approached First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans, Davies marveled at its architecture: "It is a beautiful building: seldom, if ever, had I seen a place of worship the exterior of which I liked so much." But once he stepped inside, he found the floor revolting because it was "stained all over with tobacco juice." Davies understood that spitting tobacco was a common practice in the United States, even among elite men from the upper class, but he was surprised that the "nasty habit" occurred during worship. Another British traveler, Frances Trollope, despised the ubiquity of chewing and spitting tobacco in public, and she also complained of this "most vile and universal habit" when observing it at a theatre in Washington, DC.⁶

The next surprise to Davies was more revolting than the tobacco spittle on the church floor. As worshipers entered the sanctuary, Davies saw all the Black people take their seats in the same section of the gallery. He watched for several minutes until "ultimately there were from forty to fifty of the sable race in that part of the gallery" and recounted, "Not one white was to be seen among the blacks, nor one black among the whites. There, then, was the 'Negro Pew!' It was the first time even my West Indian eyes ever beheld a distinction of colour maintained in the house of God!" When a white lay leader offered a prayer beseeching God to empower the congregation with "every grace and Christian virtue" and uphold their nation with "the great blessings of civil and religious liberty," Davies questioned how this worshiper reconciled the words he spoke aloud with the horrific sins of Black enslavement in his city and the terrors of racial oppression against people of color throughout his country.⁷

Davies visited a Baptist church in New Orleans the following Sunday and conversed with its pastor after worship. Davies explained how some English Baptist missionaries had advocated for abolition in the Caribbean and Guyana.

The pastor responded, "Slavery is a political institution. As a Christian minister, I have nothing to do with politics. My business is to preach the gospel, and try to save men's souls." And the pastor continued with a vigorous defense of enslavers and shared that he had no desire to fellowship with "uncharitable" Christians who questioned the faith of people in his church on account of their participation in slavery. Davies's frustration with the pastor intensified, especially as the day prior he had witnessed a slave auction, in which a multracial woman named Elizabeth, "about eighteen years of age, evidently the daughter of a white man," was sold for \$810, and he left the conversation with a better understanding of why some abolitionists called American churches "the bulwark of slavery."⁸

Several weeks later, Davies was invited to preach at Second Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. Davies selected the hymn "O'er the Gloomy Hills of Darkness" to precede his sermon. The Welsh Methodist William Williams of Pantycelyn composed the hymn, among the most well-known of his nearly 1,000 Welsh and English hymns. Many of Williams's English hymns were written at the request of Selina Hastings, countess of Huntingdon. Lady Huntingdon was a significant patron of Methodism in the United Kingdom. In addition to supporting Williams, she aided the ministries of Howel Harris, Charles Wesley, and George Whitefield. Lady Huntingdon's patronage was not limited to Methodism or Europe. She also invested in ministries among Indigenous and enslaved Black persons in North America. She met Samson Occom, a Mohegan pastor and the first ordained Indigenous Presbyterian minister in North America, when he visited England from 1766 to 1768, and thereafter financially supported his ministry. She was involved in the publication of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw's autobiography in 1772, the first such narrative from a formerly enslaved African printed in England, and she also helped make possible the publication of Phillis Wheatley's volume of poetry in Boston one year later, the first publication from an African American woman. Both Gronniosaw and Wheatley dedicated their works to Lady Huntingdon. Williams's hymn "O'er the Gloomy Hills of Darkness" includes a verse reflecting the missionary endeavors in North America that Lady Huntingdon and Williams himself championed:

"Let the Indian, let the Negro,
Let the rude Barbarian see
That divine and glorious Conquest
Once obtain'd on Calvary.
Let the Gospel, &c.,
Word resound from Pole to Pole."⁹

When the London Missionary Society, which included in its ranks Davies and his father-in-law, held its inaugural meeting in 1795, all who gathered at Lady Huntingdon's Spa Fields Chapel in London sang "O'er the Gloomy Hills of Darkness" as the opening hymn.¹⁰ Therefore, it is not surprising that Davies chose this hymn for his first sermon in an American church.

But Davies was astonished and aggrieved when the congregation in Cincinnati arrived at the second verse. The words "Let the Indian, let the Negro" did not appear and instead were replaced with "Let the dark benighted pagan." Davies was furious that "the Indian" and "the Negro" had "vanished" and "a wretched alteration" appeared in their place. Davies immediately believed the change was "suspicious in design" and later learned that the revision existed in hymnals throughout the United States, except in those hymnals used in congregations of Welsh descent. Davies surmised, "Slaveholders, and the abettors of that horrid system which makes it a crime to teach a negro to read the Word of God, felt perhaps that they could not devoutly and consistently sing, 'Let the Indian, let the Negro.'"¹¹

Settler Colonialism, Slavery, and the Making of American Christianity

This book confronts the histories of settler colonialism and slavery and illuminates how these two devastating realities informed and ultimately deformed Protestant Christianity in the North American colonies and antebellum United States. Many years have passed since Ebenezer Davies decried the omissions of "the Indian" and "the Negro" in the white American rendition of a beloved Welsh hymn. Whereas Davies and others in the past spoke directly of "slavery," they did not address "settler colonialism" with this specific term. The concept of settler colonialism emerged in the 1960s as scholars engaged the histories of foreign intrusion in other territories and the processes by which these foreign groups exploited the resources of Indigenous populations and exerted political domination over them. Settler colonialism is one form of colonialism that emphasizes the seizure of Indigenous lands and displacement of Indigenous peoples by foreign settlers for the purposes of constructing their own ethnic, national, and religious societies.

I contend that settler colonialism and slavery shaped American Christianity in deep, haunting, distinctive, and enduring ways. Just as any trustworthy treatment of US history must grapple with the ideals, advances, compromises, and contradictions of democracy and freedom, the same holds true for understanding American Christianity. Yet I find that too many Christians in the United States today have incomplete, incoherent, and insufficient understandings

of the history of settler colonialism, slavery, and American Christianity. Settler colonialism and slavery were among the greatest forces that have shaped American Christianity. I include in this book inspiring accounts of different Indigenous, Black, and white Christians who actively protested these racial oppressions.

