

# Critical Dilemma

Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer



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## CHAPTER 1

# A Looming Crisis

**T**his book is not about the Republican party.

This book is not about the Democratic party.

This book is not about the Libertarian Party or the Green Party or the American Solidarity Party or the Whig Party or the Bull Moose Party.

This book is not about politics.

When talking about social justice or wokeness or critical race theory or even race inside or outside of a church setting, we've found these reassurances to be necessary. Someone will inevitably assume that we're trying to convince them to vote for a particular party or candidate. That's not the case.

We recognize that, rightly understood, theology is upstream from culture, and culture is upstream from politics. As Richard John Neuhaus put it, "politics is a function of culture and culture, in turn, is reflective of (if not a function of) religion."<sup>1</sup> We therefore agree that Christianity should inform Christians' cultural and political stances. Nevertheless, this book is not about politics; it's not even principally about cultural stances that are the basis of politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1984), 132.



We're not writing this book to applaud or to criticize gun control. We're not writing to promote a \$15 or a \$30 minimum wage or the abolition of the minimum wage. We're not writing to discuss school funding or trade tariffs or immigration policy or the Department of Defense budget. While these are important matters, and while we care about them to varying degrees, our concerns are not political; they are theological.

A particular set of ideas has overtaken our culture and has begun to overwhelm the professing church. These ideas, as we'll show, are seriously detrimental to the common good and to basic Christian theology. To the extent that we embrace them wholeheartedly, substantially, or even moderately but uncritically, we'll sow discord in society and will undermine sound doctrine. Eventually, left unchecked, they will tear society apart and will decimate the visible church.

That's quite a remarkable claim. What are we basing it on? Are we being alarmist? What exactly are we talking about?

Let's begin by considering a set of cultural artifacts.

## Wokeness in the Wild

In 2016, four scholars published an article entitled "Glaciers, Gender, and Science" in the peer-reviewed journal *Progress in Human Geography*. They argued that the creation of a "feminist glaciology framework" would lead to "more just and equitable science and human-ice interactions."<sup>2</sup> Most of the people who heard about this article were simultaneously amused and confused. Glaciers are large blocks of ice. How are feminism and gender related to the study of large blocks of ice?

That same year, there was a horrific terrorist attack at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. The shooter swore allegiance to the Islamic State before killing nearly 50 people. In response, the Black Lives Matter website featured an open letter that stated, "The enemy is now and has always been

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Carey et al., "Glaciers, Gender, and Science: A Feminist Glaciology Framework for Global Environmental Change Research," *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 6 (December 2016): 770-793, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515623368>.

the four threats of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and militarism. These forces and not Islam create terrorism. These forces, and not queer-ness, create homophobia.”<sup>3</sup> That seems like an odd response. What does capitalism or the patriarchy have to do with an Islamic terrorist shooting up a gay nightclub?

In 2017, *The New York Times* published an op-ed entitled “Can My Children Be Friends With White People?” by Ekow N. Yankah, a Black professor of law at Yeshiva University. Wondering how he will parent his young children in light of President Trump’s 2016 election, the author writes, “I will teach them to be cautious, I will teach them suspicion, and I will teach them distrust. Much sooner than I thought I would, I will have to discuss with my boys whether they can truly be friends with white people...I will teach my boys to have profound doubts that friendship with white people is possible. When they ask, I will teach my sons that their beautiful hue is a fault line. Spare me platitudes of how we are all the same on the inside. I first have to keep my boys safe, and so I will teach them before the world shows them this particular brand of rending, violent, often fatal betrayal.”<sup>4</sup>

Not to be outdone, *The Washington Post* published an op-ed a few months later entitled “Why Can’t We Hate Men?” by Suzanna Danuta Walters, professor of sociology at Northeastern University. Reeling off a litany of examples of sexual abuse and misogyny, she muses that “in this indisputably true context, it seems logical to hate men. I can’t lie, I’ve always had a soft spot for the radical feminist smackdown, for naming the problem in no uncertain terms. I’ve rankled at the ‘but we don’t hate men’ protestations of generations of would-be feminists and found the ‘men are not the problem, this system is’ obfuscation too precious by half.” She concludes with a call to male allies: “So men, if you really are #WithUs and would like us to not hate you for all the millennia of woe you have produced and benefited from, start

