



**IS CHRISTIANITY  
THE WHITE MAN'S  
RELIGION?**

**HOW THE  
BIBLE IS  
GOOD NEWS  
FOR PEOPLE  
OF COLOR**

**ANTIPAS L. HARRIS**



**InterVarsity Press**  
ivpress.com

Taken from *Is Christianity the White Man's Religion?* by Antipas L. Harris.  
Copyright ©2020 by Antipas Lewis Harris.  
Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE STRIKING QUESTION

*Race in America is a form of religious faith, and we will never be able to understand or address it with the necessary knowledge, energy or commitment until we comprehend its true architecture. . . . How might we overturn this racial architecture that is built inside Christian life and practice in the West?*

WILLIE JENNINGS

I was teaching a graduate course on ministry leadership when a twenty-two-year-old student interrupted my lecture with a bizarre question: “What do you say to your friends who are leaving the church and arguing that Christianity is the white man’s religion?”

I was taken aback by the question. First, it was unrelated to the topic of the day. Second, I wondered who in the world would argue such a thing.

The class discussion that ensued opened up a world of discovery. I couldn’t shake the conversation out of my mind for several weeks. Since then, I’ve learned that many young people of color across North America, all over Europe, and throughout Africa are often wary of Christianity because of current religious alignments with divisive politics, not to mention the global history of pain already associated with branches of Christianity. Many Christians (like I was) are unaware of the current conversations about this on the streets. My concern and subsequent research led me to write this book.

The question of whether Christianity is a trustworthy religion for everyone is not new. Over the years, many people and groups have asked this question. For example, the Nation of Islam was convinced that Christianity was the white man's religion, dating back to the Jim Crow era of racial segregation. It is deeply concerning that since then, after all the changes that have taken place, this question has resurfaced. A new wave of religious skeptics has arrived with serious questions about faith, identity, and the struggles of everyday life. From followers of the Nation of Islam and the Five Percent Nation to students of Science and Consciousness and others, there is a circumspection regarding oppressive attitudes and beliefs associated with the history of Western Christian practice. Times have changed, but similar observations that provoked the question years ago are provoking skepticism today.

The student's question brought to mind three distinct situations, one of which occurred in 2002 when I was a student at Yale Divinity School. Just outside the barbershop on Dixwell Avenue in New Haven, Connecticut, a group of self-identified black, Jewish men sold kosher hot dogs. One day, one of them stopped me and asked who I was, where I was from, and what I did. My interest in theological studies caught his attention. He felt the need to share with me that black people are the true Jews. To be honest, the conversation was rather intriguing; it was my first encounter with an African American who claimed to have found his true identity. His serious and intelligent conversation kept my attention for longer than I intended. Before this point, my only point of reference to black Jews was Ethiopian Jews. It was clear, however, that the brother in New Haven was not talking about the Jews who are native to Ethiopia. He was saying that African Americans are Israelites and don't know it.

Several years later, I was invited to speak on urban evangelism for the Solid Rock Church Conference at the Founder's Inn in Virginia Beach. A pastor from Washington, DC, expressed concern

about a group of African Americans who seemed to connect well with the young black men in Washington's distressed areas. He explained that these men wore yarmulkes, called themselves Israelites, and sought to convince other young men that Christianity is the white man's religion and that black people are the true Israelites. It was an earful! Immediately, I made the connection with the "black Israelite" I had previously met in New Haven.

In 2011, I went with a group of college students to New York for an Urban Plunge Excursion. We partnered with the New York School of Urban Ministry (NYSUM). Students interested in urban evangelism joined us on 125th Street to pray with passersby. Energized by the pedestrians' openness to spontaneous prayer, some of the students wandered a bit further down 125th Street to a bus stop near the Apollo Theater. *More people to pray with*, they thought.

From a distance I noticed that a few of the students were having a lively conversation, so I went to join them. As I approached, I realized that the young seminarians were in an intense theological conversation with brothers from the Nation of Islam. With a quick-talking New York style, the Nation of Islam brothers were trying to persuade our slower-talking Virginian seminarians that Christianity is the white man's religion.

