



How should the church respond to critical theories?

Dr. Neil Shenvi

East Carolina University

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This talk is not about Trump



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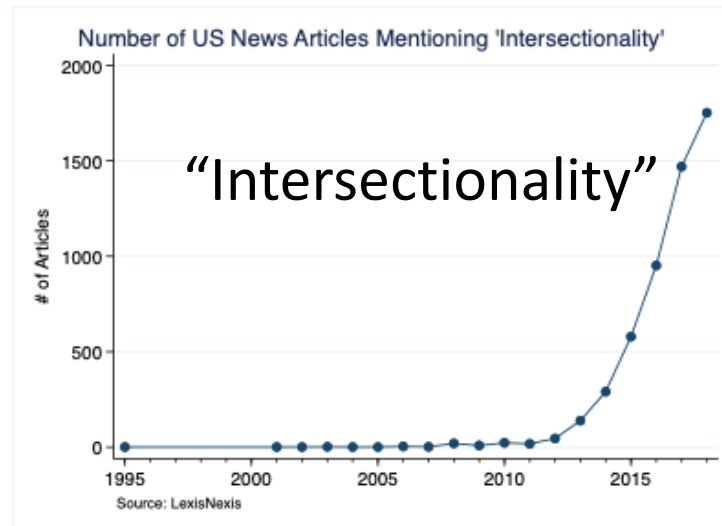
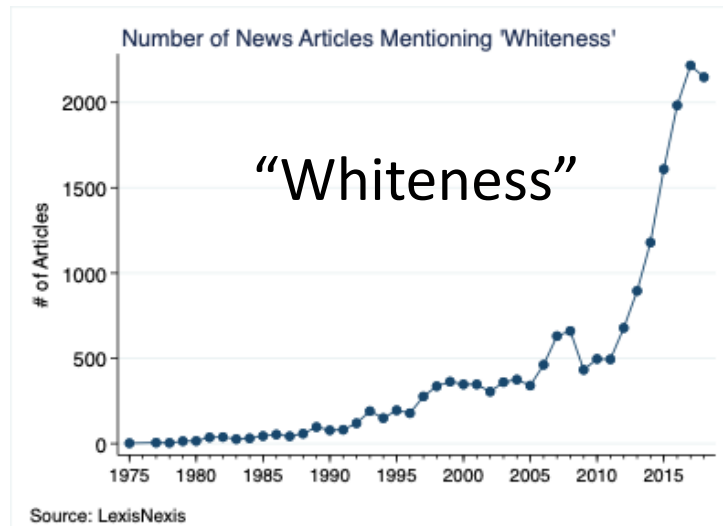
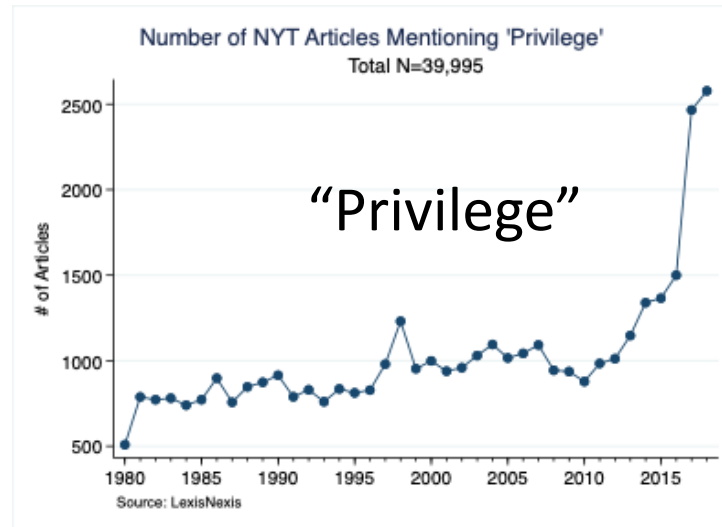
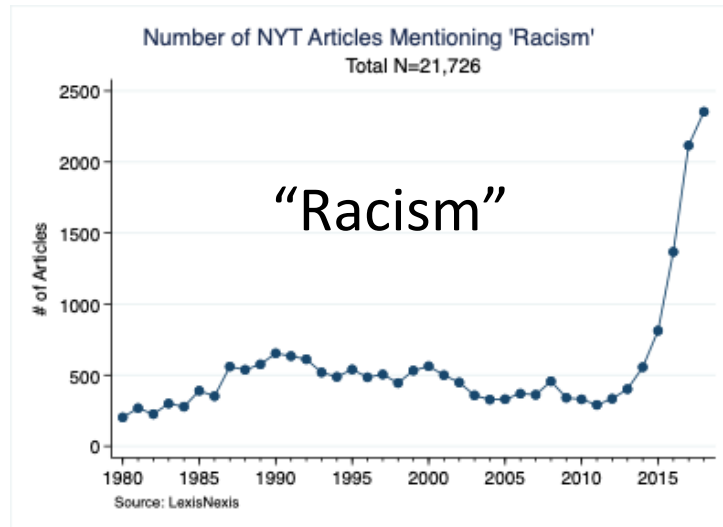
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NYTimes word usage



Smithsonian NMAAHC

"Whiteness and white racialized identity refer to the way that white people, their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups of are compared."

TALKING ABOUT RACE | NMAAHC

ASPECTS & ASSUMPTIONS OF WHITENESS & WHITE CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

White dominant culture, or **whiteness**, refers to the ways white people and their traditions, attitudes and ways of life have been normalized over time and are now considered standard practices in the United States. And since white people still hold most of the institutional power in America, we have all internalized some aspects of white culture — including people of color.



Rugged Individualism

- The individual is the primary unit
- Self-reliance
- Independence & autonomy highly valued + rewarded
- Individuals assumed to be in control of their environment, "You get what you deserve"

Family Structure

- The nuclear family: father, mother, 2.3 children is the ideal social unit
- Husband is breadwinner and head of household
- Wife is homemaker and subordinate to the husband
- Children should have own rooms, be independent



Emphasis on Scientific Method

- Objective, rational linear thinking
- Cause and effect relationships
- Quantitative emphasis

Black Lives Matter

“We are self-reflexive and do the work required to dismantle cisgender privilege and uplift Black trans folk, especially Black trans women who continue to be disproportionately impacted by trans-antagonistic violence...

We foster a queer-affirming network. When we gather, we do so with the intention of freeing ourselves from the tight grip of heteronormative thinking, or rather, the belief that all in the world are heterosexual (unless s/he or they disclose otherwise).”



Blue's Clues Pride Month Cartoon



jacky is in DR fanfic hell
@WaferBiscuits

blues clues taking the time to give this beaver top scars
makes me feel a lot of feelings ngl

"Families marching one-by-one

Hurrah, hurrah

Families marching one-by-one

Hurrah, hurrah

This family has two mommies

They love each other so proudly

And they all go marching in the Big
Parade...

