

The Influence of Christianity in Shaping Conservative Asian America

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INTRODUCTION

In 2022, Pew Research Center conducted a survey and found that four out of ten U.S. adults believed the country “should be a ‘Christian nation.’”¹ Half of Americans said the Bible should influence U.S. laws, and over a quarter of Americans believed that the Bible should take priority over the

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38FB4WN5C>

[†]. J.D., New York University School of Law 2024; B.S. Bioengineering, University of California, Berkeley 2018. I am forever grateful to my family for the life experiences and inspiration to explore this topic, none of which would ever have been possible without them. For my legal career, thank you to Professors Jonathan Abel and Angela Gius of UC Law San Francisco, and Russell Acton of the late “Easy Creole,” for being the shoulders of giants on which I stood. For all the insight and feedback, a special note of appreciation to Professor Omavi Shukur, and the editors of *Asian American Law Journal* at Berkeley Law. Lastly, a personal and heartfelt thank you to Christine Park and 180 Church for your endless love and support.

1. GREGORY A. SMITH, MICHAEL ROTOLO, PATRICIA TEVINGTON & ACHSAH CALLAHAN, PEW RSCH. CTR., 45% OF AMERICANS SAY U.S. SHOULD BE A “CHRISTIAN NATION” 5 (2022) https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2022/10/PF_2022.10.27_christian-nationalism_REPORT.pdf [<https://perma.cc/YX3J-GHCU>].

will of the people.² Asian Americans contribute to these statistics; in 2014, the Center's "Religious Landscape Study" surveyed 35,000 Americans nationwide³ and found that a third of Asian Americans identified as Christian.⁴ Furthermore, 59 percent of Asian American Christians identified as conservative, compared to 24 percent non-Christians and 21 percent unaffiliated with any religion.⁵ Of Asian Americans identifying as conservative, 59 percent were "absolutely certain" in a belief in God and 50 percent found the importance of religion in one's life as "very important."⁶ Additionally, the Center found Asian American evangelicals to be more zealous compared to White evangelicals—72 percent compared to 49 percent, respectively, believed that "[Christianity] is the one, true faith."⁷

Why is Christian conservatism so prevalent among Asian Americans? In this Article, I explore the colonial legacy of Christianity throughout Asian American history and its influence on Christian conservatism within Asian American communities. I theorize that specific forms of Christianity, through colonialism and xenophobic policies driven by ideologies inspired by White supremacy, shaped conservative ideologies that permeate many Asian American churches today. This Article seeks to highlight the tension between the ideologies that once discriminated against and oppressed Asian Americans and the conservative values that descended from said ideologies later adopted by Asian American Christians.

"Asian American" is a complex term, and its standard use includes immigrants and descendants from countries throughout Central, East, South, and Southeast Asia. Because further research is necessary to properly address Christian conservatism within this term's standard use, this Article uses "Asian" and "Asian American" narrowly to primarily refer to people of East Asian origin. "Asian American churches" also narrowly refers to Christian churches of these ethnicities.

Part I focuses on Christianity's legacy in U.S. law and its ensuing influence over policies governing Asian immigration in the nineteenth century. Christian thinking dominated precolonial and colonial eras from the birth of the United States of America and took crude and oppressive forms

2. Michael Lipka, *Half of Americans Say Bible Should Influence U.S. Laws, Including 28% Who Favor It Over the Will of the People*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (Apr. 13, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/04/13/half-of-americans-say-bible-should-influence-u-s-laws-including-28-who-favor-it-over-the-will-of-the-people/> [https://perma.cc/N8QC-7VUY].

3. *Religious Landscape Study: Asians*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (2014), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition/asian> [https://perma.cc/2NKP-XRNV].

4. *Id.*

5. *Religious Landscape Study: Asians Who Identify as Conservative*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (2014), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/political-ideology/conservative/racial-and-ethnic-composition/asian/> [https://perma.cc/T4F4-9ZAZ].

6. *Id.*

7. *Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (July 19, 2012), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/07/19/asian-americans-a-mosaic-of-faiths-overview/> [https://perma.cc/FP8L-PU9T].

during the Civil War and Reconstruction Era. Faith was often used to justify and perpetuate White supremacy, slavery, and Jim Crow. Throughout each period, Christianity was repurposed into novel arguments to justify preserving segregation and the racial hierarchy.

Part II introduces the arrival of Asian immigrants in the United States and explores the role Christianity played in the formation of Asian American identity. This Part focuses on the influence of Christianity on Asian American history and theorizes its contributions to the prevalence of conservative ideologies of Asian American Christians today. A marketing of conservative Christian values with political antagonism toward communism and socialism appealed to Asian immigrants seeking refuge from political turmoil in their home countries.

Political and religious leaders championing Christian conservatism have historically resisted progress toward racial equality for Asian Americans and other minority groups. Continuing conservatism in Asian American Christianity therefore preserves a status quo and implicates a greater harm by hindering the broader interests of racial equality.

Part III offers ongoing and future discussions of racial justice, in light of Christian conservatism, from the lens of Asian American Christianity.

I. REMNANTS OF CHRISTIANITY IN U.S. LAW

The interplay between Christianity, U.S. law, and Asian American identity contributed to the development of the current generation of conservative Asian American evangelicals. This theory requires a careful examination of two concurrent histories. Part I.A will explore the foundation of Christianity in U.S. law, drawing focus to the founding and construction of racial hierarchies that first oppressed African slaves and Black Americans. This ensconced a legacy of hierarchies that Asian immigrants were inserted into in the nineteenth century. Part I.B shifts focus to the influence of Christianity on U.S. law regarding Asian Americans—from early policies that targeted the first Asian immigrants to contemporary policies.

A. Early U.S. Law

Christian ideals permeated early colonial documents. The Mayflower Compact, one of the earliest records in American history, was written “for the Glory of God and Advancement of the Christian Faith.”⁸ The Declaration of Independence was written under the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” instilling the fundamental American value that “all men are created equal” as an “endow[ment] by their Creator[.]”⁹ The current state constitutions of Colorado, Iowa, and Washington refer to either a “Supreme Ruler of the Universe” or “Supreme Being” in their preambles, and thirty-

8. MAYFLOWER COMPACT para. 1 (1620).

9. THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE paras. 1–2 (U.S. 1776).

four state constitutions invoke “God” more than once.¹⁰ While the U.S. Constitution makes no explicit allusions to Christianity,¹¹ its language reflects significant biblical influence.¹² If an interpretation or practice of common law conflicted with Christian teaching, it was considered invalid.¹³ Christian influences in common law bled into precolonial English jurisprudence where the “law of God” was fundamental to English law.¹⁴ The earliest colonists wove Christian ideals into the fabric of the early colonial codes, which dictated much of punishable conduct.¹⁵ The original thirteen colonies of the North and South abided by colonial codes drawn from tenets of the Bible.¹⁶ For example, the colony of Virginia borrowed from Mosaic law in punishing blasphemy of the faith, homosexuality, and adultery.¹⁷

Almost every state had an established church, religion-based voting provisions, religious qualifications to take office, religious oaths, and taxes to support the church.¹⁸ The Framers of the Constitution viewed political and legal models in the Bible as inspirations for their own political and legal systems.¹⁹ For example, a “Republican Form of Government” in Article IV, Section 4 of the Constitution²⁰ reflects the Framers’ perception of the Old Testament’s Hebrew commonwealth as a “divinely inspired model” worthy of emulation.²¹ While some constitutional values derived inspiration from other sources, Christianity’s influence was unquestionably authoritative and arguably the most influential.²² The Bible was widely accessible and unquestionably authoritative at the time, reinforcing the view that this form of government was divinely favored.²³

The judiciary also wrote opinions favoring Christianity. In 1892, the Supreme Court infamously claimed that the United States “is a Christian nation.”²⁴ The Court viewed U.S. citizens as “a Christian people” and the

10. See Aleksandra Sandstrom, *God or the Divine Is Referenced in Every State Constitution*, PEW RESEARCH CTR. (Aug. 17, 2017), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/08/17/god-or-the-divine-is-referenced-in-every-state-constitution/> [https://perma.cc/V8TZ-HLGV]; see also LA. CONST. pmbl.; MINN. CONST. pmbl.; IOWA CONST. pmbl.; COLO. CONST. pmbl.; WASH. CONST. pmbl.

11. The closest reference to Christianity in the U.S. Constitution is the reference of “Year of our Lord,” which appears as a common time denotation. U.S. CONST. pmbl.

12. DANIEL L. DREISBACH, *GREAT CHRISTIAN JURISTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY* 7–9 (2019).

13. *Id.*; see also Jayson L. Spiegel, *Christianity as Part of the Common Law*, 14 N.C. CENT. L. REV. 494, 496–97 (1984) (illustrating historical notions of English influence where any act of Parliament inconsistent with the “law of God” was considered void).

14. See Spiegel, *supra* note 13, at 465.

15. DREISBACH, *supra* note 12, at 5–6.

16. *Id.*

17. Compare DREISBACH, *supra* note 12, at 5–6, with 1 *Corinthians* 6:9–10; see also Stuart Banner, *When Christianity Was Part of the Common Law*, 16 LAW & HIST. REV. 27, 32 (1998) (noting the prevalence, despite rare use, of blasphemy statutes as relics of Christian influence on colonial laws).