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<sup>3</sup> Black Lives Matter, “In Honor of Our Dead: Latinx, Queer, Trans, Muslim, Black—We Will Be Free,” June 14, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160614192829/http://blacklivesmatter.com/in-honor-of-our-dead-queer-trans-muslim-black-we-will-be-free/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ekow Yankah, “Can My Children Be Friends With White People?,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/11/opinion/sunday/interracial-friendship-donald-trump.html>.

with this: Lean out so we can actually just stand up without being beaten down. Pledge to vote for feminist women only. Don't run for office. Don't be in charge of anything. Step away from the power. We got this. And please know that your crocodile tears won't be wiped away by us anymore. We have every right to hate you. You have done us wrong. #BecausePatriarchy. It is long past time to play hard for Team Feminism. And win."<sup>5</sup>

Are these approaches warranted? Are they healthy? Are they likely to lead to genuine love and unity?

In 2018, there was a Twitter exchange between Cher and Rosie O'Donnell, two entertainers with large social media followings. Cher tweeted out her support for a Joe Biden-Beto O'Rourke presidential ticket. Rosie replied, "say no 2 joe." When someone asked, "What's wrong with Joe Biden?" Rosie elaborated curtly, "No more old white men."<sup>6</sup> Once again, people were both offended and confused. Wasn't O'Donnell's response an obvious manifestation of blatant racism and sexism? And when Biden became the eventual Democratic nominee, why were 49 percent of White Democrats bothered that their candidate was a "white man in his 70s," compared to only 28 percent of Blacks and 30 percent of Hispanics who shared this concern?<sup>7</sup>

In 2019, Vicky Osterweil published a book-length defense of looting, which Osterweil defines as "the mass expropriation of property, mass shoplifting during a moment of upheaval or riot."<sup>8</sup> The book argued, "Looting attacks some of the core beliefs and structures of cisheteropatriarchal racial

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<sup>5</sup> Suzanna Walters, "Why Can't We Hate Men?," *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-cant-we-hate-men/2018/06/08/f1a3a8e0-6451-11e8-a69c-b944de66d9e7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-cant-we-hate-men/2018/06/08/f1a3a8e0-6451-11e8-a69c-b944de66d9e7_story.html).

<sup>6</sup> Rosie O'Donnell, Twitter post, December 12, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Rosie/status/1073077220707614720>.

<sup>7</sup> Amina Dunn and Jocelyn Kiley, "Some Democrats are bothered nominee is an older white man—and they solidly back Biden in November," *Pew Research Center*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/20/some-democrats-are-bothered-nominee-is-an-older-white-man-and-they-solidly-back-biden-in-november/>.

<sup>8</sup> Natalie Escobar, "One Author's Controversial View: 'In Defense Of Looting,'" *NPR*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2020/08/27/906642178/one-authors-argument-in-defense-of-looting>.

capitalist society...Looting rejects the legitimacy of ownership rights and property, the moral injunction to work for a living, and the ‘justice’ of law and order. Looting reveals all these for what they are: not natural facts, but social constructs benefiting a few at the expense of the many, upheld by ideology, economy, and state violence.”<sup>9</sup> Following protests and scattered looting in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, NPR interviewed Osterweil, who maintained that looting in this context attacks “the idea of property,” and “the history of whiteness and white supremacy.” Osterweil continued: “[Looting] provides people with an imaginative sense of freedom and pleasure and helps them imagine a world that could be...riots and looting are experienced as sort of joyous and liberatory.” After widespread ridicule, NPR added an introductory sentence apologizing that the original article “did not provide readers enough context for them to fully assess some of the controversial opinions discussed.”<sup>10</sup> Why is looting an attack on “cisheteropatriarchal racial capitalist society”? Why is it being viewed as a societal good—a healthy, cathartic, reparative action?

In 2020, the Smithsonian Institute’s National Museum of African American History and Culture posted (and later removed) an infographic on the “Aspects and Assumptions of Whiteness and White Culture in the United States,” which listed items like “Emphasis on Scientific Method,” “Objective, rational linear thinking,” “Cause and effect relationships,” “Future Orientation,” “Delayed gratification,” “Be polite,” and “Hard work is the key to success” as elements of “whiteness.”<sup>11</sup> These claims would make sense in the middle of a neo-Nazi manifesto. But what are they doing in a purportedly progressive, antiracist educational document created by a federally funded national museum?

