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“VENGEANCE IS MINE”: HOW RELIGIOUS SOUTHERN WHITE SUPREMACY SHAPED THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

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ABSTRACT

White supremacy and the prison industrial complex have a long history of reinforcing one and other. Throughout this history Southern white religious groups have co-opted Christianity to inform their beliefs on crime and punishment. As a result, social, political, and economic efforts to maintain religious white supremacist ideals have bled into and shaped the criminal justice system. This research explores the evolution of these groups’ impact starting with American slavery and ending with the present day by assessing the strategic integration of Christianity, white supremacy, and the politics of crime. This chronological analysis reveals historical foundations as well as modern ramifications of past actions.
Religious southern white supremacists have taken many forms throughout history. At each step in their transformation, they have fought to preserve their values and identity. Stemming from their ideological emergence during American slavery, two important features of their identity are punishment and racism. Christianity has been both a shield for white supremacists as well as a tool for segregation and enslavement. Consequently, religious southern white supremacist groups have both directly and indirectly used religion to facilitate the transition from slavery to the prison industrial complex.

As enslaved Africans were brought to America, the mixing of many African cultures created the foundation for a new Black culture in what became the United States. With African heritage influencing the already-present white Christianity, African American Christianity became the religion of this emerging culture (Johnson 19). The motivation for converting to Christianity varied from enslaved person to enslaved person: some were moved by the gospel, some assimilated to survive, and others remained resistant. Similarly, the motivation for slave owners to convert their slaves varied. The Bible was at times explicitly used to inspire obedience. However, many planters believed they were first and foremost saving slaves’ souls, and the gospel as a tool for “discipline and control” was just a beneficial side effect. As a result, the gospel that was preached to slaves was more than a lesson about how to live a godly life—it was also a lesson about how to be a good slave (Sernett 64). Charles Colcock Jones, a clergyman and plantation owner of the 1800s, believed that religion would firstly “save slaves” and also create “a greater subordination” and “respect and obedience [to] all whom God in his providence has place in authority over them” (Johnson 21). Planters were still hesitant to introduce religion to slaves as they feared it would inspire mutiny. This hesitancy caused parts of the Bible to be intentionally not taught to slaves:

They certainly would not preach to their congregations that Pharaoh had enslaved the children of Israel and had held them in bondage in Egypt, that the Lord had then visited plagues on the slaveholders, or that Moses had led the slaves in a mass escape out of bondage in Egypt to the Promised Land. (24)

This manipulated version of the Bible only strayed further from narrative facts of the text as time passed. Not only did enslaved people believe the false words preached to them, but the lies planters told were ingrained in their own racial ideologies.

By the time enslaved people were emancipated, their relationship with Christianity was well-established, and they began forming their own churches with their own preachers. With a new “physical and spiritual freedom,” Black churches were the only empowering institutions Black people inherited from slavery, thus making them the center of the new culture that was being built (Harvey 69). While southern Black people were establishing their religious culture, they were also starting to get involved with politics. Not only were churches a place for the recruitment of Black voters into the Republican Party, but also, “more than 230 [b]lack clergymen held local, state, or national office during Reconstruction” (75). White Christian southerners had different expectations for the religious community following emancipation. They anticipated a similar hierarchy that existed during slavery: white-run churches with racial segregation. White southerners had crafted this concept that religion informed and supported the racial caste system they had created. Only now, Black people were no longer complying to the system and were openly objecting to it. This
retaliation ignited a new sense of rage and hatred, creating a path for a new form of religious domestic terrorism. Out of this, we see the rise of groups like the Ku Klux Klan who aided in preserving the ideological, political, and economic pillars of white supremacy.