18. Spiegel, *supra* note 13, at 501.

19. DREISBACH, *supra* note 12, at 9.

20. U.S. CONST., art. IV, § 4.

21. DREISBACH, *supra* note 12, at 9.

22. *Id.* at 11.

23. *Id.*

24. *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, 143 U.S. 457, 471 (1892).

“morality of the country . . . deeply ingrafted upon Christianity.” State courts adopted similar approaches. A New York court opined that “Christianity . . . is not unknown to our law.”²⁵ A Pennsylvania court held that “Christianity . . . is and always has been a part of the common law of Pennsylvania.”²⁶ The Supreme Court reinforced this attitude in the twentieth century²⁷ by characterizing the country as “a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being,”²⁸ with laws that “are not inconsistent with the will of God.”²⁹ The integration of Christianity into political structures had far-reaching implications—it would later be used as justification for slavery and be weaponized against people of color.

B. Antebellum and Civil War Era

Christianity’s role evolved from influencing early forms of U.S. government to inspiring justifications for slavery.³⁰ The doctrinal split on slavery between the North and South widened during the Civil War in 1861. Both sides attacked or defended slavery through their respective interpretations of the same Christian doctrines.³¹ Evangelical Christianity inspired many Southerners to defend the practice: Southern Baptists in particular practiced literal biblical readings to counteract the North’s mounted attacks.³² These literal readings claimed the Bible acknowledged—if not entirely supported—slaveholding.³³ Southerners compared themselves to Old Testament Israelites: a “beleaguered small nation surrounded by enemies.”³⁴ This comparison encouraged Southerners to view secession as consistent with the biblical narrative of oppression.³⁵ Christian justification for slavery reached far beyond the pews and found support within public discourse.³⁶

25. *People v. Ruggles*, 8 Johns 290, 298 (1811).

26. *Updegraph v. Commonwealth*, 1824 WL 2393, 5 (1824).

27. *Spiegel*, *supra* note 13, at 513; *see also* *United States v. Macintosh*, 283 U.S. 605, 625 (1931).

28. *Zorach v. Clauson*, 343 U.S. 306, 313 (1952).

29. *Macintosh*, 283 U.S. at 625 (1931).

30. DREISBACH, *supra* note 12, at 15.

31. KEVIN PHILLIPS, *AMERICAN THEOCRACY: THE PERIL AND POLITICS OF RADICAL RELIGION, OIL, AND BORROWED MONEY IN THE 21ST CENTURY* 142 (2007).

32. *Id.* at 142–43; *see also* Larry R. Morrison, *The Religious Defense of American Slavery Before 1830*, 37 J. RELIGIOUS THOUGHT 16, 16 (1981) (discussing religious defenses of slavery in colonial history).

33. PHILLIPS, *supra* note 31, at 142–43; *see also* *Exodus* 20–21 (presenting the Ten Commandments and the biblical relationship between “master” and “slave” in the Old Testament); *Matthew* 10:24 (discussing the relationship between “master” and “slave” in the New Testament); *Ephesians* 6:5–6 (New Revised Standard Version) (discussing the obligation to submit to “earthly masters” as an analogue of obedience to Christ).

34. PHILLIPS, *supra* note 31, at 143–44.

35. *Id.* at 144.

36. In 1820, the *Richmond Enquirer* elaborated on the “literal truth of the Bible and its sanction of slavery” and concluded with five propositions that the newspaper “presume[d] few faithful believers will controvert,” the last of which expressed its clear belief: “That if one, or more decisions of the written word of God, sanction the rectitude of any human acquisitions, for instance, the acquisition of a servant

Proslavery Christians used two main biblical claims to justify slaveholding. The first claim relied on Cain and Abel in the Book of Genesis.³⁷ Slavery supporters interpreted Cain's curse to mean that God ordained slavery before it even appeared in American society.³⁸ When Cain murdered his brother Abel, God cursed Cain and his descendants by marking him.³⁹ This "marking" connoted those with "black" or "dark skin" as disobedient outcasts from society, which gained credence from various traditions and folklores over centuries.⁴⁰ By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European and American writers widely popularized this narrative.⁴¹ The second claim relied on Noah's descendants.⁴² Known as the "Curse of Ham," this claim pertained to Noah cursing his son, Ham, because of Ham's immoral act.⁴³ Noah cursed Ham's descendants⁴⁴ to perpetual servanthood to Ham's brothers.⁴⁵ Southern clergymen⁴⁶ used this account to assert that Africans were Ham's modern descendants condemned to serve the descendants of Ham's brothers.⁴⁷ To these clergymen, enslavement of

by inheritance or purchase, whoever believes that the written word of God is verity itself, must consequently believe in the absolute rectitude of slave-holding." Morrison, *supra* note 32, at 16–17.

37. Cain and Abel were brothers. Cain became jealous of Abel and murdered him because he felt God favored Abel over himself. As a result, God cursed Cain but placed a mark on Cain so none later would harm him later. *Genesis* 4:8–15 (New Revised Standard Version).

38. Morrison, *supra* note 32, at 17.

39. See *supra* note **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

40. DAVID M. GOLDENBERG, BLACK AND SLAVE: THE ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF THE CURSE OF HAM 40–41 (Dale C. Allison, Jr., Christine Helmer, Thomas Römer, Choon-Leong Seow, Barry Dov Walfish & Eric Ziolkowski eds., 2017); see also Nyasha Junior, *The Mark of Cain and White Violence*, 139 J. BIBLICAL LITERATURE 661, 662, 664 (2020).

41. GOLDENBERG, *supra* note 40, at 40–41.

42. God instructed Noah to build and board an ark with his family and a pair of each animal to survive the flood. God was displeased with the sinfulness of the world and sought to cleanse the world with a flood. Noah was the only righteous of those before being wiped by the flood. *Genesis* 7 (New Revised Standard Version).

43. *Genesis* 9:18–29 (New Revised Standard Version); see Noel Rae, *How Christian Slaveholders Used the Bible to Justify Slavery*, TIME (Feb. 23, 2018), <https://time.com/5171819/christianity-slavery-book-excerpt/> [<https://perma.cc/39NP-44F6>].

44. Ham's son was named Canaan, and all his descendants were known as "Canaanites." *Genesis* 10:6 (New Revised Standard Version).

45. *Genesis* 9:18–29 (New Revised Standard Version).

46. Frederick Dalcho, a South Carolinian Episcopal clergyman wrote an "elaborate explication" of this portion of the Bible to explicitly reinforce African enslavement as a form of divine decree and prophesy. Morrison, *supra* note 32, at 17–19. George Whitefield, famous for his work in the Great Awakening, campaigned fervently for legalization of slavery based on his economic reasoning that the country would only prosper through slavery. In particular, Whitefield supported slavery and campaigned against cruel treatment of slaves. See JESSICA PARR, INVENTING GEORGE WHITEFIELD: RACE, REVIVALISM, AND THE MAKING OF A RELIGIOUS ICON 4–5, 64–65 (2015) (illustrating Whitefield's paternalistic justification for slavery for personal, religious, and socioeconomic gains); see also Mark Galli, *Slaveholding Evangelist: Whitefield's Troubling Mix of Views*, CHRISTIANITY TODAY (Apr. 1, 1993), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-38/slaveholding-evangelist.html> [<https://perma.cc/966Y-AESZ>] (discussing Whitefield's controversial legacy). See generally FREDERICK A. ROSS, SLAVERY ORDAINED OF GOD (1857) (presenting a minister's apologetics for Christian slaveholding).

47. *Genesis* 4 (New Revised Standard Version); see Morrison, *supra* note 32, at 18; see also *The Curse of Ham and Biblical Justifications for Slavery*, ZONDERVAN ACAD. BLOG (Feb. 11, 2022),

Africans was fulfillment of biblical prophecy.⁴⁸ To further this claim, Southern churches also manipulated biblical canon by characterizing Ham as Black to insist his descendants were indeed from Africa.⁴⁹ While proslavery polemicists heavily depended on the Old Testament to serve their agendas, they largely ignored the New Testament and Jesus's inclusive, nondiscriminatory ministry.⁵⁰

C. Jim Crow and Segregation

Narratives ostensibly backed by Christianity evolved from justifying slavery to validating segregation during the Reconstruction Era and into the twentieth century. Southerners refused to accept emancipation because it threatened underlying institutions and structures that promoted slavery.⁵¹ In turn, Southern churches turned to the Lost Cause mythology—valorizing the Confederacy for defending Southern heritage and states' rights, while ignoring slavery as the Civil War's focus.⁵² Many Southern evangelical Whites corralled together under certain denominations separated from their Black counterparts.⁵³ The Southern Baptist Convention, born from Christian segregationist sentiment, controlled and influenced much of White religious life in the South by the late nineteenth century.⁵⁴ Various denominations, including Southern Baptists, resisted equality by advocating for a racial hierarchy through views that generally sought to preserve the status quo of power, including continued subordination of women.⁵⁵ This ideological resistance inspired Jim Crow laws, state and local laws that subjugated Black Americans and other minority groups for decades into the Civil Rights Era.⁵⁶

<https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/the-curse-of-ham-and-biblical-justifications-for-slavery> [<https://perma.cc/E3K7-ZBRL>] (explaining the Curse of Ham's interpretation and its relationship to the defense of slavery).