The brothers from the Nation of Islam were quite versed in the tenets of their own faith as well as Christian Scripture. However, I noticed how they misquoted the Scriptures to suit their own agenda. While I do not remember the specific passage, I recall inserting myself into the conversation and calling them out on the misquotation. I then abruptly invited my students to return to the rest of our colleagues on the other end of the street. As I left the brothers from the Nation of Islam, I remember thinking, "Our students have got to know the Scriptures!"

In 2017, Bishop T. D. Jakes shared with me that he was planning to host a Global Think Tank on the African seedbed of Christianity at that year's International Pastors and Leadership Conference.

Ironically, the conversation with the bishop was only a few days after my seminary student shared his concern about the growing skepticism that many urban youth and young adults have about Christianity.

I soon learned that pastors all over the Western world are concerned about the foothold the Black Hebrew Israelite movement and other religious groups are gaining in urban areas. Eight thousand pastors and leaders gathered at Bishop Jake's global think tank that addressed the African presence in the Bible. They wanted tools to prepare their congregations to defend the faith in everyday conversations, such as around dinner tables, on street corners, and in barber shops and beauty salons.

As a whole, millennials are more educated than previous generations. The combination of the "more educated" and "undereducated" creates a tension of knowledge in society and raises a lot of questions. Some of those questions are about religion. In an internet age where information is rampant, it is hard to distinguish valid information from what is invalid. People are getting information from everywhere. Much of it is laced with uninformed opinions. We are often caught in a maze of uncertainty, trying to determine what is trustworthy.

For this generation, religion must touch the heart and not simply mandate rules. Touching the heart goes beyond cozy emotions and speaks to practical dynamics of faith. In other words, genuine religion touches the streets. It champions causes and advocates for justice. It helps people gain a moral compass, discover their identity, and develop gifts—which is exactly what my family and church provided for me at a young age.

### **GROWING UP IN THE BLACK, SANCTIFIED CHURCH**

I grew up in a small Pentecostal church in Manchester, Georgia. Pentecostal churches were often called "sanctified churches" because they placed a heavy emphasis on "living holy." While the sanctified church emphasized personal piety, it also drew on Scripture to cultivate our moral conscience, illuminate our personal

identity, and strengthen us in our gifts. My dad and mom started our church in the early 1970s, and most of our members were African American. My formative years of faith were rooted and grounded in my experience with God.

Our church was a place of refuge, encouragement, and empowerment. We had a community made up of everyone from single-parent families to two-parent families with tons of children. My parents had eight kids and another couple had fourteen. We were like one big family who loved God and each other. Church was everything for us. We worshiped up to four times a week. Our faith taught us that Jesus understands our social and personal situations—a truth that became so deeply rooted in our faith orientation that, for us, Jesus was black like us. Don't get me wrong—our church did not preach that Jesus is African American. What I mean is that when we read the Bible, we interpreted Jesus through the lens of our experience.

For black people, blackness is more than a color. It is a rich heritage, a contribution to the world. For blacks with a history of slavery, to be black involves a history of pain and social struggle. Black Christian history, the one that framed the origins of black churches, passed down a grassroots understanding that Jesus loves us amid a hateful world. Jesus journeys with us through life's ups and downs. He is with us when down in the dumps just like God was with Israel during their time in Egypt. Just as God imputed identity to Israel and made a people of them, our identity was formed in Christ. We are "Jesus people." For centuries, millions of black people have relied heavily on that identity. More than two hundred years of slavery and almost a century of Jim Crow honed a common faith in black churches that our hope must be in God. We have believed that he would make a way when none was visible. And in our little church in Manchester we witnessed the Lord do just that, time after time.

We experienced God as a father for the fatherless, a mother for the motherless, a friend for the friendless, water for the thirsty, and food for the hungry. Jesus sided with us amid pain, frustration,



agony, and loss. The redeeming Christ saved us from sin. The crucified Christ acquainted himself with black suffering. The loving God would help us succeed against all odds. Again and again, my life story confirmed such a God!

