

Critical Theory and Christianity: Are They Compatible?

Dr. Neil Shenvi

Tiny Heartbeat Ministries

July 24, 2026

This talk is not about Trump



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

History

- Based on Northern European immigrants’ experience in the United States
- Heavy focus on the British Empire
- The primacy of Western (Greek, Roman) and Judeo-Christian tradition

**Protestant Work Ethic**

- Hard work is the key to success
- Work before play
- “If you didn’t meet your goals, you didn’t work hard enough”

Religion

- Christianity is the norm
- Anything other than Judeo – Christian tradition is foreign
- No tolerance for deviation from single god concept



**Status, Power & Authority**

- Wealth = worth
- Your job is who you are
- Respect authority
- Heavy value on ownership of goods, space, property

Future Orientation

- Plan for future
- Delayed gratification
- Progress is always best
- “Tomorrow will be better”

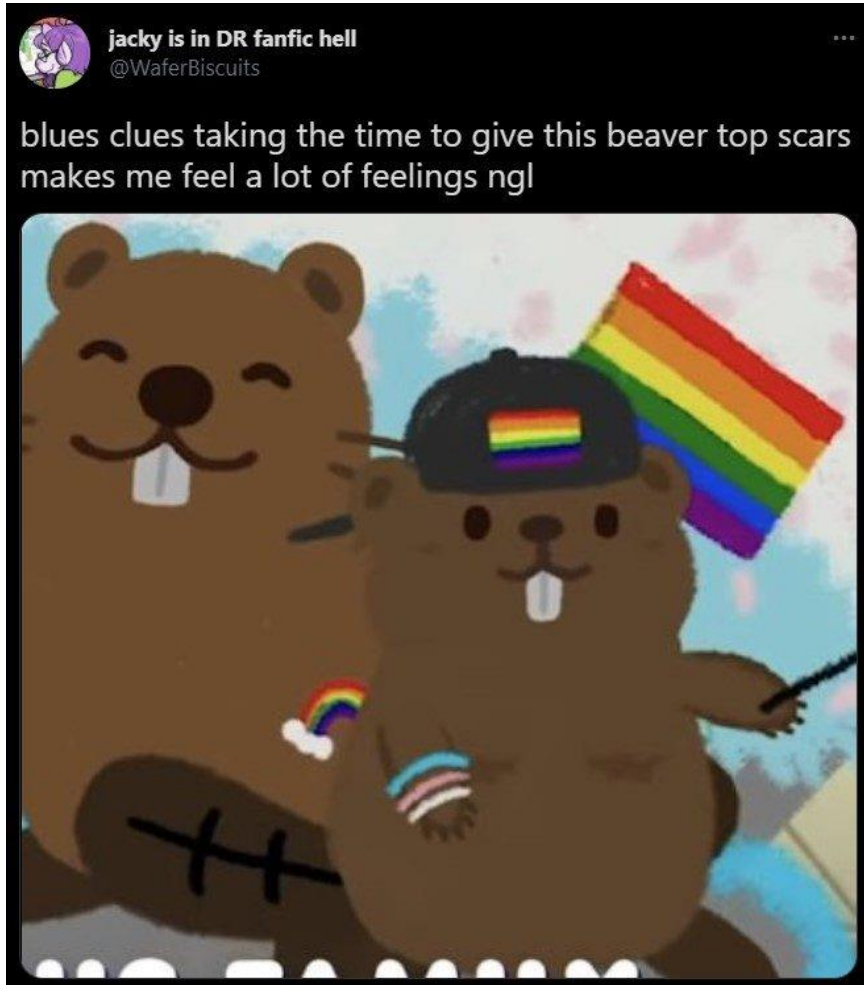
**Time**

- Follow rigid time schedules
- Time viewed as a commodity

Aesthetics

- Based on European culture
- Steak and potatoes; “bland is best”
- Woman’s beauty based on blonde, thin – “Barbie”
- Man’s attractiveness based on economic status, power, intellect

Blue's Clues Pride Month Cartoon



"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.



Abortion



Planned Parenthood
@PPFA



Barriers to birth control—and abortion—fall harder on people of color and Indigenous peoples, young people, immigrants, LGBTQ+ folks, those working to make ends meet, and people with disabilities. This [#FreeThePill](#) Day let's make care more accessible and equitable for ALL



1:30 PM · May 9, 2023 · 8,850 Views



10



23



50



Relevant ▾



Planned Parenthood
@PPFA · Jun 9, 2020



The fights for LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, and racial justice are linked. We're committed to building a world where everyone can access basic human rights — including health care — and live free from violence and discrimination. [#Pride](#)

With you in PROTEST.
With you in PRIDE.



