

Christianity and Critical Theory: A Brief Case for Complementarity

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Abstract

Contemporary discourse on the intersection of Critical Theory (CT), Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Christian theology and ethics has reached an all-time high. This is particularly true with white evangelicalism in the U.S., where denominations, popular figures, and an endless stream of media regularly, publicly, and explicitly decry “Critical Theory” in all its forms—even if it is clear that critics have not informed themselves of what exactly they are critiquing. What explains this social and cultural phenomenon? And is CT really inherently opposed to all things “Christian”? This presentation will suggest that, despite being categorically different, CT and certain traditions of Christian thought are highly complementary, even to the point where specific ideas of specific Critical Theories function as extensions of classical theological dogmas. Specific attention is given to the psychology of racism in Critical Race Theory and the doctrine of total depravity in reformed thought, among others.

Introduction¹

It is difficult to overstate the cultural chaos and discursive invective surrounding the subject of Critical Theory (henceforth CT) in contemporary North America. This is particularly true in the U.S. Several states have already banned Critical Race Theory from primary education, while others propose banning use of words like “patriarchy” and “social justice”² in classrooms, ending “requirements that public schools include writings on women’s suffrage and the civil rights movement

1 An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 2021 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in San Antonio, Texas.

2 Reid Wilson, “‘Woke,’ ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘equity’: Wisconsin GOP proposes banning words from schools,” *The Hill* (September 29, 2021).

in social studies classes,”³ and eradicating Native Americans from American history.⁴

This radical movement can be framed in many ways, such as embodying a larger “fascist resurgence” that parallels contemporary movements in Brazil, India, and Russia. But it can also be framed as integration with white Christian nationalism and evangelical fundamentalism.⁵ As it will be discussed below, there are now books, conferences, and theological documents written by seminary presidents dedicated to being “anti-woke” and anti-CT. In this context, the academy is seen as particularly insidious; “Professors are the enemy,” as J. D. Vance remarked in 2021.⁶ The argument is also explicitly made that anything non-conservative (whether political, ethical, or theological) is inherently *anti-Christian*. “Critical Theory” (and its various expressions) is said to be cause of social strife, ideological extremism, and the decline of Western civilization itself.

While this movement is undoubtedly characterized by political and religious fanaticism, there are nevertheless clear and sharp claims about the limits of Christian thought and behavior, and a powerful class of society that is invested in enforcing these limits. In other words, the anti-CT movement is too concerning to try to ignore, even if responding to it risks public embarrassment by scholars.

What I suggest below is that Critical Theory, broadly understood, is actually more complementary to Christian faith than antagonistic. By revisiting the life and teachings of Jesus in earliest Christian memory, and revisiting traditional doctrines (e.g., sin and depravity), the centrality of social justice becomes acutely apparent. While this will leave many questions unanswered, in keeping with this journal’s focus on “theology, scripture, and culture,” it will hopefully show the profound contradictions and social consequences this debate will likely produce within the hardened, fundamentalist Christian religious tradition that has developed.

3 Paul Stinson, “Texas Senate Votes to Remove Required Lessons on Civil Rights,” *Bloomberg Law* (July 16, 2021).

4 Stephen Groves, “Indigenous history, culture cut from South Dakota standards,” *Associated Press* (August 10, 2021).

5 See Samuel Perry and Philip Gorski, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Katherine Stewart, *Power Worshipers* (New York: Bloomsbury Adult, 2022); Eric L. McDaniel, Irfan Nooruddin, Allyson F. Shortle, *The Everyday Crusade: Christian Nationalism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Paul Miller, *The Religion of American Greatness: What’s Wrong With Christian Nationalism* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Academic, 2022);

6 Henry Reichman, “‘The Professors Are the Enemy,’” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (December 14, 2021).