My dad even established a school at our church. It was a place to deepen our faith through a Christian education curriculum, provided an escape from youthful vices, and helped the children of the church navigate the contours of southern racism. Even in the 1990s, the black experience in the Deep South was tough, but for most of my young life I didn't realize it. When I discovered the reality of racism, I was shocked out of my mind!

We had very friendly relationships with white Pentecostal congregations. We visited their churches, and they came to ours. But there were nagging reminders that the two churches were different. Partly, the black orientation to church differed from the way white people experienced church in the Deep South. For example, one time our church took a youth group to a skating rink in Griffin, Georgia, because it was the closest location to Manchester with a weekly Christian music skate night. While at the skating rink, my dad (our pastor) and a white pastor developed a friendship. Each week, they would chat about the faith, church life, and vision for their ministries. At one Christian skate night, the white pastor told my dad that a black man was coming to his church, but he didn't really know how to relate to him. So he suggested that the man come to our church. Never mind the distance from Griffin to Manchester is about forty miles, which is an hour drive time.

Conversely, our church's focus on helping black people succeed in Christ was not always an inviting experience for white people. For example, during one of my dad's practical sermons on the necessity of personal responsibility, he paused and asked the congregation a question something like, "Why does God want us to be responsible and work?" Forgetting that we had a white visitor that day, a brother in the church responded, "So we can pay these white



folks their money!” Only after he spoke did he remember the visitor and quickly say, “Oh, excuse me!” Many of us laughed, including the visitor, but this story illustrates how our faith was formed within a context of the black experience against a dominate white society that we viewed as indifferent to black people.

One traditional feature of African American churches was that they helped blacks synthesize their faith within the broader context of white economic and ideological superiority. The way we learned about God, Jesus, and the Bible helped us succeed in the white world. However, in a predominately white society, most white people can't relate to being in a situation where they are the minority. Most could probably live their lives without ever experiencing a majority black context.

Black churches in the Deep South not only constituted a majority of black people, they also preserved some of the qualities passed down from the slave and Jim Crow era religious traditions. This is probably the case because there was really no theological or liturgical model to which to subscribe; it was just the way black people did church. Their spirituality was inextricably formed alongside their experience. Princeton religion professor Albert J. Raboteau points out, “The slaves’ historical identity as a unique people was peculiarly their own. In the spirituals the slaves affirmed and reaffirmed that identity religiously as they suffered and celebrated their journey from slavery to freedom.” One must not dismiss cultural identity too quickly. African American spirituality was formed through the pressures of oppression. Black human and Christian identity were shaped in spite of a society that rejected both. Black families and churches safeguarded young minds and lives from mainstream identity adversity.

## **THE SHADOW OF JIM CROW**

I was blessed with parents and grandparents who, in some ways, continued the historic African American approach to childrearing.

Although nearly a hundred years had passed since the abolition of slavery, my grandparents grew up in Georgia during Jim Crow's segregation. My parents caught the tail end of it as well. The attitudes that permeated Jim Crow and the structural systems set in place from the nation's inception, in many ways, continue until this day. So my parents invested a lot of time and support in my siblings and me. At the time, I did not realize how much they shielded us from the ugly experiences they had endured.

Now that I am an adult, some of the funny but serious experiences they shared from their life under the Jim Crow era's segregation come to mind. For example, Dad went to a restaurant when he was a teenager. After walking through the door, the owner, a grumpy white man, said, "We don't serve n——s." Dad said that he humorously responded, "Oh, good; I don't want one of those. I want a burger," then took off running for fear the man would try to hurt or even kill him. In the Deep South, in those days, it was not always clear who were members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)!

