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Becoming white: religion and the construction of race

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**Becoming White:
Religion and the Construction of Race**

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Senior Thesis

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Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	2
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	3
<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Chapter One- An Overview of Whiteness</i>	8
<i>Chapter Two- The Mormon Case: A Theological Basis for Whiteness</i>	32
<i>Chapter Three- Jews and Whiteness: A Story of Ambivalence</i>	49
<i>Conclusion- The Present-day Implications</i>	70
<i>Works Cited</i>	81

Abstract

This thesis examines the construction of whiteness in America by focusing specifically on the relationship between Protestantism and whiteness. It examines the canonical works on whiteness and the role religion does and does not play in their understandings of how whiteness has formed. By looking specifically at Mormonism and Judaism it is evident that whiteness cannot be understood separately from religion and thus that the canonical works on whiteness have overlooked the importance of religion in these formations. Mormons and Jews were denied whiteness for a time because of their distance from Protestantism, and ultimately were able to achieve whiteness by embracing the American Christian project of white supremacy, Manifest Destiny, and ownership, and by conforming to the demands of Protestant American society. By historicizing and problematizing race and showing that it is complex, changing, and unstable, it lays the framework for understanding the ways whiteness functions today, particularly when it comes to Muslim Americans. It also works to bring whiteness into conversations about race because often race is assumed to mean blackness.

Keywords: *Whiteness, America, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, The Book of Mormon, Judaism, Race, Protestantism, Manifest Destiny, American Exceptionalism, Islam*

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Introduction

“The awesome power of race as an ideology resides precisely in its ability to pass as a feature of the natural landscape.”¹ This quote from Matthew Frye Jacobson’s book *Whiteness of a Different Color* is in many ways the thought that drives this work. The intention of this thesis is to disrupt the way we think about race. We, as members of American society, are accustomed to thinking about race in a very specific way that is predicated on a black/white binary and treats race as part of the natural world. It seems obvious to us that certain people are black, certain people are white, and you can tell what race someone is on sight. That there are different races made distinct by skin color seems as natural to us as the fact that some people are tall and some people have green eyes. Race seems to be a fundamental condition of human beings, but race is a social construction and not a biological reality. Our current understanding of race as being simply about skin color is a recent development and is no more logical or real than the historical constructions of race that seem absurd and illogical to us now.

Primarily this thesis is about showing that whiteness is rooted in Protestantism in America and cannot be understood separately from Protestantism. We have always thought of race and religion as two fundamentally separate social categories, and thus two separate analytical categories, but they are deeply connected. Whiteness has primarily been formed by implicit or explicit references to Protestant Christianity and cannot be studied without understanding its infusion and connection with Protestant Christianity. The connection becomes clear when you examine specific cases where whiteness was denied. In all of the significant cases where a group of people, who might otherwise be considered white on the basis of their

¹ Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 4

skin color, were denied whiteness, the common thread was that members of the group were not Protestant. This was the case for Mormons, Irish and Italian Catholics, and Muslim immigrants from the Middle East among others. The fact that none of these groups are Protestant is not a coincidence. Rather it was their distance from Protestantism that led to them being excluded from whiteness.

It is important to understand that being legally considered white isn't enough to make one white. Mormons and Jews have always been legally white, but their experience didn't reflect this. It may be hard to see in light of our current constructions that these people weren't considered white in the past, but the point of my paper is that race is constructed and shaped by particular moments. The remarkable thing is that their whiteness has become naturalized to us, because that's not how it has always been. If that claim seems doubtful, look at the current experiences of Arab and Middle Eastern immigrants in this country. Though they are white according to the U.S. government, they are decidedly not white in the eyes of American society and very few Americans would see them as anything other than brown.

In order to show the role of religion in the construction of whiteness, this thesis will focus on several key examples that show this relationship best. First though, Chapter One serves to explore the canonical works on whiteness, explain their central arguments, and examine the ways in which religion does and does not factor into their conceptions of whiteness and race. Ultimately many of the books overlook or underplay the significance of religion in whiteness, and Chapter Two uses the case of Mormon whiteness to show that religion is essential to constructions of whiteness. Religion was the lens through which outsiders understood Mormon racial identity, and the lens through which Mormons understood their own whiteness. Chapter Three documents the Jewish relationship with whiteness and race. Jews had a more complicated

journey into whiteness, because they themselves were unsure if they wanted to be considered white. However, by the end of World War II Jews became white in part due to the events of the war and expanding notions of whiteness in the face of the civil rights movement and increasing anti-black racism. Finally, the conclusion looks at what this means for whiteness today and specifically focuses on the racial experiences of Muslim immigrants and the connection between white supremacy and religious notions of whiteness. The connection between whiteness and religion has profoundly impacted the experiences of many different groups of people in American history and continues to shape the way race functions today.

Ultimately, whiteness becomes accessible by embracing Protestantism in some sense. This comes about in two major ways. The first is by embracing the American Protestant project. In the United States notions of citizenship, property rights, ownership, and even the right to be American and live on the land are tied up fundamentally with a Protestant understanding of America. According to this understanding, America is divinely blessed and was destined to occupy the land it does and achieve the status it has. The founding of the nation and the westward conquest were all understood to be religiously motivated endeavors that were supported by God. As such, there is a deep link between American identity and this religious foundation. Mormons gained access to whiteness because even though they aren't Protestant, they happily embraced the larger American Christian project and reproduced dominant notions of white supremacy, even incorporating them into their theology. They were essential to the conquering of the west and displaced massive numbers of Native Americans as they settled into the Salt Lake City area.²

² Mueller, Max Perry. *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 162-167

The other way in which groups embraced Protestantism was in the way religion is practiced in America and what we understand to be acceptable and true forms of religion. This takes the form of understanding religion as a set of beliefs that an individual has, which is fundamentally aligned with the notion of secularity in America which posits that religion can be private and excluded from the public sphere. Jews were able to achieve whiteness in part by shedding the aspects of their religion that marked them off as outside of this system like clothing, rituals, and practices that signaled to others that they were not Protestant. They have also embraced the larger mythos of American exceptionalism and white supremacy that underpin the Protestant project.

Blackness is also fundamental to whiteness. It is the “other” against which whiteness is constructed and juxtaposed. Part of the purpose of this work is to deessentialize race and show the fundamental ways in which it is constructed, how it has changed over time, and what it means to be considered a member of one race. An essential part of that project is exposing the ways in which no singular white (or black) race exists. Whiteness has meant different things to different people at different times, just as blackness has. Whiteness is changing and there are multiple kinds of whiteness. Jews and Mormons have become white in different ways and live different experiences of whiteness.

There is a tension within American race stemming from the fact that on the one hand, our racial system is based on a black/white divide which sees that as the only racial distinction that matters. But on the other hand, there were undoubtedly many white races and different white experiences that can and should be understood racially. In order to understand the multiplicity of whiteness and its adaptability over time we must examine the connection between whiteness and religion.

Chapter One

An Overview of Whiteness

“Whiteness is everywhere in American culture, but it is very hard to see.”³ George Lipsitz argues this in an article published in *American Quarterly*, which calls for scholars among others to acknowledge the investment in whiteness that has existed throughout American history. This investment in whiteness has taken the form of massive disparities in access to citizenship, property, economic opportunities, and social capital, and it has been built upon a framework of legal and social practices that value whiteness above all else. White supremacy has been the organizing principle throughout American history, and in order to begin to understand how to dismantle this system we have to examine how race has been constructed throughout American history and how that legacy shapes the world we live in today. Essential to this is the invisibility of whiteness. Though it is the organizing principle of American society, it is the unmarked category, the norm from which you can deviate. Whiteness is assumed so it doesn’t get explicitly addressed. Only those that are different need to categorize their racial identity.

Our society is built upon an understanding of what it means to be white, an understanding which has been formed over the last two centuries of American life. As Lipsitz argues, “American economic and political life gave different racial groups unequal access to citizenship and property, while cultural practices including wild west shows, minstrel shows, racist images in advertising, and Hollywood films institutionalized racism by uniting ethnically diverse European-American audiences into an imagined community—one called into being through inscribed appeals to the solidarity of white supremacy.”⁴ Key to white supremacy was the uniting

³ Lipsitz, George. “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the ‘White’ Problem in American Studies.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 3, 1995, 369

⁴ *Ibid*, 370

of those “ethnically diverse European Americans” into the category of white (as opposed to black) because they were, for much of American history, decidedly not united.

The notion of a singular white identity was central to this system, but it was something that had to be forged. Now we understand whiteness as a single racial category within which ethnic variations account for different experiences. However, for much of American history there was not one white race but rather numerous races that were made distinct by various factors, including class and national origin. Each had their own inherent racial qualities, which dictated their fitness for participation in American society. There is a substantial amount of literature exploring these races and what it means to be white, yet much of the literature on whiteness has glossed over or underplayed the role of religion in discussions of whiteness. The central claim of this thesis is that religion is not peripheral to these conversations, but rather central. It has been key in determining who gets to be white, both socially and legally. America has always been a white country, but more than that it’s always been a Protestant country. Whiteness was predicated on Protestantism from the nation’s earliest days. These two categories, whiteness and Protestantism, cannot be separated in analysis, because they have never been separated in society.

In order to understand the role of religion in conversations about race, we must first look at how race has been conceived more broadly, and what the prominent works in the field have argued, particularly when it comes to the formation of a white racial identity. At its core, this thesis is about showing that whiteness cannot be understood separate from Protestantism. Protestant Christianity is the means through which race is constructed, and those who have been excluded from whiteness (like Jews and Mormons) have been excluded because of their distance from Protestantism. The fact that it was non-Protestant groups that were denied whiteness was

not a coincidence. In some ways becoming white is about becoming Protestant, if not in faith then in the ways in which your religion is practiced and through your commitment to the larger Protestant American project.

In the last 20 years, numerous works have emerged exploring how whiteness has been constructed, and what factors have changed the way Americans think about race. Some of the best critical writing on whiteness, Nell Painter's *The History of White People*, Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of A Different Color*, and David Roediger's *Working Toward Whiteness*, focus on the role of capitalism, perceptions of beauty, class, national origin, and notions of citizenship and democracy as central to the formation of a singular white racial identity. While these authors present a compelling picture of racial construction, what is notable is the ways in which religion doesn't factor significantly into their accounts. While religion doesn't go entirely unexamined in these works, particularly in Jacobson and Painter's books, their accounts are very thin, and it occupies a very tertiary role in their analysis. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to accomplish two things. The first is look more closely at these canonical works on whiteness and outline the argument that each of these authors make, and the second is to highlight the ways in which religion is and is not a factor in their analysis.

How do we think about race in America?

"To be American is to be both black and white," or so says Grace Hale in the opening sentence of her book, *Making Whiteness*.⁵ This sentence is incredibly telling because it shows both the centrality of race to American identity, and the centrality of a binary to our understanding of race. The history of race in America is in many ways the history of two

⁵ Hale, Grace Elizabeth. *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 4

different and incompatible racial structures: one for the numerous and changing white European races, and one that posits a black/white dichotomy. These structures are related but at odds with each other. The binary racial structure that pits black against white has no place for a multiplicity of white racial identities, especially if it includes a hierarchy of white races. In the binary system the only distinction that matters is between whiteness and blackness. These two racial structures function at the same time, and much of the historical work done on race and whiteness explores the confusion and chaos that necessarily emerges with these two systems in place. In many ways the former racial structure of numerous white European races has been absorbed into the latter binary structure, but the binary structure is just as artificial and constructed as the former now seems to us today. Race is not natural or real in any biological sense and thinking about how it has been constructed is essential in thinking about how it functions in our society presently.

The binary conception of race is also characterized by an uneven application of the term “race.” Nell Painter in her book, *The History of White People*, argues that from the 1950s forward, white people “thought that they were individuals who had succeeded by themselves and that ‘race’ had always meant black people, who had not.”⁶ In contemporary conversations white is still the unmarked category, the default position from which race marks a deviation. Whiteness is constructed as the absence of race, at least in the American context. This conception should be challenged on several fronts. First, whiteness has been as fraught and contested as blackness, and American history is a history of determining who should be allowed to gain the social, legal, political and economic benefits that come with whiteness. Second, whiteness as skin color has rarely been the sole factor that determines access to those things, and it was unclear for large stretches of time exactly who could, or should, be included in the category of white.

⁶ Painter, Nell Irvin. *The History of White People*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 383

Whiteness is neither the lack of race nor is it the default, yet even scholars engaging in these issues often reinforce this narrative. In describing the racial understanding present in early twentieth century America, Roediger says that “WASP [white Anglo-Saxon Protestant] may have gained currency in part as an employment agency acronym that identified nonracial workers.”⁷ The idea that white workers are “nonracial” is significant because it reinforces a worldview that centers whiteness as the default and reproduces hierarchies and marginalization. White is neither nonracial nor is it a value-neutral category; it has been carefully constructed and changed based on different historical moments, economic concerns, world events, and social movements.

Early American notions of whiteness

In the aforementioned *Whiteness of A Different Color*, Jacobson presents a history of the shifts between the different racial structures and the tensions that emerged around them as they changed and merged together. In this book, Jacobson examines three different eras in American whiteness and looks at both the factors that shaped these eras and the factors that led to a shift in conceptions of whiteness. The first time period he explores is 1790 through the 1840s. This period is reflective of a simple, binary racial understanding. The time was characterized by a monolithic understanding of whiteness, best illustrated in the naturalization policy in place that limited citizenship to “free white persons.” The use of the phrase “free white persons” is significant for two reasons, the first being that the category of white didn’t need legal clarification. It was self-evident and largely uncontested. The second significant aspect of this phrase is the association between race and citizenship. Limitations on democracy based on

⁷ Roediger, David R. *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*. (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 76

gender, class, and especially race weren't contrary to the universalist aspirations of enlightenment thinkers or founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson, who established this country on the notion that "all men are created equal." Rather, this was a fulfillment of those ideals because it was clearly understood that not all people were fit for self-government or participation in democracy. Painter describes how even while writing about the equality of men, "Jefferson theorized American's right to independence on the basis of Saxon ancestry."⁸ Democracy was never supposed to be for everyone. White, property-owning men were the only people qualified for or capable of this responsibility. The link between democratic participation and whiteness would prove very significant later when questions were raised about European immigrants' fitness for self-rule. Whiteness, set up in opposition to blackness, underpinned the expectations about what it meant to be American.