On “Critical Theory”

For the purposes of this article, I define CT in its broadest sense as social theory—not simply the Frankfurt School philosophy, nor contemporary literary criticism (though it certainly involves both), but rather, something close to what Lois Tyson says in her text *Critical Theory Today*:

... even our ‘personal,’ ‘natural’ interpretations of literature and of the world we live in ... are based on assumptions, on ways of seeing the world, that are themselves theoretical and that we don’t realize we’ve internalized. In other words, there is no such thing as a non-theoretical interpretation. We may not be aware of the theoretical assumptions that guide our thinking, but those assumptions are there, nevertheless.⁷

To borrow from Herbert Marcuse, “Critical theory strives to define the irrational character of the established rationality ...”⁸

Thus, for example, the critical theory of feminism looks at our “rational world” and notices that over half the population is female, but all U.S. Presidents, most CEOs, owners of businesses, church ministers, judges, and professors are *male*, and it asks: “why?” It notices that “man” in language represents the generic human, but not “woman.” It observes a history of prohibiting women from owning property, going to college, teaching, serving on jury, and studies a mind-boggling history of violence of men against women (all unparalleled for the history of men)⁹ and challenges whether this world is truly “rational” and just.

Similarly, the radical economic tradition (often abbreviated “Marxist Theory”) looks at a world of vast economic inequalities and the drudgery of wage labor under a hierarchy of power and exploitation and asks if this is really the best mode of material production. It observes everything from money, to property rights, employment, fiat currency and central banks, and all the other givens and places them in a historical context instead of seeing them as eternal.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) observes that white households have ten times the average wealth of black households; that African Americans are disproportionately pulled over by police, sentenced, and incarcerated; and that the history of this country is one of slaveholding, racial segregation, and abuses of all kinds by white people against African Americans.¹⁰ In response to these observations it

7 Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 3-4.

8 Herbert Marcuse, “The Catastrophe of Liberation,” in *Critical Theory: The Essential Readings* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1992), 104.

9 Elaine Storkey, *Scars Across Humanity: Understanding and Overcoming Violence Against Women* (London: SPCK, 2015).

10 See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2012); Ibram X. Kendi,

asks, “Why? How did this happen? How does it still keep happening? Is this really ‘nature’ and ‘God’s design’ as we’ve been told, or is it irrational and unjust?”

One could make similar observations for post-colonial, queer, deconstructionist, and other theories—though (a) some “critical theories” do not fit this line of reasoning as neatly as these three examples;¹¹ (b) this general framework is always evolving, and (c) critical analysis predates these formal approaches. Nevertheless, it is adequate enough to say that *CT as it functions today is simply critical-thinking about society*.

1. It looks primarily at *society*¹² or group behavior—and especially critically evaluates contemporary *capitalist* society.
2. It sees social phenomena as social constructs, inevitably products of their time.¹³
3. As such, it questions the legitimacy of what is considered “normal” in society.¹⁴
4. The underlying concern is the “concern for the abolition of social injustice.”¹⁵

CT is therefore an essential framework for social science. It reflects “the beginner’s mind,” the mindset that “approaches the world without knowing in advance what it will find; it is open and receptive to experience.”¹⁶ Or at least, it *should* be that way.

Any theoretical framework can become reductionistic and unhelpful—something critical theorists are often (though not always) aware of.¹⁷ For example, Ibram Kendi in *How to Be an Antiracist* argues that “there is no such thing as a

Stamped from the Beginning (New York: Type Books, 2016); Jemar Tisby, *How to Fight Racism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).

11 E.g., Freudian psychology, if it is considered a “critical theory.”

12 Max Horkheimer, “The Foundations and Methods of Critical Theory,” 246: “Critical thinking is the function neither of the isolated individual nor of a sum-total of individuals. Its subject is rather a definite individual in [their] real relation to other individuals and groups, in their conflict with a particular class, and finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature.”

13 E.g., Max Horkheimer, “The Foundations and Methods of Critical Theory,” 242: “It is not only in clothing and appearance, in outward form and emotional make-up that [people] are the product of history. Even the way they see and hear is inseparable from the social life-process as it has evolved over the millennia . . .”

14 Horkheimer, *Foundations and Methods* 244: “in Horkheimer’s words: ‘the critical attitude . . . is wholly distrustful of the rules of conduct with which society as presently constituted provides each of its members.’”