But the larger story that unfolds in the pages of this book is the failure of white American Christianity. White Christians perpetrated horrible crimes against Indigenous and Black peoples. They justified their sins of land theft, enslavement, coercion, and violence with a vicious torrent of biblical texts and scriptural interpretations. They also remade American Christianity into a religion that bolstered their economic, political, and social interests. The reshaping of American Christianity did not happen all at once, but it occurred through a cumulative process of compromise, deception, defense, and conviction. White Christians crafted religious arguments to address the evolving circumstances of settler colonialism and slavery. The invention of racist theologies was often initially met with opposition from some Christians who questioned the morality and rationality of displacing Indigenous peoples and enslaving persons of African descent. But over time, the desire to accumulate more property and wealth quenched the qualms about forming a racially unjust nation, which were experienced by fewer and fewer white Christians. Racist theologies were vigorously defended and rigorously refined, and ultimately became normative convictions for white Christians in many churches.

Indigenous, Black, and concerned white Christians therefore reckoned with the deforming of American Christianity and constructed prophetic theologies of freedom, justice, and resistance. In doing so, they devoted their hearts, minds, and bodies to grasping the problems of racial oppression and worked toward reforms to solve these problems. In 1846, James McCune Smith, the first African American to earn a medical degree (from the University of Glasgow in Scotland) wrote his dear friend, Gerrit Smith, a white Presbyterian abolitionist. McCune Smith divulged his weariness even as he pressed on for Black liberation: “At times I am so weaned from hope, that I could lay me down and die, with the prayer, that the very memory of this existence should be blotted from my soul.” The Black physician prayed to God “for renewed faith and hope and encouragement,” but he also confessed that the obstacles to justice were deep and wide. White racism against people of color was rampant, so much so that “the heart of the whites must be changed, thoroughly, entirely, permanently changed.” But McCune Smith did not prescribe antiracism as the sole remedy. Structural changes in education, employment, and housing were also necessary for racial equality in the United States.¹²

Gerrit Smith also wrestled with the perverse and pervasive ways that racial injustice infiltrated and influenced white Christianity. In 1858, Smith stated, “The Bible is really the best book in the world: though the present uses of it make it practically the worst.”¹³ He had previously argued in 1837 that the complicity and complacency of white Christians toward slavery illustrated that the defining feature of their faith was the “doctrine of expediency.”¹⁴ The white abolitionist was further dismayed when witnessing the rise, not the decline, of proslavery Christian doctrines and teachings over the previous two decades. White proslavery Christians had “misapprehended, misinterpreted, and perverted” the Bible such that “no other book—nay no number of books—does so much to darken the mind and shrivel the soul.”¹⁵

Smith assessed the great revival movement sweeping across the nation—referring to what some of his contemporaries called the “Businessmen’s Revival,” because it had emerged from New York City’s lower Manhattan in 1857—according to the following rubric: “There is a widespread revival of religion in our country. Of what religion time alone can surely tell. It is not Christianity, if it shall allow the rich to stand aloof from the poor, and the people of one complexion to refuse to associate with the people of another. It is not Christianity, if it is like the current religion.”¹⁶ The “very first lesson in the school of Christ” is to love one’s neighbor, “rich or poor, white, red, or black,” but one of the many devastating results of settler colonialism and slavery was the white Christian failure to enact this fundamental principle in the United States from the nation’s founding to the Civil War.¹⁷

Roughly fifteen years before Ebenezer Davies’s account, another English visitor also observed how white Americans had developed an antipathy toward talking and thinking about the obvious injustices against Indigenous and Black persons in their country. In 1834, Harriet Martineau began her travel throughout the United States. She had gained acclaim from her writings about economics in England and published in 1837 an account of her insights and observations from two years in the United States. Martineau emerged as one of the most prominent English intellectuals in the nineteenth century and is recognized today as the first woman sociologist.

Martineau participated in several public events in Massachusetts in which white residents honored the “Pilgrim Fathers” and celebrated how these ancestors colonized Indigenous territory that now formed their predominantly white commonwealth. In the town of Plymouth, Martineau attended the annual “Forefathers’ Day” festival commemorating the initial arrival of the English ship *Mayflower* on Wampanoag land in 1620. As she approached Pilgrim Hall Museum, which was at this point in its tenth year of existence, the historical portrait that awaited visitors staggered Martineau: “Samosat,

the Indian chief, is advancing, with English words of greeting, —‘Welcome, Englishmen!’ Elder Brewster, and the other fathers, with their apprehensive wives and wondering children, form an excellent group; and the *Mayflower* is seen moored in the distance.”

The English sociologist found it curious that white Americans did not allow for even a moment to grapple with a history that resulted in the oppression of the very Indigenous nations and tribes that once inhabited all the lands across their nation. Instead, white Americans reveled in the revisionist histories they chose to tell themselves: “I felt as if in a dream, the whole time that I was wandering about with the rejoicing people, among the traces of the heroic men and women who came over into the perilous wilderness, in search of freedom and worship.”¹⁸

Martineau had earlier witnessed a monument in the town of Deerfield marking the English military victory over a coalition of Indigenous tribes under the command of the Wampanoag sachem (chief) Metacom during a conflict known as King Philip’s War (King Philip was the name that English colonists employed for Metacom) from 1675 to 1676. She regarded the rationale for this site as “far-fetched and dubious” because it marked the vicious and violent excesses of settler colonialism. Martineau interpreted “the story of King Philip” as “one of the most melancholy in the records of humanity” because the Indigenous leader rightly regarded his adversaries as “robbers” seeking to steal the lands and destroy the livelihoods of his people. She reflected, “Then occurs the question about the Indians,—‘where are they?’ and the answer leaves one less sympathy than one would wish to have with the present security of the settler.”¹⁹

The orations delivered at civic gatherings such as Forefathers’ Day also left Martineau “disgusted.” The speakers, who were often local politicians, did not inspire their listeners toward responsible civic participation, especially in relation to Indigenous peoples, but instead spoke tawdry tales of half-truths and downright falsehoods. The first problem Martineau identified was speechmaking that fell prey to “the prostitution of moral sentiment” and “the clap-trap of praise and pathos.” Yet the second ailment was no worse than the first: a misestimation of the American people. Martineau contended that the orators treated their listeners with even less regard than parents hold for their youngest children, because they perpetuated the notion that most white Americans could not engage complex ideas about their history, society, and nation.²⁰