The binary conception of race isn't just about categorizing people, but about perpetuating assumptions about intelligence, capacity, class, beauty, and social value. These judgments have become embedded into our perceptions of race throughout the last two centuries and often become part of the basic assumptions people make about race. While Jacobson spends considerable time exploring the use of the word white in this naturalization law, Painter complicates this history in an interesting way by looking at the inclusion of the word "free." She points out that "had all whites been free and whiteness meant freedom, as is often assumed today, no need would have existed to add 'free' to 'white.'"⁹ Painter challenges the basic understandings we have of what white and black mean today, and what they have meant historically. She speaks to an extensive history of white indentured servitude. While the ultimate

⁸ Painter, *History of White People*, 111

⁹ *Ibid*, 105

attainment of freedom was theoretically possible, the work was so difficult before achieving freedom. Servitude was often a lifelong debt, which is frequently overlooked in conversations about race and freedom. Despite common modern perceptions that white has always meant free and black has always meant enslaved, she argues that it was only “an eighteenth century boom in the African Slave trade” that “created the now familiar equation that converts race to black and black to slave.”¹⁰ This quote underlines the perception that race is something that only applies to black people. However, this assumption is a gross oversimplification of the racial history of America and it ignores the realities of white racial construction and the conflicts that emerged around it.

Jacobson links citizenship, participation in democracy, and race together which Painter doesn't dispute, but rather complicates. Between $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{2}{3}$ of early white immigrants were unfree which challenges the idea that whiteness was the sole requirement for social participation. Whiteness alone, even an uncontested whiteness, was not enough to warrant full standing in the political and legal sphere. Race might have been understood simply as white versus black, but not all white people were considered equal. Differences were present, but all within the single white race, and ultimately there were few conversations during this time about the social and political capacities of free whites.

The emergence of white races: how and why things changed

If Jacobson's first era of whiteness is notable because of the unquestioned understanding of what white meant, the second era is notable because that simple understanding of white vanished in the face of massive waves of immigration, particularly from Eastern and Southern

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 42

Europe. During this time “race was at once biological and cultural, inherited and acquired.”¹¹ This period, which lasted from the 1840s until 1924, was characterized by a complicated and changing landscape of dozens of white races, each with their own inherent qualities, which might pose a problem for their participation in American democracy. These questions were ushered in by a massive wave of immigration from Ireland in the 1840s during the Irish Famine. The Irish, and the equally large numbers of Eastern and Southern Europeans that followed, created a crisis for Protestant Anglo-Saxon Americans who on the one hand were deeply concerned about the racial character of America, while on the other hand needed cheap labor sources as the Industrial Revolution created an unprecedented demand. The same qualities that might make someone fit for a section of the labor market might also raise questions about their fitness for self-rule through democratic citizenship and participation. Jacobson argues that the tensions between labor and fitness for democracy were what fundamentally changed whiteness during this era.

As the era progressed, contradictory formations of whiteness emerged: one in regard to who should be allowed into the United States, and one in regard to who was already here. Jacobson argues that racially conceived groups like Celts and Hebrews “were becoming less and less white in debates over who should be allowed to disembark on American shores, but were becoming whiter and whiter in debates over who should be granted the full rights of citizenship.”¹² Further, Jacobson describes how “it is one of the compelling circumstances of American cultural history that an Irish immigrant in 1877 could be a despised Celt in Boston—a threat to the republic—and yet a solid member of The Order of Caucasians for the Extermination of the Chinaman in San Francisco, gallantly defending U.S. shores from an invasion of

¹¹ Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 33

¹² Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 75

‘Mongolians.’”¹³ Whiteness not only operated differently at different times for a particular group, but also within different contexts during the same moment. This illustrates best how these immigrant groups could be “conditionally white.” Circumstance was everything. Germans on the frontier were easily integrated into a white vs. nonwhite (“Indian”) racial worldview, while at the same time the Irish in New England were faced with constant challenges to their whiteness, often in the form of comparisons to Native Americans and comments about their inherent racial barbarism and savagery. This meaning of race during this time was unclear and changing.

Like Jacobson, Roediger argues that these immigrants occupied an imprecise racial position. They existed “‘Inbetween’ hard racism and full inclusion” and were “neither securely white nor nonwhite.”¹⁴ Roediger also looks at the second era of whiteness that Jacobson outlines, but his argument looks almost exclusively at the centrality of labor and the working class in the construction of racial identity. In his book *Working Towards Whiteness*, Roediger argues that race was formed and challenged among the working class, and that labor movements, New Deal reforms, and voting practices were essential to the formation of conditionally white groups and their eventual shift into securely white. While Jacobson acknowledges that labor tensions exacerbated racial conflicts, Roediger shows the ways in which these tensions actually helped form and maintain these racial categories in the first place. Race was an incredibly useful tool for those in control of the means of production. Roediger argues that, “The ways in which capital structured workplaces and labor markets contributed to the ideas that competition would be cutthroat and should be racialized. In the early twentieth century, employers preferred a labor force divided by race and national origins. As radicals understood at the time... Work gangs

¹³ *Ibid*, 5

¹⁴ Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 12

separated by nationality and/or race could be made to compete against each other in a strategy not only designed in the long run to undermine labor unity and depress wages but also to spur competition and productivity every day.”¹⁵ Dividing white immigrant groups into different racial categories wasn’t just about racial hierarchies and race purity; it also served very specific capitalist interests and the deliberate fostering of these conflicts should not be overlooked.

This connection between labor and race can also be seen in the actions of labor organizers and unions themselves. Organizations like the American Federation of Labor (AFL) were interested in fostering racial conceptions of new immigrant groups that could then be deployed to ensure that “old-stock” immigrant groups like Anglo-Saxons, Teutonics, and Nordics (which eventually included Germans and Irish) got better positions and benefits. Roediger explains how, “Reflecting this view of Eastern and Southern Europeans as ‘inbetween,’ the AFL insisted on outlawing Asian immigration and restricting European ‘new immigration.’ Organized labor’s opposition to the Italians as the ‘white Chinese’ and ‘padrone coolies,’ or to new immigrants generally as ‘white coolies,’ usually acknowledged and questioned immigrant whiteness at the same time, associating ‘lesser’ whites with nonwhites while leaving open the possibility that contracted labor, and not race, was at issue.”¹⁶ Race was essential to labor disputes and workers movements. Theodore W. Allen echoes this sentiment in this book, *The Invention of the White Race*, saying “within the constraints imposed by Republican economic policies, wage earners developed a uniquely American organizational apparatus that depended on, and maximized, racial exclusion.”¹⁷ While exposing the racism and discrimination these groups were subject to, including discriminatory hiring and housing practices, Roediger also

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 73

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 82

¹⁷ Allen, Theodore W., *The Invention of the White Race*. (London; New York: Verso, 1994), 293

shows that their position was never fully outside whiteness. Despite racial ambiguity, “The courts consistently allowed new immigrants, whose racial status was ambiguous in the larger culture, to be naturalized as white citizens.”¹⁸ Their condition was fundamentally one of inbetweenness. They occupied a position where they could be legally white, yet still face questions about their racial character rendering them not completely white. Whiteness was fundamentally unstable as a category.

The emphasis on race in labor disputes was also not exclusive to the working class and labor organizations. Henry Ford, notable business magnate and founder of Ford Motor Company, included with each new car purchase a magazine called “Mr. Ford’s Own Page” which spread his racist and anti-Semitic ideas. Painter describes how Ford saw Jews as “the international financiers he believed to be building up the labor unions he hated in order to reproduce competition and raise prices.”¹⁹ The questionable whiteness of different immigrant groups was just as pressing for the people who owned the factories as it was for the laborers working in the factories. Whiteness was altered and crafted to reflect specific interests, particularly capitalist interests, and as such should not be thought about separately from the history of labor and capitalism.

Painter also speaks extensively to the connection between socioeconomic class and race. She argues that “Back in the twentieth century, white people were assumed to be rich or at least middle-class, as well as more beautiful, powerful, and smart.”²⁰ If white meant wealthy, then the preponderance of poor whites challenged that notion of whiteness. As such, wealthy elite Anglo-Americans at this time became very concerned with the idea of “Race Suicide.”

¹⁸ Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 60

¹⁹ Painter, *History of White People*, 326

²⁰ *Ibid*, 387

“Race Suicide,” a term coined by the prominent sociologist Edward A. Ross, was used to talk about what would occur if high stock Anglo-Saxon or Nordic Americans were to mix with not only immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, but also with poor whites of “native” (Anglo-Saxon) descent. Mixing across class lines would lead to the destruction of the race just as much as mixing across racial lines. Painter points out that this sentiment was echoed in the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was paramount in shaping American racial understandings. He spoke extensively about what it meant to be American. For him, “The American was the same as the Englishman, who was the same as the Saxon and the Norseman.”²¹ Anglo-Saxon identity wasn’t enough to qualify one for “American Identity” though. Painter argues that “It’s important to notice that when Emerson said ‘American,’ he meant male white people of a certain socioeconomic standing—his. Without his saying so directly, his definition of American excluded non-Christians and virtually all poor whites.”²² It’s worth noting that “Race Suicide” was almost entirely unconcerned with the black/white racial binary. It was understood of course that black/white miscegenation was unacceptable, but the principle concern was that of mixing between different white races and across class lines. One couldn’t be white, let alone American, unless they were of a certain social, economic (and religious) standing.

These conversations about white racial identity, class, and “race suicide” were predominantly intellectual debates about the national identity of America, not about citizenship for the “undesirable” southern or eastern Europeans or for poor whites. They weren’t stripped of their rights nor were they ever considered nonwhite in the eyes of the law. Nevertheless, there

²¹ *Ibid*, 183

²² *Ibid*, 185

were still consequences for these groups, even if they didn't involve removing or denying citizenship. In order to preserve the American identity that Emerson spoke to, Teddy Roosevelt, among others, advocated for a system of "positive" and "negative" eugenics. The "positive eugenics" applied to the wealthy, superior stock Americans who were encouraged to reproduce and expand the race. By contrast, the poor and working class, even of Anglo or Nordic descent, were discouraged from reproducing as a means of "negative eugenics." Class was just as essential to American conceptions of race at this time as skin color or national origin.

The emphasis on eugenics didn't stop at persuading some groups to reproduce or dissuading others. Painter describes how during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century sterilization emerged as a viable option and encouraged means of controlling the racial quality of America. Numerous states passed forced sterilization laws, which argued that "heredity plays an important part in the transmission of insanity, idiocy, and imbecility, epilepsy, and crime."²³ Yet, as Painter points out, the people targeted by these laws didn't necessarily fall into the aforementioned categories. The first woman sterilized in Virginia was an eighteen-year-old whose only crime was to be the "pregnant, unmarried, feeble-minded daughter of an unmarried, feeble-minded mother."²⁴ Painter emphasizes that race was about class as much as anything else. Though these sterilization laws were controversial and occasionally struck down by the courts, "many in the United States were more than ready, even eager, to stem the degenerate tide threatening to swamp its Anglo-Saxon genetic pool."²⁵ The perilous future of the upper class, white, Anglo-American was a paramount concern for those interested in maintaining racial superiority, and there was little they weren't willing to do to protect their supposed racial

²³ *Ibid*, 274

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ *Ibid*, 273

identity. By looking at this history, Painter makes it abundantly clear that whiteness was far more than just skin color.

Jacobson argues that in all the cases of conditional whiteness, “the problem this immigration posed to the polity was increasingly cast in terms of racial difference and assimilability.”²⁶ The use of a racial understanding of difference, rather than an ethnic one, is significant because difference was understood as biological and inherent, as race would imply, rather than cultural or environmental, as ethnicity would imply. A ranking of difference emerged in which some people, like blacks or Asians, were understood to be completely different, while others, like the Irish and “Hebrews,” were understood to be only somewhat different. However, any difference was viewed by the public as a threat to the republic.

White and black: the emergence of the modern racial dichotomy

Jacobson and Painter both end their books by exploring how racially distinct “white” groups became integrated into a single white Caucasian race. Jacobson does this by looking at what he considers the last era of American whiteness, a period of time from 1924 through the 1960s. 1924 is significant because it was the year that the Johnson-Reed Act was passed, which drastically curbed the flow of immigrants from “undesirable” European nations who had caused the crisis about whiteness in the previous era. During this period, whiteness reconsolidated into a single category under the new title “Caucasian.” This reinforced and elevated a black/white binary understanding of race. Jacobson argues that this happened for a number of reasons. First, the Johnson Act cut immigration and eliminated much of the nativist concern about the racial quality of those coming to the U.S. Second, Jim Crow and early Civil Rights activism erased many of the distinctions between whites. Whiteness solidified in the face of black resistance, and

²⁶ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 8

the rise in white supremacy movements reinforced this understanding of whiteness. “Caucasian” emerged as the term for this new category because it brought a scientific weight to the idea of whiteness. It challenged the idea of white hierarchies and explained differences within “White” as cultural and environmental, rather than racial. The view that culture determined behavior and not biology marked a shift toward an ethnic view that didn’t previously exist.

Painter also argues that the rise in an ethnic understanding of white is significant because it made the difference between white and black deeper. This is when our modern understanding of race which is based on a very stark black/white dichotomy emerged. During the 1930s, American identity became more fundamentally about a binary understanding of race. Painter describes how during this time “being a real American often meant joining anti-black racism and seeing oneself as white against the blacks.”²⁷ The new ethnic view of whiteness allowed for an erasure of the racial histories of European immigrants, which in turn allowed for race to be removed from the white side of the equation. It is precisely this process that relegated race to the black side of a white/black worldview. American meant white in a way that required no clarification and politics emerged to reinforce this understanding. In the Jim Crow south, the political and legal structure “pitted white people—*Americans*—against an alien *race* of black degenerate families judged lacking of those self-same virtues.”²⁸ The unification of the white races into a single identity that was understood to be American meant that whiteness could more easily be left out of conversations about race and reinforce the belief that race is a natural part of the landscape of mankind.