15 Horkheimer, *Foundations and Methods*, 253.

16 Kerry Ferris and Jill Stein, *The Real World: An Introduction to Sociology*, 6th ed. (New York: W & W. Norton, 2019), 10.

17 Note, for example, the remarks of Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 3; Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), chs. 6–7.

not-racist idea, only racist ideas and antiracist ideas.”¹⁸ Assertions like these are difficult to square with others made by the same author—namely that racist ideas have a timeline, and certainly post-date “ideas” in general. Similarly, feminist frameworks may presume discrimination when a certain woman is paid less than a man when this difference may have to do with different variables. The catastrophic failures of Marxist reductionism can be easily witnessed when examining the first two years of Lenin’s reign and in several years of Stalin’s dictatorship in Russia—where class enemies and endless varieties of the bourgeoisie were manufactured, and nearly all aspects of human life were reduced to one’s relation to the communist state.¹⁹ Some of Freud’s ideas have become the butt of jokes because of their notorious lack of falsifiability. In short, ideological frameworks are meant and used regularly to open one’s eyes to dimensions, relations, and experiences that were previously invisible, and without incorporating other frameworks, they naturally run the risk of absolutizing the dimension and perspective they seek to understand.

The whole enterprise of critical theory is also *interconnected*. Capitalism, for example, has historically been both racist and sexist. Whether one turns to the African American slave trade or to women’s unpaid domestic labor, this interdependence and *intersectionality* is evident.²⁰ Regimes of power and systems of exploitation reinforce each other,²¹ as seen in (for example) increased violence against transgender persons of color.²² “The forces that impose class injustice and economic exploitation are the same ones that propagate racism, sexism, militarism, ecological devastation, homophobia, xenophobia and the like.”²³

18 Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: Random House, 2019), 20.

19 See Richard Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1996); Olev Khlevniuk, translated by Nora Seligman Favorov, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). These works should be balanced by Robert C. Allen, *Farm to Factory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Walter Rodney, *The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World* (London: Verso, 2018).

20 Kimberlé Crenshaw, a co-founder of Critical Race Theory (as a technical discipline in the field of law), coined the term “intersectionality” in a 1989 paper to help explain the oppression of African-American women. Standard sociology textbooks now define it as “a concept that identifies how different categories of inequality (race, class, gender, etc.,) intersect to shape the lives of individuals and groups.” Ferris and Stein, *The Real World*, 188.

21 Hence bell hooks’ use of the phrase “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” Cf. Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 122–25.

22 See “Fatal Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2020,” *Human Rights Campaign*; Anna Marie Forestiere, “America’s War on Black Trans Women,” *Harvard Civil Rights Law Review* (September 23, 2020). Cf. Wirtz, Andrea L., Tonia C. Poteat, Mannat Malik, and Nancy Glass. “Gender-Based Violence Against Transgender People in the United States: A Call for Research and Programming,” *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 21:2 (April 2020): 227–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018757749>.

23 Michael Parenti, *Blackshirts and Reds* San Francisco: City Light Books, 1997), 151.

On “Christianity”

Again, for our purposes, “Christianity” here refers to its broadest sense: a religious tradition that finds its inspiration in the life, teaching, and legacy of Jesus of Nazareth. “God,” the Creator of the world, has been revealed in various ways—significantly, however, in Jesus. Various people using various philosophical and theological frameworks grasp at this “Christ-event” (Barth), whether Greek philosophy (John calls Jesus the “*logos*”), or in terms of the contemporary Roman emperor (“Lord and Savior,” “son of God,” etc.), or simply “God with us” (“Immanuel”), or through Jewish images, metaphors, and models (“son of man,” “anointed one,” etc.). In Christ, we learn the good news that God loves the world and calls humans to join in the work of restoration and transformation. We also learn the risks of this social, economic, and spiritual work: Jesus was crucified by the Romans on charges of insurrection.