The philosophy of the Ku Klux Klan perfectly embodies white supremacy’s co-option of Christianity. They believe that God’s creation of separate races was intentional. Moreover, whites were assigned as the superior race, and are thus responsible for keeping it that way (Baker 177). This rationale resembles that of plantation owners who believed God had deemed them spiritually superior to their slaves. The Klan was known for their ritualistic lynching of Black people—usually as punishment for a fabricated crime. The “crimes” in question were anything that threatened “racial and moral purity,” and to the Klan, simply being Black and out of place was enough to qualify as such a “crime” (Wood 49). According to history scholar Amy Wood, “The evangelical alarm about moral disorder was thus inseparable from the broader distress that emancipation and urbanization had upended the traditional racial hierarchy” (49). Lynching highlights white religious southerners’ fixation on punishment in the name of God. As the process makes symbolic parallels to religious themes like Judgment Day and the fires of Hell, it allows the Klan to play the role of God condemning spiritually inferior beings while simultaneously asserting their superiority.

The more lasting ideological effects of the Klan’s beliefs stem from their 1920s revival. Now with more reach, the Klan also acted as “a mainstream social club for white Protestants” (Blee 34). Although the Klan started as a fringe group, they were able to appeal to the common people of the South. This period also saw them emphasizing political and social reform, and by 1923 “as many as 75 United States congressional representatives and Senators owed their seats to the Klan” (Selepak). This catalyzed the injection of religious white supremacy into the U.S. government and legal system.

The persecution of Black people in the early twentieth century was not limited to the physical violence of groups like the Klan. Black people were also persecuted and enslaved by the legal system. With Protestantism being the religion of the South, the courtroom was commonplace for religious beliefs. Furthermore, because the South’s version of Protestantism was injected with racist ideology, God was often used to justify the racial prejudice in the justice system. The conviction of a crime for Black southerners often resulted in them being placed in systems like convict leasing, which bore an eerie resemblance to slavery. Alex Lichtenstein summarizes the reasons behind the rise of convict leasing in the postbellum South as “the legacy of slavery, the destruction of southern penitentiary buildings during the Civil War, postwar fiscal retrenchment, political corruption, and a general lack of concern for convicts, most of whom were black” (3). This new industry gave financial incentive, so, similar to slavery, the South’s beliefs about law and order, religion, and Black people didn’t just govern how they lived their lives, it also fueled their economy. The economy depended on forced labor, so white southerners justified the exploitation of Black people by masquerading their falsified religious beliefs as “morality” and “values” and ignoring any cognitive dissonance that came up. This point in history began to solidify southern Protestantism as a feature of right-wing politics, racism, and “law and order” culture.

Around the 1940s, the KKK’s numbers diminished as a new era arrived. The social unrest of the postwar era prompted in part by the Great Depression and a national war on crime created an ideological battlefield similar to that of the Reconstruction Era. Black Americans were experiencing
more upward mobility, and the U.S. was taking a firm but contradictory stance against human rights violations during WWII. Therefore, southern Christians found themselves again needing to preserve the status quo and their white supremacist ideologies. Now however, they had to find less socially taboo ways to maintain their power, so they used their social, political, and economic influence to assert their superiority. During this time period, postwar evangelicals took center stage as the preservationists of southern white Christian values, and in 1942 the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was founded (Jones 36). An important part of evangelicals’ platform was their toughness on crime and punishment, which had evolved directly from the ideologies used by white supremacists in regard to lynching. In the 1960s, the NAE released their own crime resolutions that cited “law and order” as “essential principles in the divine economy.” They described crime as a force, like civil rights, as an “ominous sign of crisis” that proved “law and order are breaking down on a national scale” (Griffith 131). Due to evolving societal norms regarding race, African Americans were not typically mentioned when discussing the problem of crime and punishment. However, the 1960s sees a more frequent use of political dog whistles, and “law and order” is one of the most common.