²⁷ Painter, *History of White People*, 363

²⁸ *Ibid*, 380

Additionally, Jacobson argues that Caucasian, as representative of a single white racial identity, emerged as a term in response to a rise in imperialism. Imperial projects, like the conquest of western America and the occupation of the Philippines, manufactured a pan-white supremacist narrative, which was paired with the domestic unification of whiteness in the face of black resistance. The unification of the white races was also due in part to courts upholding the “free white persons” conception of race, which allowed massive European immigration in the first place. No one was stripped of their citizenship, so a lot of the previous debate about the whiteness of these groups was intellectual and social, not legal. Eastern and Southern Europeans remained white in the eyes of the law, despite widespread public discussion.

In light of these authors, whiteness no longer appears as the default, or an uncontested, natural part of the landscape. It is subject to debate and change, and should be examined in light of this history. The history of race in America is one in which a white/black binary understanding of race has been central even as whiteness came into question. Still more than that, it is a complicated and changing category that adapts to different moments and circumstances. This gets at the central tension in American racial constructions wherein the system can both be set up around a binary racial structure and contain a multiplicity of white (and black) races and racial experiences. The system posited a strict division between black and white but at the same time whiteness was astoundingly vague. It was changing, inconsistent and unclear even as it was imbued with great importance. Rather than examining the ways in which multiple white races might challenge a binary conception of race, Americans have used whiteness, even conditional whiteness, to reaffirm and uphold this binary racial picture. As Painter points out, “The fundamental black/white binary endures, even though the category of whiteness—or we might say more precisely, a category of nonblackness—effectively

expands.”²⁹ The questionably white European immigrants of the 19th century had become securely white by the mid-to-late twentieth century, showing the adaptable and expansive nature of whiteness, particularly in the face of the rigid black/white binary.

Discussions, or lack thereof, of religion

Together these authors present a compelling history of whiteness that shows the ways in which capitalism, citizenship, beauty, class, and labor have come together to create a singular white identity. However, these authors have overlooked religion as one of the driving forces in this conversation. While each of these authors has touched on religion in one way or another, they haven’t explored the centrality of religion to the construction of whiteness.

The lack of emphasis on religion as a factor in racial constructions feels most noticeable when looking at the emergence of white races. Jacobson is very specifically interested in examining how race is both conceived and perceived, and which factors carry the most weight when attempting to determine the racial nature of specific immigrant groups. Throughout his book, he talks about the ways in which different white races were thought about, including physically, and looks at the ways in which certain groups were singled out. Separate from race, he argues that from the very beginning of America, religion was a salient marker of difference, and it wasn’t just about practice and belief. He argues that “Religion itself carried physical markers, as far as seventeenth-century Euro-Americans were concerned” and while this wasn’t necessarily a racial understanding, it’s still significant that people believed you could see religion.³⁰ Given that it has been non-Protestant groups that have been seen as not white, it seems fair to think that there has always been an aspect of ‘seeing religion’ that has fueled racial

²⁹*Ibid*, 396

³⁰ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 31

understandings. This speaks to a larger centrality of religion to race and American identity, but discussion about religion feels most lacking within each of the three main examples he chooses to look at in the era of whiteness characterized by conditional whiteness faced by immigrants between 1840 and 1924. He looks at three different “racial” groups, which he sees as particularly representative of the tensions around whiteness. These groups were the Irish, Italians, and Jews. None of these groups are Protestant, and I don’t believe that’s a coincidence.

Yet when exploring each of these groups, he doesn’t focus on the connection between their religious identity and their questionable whiteness. When questions about Irish whiteness emerged, Jacobson argues that it was their Catholicism specifically that raised questions about their capacity for self-rule. Their allegiance to the Pope would make them incapable of free thought and would make them unable to participate in democracy, and as such Jacobson notes that “the persistence of Irish Catholicism was inseparable from the issue of Celtic racial identity.”³¹ However, he only speaks to the role of Catholicism in Irish racial identity in one paragraph, and the story he presents is one in which Catholicism is used to justify Irish racial exclusion, rather than the reason they were considered racially different in the first place. Even further, when speaking about the racial conception of Italians, also Catholic, he doesn’t mention religion and instead focuses on their work and living habits which marked them as non-white by association. Italian immigrants, he argues, “accepted economic niches...marked as ‘black’ by local custom, and...they lived and worked comfortably among blacks.”³² It was their refusal to “act white” (i.e., embrace white supremacy) that marked them as racially different according to Jacobson. While this was inarguably part of what placed them into a racial middle ground, their

³¹ *Ibid*, 70

³² *Ibid*, 57

deviation from a Protestant norm is also significant. The connection between the Vatican and Italian immigrants shouldn't be overlooked, and if the Irish were considered unfit to participate in society because of their allegiance to the pope, the same must also be said about the Italians. Yet, Jacobson doesn't address the religious identity of the Italian immigrants in any significant way.

Jacobson dedicates a whole chapter to the position of Jews in the era of unstable whiteness, but ultimately argues that Judaism faded as a racial category. He argues that Jews were seen both religiously and racially and that “[s]ocial and political meanings attached to Jewishness generate a kind of physiognomical surveillance that renders Jewishness itself discernable as a particular pattern of physical traits (skin color, nose shape, hair color and texture, and the like).”³³ It is clear then that Judaism was very concretely tied to a racial perception that could be seen on the body. This was also true for the Irish, but Jews were particularly singled out for unassimilability and Jacobson argues that the tragedies of World War II brought Jews into the category of Caucasian and silenced much of the talk of a Jewish race. Jacobson paints a picture of Judaism that is very neat, and involves Judaism fading as a racial category but staying as a marker of difference. This seems overly simplistic and ignores the centrality of anti-Semitism in white supremacist ideologies even in the wake of World War II. The “Jewish Race” might have disappeared from dominant Protestant conversations, but it didn't disappear from American conceptions of whiteness. It remained a central focus of the people who were most concerned with defining and upholding a white American identity. Ignoring the endurance of the myth of a Jewish race in American society is an oversight.

³³ *Ibid*, 174

Roediger's argument, while compelling in the ways that it shows the centrality of the working class and labor conflicts in creating a single white racial identity, largely ignores religion as a factor for exclusion and the role of Protestantism in the formation of an American racial identity. He's almost exclusively concerned with economic and capitalist forces in the formation of whiteness. When he does make mention of religion, it is in the role of Catholic parishes in creating national "racial" identities and the role of religion in different groups self-conceptions, separate from their racialization by others. While labor is undoubtedly central to racial formations in nineteenth century and early twentieth century America, it cannot account entirely for the emergence of different white races, nor for the unification of those races into the single racial category of Caucasian.

Painter focuses on religion more than Jacobson or Roediger, but religion feels incidental to the story she is telling. She dedicates several chapters to exploring the appearance and use of the word Caucasian in late 18th century Europe. One of the most influential writers on this topic was Christoph Meiners, who would become a favorite intellectual for Nazis. Painter describes how Meiners created a definition of Caucasian which not only excluded Jews, Armenians, Arabs and Persians—who were all considered Caucasian in earlier definitions of the word—but also divided up the people of Germany. She notes that "Northerners, such as the Protestants of Dresden, Weimar, Berlin, Hanover, and Göttingen were in; southerners—the Catholics of Vienna—were out."³⁴ The inclusion of Protestants and exclusion of Catholics to early conceptions of Caucasian strikes me as very telling of the role of religion in conceptions of race, but for her the religious nature of the division is noted, not commented on.

³⁴ Painter, *History of White People*, 89

Later, when speaking about the anti-Irish sentiment in both Britain and early America, she notes that “anti-Catholicism has a long and often bloody national history, one that expressed itself in racial language and a violence that we nowadays attach most readily to race-as-color bigotry, when, in fact, religious hatred arrived in Western culture much earlier, lasted much longer, and killed more people.”³⁵ This easy distinction between religious bigotry and race-as-color bigotry is notable because she also dedicates considerable space to talking about the ways in which Irish difference was seen physically. She notes that several prominent speakers, including Frederick Douglas, spoke to the similarity between enslaved blacks and Irish oppression including in their appearance, and that people thought that Irishness could be seen on the skin. Irishness was seen as a racial identity, and Catholicism was seen as central to Irishness. To then distinguish between religious bigotry and race-as-color bigotry seems odd especially given that her book ultimately makes the argument that race-as-color is an inaccurate and incomplete way of understanding what race is and how it has been used historically.

The Irish aren’t the only example she focuses on in which religion is central to racial identity. In talking about the post World War I period she points out that “Before the war Jews had figured as only one in a list of inferior Europeans, along with Slavs and Italians. Now Jews moved to the top, personifying the menace of immigration and bolshevism in racial terms.”³⁶ Whereas before Jews had been only one amongst many “alien” races, they became a central focus in racial rhetoric, which was not divorced from their religious identity. Anti-Semitism was central to white supremacy, but she doesn’t give much attention to Jews beyond as one of many groups. Judaism in particular is a target of white racial violence, and is central to racial formation

³⁵*Ibid*, 132

³⁶ *Ibid*, 304

both historically and in the present day, which is largely overlooked by Painter, despite her occasional remarks about Jews as a specific target for racial exclusion in the early twentieth century. Religion can be seen throughout her book as central to race, but only by reading between the lines. She doesn't explicitly focus on it.

This oversight in all of these books becomes even more glaring in light of the way whiteness is thought about by those who are most concerned with being white, both in the past and in the present. In the early twentieth century, the Ku Klux Klan built a nationwide movement that was not just about maintaining white dominance. In *Gospel According to the Klan*, Kelly Baker argues that the driving ideology for the Klan “was not just an order to defend America but also a campaign to protect and celebrate Protestantism. It was a *religious* order.”³⁷ Protestantism was inseparable from whiteness, and further it was inseparable from what it meant to be American. The Klan believed that “Nationalism and faith in American character combined whiteness, Protestantism, and patriotism to signify who American citizens really were.”³⁸ The Klan was not on the fringes of American society, nor were they expressing beliefs that were unpopular. The KKK made explicit the construction of whiteness that existed across much of American society and informed what it meant to be white, both socially and in the eyes of the law. Fundamentally, you cannot look at whiteness in America without acknowledging that in the eyes of many Americans, “White supremacy and the religious tradition were symbiotic; the ruin of one would equal the destruction of the other. Whiteness was the lynchpin of America’s Protestant Christian society.”³⁹ This has not changed. Jewishness is still a focus of white

³⁷ Baker, Kelly. *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 5-6

³⁸ *Ibid*, 190

³⁹ *Ibid*, 194

supremacist activity in the present day, to the point that white supremacists marching in Charlottesville in 2017 chanted “Jews will not replace us.”

When it comes to the historical explorations of whiteness, there are several cases, which this thesis will explore in the following chapters, that render visible the connection of whiteness and Protestantism in determining who got to count as white. One notable example, and the subject of the following chapter, is the Protestant response to Mormons in the mid-to-late 19th century. Mormons, often the children of elite Anglo-American Protestants, were considered a racial group, and a nonwhite one at that. Paul Reeve argues that “Even though the bulk of Mormon immigrants originated in Great Britain and Scandinavia, generally desirable parts of Europe, the simple fact that they had converted to Mormonism made them racially suspect and undesirable. No true Anglo-Saxon would fall prey to such a regressive trap as Mormonism.”⁴⁰ The example of Mormons is particularly illuminating because as the children of Nordic or Saxon parents, often of good social standing, they would otherwise be at the top of the racial hierarchy. Here religion is the factor, and the only one at that, which marks racial difference.

Religion and religion alone can make someone nonwhite, or at least less white, in the eyes of nineteenth century Protestant society. By exploring in more depth the case of Mormons, as well as expanding on the case of Jews, I will examine the role of religion in the construction of whiteness and racial categories throughout American history. Religion has always been central to American identity, and prominent Americans have often had a very Protestant understanding of that identity. American identity has also always been understood racially.

⁴⁰ Reeve, W. Paul. *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness*. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2015), 43

America was built for white people. These ideas have come together throughout history to make religion a central factor for the formation of a white American identity.

Chapter Two

The Mormon Case: A Theological Basis for Whiteness

“As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.”⁴¹ This quote from George Lipsitz points to the failing of modern society to examine whiteness as a racial category. However, whiteness has been constructed and imbued with meaning just as much as any other racial category. It was not always clear what it meant to be white, and nineteenth century Americans were deeply concerned with figuring out who got to be white, both socially and legally. While numerous factors have been important to constructing whiteness (like class, national origin, labor conflicts, and notions of citizenship), a central, and overlooked, factor is religion. Specifically, whiteness is understood as Protestant and deviation from Protestantism renders one immediately racially suspect.

No example shows this more clearly than the case of Mormon racial identity in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Religion was the lens through which Mormons’ racial identity was understood and constructed by Protestant Anglo-Saxon society. It was also the lens through which Mormons understood their own racial identity. It wasn’t only outsiders who were speaking about a unique racial identity for Mormons. Mormons themselves spoke of their own racial identity and their differences from Protestant society. This chapter seeks to show that the Mormon relationship to whiteness (as conceived both inside and outside the Mormon community) cannot be understood separately from their religious identity.