Black churches were very helpful in navigating a society in which we lived, but felt powerless to change. In addition to family and nurture, black churches gave my brothers and me a platform to express our musical talent and preaching. Our singing group, the A Boys (later renamed A7), went from church to church, singing and proclaiming the gospel. Our intense involvement in church shielded us from much of the lingering racial problems of the Deep South. They made us feel important, loved, and affirmed. Who could lose with that kind of support?

Reflecting on it, though, I have mixed emotions. On the one hand, it was helpful that my parents safeguarded us and that our church provided a refuge from racism. It helped that my faith was grounded in the black church at an early age. I often wonder what life would be like if I didn't have the foundation that I had. By the time I was exposed to society's original sin, my faith was strong in the God I had met long before.

On the other hand, it was hard to find my own voice. Even worse, I struggle with second-guessing my ideas. When one holds back from sharing their perspective, society is cheated of their contribution to human progress. For me, second-guessing traces back to my childhood. So many young people of color suppress their ideas for fear of societal contempt.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. encouraged blacks to be leaders. I think this is one of the reasons I love his messages so much. King said, “A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus, but a molder of consensus.” King lived leadership that molded consensus. However, his outspokenness resulted in his assassination. Black parents who remember his murder face a moral dilemma in child-rearing: Do they want their children to live? Or do they want them to speak their minds? King would be an anomaly if he were the only example. But the corridors of history are decorated with heroes who spoke up for justice and lost their lives as a result of it.

In spite of the exemplary work of our forefathers and foremothers who gave their lives for the freedoms we enjoy, many people continue to live with the same quandary: Should I speak up or keep silent? Should I act or refrain from doing anything at all? Should I stand boldly or acquiesce?

Certainly, everyone can relate to this point. Every human being confronts a similar moral dilemma. Many people experience loss simply because they speak up for truth, are rejected for sharing their stories, and are excluded for pointing out problems that adversely affect society. At best, many have learned to go along to get along because if they fight back, they might not live to tell.

## **COLLEGE DAYS**

Growing up in Manchester, racial problems in my little hometown paled in comparison to some other southern towns. I never met anyone wearing white sheets and hoods. For most of my early life, I thought I had never met a member of the KKK. However, when

I was a student at LaGrange College, I spent a lot of time in the community and became friends with a white classmate who grew up in LaGrange. He knew a lot about the town, and he knew a lot of the people. One day, he shared with me that someone we knew from the community was part of the KKK. She was actually one of their leaders who led local gatherings, which were then non-violent—as far as we knew. When my friend told me this, it freaked me out! Had I lived in a bubble all this time? I was under no illusion that everything was hunky-dory with regard to race relations, but I was swiftly learning that I was not that far removed from racist history. In fact, it may have been more dangerous because the lines of separation were not as clear as they were under Jim Crow.

Another time during college, my brother and I decided to branch out and fellowship with white Pentecostal churches. Although we were raised in a majority black church and an all-black parochial school, we had adjusted quickly to a majority white college. I preached at a special service one Sunday night at a white Pentecostal church in LaGrange. It was packed with young black and white people, mostly from the college. Since the church had been dwindling in attendance, the pastor was particularly excited to see so many young people that night, so he asked my brother and me for a meeting to discuss joining his staff. At the interview, the first question he asked was, “What do you all think about interracial marriage?” Shocked by the question, we said, “We have no problem with it.” The pastor openly expressed concern that if we were to join his staff, we might fall in love with one of the white women in his church. He then explained, “I would be concerned about those poor children. They would not know if they are white or black.” Needless to say, our working relationship with that church did not materialize. Confused and feeling rejected, I struggled to grasp why the anointing on my life could not overcome my blackness.

One may question my reasons for bringing up my college days in this book. Some would say that times have changed, and this story is anachronistic. But let's not jump to conclusions so quickly! If Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Mya Hall, Jemel Roberson, Botham Jean, Atatiana Jefferson, and others could come back to life, they would argue otherwise. They are dead. There is just no convincing rationale for their deaths. Surprisingly the courts did not even convict their assassins! Could it be that their blackness posed a threat to public safety? When black and white Christian leaders don't work together to address such public concerns, young people tend to make sweeping conclusions that Christianity remains part of the race problem.