It was hard for white American Christians to ignore the sins of settler colonialism and slavery throughout the first several decades of the United States. In *The Indian World of George Washington: The First President, the First Americans, and the Birth of the Nation*, Colin G. Calloway rightly maintains that it is impossible

to make sense of US history without understanding Indigenous peoples, persons of African descent, and the newly constituted federal government's grappling with them. In his first term as president, Washington met and dined with representatives from the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Muscogee (Creek), Mohawk, Oneida, and Seneca nations. Washington and other government officials invested significant effort and ink to conduct diplomatic relations with Indigenous leaders. Calloway therefore criticizes the glaring absence of Indigenous peoples in how Americans have remembered the past and assesses historical treatments of African Americans as lacking in depth. The historian contends, "From cradle to grave Washington inhabited a world built on the labor of African people and on the land of dispossessed Indian people."²¹ The nation's first president interacted with enslaved Africans more frequently than with Indigenous peoples in his daily life, but the latter were always on Washington's mind, especially because Indigenous lands were central to his vision for the young nation's future. In subsequent years, settler colonialism and slavery would come to dominate civic discourse, as debates raged about the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and Americans everywhere discussed the ramifications of several US Supreme Court decisions, such as what *Worcester v. Georgia* in 1832 signified for Cherokee sovereignty and what *Dred Scott v. Sandford* in 1857 meant for African American citizenship.

Like Davies, Martineau also criticized white Protestant clergy in the United States for their silence on slavery and racial injustice. Martineau too observed that "the Indian" and "the Negro" were nowhere to be found in congregational worship. She often encountered the boast that Protestant Christianity was flourishing in the United States, and that the reason for this growth was the "Voluntary Principle."²² Unlike in her home country of England, there were no state-sponsored churches in the United States. Religious organizations were therefore voluntary associations, which meant they were responsible for financing their buildings and compensating their leaders without direct government assistance. One of the earliest church historians in the United States, the Swiss-born and German American immigrant Philip Schaff, explained in Berlin to a German audience in 1854: "Another peculiarity in the ecclesiastical condition of North America, connected with the Protestant origin and character of the country, is the separation of church and state. . . . The church, indeed, everywhere enjoys the protection of the laws for its property, and the exercise of its functions; but it manages its own affairs independently, and has also to depend for its resources entirely on voluntary contributions."²³

The voluntarism of American religious life astonished many European visitors, because it was wholly different from their contexts and cultures. Some

could not fathom that churches were economically self-sufficient from the tithes and offerings of worshipers. Others doubted that educated men from the middle and upper classes of American society would seek to be clergy without the assurance of a decent salary apportioned through government funds. Martineau agreed that the voluntary principle was proving successful, with evidence of churches everywhere and ostensibly competent clergy in many of them. But one limitation was hesitant preaching, which strove to avoid making parishioners uncomfortable. White pastors were keenly aware of racial oppression, and they were attuned to the discourse among their congregants over the forced deportation of various Indigenous peoples and the westward expansion of slavery, but they refrained from preaching about the most pressing moral issues of their day, because they did not want to offend worshipers.

One component of American Protestantism that Martineau found admirable was that clergy were generally restrained in their pursuit of material gain. In her English context, Martineau observed that one of the abuses of established Christianity (meaning a state-sponsored Church of England) was that some ministers chased after “worldly pomp and state” in prestigious appointments with luxurious parsonages. It was therefore refreshing for Martineau to witness that “the clergy in America are not, as a body, seekers of wealth,” which she attributed in large part to the reality that exorbitant salaries were available to only a few.

But Martineau also identified a significant weakness in American churches: Because clergy compensation took the form of “small salaries and large presents,” it was difficult for pastors to preach freely and fully from their consciences and convictions: “The American clergy being absolved from the common clerical vices of ambition and cupidity, it remains to be seen whether they are free also from that of the idolatry of opinion.”²⁴ As she considered the reluctance of most white clergy to publicly support the abolitionist movement and preach against slavery, Martineau understood that monetary greed was not the impetus behind this resounding silence. Rather, the scarcity of bold preaching was due to a desire to maintain one’s modest livelihood working as a pastor. Yet Martineau did not absolve these pastors for their moral failings. She asserted that they were “the most backward and timid class in the society in which they live,” because too many clergy compromised their holy vocations when refusing to raise “what may be disturbing questions before their people.”²⁵ She connected this indictment with her larger criticism of white America: Whether in congregations, civic gatherings, or everyday conversations, there existed a troubling aversion, which sometimes evolved into an implacable hostility, toward addressing the pervasive sins of settler colonialism and slavery.

Reversing Sidney Mead's "The Nation with the Soul of a Church"

In 1975, Sidney E. Mead published a collection of essays in a book entitled *The Nation with the Soul of a Church*. Mead, a leading church historian who taught at several schools, including the University of Chicago Divinity School, Claremont Graduate School, and the University of Iowa, served as president of the American Society of Church History in 1953. Throughout Mead's career, he studied the interrelated dynamics of culture, politics, and religion in American history. Mead desired to know, "What is the religion of the American culture?" He affirmed the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson's observation that "self-identity is found in a sense of solidarity with the ideas and ideals of a historical community" and the theologian Paul Tillich's delineation of religion as an "ultimate concern" providing "the substance of culture" such that "culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself."²⁶

Mead therefore identified two distinct yet concurrent movements in US history. The first entailed how voluntarism fostered pluralism within Christianity and the rise of a wide variety of congregations and denominations in the absence of one dominant state-sponsored church. But Mead explained that there was nonetheless a broader and deeper American religion that developed alongside this panoply of many different churches, which he called "the religion of the Republic." In 1967, Robert N. Bellah advanced the notion of a powerful "civil religion in America" expressed "in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals" based on interpretations of this nation's founding.²⁷ Presidential inaugurations and Independence Day celebrations are liturgical acts honoring the ideals of democracy and liberty pronounced in the revered texts of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. Mead's "religion of the Republic" likewise operated within and beyond Christianity.

At its best, national ideals inspired the American public toward a greater acceptance of cultural diversity and a more resilient solidarity of ultimate concern. In the case of American Christians, they were simultaneously "Christians and loyal citizens of the commonwealth in which they live; . . . the theology of their denomination is different from the theology that legitimates the constitutional and legal structure of their country."²⁸ Mead explained that American Christians adhered to both theologies and constantly engaged them as people who lived in two worlds—the world of their faith community and the world of their civic community—at the same time.