⁴¹ Lipsitz, “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness,” 369

Outside conceptions of the Mormon race

The history of the Mormon Church in the United States is a contentious one, filled with marginalization both by the church and of the church by outsiders. The Mormon Church exists as a uniquely American institution that places heavy religious significance on the physical land of America and certain groups of chosen people. The church preaches a goal of universal salvation and ultimately wants to create God's kingdom on earth by converting everyone and establishing a religiously led society. At the same time, this goal exists alongside contrasting notions of race and white supremacy within the church that have led Mormons to undermine this goal.⁴²

Mormonism emerged in the nineteenth century as a fundamentally American religion. Founded in 1830 by the prophet Joseph Smith in Rochester, NY the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or LDS, emerged in the wake of the Second Great Awakening as a “refuge from the confusion of American religious pluralism through a compelling millenarian synthesis of traditional Christian and distinctively American history and theology.”⁴³ Mormonism developed during a time of great religious renewal when many new branches of Christianity were surging in popularity, but the LDS church was distinct in the American mind for several reasons including their marriage habits and their perceived (and sometimes true) tolerance of, and mixing with, Native Americans. These markers of difference weren't just about religious practices, but rather were seen to represent the racial deterioration and difference of the Mormon people.

⁴² For more early Mormon history and race, see Hokulani K. Aikau, *A Chosen People, a Promised Land: Mormonism and Race in Hawai'i*, or Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*.

⁴³ Smith, Merina, *Revelation, Resistance, and Mormon Polygamy: The Introduction and Implementation of the Principle, 1830- 1853*. (Utah State University Press, 2013), 21

Anti-Mormon sentiments during the nineteenth century were prevalent and led to the expulsion of Mormons from several locations around the country including Ohio, Missouri and Illinois before they ultimately settled in what would later become Utah. Mormonism navigated, and continues to navigate, a seemingly contradictory space wherein it is “simultaneously quintessentially American and yet continues to be marginalized and seen as a threat to American values.”⁴⁴ The most obvious reason for mistrust of Mormons was that Mormonism was not a form of Protestant Christianity, and there was a general intolerance for non-Protestant religions in nineteenth century America. Protestantism and Anglo-Saxonism (and thus whiteness) were inextricably linked with American Exceptionalism and the founding ideals of the nation. Kelly Brown Douglas argues “That the early evangelicals equated an Anglo-Saxon identity with a Protestant identity cannot be emphasized enough.”⁴⁵ To deviate from Protestant Christianity then was to deviate from Anglo-Saxonism because they were one and the same.

The reason most commonly thought of today, and one that certainly played a great role in the persecution of Mormons in the first half a century of the religion, was their practice of plural marriage. This custom, which was justified as both a harkening back to the great patriarchs like Abraham and as a way of building God’s kingdom on earth, was considered a sign by Protestant America of the inherent moral corruption of Mormonism. Considerable effort, including the mobilization of troops against the Mormon community in Utah in 1857 and several acts passed in congress, went into curbing the practice. While anti-Mormon sentiments certainly stemmed from anti-Polygamist views and mistrust for non-Protestant religions, these were seen as

⁴⁴ Aikau, Hokulani K., *A Chosen People, a Promised Land: Mormonism and Race in Hawai’i*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota; University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 6

⁴⁵ Brown, Kelly Douglas. *Stand Your Ground; Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Orbis Books, Kindle Edition, 2015), Kindle Locations 672-673

evidence of the racial declination of the “Mormon Race” rather than the cause. As Americans became aware of Mormonism,

government documents, newspapers, political cartoons, novels, Protestant tracts, diaries, journals, travel narratives, and editorials combined to create powerful physical descriptions of Mormons designed to undermine Mormon whiteness. The racialization process preceded the introduction of polygamy and included the growing theme that Mormons were “foreigners,” “aliens,” “degraded,” intellectually inferior, lazy, susceptible to superstition and fanaticism, and from the lowest stratum of European or American society. The introduction of polygamy only confirmed such ideas and gave them new life.⁴⁶

Though we now think of polygamy as the defining factor that renders Mormons different, it was in no way necessary or central to the story Protestant America was telling about the Mormon racial identity during the nineteenth century.

Perceptions of race in the nineteenth century were complicated and often contrived. In his book on race and early Mormonism *Religion of a Different Color*, Reeve argues that “outsiders were convinced that Mormonism represented a racial—not merely religious—departure from the mainstream, and they spent considerable effort attempting to deny Mormon whiteness.”⁴⁷ As stated above, Mormons were often the children of Anglo-Saxon or Nordic Protestant parents and thus would otherwise be the top of the racial hierarchy, which perfectly exemplifies the arbitrary and shifting nature of race as a category for nineteenth century Americans. In order to justify their discrimination towards Mormons, Protestant Americans fabricated a narrative of a Mormon connection with different racial minorities including most notably Native Americans, and saw these differences physically. A consistent theme in writing about Mormons was that their faces, and eyes in particular, were different and showed the insidious and weak character of Mormons, but many descriptions of the Mormon body “went beyond the eyes and face to suggest that

⁴⁶ Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 51

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 4

Mormons were more animalistic or devilish than human, especially as they were sometimes described with cloven feet and horns.”⁴⁸ This imagery plays on old anti-Semitic tropes and speaks to the larger perception that religion can be seen physically.

The racialization of Mormons wasn’t based on skin color. Reeve describes how “Mormons were overwhelmingly white and should have easily blended into the racial mainstream. Yet their ability to blend only seemed to exacerbate anxiety among outsiders, so much so that they grew increasingly intent upon seeing a difference where none existed.”⁴⁹ Despite their white lineage, Mormon difference was understood fundamentally as racial, not merely about cultural anxieties. It was understood as being about physical difference that reflected their suspect character, and dominant Anglo-American society was very interested in seeing that difference. “Although outsiders could never fully agree upon the color, they conjured a variety of Mormon bodies upon which to inscribe their hatred: red, black, yellow, and ‘not white.’ Mormonism thus became a religion of a different color, a pariah faith with racially aberrant adherents.”⁵⁰ Their racial difference was then used to justify discrimination and expulsion. As part of their quest for a Mormon holy land, Mormons settled in several different locations in the Midwest. They were not welcome. On multiple occasions they were driven from where they attempted to settle until they ultimately settled in Salt Lake City. When the Mormons were driven out from each location, it was always understood in racial terms. “Much of the racialization that took place in these expulsions conflated Mormons with Indians and blacks as justifications for driving white people from their homes.”⁵¹ The expulsion of Mormons from

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 24

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 9

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 20

Missouri among other locations is incredibly significant. Fundamentally, whiteness bestows the rights of property and citizenship. It is deeply tied to notions of Manifest Destiny and confers in essence the right to live in America. The fact that Mormons were driven from their homes shows the extent to which Mormons were denied whiteness. There was a widespread belief that Mormons were basically Native savages who were an affront to white civilization.

Mormons were seen as holding a number of suspect traits that were held against them by Protestant America. Reeve describes how in the eyes of Protestant America, the Mormon's "perceived ignorance, lower-class status, susceptibility to despotic rule, and ultimately polygamy marked them as inferior."⁵² These qualities were all seen as inherent to those who practice Mormonism, and though these are more cultural than racial, when they became inextricably linked to those in the faith, the "religious bled into the racial."⁵³ It wasn't just that those who joined the faith were racialized when they joined, but it was thought that it was a previous suspect identity that drew them to the faith in the first place. "In a circuitous argument, outsiders posited that Mormons were degraded because they did not act white and that they did not act white because they were degraded."⁵⁴ In the contrived racial logic of nineteenth century America, it was only the racially suspect who would be interested in a religion that was so contrary white Protestant society.

The racialization of Mormons even predated knowledge of polygamy, the practice that was most commonly held against them. "After polygamy became an acknowledged fact, it only solidified outsiders' previous determination that Mormons were a deterioration of whiteness"

⁵² *Ibid*, 19

⁵³ *Ibid*

⁵⁴ *Ibid*

rather than contributing to the racialization in the first place.⁵⁵ Ultimately all of the defining characteristics of Mormonism were held against them and used to cast doubt on their racial identity. Race here transcended the increasingly scientific understanding of race that saw it as biological fact, and was “also cultural, something that Mormons created in being Mormon.”⁵⁶ Mormonism was in fact a racial identity just as much as it was a religious identity.

It’s important to note that Mormon Americans did have a different relationship to Native Americans than did most Protestant Americans in this time of Andrew Jackson and the Trail of Tears. *The Book of Mormon*, the scripture off which Mormonism was based, tells an interesting tale of the history of both Israelites and America. The story in *The Book of Mormon* goes that after the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 600 B.C., a small tribe of Israelites, one of the ten lost tribes, sailed to the New World. When this tribe settled in America, it split into two factions, the Nephites and the Lamanites. These two factions spent centuries warring and the Lamanites fell from God’s grace and were cursed with “a skin of blackness” as a sign of their iniquity.⁵⁷ The Lamanites eventually wiped out the purer and light skinned Nephites and forgot the teachings of the gospel. It was these dark-skinned Lamanites who strayed from God’s path that would eventually become the Native Americans that populated the New World when it was rediscovered centuries later, or so says Mormon cosmology.

Under this worldview, “race was not a permanent part of God’s vision for humanity. Race entered into history as a result of sin.”⁵⁸ Because race entered the world through sin, Mormons were interested in creating a future without racial divisions. In his book *Race and the*

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 40

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 19

⁵⁷ The Holy Bible. Ed. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013. Web. Authorized King James Vers., 2 Nephi 5: 21

⁵⁸ Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 18-19

Making of the Mormon People, Max Perry Mueller argues that “for early Mormons, ‘whiteness’—both as a signifier and even as a phenotype—was an aspirational racial identity that nonwhites could achieve through conversion to Mormonism ... They hoped to fold red and, in a more limited manner, black Americans into a white—as in raceless—Mormon people.”⁵⁹ It is incredibly telling that Mormons saw whiteness as raceless in some essential way. It reflects a broader perception of race that sees white as the default from which one can deviate. Mormons simply made explicit and made whiteness into an attainable goal. In the Mormon worldview race wasn’t inherent and unchanging. One could change their race through certain actions i.e., by converting to the faith. This fundamentally shaped the way Mormons interacted with Native Americans, and other nonwhite converts who might have been limited in number but were unquestionably present. Even though white Mormons saw themselves as racially superior, there was hope for these others.

The story of the Lamanites is significant in understanding the Mormon relationship with race for two reasons. First, it sets up Native Americans as a chosen people descended from Israel capable of spiritual redemption, which was an unprecedented view towards so-called Indians during this time. More importantly, it sets up a clear racial hierarchy within Mormonism. God cursed the Lamanites with dark skin, which necessarily irrevocably links dark skin with damnation and sin within Mormon scripture. *The Book of Mormon* allows for the redemption of these Lamanites through baptism and a return to the gospel, but there was inherently a racialized understanding of purity and divinity. This idea of whiteness and God’s favor were so linked that

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 21

“some Mormons believed that the conversion and uplift of Native American peoples would be marked by...an actual change in skin color and progression toward whiteness.”⁶⁰

However, despite a theological and scriptural connection to Native Americans, Mormons weren't conspiring with Native Americans to destroy white settlements as was claimed in the 1840s and 50s. The Mormon relationship with Native Americans was ultimately fraught with colonial undertones as Mormons migrated west into Native territory and took a paternalistic, white savior approach to the supposed savagery. The closest Mormons got to collusion with Native Americans was a supposed path of redemption for Native Americans that took the form of white Mormons marrying Native Americans in order to breed out their dark skin and thus their sin, but that ultimately didn't go very far because of both an unwillingness on the part of Native Americans and preconceived racist notions towards them on the part of white Mormons.⁶¹

This religious connection between Mormons and Native Americans was also significant outside of the Church because it became a tool by which Protestant Americans could deny Mormon whiteness. The concept of race in 19th century America was a malleable social construct not based on any sort of biological reality, and this was seen most clearly in the widely held belief that “even if Mormons were white at conversion, becoming Mormon, with its concomitant version of Indian Redemption, marked a deterioration toward redness.”⁶²

By stripping Mormons of their whiteness, Protestant America was also stripping Mormons of their citizenship within America and their sense of belonging. Though the instances of actually stripping Mormons of their rights were limited, Reeve describes how “in every situation ‘Mormon’ became a distinct nomenclature employed by outsiders to differentiate

⁶⁰ Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 56

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 63

⁶² *Ibid*, 57

between themselves as ‘citizens,’ people with rights to life, liberty, and property—or the blessings of whiteness—and ‘Mormons’ as people shorn of those same basic rights.”⁶³ One of the most public debates around Mormonism occurred when one of their apostles, Reed Smoot, was elected to the Senate for Utah in 1902, and resulted in three years of congressional hearings to determine if he was fit to serve because of the unlawfulness of Mormon practices. Ultimately he was allowed to serve, but there was much debate about his qualifications due to his racial qualities.

Mormon conceptions of race: asserting whiteness

In response to this racialized view of Mormonism, Mormons “in turn fought to maintain and ultimately claim their white identity.”⁶⁴ This white identity was understood through Mormonism. Mormons thought of themselves as a race above, a purer white race entirely because of their faith. Mueller argues that in fact, “Mormons also created a new, distinctly white Mormon race to which even other white Americans didn’t belong.”⁶⁵ Mueller’s claim is that “within the Book of Mormon’s hermeneutic of restoration whiteness becomes an aspirational identity, which even those cursed with blackness can achieve.”⁶⁶ Yet this wasn’t the reality of how Mormons thought about race. In the face of Protestant denials of whiteness, Mormons did not adhere to this ideology. Rather “Mormons asserted their superior whiteness often by targeting nonwhites for race-based political and religious exclusion, persecution, or bodily harm.”⁶⁷ Despite a divine understanding of race as against God’s design, Mormons participated in a system of white supremacy and worked to assert their whiteness under that system.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 21

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 4

⁶⁵ Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 11

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 42

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 11

The Mormon claiming of whiteness took several shapes. One was the codification of exclusionary policies that forbade black participation in the priesthood and black presence in Mormon temples in the 1850s. These policies remained in place in the LDS church until 1978. The other way it manifested was in Mormon missionary interactions with native populations in both international and non-white environments from the beginning of missionary work in the 1840s through the 20th century. Mormonism has an unparalleled missionary system in which every member of the church is, at least in theory, a missionary. Even in the first years of the Mormon Church, when they were being driven from several locations around the United States and their place in the world was unsure, Mormons sent out missionaries in order to grow the faith. One tenant central to the Mormon faith is the commandment to “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature,” and Mormons take this very seriously.⁶⁸

In her book on the history of Mormons in Hawaii, Hakulani Aikau argues that “from its origins in upstate New York, the church has held a fundamental belief that through missionary work it will bring all the people of the earth-past present and future- into salvation through the teaching and acceptance of the gospel.”⁶⁹ While the racialized understanding of Mormons by Protestant outsiders is interesting, what are particularly fascinating are the ways in which Mormons internalized their conceptions of race and attempted to reconcile the resulting exclusionary policies with the supposed goals of total conversion. LDS mission history in Hawaii and the Mormon Church’s practices in Germany under Hitler’s rule both serve as telling case studies where this tension was made visible.