The Smithsonian is hardly alone in adopting this perspective. At a Walmart training program, employees were told that racism is “a system of

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<sup>9</sup> Vicky Osterweil, *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2020), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Escobar, “One Author’s Controversial View: ‘In Defense Of Looting.’”

<sup>11</sup> Marina Watts, “In Smithsonian Race Guidelines, Rational Thinking and Hard Work Are White Values,” *Newsweek*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/smithsonian-race-guidelines-rational-thinking-hard-work-are-white-values-1518333>.

advantage for those considered white, and of oppression for those who are not considered white,” that people of color can suffer from “internalized racial oppression” characterized by “internalized negative messages about self and other people of color, distancing, exaggerated visibility, and protection of white people,” and that “white supremacy culture” includes things like “worship of the written word,” an “emphasis on being polite,” “individualism,” and “objectivity.”<sup>12</sup> Again, we might expect to hear some of these claims at a white power meeting, but why are they being asserted at a diversity training session held at a large corporation?

In 2021, a CNN news article stated that “it’s not possible to know a person’s gender identity at birth, and there is no consensus criteria for assigning sex at birth.”<sup>13</sup> This sentence remained intact for 24 hours until it was finally removed due to public outcry. Even if we believe there’s a difference between sex and gender, is it really true that “there is no consensus criteria for assigning sex at birth”? And has any human being ever “assigned” someone’s sex at birth? Isn’t sex “recognized” rather than “assigned”?

CNN was not the only organization making surprising statements about gender. The American Civil Liberties Union has also generated a steady stream of confusing content with regard to sex and gender identity. An April 30, 2020, ACLU article debunked “Four Myths About Trans Athletes,” including “Trans athletes’ physiological characteristics provide an unfair advantage over cis athletes,” and “Sex is binary, apparent at birth, and identifiable through singular biological characteristics” (note: these statements were presented as *myths*, not as true observations about reality).<sup>14</sup> They stated confidently that “FACT: Trans athletes do not have an unfair advantage in sports” and “FACT: Trans girls are girls.” Then, in response to the leak of the Dobbs Supreme Court decision that eventually overturned

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher F. Rufo, “Walmart vs. Whiteness,” *Christopher\_Rufo*, October 14, 2021, <https://christopherrufo.com/walmart-vs-whiteness/>.

<sup>13</sup> Devan Cole, “South Dakota’s governor issues executive orders banning transgender athletes from women’s sports,” *CNN*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/30/politics/south-dakota-transgender-sports-kristi-noem/index.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Chase Strangio and Gabriel Arkles, “Four Myths About Trans Athletes, Debunked,” *ACLU*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/news/lgbtq-rights/four-myths-about-trans-athletes-debunked>.

*Roe v. Wade*, they tweeted out the statement, “Abortion bans disproportionately harm: Black, Indigenous & other people of color, the LGBTQ community, immigrants, young people, those working to make ends meet, people with disabilities.”<sup>15</sup> Many people, including pro-choice feminists, noticed the puzzling omission of women from this list of people supposedly harmed by abortion bans. Why?

In June 2021, the television show *Blue’s Clues*, which is geared toward preschoolers, released a Pride Month animated sing-along video featuring drag queen Nina West and set to the tune of “The Ants Go Marching.”<sup>16</sup> The lyrics celebrated the many gender and sexual identities represented in a Pride parade and included explicit references to asexual, bisexual, pansexual, and nonbinary adults. One of the cartoon beavers in the video was portrayed with double-mastectomy scars, indicating that this character represented a biological female who had had her breasts removed by gender reassignment surgery. Do preschoolers, who are still learning their shapes and letters, really need to understand what *nonbinary* and *pansexual* mean?

Many Christians recognize that something is going on “out there” in the culture among secular progressives. But some deny that these types of concerns are problems “in here” in the church, at least not among conservative evangelicals. Unfortunately, that’s not remotely true.

In 2013, Dr. Christena Cleveland published the book *Disunity in Christ* through InterVarsity Press, urging Christians to set aside their differences and to love one another across racial and political boundaries. In 2015, she was the keynote speaker at InterVarsity’s Urbana Missions conference and addressed CRU (Campus Crusade for Christ) at their CRU15 staff conference. In 2016, she wrote a series of articles on race for *Christianity Today*, a major evangelical magazine. In 2018, Thabiti Anyabwile and Isaac Adams, two notable pastors with evangelical credibility, recommended Cleveland

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<sup>15</sup> ACLU, Twitter post, May 11, 2022, <https://twitter.com/ACLU/status/1524431029473316866>.