The social safe space for conservatives in the postwar era was in religious communities like evangelical churches. As evangelicals and other conservative religious groups gained more social following, they began to work toward preserving their values on the political front similar to the white supremacists of the 1920s. George Wallace’s campaign for the 1968 presidency exemplifies a radicalized version of white southerners’ views on race, crime, and religion. Wallace ran as an Independent, but supported Christian, right-wing values. Although he lost the presidential election and was often regarded as a radical, religious communities showed strong support for him. For example, a study done by the Gallup Poll found that 45% of Southern Baptists voted for Wallace (Orum 676). After being elected as governor, Wallace gave a speech saying that his resistance to integration would be peaceful, and “any breakdown in law and order will come from outsiders and people like Martin Luther King” (Lesher 171). His use of the terms “outsiders” and “people like Martin Luther King” highlights which communities he believed were true threats to “law and order”: Black people and people who “threatened” white, Christian values. Furthermore, the term “law and order” specifically transcends just a concern for crime. When explaining the term, former chairman of the Alabama Association of Citizens Councils C.E. Hornsby says:

Don’t be dissuaded by those of carpetbagging and scalawagging nature who ... believe that the issue is between law and order ... and lawlessness. The issues are the same now as ever: segregation versus integration; states rights versus federal usurpation; and constitutional government versus judicial and executive fiat. Naturally, we hope violence and bloodshed can be avoided. However, if it comes, the blame will rest squarely on the shoulders of the NAACP and the federal government. (Lesher 170)

Hornsby makes it clear that topics like states’ rights and segregation are the true issue at hand, and that those opposed to them are on the side of lawlessness.

Following a shift in evangelical support to Richard Nixon, George Wallace lost the 1968 election. Nixon’s presidency established the beginning of the modern alliance between white religious groups and the Republican Party that we see today. Although he never made an explicit
appeal to evangelical voters, his policies aligned with that of the religious community. For example, Nixon took a more socially acceptable approach to “law and order” by keeping his policies colorblind, which evangelicals also promoted (Griffith 151). By appealing to the concerns of the greater white suburban communities, he was able to garner the support of evangelicals. Similar to the white supremacists of the 1920s, evangelicals of the postwar era had to accept and adapt to the shift in cultural standards. Overt racism and segregation support was scrapped from their platform and replaced with “social issues” of ‘crime violence, drugs, disruption, riot, out-of-wedlock birth, promiscuity” (Blumenthal 33).

As the evangelical community expanded outside of the South, their ideological shift affected the whole nation. Two years prior to Nixon’s election, future president Ronald Reagan was establishing his platform promoting “law and order” in his race for California governor, and he was pushed to victory by the support of California’s growing evangelical community. In 1980 Reagan was elected president with a campaign built on dog whistle politics and the fears of the conservative community. According to author Michael Flamm, “law and order” “enabled many white Americans to make sense of a chaotic world filled with street crime, urban riots, and campus demonstrations” (11). In addition to the loaded term “law and order,” Reagan’s promises to voters were often coded. In a speech about crime and California he described how “the jungle comes closer” at night, and he promised to protect his voter’s “way of life.” His heavily coded language reveals the nuances of the modern-day fight for white Christians’ identity. Politicians used words and phrases such as “jungle” that had clear historical racist undertones, but remained just ambiguous enough to shield from any backlash. Through the presidencies of Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan, civil unrest and social upheaval began to subside as America left the Civil Rights Era. Consequently, Reagan transformed the general war on crime to a more targeted “War on Drugs.”

Ronald Reagan’s presidency in particular had a great impact on the modern prison industrial complex. Much of this impact stems from his administration’s ability to engineer irrational panic around crime and drugs. However, drug use was actually on the decline. In the early 1980s a Gallup poll showed “only 2% of people in the United States identified drugs as the major problem facing society. By the late 1980s, however, that figure had risen to more than 60%” (Kilgore 61). By manipulating fear, Reagan was able to make crime a top concern and justify policies like the “War on Drugs,” which had lasting racial and systematic implications. For example, author Elizabeth Hinton details the racial aspect of Reagan’s handling of the crack epidemic:

The Reagan administration took policy makers’ shared assumptions about race and crime and ran with them. Reagan led Congress in criminalizing drug users, especially African American drug users, by concentrating and stiffening penalties for the possession of the crystalline rock form of cocaine, known as ‘crack,’ rather than the crystallized methamphetamine the White House officials recognized was as much of a problem among low-income white Americans. (309)