These babas are non-binary

They love each other so proudly...

Ace, bi and pan grown-ups you see can
love each other so proudly

And they all go marching in the Big
Parade"

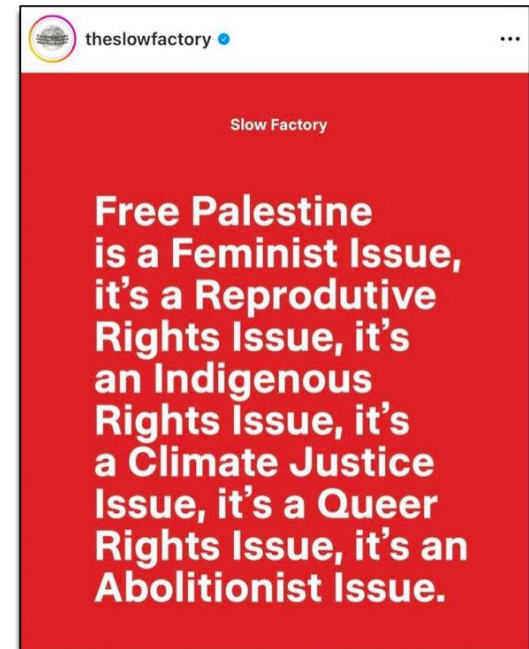
Queers for Palestine



BLACK LIVES MATTER GRASSROOTS STATEMENT IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE



As the world is faced with deep questions about self-determination, as we all desire and pray for a world of peace,, we must stand unwaveringly on the side of the oppressed. When a people have been subject to decades of apartheid and unimaginable violence, their resistance must not be condemned, but understood as a desperate act of self-defense.

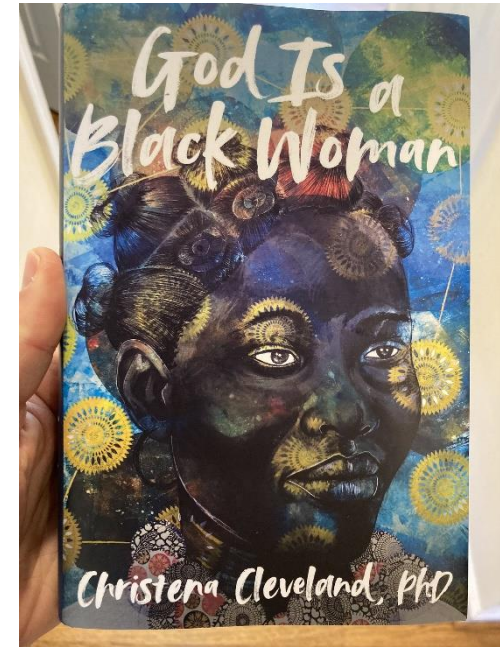


Why should we care?

2015



2022



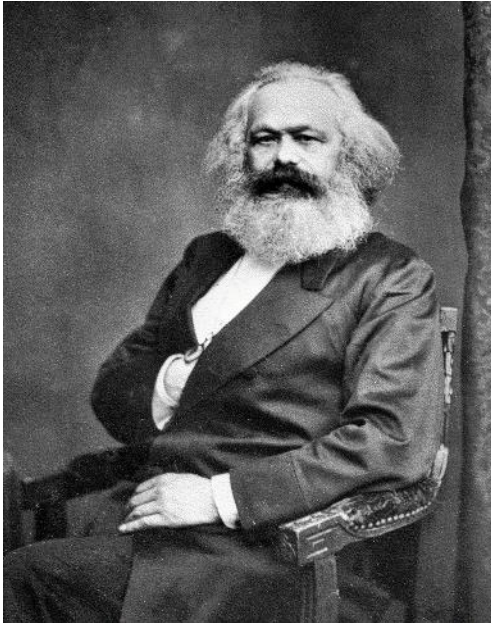
"Paul, Peter, Luke, John, James, and the writer of Hebrews repeatedly and emphatically make the same point: the unified church is the vehicle through which the kingdom of God is powerfully communicated to the world" – Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, p. 37-38 (2013)

"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" - Cleveland, *God is a Black Woman*, p. 232 (2022)

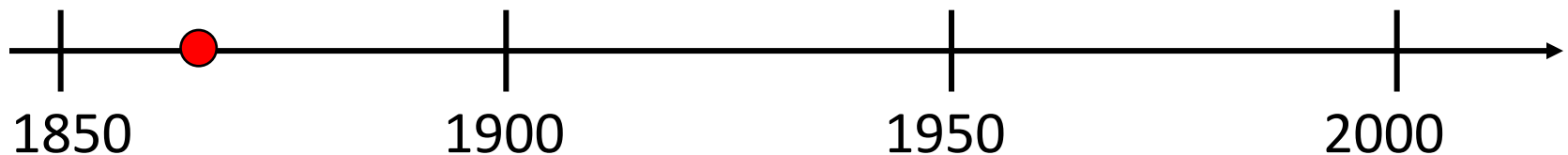
Outline

- The Origins of Contemporary Critical Theory
- The Ideas of Contemporary Critical Theory
- The Strengths of Contemporary Critical Theory
- The Problems of Contemporary Critical Theory
- Advice for Dialogue
- Conclusions

Critical theory and Karl Marx



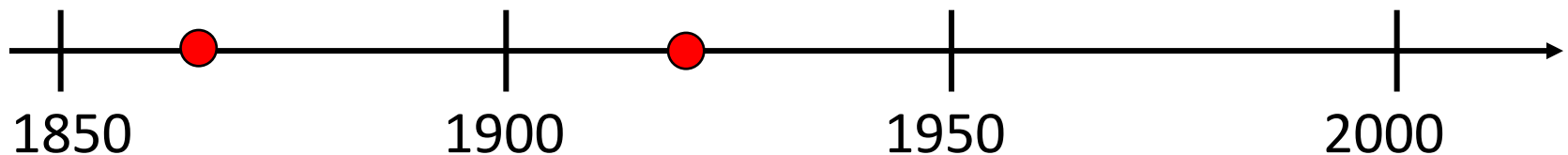
“Alone among these thinkers [i.e., Horkheimer, Bourdieu, Foucault, etc.], **Karl Marx invites consensus as a ‘true’ critical theorist. Indeed, for many, he alone inaugurates the critical tradition**” (Levinson et al, *Beyond Critique*, p. 25-26)



Critical theory and the Frankfurt School



“Critical theory was conceived within the crucible of Marxism” “The Frankfurt School not only contested establishmentarianism view of history, but projected a radical alternative. European radicals applied its ideas to reconfiguring the family, sexuality, and education.” – Bronner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 2, 7