Mead borrowed the identifying marker of the United States as a "nation with the soul of a church" from the English philosopher G. K. Chesterton. Mead emphasized Chesterton's theological analogy between the United States

and Christianity. Just as Jesus Christ was the incarnate Son of God, the United States was “actually incarnating” the principle of equality in the flesh of a nation. Chesterton heralded the United States as a unique nation because it was “conceived in liberty” and “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” in its continuing commitment to a democratic government.²⁹ Mead contended that a nation could be understood through an examination of the animating memories and unifying aspirations within its people. Here Mead linked the democratic polity of the United States with the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. The American uprising against the British monarchy and the early modern European Protestant departure from Roman Catholicism shared the conviction that the power to govern—colonies in the former and churches in the latter—belonged with the people in a representative democracy.³⁰

Mead’s interpretation of the United States as a nation with the soul of a church was multilayered. In addition to the common thread of representative democracy across national and Protestant church governances, Mead observed how Americans treated their country as if it was their church, measuring their identities by their nation’s founding ideals and anchoring their hopes in professions of American exceptionalism. Mead noted that the absence of a state-sponsored religious tradition meant two things: the growth of many denominations in a pluralistic society in which no religious group could claim sole authority as “the church,” and the nation functioning as “the church” in providing ultimate symbols, such as the flag, and essential principles, such as equality, for people to cherish, discuss, disagree about, and revere.

Mead traced a clear theological merging of Protestant Christianity with American exceptionalism and highlighted as an example of this phenomenon Lyman Beecher’s sermon at the Forefathers’ Day celebration in Plymouth in 1827, when the prominent white pastor preached, “Indeed, if it had been the design of heaven to establish a powerful nation, in the full enjoyment of civil and religious liberty, where all the energies of man might find scope and excitement, on purpose to show the world by experiment, of what man is capable . . . where could such an experiment have been made but in this country[?]”³¹ Beecher was one of many American Christians who ascribed sacrality to their nation as divinely ordained to accomplish holy purposes. Harriet Martineau participated in this same civic holiday several years later, and one wonders what the English sociologist would have thought of Beecher’s patriotic sermon, with its omission of Indigenous peoples and ongoing injustices of settler colonialism, if she was in attendance, and whether Beecher’s address belonged among the treacly public orations that Martineau trenchantly criticized throughout her American journey.

Several European visitors commented on a nationalism among the American people that readily functioned as a civil religion. The French political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville remarked in 1835 on how patriotism in the United States was “a kind of devotion” that was augmented by ritual observances, ranging from national ceremonies to local elections, and enacted with unrivaled fervor. Like some religious adherents, many Americans held nationalist loyalties that Tocqueville surmised amounted to “a kind of religion”: “It does not reason, but it acts from the impulse of faith and sentiment.”³² Tocqueville’s colleague and traveling companion in the United States, Gustave de Beaumont, captured the intensity of American exceptionalism in a fictional novel, *Marie, or Slavery in the United States*, based on his visit. Beaumont recalled his interactions with a white Presbyterian pastor: “I heard him reiterate every day that General [Andrew] Jackson was the greatest man of the century, New York the most beautiful city in the world, the Capitol the most magnificent palace in the universe, the Americans the finest people on earth.”³³

In 1856, the English Wesleyan Methodist minister Frederick J. Jobson visited the United States and wrote one year later of his astonishment at how Americans regarded their first president. Jobson also described American patriotism with religious idioms: “The veneration for Washington in the States is unbounded. He is undoubtedly the national idol; his name, acts, and sayings still govern the Americans; and perhaps of all hero-worship among nations, there is none existing which is more signal or manifest than that of Washington among this people.”³⁴ No contemporary politician was regarded as Washington, but Jobson considered it strange that every politician was interpreted in morally absolute and almost apocalyptic terms as belonging to either “the band of spotless patriots or the lowest class of scoundrels.” One consequence of such extreme attributions was that many Americans seemed to Jobson “incapable of forming any moderate judgment of their public men,” which resulted in a dearth of reasonable discussion on political issues.³⁵

Like Davies and Martineau, these three European travelers also found that the perverse ubiquity of settler colonialism and slavery, which entailed white Americans perpetrating alarming and atrocious injustices against Indigenous and Black persons, illustrated the existence of obvious contradictions to the oft-celebrated ideals of American egalitarianism and liberty. But if the United States was a nation with the soul of a church, it was of the kind of church that did not acknowledge sin, confront wrongdoing, or practice repentance. Indigenous and Black persons were not just missing from the hymn that Davies chose for a worship service or the civic festivals that Martineau attended. The white Americans who conversed with Tocqueville, Beaumont, and Jobson refused to engage their questions about “the Indian” and “the Negro.”

In what was likely an autobiographical description of what it was like talking to white Americans, Tocqueville explained: "A stranger may be well inclined to praise many of the institutions of their country, but he begs permission to blame some things in it, a permission that is inexorably refused." Tocqueville depicted this obstinate resistance among white Americans to discuss social injustices within their nation as an "irritable patriotism."³⁶ But to avoid the realities of settler colonialism and slavery in dialogues and hymns did not make them disappear.

Tocqueville lamented the enslavement of millions of Black persons and the displacement of myriad Indigenous nations. Although Protestantism was indeed institutionally flourishing, with several denominations experiencing increases in the numbers of their churches, colleges, seminaries, and missionary associations, Tocqueville maintained that some white American Christians failed to enact core principles of both their faith and their nation. The gospel of Christianity "declared that all men are equal in the sight of God" and the promise of democracy was that "all citizens are equal in the eye of the law." Yet Tocqueville stumbled upon obvious inconsistencies and outright immoralities. As he traversed "vast tracts of country formerly inhabited by powerful Indian nations who are now extinct" and witnessed the forced deportation of Choctaws from their homeland in Tennessee, Tocqueville felt deep pangs of remorse and believed "every European can perceive means that would rescue these unfortunate beings from the destruction otherwise inevitable."