<sup>16</sup> Blue’s Clues and You!, “The Blue’s Clues Pride Parade Sing-Along Ft. Nina West!” YouTube video, May 28, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4vHegf3WPU>.

and her work in an article for *The Front Porch*.<sup>17</sup> Undeniably, she was an influential figure who was platformed by prominent evangelicals and evangelical organizations.

Just four years later, Cleveland published *God Is a Black Woman*. She denounced a being she called “whitemalegod” and pronounced her devotion to the “Sacred Black Feminine.” In that work, she makes statements like “The liberation of all Black women requires the dismantling of all systems of oppression—white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and more,”<sup>18</sup> and “more than anything, we must eradicate the transphobia within ourselves and our communities. For if God is a Black woman, then She’s a Black trans woman. Obviously.”<sup>19</sup> At one point, she recounts a nightmare in which she is threatened by “Confederate-like [sic] monuments of whitemalegod [that erupt] from the ground...each one bearing a different brass plaque that paid homage to toxic masculinity’s idols of knowledge: logic, reason, tradition, certainty, and consensus.”<sup>20</sup> Logic and reason are attributes of toxic white masculinity?

Michelle Higgins offers another example of a rapid retreat from orthodoxy. She received an MDiv from the theologically conservative Covenant Theological Seminary and was a member of a conservative denomination (PCA). In 2015, she—like Cleveland—spoke at InterVarsity’s Urbana Missions Conference. In 2017, she and two other women with theologically conservative Christian backgrounds, Christina Edmondson and Ekemini Uwan, started the *Truth’s Table* podcast, which was included on *Christianity Today*’s “12 Podcasts for Your Summer Listening List.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile and Isaac Adams, “People to Know: Dr. Christena Cleveland,” *The Front Porch*, July 30, 2018, <https://thefrontporch.org/2018/07/people-to-know-dr-christena-cleveland/>.

<sup>18</sup> Christena Cleveland, *God Is a Black Woman*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2022), 223.

<sup>19</sup> Cleveland, *God Is a Black Woman*, 232.

<sup>20</sup> Cleveland, *God Is a Black Woman*, 54.

<sup>21</sup> Morgan Lee, “12 Podcasts for Your Summer Listening List,” *Christianity Today*, July 3, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/july-web-only/12-podcasts-for-your-summer-listening-list.html>.

Three years later, she became the senior pastor of Saint John's Church (The Beloved Community) in Saint Louis, which is part of a pro-choice, LGBTQ-affirming denomination. On Pentecost Sunday of 2021, she preached to her congregation: "Let the Lord lead you to queer parenting. Let the Lord show you the queerness of the Trinity in ways that you had not felt welcome to before."<sup>22</sup> According to its website, her organization *Faith for Justice* offers trainings based in "Black Womanism + Liberation Theology" and a "Black queer feminist political lens."<sup>23</sup>

Danté Stewart provides a third example. He was a student at Reformed Theological Seminary, a writer for *Christianity Today*, and was listed as a "regular contributor" at *The Gospel Coalition*, a major, theologically conservative evangelical website. As recently as April 2022, he was interviewed by *Christianity Today*.<sup>24</sup> On February 13, 2022, he tweeted, "I'm convinced: we don't need more white or evangelical theology. We need more womanist, black liberation, and queer theology to show us how to be better humans and embody a more loving and liberation faith. We can only get better if we expand the voices that lead us."<sup>25</sup> On June 30, after the Dobbs Supreme Court decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade*, he wrote an article for *Parents* magazine entitled "Overturning Roe v. Wade Isn't About Christian Morals or Protecting Life." He wrote, "This was never just about abortion or caring for families. This, and the many freedoms they will come against, is about fighting for a white patriarchal Christian nation...What makes me most sick is that Christians will celebrate this moment and believe that God made it so. No, this is not God. It is years of Christians waging a religious war. It

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<sup>22</sup> WokePreacherTV, Twitter post, September 6, 2021, <https://twitter.com/WokePreacherTV/status/1434852935289163778>.

<sup>23</sup> "Training," *Faith for Justice*, accessed December 3, 2022, <https://www.faithforjustice.org/training>.