Even given such a minimalist construction, overlap with CT is immediately evident. Scholars, for example, have recently appreciated how deeply concerned Jesus was about justice in the Jewish village community and beyond.²⁴ The parables of Jesus are themselves a form of subversive social analysis.²⁵ Indeed, while certain responses can be expected from any group under military occupation or economic and political oppression (e.g., resistance, subversion, integration, etc.), it was and remains hard to ignore the lengths to which Jesus goes to show *inclusive* love.

For example, Jesus was remembered to dignify or include such people as *ethnic minorities*, like Samaritans (John 4; Luke 10:25–37; cf. Ethiopians in Acts 8), and the children of immigrants (Mark 7:24–30); *those oppressed by virtue of their sex and social state*, like eunuchs (Matt 19; Acts 8), women (John 4; Luke 8:1–3), divorced women (John 4; Matt 19; Mark 10), bleeding women (Matt 9:20–22, Mark 5:25–34, Luke 8:43–48), accused women (John 8), sick women (Luke 13), widows (Mark 12; Luke 20–21; 1 Tim 5); the sick (John 5; Acts 3; Matt 9:20–22; Luke 14), disabled (Mark 7; 8:22; Mark 10; John 5; 9; Matt 9; Mark 2), diseased (Matt 8; Luke 17), and others ritually unclean like fisherman (Luke 5); and others who were both vulnerable and habitually disrespected, like children (Matt 19:14; Mark 10; Luke 17:2).²⁶

The way in which Jesus included these people is also significant. Marcus Borg notes, for example, that “Sharing a meal was a form of social inclusion, and

24 See in particular, Richard Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) and William Herzog II, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

25 William Herzog II, *The Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

26 Others humanized by Jesus were tax-collectors (the economically exploitative) and Roman centurions (the physically violent and oppressive). What all of these groups seem to have in common is a marked degree of real or potential shame.

refusing to share a meal was a form of social exclusion.”²⁷ For crossing these cultural boundaries, Jesus was rebuked.²⁸ The Apostle Paul would later rebuke Peter for doing the opposite (Gal 2–3) and excluding Gentiles at the table. (This was actually the origin of Paul’s famous doctrine of “justification.”²⁹)

The late James Dunn recently concluded in his final book that there are “a number of emphases and priorities that we can say with some confidence the first followers of Jesus attributed to Jesus.”³⁰ Most, if not all, of them embody an ethos of inclusion. In his textbook on ethics, David Gushee makes similar observations, noting how the famous command in Matthew 5:48 should be rendered, “Be complete or all-inclusive therefore, as your heavenly Father is complete or all-inclusive.”³¹

Christianity and Critical Theory

If, therefore, there is any coherent overlap between “Critical Theory” and a historically-informed understanding of early Christianity, it would seem to be this concern for social and economic justice in an unjust and oppressive world. It would also seem obvious that this ethos is extremely important for the present condition. This is evident given recent events in North America, but also in the larger, global picture. For example, economist Jeffrey Sachs argues in *The Age of Sustainable Development* that for our planet to survive and thrive at all, we need to achieve three goals—one of which is “broad-based social inclusion.”³²

Jesus was very much standing in line with the prophetic tradition in this regard,³³

27 Marcus Borg, *Jesus: The Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 159.

28 Mark 2:16; Luke 7:34; 15:2; 19:7; Matt. 11:19. Cf. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 1994), 220: “The deliberate conjunction of magic and meal, miracle and table, free compassion and open commensality, was a challenge launched not just on the level of Judaism’s strictist purity regulations, or even on that of the Mediterranean’s patriarchal combination of honor and shame, patronage and clientage, but at the most basic level of civilization’s eternal inclination to draw lines, invoke boundaries, establish hierarchies, and maintain discrimination.”

29 N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 190: “Galatians 2 offers the first great exposition of justification in Paul. In that chapter, the nub of the issue was the question, who are Christians allowed to sit down and eat with? . . . Many Christians, both in the Reformation and in the counter-reformation traditions, have done themselves and the church a great disservice by treating the doctrine of justification’ as central to their debates, and by supposing that it described the system by which people attained salvation. They have turned the doctrine into its opposite. Justification declares that all who believe in Jesus Christ belong as the same table, no matter what their cultural or racial differences.”