As the abolitionist movement was making strides in the 1830s, it appeared to Tocqueville that white Christians were "the enemies of liberty" in their defense of slavery and resistance to Black liberation. Abolitionists therefore attacked white churches because "the high-minded and the noble advocate bondage."³⁷ Beaumont also highlighted the prevalence of racial prejudice among white Americans: "Never, since I had been in America, had I seen a white person take pity on a Negro; I had heard it constantly said that colored people were not worthy of commiseration, deserving nothing but contempt."³⁸ Jobson supported the various initiatives of white American Methodist missionaries among Indigenous peoples, but he could not ignore the greater sins of systematic Indigenous oppression at the hands of rapacious white settlers and the US government itself. Jobson stated, "But the cupidity of the American Government dispossessed them of the lands which, in mockery, had been 'guaranteed to them and to their children forever,' and drove them from their settled homes in the heart of the country to the uncultivated and uninhabited parts beyond the Mississippi."³⁹ Jobson was concerned for Indigenous peoples in the new territories allocated to them because he doubted the US government would secure their well-being when scores of white settlers eventually

migrated westward. Although some white missionaries were steadfastly doing good, their ministries alone were not the remedy to address the ramifications of prior land dispossession and enduring anti-Indigenous discrimination, policy, and violence.⁴⁰

Jobson recounted the terrible racial injustices he witnessed as demonstrations of evil unlike anything he had encountered in his life. On a train passing through Maryland and Virginia, Jobson saw enslaved Black persons sorrowfully laboring in fields with dejected countenances. In Baltimore, he preached at Sharp Street Church, the first African American Methodist congregation in the city, his first experience worshipping with a multitude of free and enslaved Black people. The few white persons in worship were other pastors who were also passing through the city en route to the Methodist Episcopal Church General Conference in Indianapolis. Jobson wryly opined, “Whites of the churches in America do not mingle and worship with the blacks, even when visited by an English minister; whom, perhaps, they flock in crowds to hear when he preaches in a church not set apart for the African race.”⁴¹

As the service progressed, Jobson felt the power of the gospel expressed in prayer and song, and preached without restraint “from an overflowing heart” on the promises of liberty unleashed in Christ’s anointing to proclaim good news to the poor. Jobson described what was happening as he spoke: “The whole mass of dark worshippers bowed and waved to and fro like a field of ripe corn before the wind; and, at length, clearing spaces around them, some of them leaped up from the ground and swung themselves round, literally ‘dancing before the Lord.’”⁴²

Yet Jobson later juxtaposed the awe-inspiring faith he felt at Sharp Street Church with the strong grip of proslavery theology in white American churches and the scourge of anti-Black racism across the nation. It was simultaneously inconceivable and evident to Jobson that so many white American Christians beheld God’s justice and nonetheless either supported slavery or remained complicit in their inaction for Black liberation. Jobson sadly concluded that white American Christians exhibited unsurpassed “energy, expertness, and tact” in their economic development—they knew how to start a profitable business and build a large church—but their vile participation in slavery and vicious racial prejudices made them a people who were “disgracefully criminal” and “grossly inconsistent” as citizens of their country and followers of Christ.⁴³

Mead’s notion of the United States as a nation with the soul of a church is therefore disputable. Beaumont was just as critical as Jobson. One of Beaumont’s milder judgments was that white American Christians held two contradictory passions: they loved money, and they loved God. For some clergy, their talk about banking systems and tariff laws was as serious as their religious

meditations and sermons. Beaumont maintained, “I found this contrast all over the United States: these two opposed principles clash incessantly in American society; the one, a source of honesty, the other, of bad faith.”⁴⁴

Yet the bad faith of white American Christians in their cruel oppression of Indigenous and Black persons led Beaumont to more incisive opprobrium. The hypocrisy of white American Christians infuriated him. Mead portrayed white American Christians as simultaneously existing in two worlds. One was their specific community of faith. The other was a common larger society undergirded by the principles of democracy and freedom. Beaumont believed the ongoing injustices of settler colonialism and slavery corrupted both worlds. He acknowledged that unequal laws and arbitrary customs were found in a plethora of nations and societies across human history, but Beaumont simply judged the United States according to the claims and creeds of its people and found it a reprehensible republic that ruthlessly oppressed persons of African descent and remorselessly broke every promise it made to Indigenous peoples.⁴⁵

I therefore implement a reversal of Mead’s assertion and examine American Christianity as a church with the soul of a nation. The First Amendment in the US Constitution guaranteed religious freedom and set into motion a different trajectory for American Christianity in comparison to western Europe. Jane Louise Mesick, an historian of English travelogues about the United States, details how English visitors expressed the jarring contrast in their own words. When one visitor learned the generous annual salary of one Congregational minister in Hartford, Connecticut, he marveled that such an amount was possible without the government as the church’s “nursing father” and surmised that some Americans “pay so much for religion because they want it.”⁴⁶

But the Christianity that many white Americans wanted came at a great moral cost. And European observers such as Martineau and Beaumont were not alone in questioning whether the price was too high. Black, Indigenous, and concerned white Christians in the United States protested the quiet acquiescence of some churches and willful malice of others in connection to the American sins of settler colonialism and slavery. They not only spoke out against evil; they worked for justice with prophetic conviction and holy rage.

To “Tremble for My Country”: Competing for the Soul of a Church and a Nation

In 1774, one year after Phillis Wheatley published her book of poems, she penned a letter to the Mohegan pastor Samson Occom. Wheatley and Occom were friends who exchanged letters. They likely first met in Boston when the famed English revivalist George Whitefield was preaching there in 1764.

Occom had accepted Whitefield's invitation to accompany him on his preaching tour across New England. Occom subsequently corresponded with both Phillis and her enslaver, Susanna Wheatley, and stayed at the Wheatley home when visiting Boston.⁴⁷ Phillis Wheatley was kidnapped as a child from Senegambia and transported to the docks of Boston Harbor in 1761. Her exact age when she arrived is unknown, and the closest estimate is in one account from 1834 that suggests Wheatley was "about seven years old, at this time, from the circumstance of shedding her front teeth."⁴⁸ Her African name is also lost to history. After enduring roughly four months experiencing the terrors of the Middle Passage on the slave ship *Phillis*, the enslaved child emerged naked to be sold. Only 75 of the 96 enslaved Africans survived the voyage, a mortality rate that was higher than most transatlantic slave voyages but not uncommon.⁴⁹ A prominent white couple, John and Susanna Wheatley, purchased the child. John, a wealthy merchant, renamed her after the slave ship that had brought her to them, and Phillis was to be trained as "a faithful domestic" worker serving Susanna directly.⁵⁰

But Phillis also wrote brilliant poetry and utilized her newfound celebrity in 1773 to obtain her freedom. She despised slavery and began her letter to Occom expressing gratitude for his support of abolition: "I have this day received your obliging kind epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in vindication of their natural rights."⁵¹

The main thrust of Wheatley's letter entailed condemnation of Black enslavement and criticism of the hypocrisy of the emerging revolution in the North American colonies. Slavery was an affront against God's creative order. "In every human breast," Wheatley wrote, "God has implanted a principle, which we call love of freedom; it is impatient of oppression, and pants for deliverance."⁵² All people, regardless of skin color, possessed a capacity for liberty and capabilities to flourish in any circumstance.