<sup>24</sup> Heather Thompson Day, "Dante Stewart: Making Space for Growth," *Christianity Today*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/viral-jesus/dant-stewart-making-space-for-growth.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Danté Stewart, Twitter post, February 13, 2022, <https://twitter.com/stewarddantec/status/1492875444294725633>.



is not about protection, love, or morality. All of this is about one thing only: power. White power.”<sup>26</sup>

It is important to note that in each of these cases, these individuals had been signaling their sympathy for unbiblical, spurious ideas being promoted by critical social theory for years before they made the overt comments we just referenced. A bit of discernment would have led people to expect these statements. Many more examples of growing heterodoxy could be provided, not only from leaders with large public platforms but also from rank-and-file Christians whom we know personally. However, we have no wish to focus on individuals. We only mention these few to underscore the fact that this progressive downgrade is not a figment of anyone’s imagination.

Indeed, there is now a cottage industry of Christian literature that explores the subjects of whiteness and white privilege. In his book *Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom from Slaveholder Religion*, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove writes that “my problem as a white man was that I didn’t know how to live in skin. This was the poverty of my so-called privilege, what kept me from seeing the fullness of the gospel’s power for my own life.”<sup>27</sup> He approvingly quotes a man named Bob, who “came to the conclusion that, as a group, white people suffer from a malady [called] ‘shriveled-heart syndrome.’ It is rooted in the experience of white people enslaving black people.”<sup>28</sup>

In his book *Straight White Male*, Chris Furr writes, “Straight white men have been the apex predators in our culture, and around the world, for centuries...we have made anyone and everyone the prey by which we have sustained ourselves... We have been bred to dominate and consume... We do not know who we are apart from this, or what we could be, if not predators.”<sup>29</sup> In his book *Rediscipling the White Church: From Cheap Diversity to True Solidarity*, David Swanson writes:

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<sup>26</sup> Danté Stewart, “Overturning Roe v. Wade Isn’t About Christian Morals or Protecting Life,” *Parents*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.parents.com/kindred/overturning-roe-v-wade-isnt-about-christian-morals-or-protecting-life/>.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom from Slaveholder Religion* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2018), 60 (emphasis in original).

<sup>28</sup> Wilson-Hartgrove, *Reconstructing the Gospel*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> Chris Furr, *Straight White Male: A Faith-Based Guide to Deconstructing Your Privilege and Living with Integrity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2022), 3.

We [whites] are a damaged people. In the past, most of us have ignored the hidden wound, the result of our devilish bargain for controlling power. We don't think of ourselves as privileged, as having been given a leg up at someone else's expense. But if we will be still long enough, we might begin to sense the damage we carry, the damage with which we are complicit, the damage we've inflicted. And if we choose to trust the voices and experiences of people of color, our capacity to feel this damage will grow, and with it, our ability to challenge the destructive demands of whiteness.<sup>30</sup>

In *Can "White" People Be Saved?* we find various contributors making statements like "whiteness [is] a way of being in the world [that] has been parasitically joined [to] Christianity,"<sup>31</sup> and "whiteness is best understood as a religious system of pagan idol worship."<sup>32</sup>

The statements we've highlighted in this section were all made publicly, but we want to emphasize again that people are also being affected privately in their everyday lives. Whether it's a colleague who enters a Zoom meeting with pronouns in their bio, or your neighbor's "In This House, We Believe..." yard sign, or your local knitting club imploding over accusations of colonialism and cultural appropriation,<sup>33</sup> many of us feel like we've entered some kind of alternate reality (notwithstanding the increasing numbers of people who are content with that alternate reality). Yet, in trying to understand what's happening, both Christians and non-Christians make several common errors.

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<sup>30</sup> David Winston Swanson, *Rediscovering the White Church: From Cheap Diversity to True Solidarity* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2020), 49-50.

<sup>31</sup> Willie James Jennings, "Can White People Be Saved? Reflections on the Relationship of Missions and Whiteness," *Can "White" People Be Saved?*, eds. Love L. Sechrest, Johnny Ramírez-Johnson, and Amos Yong (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 27.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew T. Draper, "The End of 'Mission': Christian Witness and the Decentering of White Identity," *Can "White" People Be Saved?*, 177.

<sup>33</sup> Kathrine Jebesen Moore, "A Witch-Hunt on Instagram," *Quillette*, February 17, 2019, <https://quillette.com/2019/02/17/a-witch-hunt-on-instagram/>.