30 “The Love Command,” “Priority of the Poor,” “Openness to Gentiles,” “Women among His Close Followers,” “Openness to Children,” “Relaxation of Food Laws,” and “The Last Supper or Lord’s Supper.” James Dunn, *Jesus According to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019).

31 David Gushee and Glenn Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 101.

32 Jeffrey Sachs, *The Age of Sustainable Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 182.

33 G. M. Williamson, *He Has Shown You What Is Good: Old Testament Justice Then and Now*

and that is how CT can function as well: for questioning what is “normal,” speaking truth to power, subverting the dominant discourse, and, as Cornel West puts it, to “bear witness to people’s suffering” and “overcome injustice.”³⁴ In fact, it may be this relationship that seems to bother anti-CT religious conservatives the most: academia, the dangerous “secular university,” is doing a better job than the church imitating this powerful and prophetic “spirit of Christ.” In any case, the French Christian sociologist Jacques Ellul framed this orientation in poignant terms:

Christians were never meant to be normal. We’ve always been holy troublemakers . . . creators of uncertainty, agents of dimension that’s incompatible with the status quo; we do not accept the world as it is, but we insist on the world becoming the way that God wants it to be.³⁵

Transformation, however, assumes a definable state of misery and corruption. This is where Critical Theory and Christian theology overlaps the most.

Systemic Sin

In his 2018 presidential AAR lecture “In the Ruins of White Evangelicalism,” David Gushee quotes extensively from the writings of African American literature as a lens to understand racist white Christians (i.e., slave owners, or church members who opposed civil rights, etc.) under the three themes of “moral debase-ment,” “religious powerlessness,” and “perceptual blindness.”³⁶ How is it that so many Christians in so many places and for so long systematically dehumanized other human beings and did not see a problem?³⁷ His brief literary analysis clearly demonstrated how racism is upheld for personal economic benefit, for establishing pride and superiority, involves slander against the oppressed, arbitrary use of power, unchecked anger and violence, relational alienation, and willful blindness. This condition was not “forged overnight,” for it was “the practiced habit of jabbing out one’s eyes and forgetting the work of one’s hands.”³⁸

This presentation was a vivid description of “total depravity,” and it challenges the idea that Calvin’s picture of humanity is far too cynical and pessimistic to be

(Eugene Wipf and Stock, 2012; originally published by Lutterworth Press). Jemar Tisby, author of *The Color of Compromise*, posted a short video of his computer screen, where he searched for the word “oppress” in the NIV Bible. It returned over a hundred results; he highlighted Ps 9:9; Isa 1:17; Jer 22:3; and Luke 4:18.

34 Cornel West, *Black Prophetic Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 2.

35 Despite its wide currency in a variety of publications, I have not been able to locate the primary source of this quotation (even after asking the Jacques Ellul Society for insight). Having read many of Ellul’s books myself, however, it seems characteristic of his tone and perspective.

36 Available on the AAR YouTube page at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPkl-sBFzdQ>

37 Some certainly did see this contradiction with Christian faith and life. See for example, Ida B. Wells, *The Light of Truth* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2014), 41, 173, 174, 182, 183, 197, 224, 241, 261, 262, 283, 289, 297, 300, 308, 309, 311, 401, 402, 405, 406, 414, 451, 452, 554.