48. ZONDERVAN ACAD. BLOG, *supra* note 47.

49. *Genesis* 9:18–29 (New Revised Standard Version); see Rae, *supra* note 43.

50. See Rae, *supra* note 43. Much of defense of slavery overlooked the New Testament; specific passages, however, were occasionally taken out of context to justify slavery. Justifications included parallels held between submission of slaves to slaveowners, wives to husbands, and children to parents in the American South. See also Elizabeth L. Jemison, *Proslavery Christianity After the Emancipation*, 72 TENN. HIST. Q. 255, 255 (2013) (illustrating broadly Southern reaction and resistance to Emancipation by way of Christianity).

51. See Jemison, *supra* note 50, at 263–64.

52. Clint Smith, *Why Confederate Lies Live On*, ATLANTIC (May 10, 2021), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/06/why-confederate-lies-live-on/618711/> [<https://perma.cc/CU7P-P2AM>].

53. PHILLIPS, *supra* note 31, at 152.

54. *Id.*

55. See Jemison, *supra* note 50, at 266.

56. Kenneth E. Frantz, *How White Southern Christians Fought to Preserve Segregation*, RELIGION & POL. (June 29, 2021), <https://religionandpolitics.org/2021/06/29/how-white-southern-christians-fought-to-preserve-segregation/> [<https://perma.cc/X7GV-7XHU>]; see J. RUSSELL HAWKINS, THE BIBLE TOLD THEM SO: HOW SOUTHERN EVANGELICALS FOUGHT TO PRESERVE WHITE SUPREMACY 1 (2021); see also Tom Gjelten, *White Supremacist Ideas Have Historical Roots in U.S. Christianity*, NPR (July 1, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/01/883115867/white-supremacist-ideas-have-historical-roots-in-us-christianity> [<https://perma.cc/86FP-6GPA>].

The emergence of White supremacist hate groups steeped in Christian nationalism, then, was no coincidence. The Ku Klux Klan drew from Christianity as evidenced through the appropriation of Christian imagery in its film, *The Birth of a Nation*.⁵⁷ Hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan claimed connections between faith and racial purity,⁵⁸ and these ideologies were reminiscent of those from the colonial and antebellum eras. William Joseph Simmons, a Southern Methodist preacher, singlehandedly brought a second wave of terror in reviving the Ku Klux Klan in 1915 by climbing a Georgia mountain and burning a cross to signify “the Light of Christ.”⁵⁹

Black Americans at the turn of the twentieth century either fled to the North and West as part of the Great Migration, or remained in the South.⁶⁰ Yet, Black Christians in both demographics shared a similarity: they established distinct religious communities and cultures through the adoption of their own interpretations and practices of Christianity.⁶¹ Diaspora triggered by the Great Migration propelled a culture within many Black churches committed to social change still seen today, especially within urban areas.⁶² Some Black churches of the South looked to the faith they shared with their White counterparts as a source of hope for liberation and racial equality.⁶³ However, controversy grew over whether unifying churches could take precedence over skin color.⁶⁴ Other Black Christians were distrustful of White congregations retaining or absorbing their Black counterparts, seeing it as an insidious means of social control.⁶⁵ Divided views on addressing segregation also allowed many White churches to avoid the debate by simply

57. Randall J. Stephens, *The Klan, White Christianity, and the Past and Present*, RELIGION & CULTURE F. (June 26, 2017), <https://voices.uchicago.edu/religionculture/2017/06/26/the-klan-white-christianity-and-the-past-and-present-a-response-to-kelly-j-baker-by-randall-j-stephens/> [<https://perma.cc/L8LU-R78C>].

58. *Id.*

59. DeNeen L. Brown, *The Preacher Who Used Christianity To Revive the Ku Klux Klan*, WASH. POST (Apr. 10, 2018), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/04/08/the-preacher-who-used-christianity-to-revive-the-ku-klux-klan/> [<https://perma.cc/24SB-V7P5>].

60. ISABEL WILKERSON, *THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS: THE EPIC STORY OF AMERICA'S GREAT MIGRATION* 22–25 (2010); see *The Great Migration (1910–1970)*, NAT'L ARCHIVES & RECS. ADMIN. (June 28, 2021), <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration> (last visited Mar. 8, 2024) [<https://perma.cc/A34K-28KR>].

61. Compare NICOLE MYERS TURNER, *Black Christianity After Emancipation*, in A COMPANION TO AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY 206, 208–210 (2021) (describing cultural conflicts between Black Christians of North and South and the independent formation of a Black church after Emancipation), with JUDITH WEISENFELD, *A NEW WORLD A-COMING: BLACK RELIGION AND RACIAL IDENTITY DURING THE GREAT MIGRATION* 29–30 (2017) (describing a novel interpretation of identity for Black Christians based on Judeo-Christian tenets), and MILTON C. SERNETT, *BOUND FOR THE PROMISED LAND: AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGION AND THE GREAT MIGRATION* 59–60 (1997) (describing the attitude held by some Black Christians migrating to the North as an analogy of biblical exodus).

62. SERNETT, *supra* note 61, at 4–5.

63. See JAMES BENNETT, *RELIGION AND THE RISE OF JIM CROW IN NEW ORLEANS* 104 (2005) (exemplifying the push by Black churches to spiritually unite with white Christian counterparts despite racial differences).

64. *Id.* at 111–12.

65. *Id.* at 3.

turning a blind eye.⁶⁶ Therefore, rather than serving as a means to unify, Christianity evolved into a means of preserving Whiteness within White churches. This distilled a form of White Christianity meant for White communities and White interests. When the federal government intervened with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, calls for desegregation took the national stage.⁶⁷ In response to desegregation of public schools, many White segregationist Christians began to turn inward to the private sphere, namely private schools and universities, to preserve their ideals.⁶⁸ Thus, Christianity again evolved to maintain the narrative of White supremacy.

D. Policies of the Contemporary Public Sphere

A key evolution in the manipulation of Christianity occurred in the Civil Rights Era. Evolving from previous rationales declaring segregation of all spaces as the will of God, a new theology emerged claiming that segregation was meant to preserve Christian values of the nuclear family.⁶⁹ Segregated education was a fitting evolution for segregationist Christians in this era; many White Christians found solace in asserting their fundamental rights under religion in order to protect their views.⁷⁰ In exchanging explicit racism for values that preserved the nuclear family, embracing “color blindness” became a predominant narrative within white Christian circles.⁷¹ The goal of color blindness—a mentality adopted by conservative Christians today—was to espouse “a heart that held no prejudice toward someone with a different skin color in order to arrive at a point where race held no meaning.”⁷² Color blindness rationalized countering programs and policies promoting racial inclusivity without relying on stale segregationist rhetoric of the past.⁷³ Now, conservative White Christians could, in their own good consciences, proactively build “colorblind” structures of inequality as successors of segregation.⁷⁴ Christianity took a new form in easing the transition from segregationist ideals to “colorblind” policies, all the while preserving the same racial hierarchies.

Political leaders also played a significant role in projecting Christian values onto public policy. As antagonism toward socialism and communism grew in the wake of World War II and into the Cold War, Christian

66. *Id.* at 8; see Justin Taylor, *A Conversation with Four Historians on the Response of White Evangelicals to the Civil Rights Movement*, GOSPEL COAL. (July 1, 2016), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/a-conversation-with-four-historians-on-the-response-of-white-evangelicals-to-the-civil-rights-movement/> [https://perma.cc/YGC2-X7AG] (quoting J. Russell Hawkins).

67. HAWKINS, *supra* note 56, at 100.

68. *Id.* at 133.

69. *Id.* at 133–34.

70. *Id.* at 150.

71. *Id.* at 148, 153.

72. *Id.* at 130.

73. *Id.* at 129–30.

74. *Id.* at 130.

evangelicals underwent the same pattern of exercise: evolving their interpretation of Christian doctrines to affirm their social policies. Joseph McCarthy, who infamously stoked fears of communism to amass support for nationalism, spoke of an “all-out battle between communistic atheism and Christianity.”⁷⁵ McCarthy’s claims to patriotism appealed to many conservatives and white Christians who believed the fate of the United States was particularly significant to God.⁷⁶ This preserved a Christian colonialist view that the country was “God’s ideal society” meant to edify other parts of the world.⁷⁷ President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who McCarthy had also served, claimed that the American government was “founded in a deeply-felt religious faith”⁷⁸ and fought “a war of light against darkness, freedom against slavery, Godliness against atheism.”⁷⁹ Spiritual figures also promoted this sentiment. Billy Graham, an influential reverend who served as a spiritual advisor to Eisenhower, played a significant role in converging American patriotism and capitalism with Christian identity by vilifying countries associated with communism.⁸⁰ Graham frequently criticized communism in his sermons as an entity seeking to “destroy the American home and cause . . . moral deterioration.”⁸¹ This use of Christianity rationalized nationalist and xenophobic sentiment on the political front.