Other critical theorists

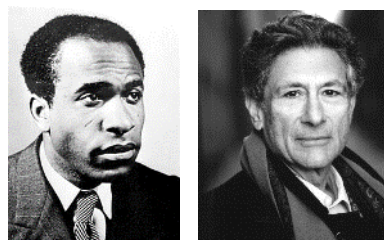
Cultural Studies



Bourdieu

Hall

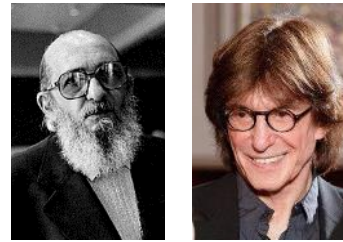
Postcolonialism



Fanon

Said

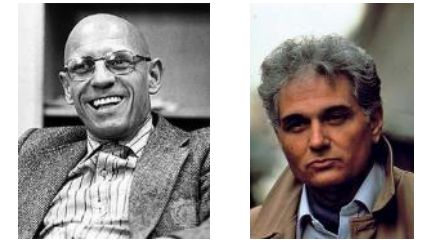
Critical pedagogy



Freire

Giroux

Postmodernism



Foucault

Derrida

Feminism



de Beauvoir

Friedan

Black feminism



hooks

Lorde

Queer theory



Butler

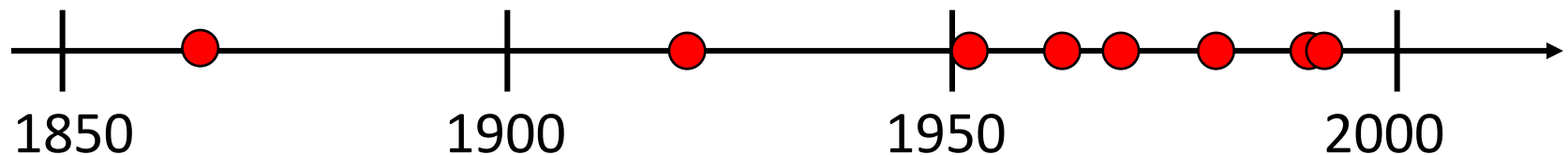
Rich

Critical Race Theory

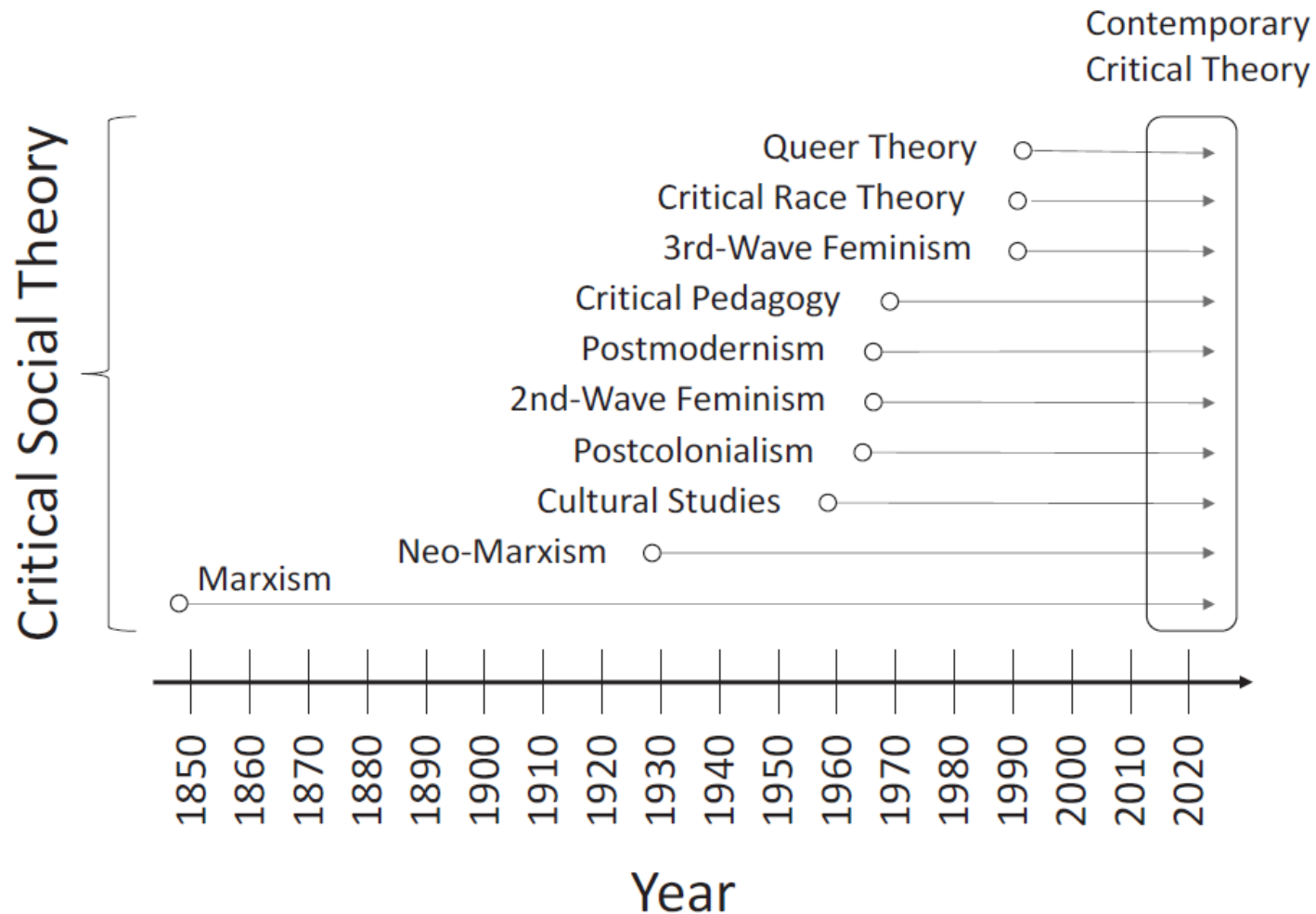


Bell

Crenshaw



The history of contemporary critical theory



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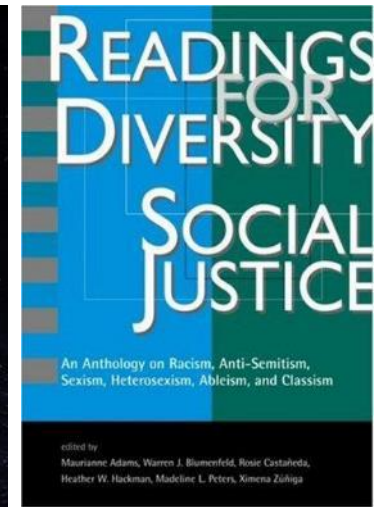
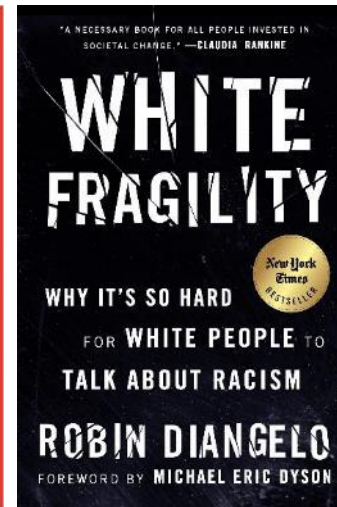
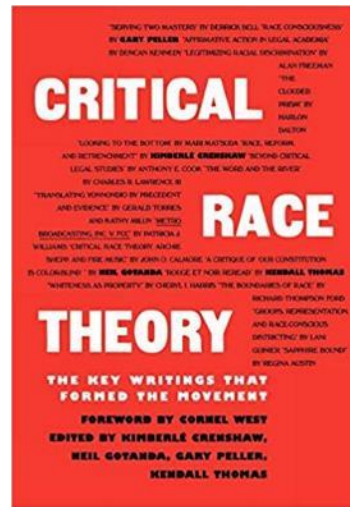
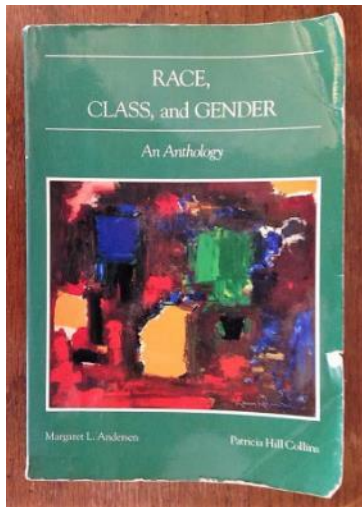
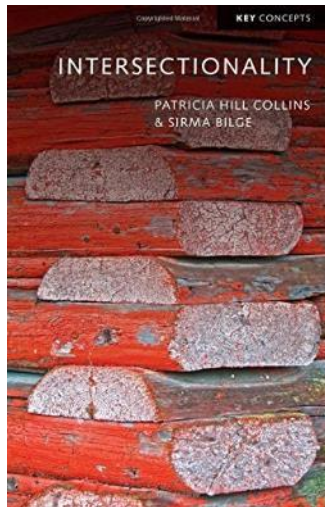
The Central Ideas of Contemporary Critical Theory?

Idea 1: Social binary

Idea 2: Oppression through ideology

Idea 3: Lived experience

Idea 4: Social justice



Idea #1: Society is divided into oppressed and oppressor groups

“For every social group, there is an opposite group... the primary groups that we name here are: race, class, gender, sexuality, ability status/exceptionality, religion, and nationality”

“*Oppression* describes a set of policies, practices, traditions, norms, definitions, and explanations (discourses), which function to systematically exploit one social group to the benefit of another social group. The group that benefits from this exploitation is termed the *dominant* (or agent) group, and the group that is exploited is termed the *minoritized* (or target) group.... **Sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism are specific forms of oppression**” – Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?* p. 44, 61



Idea #1: Society is divided into oppressed and oppressor groups

64

Is Everyone Really Equal?

Figure 5.1. Group Identities Across Relations of Power

Minoritized/Target Group	Oppression	Dominant/ Agent Group
Peoples of Color	Racism	White
Poor Working Class Middle Class	Classism	Owning Class
Women; Transgender; Genderqueer	Sexism	(cis)Men
Gays; Lesbians; Bisexuals; Two Spirit	Heterosexism	Heterosexuals