38 Ta-Nahisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2015).

real.³⁹ Indeed, Calvin's own description of sin seems as penetrating as contemporary social critics, ethicists, and critical theorists:

Men . . . are so inclined to self-flattery that they always want, as far as possible, to dissuade the mind from recognizing their sin. This, I think, was what led Plato to maintain that we do not sin except through ignorance. That might be an apt saying of his if man, in his hypocrisy, could hide his faults so that the conscience was able to escape the judgment of God. But since the sinner, his heart failing to discern good from bad, is each time forcibly brought back to the fact of sin, and cannot close his eyes without sometimes having, however reluctantly, to open them, it is wrong to say that he sins through ignorance.⁴⁰

Calvin notes that people often sin when "personal considerations arise," and elsewhere writes that "our mind is so blind in this respect to God's law that it cannot appreciate how evil are its appetites. . . . When philosophers speak of the unruly impulses of the heart, they mean those which are plain to see," not hidden out of view.⁴¹

In a recent interview with Tripp Fuller, liberal seminary President Stephen G. Ray Jr. maintained his "Calvinist" label essentially for this reason: this level of depravity is *real*.⁴² And while Calvin may have emphasized the individual and internal aspects more than the social, the whole point is that sin is *systemic*—passed down each generation throughout the whole world. This is, after all, why the whole cosmos, not just human souls, needs redemption. In Calvin's words, "through man's fault a curse has extended above and below, over all the regions of the world,"⁴³ and "this perversion of our nature is never passive in us, but continually produces new fruit. . . . In the same way a fiery furnace always spews out flames and sparks . . ."⁴⁴

The irony is that contemporary evangelical Protestants fail to see that such systemic sin actually exists in the real world, and that it has specific names, like "systemic racism," "patriarchy," "economic exploitation," etc. In fact, they either deny such sin exists, or affirm it as God's design, in a variety of ways.

For example, in fall of 2020, six Southern Baptist seminary Presidents issued

39 E.g., John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Robert White (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015, orig. 1541), 36: "Man is, in himself, nothing but lust."

40 Calvin, *Institutes*, 60.

41 Calvin, *Institutes*, 62.

42 Tripp Fuller, "Stephen G. Ray Jr: how to be a passionate progressive dye in the wool Calvinist" (July 14, 2021). Available online at: <https://trippfuller.com/2021/07/14/stephen-g-ray-jr-how-to-be-a-passionate-progressive-dye-in-the-wool-calvinist/>

43 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006, orig 1559), II.1.5.

44 Calvin, *Institutes* (1541), 36.

a statement on the twentieth anniversary of the *Baptist Faith and Message*,⁴⁵ saying, “We stand together on historic Southern Baptist condemnations of racism in any form and we also declare that affirmation of Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and any version of Critical Theory is incompatible with the *Baptist Faith & Message*.”⁴⁶ This is a contradictory claim, since the most mild version of CRT is generic anti-racism, which these authors claim to support. It is also not by chance that the representative institutions of these Presidents were largely built by slave labor/slaveowners.⁴⁷ In response to this discovery at SBTS, President Albert Mohler insisted on inaction—even refusing to offer tuition discounts to the descendants of such slaves (as other universities have done).⁴⁸ Critical Theory could help explain this callousness, and explain why some religious institutions remain so allergic to anti-racism.

The allergic reaction is, indeed, very strong. Voddie Baucham, another seminary administrator, anti-CT celebrity, and author of *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe*, was recently shown to intentionally misrepresent and plagiarize the work of Critical Race Theorists.⁴⁹ Owen Strachan, another seminary dean, authored another best-seller of similar quality called *Christianity and Wokeness: How the Social Justice Movement Is Hijacking the Gospel - and the Way to Stop It*. The first two pages of the preface by pastor and former seminary President John MacArthur are iconic of the anti-CRT movement as a whole: error-ridden, uncritical, and downright convoluted, making embarrassing claims, like that the word “colonization” is a “buzzword” of CRT, that CRT is a “worldview,” and that (nevertheless) such critics of CRT are of “the keenest minds in the academic world.”⁵⁰

MacArthur, Baucham, and other reformed and Baptist pastors produced/signed the 2018 “Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel,” an earlier event that added fuel to this socio-religious fire. Chapter 8 states that “WE DENY that political or social activism should be viewed as integral components of the gospel or primary to the mission of the church.” Chapter 14 states that “we emphatically deny that

45 The statement was in response to an earlier 2019 resolution that was adopted, which labeled CRT a useful “analytical tool.”