This integration of politics with Christianity prevailed throughout the public sphere. In 1952, President Harry S. Truman instituted the practice of an annual National Day of Prayer⁸² after Congress provided for one.⁸³ In 1954, Congress incorporated “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance,⁸⁴ which most states still mandate in public schools.⁸⁵ In 1955, Congress

75. *The Cold War*, in 2 THE AMERICAN YAWP: A MASSIVELY COLLABORATIVE OPEN U.S. HISTORY TEXTBOOK 257, 275–76 (Joseph L. Locke & Ben Wright eds., 2019); see WILLIAM G. MCLOUGHLIN, REVIVALS, AWAKENINGS, AND REFORM 189 (2013).

76. Robert P. Ericksen, *The Role of American Churches in the McCarthy Era*, in 3 KIRCHLICHE ZEITGESCHICHTE 45, 46 (1990).

77. *Id.*

78. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Remarks at the Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast of the International Christian Leadership (Feb. 5, 1953).

79. PETER GRIES, THE POLITICS OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY: HOW IDEOLOGY DIVIDES LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES OVER FOREIGN AFFAIRS 215 (2014).

80. Patrice Taddonio, *How Billy Graham Helped Merge Patriotism and Christianity*, PBS (Feb. 21, 2018), <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/how-billy-graham-helped-merge-patriotism-and-christianity/> [<https://perma.cc/9Q4Q-NLLM>]; see also *The Cold War*, *supra* note 75, at 276–77.

81. *The Cold War*, *supra* note 75, at 276.

82. Proclamation No. 2978, 66 Stat. C35 (June 17, 1952).

83. National Day of Prayer, Pub. L. No. 82-324, 66 Stat. 64 (1952).

84. Pledge of Allegiance, Pub. L. No. 83-396, 68 Stat. 249 (1954). The reference “under God” was reaffirmed in 2002. Pub. L. No. 107-293, 116 Stat. 2057 (Nov. 13, 2002).

85. Brad Dress, *Here Is the Breakdown of Laws in 47 States That Require Reciting the Pledge of Allegiance*, HILL (Apr. 2, 2022), <https://thehill.com/homenews/3256719-47-states-require-the-pledge-of-allegiance-be-recited-in-schools-here-is-a-breakdown-of-each-states-laws/> [<https://perma.cc/QW2T-ELYX>].

mandated “In God We Trust” to be printed on all U.S. currency.⁸⁶ In 1956, Congress established “In God We Trust” as the national motto.⁸⁷ The marriage of religion and politics did not occur in a vacuum: it was another evolution of Christianity for its continued use to preserve a racial status quo. The contemporary association between Christianity and conservative values may largely be credited to President Ronald Reagan. The Reagan administration blurred the line between church and state.⁸⁸ Reagan’s politically conservative policies gained the support of religious Southern Whites, embedding conservative Christian values in politics for generations to come.⁸⁹ Among Reagan’s supporters was the Moral Majority, an organization that lobbied for conservative agendas, including mandated prayer in schools and bans on abortions in the 1970s.⁹⁰ As a result, Reagan served as the national and global face of the conservative Christian agenda. This included fiscal conservatism, known as trickle-down economics or “Reaganomics,” that benefited the wealthy.⁹¹ Reagan’s associations with notorious conservative televangelists and Christian leaders further cemented conservative politics within Christianity.⁹²

These political and spiritual figures endorsed the narrative that Christianity corresponded with conservative values steeped in capitalism and nationalism.⁹³ This latest evolution of Christianity espoused a convincing

86. Inscription on Currency and Coins, Pub. L. No. 84-140, 69 Stat. 290 (1955); Sarah Begley, *How “In God We Trust” Got on the Currency in the First Place*, TIME (Jan. 13, 2016), <https://time.com/4179685/in-god-we-trust-currency-history/> [https://perma.cc/9CXY-9GPA].

87. Pub. L. No. 84-851, 70 Stat. 732 (July 30, 1956).

88. Steven M. Gillon, *Reagan Tied Republicans to White Christians and Now the Party Is Trapped*, WASH. POST (Mar. 21, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/03/22/reagan-tied-republicans-white-christians-now-party-is-trapped/> [https://perma.cc/RUU5-46CH].

89. Steven P. Miller, *The Evangelical Presidency: Reagan’s Dangerous Love Affair with the Christian Right*, SALON (May 18, 2014), https://www.salon.com/2014/05/18/the_evangelical_presidency_reagans_dangerous_love_affair_with_the_christian_right/ [https://perma.cc/F3W3-X4YG].

90. DANIEL K. WILLIAMS, *GOD’S OWN PARTY: THE MAKING OF THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT* 200 (2012).

91. Charles Redenius, *Thatcherism and Reagonomics: Supply-Side Economic Policy in Great Britain and the United States*, 10 J. POL. SCI. 96, 97–98 (1983).

92. See generally David John Marley, *Ronald Reagan and the Splintering of the Christian Right*, 48 J. CHURCH & STATE 851 (2006) (illustrating the controversial legacy of Reagan’s relationship with two prominent Christian televangelists, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, regarding conservative Christianity).

93. Bob Jones, Sr. is an evangelist and the founder of Bob Jones University, a conservative Christian university. He held a close relationship with Billy Graham and infamously stated in a speech in 1960: “If we would just listen to the Word of God and not try to overthrow God’s established order, we would not have any trouble. God never meant for America to be a melting pot to rub out the line between the nations. That was not God’s purpose for this nation. When someone goes to overthrowing His established order and goes around preaching pious sermons about it, that makes me sick—for a man to stand up and preach pious sermons in this country and talk about rubbing out the line between the races—I say it makes me sick” Justin Taylor, *Is Segregation Scriptural? A Radio Address from Bob Jones on Easter of 1960*, GOSPEL COAL. (July 26, 2016), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/is-segregation-scriptural-a-radio-address-from-bob-jones-on-easter-of-1960/> [https://perma.cc/4GJL-27XE]; see also Kevin M. Kruse, *How Corporate America Invented Christian America*, POLITICO (Apr. 16, 2015), <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/04/corporate->

narrative: being American meant being Christian, and being Christian meant adopting conservative values that opposed ideologies associated with various communist and socialist regimes in Asia. This set the tone for generations of Asian Americans, as explored in Part II.

II. REMNANTS OF CHRISTIANITY IN ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

The influence of Christianity on public life in America intersected with Asian immigration in the nineteenth century. Refuge and opportunity appealed to Asians who were fleeing war and poverty in their home countries by immigrating to the United States. Soon enough, a generation of Asian Americans would adopt the conservative ideals of Christianity that were entangled with sociopolitical ideologies.

A. Asian American Exclusion

Christianity served as a basis for xenophobic attitudes that reflected the political climate and justified the exclusion of Asian immigrants. Hostile narratives were crafted by White Americans who viewed countries like China as ripe for proselytization and economic investment.⁹⁴ Under paternalistic agendas, White missionaries traveled throughout China and imposed their religion and socioeconomic policies under the notion of American exceptionalism.⁹⁵ These narratives turned when migration from Asia to the United States began to grow.⁹⁶ The abolition of slavery shifted demand for labor onto Asian immigrants,⁹⁷ but their increased arrivals intensified nativist hostility.⁹⁸ Organizations formed to resist Asian immigration and exclude Asian Americans from education and government.⁹⁹ Violence against Asian Americans and immigrants became common.¹⁰⁰ In response, Congress limited Asian immigration by banning Chinese women to “end the danger of cheap Chinese labor and immoral Chinese women.”¹⁰¹ Seven years later, Congress widened the prohibition to

america-invented-religious-right-conservative-roosevelt-princeton-117030/ [https://perma.cc/5REU-E5SJ] (describing Reverend James Fifield, Jr.’s role in tying conservative ideals with Christianity by tying wealth through capitalism with doctrine).

94. GORDON H. CHANG, *FATEFUL TIES: A HISTORY OF AMERICA’S PREOCCUPATION WITH CHINA* 60, 63–65 (2015).

95. *Id.* at 64–65.

96. *Id.* at 67–68.

97. Timothy Tseng, *How American Exclusion Created the Chinese Church*, CHRISTIANITY TODAY (May 11, 2022), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/may-web-only/chinese-church-north-america-history-exclusion.html> [https://perma.cc/JY9H-JFRS].

98. KORNEL CHANG, *AMERICAN CROSSROADS: PACIFIC CONNECTIONS* 93–97, 102–06 (2012).

99. *Id.*

100. See *Rock Springs Massacre: Topics in Chronicling America*, LIBR. OF CONG., <https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-rock-springs-massacre> [https://perma.cc/2FPM-5W9B]; see also Erika Lee, *Hemispheric Orientalism and the 1907 Pacific Coast Race Riots*, 33 AMERIASIA J. 19, 19–20 (2007).

101. George A. Peffer, *Forbidden Families: Emigration Experiences of Chinese Women Under the Page Law, 1875–1882*, 6 J. AM. ETHNIC HIST. 28, 30–31 (1986).