## Mistaken Responses

*“This is all meaningless nonsense.”*

First, many people dismiss these cultural artifacts as bizarre, incoherent manifestations of political correctness run amok or mere expressions of the contemporary progressive zeitgeist. As understandable as these reactions are, they are incorrect. These events are rooted in a coherent, comprehensive, and increasingly influential set of ideas that emerge from a broad academic field of knowledge known as critical social theory.

Critical Theory began in the early 1920s with the Frankfurt School, a school of social theory and critical philosophy first affiliated with the Institute for Social Research at Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany. When capitalized, the term *Critical Theory* often refers to the Frankfurt School and their direct descendants. However, critical social theory (which is sometimes referred to as “critical theory”—note the lowercase letters) is an umbrella category that encompasses the numerous critical social theories (or critical theories) that have been spawned by and have developed within the critical tradition: feminist theory, postcolonialism, critical pedagogy, queer theory, and critical race theory, among others. Over the past century, critical social theory has captured the imaginations of multiple generations of social theorists and scholars, has shaped multiple academic disciplines, and has spread all over the world. Language that was once confined to the rarefied atmosphere of academia has now found its way into the public square. Terminology that was once only familiar to a few intrepid gender studies majors now fills the pages of *New York Times* bestsellers. Ideas that were once considered bizarre and esoteric are now available for purchase second- or thirdhand from every street vender in the marketplace of ideas. If we’re to truly understand our cultural moment, a familiarity with the knowledge area of critical social theory is vital.

*“This is just liberal-conservative political sparring.”*

Another common mistake is to assume that the only critics of these ideas are conservative Christians, diehard Republicans, or sinister far-right

conspiracy theorists. Yet, more and more, atheists, liberals, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and notable feminists are beginning to express concern at the rapidity with which these ideas have taken root in our culture. Figures such as cultural commentators and journalists Douglas Murray, Andrew Sullivan, and Bari Weiss, comedians Bill Maher, Andrew Doyle (aka Titania McGrath), and Ricky Gervais, visionary and innovator Elon Musk, cultural critic and author Thomas Chatterton Williams,<sup>34</sup> renowned fantasy author J.K. Rowling, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, neuroscientist Sam Harris, biologist Jerry Coyne, linguist John McWhorter, economist Glenn Loury, and feminist Camille Paglia, just to name a few, have opposed the growth of “woke orthodoxy,” essentially arguing that it is an enemy of liberal democracies.

One of the most notorious of these protests came in the form of a series of “hoax” papers written by James Lindsay, Helen Pluckrose, and Peter Boghossian.<sup>35</sup> All three were self-described liberal atheists, and both Lindsay and Boghossian have written books promoting atheism. Yet the trio decided to set their sights on what they saw as the corruption of academia by the methods and assumptions of critical social theory. Over the course of two years, they managed to have seven fake papers accepted by peer-reviewed academic journals on absurd topics ranging from “fat bodybuilding” to “dog park rape culture.”<sup>36, 37</sup>

Similarly, Brett Weinstein, a progressive Bernie Sanders voter and biology professor at Evergreen State College, made headlines when a video clip

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<sup>34</sup> We highly recommend Williams’ *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race*. It is beautifully written and provides an inoculation against a number of spurious perspectives regarding race.

<sup>35</sup> Yascha Mounk, “What an Audacious Hoax Reveals About Academia,” *The Atlantic*, October 5, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/new-sokal-hoax/572212/>.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Baldwin, “RETRACTED ARTICLE: Who Are They to Judge? Overcoming Anthropometry through Fat Bodybuilding,” *Fat Studies* 7, no. 3 (September 2, 2018): i–xiii, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2018.1453622>.

<sup>37</sup> “Statement of Retraction: Human Reactions to Rape Culture and Queer Performativity at Urban Dog Parks in Portland, Oregon,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 27, no. 2 (February 1, 2020): 307-326, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1475346>.

went viral, showing him being confronted by angry students outside his classroom.<sup>38</sup> He was targeted because he had objected to a schoolwide “day of absence” in which White students were asked to stay off campus to show solidarity with students of color and the obstacles they face due to racism. When he insisted that no student should be told to remove themselves from campus because of their race, he faced a backlash that eventually engulfed Evergreen. He and his wife, fellow professor Heather Heying, were eventually forced to leave the campus over safety concerns. They later resigned.

Though the clash between proponents and opponents of these ideas is often framed in terms of a culture war, it’s clear that something deeper is going on.

