

## **“Race and Religion in the U.S.”**

*A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*First Parish in Wayland*

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The title of the sermon sets up an impossible task. In the next few moments, there is no way that I will address the entirety of the subject of race and religion in the U.S. Rather than attempt an exhaustive analysis today, my intent is to invite us all into a deeper reflection of the dynamics of race, religion, and our place within these dynamics. I do so because I have become increasingly convicted that those of us who identify as white need to better understand our own racial identity and the impact of ‘whiteness’ on the world.

This conviction of the importance of race deepened after hearing a panel speak on “Race, Religion, and the 2016 Elections” at the American Academy of Religion conference last month. I walked away from what I heard with a mix of hope and resolution.

First, the statistics. Robert P. Jones, author of *The End of White Christian America*, and CEO of the [Public Religion Research Institute](#) (PRRI) walked the audience through their findings. Repeatedly, Jones urged caution at over-interpreting the election results. The demographic patterns of who voted with which party have followed quite consistent patterns over the last couple decades. This election was not a “sea change,” according to Jones. Rather, just enough changed in the right places to flip the election from the Democratic to the Republican candidate.

And yet, things *are* changing. In 2004, white Christians made up 59% of the U.S. Twelve years later, white Christians fall into a minority of 43%. During these same twelve years, the percentage of people *for* same-sex marriage grew from 32% in 2004 to 59% in 2016. As Jones described, “the lines crossed.”

Although white Christians have fallen below 50% of the U.S. population, they make up a higher percentage of the electorate. They are overrepresented at the ballot box. In short, a [PRRI essay](#) simply states, “White Christian voters were the backbone of Donald Trump’s electoral coalition.”

In reading more of the PRRI analyses, [another statistic](#) stood out to me: “A majority (56%) of white Americans say American society has changed for the worse since the 1950s, while roughly six in ten black (62%) and Hispanic (57%) Americans say American society has changed for the better.” In other words, race has a lot to say about what direction a person thinks the country is headed.

Hearing all of these statistics challenges us, I believe, to learn something more about the interaction of race and religion in the U.S. As a minister, the concern I have is not about which political party won the election. My concern is that a political candidate who many agree has strong allegiances to white nationalists as well as a track record of bigoted, xenophobic statements wins because of white Christians. What does this say about race and religion? About religion and racism?

Evangelical Christian leader, Jim Wallis, also participated in the panel on Race and Religion. Wallis, best known as editor of *Sojourners* magazine, has been a strong voice for a more progressive understanding of evangelical Christianity. Wallis listened to these same statistics and then responded with a disappointed fierceness in his voice. Stating that white identity had replaced faith identity, he called for faith identity to displace white identity. Evangelical Christians, he continued, need to be called to repentance, which in this context means “dying to whiteness.” The original sin of America, he suggested, was not slavery, but the decision by Christians to not see Native peoples and Africans as also made in the Image of God.

As a congregation founded in 1640, First Parish is a congregation established by European settlers who identified as Christian—in other words, by white Christians. We may no longer identify ourselves as Christians, but the legacy of our congregation locates us within this story of race and Christianity in the U.S. Though we may not all embrace language of being made in the image of God, as Unitarian Universalists we do promote and affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Every person.

Which is why you might say that our motto could be “All Lives Matter.” We honor the dignity of all. We promote universal human dignity. As religious liberals, we embrace an inclusive and diverse community in which all lives matter. Indeed, shortly many of us will stand with our Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Baha’i, and non-affiliated neighbors in support of the Islamic Center after they received a letter of hate. Such an action emerges from a conviction that the lives of our Muslim neighbors matter and should not be threatened by hate, but supported in love.

I wonder what’s next? I don’t think everything will be fine—especially not for those who are not white, not Christian, not wealthy, or not citizens. Our conviction that all lives matter is important to hold on to because in fact not all lives *do* matter as much as others in our society. Rather, we live in a society rife with inequalities, prejudices, and just plain hate. There is a large gap between the ideals of a free, equal, and safe society and the reality of multiple injustices.

Yet such injustice does not need to go unanswered and unchallenged.