Muslims; Buddhists; Jews; Hindus; and other non-Christ- ian groups	Religious Oppression Anti-Semitism	Christians
People with Disabilities	Ableism	Able-bodied
Immigrants (perceived)	Nationalism	Citizens (perceived)
Indigenous Peoples	Colonialism	White Settlers

Idea #2: Oppression occurs through hegemonic power

“oppression also traditionally carries a strong connotation of conquest and colonial domination... New left social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, however, shifted the meaning of the concept of oppression. **In its new usage, oppression designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society...** Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people’s choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in **unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols.**” – Iris Young, “Five Faces of Oppression,” *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, p. 36



Idea #2: Oppression occurs through hegemonic power

“*Hegemony* refers to the control of the ideology of society. **The dominant group maintains power by imposing their ideology on everyone.**”

“From a critical social justice perspective, **privilege is defined as systemically conferred dominance** and the institutional processes by which the beliefs and values of the dominant group are ‘made normal’ and universal.” – Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?* p. 73, 80



Idea #3: 'Lived experience' gives oppressed groups privileged access to truth

“The idea that objectivity is best reached only through rational thought is a specifically **Western and masculine way of thinking** – one that we will challenge throughout this book.” – Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins, “Reconstructing Knowledge,” in Anderson and Collins, *Race, Class, and Gender*, p. 4-5



Idea #3: 'Lived experience' gives oppressed groups privileged access to truth

Oppression and epistemology:

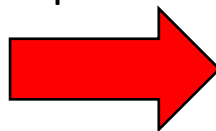


Privilege



Internalized oppression

Lived
experience

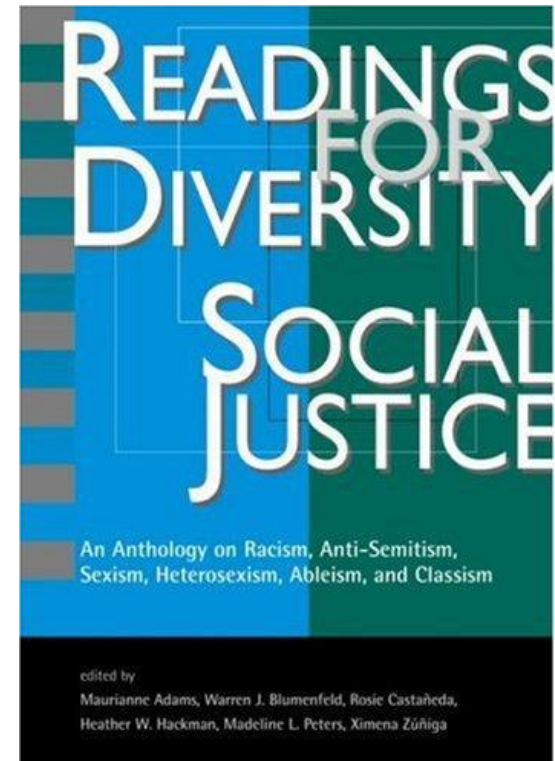


Liberatory consciousness

Idea #4: Social justice demands the liberation of oppressed groups

Definition of social justice:

“Prior to celebrating diversity, we must first eliminate intolerance. No matter what form it takes or who does it, we must all take action to stop intolerance when it happens. Working towards a celebration of diversity implies working for **social justice – the elimination of all forms of social oppression**... Social injustice takes many forms. It can be injustice based on a person’s **gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, or economic class.**” – Mary McClintock, “How to Interrupt Oppressive Behavior,” *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, p. 483



Outline

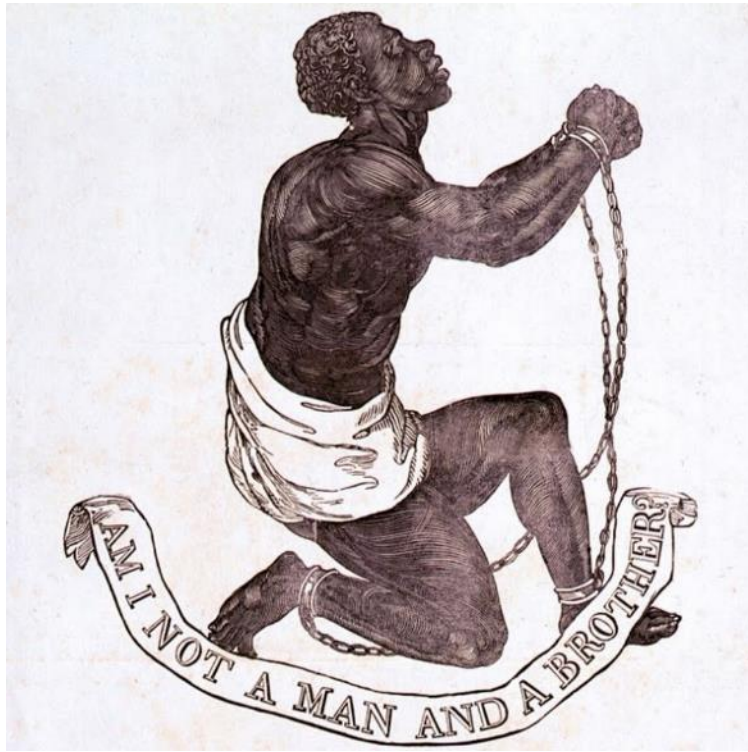
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Strength #1. Emphasis on the sinfulness of oppression

- “Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.” – Is. 1:17
- “Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.” – Zech. 7:20
- “Love your neighbor as yourself.” – Mark 12:30
- “Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts” – James 5:4



Strength #2. Focus on structures, systems, and norms



Strength #3: Recognition of hegemonic power



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Christianity and contemporary critical theory are competing worldviews

	Christianity	Contemporary critical theory
Who are we?	God's creatures	Members of various groups
What is our problem?	Sin	Oppression
What is the solution?	Jesus	Liberation
What is our duty?	Loving God	Liberating the oppressed
What is our purpose?	Glorifying God	Working for liberation

Christianity and contemporary critical theory are competing worldviews

Christianity			
Creation 	The Fall 	Redemption 	Restoration 
Contemporary Critical Theory			
--	Racism Ableism OPPRESSION Heterosexism Cisgenderism	Protest Resistance ACTIVISM Education Awareness	Equality Power reversal LIBERATION Justice Diversity

Unifying themes of critical theory

“the cluster of philosophical approaches to [issues of identity is] **known by the umbrella term critical theory**. Critical theory is today a diverse phenomenon that draws deeply and variously on strands of Marxist thought, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, queer theory, and deconstruction... at the core of the various approaches of critical theorists lies a relatively simple set of convictions: **the world is to be divided up between those who have power and those who do not; the dominant Western narrative of truth is really an ideological construct designed to preserve the power structure of the status quo; and the goal of critical theory is therefore to destabilize this power structure by destabilizing the dominant narratives that are used to justify –to ‘naturalize’– it**” - Trueman



Critical theory as worldview

“we now have Social Justice texts--forming a kind of Gospel of Social Justice--that express, with absolute certainty, that all white people are racist, all men are sexist, racism and sexism are systems that can exist and oppress absent even a single person with racist or sexist intentions or beliefs... sex is not biological and exists on a spectrum, language can be literal violence, denial of gender identity is killing people, the wish to remedy disability and obesity is hateful, and everything needs to be decolonized.

Does this sound like a metanarrative? That's because it is. Social Justice scholarship and its educators and activists see these principles and conclusions as *The Truth* According to Social Justice--and they treat it as though they have discovered the analogue of the germ theory of disease, but for bigotry and oppression”

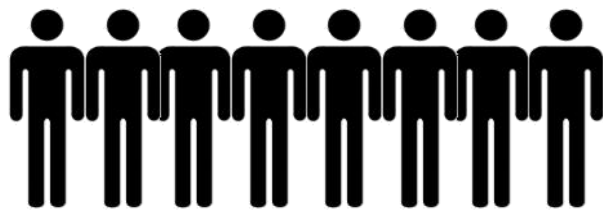
-Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, p. 182-183



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Adversarial identities



White

Male

Rich

Heterosexual

Cisgender

Christian

Able-bodied

Non-white

Female

Poor

Homosexual

Transgender

Non-Christian

Disabled

Adversarial identities

“I began to understand why **we [White women] are justly seen as oppressive**, even when we don't see ourselves that way. I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence.

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will.”

– Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” in *Race, Class, and Gender*, 72