Chinese men through the Chinese Exclusion Act.¹⁰² Domestic hostility toward Asian immigrants grew as White Americans began to fear “their perceived ‘alien’ customs and religious practices.”¹⁰³ Some White ministers argued that Asian immigrants would “convert” Americans to heathenism if permitted to immigrate freely, signaling White supremacy under the notion of Christian superiority.¹⁰⁴ Associating Asian immigrants with heathenism and barbarism in this manner justified the push for their alienation, exclusion, and mistreatment.¹⁰⁵ For example, some White ministers urged for the annexation of present-day Hawai‘i to preserve “American and Christian Caucasian people” from “being submerged and overrun by Asiatics.”¹⁰⁶ Some engaged with Asian immigrants out of racial and religious paternalism, believing that Asian immigrants were meant to be converted and returned to their homelands.¹⁰⁷ Arguments analogizing Asian immigrants to African slaves or Indigenous peoples appealed to prevailing White views toward Black and Native Americans.¹⁰⁸ Thus, Christian superiority was further associated with racial superiority and the American racial hierarchy was further extended to categorize Asian Americans as a lesser class.

In 1954, a year after Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act, the federal government forcibly relocated 120,000 Japanese Americans to internment camps in response to growing anti-Japanese sentiment during World War II.¹⁰⁹ This discrimination prompted some Japanese Americans to begin attending Christian services under the belief that Christians in the United States faced less discrimination.¹¹⁰ However, Japanese Americans received little sympathy from the majority of White Christians.¹¹¹ Mainstream denominations responded passively and tepidly. Some hesitated and skirted condemning internment, while others sympathized with Japanese Americans but justified internment out of fear of political backlash.¹¹² Even if churches held a strong stance, most explicit advocacy took place behind closed doors.¹¹³ Statements issued by White Christian leaders rarely considered the lived experiences and desires of Japanese Americans, further

102. Erika Lee, *The Chinese Exclusion Example: Race, Immigration, and American Gatekeeping, 1882–1924*, 21 J. AM. ETHNIC HIST. 36, 42 (2002).

103. PLURALISM PROJECT, HARV. UNIV., DISCRIMINATION AND EXCLUSION 1 (2020), https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/pluralism/files/discrimination_and_exclusion_1.pdf [<https://perma.cc/755B-Q58C>]; see also Robert Seager II, *Some Denominational Reactions to Chinese Immigration to California, 1856–1892*, 28 PAC. HIST. REV. 49, 50 (1959).

104. *Id.*

105. KATHERYN GIN LUM, HEATHEN: RELIGION AND RACE IN AMERICAN HISTORY 167–68 (2022).

106. ERIKA LEE, MAKING OF ASIAN AMERICA: A HISTORY 129–30 (2016).

107. Seager, *supra* note 103, at 50; see LUM, *supra* note 105, at 164–65.

108. See LUM, *supra* note 100, at 168–169.

109. See Immigration Act of 1917, Pub. L. No. 64-301, 39 Stat. 874; see also Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act, Pub. L. No. 78-199, 57 Stat. 600 (1943).

110. ANNE M. BLANKENSHIP, CHRISTIANITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND THE JAPANESE AMERICAN INCARCERATION DURING WORLD WAR II 17 (2016).

111. *Id.* at 20.

112. *Id.* at 29–30.

113. *Id.* at 31.

highlighting the racial hierarchy and paternalism within churches.¹¹⁴ This widespread passivity amongst Christian leaders of mainstream denominations in the face of racial injustice toward Japanese Americans¹¹⁵ contrasts with their outspoken narratives directed at Chinese immigrants just years earlier. Such contrast demonstrates the uneven application of Christianity to policy: Christianity applied only when it affirmed a historically White power to assign value to race. As illustrated here, Christianity evolved to promote or defend policy only when it served narratives that preserved the American racial hierarchy.

B. Anticommunism and Conservative Politics

The pattern of evolving Christian doctrine extended into the mid-twentieth century. As immigration policies relaxed for Asian immigrants in this era with subsequent amendments and repeals of statutes, many Asian immigrants—particularly those disillusioned with the political fallout within newly minted communist regimes—sought refuge and opportunity in the United States.¹¹⁶ The Communist Revolution that began in 1949 in China created decades of intense poverty, political persecution, and societal upheaval that remain controversial to this day.¹¹⁷ On the other hand, American disdain for communism and socialism throughout Asia—China since the 1940s,¹¹⁸ Korea in the 1950s,¹¹⁹ Vietnam in 1970s,¹²⁰ and the Soviet Union in the 1980s¹²¹—made the United States a haven for immigrants seeking refuge from war in their home countries. For some immigrants, Christianity was a familiar concept due to interactions with Christian missionaries.¹²² For others, the country's anticommunist stance, in part rationalized by Christianity as illustrated in Part I, made the Christian faith

114. See, e.g., *id.* at 47.

115. *Id.* at 37.

116. See PETER KWONG & DUŠANKA MIŠČEVIĆ, CHINESE AMERICA: THE UNTOLD STORY OF AMERICA'S OLDEST NEW COMMUNITY 216–18, 223, 227–28 (2005).

117. *Id.*; see also Andrew Ong, *Why Most Chinese American Christians Are Conservative Evangelicals*, REFORMED MARGINS (Aug. 26, 2016), <https://reformedmargins.com/why-most-chinese-american-christians-are-conservative-evangelicals/> [<https://perma.cc/QZB3-9UGL>] (discussing how American Christianity became refuge for those disillusioned by war and political revolution in China).

118. See KWONG & MIŠČEVIĆ, *supra* note 116, at 220–21; Victor S. Kaufman, *A Response to Chaos: The United States, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution, 1961–1968*, 7 J. AM.-E. ASIAN RELS. 73, 73–74 (1998); see also He Di, *The Most Respected Enemy: Mao Zedong's Perception of the United States*, 137 CHINA Q. 144, 147–148 (1994) (presenting a perspective of bilateral animosity between China and the United States).

119. See Kathryn Weathersby, *Attack on South Korea*, in WILSON CTR., THE US, THE USSR, AND THE KOREAN WAR, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/essays/us-ussr-and-korean-war> [<https://perma.cc/F68S-LXHF>] (discussing President Truman's concerns of communism in Korea preceding the Korean War). See generally HARRY TRUMAN & ROBERT FERRELL, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF HARRY S. TRUMAN I (1980) (noting President Truman's antipathy towards communism).

120. See Louis Menand, *What Went Wrong in Vietnam*, NEW YORKER (Feb. 19, 2018), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/26/what-went-wrong-in-vietnam> [<https://perma.cc/TF5G-MC2Q>].

121. *Id.*

122. See CHANG, *supra* note 94, at 68–69.

the “best contextual fit” for assimilation.¹²³ Christianity promised potential for easier adjustments for Asian immigrants hoping to survive otherwise hostile environments. Conservative Christian theology in particular provided comfort to struggling immigrants.¹²⁴ By upholding more literal readings of biblical passages, conservative theology preached a strong message of hope and certainty for the future and appealed to immigrants disillusioned by experiences in their home countries.¹²⁵ Christianity, as it appeared in the public sphere to Asian Americans, often equated to the holding of conservative values.

Figures like Billy Graham played a crucial role in marketing a conservative framework of Christianity for Asian Americans. Graham’s deep spiritual involvement in Korea during the Korean War tied a Christian glorification of Whiteness to anticommunism.¹²⁶ Korean students immigrating to the United States were especially targeted by Christian paternalism in the religious and political effort against communism.¹²⁷ Notable Christian universities like Bob Jones University, which still practiced segregation against Black Americans, extended integration to Korean Americans during this time out of paternalism.¹²⁸ To further preserve the racial hierarchy, these institutions reduced and infantilized Asian American identity, distinguishing their treatment of Asian Americans from that of Black Americans under the impression of acceptance to American society.¹²⁹ For some Asian Americans, this narrative appeared on its surface welcoming as it catered to individual interest and wellbeing. Graham’s advocacy portrayed the United States as a democracy espousing racial equality, but undergirding his advocacy was White Christian paternalism over Asian countries.¹³⁰ Through compelling arguments against communism, Graham conveyed a form of Christianity that inspired a focus on individuality rather than broader racial interests.¹³¹ As a result, many Asian Americans adopted a conservative form of Christianity that focused on individual conversion and personal piety. However, this form could neither adequately identify nor address social and structural barriers to racial equality.¹³² Graham’s influence over conservative Asian Americans illustrates the ongoing paradox of conservative Asian American Christianity: the adoption of spiritual and political values driven by paternalist or White supremacist narratives that oppress a racial identity.

123. Ong, *supra* note 117.

124. *Id.*

125. *Id.*

126. HELEN JIN KIM, RACE FOR REVIVAL: HOW COLD WAR SOUTH KOREA SHAPED THE AMERICAN EVANGELICAL EMPIRE 38–40 (2022); *see id.* at 51.

127. *Id.* at 56.

128. *Id.* at 56, 59–60.

129. *Id.* at 60.

130. *Id.* at 164–65.

131. *Id.* at 109, 115–18.

132. *Id.* at 165.