In recent years, one very visible place of resistance to injustice has been the slogan Black Lives Matter. From high-profile shootings of unarmed black men to the murder of nine black persons in a Charleston church to the racialized impact of mass incarceration, there is clear evidence that black lives do *not* matter as much as other lives . . . as white lives. Engaging the slogan, Black Lives Matter, does not negate our conviction that all lives matter. Rather, it amplifies this value by holding up the ways in which it is not yet true.

We need to amplify the message that black lives and Muslim lives, queer lives and immigrant lives matter because there are those who actively believe that such hierarchies of race, class, gender, and nationality are how it should be. Whites are better than blacks. Christians are more civilized than Muslims or more honest than Jews. Men should lead and women follow. Cis-gender, heterosexuality is not only better . . . it is the only legitimately moral and ‘natural’ way to live. In other words, white Christian men are the best. They should be running things.

Such viewpoints are not new. Certainly not new with the 2016 election. They are very, very old and can be traced widely and deeply in U.S. culture. And yet, they are also viewpoints that have long been challenged and resisted. A third panelist on the Race and Religion panel was Stephen Prothero of Boston University. In his recent book, *Why Liberals Win the Culture Wars (even when they lose elections)*, he traces a tension in U.S. history between those who would pursue an ever more expansive understanding of belonging and equality and those who would seek to pull back to a narrower understanding. Although the issues varied, the underlying tension has been between inclusion versus exclusion; monoculture versus multiculturalism. And, on the whole, the country *is* becoming more inclusive and multicultural over the generations. This is the hope that I walked away with.

Consider again those statistics—a majority of white Americans say the country has changed for the worse since the 1950’s and nearly six in ten black and Hispanics say it has changed for the better. White Christians have slipped into the minority after long existing as the majority. Support for same-sex marriage nearly doubled in the last 12 years. A white Christian dominant mono-culture is shrinking. A society of many cultures, races, sexualities, and religions is taking its place.

Such cultural change is rather astounding. Some of you here have witnessed remarkable changes in your lifetime. Some of you have lived through periods of retrenchment that sought to hold on to a narrow sense of who belongs here in the U.S. And, here we are again—waking up to the reality of deeply divided visions for what our nation should be and who does and does not fully belong in the U.S.

If our religious viewpoint as Unitarian Universalists calls us to affirm the worth and dignity of every person as well as to value multiple religious expressions, then I wonder what this looks like in practice? And I wonder if we too need to ask whether it is our religious identity or our race identity that drives our responses and our actions to such questions? In what ways are our racial and religious identities entwined?

These are questions to explore, not simply answers for me to pronounce from the pulpit. But, in light of the statistics of cultural change, of the racial injustice we see, and of the divisions in our country, I do think now is the time to explore such questions.

*How* each of us explores these questions of race and religion will be different. We are different people with different histories and different ways of learning. Some of us are restless to take an action in support of justice. Some of us want to learn and understand more through books or films. Some of us want to be in conversations with folks who are different than us. Some of us want to join the march or the political fight. Some of us are already in the midst of a personal struggle that simply eclipses our capacity for social action.

Wherever you are in your questions, my hope is that First Parish will be a place that supports your search, your wrestling, and your longing to take action. For those restless to act, there are Black Lives Matter buttons and lawn signs available in coffee hour. These are an opportunity not only to wear a visible sign of your commitment to racial justice, but are also an opportunity to explore how it feels to wear it . . . does it make you more aware of racial dynamics? Does it lead you into new conversations of either conflict or solidarity?

For those of us seeking knowledge, we are developing a “Justice Library” for books and videos to help deepen our understanding of a range of issues. You can read a book and see who else read it in order to start a conversation. In addition to these smaller conversations, I will be looking for ways for us to come together as a congregation for larger conversations. What additional resources, programs, issues, or frameworks for social action might we wish to develop?

Part of our covenant to one another promises to work together for a better world. As we live out this promise, I believe that we all have something to contribute and that we all have something to learn. Such work may be challenging and even risky at times, but ultimately, by living into our deepest values and hopes I believe we will find more meaning and purpose, love and connection.

So may it be,  
Amen