Policies like these had devastating effects on the rate of incarceration for people of color. By the mid-1980s, over half of the prison population was African American (Hinton 310). The effects of this era were pervasive because they not only transformed the prison industrial complex as an institution, but also as a concept.
The prison industrial complex as an institution can be defined as a “set of bureaucratic, political and economic interests that encourage increased spending on prisons, regardless of actual need” (Schlosser). Evangelicals and similar white, religious communities grew into a large and powerful voting bloc, making them a political interest for the growing prison industry. The growth of the industry was exponential. From 1980 to 2007, the number of people in prison for drug offenses increased by 1,100 percent (Alexander 20). More punitive measures were being used during this growth as the death penalty and mandatory minimums were used more often for drug-related offenses (Alexander 53). The power of the prison industrial complex exists outside of prison walls, as well. For example, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 brought criminalization of drug use to a new level by allowing for eviction from public housing and exclusion from federal benefits for convicted drug offenders (Alexander 53). Policies like this, which promoted civil penalties for drug use, even further ostracized individuals from society for their crimes. Because voters and politicians generally accepted these policies, socially prohibitive punitive measures were solidified as the standard response to crime.

A fundamental component of the prison industrial complex is that the criminal justice system as a whole prioritizes retribution for the victim over rehabilitation for the criminal. This becomes more problematic when we understand how criminality and race have been intentionally codified together. Religious white supremacists and their descendent communities in particular have a history of criminalizing Black people in the name of protecting white victims. As evidenced by the vigilantism of the Ku Klux Klan and the evangelical push for “law and order” in the 1960s, punishment as a response to unfavorable race relations and moral deviance was not new. Because these communities had already planted this seed, they were able to have a large influence over the American conscience regarding prison. Whiteness and godliness were made synonymous with general goodness, causing anything not white and not Christian to often be perceived as morally deviant. Religious white supremacists conflated crime and moral deviance, and positioned themselves as the victims. Furthermore, this pro-incarceration shift, which evangelicals catalyzed, successfully married the concept of prison and punishment, which had not always been the case. Surveys show that in 1980 only 32% of individuals believed the purpose of prison was to punish. By 1993, that number had grown to 61% (John). Religious white supremacists made “criminal versus victim” a new version of the “us versus them” rhetoric that had been crucial to their identity.

By capitalizing on the fear of the white middle-class, the prison industrial complex validated their concerns. It reaffirmed their underlying beliefs about white supremacy, religion, and punishment: their communities and values were allegedly being threatened, and the prison system was proposed as a solution for that. Since the advent of convict leasing, the prison industrial complex had been racialized. But now, with color-blind policies and dog-whistle politics, America could pretend this was not the case. Evangelicals whose values had directly evolved from those of Christian slaveowners could effectively ignore the stain that racism had left on their identity. However, it was so deeply ingrained in their ideologies that its presence remained.

The problems of the prison industrial complex and its ties to white supremacy are still here. Ongoing social upheaval and civil unrest create a political void that politicians like Reagan and groups like evangelicals have historically exploited. On August 11, 2017, Klansmen, white nationalist
groups, and far-right groups took the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of Confederate statues. The public generally responded with fear and astonishment that white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups existed in such large numbers in the twenty-first century. Former president Donald Trump’s response evoked even more shock. When asked to condemn “white supremacists and right-wing militia” he responded, “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by. But I’ll tell you what: Somebody’s got to do something about Antifa and the left. Because this is not a right-wing problem — this is a left-wing problem.” His soft rejection of white supremacy and shifting of blame to the left has similarities to George Wallace’s response to desegregation. Moreover, the state of the U.S. prison system is worsening. As of 2022, almost 2 million people are incarcerated, a disproportionate percent of which are Black (Sawyer and Wagner). This nation has yet to really address the problem of mass incarceration and the punitive nature of our prison system. When the prison population continues to increase, and the American people easily accept the philosophies that govern the prison industrial complex, everyone is complicit. The problem of the prison industrial complex has expanded far beyond its southern, religious, white supremacist roots, and until its problematic foundations are addressed, it will continue to grow.
WORKS CITED