While I hope society finally moves beyond the race problem, we must not deny that the problem remains a reality. I have been followed in stores and overlooked for opportunities for which I was more qualified than the person(s) hired. On two separate occasions, my brothers and I have stopped at gas stations to fill up and grab a snack only to be stopped by a white cashier who told us, "All y'all can't come in here at the same time." Because we were black, we were criminal suspects upon arrival. When I share this experience with my white friends, they are appalled. Groups of white men enter stores all the time and never have this kind of experience.

It is all the more heartbreaking when negative attitudes against other people are either embodied or perpetuated by people who claim to be Christians. When I discovered this, I was dumbfounded. I had come to know Jesus as one who loves everybody. Why in the world don't his people do the same?

#### **DEMANDING A NEW FAITH**

These days, young people are searching for meaning and identity. While the church was the context of my youth, nowadays young people do not experience church the same way. Research is showing

that they are enthralled with spirituality more than ever but are rejecting the church.

One of my professors at Boston University, the late Dale Andrews, once pointed out, “Black urban youth and the black middle class feel that church has become irrelevant to their daily struggles. At the core of their frustrations lie displaced faith identity conflicts.” Churches in black communities are important symbols of faith and places where black people congregate for certain events such as weddings, funerals, and so on. However, the traditional, dominant cultural assumptions about the faith are no longer hallmarks of black Christianity like they were as recently as the ’80s and ’90s. There are many reasons for this, among them technological advancements with global influences and the influx of new ideas and shifts in family structures. The internet has replaced both the textbook and the library. And far fewer parents are requiring their children to go to Sunday school or church at all. Fewer and fewer youth and middle class people see places with steeples as spaces of self-discovery and spiritual formation. They take their questions to the bookstores, classrooms, and internet. Google is the new card catalog, opinions are the new source of knowledge, and online video portals such as YouTube and Netflix are the new pulpit. So, while people are more spiritual today than previous generations, what they see in the media and online shapes their vision of the world, God, and themselves.

A growing number of youth and young adults are opting for subcultural identity groups (i.e., gangs) and alternative religious groups such as science and consciousness groups, five percenters, the Nation of Islam, Black Israelites, Wiccans, and varying forms of witchcraft to guide them in self-discovery and their search for success. Similar to my early orientation to the Christian faith, spirituality in these groups tends to be experience based. Experience must not be underestimated, but it is varied and complex. It can be very difficult to find one’s self without a sound faith foundation.

Difficult times, broken dreams, family misfortunes, and broken hearts will send one's life into a tailspin of doubt and even atheism. However, even the most cynical person wonders if there might be something out there somewhere to help cope with life.

Pew Research reports that millennials are reluctant about going to church and don't value Scripture as a guide for living. Yet they are more spiritual than previous generations. For millennials, spirituality is the search for a God who cares about their everyday life and is concerned for the flourishing of their lives.

One wonders if the church's interpretation of Scripture has not kept up with the questions of this generation. Meanwhile, alternative spiritual groups are offering responses to this generation's questions and an increased number of both college students and career-focused urban millennials are buying what they are teaching. While these religions have profound differences, they commonly emphasize the integration of spirituality into everyday life, and their ideas have infiltrated contemporary hip hop, pop, rock, and country music; literature; and poetry.

**We must revisit the roots of Christianity, reckon with its decorated history, and advance a renewed vision of the faith.**

I am deeply concerned that Christianity—with such rich gifts of unity, love, and hope at its foundation—is losing its meaningfulness in American cities. We must revisit the roots of Christianity, reckon with its decorated history, and advance a renewed vision of the faith. That way, we can restore the integrity of Scripture and unveil the necessity of the church such that this generation and future generations will better connect with the church.