46 George Schroeder, “Seminary presidents reaffirm BFM, declare CRT incompatible,” *Religious News Service* (November 30, 2020). Available online at: <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/seminary-presidents-reaffirm-bfm-declare-crt-incompatible/>

47 Ken Shepherd, “Baptist Seminary Acknowledges Its Founders Owned Slaves; No Name Changes Planned,” *Associated Press* (December 13, 2018).

48 Shepherd, “Baptist Seminary Acknowledges.”

49 Nicola Menzie, “‘Fault Lines’ Author Voddie Baucham Confused or Making Things Up, Richard Delgado Says in Response to Misquote on ‘Righteous Actions’ of Whites” (August 3, 2021). Available online at: <https://faithfullymagazine.com/fault-lines-voddie-baucham-crt-richard-delgado>

50 John MacArthur in Owen Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness: How the Social Justice Movement Is Hijacking the Gospel—and the Way to Stop It* (Washington D.C.: Regnery, 2021). Cf. Mark Driscoll, *Christian Theology vs. Critical Theory* (Real Faith, 2021).

lectures on social issues (or activism aimed at reshaping the wider culture) are as vital to the life and health of the church as the preaching of the gospel and the exposition of Scripture.”⁵¹ It is strange that the authors’ staunch anti-abortion activism isn’t included in these rejections of social/political activism, nor does it occur to the authors that “preaching of the gospel and exposition of Scripture”—at least as they understand it—simply failed to make a difference when it mattered most, time after time throughout history. In fact, some of history’s most popular preachers, from Whitefield to Edwards, owned slaves. (This has always been the problem with *sola scriptura* of the most reductionistic kind: if it doesn’t deliver on its promises—like saving people from a life of active sin—what’s Plan B?⁵²) The authors also ignore how the Jesus movement was and remains inescapably social.⁵³

To many religious observers, then, this coordinated enterprise embodies not a commitment to truth, but in some ways actually expresses the kind of depravity described by Calvin.⁵⁴ Such reactionaries are too caught up in being “anti-woke” to recognize that the “woke” metaphor means “waking up to our world of sin and embarking on a radical new life.” This is, after all, what Jesus meant when calling sinners to be “born again.” *Waking-up* has been central to early Christian tradition ever since (John 11:11; Rom 13:11; Eph 5:14; Rev 3:2–3; cf. Luke 9:32; 1 Cor 16:13; 1 Thess 5:6). How ironic, then, that religious authorities today have made this metaphor the focal point not for determining who is *in* Christ, but who is *outside* of Christ.

This is not to deny that there exists a superficial kind of “wokeness”—one that is commercialized and utilized for validating political goals. In my experience and that of others I know, there is considerable skepticism regarding the authenticity of corporations and businesses that put on a public appearance of being “inclusive” precisely by those within marginalized groups. Marketing is marketing. The white liberalism characteristic of Harvard, New York Times, the

51 Available online at: <https://statementonsocialjustice.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/SSJG-FINAL.pdf>.

52 E.g., “When the negro has appealed to the Christian and moral forces of the country—asking them to create a sentiment against this lawlessness and unspeakable barbarism; demanding justice and protection of the law for every human being regardless of color—that demand has been met with general indifference or entirely ignored.” Ida B. Wells, *The Light of Truth* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2014), 405–6.

53 Cf. Herzog, *The Parables*; Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016); Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: MacMillan, 1917), *idem*, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

54 It is similar to when Ida B. Wells observed that Christians are too worried about saving people from hell-fire to save people from the real fires that they’re lighting here on earth. See Wells, *The Light of Truth*, 173–74. Many today seem too worried about CRT being “taught in schools” to notice the outright racist, sexist, heteronormative, Eurocentric, colonialist history that they have created, funded, and propagated for centuries.

Democratic Party, and to some extent, denominations like the PCUSA, seems saturated in more virtue-signaling than authentic, radical compassion. In the end, however, such rhetoric is neither here nor there, for as Jesus said, “you will know them by their fruits” (Matt 7:15–20).