As another example, Vietnamese Americans, carrying strong anticommunist sentiments from war in their motherland, also found anticommunist Christianity compelling. The South Vietnamese diaspora shared a common sentiment with White nationalist rhetoric directed against communism, and anticommunist South Vietnamese communities formed throughout the United States in the wake of the Vietnam War.¹³³ Vietnamese Americans sympathized with President Reagan's anticommunist rhetoric because it affirmed their reactions to intergenerational trauma from communist regimes.¹³⁴ Similarly, anticommunism and Christianity undergirded much of American conservative activism,¹³⁵ inspiring a similar effect of sympathy from Vietnamese Americans with conservative policies still felt today.¹³⁶ Reagan's actions also created good faith with the immigrant public. Through the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986,¹³⁷ the Reagan administration granted amnesty to many undocumented immigrants who had arrived in the country prior to 1982.¹³⁸ President Reagan also signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, granting reparations to interned Japanese Americans during World War II.¹³⁹ Such hospitable policies should be viewed with Reagan's affiliation with ideologies and leaders of the Christian right in mind. Presented with this backdrop, some Asian Americans found ostensible warmth and welcome from the narrative presented through the collaboration between conservative politicians and Christian leaders. The work of these figures stemmed from racial and religious paternalism over Asian countries and their immigrants, contributing to the formation of a conservative stronghold in Asian American Christianity today.

C. Christianity in "Racial Triangulation"

The classification of power and privilege of Asian Americans has been relative to Whiteness or Blackness.¹⁴⁰ Thus, when Asian migrants became Asian Americans, underwent a racial categorization within the American racial power structure. The role of Christianity in, and its contributions to, this power structure for Asian American identity may be better understood within Claire Jean Kim's theory of "racial triangulation." Racial triangulation is a theory illustrating the insider-outsider and superior-inferior

133. *Id.* at 168.

134. Kimmy Yam, *Who Are the Asian Americans Still Voting For Trump in Spite of His 'China Virus' Rhetoric?*, NBC NEWS (Oct. 27, 2020), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/who-are-asian-americans-still-voting-trump-spite-his-china-n1244849> [<https://perma.cc/3BCB-8RZ7>].

135. KIM, *supra* note 126, at 146.

136. Yam, *supra* note 134.

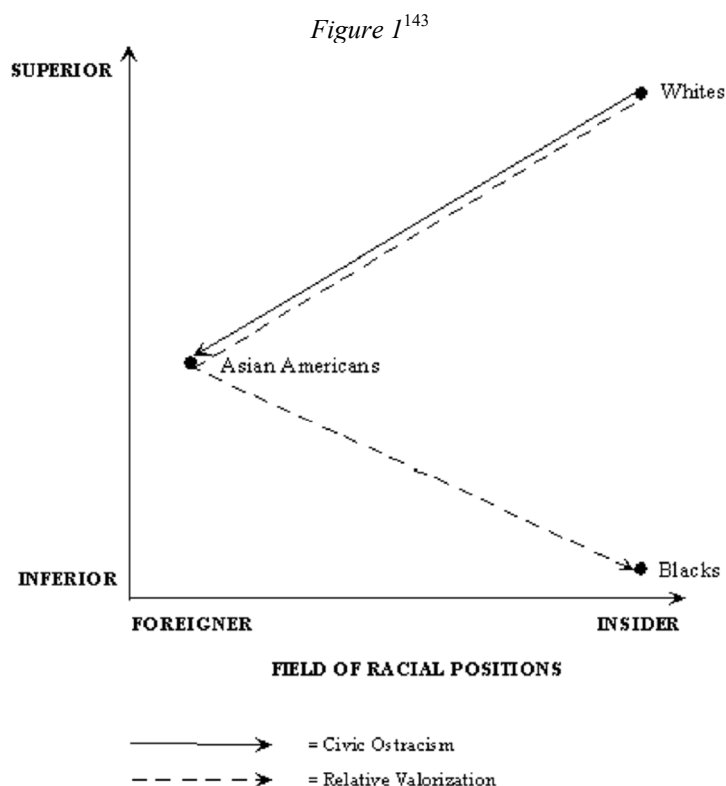
137. *Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986*, LIBR. OF CONG., <https://guides.loc.gov/latin-civil-rights/irca> [<https://perma.cc/B33L-GWPK>].

138. *See A Reagan Legacy: Amnesty For Illegal Immigrants*, NPR (July 4, 2010), <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128303672> [<https://perma.cc/JY2V-PACT>].

139. Civil Liberties Act of 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-383, 102 Stat. 903.

140. Juan F. Perea, *The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race: The "Normal Science" of American Racial Thought*, 85 CALIF. L. REV. 1213, 1219-20 (1997).

power dynamics held among White, Black, and Asian peoples.¹⁴¹ The insider-outsider dynamic situates Whites and Blacks above Asians; the superior-inferior dynamic situates Whites and Asians above Blacks.¹⁴² Figure 1 reproduces Kim's depiction of racial triangulation.



Kim's racial triangulation diagram further illustrates "relative valorization," where Whites assign more value to Asian Americans than to Blacks "on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to dominate both groups."¹⁴⁴ However, Whites treat Asian Americans with "civic ostracism" because they appear "immutably foreign and unassimilable with Whites on cultural and/or racial grounds," which in turn "ostracize[s] them from the body politic and civic membership."¹⁴⁵ Kim's theory holds that these competing influences confine Asian American identity to an amorphous and ambiguous interstitial space, driven by hegemonic norms determined by Whites.

141. Claire J. Kim, *The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans*, 27 *POL. & SOC.* 105, 108 (1999).

142. *Id.*; see also Robert Chang & Neil Gotanda, *The Race Question in LatCrit Theory and Asian American Jurisprudence*, 7 *NEV. L.J.* 1012, 1024–26 (2007) (contextualizing racial triangulation in assimilation for Asian Americans that preserve racial binaries within White supremacy).

143. Kim, *supra* note 141, at 108.

144. *Id.*

145. *Id.*

Christianity's influence also contributed to cementing Asian American identity in this interstice. This Part seeks to connect Christian justifications for Asian exclusion, contextualized in Part II.A and specified to Asian Americans in Part II.B, to the placement of Asian Americans within the power structure illustrated by Kim's racial triangulation theory. While racial triangulation is but one approach, examining Christianity in this context can help us understand how Asian Americans have been used to entrench a racial status quo and hinder the broader interests of racial justice.

The racial hierarchy presented throughout Part I was largely built within a Black/White binary.¹⁴⁶ Christian rationalizations for a structure dependent on this binary dominated narratives supporting slavery and segregation.¹⁴⁷ The introduction of Asian American identity extended these Christian rationalizations to Asian Americans, expanding the Black/White binary and giving rise to racial triangulation. Initial xenophobia toward Chinese immigrants was driven by Christian thought and subjected Asian American identity to below that of Whites.¹⁴⁸ Even those who engaged with Asian immigrants out of Christian paternalism inherently viewed Asians as lesser than Whites through analogy to Blacks within the Black and White binary.¹⁴⁹ Narratives of White supremacy and Asian subjugation were not corrected by silent Christians and churches as evidenced in the discourse at the time of Japanese internment.¹⁵⁰ Compared to how Christianity had been used explicitly and vocally to preserve White hegemony, such silence and complicity in the face of overt racial discrimination and persecution exemplifies an instance of racial valuation: relative to White interests, Asian American interests appeared less worthy of advocacy under Christian rationales. Christianity was a means to categorize Asian Americans as racially inferior to Whites.

Part I.B contextualizes the role of Christianity in shifting narratives of Asian Americans, classifying their relative superiority to Blacks while preserving their inferiority to Whites. Doves of Asian immigrants seeking refuge in the United States in the mid-twentieth century were met with domestic fears of communism and socialism abroad,¹⁵¹ but Christianity helped address this immigrant dilemma. Prominent figures like Billy Graham or Bob Jones espoused more ostensibly compassionate views for Asian refugees, especially in countries that received exposure to Christian missionaries.¹⁵² However, racial and White Christian paternalism hidden beneath apparent hospitality reduced Asian American identity while also elevating its value above Blacks. The integration of Christian values into

146. Perea, *supra* note 140, at 1220.

147. *See supra* Part I.B–C.

148. *See supra* Part II.A.

149. *Id.*

150. *Id.*

151. *See supra* Part I.B.

152. *Id.*

conservative politics that warmly “welcomed” Asian Americans were still entrenched in racial hierarchies that not only continued to discriminate against Blacks, but also wedged Asian Americans in the racial interstice between White and Black.¹⁵³ Part II.A and II.B together also illustrate how Christianity helped characterize Asian Americans as outsiders. Xenophobia had already identified Asian Americans as “heathens” inherently foreign to American civic life.¹⁵⁴ Christian paternalism rooted in a racial hierarchy encouraged sidelining Asian American identity when differentiating treatment of Asian Americans from Black and White.¹⁵⁵ As Christianity intertwined with anticommunist politics, Christian conservatism emerged.