Wheatley herself was evidence that persons of African descent could thrive in a predominantly white society if given equal access to education and employment. The Black mathematician Benjamin Banneker expressed a similar sentiment to Thomas Jefferson in 1791. In his letter, Banneker appealed to "the rights of human nature" and "the obligations of Christianity" in explaining that Black persons were not only created in the same divine image as white persons but also had commensurate intellectual abilities. As a free person of color, Banneker was proud to "cheerfully acknowledge that I am of the African race," while also lamenting "the unjustifiable cruelty and barbarism" that reduced enslaved Africans to brutes and chattels.⁵³

Wheatley adapted popular revolutionary rhetoric, in which white colonists compared their plight under excessive British taxation to the ancient Israelites in Egyptian captivity from the book of Exodus, and instead identified white enslavers as “modern Egyptians.” Without efforts to rid the colonies of slavery, the revolutionary cause was not as righteous as the patriots professed. And the patriots were neither as holy nor as heroic as they thought themselves to be. Wheatley ended her letter emphasizing the immoral incongruity of a revolutionary movement that did not pursue Black liberation. “This I desire not for their hurt,” wrote Wheatley about the patriots, “but to convince them of the strange absurdity of their conduct whose words and actions are so diametrically opposite.” The Black poet then employed an acerbic irony in juxtaposing the revolutionary “cry for liberty” alongside the continual desire of white persons to exercise “oppressive power” over enslaved Africans, which were contradictory impulses that did not “require the penetration of a philosopher to determine.”⁵⁴

Although there is no trace of Occom’s letter that prompted Wheatley’s fierce reply, Occom’s antislavery convictions are palpable in one of his sermons from 1787. Occom preached from Luke 10:26–27, which recounts the parable of the Good Samaritan and captures Christ’s twofold summary of the divine law in love toward God and neighbor. The sermon began with the definition of a “true neighbour”: “When he sees his neighbour in distress, he is as ready to help him as he is willing to be helpt when in the same circumstance, he is ready to feed the hungry as he is willing to be fed when hungry himself.”⁵⁵ Occom denounced proslavery Christianity as antithetical to the gospel. He understood that some enslavers and enablers of slavery employed Christian justifications for their iniquities and countered: “You that are slavekeepers, do you love God, and do you love your neighbour, your neighbour Negroe as yourself, are you willing to be slaves yourselves, and your children to be slaves too?” Enslaved Africans were fellow neighbors and the clear scriptural mandate therefore called for Black liberation. Occom surmised Christian enslavers were “not neighbours to anyone” and “consequently they are not lovers of God,” which illustrated that a person’s self-identification as a Christian did not necessarily make them so.⁵⁶

In addition to the impossibility of proslavery Christianity, Occom also engaged settler colonialism and nationalism. During the American Revolution, Occom remained politically neutral. He advised the Oneidas in 1775 to refrain from participating in a war that was not theirs to fight. Occom advanced a twofold argument. He first articulated a theology of pacifism grounded in Christ as the divine “peacemaker” who heralded an end to all war

and bloodshed. Christians were instructed to unite “as one family in peace,” obeying the “new command” from Jesus in John 13:34 to love one another. Occom then offered his interpretation of the war, expressing sympathy for the rebelling colonists, before imploring the Oneidas to avoid meddling in the “quarrels among the white people.”⁵⁷

One historian maintains that Occom “made the most powerful case for Native American sojourning neutrality.”⁵⁸ Occom delivered his sermon on neighbor-love in 1787, two weeks before the delegates of the Constitutional Convention gathered in Philadelphia, and the Mohegan preacher understood the importance of relations between the new American republic and various Indigenous nations. The parable at hand illustrated an extension of love across two persons of different nationalities: “And this love the Samaritan showed to a stranger and to a man who was quite of another nation, yea of a nation who despised him.” Occom acknowledged the inherent instincts of nationalism and did not believe the Bible prohibited the “very natural” inclination “for every nation to have a national love.” Yet the ethic of neighbor-love persisted as Christians were instructed to love all persons rather than solely those who shared their national and racial identities. In the postrevolutionary context of the United States, Occom dreamed of a racially just world in which “English, Indians and Negroes and so forth” honored one another and lived together in peace.⁵⁹

In 1781, Thomas Jefferson wrote a book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, that took the form of answers to a series of queries that the French politician François Barbé-Marbois presented to leaders of each of the thirteen North American colonies. Jefferson revised the work in 1782 and first published it three years later in Paris, when he resided there as the US minister to France. Jefferson’s *Notes* found a wide transatlantic circulation, especially after an edition in London in 1787, and it emerged as one of the earliest and most significant treatments of culture, politics, religion, and society in the newly formed United States. Jefferson also composed the initial draft of the US Declaration of Independence, which was then revised in committee by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman, but Jefferson alone was later credited with the most famous sentence in the document: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”⁶⁰

Yet Jefferson disagreed with Wheatley, Banneker, and Occom about the racial destinies of Indigenous and Black persons in their nation. He wrote more highly about Indigenous peoples than persons of African descent in *Notes*. Jefferson refuted the question of gradual Black emancipation, such as a proposal that

pushed to liberate enslaved persons at the age of twenty-one, with several rationales. One was the “deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites,” which would obliterate any possibility of Black flourishing in the country. Another was Black racial inferiority, which was evident when measuring the three races that comprised much of the United States. Jefferson wrote least about white people because he either took for granted their racial superiority or understood that his readership did. In Jefferson’s estimation, Indigenous peoples had less contact than Black persons with white communities, but nevertheless the intellectual capacities and creations of the former exceeded the latter. Indigenous peoples “astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated.”⁶¹ Persons of African descent, despite their greater proximity to white people, languished in comparison. Jefferson averred, “But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never saw even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture.”⁶² Jefferson contended that even persons of African descent generally preferred “the fine mixtures of red and white” skin over the “immovable veil of black” skin on their own bodies.⁶³