Conclusion

CT and CRT essentially function similar to how feminism and communism did throughout the 1970s and 1980s: it functions as a scare-tactic, but also as a threat to male capitalist hegemony. Thus, when Tom Buck spoke at the 2021 Wokeness and Gospel Conference, he tweeted that CRT is the “worse threat to Christianity since communism.”⁵⁵ This comparison was not arbitrary. Ultimately, then, CT is the latest ideological scapegoat for a group whose monopoly on power is slipping, though the threat is real. CT, which is little more than critical thinking about society, poses a basic threat to any perspective, movement, or religion that cannot survive such basic scrutiny.

This explains both the prohibitions of CRT in schools and attacks on the social sciences in general. If racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. are no longer legal, and are falling out of style in societal institutions, these attitudes and institutions can at least make a last stand behind lecterns as much as pulpits. In addition to Baucham and Strachan, the Toronto psychologist Jordan Peterson and mathematician James Lindsay⁵⁶ frequently criticize anthropology, sociology, English literature, women’s studies, and other fields for being hopelessly corrupted. (It is not clear what this *uncorrupted* social science, free from the chains of CT, would actually look like.⁵⁷) This stance reveals the anti-academic nature of the anti-CT movement where professors are the enemy.

The threat of a changing world is, however, always real to those who resist change. Kristin Kobes DuMez argued in *Jesus and John Wayne* that conservative evangelicals did not support Trump despite their beliefs and culture, but *because* of them.⁵⁸ While DuMez demonstrated that white evangelicalism has always been patriarchal and hyper-masculine, Jemar Tisby and Anthea Butler in their recent monographs demonstrated that it has always been racist.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, Kevin

55 This tweet (and Buck’s account) was subsequently deleted. I quote here from memory. Similarly, Strachan (citing MacArthur) in *Christianity and Wokeness*, 26, calls wokeness “the greatest danger to the church . . . in six decades.”

56 For example, both have been positively interviewed by the reformed Baptist nationalist organization Sovereign Nations (see <https://sovereignnations.com>). Baucham also gives credit to Lindsay’s influence on his thought in *Fault Lines*. Albert Mohler warmly interviewed James Lindsay on his podcast.

57 The University of Austin (UATX) is one attempt.

58 Kristin Kobes DuMez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020).

59 Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 136.

Kruse has demonstrated that, since the 50s, it has been nationalist. Charles Fensham and others have demonstrated that it has been violent towards gender and sexual minorities.⁶⁰ In that sense, CT is indeed incompatible with what (for example) *Baptist Faith and Message* historically represents, and the “catastrophe of evangelicalism” *really is* the issue of “social justice.” That is, to the extent that contemporary Christianity—and “Western Civilization”—is sexist, racist, homophobic, heteronormative, and economically predatory, in a word, built on power and domination, CT *is* an existential threat. CT is where people can learn about and expose such harmful power differentials, and organize resistance. Like Jesus’ parables in occupied Palestine, CT may be able to help carve out room for a message of hope in the lives of the oppressed.

Academia has indeed furnished frameworks of interpretation that are proving more meaningful to young people than traditional religious ideas and institutions. But in the absence of what William James calls “dogmatic theology,”⁶¹ many religious identities are no longer *religious*, but strictly cultural and political.⁶² And while CT is a way of thinking, it is not a “worldview” or world religion. Nevertheless, there are at least potential areas of positive overlap, if not a complementary relationship on some important matters. If the result is a more just, equitable, and flourishing society, religious practitioners and professors ought not hesitate to join hands.

60 Charles Fensham, *Misguided Love: Christians and the Rupture of LGBTQI2+ People* (Journal of Pastoral Publications Inc., 2019).

61 “We must therefore, I think, bid a definitive good-bye to dogmatic theology. In all sincerity our faith must do without that warrant.” William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, orig 1902), 341.

62 This is true with “evangelical” and “republican.” Ryan Burge, “Why ‘Evangelical’ Is Becoming Another Word for ‘Republican’,” *The New York Times* (October 6, 2021).