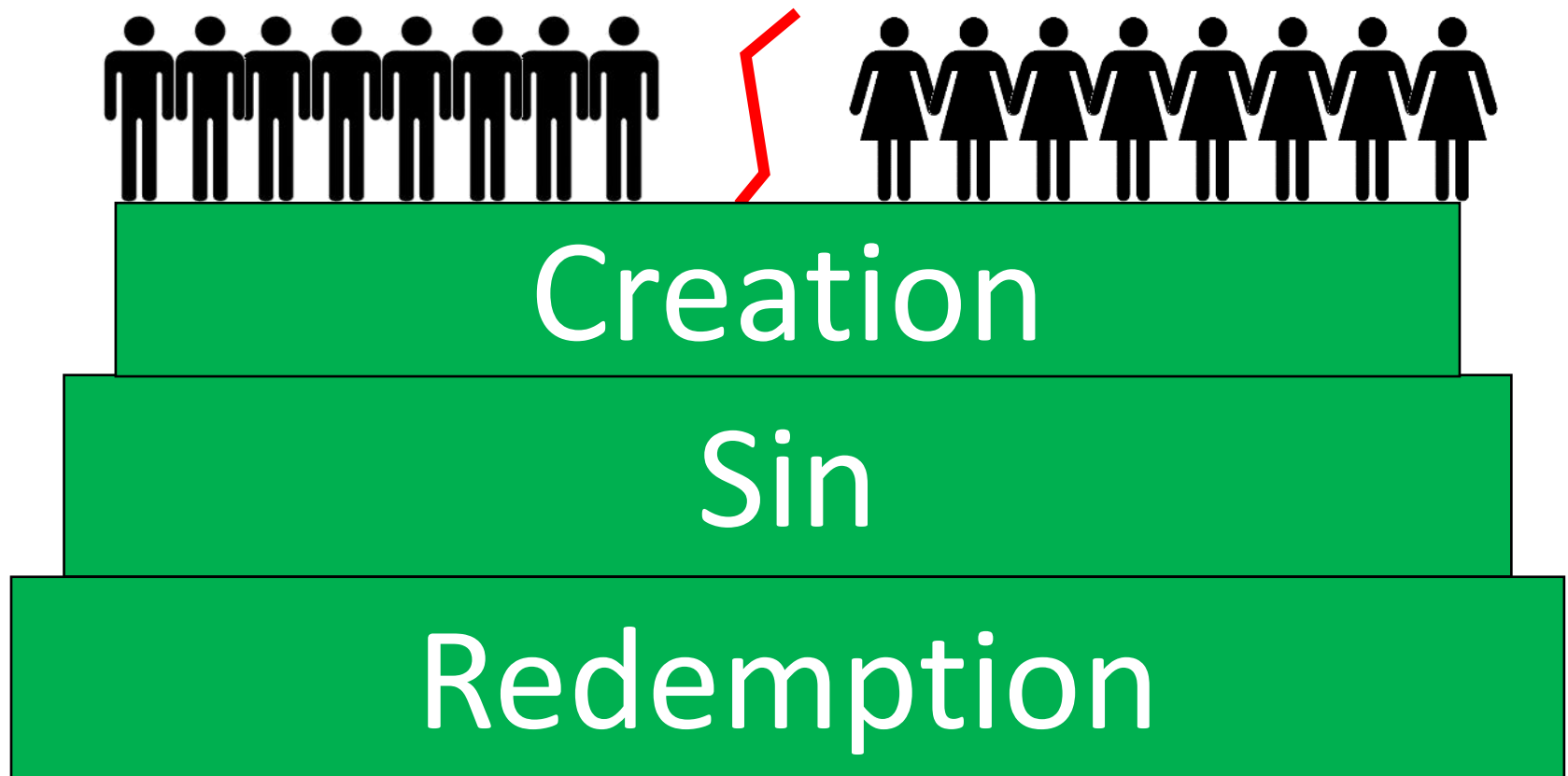
Adversarial identities

“if you are white in a white supremacist society, **you are racist**. If you are male in a patriarchy, **you are sexist**. If you are able-bodied, **you are ableist**. If you are anything above poverty in a capitalist society, **you are classist**. You can sometimes be all of these things at once.”

– Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race?*, 220-221



Identity and solidarity



Identity and solidarity

“God created man in his own image,
**in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.”**

- Genesis 1:27

“there is no distinction: **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**” - Romans 3:22-23

“he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” - Eph. 2:11-16

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Contemporary critical theory and “lived experience”

Oppression and epistemology:

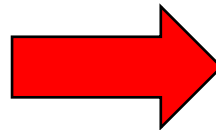


Privilege



Internalized oppression

Lived
experience



Liberatory consciousness

Deferring to lived experience

“It is about race if a person of color thinks it’s about race. This may sound at first like I’m asking you to just take every person of color’s word for it, as if they are infallible... But the truth is, whether or not someone is fallible is beside the point. We are, each and every one of us, a collection of our lived experiences... **And our experiences are valid**...And so, if a person of color says that something is about race, it is— because regardless of the details, regardless of whether or not you can connect the dots from the outside, their racial identity is a part of them, and it is interacting with the situation.”

—Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race?* 15



Deferring to lived experience

“Privileged people who are truly committed to standing in solidarity with oppressed folks [must] commit to knowing, bearing and even being targeted by their anger...Now is not the time for privileged folks to be a ‘prophetic voice’ in the lives of oppressed people by speaking hard truth about what (privileged people think) oppressed people should be doing to improve their situation. **Privileged people lost their right to the prophetic megaphone when they knowingly or unknowingly participated in societal systems that benefit some people and oppress others. Sorry folks - you can’t be a prophet and an oppressor at the same time.**”

– Dr. Christena Cleveland, Listening Well as a Person of Privilege – Seek to Understand and Embrace Anger,” April 15, 2013.



Scripture on Lived Experience

- “let every person be **quick to hear, slow to speak**, slow to anger.” – James 1:19
- “when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. **You need not be afraid of him.**” – Deut. 18:22
- “The one who states his case first seems right, **until the other comes and examines him.**” – Prov. 18:17
- “**To the teaching and to the testimony!** If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.” – Isa. 8:20
- “He presented himself alive to them after his suffering **by many proofs**, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” – Acts 1:3

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Conflicting Soteriology

	Christianity	Contemporary Critical Theory
Sin	Rebellion: breaking God's commandments	Privilege: whiteness, patriarchy, classism, heterosexism, ableism, cisgenderism
Salvation	Redemption: repent and believe the gospel	Activism: confess your privilege, divest from privilege, do the work, center marginalized voices, stop taking up space

The Sin of Privilege

“Antiracist policies cannot eliminate class racism without anticapitalism policies. Anticapitalism cannot eliminate class racism without antiracism.”

“To truly be antiracist is to be feminist. To truly be feminist is to be antiracist.”

“We cannot be antiracist if we are homophobic or transphobic... **To be queer antiracist is to understand the privileges of my cisgender, of my masculinity, of my heterosexuality, of their intersections.**”

– Kendi, *How to Be Antiracist*, 159, 189, 197.



The Sin of Privilege

“it is not possible for your parents to have taught you not to be racist, or for your parents to have been free of racism themselves. **This is not possible** because racism is a social system embedded in our culture and its institutions.”

“From an antiracist perspective, the question is not, ‘Did racism take place’ but ‘How was racism taking place’ because the assumption is that **racism is always at play, always operating**”

– DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean to Be White?*, 265, 330.



Doing the Work of Salvation

“The first and most important task in shaping an anti-racist church is to give birth to an anti-racist Christian identity... Taking this birthing metaphor one step further to the biblical imagery of rebirth, **this identity-transforming process can be understood in no less powerful terms than what Jesus described as being ‘born again’--a complete spiritual transformation.**”—
Joseph Barndt, *Becoming an Antiracist Church*, 153.

