



Baptizing White Supremacy

An interview with Robert P. Jones

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you define white supremacy? What has it looked like in the past, and what does it look like today? What beliefs among white Americans is James Baldwin condemning when he writes that some Americans have been “white too long”?

2. Robert P. Jones argues that racism influenced what white churches have taught: which scriptural passages were emphasized or overlooked, what kind of relationship Christians were encouraged to have with God. What are ways you do (or do not) see racism inherent in the institutional Church? How have Christian institutions “baptized” white supremacy?

3. If you grew up in a Christian tradition, what did you hear about the Church’s relationship to important moments in American history? What did you hear about its relationship to racism? Have you ever felt, as Jones puts it, “betrayed” when you learned something negative about the Church’s past?

4. Are the results of Jones’s study surprising to you? How does your personal experience of institutional religion inform your answer? If you could, what questions would you want to ask respondents about their opinions on racism and white supremacy?

5. “I’ve been deeply shaped and formed by this tradition in both good and bad ways,” Jones says. How has your tradition shaped the way you think about racism? How has your tradition shaped how you think about justice?

6. Jones asks, “If some of the best parts about ourselves have been formed by the Church, how can it also be true that some of these awful things in our history are true?” Catholics have asked similar questions about the sex-abuse crisis. Do such failures change the fundamental character of the institution?

7. Do you agree with Jones’s assessment of the value (or lack thereof) of institutional statements? Is there a disconnect between what happens at the level of Church leadership and what happens “on the ground”? What are steps you want to see denominations and individual church communities take to further the work of justice?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Regina Munch, “Worship of a False God,” July/August 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/worship-false-god>

Burke Nixon, “Necessary Work,” June 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/necessary-work>

M. Shawn Copeland, “Breath & Fire,” July/August 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/breath-fire>

John Gehring, “Naming the Sin,” October 2019: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/naming-sin>

Rita Ferrone, “Will Anything Change This Time?” September 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/will-anything-change-time>