⁶⁸ The Holy Bible. Ed. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013. Web. Authorized King James Vers., Mark 16:15

⁶⁹ Aikau, *A Chosen People, a Promised Land*, 7

Hawaii is arguably one of the most successful and surprising locations of Mormon missionary service. The first missionaries were sent to Hawaii—then the Sandwich Islands—in the early 1850s. During this time, in addition to struggling to find a location for the American Zion, the LDS church was “drawing upon dominant notions of race and worthiness, [and] began to redraw the boundaries between those souls who they deemed chosen and those who were not.”⁷⁰ While it would have fit in nicely with the racialized understanding of divinity that emerged out of *The Book of Mormon* to deem the Native Hawaiians and Polynesians unworthy, the mission president in Hawaii had a divine vision in 1851, which traced the Polynesian lineage back to a lost tribe of Israel. While there is debate as to whether the Polynesians are decedents of the Lamanites or the Nephites, it is agreed that they are “chosen peoples connected to Israelite lineage and thereby are desirable religious subjects.”⁷¹

While the Native Hawaiians and Polynesians occupied this space of worthiness within the Church starting in 1851, relations with them over the next century were approached with the notions of racial hierarchy, colonialism, and paternalism that were typical for missionaries at the time. The relationship between the predominantly white church hierarchy and the predominantly indigenous body of laypeople was complicated and served a variety of purposes for each group involved. For the LDS church, the divine history of Native Hawaiians and Polynesians created an opportunity for “a new social community that it would be able to both save and exploit as it proselytized among Native Hawaiians and as new missions were established throughout Polynesia.”⁷² One of the best examples of the relationship between the church and the Native Hawaiians was the creation of the Lāʻie plantation on Oahu. In 1865 LDS leaders in Hawaii

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 31

⁷¹ *Ibid*

⁷² *Ibid*, 53

purchased large tracts of lands for their congregation to work and to provide a space in which Mormons Hawaiians could come together and live their faith. The plantation served as an opportunity for Native Hawaiians to support themselves and continue the cultural farming practices that might otherwise have been impossible to sustain in the face of land privatization on the island, but at the same time “the Lā’ie plantation served as a colonial outpost for Salt Lake City.”⁷³ Despite their status as chosen people, Native Hawaiians and Polynesians were often viewed by the Church as an opportunity for exploitation and salvation at the same time.

Another more contemporary example of the tension around race in the Mormon Church in Hawaii is the existence of the Polynesian Cultural Center on Oahu, which is run by the LDS church. Founded in 1963, the center is advertised as a living museum and cultural epicenter where people, mostly foreign white tourists, can come and experience authentic indigenous Polynesian cultures while at the same time providing jobs for young Polynesians attending the Church College of Hawaii which would later become Brigham Young University- Hawaii. While many of the employees view the center as a place that “helps young Polynesians develop a strong cultural identity that they carry throughout their lives,” it’s impossible to ignore the fact that the center also perpetuates cultural tourism.⁷⁴ Regardless of the good intentions of the Church, cultural tourism “transforms native culture and native people into objects packaged, purchased and visually consumed.”⁷⁵ The existence of the Polynesian Cultural Center reflects paternalistic views that native culture is no longer a lived experience; it is something that needs to be preserved as a relic of the past, and the means by which these cultures are being preserved serves primarily within the larger church establishment as a source of profits.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 70

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 133

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 131

Hawaii is a particularly interesting case of Mormon missionary service because it has been very successful, despite the fact that the narrative presented to Native Hawaiians and Polynesians is one that recreated “existing racial hierarchies that could have turned Hawaiians against the Church.”⁷⁶ Mission leaders were able to reconcile this racial hierarchy with their goals of universal conversion through this Polynesian-Israelite connection, which allowed them to take a paternalistic and colonial approach to the Native Hawaiians and Polynesians. They were lower in the racial hierarchy, but via this connection to the divine they were still worthy of, and in need of, salvation.

A completely different site of navigation of this tension between universalism and racial exclusion was Mormon involvement with Hitler’s Third Reich. Official mission policy says that missionaries are supposed to cooperate with foreign governments in order to ease the missionary process, but “LDS Church leaders exceeded the effort necessary for survival. The historical record reveals numerous efforts to court favor with the Nazi state, from stressing common interest in genealogical research to professing admiration for Hitler’s carefully cultivated image as a non-smoking, non-drinking devotee of healthy living.”⁷⁷ It wasn’t just church officials who were engaging with the Nazi government in positive ways. Hitler became something of an icon for many Mormons living in Germany. Not only did he feed into the Mormon clean-living ideal, but several Nazi policies he created coincidentally aligned with Mormon traditions, which fed into perceptions of a connection between Hitler and Mormons. One was the Nazi rationing policy, which necessitated that German citizens cut down on their meals the second Sunday of the month. A commandment by Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, said that Mormons should

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 186

⁷⁷ Nelson, David C. *Moroni and the Swastika: Mormons in Nazi Germany* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), 4-5

fast the first Sunday of the month, and many Mormons read into this coincidence as a sign that they were the Führers chosen people. It went so far that “some ordinary congregants convinced themselves that Hitler had read the Book of Mormon and was a secret church member.”⁷⁸

While individuals of any faith are going to have a variety of opinions, what was particularly telling of the Mormon tension between universalism and their racialized conceptions of salvation were the institutional actions taken by the LDS church during the prewar years of 1933-1939 and during the war itself. Despite the theological goals of converting everyone, “some German Mormon leaders refused to baptize prospective Jewish members.”⁷⁹ Further, LDS members in America denied assistance to converts of Jewish ancestry, even if they had been Mormons for many years before Hitler came to power. In addition to denying members of Jewish lineage, Mormon leaders attempted to please the Nazi government by changing “liturgical practices and missionary efforts to accommodate the Nazi state’s anti-Semitic bias. Ecclesiastical leaders purged German-language hymnals of references to Zion and Israel that had existed since Mormon Church music had been translated into German during the nineteenth century.”⁸⁰ What is significant about this purging is that in most other situations, like in dealing with Native Americans and Polynesians, Mormonism placed a heavy emphasis on a connection to Israel. The Salt Lake City region is referred to as the American Zion, and with both Native Hawaiians and Native Americans it was a direct connection to Israel that elevated their status within the church. This shows an institutional willingness to compromise religious values in the face of the white supremacy that existed within the church. Not only were German Mormons willing to work with

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 13

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 6

⁸⁰ *Ibid*

the Nazi government but also many LDS members believed that “Hitler was cleaning up ethical decay in Germany.”⁸¹

Mormonism has a singular relationship with race. While Mormons spent a considerable amount of their early history being persecuted and marginalized for their supposed racial decline among other things, they responded to this by internalizing a quest for whiteness that at times put them at odds with their theological goals. This internalization of a quest for whiteness led to the perception, and reality at least within the United States, of Mormons as overwhelmingly white. Arguably, the most fascinating thread within this story about Mormon race is that a group of people who “understood all schisms within the human family—religious, political, and racial—as anathemas to God’s design” did not come to fruition and the racial dynamics of the nineteenth century “instead resulted in creating a Mormon people whose racial particularism—in particular, whose whiteness—became a hallmark feature of their identity well into the second half of the twentieth century.”⁸² Mormons ultimately ended up embracing the same white Christian Project guiding Protestantism in the United States, and that was essential to becoming white in American society.

All of this is to say Mormon identity cannot be separated from race. Mormonism was central to their perceived racial identity by Protestants, and to the way Mormons thought about their own racial identity. To look at whiteness in the United States without acknowledging the role that religion has played in its formation would be to deny the Mormon racial experience which was unquestionably present for much of the nineteenth century. The fact that Mormons, who have so firmly cemented their image as white in the American mind that it boggles the mind

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 140

⁸² Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 8, 17

that they could have ever been not white, were considered to be racially inferior to white Protestant America lays bare the artificial and evolving nature of race in America. If Mormons, who are now the whitest of the white, could be thought of as not white, it becomes clear that race is shaped by particular cultural, political and religious moments and that our current understanding of race is no more “true” than this historical perception of Mormons as nonwhite nor their current status of white.

The Mormon quest for whiteness was ultimately incredibly successful, despite the ways in which the Church actively seeks out those who are not white. Remarkably, these two things coexist in the Mormon church. The church can be overwhelmingly white in the minds of those inside and outside of the Church, yet still have a religious narrative around Native Americans and Polynesians which situates them as chosen people. Perhaps the best way to understand how this happened is by returning to the narrative of American exceptionalism, manifest destiny, and expansion that Brown Douglas sees as central and essential to the American Protestant project. If American Protestantism, and thus whiteness, is predicated upon those concepts, Mormons have arguably been more successful at this than many Protestants. Their understanding of America as divinely blessed and Salt Lake City as a holy land is in essence just religiously conceived colonialism. The Mormon story in both America and Polynesia is a story of conquest and conversion, a fulfillment of the Protestant Christian project in almost every way. While Mormons are not Protestant, and are not considered Protestant, their journey into whiteness is a journey into Protestantism in some sense. Mormons always considered themselves white, and they were able to cement themselves as white in the eyes of Protestant America by embracing the central tenants of American Protestantism.

Chapter Three

Jews and Whiteness: A Story of Ambivalence

In 1967 James Baldwin wrote in a New York Times editorial piece that “In the American context, the most ironical thing about Negro anti-Semitism is that the Negro is really condemning the Jew for having become an American white man--for having become, in effect, a Christian.”⁸³ This idea—that in becoming white Jews have become Christian—is an incredibly bold claim, but it’s also one that illustrates the centrality of Christianity to whiteness as a category. To be white was to be Christian for a significant portion of American history. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when Jews were facing questions about their racial identity and were excluded from whiteness, it was precisely because of their lack of Christianity that they were denied whiteness. While the common narrative presented around Jewish whiteness argues that an expansion of whiteness occurred which allowed Jews to become white, Baldwin argues that the basic foundations of whiteness remained the same and that Jews functionally abandoned their religion to become white.

Baldwin was talking about embracing the systems of power that come with being Christian in America. Jews made the choice to accept the privileges of whiteness, including access to rights of citizenship and property. Whatever history of exclusion may have existed, Jews were able to achieve significant amounts of economic mobility and a “high degree of integration into universities, neighborhoods, professions and other central institutions of American life.”⁸⁴ The idea that this was facilitated by Jews becoming Christian is rooted in the

⁸³ Baldwin, James, "Negroes are Anti-Semitic because They're Anti-White" New York Times, 1967

⁸⁴ Goldstein, Eric L. *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006), 213

American Protestant project that ties notions of ownership and material wealth to divine providence. Kelly Brown Douglas argued that Manifest Destiny, which is the foundation for America's entire understanding of property and race, was fundamentally a question about who was deserving of land and that "Within America's narrative of Manifest Destiny, that right belonged to God's chosen, those who had been called to carry forth God's mission of virtue and liberty across the globe."⁸⁵ Thus by accepting the rights to property and land, which came with being white, Jews bought into this Protestant American project. Fundamentally, "Manifest Destiny itself is supported by the very biblical story that provides America's quintessential identity as the new Israelites."⁸⁶ When Baldwin accuses Jews of becoming Christian, it is fundamentally a critique of Jewish participation in this project, which is built by exploiting black bodies and black labor.

Jews have also "become Christian" by performing their religion in a way that conforms to the demands of the dominant Protestant society. In essence, this took the form of embracing the American brand of secularism. While this may seem contradictory, Saba Mahmood argues that "Secularism has sought not so much to banish religion from the public domain but to reshape the form it takes, the subjectivities it endorses, and the epistemological claims it can make."⁸⁷ The form that religion can take is shaped by a Protestant understanding of religion which sees religion as "an abstracted category of beliefs and doctrines from which the individual believer stands apart to examine, compare, and evaluate its various manifestations."⁸⁸ This is a view of religion that renders it as purely individual, and private in a way that is very Protestant in nature.

⁸⁵ Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, Kindle location 2049-2050

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 2181-2182

⁸⁷ Mahmood, Saba, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture*, Spring 2006; 18: 326

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 341

As a result, the less visible Judaism has become, the more acceptable it was to mainstream American society. Jews in America practice their religion in a way that is acceptable to Protestant understandings of faith, which has eased their journey into whiteness.

While few would go so far as Baldwin in saying that Jews have become Christian, there is an unavoidable connection between religion and race that is raised when looking at Jewish whiteness. His quote is also significant because he condemns the Jew for “having become an American white man” which points to the fact that Jews *became* white. There was unquestionably a time when Jews were not white. Jews were denied whiteness for a significant portion of American history, and it was only in the mid-twentieth century when Jews cemented their place as fully white in the eyes of American society. Ultimately, the story of Jewish race and whiteness is one of two separate yet equally important forces: the internal and the external conceptions of Jewish racial identity, both of which worked at times together and at times against each other to define Jewish racial identity. The one consistency in this story is that religion and whiteness are deeply intertwined, and each inform conceptions of the other. Jews present a story of becoming white in America that points to the connection between race and religion and the ways in which racial identities change based on the historical moment.

