

EXCERPT



Is Christianity the White Man's Religion? *How the Bible Is Good News for People of Color*

May 19, 2020 | \$22, 192 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4599-6

Antipas L. Harris, a theologian and community activist, believes that biblical Christianity is more affirmative of cultural diversity than many realize. In this sweeping social, theological, and historical examination of Christianity, Harris responds to a list of hot topics from young Americans who struggle with the perception that Christianity is detached from matters of justice, identity, and culture. He also looks at the ways in which American evangelicalism may have incubated the race problem.

Biblical Christianity Is Not Just for White Westerners

A young graduate student interrupted my lecture with a rather odd question. He said, “Dr. Antipas, a lot of my friends are asking me why black people would be Christians when the Bible seems to support slavery. They say Christianity is the white man’s religion.” The question seemed unrelated to the course on Leadership in Church and Ministry, yet the sincerity in the student’s eyes pierced my heart as he waited for an answer. To be honest, I don’t remember my immediate response. But the question echoed in my mind for weeks.

The question of whether Christianity is a trustworthy faith for people of color is not new. Over the years, many people and groups of people 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, after all this time and the changes that have taken place since then, this question has resurfaced. A new wave of religious skeptics has arrived with serious questions about faith, identity, and the struggles of everyday life. They are wary about perceived exclusionary attitudes, beliefs, and practices of Christians. 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 Theatre. *More people to pray with*, they thought.

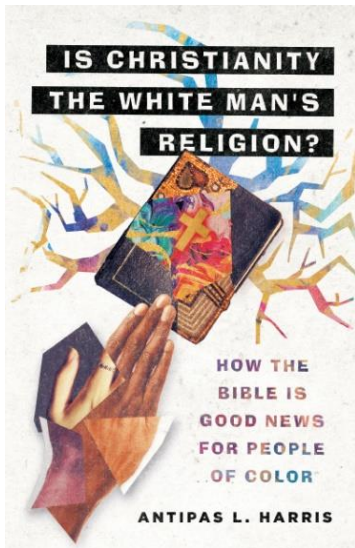


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"Unless we ask questions, we don't get answers. Antipas Harris, without hesitation or trepidation, has not only realistically and learnedly dealt with the quintessential 'elephant in the room' looming in the minds of many black millennials, but he has expanded our vision and understanding of Jesus Christ, the Bible, and cultural relevancy."

—Dale C. Bronner, founder and senior pastor of Word of Faith Family Worship Cathedral, Atlanta

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 Jakes' Global Think Tank on the African Presence in the Bible. They wanted tools to share with their congregations to prepare them to defend the faith on the 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 wherein information is rampant, it is hard to distinguish valid information from that which 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.

—Taken from chapter one, "The Striking Question"

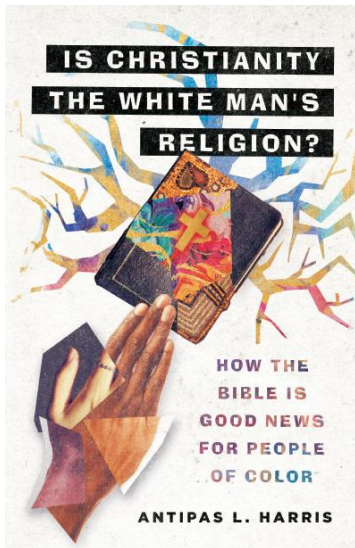


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Q & A



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How the Bible Is Good News for People of Color

The title *Is Christianity the White Man's Religion?* is a bold one. Why did you decide to tackle this question?

Antipas L. Harris: The religious landscape is tainted with allegations that Christianity is really for the “good-ole ‘white’ boys club.” Millennials and Gen-Xers are increasingly agitated with the faith as it seems to side with oppressors and use God to advance ideas that privilege the “club” over progressive views about ethnic diversity and to strong-arm human rights. Deeper still, resurging perspectives about the “white Bible,” the “white Jesus,” and the “white religion,” is off-putting to both people of color and white millennials who find racial and ethnic oppression a violation of human dignity.

What ideas and issues do you lay out in this book?

Antipas: *Is Christianity the White Man's Religion?* aims to redeem Christianity from the clutches of whiteness. It revisits the colorful origins of biblical history, traces white superiority in biblical interpretation, and re-envision the rich diversity of skin, thought, worldview, and community that God always intended.

How does your book speak to the cultural climate and tensions?

Antipas: This book has a multifaceted approach, similar to a prism:

1. It responds to brewing concern over structural and systemic social injustice toward people of color in America sponsored by a large number of evangelical Christians. The concern is that Christians side with the oppressors, bigots, and white supremacy. So then, the faith must really be a superstructure that upholds whiteness at the expense of black and brown people brutally treated.
2. *Is Christianity the White Man's Religion?* responds to questions about the white imaging of Jesus, the biblical heroes, and the marginalized presentation of people of color. It accentuates that in fact, historically, the majority of people in the Bible were people of color. There is minimal presence of Europeans until the Roman Empire.
3. This book re-imagines a Christianity that redeems the faith God intends: one of love, grace, compassion, hope, and advocacy for righteousness and justice—including social justice, or the equal treatment of all people.

What are the two to five main things you want readers to take away from your book?

Antipas:

- The Bible is full of rich ethnic, cultural, and ideological diversity.
- The origins of Christianity is Afro-Asiatic in thought and worldview.
- God's vision of the faith of Jesus is unity in diversity—full of love, compassion, and kindness—and inclusive.



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"Dr. Harris has definitely jumped into the ocean of divide with both feet, and this book will definitely make waves. . . . He has presented this controversial topic with truth, tact, and sensitivity. I wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone who wants to share the gospel of Jesus Christ without prejudice, and I sincerely hope that all Christians of all cultures get a copy and begin a journey that so many have refused to take."

—John Francis, founder and pastor of Ruach City Church

Antipas L. Harris, President of Jakes Divinity School

"Dr. Antipas Harris courageously confronts the academic view and spiritual ramifications of a debate that has existed in the black community and beyond for years! The lack of understanding is limiting our ability to represent the body of Christ. This book's genius is that every person concerned about how our world has become so polarized will see that the roots are in part wrapped around the misrepresentation of religious rhetoric—sometimes innocently conveyed—and how it's had its hand in the historical cookie jar! At the end of the day, we who are spiritual must take the lead on becoming one, which is our responsibility. . . . Jesus prayed that we might be one! Enjoy the read!"

—Bishop T. D. Jakes Sr., senior pastor of The Potter's House of Dallas

Antipas L. Harris is the president and dean of Jakes Divinity School and serves on the pastoral staff at The Potter's House in Dallas, Texas. He is an ordained minister, theological educator, and musician with degrees from LaGrange College, Candler School of Theology (Emory University), Yale Divinity School, Boston University, and St. Thomas University.

Before being appointed to his current role by Bishop T. D. Jakes, Harris founded the Urban Renewal Center in Norfolk, Virginia, where he led initiatives that addressed the intersections of faith, justice, and community development. His objective is to help people overcome distress, reinforce faith, impart comfort through the arts, and provide stability through education. His previous books include *The Gifted Worshiper* and *The Holy Spirit and Social Justice*, volumes one and two.

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