I have spent a lot of time thinking about the question my student asked me about Christianity being the white man's religion. Since then, the issue has come up again and again in conversations with other millennials. So, I spent some time with an interdisciplinary



group of scholar-friends, some of whom participated in helping me during the writing of this book. I have come to the conclusion that the question of Christianity being the white man's religion is not merely an attack on Christianity. Neither is it meant to insult white people or attack white men. It is an honest question of contemporary relevance of the faith in a diverse world.

The question challenges a history in which groups of professing Christians have used the Bible in ways that oppress others. It rejects systems that claim Christianity as foundational while privileging some and creating underprivileged situations for others. Demographic predictions observe a significant increase of ethnic diversity in American cities. Amid this change, the question of Christianity being a white man's religion expresses concern about pervasive white male ideology in society's structures. Many young people believe that the Bible and Christianity are responsible for the oppression, hate, and destruction of identity such ideological superstructures have caused.

## LIVING IT OUT

*A brief housekeeping note: At the end of most chapters, you will find a section like this one labeled "Living It Out." My goal is to keep this book practical and provide readers with a quick summary and application of what they've encountered in the chapter.*

As one seeking to understand the relationship between faith and contemporary culture, I have observed that millennials who question the relevance of the Bible and the church tend to do so in light of their lived reality. In a complex world of brokenness, people are looking for a faith that gives them meaning and a reason to hope again. Unfortunately, contemporary expressions of evangelical Christianity provide little of what this generation needs. This is especially the case with black, urban millennials. I was in a deep conversation with a former drug pusher who asserted, "Doc, you've got to take the religion to the streets!" His point was that right now there is a chasm between the Bible and the people in the streets. There is a gap between what local churches sometimes care about

and what the majority of people need. Millennials are often turned off with “church” and they reject the Bible. For them, Christianity is the religion of the oppressors and the Bible does not affirm blacks, other minorities, or women in their pain and suffering.

A closer look at the Bible and a renewed focus on love, compassion, and justice will refresh us with living water to quench our never-ending thirst for spirituality and social justice.

Churches like the one from my childhood are few and far between. Or maybe churches like that are simply ineffective in today’s social climate. There are certainly far less close-knit families such as the one I am privileged to have. As a result, the way we do church and the focus of the Christian message must respond to the changing times. However, Christian leaders tend to promote a faith that arguably supports systems of oppression and blames the downcast for their plight, overlooking the pain in the streets. The affirmation of ethnic diversity in the message of faith, and the practice of faith in social advocacy and policymaking, are necessary to meet the needs of today. A lack of attention given to these dynamics in contemporary society lends to the question that continues to resurface: “Is Christianity the white man’s religion?”

I will further unpack challenges of faith in a generation in which black and brown millennials, post-millennials, and Generation Z are searching for identity and a sense of belonging. Something is happening that has created a loss of trust in the faith. I want to re-discover biblical Christianity for a better grip on what the Bible is really about and the hope that the faith offers.

For example, learning a bit more about ethnic diversity in Scripture helps young people of color better identify with the faith. I never cease to be amazed at how people’s ears perk up when I talk about the black presence in the Bible. Time and time again, they are surprised to learn that there are people of color in the Bible. For some traditional Christians this is a trivial fact, and perhaps that is the problem. A generation in search of connection with the Ultimate Being requires more information about God than they are getting from traditional Christianity. I worry that the richness of hope, love, compassion, and acceptance in Christ escapes a faithless generation through the shadows of perceived oppression. To excavate Scripture and the essence of biblical Christianity sheds light

on a far more inclusive than exclusive Christ, more empowering than disempowering, and more affirming than demeaning faith. This says to the contemporary unbeliever that, contrary to popular belief, biblical Christianity is God's gift to those who struggle with a sense of identity and belonging, social injustice, and oppression. A closer look at the Bible and a renewed focus on love, compassion, and justice will refresh us with the living water to quench our never-ending thirst for spirituality and social justice.

**BUY THE BOOK!**

[ivpress.com/is-christianity-the-white-man-s-religion](http://ivpress.com/is-christianity-the-white-man-s-religion)