The Protestant conception of the “Jewish Race”

The story of Jewish racial identity in many ways exactly matches the changing conceptions of whiteness that Matthew Frye Jacobson laid out in *Whiteness of A Different Color*. When American immigration policy was limited to “free white persons,” European Jews were unquestionably included in that category, and though they may not have been entirely accepted by the Protestant mainstream, they were not of particular interest or worthy of discussion. If Jews were talked about at all during this before the end of the nineteenth century it was largely in

positive terms. In fact, in the seventeenth and early-eighteenth century Jews were even held up as evidence of the inherent white supremacy. Anglo-Saxon Americans “tended to see Jews’ economic success and their perceived links to ‘civilization’ as characteristics that affirmed their membership in the dominant racial grouping. Instead of casting Jewish racial peculiarity as an obstacle to whiteness, most white Americans saw the survival of the Jewish ‘race’ through the centuries as a sign that Jews exemplified white power and superiority.”⁸⁹ Jews were also seen as representative of the process of modernization and the positive qualities associated with American industrial dominance at the turn of the century. That would not last.

By the end of the 19th century, Jews were at the center of racial debates, ushered in by massive waves of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. The change in demographics was paired with growing anxieties over what modernization meant for America and much discussion emerged about the racial qualities of Jews and their inconclusive relationship to whiteness. If the American racial landscape was to be understood in terms of a black-white dichotomy, Jews were a perplexing piece of the puzzle that didn’t seem to fit anywhere. They weren’t necessarily black and were never treated with the same loathing and violence as black Americans, but nor were they undifferentiated whites. Jews were used to represent both the good and the bad of modern society, and their place was very unclear. In his book *The Price of Whiteness*, Eric Goldstein describes how “racial images of the Jew during this period presented a mixed bag: sometimes he (the image was usually male) was cast as the embodiment of progressive business techniques, an exemplar of all that was good about the nation’s industrialist capitalist ethos. On the other hand, he was also seen as the representative of many of modernity’s ills—a physical weakling, a carrier

⁸⁹ Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 18

of disease, someone who placed personal gain above the ‘finer virtues’ of polite society.”⁹⁰

Americans developed ambivalent feelings towards Jews that became increasingly negative as the twentieth century progressed.

Though race is a social construction and not a biological reality, nineteenth and twentieth century Americans were convinced that race was something innate, significant, and something that could be seen on the body. Jacobson argues that “Social and political meanings attached to Jewishness generate a kind of physiognomical surveillance that renders Jewishness itself discernable as a particular pattern of physical traits (skin color, nose shape, hair color and texture, and the like).”⁹¹ The more social meaning was given to the idea of Jewish racial difference, the more race was rendered visible on the body, and the more it was rendered visible, the more social meaning it was given. They fed into each other, especially during the pre-World War II era. Jews were unquestionably racially distinct during this time, singled out as uniquely unsuited for assimilation into society and seen as a threat to the white social order because to be seen as racially distinct was to be racially distinct. Race is formed in large part by perception, and thus Jews were not white, whatever their skin color or legal status might be.

Jews were always a conundrum for early racial theorists. In *The History of White People*, Nell Painter lays out the history of whiteness and traces the history of “Caucasian” as a racial category. The term goes back to Johann Blumenbach who was writing about the fundamental racial division found in humans in the late eighteenth century. While his definition of Caucasian included Jews, his contemporary Christoph Meiners (who would become a favorite intellectual of Nazis) did not agree. According to Painter, he “classifies Jews as Mongolian (i.e., Asian)

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 37

⁹¹ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 174

along with Armenians, Arabs, and Persians, all of whom Blumenbach defined as Caucasian.”⁹² Early phrenologists were also very interested in the “Semitic race” and the differences between that race of mankind and white Anglo-Saxons. While this was a hot topic of debate amongst racial theorists as far back as the mid nineteenth century, it wasn’t of much interest to the wider public until the turn of the century when debates about whiteness and antisemitism became more popular in the United States.

Antisemitism grew steadily in the United States from the second half of the nineteenth century in to the mid-twentieth century. Ushered in by waves of “undesirable” immigrants, including large populations of Eastern European Jews, American society became very concerned with who did and did not belong. While before the Jewish population in the United States had been small enough to avoid close scrutiny and largely from Western and Central Europe and thus more favorable, Jews became a primary target for anti-immigration sentiment. Pinter argues that prior to World War I, “Jews had figured as only one in a list of inferior Europeans, along with Slavs and Italians. Now Jews moved to the top, personifying the menace of immigration and bolshevism in racial terms.”⁹³ As such, Jews were heavily targeted in new immigration laws and the quota systems that were put into place. The Reed- Johnson Act of 1924 “ended mass immigration of Jews and others born in Eastern Europe, so that in 1936 the American Jewish population had increased only slightly...Effectively, the United States had closed its door to Jewish and other immigrants, as the 1924 law sought to target Eastern and Southern European countries, whose populations were neither Protestant nor English.”⁹⁴

⁹² Painter, *History of White People*, 88

⁹³ *Ibid*, 304

⁹⁴ Falk, Gerhard, *The German Jews in America: A Minority within a Minority* (Blue Ridge Summit: University Press Of America, 2014), 10

As laws changed to prevent more Jews from coming over to America, those already in the country faced increasing resentment and targeting from a variety of sources. In the 1920s there was a revival of the Ku Klux Klan and as Painter points out, “This new Klan of the 1920s cast a wider net than the old, no longer limiting its attacks to black people with political ambitions. In the 1920s its five million members—spread from Maine to Oregon and from Indiana to Florida—took out after ‘Katholics, Kikes, and Koloreds,’ or, less poetically and more accurately, Catholics, Jews, black people, foreigners, organized labor, and the odd loose woman.”⁹⁵ The KKK targeted Jews because according to them “Jews engaged in unfair business practices and exploited the American working class while producing nothing in return.”⁹⁶ The KKK needs to be understood fundamentally as a religious order, interested not only in preserving white identity, but in preserving Protestant white identity, because there was no other kind of whiteness. Members of the Klan “understood racial boundaries to be initiated by God. The white race, in that particular vision, was the pinnacle of civilization, and protecting the purity of whiteness reflected divine mandate.”⁹⁷ Jews, because of their refusal to accept the divinity of Christ, necessarily are excluded from whiteness. Klan theology and ideology was fueled by the idea that “Christianity was inherently white.”⁹⁸ The reverse was also true: whiteness was inherently Christian.

The Ku Klux Klan and other white citizens were willing to enact violence in order to uphold their understanding of Christian whiteness and Jews faced violence and extrajudicial attacks, including lynching. The death of Leo Frank is the most noteworthy case because Frank

⁹⁵ Painter, *History of White People*, 324

⁹⁶ Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 122

⁹⁷ Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*, 178

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 178

was murdered by a group of angry southerners after being accused of murdering a 13-year-old girl named Mary Phagan. The case brought to the forefront of American society the questions that had been brewing about Jewish racial identity. Frank was viewed racially as a Jew because Jews were seen as both a race and a religion, and as a perverted criminal as a result of his racial identity. The two were inextricably linked. Frank's legal defense team was deeply aware of this connection in the eyes of white society and crafted their legal defense strategy with this in mind. His attorney, Louis Marshall, believed that "Jews had a better chance of achieving justice by presenting themselves as undifferentiated whites rather than as Jews."⁹⁹ Jewishness made them a target of racialized violence and Leo Frank felt that firsthand when he was brutally lynched by a group of white southerners who broke into his jail in order to obtain "justice."

In addition to facing extrajudicial violence, Jews were excluded from numerous social institutions in the south during this time. As Goldstein points out, "In states where public facilities were segregated according to color, the exclusion of Jews from clubs and hotels seemed to question their social standing as whites."¹⁰⁰ Anti-Jewish sentiment was rampant, and it couldn't be disentangled from racial conceptions of Jews. Anti-Semitism and racism were often one and the same.

Common stereotypes about Jews emerged at this time and were reproduced and spread by popular and powerful figures in American society. Henry Ford was one such figure, and he included a copy of his newsletter "Mr. Ford's Own Page" with every Ford car purchased. This newsletter was rife with anti-Semitic propaganda. W.J. Cameron, who wrote the newsletter on behalf of Ford, was a strong proponent of Anglo-Isralitesm, and believed that "Anglo-Saxons

⁹⁹ Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 66

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 54

were the real descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, and England and the United States were the real Holy Land. This logic made Anglo-Saxons into the chosen people and ‘Modern Hebrews’ into impostors. Jesus was not really Jewish; in fact, he was the Nordic ancestor of modern Germans, Scandinavians, and English People.”¹⁰¹ This newsletter also reflected Ford’s belief that Jews were conspiring against him and his business. Painter argues that “Ford’s own obsession imagined the Jews less as imposters than as the international financiers he believed to be building up the labor unions he hated in order to reduce competition and raise prices.”¹⁰² Tropes about Jewish financial exploitation, inherent criminality, and antiassimilationist tendencies all combined in the minds of Protestant Americans to create an image of Jews as an unmistakable “Other,” decidedly not part of white society. They might not have been completely black, but by no means were they white.

Jews were also targeted for their relationship with African Americans and apparent unwillingness to completely embrace the black/white racial binary and the racist paradigm held by white Americans. For a time, Jewish merchants “sometimes deviated from white racial etiquette in their commercial relations with African Americans... Within the confines of their own stores, Southern Jewish merchants were often able to form relationships with black customers and extend courtesies to them that may have appeared unseemly in the public square.”¹⁰³ While this may not have been a problem during the Reconstruction era, it would change towards the turn of the century when the Jewish racial position became far less secure. Goldstein argues that “Until the 1890s, Jews were generally considered white no matter how closely they observed American racial etiquette or what attitudes they took concerning white

¹⁰¹ Painter, *History of White People*, 326

¹⁰² *Ibid*

¹⁰³ Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 59

supremacy. By contrast, their approach to African Americans at the turn of the century held much greater potential to affect their social status and to influence their own standing in the American racial order.”¹⁰⁴ Refusing to adhere to a strict racist worldview made Jews bigger targets for racialized violence and fueled questions about their whiteness. Since white supremacy and racism are central to white identity, mainstream white society couldn’t imagine a group of white Americans who wouldn’t embrace that worldview. If they weren’t racist, they couldn’t possibly be white in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxon majority.

All of the groups that were disputably white during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (like Jews, Mormons, and Catholics) might not have been considered fully white at the time, but they were considered good candidates for whiteness in the future. This idea, more than anything else, shows the extent to which “race resides not in nature but in politics or culture.”¹⁰⁵ It was understood that racial identity could change based on circumstance. These groups became understood in terms of their potential for assimilation (something which was never afforded to black Americans). Before the rise of anti-Semitism in the early twentieth century Jews were included in this argument. Commentators argued “not that Jews were already white, but that they were excellent prospects for assimilation into white America since they possessed many of the positive characteristics of white society.”¹⁰⁶ This is significant for two reasons. The first is that it shows the malleability of whiteness as a racial category, and the illogical and inconsistent understanding of race that prevailed. Race clearly wasn’t a biological reality inherent to different, incompatible groups of people, but rather something that could change.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 51

¹⁰⁵ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 9

¹⁰⁶ Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 47

This is also significant because it would not remain the approach towards Jews. Around the turn of the century, conceptions of their assimilability changed drastically. Jacobson describes how in the wake of anti-Semitism, “it was not only that Jews could be known in their greed (or their Jacobinism or their infidelism or their treachery) by their physiognomy, but their physiognomy itself was significant—denoting, as it did, their essential unassailability to the republic.”¹⁰⁷ Jews became particularly noted for their unassailability, and it didn’t help that Jewish immigrants tended to remain relatively isolated socially and marry amongst themselves.

Ultimately Jews were incorporated into dominant white society and achieved a relatively stable status in American society. This shift was ushered in by several factors. First, Jewish immigration was severely limited by immigration reforms of the 1920s, and second (and most important), World War II and the Holocaust largely ended any discussion of Jewish racial identity by Protestant society. It was no longer acceptable because of the genocidal connotations and faded from the public discourse. Third, the category of whiteness was expanding during this time in the face of the civil rights movement and increasing black activism. Distinctions between “white races” were far less important than asserting the fundamental difference between white and black.

The Jewish conception of the “Jewish Race”

The story of Jewish racial identity was also complicated by conflicting Jewish feelings about their own racial identity. They weren’t always willing to embrace whiteness and it took many years for Jews to let go (at least outwardly) of the racial definition of Jewish identity. While Mormons fundamentally understood themselves as white and worked to assert their whiteness in the eyes of the protestant mainstream, Jews were far more hesitant to embrace

¹⁰⁷ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 178

whiteness. Jews were limited throughout the process of becoming white by their commitment to Jewish distinctiveness which was fundamentally understood in racial terms.

Despite the pressures, both internal and external, to conform to a black/white binary racial system, Jews were often unwilling to abandon their racial self-conception. Goldstein describes this tension and argues “While the knowledge that they were considered a problematic group in the American racial scheme motivated Jews to try to conform to the prevailing racial paradigm and identify themselves unambiguously as white, their ongoing commitment to a distinctive identity often cut against their attempts to claim whiteness.”¹⁰⁸ Jews didn’t necessarily want to be excluded from the mainstream or become targets of racialized violence, but they couldn’t separate their Jewish identity from social difference. Because of their histories of social exclusion in Europe, many Jews had “had come to see ‘apartness’ as one of the most salient aspects of Jewish identity. As a result, in the American context they often defined themselves as a distinct ‘race,’ a description that captured their strong emotional connection to Jewish peoplehood.”¹⁰⁹ The importance of a racial conception of Jewish difference did not lessen with their increased inclusion in white society over time. In fact, “the more Jews became securely integrated in white society, the more their impulses for distinctiveness emerged.”¹¹⁰ This meant that even as Jews worked to become accepted by the Anglo-Saxon mainstream, they struggled with what that would mean for Jewish identity.