Jefferson had doubts about publishing *Notes* because he anticipated criticism. To use a contemporary idiom to describe Jefferson’s concern, the Virginian politician feared the “cancel culture” of his day. But he worried about his commentary about the immoralities of slavery, not his blatant anti-Black racism. A month after the initial publication of *Notes*, Jefferson responded to a French editor seeking permission to reprint excerpts from the work. He agreed to the request with conditions: “The strictures on slavery and on the constitution of Virginia are not of that kind, and they are the parts which I do not wish to have made public, at least till I know whether their publication would do most harm or good.”⁶⁴ In *Notes*, Jefferson delineated the barbarism of slavery and its devastating effects on both enslaved Africans and white enslavers. He acknowledged, “The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other.”⁶⁵

White children of enslavers were reared to be tyrants because they grew up watching and learning how to exert the coercive power required to sustain the ongoing enslavement of Black people. Jefferson explained that the maintenance of slavery necessitated systemic oppression abounding in intensive surveillance and incessant violence, because no human of any race, even the Black race that Jefferson considered inferior, willingly acceded to enslavement. The wheels of slavery fostered economic growth in the United States, but it “destroyed” the morality of enslavers and violated the God-given rights of the enslaved. Jefferson therefore confessed, “Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that

God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever.”⁶⁶ Jefferson panned Wheatley’s poetry as “below the dignity of criticism,” but even he could not deny Wheatley’s condemnation of American enslavers and enablers of slavery: “The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest.”⁶⁷

Francis Le Jau was one of the earliest missionaries with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) in South Carolina. The Church of England founded the SPG in 1701, and the organization commissioned Anglican clergy across British colonies in North America and the Caribbean. Le Jau was a French Huguenot who first migrated to England after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 (the revocation restored the favored position of the Catholic Church and made Protestants less welcome in France) and then to South Carolina in 1706. As he resided among English settlers, Indigenous peoples, and enslaved Africans, Le Jau often trembled for the colony, where he sought to love God and neighbor. There were ample opportunities for the missionary to administer divine grace, but Le Jau continually questioned the efficacy of his ministry, because he was caught in the larger web of colonial racial capitalism.

From his first months in South Carolina, he observed how the economics of colonization trumped his ministry of evangelization. He felt that he was facing insurmountable odds because “Mammon has hitherto got too many worshippers,” as seemingly every white colonist desired to make enormous profits in transatlantic trade.⁶⁸ Le Jau quickly understood that the accumulation of profit derived from the exploitation and enslavement of Indigenous and Black persons. He admired the Indigenous individuals and families he met and confessed that they made him ashamed of his European identity: “The Indians I have conversed with do make us ashamed by their life, conversation, and sense of religion quite different from ours; ours consists in words and appearances, theirs in reality.”⁶⁹ Too many white colonists acted unjustly toward Indigenous peoples and committed a multitude of sins ranging from trickery in barter exchanges to violence and enslavement. Le Jau despised how some white traders instigated conflicts between Indigenous nations to obtain and enslave Native prisoners of war whom they then trafficked and sold.

White colonists tried to prevent Le Jau from preaching to enslaved Africans and Natives as well as free Indigenous persons. Some of the resistance was explicit, as more than a few white colonists did not feel remorse for their “evidently evil” actions. But some of the backlash was subtle. “I am not blamed openly, for all honest people stand with me,” Le Jau reported, “but it seems by their whispers and conduct, they would not have me urge of contributing to the salvation, instruction, and human usage of slaves and free Indians.”⁷⁰ The insidious and pervasive ways in which white colonists dehumanized people of

color as commodities troubled Le Jau, and these injustices prompted doubts about whether the seeds of anything good could be planted in the wicked soils of English colonization.

Why We Must Reckon with History

Some Christians dared to defy the unjust systems undergirding first the English colonial enterprise in North America and then the United States. Indigenous and Black Christians challenged the immoral structures of economic exploitation, land dispossession, and enslavement, as well as the white people who were oppressing them. In 1794, in the first copyrighted African American pamphlet, Absalom Jones, the first ordained African American Episcopal priest, and Richard Allen, the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, reckoned with the injustices of slavery. The impetus for their pamphlet was to defend free African Americans in Philadelphia from accusations of plundering white homes when many people fled the city during a yellow fever epidemic in 1793. Jones and Allen countered that Black residents risked their lives to assist in caring for the sick and burying the dead. The Black pastors accepted a personal invitation from Benjamin Rush, a white physician and abolitionist, to join him on the medical front lines to “procure medicine duly prepared” and “administer them” to patients. Jones and Allen professed, “This has been no small satisfaction to us; for, we think, that when a physician was not attainable, we have been the instruments, in the hand of God, for saving the lives of some hundreds of our suffering fellow mortals.”⁷¹

But they quickly turned their attention to the moral maladies of slavery and its deadly consequences. Both men were formerly enslaved and had experienced firsthand how slavery divided enslaved families, dampened enslaved minds, depressed enslaved spirits, and defiled Black hearts with a vicious hate for their white oppressors. Jones and Allen acknowledged the significant racial wealth gap between white and free Black residents, but they explained that the reasons for this chasm were discriminatory laws and white antipathy toward African Americans.

Because Black enslavement was at the root of all these evils, Jones and Allen implored white Americans to also reckon with “how hateful [in the Exodus narrative] slavery is in the eyes of that God” who wreaked havoc on Pharaoh and his people for enslaving the ancient Israelites. They directly appealed to the parental affections, patriotic allegiances, and religious convictions of their white readers: “If you love your children, if you love your country, if you love the God of love, clear your hands from slaves, burden not your children or country with them.”⁷² Jones and Allen also encouraged their Black readers to take after

the example of Christ and forgive white persons because they understood all too well how racial anger could consume a Black person with soul-crushing bitterness.

In 1823, the Cherokee preacher David Brown also beseeched his white American listeners in Salem, Massachusetts, to reckon with their history. The crowd had assembled to hear Brown talk about white Christian missionary endeavors among Indigenous peoples. The atmosphere was more electric than usual as the audience awaited with bated breath to hear from an Indigenous Christian speaker. Yet Brown did not immediately launch into the conventional plea for mission support. The historian Joel W. Martin explains about Brown: “Before talking about missionaries and his kinsmen and kinswomen in the present, he wanted his audience to encounter some bitter truths about the past from a Native American perspective.”⁷³ Brown invited his listeners to journey with him back to North America before European contact, to remember that Indigenous peoples “were in a more tranquil and prosperous state previous to their acquaintance with Europeans.”