*Becoming an
Anti-Racist Church*
Journeying toward Wholeness

Joseph Barndt



Doing the Work of Salvation

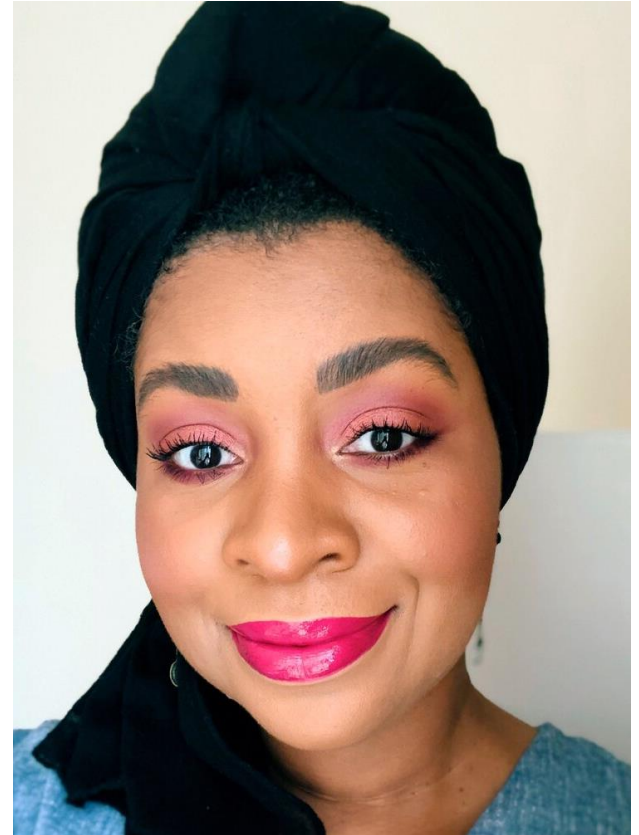
“a positive white identity is an impossible goal. White identity is inherently racist; white people do not exist outside the system of white supremacy. This does not mean that we should stop identifying as white and start claiming only to be Italian or Irish. To do so is to deny the reality of racism in the here and now, and this denial would simply be color-blind racism. Rather, **I strive to be ‘less white.’ To be less white is to be less racially oppressive.”**

– DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 149-150.



Doing the Work of Salvation

“Antiracism work is not a twenty-eight-day journey. **It is a lifelong practice. It requires your lifelong commitment to antioppression...** There is no feel-good reward at the end other than the knowledge that you are doing this because it’s the right thing to do.”
– Layla Saad, *Me and White Supremacy*, 25.



The Bible on Sin

"The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that **every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.**" - Gen. 6:5

"Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight... Behold, **I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.**"
- Psalm 51:4-5

"**None is righteous,** no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." - Rom. 3:10-12

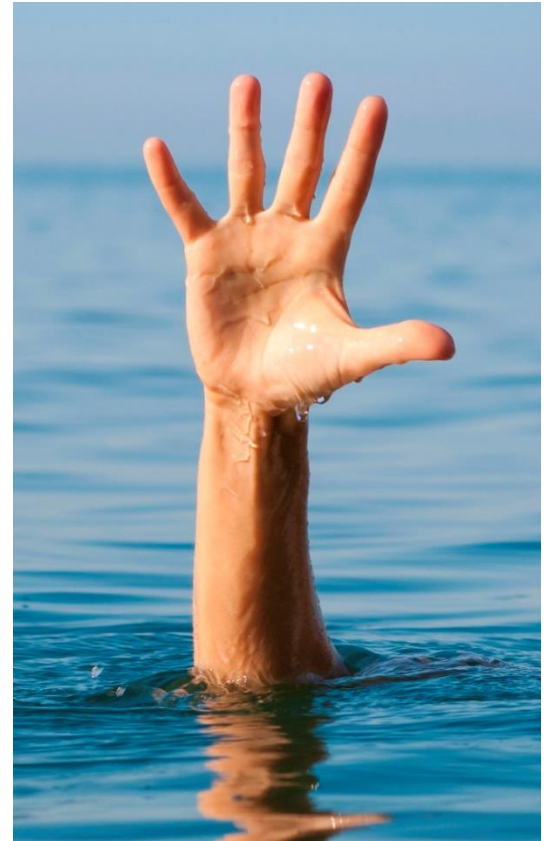


The Bible on Rescue

"God shows his love for us in that **while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**" -
Rom. 5:8

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, **even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ**—by grace you have been saved"—
Eph. 2:4-5

"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."- Luke 19:10



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Acknowledge and fight racism



Acknowledge and fight racism



Acknowledge and fight racism



Acknowledge and fight racism



Be charitable



LET EVERY PERSON BE
**QUICK TO HEAR,
SLOW TO SPEAK,
SLOW TO ANGER.**

- JAMES 1:19 ESV -

Don't be that guy



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Christianity and contemporary critical theory are competing worldviews

Christianity			
Creation 	The Fall 	Redemption 	Restoration 
Contemporary Critical Theory			
--	Racism Ableism OPPRESSION Heterosexism Cisgenderism	Protest Resistance ACTIVISM Education Awareness	Equality Power reversal LIBERATION Justice Diversity

