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Richard T. Hughes
richard.hughes@libpson.edu

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Race and the Great American Myths*

Richard T. Hughes

It is beyond dispute that America faces a national crisis fed by racial tensions at home and terrorism both at home and abroad. Not coincidentally, the crisis parallels the decline of white, Christian dominance in the United States.

A few years ago I wrote a book in hopes of grasping more fully some of the dynamics that undergird our current anxiety. I called the book *Myths America Lives By*.

The book doesn't name every American myth, but it deals at length with five myths that have profoundly shaped American self-understanding over several centuries.

The first is the myth of the chosen nation – the notion that God chose the US for a special, redemptive mission in the world.

The second is the myth of nature's nation – the conviction that American institutions such as democracy and free enterprise are grounded in the natural order of things.

The third is the myth of the Christian nation – the notion that American ideals are grounded in bedrock Christian values.

The fourth is the myth of the millennial nation – the notion that the US will usher in a golden age for all humankind.

And the fifth is the idea of the innocent nation – that while other nations may have blood on their hands, the US always preserves its innocence in even the bloodiest of conflicts by virtue of its altruism and its righteous intentions.

In 2012, in a review of James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* at the national meeting of the American Academy of Religion, I suggested that I had absorbed those five American myths as a child growing up in West Texas and that those myths had contributed in powerful ways to my own racial bias.

When I concluded my remarks and took my seat alongside the other panelists, the late James Noel, a black professor of American religion at San Francisco Theological Seminary, leaned over and whispered, "Professor, you left out the most important of all the American myths – the myth of white supremacy."

After much introspection, I have concluded that Noel was correct and that, in fact, the myth of white supremacy undergirds all the other myths that I explore in my book.

In the white imagination, the America chosen by God was not black America or red America but white America.

When the Founders argued that "self-evident truths" had underpinned "nature's nation" and guaranteed the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" for "all men," they understood "all men" to mean all *white men who owned property*.

When whites argued that America was a Christian nation, African Americans knew better. They flatly rejected that claim on the grounds that white Christians routinely supported slavery, segregation, lynching, and Jim Crow discrimination – practices utterly foreign to Christian ideals.

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Blacks rejected as well the vision of America as a millennial nation that brings freedom and justice to the rest of the world. How could a nation that enslaved and marginalized its own people bring millennial blessings to the rest of the globe?

And in light of the crimes that white America had committed against its black citizens, the notion of America as an innocent nation – a vision defiantly maintained to this day by many American whites – seemed utterly ludicrous to African Americans.

No wonder Professor Noel counseled me that white supremacy was at the root of the entire mythical structure that has informed so much of our national self-understanding.

The question we now must raise is this: How do these myths, including the myth of white supremacy, help illumine today's national crisis?

It is precisely here that Robert Jones' new book, *The End of White Christian America*, is so useful. Jones shows empirically that white Christian America (WCA, as he calls it) has died, and he argues that several factors contributed to its death.

Demographic changes were crucial, along with the failure of WCA to adequately address the concerns of younger Americans – equal rights of LGBT people, for example – in the early years of the 21st century.

But above all else, white Christian America secured its own demise through its centuries-long participation in the structures of white supremacy – slavery until the Civil War, then Jim Crow segregation, resistance to the Civil Rights Movement, creation of “Christian” academies as alternatives to integrated public schools, and most recently the refusal of many white Christians to acknowledge the legitimacy of America's first black president.

We can best discern the relevance of Jones' conclusions to the great American myths by linking his work to that of Robert Bellah. In *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (Seabury, 1975), Bellah argued that the American nation had been threatened by disintegration on three distinct occasions – at the founding, during the Civil War, and in the 1960s. If Bellah were alive today, my guess is he would view today's crisis as perhaps more grave than any that has preceded it.

Bellah wrote the foreword to *Myths America Lives By* (Illinois, 2004), but only after I had made substantial changes to the manuscript. When Bellah read the first draft of the book, he responded that I had rightly identified the nation's defining myths, but that I had eviscerated them. “Those are the only myths we have,” Bellah protested. He wanted me to show that they had some redeeming qualities.

Today, I would argue that these American myths, with the single exception of the myth of the innocent nation, still hold at least some promise. But they will collapse unless we can find some way to extricate them from the notion of white supremacy that has always sustained them.

We can accomplish that liberation, but only if we will listen carefully to people of color – groups like Black Lives Matter, for example – who are telling the nation that white supremacy must come to an end.

But the prognosis is not good when American leaders like Rudy Giuliani trivialize the Black Lives Matter message. “When you say black lives matter,” Giuliani told *Face the Nation* in July 2016, “that's inherently racist. Black lives matter. White lives matter. Asian lives matter. Hispanic lives matter. That's anti-American, and it's racism.”

And the prognosis is not good when his opponents accused former President Obama – a man who attempted time and again to help the nation understand the real issues that face black Americans on a daily basis – of using the presidential pulpit to “divide us” by color.

But the prognosis is discouraging for a much deeper reason as well. Many conservatives sense what liberals and progressives typically fail to grasp – that the mythic structure that has sustained the American nation is collapsing around them. For proof, conservative Americans typically point to what they view as “persecution” of Christians in their own country, and according to *The New York Times* (July 21, 2016), “white people think racism is getting worse – against white people.”

No wonder that 81 percent of white evangelicals cast their lot with a GOP political vision that promised political salvation, but one at odds with what John Howard Yoder called “the Politics of Jesus.” Indeed, many conservatives are hell-bent to preserve the great American myths in their current form, rooted as they are in a deep-seated conviction regarding the fundamental superiority of white culture and religion.

In *The Courage to Be*, Paul Tillich describes “the mass neuroses which usually appear at the end of an era” and which “make the average man a fanatical defender of the established order.” That is precisely what we are witnessing today as the great American myths disintegrate in front of our eyes.

In the face of this crisis, how might the church respond? The Christian response must be rooted in the radical teachings of Jesus. It will exalt the poor above the rich, the marginal above the privileged, the oppressed above the oppressor, and the dissenter above the one who seeks to crush dissent.

It will reject bigotry and racism of every kind and seek to liberate America’s national myths from the threads of white supremacy that have been woven into our tapestry of identity from an early date.

This new commitment will likely mean entering a time of uncertainty, even insecurity. But those who take up that task will help preserve the integrity of the Christian witness – and may well enrich the future of the American soul.

RICHARD T. HUGHES HAS BEEN A TEACHER AND SCHOLAR OF RELIGION AND CULTURE FOR MORE THAN FORTY YEARS. HE HAS TAUGHT AT PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY, ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY, AND MESSIAH COLLEGE, AND IS CURRENTLY SCHOLAR IN RESIDENCE AT LIPSCOMB UNIVERSITY. BESIDES *MYTHS AMERICA LIVES BY*, HIS BOOKS INCLUDE *HOW CHRISTIAN FAITH CAN SUSTAIN THE LIFE OF THE MIND* (EERDMANS, 2001) *CHRISTIAN AMERICA AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD* (ILLINOIS, 2009), AND *REVIVING THE ANCIENT FAITH: THE STORY OF CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN AMERICA* (ACU PRESS, 2008).