*“This is why Christians should ignore so-called social justice issues.”*

A third reaction to the cultural zeitgeist is for Christians to reject everything that wraps itself in the banner of justice as a distraction from the gospel. While this response is somewhat understandable, it is ultimately deeply mistaken. Whatever we think of *social justice* as a term and however concerned we are about much of the secular social justice movement, the pursuit of biblical justice by the Christian is nonnegotiable. We must never become so jaded by the abuse of the language of justice that we forget it is a thoroughly biblical concept.

In Micah 6:8, God admonishes us, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Psalm 82:2-3 instructs, “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.” In Isaiah 1:17, God commands us to “learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.” In Isaiah 58:6-7, God condemns the Israelites who engage in religious fasts yet continue to commit acts of violence and wickedness. He asks, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo

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<sup>38</sup> Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019), 128-132.

the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" Matthew 25:34-46 teaches that the alleviation of physical needs is a fruit of genuine salvation.

Even when it comes to discussions of racism, which seem to have been almost completely co-opted by secular ideologies, Christians must steadfastly resist the urge to withdraw and check out. At a minimum, racism is the sin of partiality, which God condemns (Deuteronomy 1:17; Leviticus 19:15; Proverbs 20:23; James 2:1-4). Just as we specifically name, confront, and condemn sins like adultery, pride, greed, and theft, we must specifically name, confront, and condemn racism. Nor do we need to pit social and political action against the preaching of the gospel. For decades, Christians have rightly been at the forefront of the pro-life movement precisely because of our convictions about the sinfulness of murder and the sanctity of human life. We cannot and did not let pro-life activism overshadow the gospel. But we also did not forswear activism for fear that it would detract from the gospel.

Anti-woke Christians can indeed overreach or use an unfairly broad brush to tar their perceived opponents. Real social injustices do exist. Racism does exist. Sexism does exist. Actual oppression does exist. Christians who try to address these issues from a biblical perspective often complain that they are immediately dismissed as woke, and there is some legitimacy to this concern. Any discussion of the persistence of racism should not be deemed an embrace of critical race theory. Any discussion of sexism or sexual abuse should not be denounced as capitulation to feminism. Words like *oppression* and *justice* should not immediately trigger red flags and flashing lights, since they are found all over Scripture.

Moreover, some may leap to accusing others of embracing woke ideology or social justice or CRT or radical feminism, etc., because they want to distract from the fact that they hold to racist and sexist views. If that's you, you need to repent, and seek forgiveness in Christ. Further, concerns that the anti-woke movement has become just as paranoid and radical as the woke movement are worth considering. In fact, certain expressions of Christian nationalism blur the lines with White identitarianism and seem to fantasize about a White ethnostate, both of which are evil.

As those who clearly recognize the dangers of wokeness, we likewise want to recognize the dangers of a reactionary posture that swings to the opposite extreme. We dare not ignore the Bible's extensive commands regarding justice, care for the vulnerable, and Christian social concern. Nor should we assume the most uncharitable possible interpretation of other Christians' words or intentions. If your pastor utters the word *privilege*, don't immediately assume that he's a disciple of Robin DiAngelo. If someone in your Bible study uses the phrase *social justice*, don't instantly commence a church discipline hearing. In the same way that we would not want our statements about religious liberty to be immediately written off as Christian nationalism or theocracy, we should not write off another Christians' statements about racial injustice as critical race theory or cultural Marxism. The Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) applies here as it applies everywhere.

If these three responses are wrong, what's the right response? To start with, we must name this ideology, and that's where the difficulties begin.

### What's in a Name?

Anyone trying to understand, let alone critique, woke ideas will quickly hit a semantic barrier. As soon as you attempt to apply a label to the ideology that's sweeping through our culture, some will insist that you're using the wrong term or that you're misunderstanding the term you're using or that you're using the right term, but in the wrong way (as a bonus, you may also be told you need to "do the work" and "educate yourself").