The Cherokee preacher named the problem of overly romanticized depictions of Native America as an idyllic paradise: “Far from me, however, to insinuate that the native population were free from vice, immorality, and occasionally destructive wars; for they are also the descendants of sinful apostate man.” But Brown also stated that European intrusions resulted in the “direful catastrophes” of disease, dispossession, and death for Indigenous peoples.⁷⁴ He confronted his white audience with the fullness of history and challenged them to behold his righteous indignation and work toward repairing the ongoing outcomes of settler colonialism. One way to right these wrongs was to aid “Christian missions to the Indians,” which many of his listeners were likely ready to do.

Brown did not stop there, though. Another way to specifically support “the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek nations, whose council fires still burn on the eastern side of the Mississippi,” was to ensure the US government protect their lands from encroaching white settlers and the southeastern politicians who wanted these territories for their respective states.⁷⁵ Brown endorsed the ministry of evangelization, but he also recognized its limitations. The only way to stop the wheels that put the oppressive systems of settler colonialism and slavery into motion was political action.

To Reckon with a History We Never Learned

The structure of this book consists of two main parts. The first part, chapters 2–4, examines settler colonialism; the second part, chapters 5–7, focuses on

slavery. In the final chapter, chapter 8, I draw lessons from this history to offer insights on ministries of racial justice in American churches today. I believe this book will startle more than a few readers, because it presents a little-told (or untold) history that is horrible, tragic, and traumatic.

I lament how little I learned about Indigenous peoples, settler colonialism, African Americans, and slavery in my educational training, first for congregational leadership as a pastor and then for academic instruction as a professor. What explains the deficiencies in my education and our collective misunderstanding of American Christian history? One reason is the contested place of church history in theological education. In E. Brooks Holifield's presidential address to the American Society of Church History in 2003, the historian traces the disputations that prevented ready acceptance of church history in college, university, and seminary curricula. Holifield points out that "it took a long time for the history of Christianity to secure a place in American classrooms," because focused and sustained historical study was considered dangerous for student formation, especially in relation to their faith commitments.⁷⁶ In the 1820s, several faculty members from Andover Theological Seminary, one of the earliest Protestant seminaries, resisted the hiring of a colleague specializing in history. One professor told the school's trustees that the study of history should be "altogether subordinate," and another openly expressed his concerns about the perils of too early (and perhaps too much) exposure to the complexities of the Christian past.⁷⁷ In 2005, Samuel Hugh Moffett captured the enduring discomfort with church history in recalling a story from the 1950s that "floated around the divinity school quadrangle" at Yale. Roland Bainton, a professor of church history, bumped into one of his faculty colleagues after chapel one day, and the colleague asked, "Roley, how can you know so much about church history and still be a Christian?"⁷⁸

Although church history has secured its place as among the requisite disciplines in theological education, the attending fears and fragilities remain. In 1891, the biblical studies professor Charles Augustus Briggs delivered an address at his school, Union Theological Seminary in New York, imploring his students and colleagues to pursue deeper and fuller understandings of the Bible. Briggs opposed the regnant "theory of [biblical] inerrancy" because it fostered deficient and dishonest interpretations in seeking to "explain away" obvious textual errors.⁷⁹ If Christians truly desired to get serious about their faith, they needed to stop regarding the Bible as a vulnerable infant. Briggs surveyed the landscape of American Christianity and surmised, "The Bible has been treated as if it were a baby, to be wrapped in swaddling-clothes, nursed, and carefully guarded, lest it should be injured by heretics and skeptics."⁸⁰

I share Briggs's conviction on biblical studies but apply it in this book to church history. Too many historical approaches treat both the American past and students of that past like babies. We therefore receive incomplete narratives that tell only some of the story and imbibe an incoherent concoction of partial truths that either elides the ugliest sins or isolates a few inspirational heroes. We grow up and we grow old, but our insufficient understanding of history leaves us in a perpetual state of Christian infancy. We don't know how to reckon with a history we never learned.

Reckoning with history is not an easy task. But reckon we must, if we desire a more faithful understanding of American Christianity and seek a more perfect American union. We must confront the sins of settler colonialism and slavery and comprehend how these sins shaped American Christianity. In 1711, a white woman from a South Carolina plantation approached the Anglican minister Francis Le Jau with a question that staggered him. She asked if the enslaved persons she owned could go to heaven, and if so, whether she would have to see them there.⁸¹ We do not know Le Jau's reply, but John Fletcher, a white Christian man from Louisiana, published a defense of slavery in 1852 offering an answer. Fletcher believed the Christian heaven was a place of persisting racial inequalities and was therefore confident that the eternity awaiting white enslavers would not be uncomfortable for them.⁸² After several years of working among Indigenous peoples, the white Baptist pastor Isaac McCoy could scarcely tolerate the unbridled and unrepentant racism of so many of his fellow white American Christians. In 1827, McCoy denounced the broken treaties and cruel injustices of Indigenous land dispossession as "a poor commendation indeed of a Christian nation" and four years later challenged Americans to prove their patriotic self-identification as "the most favored people that have ever inhabited the earth" through their individual actions and government policies toward Indigenous peoples.⁸³

There were several competing natures in the soul of white Christian America. One spewed hateful theologies and racist ideas, such as weaponizing Roman Catholic papal bulls from 1493 on European "discovery" and interpreting the Noahic curse of Ham in Genesis 9 to claim divine permission to steal Indigenous lands and enslave African persons. Another appealed to the Bible as a source of liberation that offered pathways of equality, justice, and mutuality for a multiracial nation.

But the most dominant nature evinced neither conviction nor courage. Instead, the heartbeat of American Christianity pounded with a yearning for compromise. It is not enough to reckon with the worst and most vicious racist doctrines. We must also study the incremental corruptions and quotidian

concessions that white American Christians made to make room for settler colonialism and slavery in their consciences, churches, and country. And we must learn from those who were inspired to remake a better nation. But too often these heroes are applied as a balm to soothe our consciences and minimize the consequences of history. If we want to envision and enact a deeply hopeful future together, we need a deeply honest understanding of our past.

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