

A fragmented Christendom civil religion

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In Jon Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, he makes an astute observation that seems to counter how many people think about Christianity and its growth and decline in America. He helps draw out, though this isn't his primary point in the book, that Christianity and white supremacy grew together in a complementary fashion. Unlike popular opinion, the early colonies were not fully "christianized" and instead it took a long gradual process for people to adhere to the popular religion of the land. However, the type of Christianity that took root had and has been deeply shaped by the slavery and racism that was and continues to be practiced. We lack the historical perspective in the present moment to realize how much impact has happened (we are like fish in water, yet we don't know anything else so it all seems right). The truth is that Christianity, or better yet, a fragmented Christendom civil religion begins to grow around the beginning of slavery and begins to crumble right as the southern freedom movement (or civil rights movement) really gets going in the 50s. This is how Butler states it:

“only recently have historians acknowledged that American church adherence or membership rose rather than declined between 1650 and 1950, though much American political rhetoric from the 1840s to the present has assumed a contradictory set of "facts.””[\[1\]](#)

This is just another reason why Christians ought not to lament the supposed dying of Christianity in our nation. The kind of Christianity that is dying (even if a slow and drama-filled death) is not what James in the New Testament refers to as true religion (caring for the most vulnerable in society) but rather it preyed on the most vulnerable and justified it theologically. Its growth and decline are intimately intertwined with what was a nightmare for First Nation and enslaved African peoples. With such a Christian witness so counter to the life and teachings of Jesus, I believe we should not lament but rather celebrate this popular expression of Christianity fading away, in hopes that something more Jesus-ish can take its place. As

Christians may we be rooted in our foundation, Jesus Christ (witnessed to in scripture and followed today in life), and not be more concerned with holding onto the Christianity we received (which in fact is an American and western creation) than faithfulness to our Lord.

[\[1\]](#) Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 4.