White Christians also used faith to perpetuate Asian American stereotypes. Structures that support racial triangulation further cemented Asian Americans within the model minority myth—that Asian Americans embracing particular values, such as diligence, emphasis on education, and self-sufficiency, are reasons for their success above Blacks within the superior-inferior axis.¹⁵⁶ The model minority myth also sustains Asian Americans within the insider-outsider axis by attributing Asian American success to their “ongoing cultural distinctiveness.”¹⁵⁷ Kim notes that this myth rationalizes White criticism of race-conscious programs by pointing to Asian Americans as the model minority without appearing racist, and in turn use colorblindness to further assert racial privilege.¹⁵⁸ Prominent Christian figures used faith to justify the colorblindness Kim identifies, in turn further supporting the model minority myth against Asian Americans.¹⁵⁹ The Reagan administration pursued colorblind policies in tandem with its integration of Christian values, tying Asian Americans into a conservative effort to preserve structures of the racial hierarchy.¹⁶⁰ In integrating Asian Americans into the racial landscape, Christianity politicized for White interests contributed this categorization to give rise to a contemporary conservatism in a generation of Asian American Christians.

III. PATHS FORWARD IN CONTEMPORARY ASIAN AMERICA

Contemporary Christian conservatism in Asian American circles continues today. Asian American churches played visible roles in resisting marriage equality in California at the turn of the twenty-first century, and more Asian American evangelicals voted for Donald Trump compared to

153. *Id.*

154. *Id.*

155. *Id.*

156. Kim, *supra* note 141, at 118; *see also id.* at 121 (table distinguishing traits attributed to “model minority” and “the underclass”).

157. Kim, *supra* note 141, at 118.

158. *Id.* at 117; *see also* Students for Fair Admission, Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard Coll., 600 U.S. 181, 230 (2023) (holding that university affirmative action programs violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment).

159. *See supra* Part I.D.

160. Kim, *supra* note 141, at 120.

any other Asian American religious group.¹⁶¹ The majority of evangelical conservatives are politically conservative and constitute a key Republican voting bloc in local and national politics.¹⁶² Asian Americans comprise this bloc; to some, a presidential candidate's faith matters most.¹⁶³ "Hot-button" social issues tend to sway more Asian American evangelical Christians toward conservative views compared to their non-Christian counterparts.¹⁶⁴ Becoming religious is often shared as a way for new immigrants to more easily address practical problems in American life, even where these problems may not necessarily be religious or warrant religion as a solution.¹⁶⁵ Christianity has appeared as a solution to some Asian immigrants for their problems because of Christianity's legacy in American life—theological salvation often endows institutional opportunities for "practical growth and community development" that many Asian Americans desire.¹⁶⁶ For immigrants in the contemporary era, Christianity continues to serve as a means for assimilation, community, and refuge in addressing practical needs.¹⁶⁷

As illustrated throughout Parts I and II, Christianity's role appears largely unchanged today but continues to present a complex question. How does one address the tension between the conservative Christianity that sustains racial injustice and subordinates the Asian American identity within a racial hierarchy and the role that conservative Christianity has served in aiding some Asian Americans and immigrants in their assimilation or survival? Part III illustrates perspectives and ongoing efforts to reconcile the incoherence between the development of Asian American identity and the heritage of Christian conservatism. This Part also introduces local voices to introduce pathways forward for the intersection between faith and racial identity. This Part seeks to contribute to the incomplete yet ongoing dialogue of racial and spiritual reconciliation.

A. Depoliticization of Christianity—Is It Possible?

In the same way Christian justifications have preserved racial hierarchies, they can also be used to achieve racial justice. Confronting the history of political racialization of Asian Americans through Christianity is one way to address how the relationship between faith and race has preserved

161. Jane Hong, *The Asian American Movement and the Church*, 25 J. ASIAN AM. STUD. 63, 63 (2022).

162. JANELLE S. WONG, IMMIGRANTS, EVANGELICALS, AND POLITICS IN AN ERA OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE 4 (2018).

163. *Id.* at 48 (citing surveys of voting values for individual Asian Americans).

164. *Id.* at 14; see SHARON KIM, FAITH OF OUR OWN: SECOND-GENERATION SPIRITUALITY IN KOREAN AMERICAN CHURCHES 128–29 (2010).

165. CAROLYN CHEN, GETTING SAVED IN AMERICA: TAIWANESE IMMIGRATION & RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE 53 (2008).

166. *Id.* at 39, 53.

167. *Id.*

a racial hierarchy.¹⁶⁸ Ki Joo Choi, a Korean American professor of Asian American theology, notes that the model minority myth supports White racism as a means to “isolate [B]lack persons from other persons of color.”¹⁶⁹ To work against this, Choi urges the integration of Christian theology to address present racialization of Asian Americans as model minorities.¹⁷⁰ Choi’s vision in employing strategies for racial justice that are “distinctively Christian,” rather than motivated by mere politics¹⁷¹ contrasts with the history of the conservative Christian agenda within twentieth-century American politics. However, separating the historical union between Christianity and sociopolitical American conservatism is difficult because what makes a strategy “distinctively Christian,” rather than tied to any political agenda, remains unclear. Critics may similarly point to Asian American Christian efforts for social justice and racial equity as equally politically motivated.

However, such criticism may not be a bad thing. Keun-joo Christine Pae, a Korean American professor of religion, notes the importance of “counterpublics”¹⁷²—ideologies that stand in opposition to a dominant ideology with the purpose of subverting that ideology’s construction in public discourse.¹⁷³ Multiple counterpublics within Asian American Christianity challenge the dominant portrayal of Asian American identity,¹⁷⁴ particularly where it has operated in tandem within Christian conservatism illustrated in Parts I and II. Liberatory and resistant thought to dominant conservative ideals of Asian American churches as a result of a long legacy of White Christianity in politics may be just as political but presents as a counterpublic necessary for continued work in racial justice. Asian American Christian engagement with a counterpublic oriented in racial justice also may foster solidarity amongst other racial groups with similar goals or historical experiences of racial marginalization under Christian notions.¹⁷⁵

B. Recentring Conversations to Solidify Racial Solidarity

The manner in which Christianity assisted some Asian immigration and assimilation also has historically prioritized individualism and personal

168. Ki Joo Choi, *Asian American Christian Ethics: The State of the Discipline*, 38 J. SOC’Y OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS, 33, 42 (2018) (discussing the need for understanding the present Asian American experience, and experiences of White racism through racial disciplining).

169. *Id.* at 41.

170. *Id.* at 42.

171. *Id.*

172. K. Christine Pae & James W. McCarty III, *The Hybridized Public Sphere: Asian American Christian Ethics, Social Justice, and Public Discourse*, 32 J. SOC’Y OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS 93, 108 (2012).

173. Alex Fattal, *Counterpublic*, in THE INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ANTHROPOLOGY (Hilary Callan ed., 2018), <https://escholarship.org/content/qt73t260cm/qt73t260cm.pdf?t=pyz12k> [<https://perma.cc/2DHU-C768>].

174. Pae & McCarty, *supra* note 172, at 109.

175. *Id.*

interests over a broader narrative of racial justice.¹⁷⁶ Scot Nakagawa, a Japanese American activist, claims that Asian Americans must “grapple with the importance of struggling to win racial equity for all of us” and “not just for Asian Americans.”¹⁷⁷ Issues like affirmative action often upstage other salient issues for contemporary Asian Americans, and Nakagawa prioritizes centering other minority groups subjugated by “figur[ing] out where those intersections exist and organiz[ing] around them.”¹⁷⁸ This view, if integrated amongst Asian American churches that often coalesce around interests pertaining mostly to their own ethnic enclaves,¹⁷⁹ may be one potential path for social change.

Sam Kim, a Korean American pastor of a predominantly Asian American church, reflects this view on education within the Christian sphere. A Manhattan native, Sam grew up as one of few Asian Americans in a predominantly Dominican neighborhood. He excelled in his studies, attended prestigious institutions, and recently was slated to become a university president. He declined the opportunity, however, when he felt dissatisfied with its potential for racial justice—the role, he sensed, was cabined to serving interests of a historically White institution. In the intersection of his race and faith, he founded a church dedicated to reaching individuals in a similar conundrum between racial and religious identities. Due to Sam’s experience in higher education, he believes Asian Americans are relatively privileged; identifying Asian Americans as “people of color” within education detracts from centering the conversation on minority groups most marginalized. Self-interest, he believes, hamstring Asian American churches from engaging in racial justice when victimhood is applied only to themselves.

Sam’s view of education may be connected to the broader issue of Asian American Christianity rooted in conservatism that entrenches the model minority status.¹⁸⁰ Recentering conversations of racial justice on races most affected by contemporary policies entrenching racial inequity provides potential, and a blank check, to individual churches and their members. Because the model minority myth perpetuates ignorance and invisibility of Asian American identity, Choi suggests that efforts to identify and understand experiences of other groups create solidarity to confront areas where White supremacy and insidious racism survive.¹⁸¹

176. See *supra* Part II.B.

177. Celeste Headlee, *What Do Asian-Americans Owe The Civil Rights Movement?*, NPR (Aug. 23, 2013), <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=214833622> [<https://perma.cc/V2TZ-6HUV>].