Their desire for distinctiveness was further complicated by their conception of themselves as a persecuted minority. “Jews’ history of persecution and social exclusion had imbued them with a strong minority consciousness that was not easily surrendered and that led

¹⁰⁸ Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 2

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 3

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 4-5

them to place a high value on group survival” and this wasn’t compatible with a simple black/white racial dichotomy.¹¹¹ Jews, if they were indeed included in the white side of the equation, would be required to participate in the oppressive system of white supremacy, which would directly challenge their minority consciousness. During the mid-nineteenth century Jews were able to get around this problem by deploying a racial self-conception because they were unquestionably white. It allowed them to distinguish themselves as racially distinct but still a part of the larger category of white, and at the time this was not concerning for Protestant Americans because whiteness wasn’t under question. As Goldstein argues, “racial language also allowed Jews to maintain their self-image as a persecuted people as they rose on the economic ladder and attained an unprecedented level of social acceptance.”¹¹² Racial language helped Jews maintain a secure sense of what it meant to be Jewish without challenging their place in society.

The problems with the racial self-conception of Jews arose when anti-Semitism began to spread and questions about Jewish racial identity became more pressing. Whereas before Jews could use racial language to express their difference without concern, Jews now had to think more carefully about what it meant to be a race apart. Goldstein argues that “Before their whiteness became suspect, Jews often found in a race a comforting means of self-understanding, one that provided a sense of security as they continued toward their goal of greater social integration. Now, with their place in America’s racial constellation increasingly in doubt, many Jews began to question the viability of race as a means of self-description.”¹¹³ The label became increasingly dangerous because racial difference justified exclusion and violence. As a result,

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 14

¹¹² *Ibid*, 19

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 86

Jews had to shift to different conceptions of what it meant to be Jewish that were in part religious but were also cultural. The shift was difficult.

Despite the risk associated with Jewish racial identity, Jews were reluctant to completely abandon it. In order to adapt to the new struggles of the twentieth century Jews often sought to find a middle-ground between insurmountable racial difference and complete assimilation into whiteness. They kept race as a means for understanding what it meant to be Jewish but worked to reframe what it meant. They argued that race, at least when it didn't concern African Americans, didn't have to mean anything significant. They sought to "define race in ways that were not as dissonant with American identity while at the same time asserting a more pluralistic vision of American nationalism that was accepting of diversity, at least in regard to European 'racial' groups."¹¹⁴ Jewish racial difference was a positive force that added to American society, or so Jews argued at the time, and it definitely did not warrant scrutiny. They began a tradition of "lauding Jewish racial accomplishments, highlighting the ways Jewish racial distinctiveness contributed to the upbuilding of America rather than to its instability."¹¹⁵ They also tried to separate their racial difference and that of blacks by arguing that there were more and less severe kinds of racial difference, and that Jewish difference was of the latter, more benign type. They adapted their arguments to the language of the times and "Drawing on the era's popular interest in psychology, Jews frequently argued that their racial distinctiveness lay in a particular mindset or 'genius,' while trying to ignore the popular wisdom that visible biological characteristics marked them off from other whites."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 172

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 175

Jews also tried to separate their isolationist tendencies when it came to marriage from race. Jacobson argues that “The policing of sexual boundaries—the defense against hybridity—is precisely what keeps a racial group a racial group.”¹¹⁷ Marriage is central to the formation of racial identity. Jews were aware that their unwillingness to marry outside of themselves could be used to point to Jewish racial difference and resistance to assimilation and thus intentionally worked to reframe the issue into one of religious difference and not miscegenation. They argued that “Jews had as much right to protect their religious integrity as groups like Quaker, Baptists, Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics, who were equally suspect of marriages out of the ‘faith.’”¹¹⁸ Further, Goldstein argues that “By focusing on religion instead of race, Jews felt they could express their opposition to intermarriage without inviting the charge that they were resisting the process of assimilation.”¹¹⁹ This strategy allowed Jews to divert questions away from their racial distinctiveness and contributed to a picture of Jews as racially white yet culturally distinct in some significant way.

This middle-ground strategy was pursued because it allowed Jews to keep their understanding of Jewish difference and argue for their inclusion into the American (white) mainstream. However, they often found that it didn’t prove sufficient in the eyes of the Protestant white majority who relied on a strict black/white binary that included a relatively undifferentiated category of whiteness. Because the middle-ground of a separate Jewish identity wasn’t viable, Jews ultimately embraced whiteness, which was predicated upon anti-black racism. The racial journey of Jews in America (just like Mormons) is a history of racism and exclusion targeted towards black Americans.

¹¹⁷ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 3

¹¹⁸ Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 100

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*

Despite their history of persecution and anti-Semitic violence, Jews ultimately embraced a racist world view which placed them unquestionably above blacks in the racial hierarchy. Goldstein describes how “Southern Jewish politicians... tried to counter prejudices against Jewish officeholding by taking up the causes of black disenfranchisement and white political dominance.”¹²⁰ Anti-black racism wasn’t just a result of becoming part of the white mainstream but actually was a tool through which whiteness was obtained. Embracing racism and white supremacy helped cement Jews as white in the eyes of white society but didn’t go unnoticed by the black community either. Jews were singled out as “exploiters of the black population” and African American leaders argued that Jews “possessed the worst qualities of American whites.”¹²¹ James Baldwin echoed this sentiment in a New York Times editorial piece from 1967 titled “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White.” Baldwin had little sympathy for the position of Jews. He showed this when he said that “The Jew's suffering is recognized as part of the moral history of the world and the Jew is recognized as a contributor to the world's history: this is not true for the blacks. Jewish history, whether or not one can say it is honored, is certainly known: the black history has been blasted, maligned and despised. The Jew is a white man, and when white men rise up against oppression, they are heroes: when black men rise, they have reverted to their native savagery.”¹²²

In fact, the history of Jewish persecution makes their participation in white supremacy all the worse. According to Baldwin, they should know better. Instead they use this history to ignore their own participation in these systems of black oppression. Baldwin rightfully points out that “One does not wish, in short, to be told by an American Jew that his suffering is as great as the

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 58

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 164

¹²² Baldwin, “Negroes are Anti-Semitic”

American Negro's suffering. It isn't, and one knows that it isn't from the very tone in which he assures you that it is.”¹²³ The black criticism of Jews is specifically rooted in their history of oppression, and the fact that they use it to escape criticism. Baldwin calls attention to this and says that “It is true that many Jews use, shamelessly, the slaughter of the 6,000,000 by the Third Reich as proof that they cannot be bigots--or in the hope of not being held responsible for their bigotry. It is galling to be told by a Jew whom you know to be exploiting you that he cannot possibly be doing what you know he is doing because he is a Jew.”¹²⁴ The picture Baldwin paints is one in which Jews have happily become the oppressor themselves, and want to be excused from being held responsible for that because of past struggles.

In many ways Goldstein is exactly who Baldwin is criticizing because he would have us sympathize deeply with the Jewish struggle. In the introduction to his book Goldstein argues that the Jewish entrance into white America “resulted in alienation, communal breakdown, and psychic pain as surely as it produced the exhilaration of acceptance in non-Jewish society.”¹²⁵ Goldstein believes that there was a huge cost for Jews. While this may be true, Baldwin argues “the Jew does not realize that the credential he offers, the fact that he has been despised and slaughtered, does not increase the Negro's understanding. It increases the Negro's rage.”¹²⁶ Jews decided that acceptance into the white mainstream was more important than ensuring that the persecution they faced didn't happen to others.

Even those Jews who did participate in the Civil Rights Movement and work on behalf of African Americans only felt comfortable doing so because they had distanced themselves from

¹²³ *Ibid*

¹²⁴ *Ibid*

¹²⁵ Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 6

¹²⁶ Baldwin, “Negroes are Anti-Semitic”

their Jewish backgrounds. Goldstein argues that “If many of the Jews who immersed themselves in civil rights activity were acting on impulses that stemmed from their background as Jews, it was actually their distance from the Jewish world that freed them to support African American causes in such visible ways.”¹²⁷ Ultimately though, most Jews chose to participate in the system of white supremacy and worked to avoid any questions about Jewish belonging in white America. This is why, according to Baldwin, the Jew “is singled out by Negroes not because he acts differently from other white men, but because he doesn't. His major distinction is given him by that history of Christendom, which has so successfully victimized both Negroes and Jews. And he is playing in Harlem the role assigned him by Christians long ago: he is doing their dirty work.”¹²⁸ The story of Jewish racial identity in American, and their evolution from a racial other into the white mainstream cannot be separated from a history of anti-black racism. Jews have ended up fully integrated into Protestant white America. They have access to the same social and legal benefits and have embraced the same racism in order to achieve that status.

The shift towards ethnic understandings of Jewish identity in recent years has only fueled the connection between Jewish whiteness and anti-black racism. The emergence of ethnic difference reinforces and cements the black/white racial binary by minimizing distinctions between whites in the face of the unquestionable difference of blackness. Painter argues that the inclusion of Jews, and other immigrant populations, into whiteness has ensured that “The fundamental black/white binary endures, even though the category of whiteness—or we might say more precisely, a category of nonblackness—effectively expands.”¹²⁹ This also ensured that blackness became a marker of difference from a normative whiteness. In the binary system,

¹²⁷ Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 147

¹²⁸ Baldwin, “Negroes are Anti-Semitic”

¹²⁹ Painter, *History of White People*, 396

whiteness is the default, a raceless category from which some people are excluded. Race is relegated to the black side of the binary and Jewish whiteness cannot be unlinked from this process which reinforces black difference.

White supremacy and Judaism

Though Jews have largely become assimilated whites in the eyes of most Americans, there is one noteworthy exception to this story. Jews have remained a primary target for white supremacy and white nationalism. Jews have become white in the eyes of all but those who are most concerned with what it means to be white. Recently, Eric Ward wrote an article titled “Skin in The Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism” in which he explains the connection between white supremacy and antisemitism. According to him, “American White nationalism, which emerged in the wake of the 1960s civil rights struggle and descends from White supremacism, is a revolutionary social movement committed to building a Whites-only nation, and antisemitism forms its theoretical core.”¹³⁰ Antisemitism is inextricably linked with white supremacy, which is significant because it shows that Jews have not fully become integrated into the white mainstream. Ward argues importantly that for white supremacists “within this ideological matrix, Jews—despite and indeed because of the fact that they often read as White—are a different, unassimilable, enemy race that must be exposed, defeated, and ultimately eliminated. Antisemitism... is a particular and potent form of racism so central to White supremacy that Black people would not win our freedom without tearing it down.”¹³¹ Though Jews have become white in the eyes of most Americans, whiteness isn’t fully accessible

¹³⁰ Ward, Eric K. “Skin in The Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism” *Political Research Associates*, June 2017.

¹³¹ *Ibid*

to them because whiteness is still understood the same way that Baldwin understood whiteness: as a Christian concept. Jewishness precludes them from whiteness.

Ward argues that “at the bedrock of the movement is an explicit claim that Jews are a race of their own, and that their ostensible position as White folks in the U.S. represents the greatest trick the devil ever played. Contemporary antisemitism, then, does not just enable racism, it also is racism, for in the White nationalist imaginary Jews are a race—the race—that presents an existential threat to Whiteness.”¹³² The fact that Jews are often thought of as white is not incidental but rather central to their targeting by white supremacists. Ward argues that “modern anti-Semitic ideology traffics in fantasies of invisible power, it thrives precisely when its target would seem to be least vulnerable.”¹³³ Jewish assimilation has largely been successful, but Jewishness has never been able to distance itself completely from racial conceptions. However, despite this exception in Jewish racial identity, Jews are largely considered white and have been assimilated into mainstream white society.

Throughout this story is the unifying themes of racially understood religious difference. Jews and Mormons both had their racial identity shaped fundamentally by religion. It’s worth noting also that while the different racial experiences of Mormons and Jews came from their different circumstances, historical moments, and pressures (both internal and external), Judaism and Mormonism themselves have played fundamentally different roles in the process of becoming white. Mormonism explicitly sees Mormons as white. Whiteness is theologically blessed and is an aspirational identity that reflects ones standing the eyes of God. Judaism on the other hand does not see whiteness in the same way. There isn’t an explicit role for whiteness, but

¹³² *Ibid*

¹³³ *Ibid*

in many ways the history of Judaism encourages the opposite of embracing whiteness. It has fostered a distinct minority identity rooted in a history of oppression and persecution. When it came to Jews becoming white, Goldstein goes so far as to say there was “a good deal of coercion involved in the process by which Jews became part of the white majority.”¹³⁴ While this underplays the agency of Jews in choosing and embracing whiteness, it does speak to the far more complicated relationship to whiteness that Jews had compared to Mormons. In both cases religion was fundamental to the formation of racial identity and the process of becoming white, but the experiences were each dictated by the particular religion.

Ultimately, Jews and Mormons both understood their identity to be religious, but also much more than that. It was racial too. Religious and racial blended together and were not easily separated. Nor could they be separated in the minds of Protestant society who understood religious difference to be racial as well. Whiteness fundamentally cannot be understood without understanding the role of religion.

¹³⁴ Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 5

Conclusion

The Present-day Implications

Islam and whiteness today

Mormons became white at the beginning of the twentieth century. Jews were white by the end of World War II. But the phenomenon of understanding race through religion did not stop then. Religion is still essential to the formation of racial identities, especially whiteness, and this can clearly be seen in the case of Islamophobia throughout the twentieth century and into the present day. Middle Eastern immigrants to the United States occupy a liminal racial space wherein they are white in the eyes of the law but are firmly brown to the American public.

Muslim immigrants weren't always white in the eyes of the law, and religion was central to calculation that was made about their racial identity. One of the first cases of Arab Muslims petitioning for naturalization was the case of a Yemeni Muslim named Ahmed Hassan in 1942 who was attempting to gain citizenship on the basis of being white. In the ruling, the judge argued that "it is well known that they are a part of the Mohammedan world and that a wide gulf separates their culture from that of the predominately Christian peoples of Europe. It cannot be expected that as a class they would readily intermarry with our population and be assimilated into our civilization."¹³⁵ What was at stake was nothing less than his racial identity because it was only through being white that he could be naturalized as an American citizen. If he was white, he could be a citizen; if he wasn't, then he couldn't be a citizen. In this case, nothing was more central to determining race than religion. It was the key, and because Hassan was Muslim it was clear that he could not be white. Whiteness remained a primarily Christian concept, and thus one

¹³⁵ Buyomi, Moustafa, "Racing Religion," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 6 no. 2, 2006, 269

could not be Muslim and white at the same time. In the article *Racing Religion*, Mustafa Bayoumi argues, “While we may be accustomed to thinking of racial definition as being determined by the color of one’s skin, what we observe here is that religion in general, and Islam in particular, plays a role in adjudicating the race of immigrants seeking naturalization in the United States.”¹³⁶ In fact, I would argue race-as-color understandings of race are a recent development and are not accurate to the way race has been constructed historically. It clearly wasn’t the basis for understanding Mormon and Jewish racial identities.