Take the word *woke*. Just a few years ago, it was a widespread term of self-identification. Websites and organizations proudly advertised themselves as woke as they sought to dismantle white supremacy and advocate for social justice. You can even find academics using *woke* unironically to refer to their own social justice advocacy. For example, consider this passage from "We Are Woke: A Collaborative Critical Autoethnography of Three 'Womxn' of Color Graduate Students in Higher Education," a peer-reviewed paper published in the *International Journal of Multicultural Education*:

We define wokeness as critical consciousness to intersecting systems of oppression. Specifically, to be a woke person is to hold

an unretractable embodied consciousness and political identity acknowledging the oppression that exists in individual and collective experiences. As womxn of color with hxrstories [sic] of colonization, our oppressors work to keep us blinded, silenced, and complacent with inequities of power by claiming a post-racist and post-sexist America. We argue that for womxn of color to be woke is to hold capital against an oppressive system by articulating the system's existence. A woke womxn does not have to possess the language to name oppression, but rather know of oppression and reject its unjust nature.<sup>39</sup>

In 2017, this term was not only acceptable but commended. Yet today, when the word *woke* is used in a critique, you'll occasionally be told that it's a racist appropriation of Black vernacular. And it is true that the word *woke* was once domiciled to the Black community and signaled an awareness and understanding of racial injustice. But as Columbia linguist John McWhorter is apt to remind, "words are on the move."<sup>40</sup> No group, ethnicity, people, or era owns a word, and word meanings are shaped by cultural and subcultural nuances attending their dominant usage. Moreover, certain words become plagued by the semiotic concept of a "floating signifier," where a word no longer has an agreed upon meaning. To an extent this applies to the term *woke*.

*Critical race theory* is another term that people sometimes apply to the collection of ideas swirling around whiteness, systemic racism, white privilege, and microaggressions. For instance, in her book *Critical Race Theory: A Primer*, UC–Berkeley law professor Khiara Bridges devotes entire chapters to "Core Concepts" like "Structural/Institutional Racism" (chapter 7), "Implicit Bias" (chapter 8), "Racial Microaggressions" (chapter 9), and

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<sup>39</sup> Aerial A. Ashlee, Bianca Zamora, and Shamika N. Karikari, "We Are Woke: A Collaborative Critical Autoethnography of Three 'Womxn' of Color Graduate Students in Higher Education," *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 19, no. 1 (February 28, 2017): 90, <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v19i1.1259>.

<sup>40</sup> John H. McWhorter, *Words on the Move: Why English Won't—and Can't—Sit Still (Like, Literally)* (New York: Henry Holt, 2016).



“White Privilege” (chapter 10), despite the fact that these terms were technically developed outside of CRT and outside of a legal context.<sup>41</sup> Yet if you mention CRT, you’ll sometimes be told that it’s merely an esoteric legal theory that is taught only in graduate school.<sup>42</sup>

If you switch to *cultural Marxism*, you’ll be greeted with horrified gasps and sternly informed that this term derives from a neo-Nazi conspiracy theory, despite the fact that the phrase has a lengthy scholarly pedigree and was used by academics for decades.<sup>43</sup> For what it’s worth, the fact that the term *has* been adopted by white supremacists means we should probably steer clear of it to avoid any confusion.

Will *critical social justice* work? This term is used by Robin DiAngelo and Özlem Sensoy in their book *Is Everyone Really Equal?* and, as these authors describe it, critical social justice (CSJ) encapsulates many of the ideas that are often attributed to wokeness both in culture and in the academy. In defining critical social justice, they write:

A critical approach to social justice refers to specific theoretical perspectives that recognize that society is *stratified* (i.e., divided and unequal) in significant and far-reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Critical social justice recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this. The definition we apply is rooted in a critical theoretical approach.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Khiara M. Bridges, *Critical Race Theory: A Primer* (St. Paul: Foundation Press, 2019), xiv-xv.

<sup>42</sup> For an extended argument that even the purely legal aspects of CRT are incompatible with Christianity, see Neil Shenvi and Timon Cline, “What if Critical Race Theory Were Just a Legal Theory? A Christian Critique,” *Liberty University Law Review*, Vol. 17, Issue 3 (2022), [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1343&context=lu\\_law\\_review&fbclid=IwAR2EtXHLGSeaOCIO7Zc81fkscWzjGj8UbqE8vjATH2I3KjsdcBEZ1Xfl6Pk](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1343&context=lu_law_review&fbclid=IwAR2EtXHLGSeaOCIO7Zc81fkscWzjGj8UbqE8vjATH2I3KjsdcBEZ1Xfl6Pk).

<sup>43</sup> Rob Smith, “Cultural Marxism: Imaginary Conspiracy or Revolutionary Reality?,” *Themelios*, Vol. 44, Issue 3 (December 2019): 436-465.

<sup>44</sup> Özlem Sensoy and Robin J. DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, 2d ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017), xx.