



## not Colonialist: New Goals Amid American Christians' Privilege



**Abby Prible**

She/Her

First-Year

Political Science &

International Studies

While Americans are guaranteed freedom of religion under the United States Constitution, religious privilege exists. Christians have always had religious privilege in the United States, and this is manifested in two ways: small scale benefits and large scale conversion.

On a small scale, Christians are regularly granted days off school and work to celebrate religious holidays, such as Christmas and Good Friday, and many are provided religious texts in hotel rooms, such as the Bible and the Book of Mormon. "Small" instances of privilege like this are so prevalent in our society that they often go unnoticed and can lead many Christians to have a superiority complex.

On a larger scale, the superiority complex of American Christians has historically been tied to their eagerness to convert people to their religion. According to an Ohio State University's article, "Forcing Religion on the Indigenous?" when colonists came from Europe, many of them had the goal of converting Indigenous people to Christianity. These colonists believed that they were actually doing Indigenous people a favor—saving them from eternal damnation and suffering. This idea stems from the false belief that non-Christian religions are immoral. This conversion of Indigenous and, as began later, enslaved peoples, was conversion by force, according to Marcus W. Jernegan's article "Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies."

This idea persists in our society today in the form of neocolonialism, which Britannica defines as "a further development of capitalism that enables capitalist powers (both nations and corporations) to dominate subject nations through the operations of international capitalism rather than by means of direct rule."

Many Christians travel on mission trips to foreign countries, with the goal of providing services and converting people to Christianity. An example of this is when churches travel in groups to foreign countries, often in Africa and Latin America, to paint houses or teach Bible classes to children. Gabrielle Martinez, writer of "Mission Trips Essentially Modern-Day Colonialism," is a critic of

this and says that "people on mission trips have the motive of evangelizing people who didn't ask to be evangelized." It is clear that mission trips—also known as "voluntourism"—further the white Christian saviour complex in the U.S.

Our society also often praises those who forcibly convert people to Christianity. For example, Mother Theresa is largely seen as the epitome of peace and humanitarianism. What many do not know is that Mother Theresa actually forcibly converted many people. According to Krithika Varagur, columnist for The Wall Street Journal, there are accounts of Mother Theresa attempting to baptize the dying.

Having a savior complex is not how people should coexist in society today: equality cannot exist when superiority does. Instead, let us recognize the value that diverse religious identities and various perspectives bring. In order to dismantle the system of white Christian supremacy, it is imperative that Christians recognize their privilege and focus on extending opportunities to people of non-Christian religions. Khyati Y. Joshi, writer of the book, "White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America," says, "Acknowledging how and why religious minorities suffer structural disadvantages helps us to find ways to create a society that takes all kinds of diversities into account and affords opportunities for all kinds of people to live fulfilling lives."

Through small scale benefits and large scale conversion, American Christians have experienced great religious privilege. Certainly, there has been internal violence and spiteful rhetoric between Christian groups; however, if we focus on helping others, instead of superiority and division, then we can begin to coexist.