Redefining oppression

Oppression =
Unjust, tyrannical
treatment

Oppression =
Hegemonic
norms

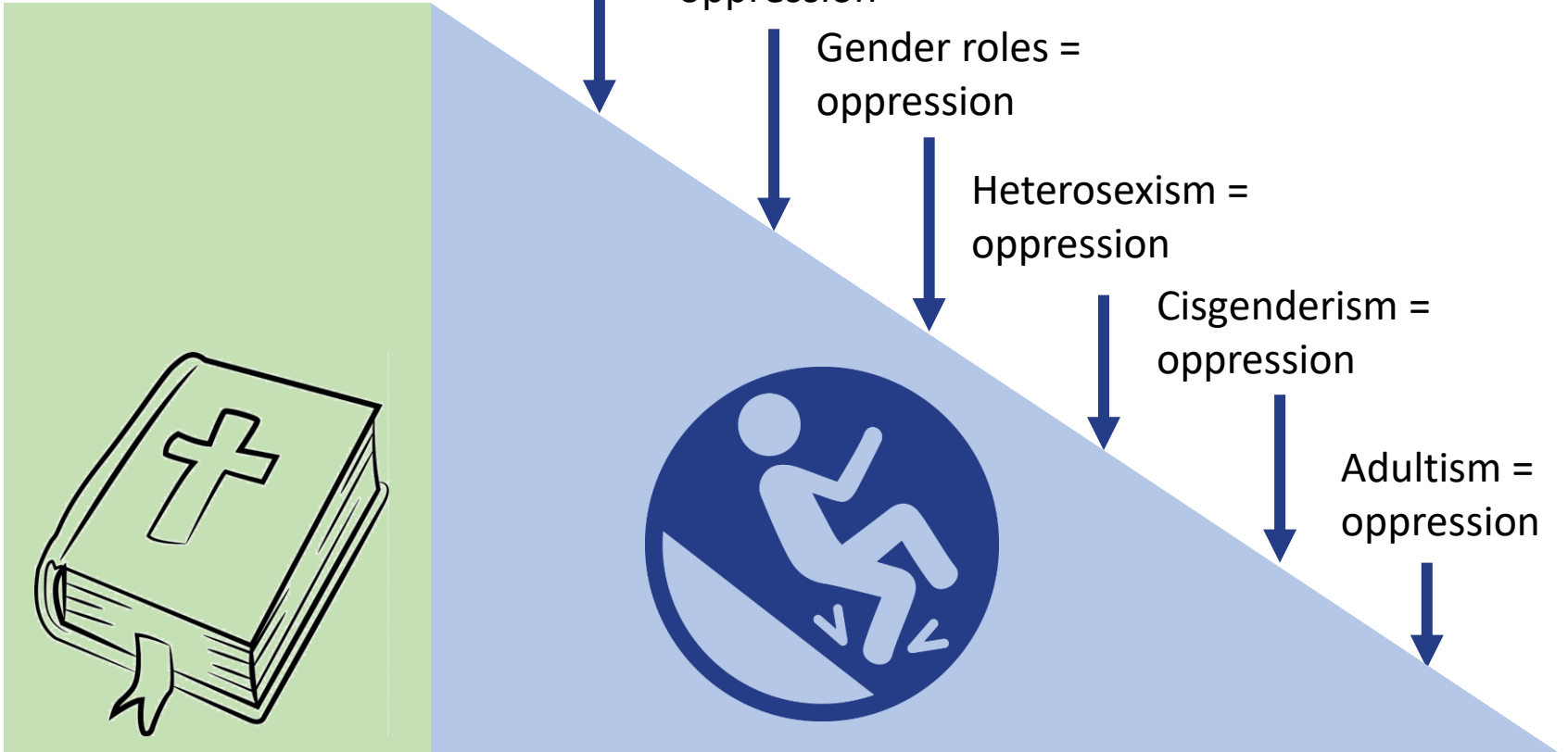
Whiteness =
oppression

Gender roles =
oppression

Heterosexism =
oppression

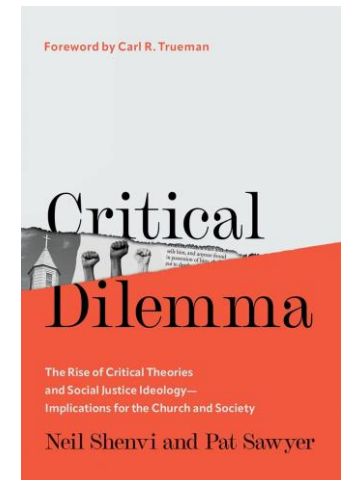
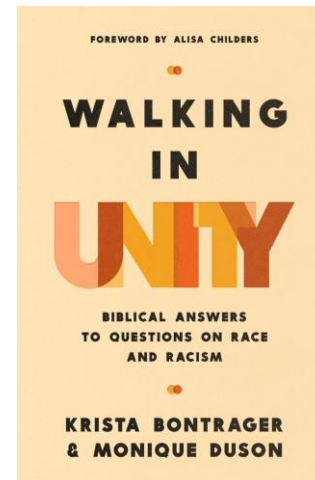
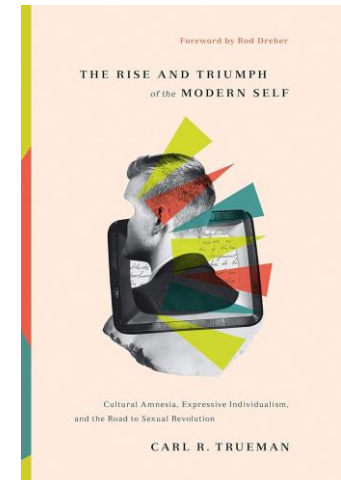
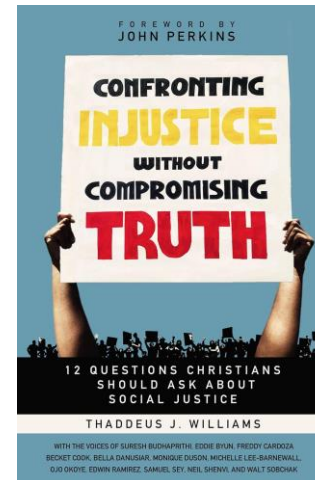
Cisgenderism =
oppression

Adultism =
oppression

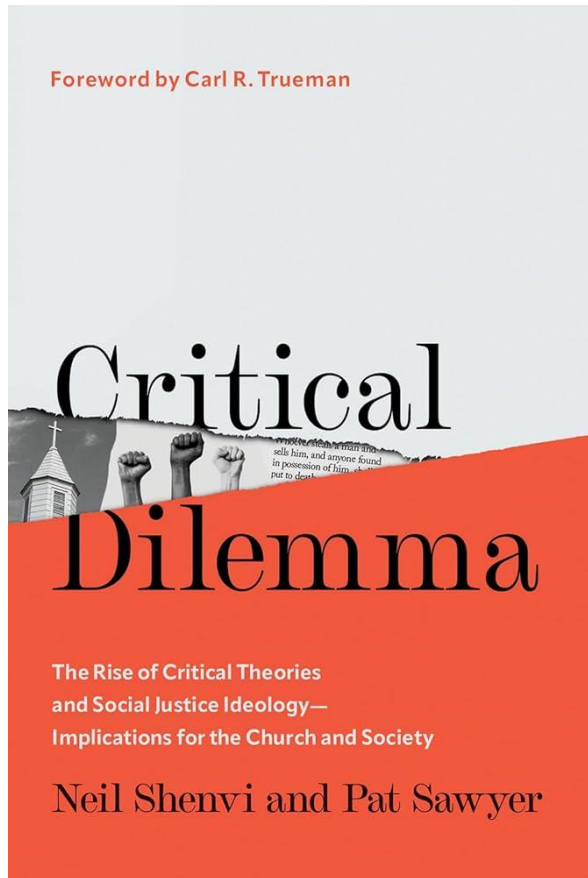


Additional resources

- Thaddeus Williams, *Confronting Injustice Without Compromising Truth*
- Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*
- Krista Bontrager and Monique Duson, *Walking in Unity*
- Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer, *Critical Dilemma*



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Acknowledgements

Dr. Christina Shenvi



- shenviapogetics.com/slides/
- criticaldilemma.com/
- Twitter @NeilShenvi

Dr. Pat Sawyer