178. *Id.*

179. See Kelly H. Chong, *What It Means To Be Christian: The Role of Religion in the Construction of Ethnic Identity and Boundary Among Second-Generation Korean Americans*, 59 SOCIO. RELIGION 259, 266–70 (1998); see also CHEN, *supra* note 165, at 6–7.

180. See *supra* Part II.C.

181. Choi, *supra* note 168, at 42.

Hybridity may be a potential solution. The theory of hybridity suggests that the notion of Jesus Christ, central to Christianity, has historically been a hybridized concept as Christianity encountered diverse cultures.¹⁸² Historical struggles for political independence by the formerly oppressed often wove the images and teachings of Jesus with particular emphasis on liberation and resistance; this could be translatable to the Asian American Christian.¹⁸³ Hybridizing the image of Jesus Christ to Asian American identity and the Asian American experience may unify Asian Americans with other racial groups, enabling Asian Americans to recognize analogous forms of racial injustice felt by adjacent minority groups.¹⁸⁴ Hybridization can therefore be one form of recentring for racial solidarity available to Asian American Christians seeking to reconcile their racial and spiritual heritage.

C. Investing Into the Next Generation of Asian American Christianity

An emerging young generation of Asian American Christians has become more attuned to issues in racial justice and Asian American racial history than its predecessors.¹⁸⁵ Young Asian American Christians are active in college environments, raising awareness through advocacy that bridges the traditional rift over topics of equal justice by conservative Christianity.¹⁸⁶ Jon,¹⁸⁷ a Korean and Chinese American, is part of this generation reconnecting with Christianity while remaining suspicious of its institutional history.¹⁸⁸ The media has illustrated his journey, highlighting a shift in spirituality amongst “Gen Z.”¹⁸⁹ As a graduate student who grew up in a Jesuit private school, Jon resented the hypocrisy of conservatism he witnessed in various churches. Though jaded by the institutional monolith that he saw as Christianity, he found a refreshing narrative in his church. Jon liked that the new church preached an inclusive message focused on Jesus’s

182. Pae & McCarty, *supra* note 172, at 103.

183. *Id.*

184. See *id.* Compare Fred Mok, *How Asian Americans Bear The Shame Of Jesus*, SOLA NETWORK (June 4, 2019), <https://sola.network/article/bear-shame-of-jesus/> [<https://perma.cc/PM3G-MDNT>] (presenting integration of Jesus’s experiences into the Asian American experience of cultural disconnectedness), with Jeffrey K. Jue, *Does the Asian-American Church Need an Adjusted Gospel?*, 9MARKS (Sept. 25, 2015), <https://www.9marks.org/article/does-the-asian-american-church-need-an-adjusted-gospel/> [<https://perma.cc/6VHK-K62G>] (using Asian American culture and heritage within Christianity to confront the fractious effect of historical Asian American marginalization).

185. See Curtis Yee, *Young Asian American Christians Are Finding Their Voice on Racial Justice*, CHRISTIANITY TODAY (July 15, 2020), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/july-web-only/millennial-gen-z-asian-american-christians-racial-justice.html> [<https://perma.cc/L4HF-4BJY>].

186. See Meena Venkataramanan, *Asian Americans Are Changing the Face of Evangelicalism*, WASH. POST (May 5, 2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/05/03/asian-american-evangelicals/> [<https://perma.cc/FR48-S4QZ>].

187. A personal thanks to Jon. Thank you for allowing me to share your journey of faith and story of redemption on this platform.

188. See Rikki Schlott, *Gen Z “More Spiritual” Than Millennials—Yet More Suspicious of Denominations*, N.Y. POST (May 27, 2023) <https://nypost.com/2023/05/27/why-gen-z-is-more-spiritual-and-religious-than-millennials/> [<https://perma.cc/42YG-AVY4>].

189. *Id.*

ministry rather than what he felt were instituted traditions. For Asian American Christianity, a shift toward greater spirituality despite greater skepticism in religious institutions, as illustrated in Jon, reflects ongoing reconciliation between religious and racial identity.

Billy¹⁹⁰ is a Korean American university chaplain who also serves in the New York Coalition of Asian American and Pacific Islander Churches (NYCAAPIC). The NYCAAPIC was formed to establish a platform for Asian American Christians for civic engagement.¹⁹¹ In his advocacy, Billy noted how churches frequently fail to address racial injustices despite preaching justice and morality from the pulpit. Billy integrates his advocacy into his work as a university chaplain with younger Asian American Christians like Jon because he feels that “Gen Zers”¹⁹² tend to care more about issues involving racial justice. His ministry focuses on two areas: (1) mentorship within Asian American churches to bridge intergenerational gaps in values and (2) engagement with racial injustices to counteract the history of silence in churches. Billy currently focuses his work on Gen Z students because, to him, they represent the future face of Asian American Christianity.

Investment in the next generation suggests potential because younger Asian Americans are more attentive to matters in Asian American identity and racial justice. While any institutional change is often met with resistance from older generations of Asian American Christians, younger Asian American Christians may be more receptive. They may also be more creative with introducing novel counterpublics that challenge the Christian and conservative status quo. This Article acknowledges that little is written and researched on the intersection of Christianity and Asian American identity. With hope, the next generations of Asian American Christians who feel similarly situated and are grappling with a racial and spiritual tension may move the needle forward and evolve the conversation.

190. A personal thanks to Billy who was a pivotal figure to my transition to a new city. Much of Billy’s ministry inspired me to investigate this topic.

191. *About Us*, N.Y. COAL. OF ASIAN AM. PAC. ISLANDER CHURCHES, <https://www.nycaapic.org/about-us> [<https://perma.cc/Z4VP-D6CV>].

192. Cheyanne M. Daniels, *Economy, Racial Justice and Abortion Access Among Top Concerns for Gen Z Voters of Color*, HILL (Oct. 20, 2022), <https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/equality/3697422-economy-racial-justice-and-abortion-access-among-top-concerns-for-gen-z-voters-of-color/> [<https://perma.cc/LT8G-9Y98>]; Kian Bakhtiari, *Gen-Z Demand Racial Justice, Not Just Diversity, Equity And Inclusion From Brands*, FORBES (June 5, 2022), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kianbakhtiari/2022/06/05/gen-z-demand-racial-justice-not-just-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-from-brands/> [<https://perma.cc/UCB8-NW2Q>]; see, e.g., *Discrimination Experiences Shape Most Asian Americans’ Lives*, PEW RSCH. CTR., <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-ethnicity/2023/11/30/discrimination-experiences-shape-most-asian-americans-lives/> [<https://perma.cc/383A-6MZF>] (showing disparity in awareness and perception of the “model minority” myth depending on age); Kim Parker & Ruth Igielnik, *On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (May 14, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/> [<https://perma.cc/RX8K-85YE>] (noting that “Gen Zers” are more likely to believe racial disparities exist than Gen X or older).

CONCLUSION

Christianity can be found in much of legal history and doctrine, particularly when used to promote whiteness. The weaponization of Christianity to preserve White supremacy in turn contributed to the formation of Asian American identity. This racial identity was not created in a vacuum. Rather, the inspiration of Christianity on those seeking to preserve a White racial hierarchy through U.S. law helped shape Asian American identity. A significant portion of this complex relationship between Christianity and U.S. law was already in place prior to the arrival of the earliest Asian immigrants. However, Christianity and White supremacy sustained justifications for characterizing and categorizing Asian American identity. The shifting narrative employing Christianity to antagonize communism, in response to intercontinental conflicts throughout the twentieth century, welcomed and comforted some Asian immigrants seeking asylum from their war-torn home countries. These narratives were descended from earlier narratives that defended slavery, segregation, and racially discriminatory immigration policies. Collectively, the narratives contribute to the conservative Christian right, of which Asian Americans occupy a notable part. This reality illustrates the irony within the history of Asian American identity: once victims of oppressive policies pushed forward by Christian conservatism, Asian Americans appear as some of the movement's staunchest supporters.¹⁹³ The path forward is tricky and complex, as outright depoliticization of Christianity contradicts the call for mobilization for racial justice from Asian American Christians and churches. Alternative paths forward may include shifting narratives within Asian American Christians and churches to center perspectives of oppression and racial subjugation to neighboring minority groups. Investment into Asian American youth holds alternative potential against the inertia of institutional Christianity affecting the generations before.

Frederick Douglass recognized Christianity's corrupted role in America in 1845: "[B]etween the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference . . . I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt . . . partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land."¹⁹⁴ The Christianity that Douglass envisioned may feel too idealistic in light of the complicated history between Christianity and politics. However, identifying Christianity's role in the formation of Asian American identity and conservatism throughout history is a step toward continued work in racial justice and equality for Asian Americans at large. Nothing stands in the way

193. See WONG, *supra* note 162, at 21 (presenting Asian American evangelical Christians as statistically having the highest percentage of votes for Trump in the 2016 presidential election amongst minority groups). See also *id.* at 26 (illustrating a disparity in support for the conservative agenda between Asian American evangelicals and nonevangelicals).

194. FREDERICK DOUGLASS, NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AN AMERICAN SLAVE 118 (1845).

of realizing a pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity that no longer creates a tension between one's race and one's religion. It may just be a long way there.