Even more telling than the exclusion of Muslim immigrants from whiteness was the inclusion of Christian immigrants from the same region into whiteness. Around the same time as the Hassan case and other racial determination cases, several Syrian and Armenian immigrants successfully petition for citizenship on the basis of their whiteness. Bayoumi notes that “All of the Syrians to come before the Court during the racial exclusion era were Christian, and the Court often found it important to underline this fact in every instance it could .”¹³⁷ In fact, the whiteness of such groups was specifically justified in opposition to the obvious non-whiteness of other Middle Eastern groups. Neda Maghebouleh wrote extensively about this in the book *Limits of Whiteness* in which she explores how Iranians became white in the eyes of the law, and the limitations of that whiteness. According to Maghebouleh, the court found “Armenians to be well positioned for American assimilation thanks to their shared Christian allegiance to ‘the European side,’ the...court ruled in favor of Armenian whiteness, as juxtaposed to the non-whiteness of ‘fire worshipping’ Iranians and other Ottoman-rules Muslims.”¹³⁸

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 278

¹³⁷ *bid*, 281

¹³⁸ Maghebouleh, Neda. *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017), 19

In some ways the strange part of this story is that Middle Eastern immigrants ever became white in the eyes of the law. Bayoumi argues that in many ways this shift was a reflection of changing US foreign policy. He points out that in the years between the Hassan case in 1942 (which decided Arab Muslims were not white) and the Mohreiz case in 1944 (which decided that Arab Muslims were white), “the political situation has changed, with the United States shedding its isolationist past for global dominance” and thus casting Muslims as white could be beneficial for new goals in the Middle East.¹³⁹ The Judge in the Mohreiz case made this explicit and said in his decision that making Mohreiz white was done in part “to promote friendlier relations between the United States and other nations.”¹⁴⁰ Muslims still occupied an unstable place in the eyes of the law though, evidenced by inconsistent legal rulings about their race until 1978 when the US government stabilized racial categories for the first time, and Iranians and others with Middle Eastern origins were now firmly white in the eyes of the law. However, in 1979 the Iranian Revolution and the Hostage Crisis brought about anti-Arab sentiment and Islamophobic discrimination on an unprecedented scale, so while these groups were newly white in the eyes of the law, they “were socially browned in nightly news reports and mass public demonstrations that rejected their presence.”¹⁴¹ As soon as they became legally white, they were cast as unquestionably brown by white (Christian) society.

While Muslim (and non-Muslim) immigrants from the Middle East are still technically white legally, new laws, especially from 2001, have created a racialized understanding of what it means to practice Islam, or to come from a Muslim-majority country. One prime example is the Bush-era policy known as special registration. As part of the “war on terror,” special registration

¹³⁹ Bayoumi, “Racing Religion,” 284

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 269

¹⁴¹ Maghebouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 45

was a government mandated surveillance program that required male nonimmigrants over the age of 16 to register with the Department of Justice and were subject to interviews (under oath), fingerprinting and being photographed. The significant part of special registration was the countries which were included under the program. Bayoumi argues that

considering the broad geography of special registration, it makes descent or inheritability of Islam (and gender) the defining criterion. And that inheritability has nothing to do with enemy nationality since most of the listed nations are considered allies of the United States. Nor has it anything to do with belief or political affiliation since it says nothing about each individual's worldview. Rather, it is only about one's blood relationship to Islam. Through that blood relationship, legal barriers have been established to exclude as many Muslims as possible, and that fact consequently turns Islam into a racial category.¹⁴²

So, while these persons are still technically white according to the defined racial categories, they are not treated as white by all aspects of the law. Any connection to Islam makes one racially suspect in the United States, and Islam cannot be divorced from racial conceptions. It is evident that being white in the eyes of the law does not make one white, as was also the case for Mormons and Jews.

The fact that Middle Eastern immigrants are still white in the eyes of the law actually complicates their position, especially when it comes to the increased discrimination and targeted violence that Arab and Muslim Americans are facing. Being legally white means that they aren't protected under the law the way they might otherwise be. Maghbouleh is very interested in this legal limbo and describes how Middle Eastern and Muslim immigrants "are targets of (seemingly, and sometimes clearly) racist actions by individuals and institutions at the same time that they lack consistent access to race-based recourse. They find themselves in racial loopholes in which they are not white enough to avoid racial discrimination but too white to have it legally

¹⁴² Bayoumi, "Racing Religion," 278

redressed.”¹⁴³ Despite the clearly racial motivations behind acts of discrimination and violence, “the law cannot make sense of white-on-white discrimination.”¹⁴⁴ It’s evident here that legal definitions of race are only one part of racial construction and that they alone are not sufficient to understand what it means to be white, or not white.

The Jewish story of whiteness in many ways sheds a lot of light on the current pressures and experiences surrounding Arabs and Muslims in the United States. In the same way Jews “became Christian” in part by practicing their faith in a way that aligns with Protestant understandings of faith, Saba Mahmood argues that “The United States has embarked upon an ambitious theological campaign aimed at shaping the sensibilities of ordinary Muslims.”¹⁴⁵ Islam is seen as particularly threatening today because it doesn’t look anything like what Protestant America has deemed religion should look like. Americans fear Islam because “the adherence of ordinary Muslims to Islamic rituals, liturgies, and observances is regarded as evidence of a distorted relationship to religious truth (universal and abstract), turning them into pawns in the hands of those who seek to manipulate them for worldly reasons.”¹⁴⁶ As a result, there has been a concerted effort to reshape Islam into something more acceptable and similar to Protestantism. There have been calls by Americans for a Muslim reformation, like the Christian one brought about by Martin Luther, and “a cornerstone of this strategy is to convince Muslims that they must learn to historicize the Quran, not unlike what Christians did with the Bible.”¹⁴⁷ While I think Goldstein is oversimplifying when he says that “there was also a good deal of coercion involved in the process by which Jews became part of the white majority,” this is what is

¹⁴³ Maghebouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 30

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 45

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 329

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 342

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 335

happening to Muslim immigrants in the present day.¹⁴⁸ In essence, these pressures are about rendering Islam more Protestant, and they are fundamentally connected to notions of race and whiteness. Arab and Muslim immigrants will not be seen as white by American society until they adhere to Protestant mores and fit within the model of American “secularism” that is based of those mores.

All of this is to say that you cannot understand the legal and social position that Muslim and non-Muslim Middle Eastern immigrants are in in the United States without understanding both the history of racializing Islam and the fundamental connection between whiteness and Christianity in America. The connection between race and religion is not limited to the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. They inform racial construction, both legal and social, well into the present day, and whiteness at any point in American history cannot be understood fully without looking at religion. Even for Jews who have attained a level of legal and social whiteness well above what Muslim and Arab immigrants have ever been able to attain, they remain the target of racialized violence and discrimination from the white nationalists and white supremacists who are most concerned with what it means to be white.

Reevaluating whiteness today

In many ways whiteness goes unacknowledged in the present day. We talk a lot about race, but race is inherently understood to connote blackness. There is whiteness, and then there is race which is blackness. Most Americans don’t think about what it means to be white, with the noteworthy exception of white supremacist groups. Notably, these groups have not let go of the Christian understanding of whiteness that excludes groups like Muslims and Jews. If everyone else wants to understand these movements as they grow in popularity and power in the age of

¹⁴⁸ Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 5

Trump, understanding the Christian formation of whiteness is essential. History informs the present, and race in the present day is fundamentally shaped by religious conceptions of race. Exploring this history makes clearer numerous facets of present day life including the position of Muslims in the category of whiteness, the role of anti-Semitism in white supremacist movements, and the very formations of what it means to be white (and American). The fact that religion is no longer explicitly the basis for whiteness in the way it once was does not mean that it doesn't still implicitly shape racial categories and everyday experiences of race.

At the heart of the matter, to be white (in the past and the present) is to buy into American Exceptionalism. They are deeply connected because “whiteness provides a protected space for America's Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. It creates a distance between its most opposing force—blackness.”¹⁴⁹ Whiteness is predicated on a notion of superiority that is built into the very foundations of the American Christian project and in that sense, it hasn't changed since members of the Ku Klux Klan in the early twentieth century articulated the logic that has underpinned all of American racial understanding. They believed that “not all whites were ‘actually white’ unless they embraced white supremacy.”¹⁵⁰ To that end, Mormons and Jews, to different extents, have embraced this project as part of becoming white. Mormons have articulated it clearly in their theology and church practice, and while Jews do not have that same institutional support for white supremacy, they benefit from and are complacent in the system of white supremacy that structures almost every aspect of American public life. To be white in America is to benefit from white supremacy.

¹⁴⁹ Brown, *Stand Your Ground*, Kindle Locations 778-779)

¹⁵⁰ Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*, 167

Further, becoming white is about being willing to participate in the American Christian project. While Mormons were forced west on their quest for a homeland, ultimately, they were essential to Manifest Destiny and the conquering of what would become the American continent. Manifest Destiny was fundamentally a Christian project. Kelly Brown Douglas argues that Manifest Destiny was at its heart about creating a white Christian nation and that “For the evangelical sectarians it was about spreading the great Anglo-Saxon idea of ‘a pure spiritual Christianity.’ This was a mission destined to be launched from the place that was ‘the great home of the Anglo-Saxon,’ the United States.”¹⁵¹ As white Americans expanded the nation, central was the idea that “the nation they inhabited was a religious one, and threats to faith, nation, and race were one and the same.”¹⁵² Mormons avidly participated in the American Imperial project, and their complete embrace of the ideology of white supremacy eased their progress into whiteness. Their westward expansion directly fit into this project since “within the Manifest Destiny narrative, land and race are connected. One's right to land was dependent on being of the right race.”¹⁵³ While Mormons had a tenuous relationship with whiteness, especially in the first years of the faith, they were able to firmly establish their place in white society, and their participation in this project helped ensure that.

James Baldwin framed the Jewish entrance into whiteness as also being about participating in the Christian project and centers that in his criticism of Jews working around him in Harlem. According to him, the Jew’s “major distinction is given him by that history of Christendom, which has so successfully victimized both Negroes and Jews. And he is playing in Harlem the role assigned him by Christians long ago: he is doing their dirty work.” Both of these

¹⁵¹ Brown, *Stand Your Ground*, Kindle Locations 2020-2023

¹⁵² Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*, 245

¹⁵³ Brown, *Stand Your Ground*, Kindle Locations 2050-2051

stories of becoming white are deeply connected to the American Christian project, and the Protestant ethos at the heart of the American identity. Being visibly not Protestant by wearing a Hijab, or a Turban, renders you not white (or raises questions about your whiteness) because you aren't Protestant. You have explicitly noted that you are not participating in the American Protestant project, and thus your Americanism is in question. Even Orthodox Jews who visibly mark their difference from the Protestant norm might be read as racially different from Jews whose religion is less visible on the body. By marking yourself as religiously distinct, you are less American, and less white, because you're not Protestant.

Further it's important to emphasize that the racial landscape we have now was not predetermined. It might seem obvious to us now that Mormons the Irish are white, but they weren't always, and there was no guarantee that they would end up in the position they are in now. Race is constructed based on specific cultural, historical, religious, political, and social moments and what is "true" today about race today might not be true tomorrow, nor was it true yesterday. Acknowledging the malleable and contrived nature of race is the first step in understanding fully how race functions in society, and how we can work to overcome the systemic racial inequality and violence that permeates this country.

Whiteness as a category is more stable than it had been in the past, and there are less questions about who can and should be considered white. The answer to those questions seem obvious to most people and there isn't much debate on these issues, but the fact that whiteness has stabilized does not mean that it will remain that way. If anything, this thesis should make clear that notions of race are constantly changing. What this means is that there isn't any security in the current landscape. There's no way to say what will happen, and groups that have become

white might lose that status at some point in the future. The only consistency to race in America has been its inconsistency.

In the first chapter, I included a quote from Kelly Barker on the ideology of the Klan that I want to return to. When talking about the second era of the KKK, Baker argues that “the religious movement was bound to the superiority and dominance of whites, which if challenged would lead to the downfall of Protestantism as a whole. White supremacy and the religious tradition were symbiotic; the ruin of one would equal the destruction of the other. Whiteness was the lynchpin of America’s Protestant Christian society.”¹⁵⁴ While this was explicitly true for members of the KKK, it has also been true for larger white society. Throughout American history, this idea has shaped the way whiteness has been thought about by people across the country. In the American Mind, these things are all linked together. To be white is to be Protestant is to be American. They are one and the same. You cannot have whiteness without Christianity.

As a final note, it is worth speaking to the failures of this work when it comes to racial diversity within each of these religious identities explored. There are black Mormons, Jews and Muslims all of whom have never had access to whiteness even as their coreligionists have been folded into white American society (even in a limited way in the case of Muslims). This work speaks against a simple color-based understanding of race, but it still is the basis for a lot of racial categorization, and the religious lens, while important, is limited by this larger framework. Regardless of religion, those who are perceived as black cannot gain access to whiteness even through Christianity. Whiteness is accessed through Christianity, except when it comes to blackness, the insurmountable barrier that cannot be overcome even through religion.

¹⁵⁴ Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*, 194

Antiblackness is at the heart of all racial formation in the United States. Whiteness is defined not by what it is (Protestant, Anglo-Saxon), but what it is not, and blackness is central to that.

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