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THE HIDDEN  
ROOTS *of*  
WHITE  
SUPREMACY

*and the*  
PATH *to a* SHARED  
AMERICAN  
FUTURE

Robert P. Jones

Author of *White Too Long*

## BOOK REVIEW

# The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and the Path to a Shared American Future

By Robert P. Jones, Ph.D.

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## ABSTRACT

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This review of Robert P. Jones' 2023 book, *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and the Path to a Shared American Future*, examines Jones' analytical approach to the origins of white Christian supremacy in the U.S. Jones' work resonates deeply with the current Trumpian moment of white conservative backlash and anti-Blackness, tracing the roots of institutionalized racism to the early Atlantic slave trade. A key point is his discussion of the Doctrine of Discovery (DoD)—a papal verdict that enshrined the dispossession of Indigenous land into Indian law. However, the author raises concerns about portraying the DoD as a race-based phenomenon, arguing that this characterization obscures critical distinctions between white supremacy and settler colonialism. As such, the right to self-determination under tribal law merits further discussion, particularly as Indian nationhood faces increasing endangerment under current U.S. authorities.

**Keywords:** White Christian Supremacy, Settler Colonialism, Doctrine of Discovery (DoD), Tribal Sovereignty, Self-Determination, Institutionalized Racism, Atlantic Slave Trade, Indian Nationhood, Theological Foundations of White Supremacy, Black and Indigenous Rights

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In his third book, bestselling author and religious studies scholar Dr. Robert Jones expands on the theme of his last two books examining white supremacy in American Christianity. As the founder of the Public Religion

Research Institute (PRRI) much of Jones's work is drawn from years of public opinion surveys as well as his background in theology and his lived experience growing up white and Christian in Mississippi. With increasing demographic

shifts as the country becomes less white, Jones perceives trends in the loss of primacy of white Christians in the U.S. (white Christian America, aka WCA as he calls it). The rise of the Tea Party, for example, Jones sees as a conservative backlash to eight years of a Black president, as well as the hard-won rights to same-sex marriage. This has led to what Jones calls the “new identity politics” of white Christian nationalism.

What distinguishes this book from his other studies is his attention to the role of the Doctrine of Discovery (aka the doctrine of Christian discovery) as the foundation of WCN. Scholars of American Indian and other Indigenous studies fields are intimately familiar with the DoD as the founding principle of federal Indian law in the United States, but also as an ideology at the core of colonialism itself. The DoD originated in fifteenth-century Roman Catholic Church edicts known as papal bulls which laid out the justification for the slavery of non-Christian people and the taking of their lands in the name of salvation. The U.S. Supreme Court drew on that history to enshrine the DoD in the first Indian rights case ever argued, *Johnson v. M'Intosh*, in 1823. Asked to settle a land dispute between two white men, the court undertook questions about legitimate land title, which led to questions about the nature of Indian land ownership. The Court made the case that Indians did not hold title to lands in the ways Europeans did and that “discovery” by a culturally and religiously superior people meant that they only possessed a right of occupancy, not title.

The DoD institutionalized hegemony and domination as structural, legal realities that govern the lives and lands of American Indians to this day. Jones frames the DoD in a way that is both unusual and provocative to explain not just how American Indians have been subjugated unconsentingly to U.S. authority, but also the roots of white supremacy more broadly. In this framing, the ideologies underpinning U.S. slavery and anti-Black racism are connected to the colonization of American Indians. One way that Jones makes these linkages is to challenge the “original sin” narrative of the New York Times’ *1619 Project* published in 2019, in which slavery is the U.S.’ original sin. For Jones, slavery’s roots in the U.S. are more likely in 1493 when Columbus arrived back to Europe with Indigenous captives and to a hero’s welcome. “The Doctrine of Discovery, in short, merged the interests of European imperialism, including the African slave trade, with Christian missionary zeal,” Jones writes (p. 15).

To build the case that white supremacy in the U.S. is more a product of colonialism than the African slave trade, the book compares particular historical moments and places of anti-Black racism and American Indian oppression in three sections. These chapter sections tell of the murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi, lynchings in Duluth, Minnesota, and the Tulsa Race Massacre. Each section begins with “before” Mississippi, “before” Minnesota, and “before” Oklahoma to highlight Indigenous histories and to tell stories of atrocities which include the

Trail of Tears, the mass hanging of the 38+2 Lakota warriors ordered by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, and the Osage Reign of Terror in the early twentieth century. The sections include discussions of how racial reconciliation is commemorated in these places as truth-telling and repair in partnership with white people.

*The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy* is a compelling intervention into cultural studies, Black studies, Indigenous studies, Ethnic studies and related fields. The Doctrine of Discovery, with its foundation in medieval Euro-Christianity that sees humans in hierarchical terms where some human groups are more deserving of society's benefits than others, is an extraordinary legal principle in a country that touts the virtues of liberty and justice for all and prides itself (at least theoretically) on the idea of the separation between church and state. In our current Trumpian historical moment, characterized by authoritarian white Christian nationalism and thinly veiled contempt for the civil rights of non-white others weaponized in anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) rhetoric and legal action, a serious grappling with the DoD is more necessary now than ever. Jones's thesis, however, treads dangerously close to critical race theory at a time when educators are threatened with a wide array of consequences for teaching "anti-American" material. But it's not the alleged anti-Americanness that is the problem.

For American Indians there are serious risks to framing the Doctrine of Discovery as a race-based phenomenon, if this is what Jones is gesturing toward. This is especially true now when attacks on tribal sovereignty are ramping up based on arguments that American Indians enjoy special rights in violation of the equal protection clause of the Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment, as we've seen with the 2023 *Brackeen* case and in 2013 with the *Baby Veronica* case in the Supreme Court. These challenges to the Indian Child Welfare Act strike at the core of tribes' capacity for self-determination. The counterargument that must be maintained is that tribal sovereignty in American law is based not on race but on tribes' political status and the treaty relationships that uphold their nationhood.

As I have argued [elsewhere](#), federal Indian law via the Doctrine of Discovery in the 1823 *Johnson* decision does not originate from racialization or racial thinking; it emanates from ideologies rooted explicitly in religious and cultural supremacy. This is a critical distinction for Native peoples. As interesting as it is to link the DoD to white supremacy, it treads too close to conflating American Indians' experience of settler colonialism and genocide to Black Americans' experience of race-based oppression. I would like to see Dr. Jones think through these distinctions and comment.

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Dina Gilio-Whitaker is a Native American studies scholar and journalist, focusing on the topics of environmental justice, Indigenous knowledge, and identity. She is a lecturer faculty in American Indian Studies at California State University San Marcos and co-founder of the Indigenous Climate and Environmental Collaborative at CSUSM, advising researchers, conservation and other organizations on Indigenous engagement and policy-based protocols. Her most recent book is the award-winning *As Long As Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock*, released in 2019 and her forthcoming book *Who Gets to be Indian: Ethnic Fraud and Other Difficult Conversations about Native American Identity* is scheduled for release in fall 2025 from Beacon Press.