11



28



97



ACLU
@ACLU · May 11, 2022



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

Protecting abortion access is an urgent matter of racial and economic justice.



3.4K



2.3K



1.7K



Neil Shenvi
@NeilShenvi



Could you clarify how gay men are disproportionately harmed by abortion bans?

4:21 PM · May 11, 2022



33



40



2.1K



7



Relevant ▾

[View activity >](#)

Is wokeness dead?



Wokeness is not dead



Today marks the start of Pride Month!

#Pride is more than a celebration—it's the story of LGBTIQ+ communities coming together to protect, uplift and resist.

@UN_Women reaffirms #ThePowerOfCommunity and stands in solidarity with LGBTIQ+ communities everywhere.

#PrideMonth

PRIDE
PRIDE
PRIDE
PRIDE
PRIDE
PRIDE



12:05 AM · Jun 1, 2025 · 21.6K Views



Intersectional feminism gives us a prism to see how our experiences overlap—and how our freedom depends on freedom for all 🌈

This #Pride, let's apply that lens to celebrate the #PowerOfCommunity.

🔗 See why intersectional feminism matters: unwo.men/fecF50WehzW

#PrideMonth



”

All inequality is not
created equal.

Kimberlé Crenshaw
Legal scholar



10:01 AM · Jun 21, 2025 · 13.2K Views

Wokeness is not dead

NANCY ARMOUR

Simone Biles

Add Topic +

Simone Biles shows her greatness again in standing up for transgender community | Opinion



[Nancy Armour](#)

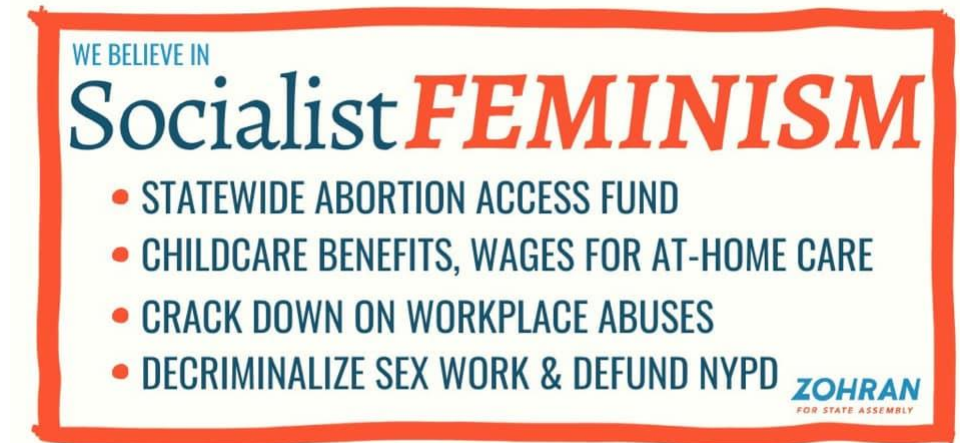
USA TODAY

June 6, 2025, 9:28 p.m. ET



There is no scientific evidence that transgender women athletes have a physical advantage over cisgender women athletes, but that hasn't stopped Gaines from claiming they do. She insists they are "robbing" cisgender women of places on the podium, and she doesn't care if it's a 12- or 22-year-old that she's putting in harm's way in this overheated climate where ignorance and violence are celebrated equally.

Wokeness is not dead



Zohran Kwame Mamdani

June 8, 2020 · 🌐

Defunding the police is a feminist issue.

Women, especially trans women, are disproportionately impacted by police violence & the violence of incarceration.

We need to divest from these systems & invest in services that lift all of us up.

Read more: bit.ly/Z4ASocFem

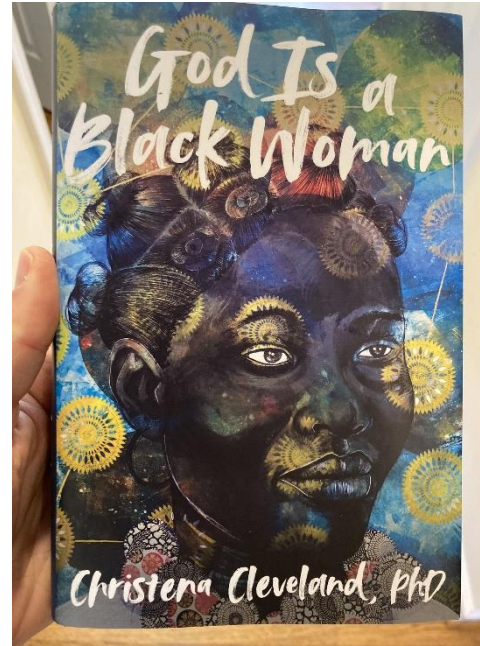


Why should we care?

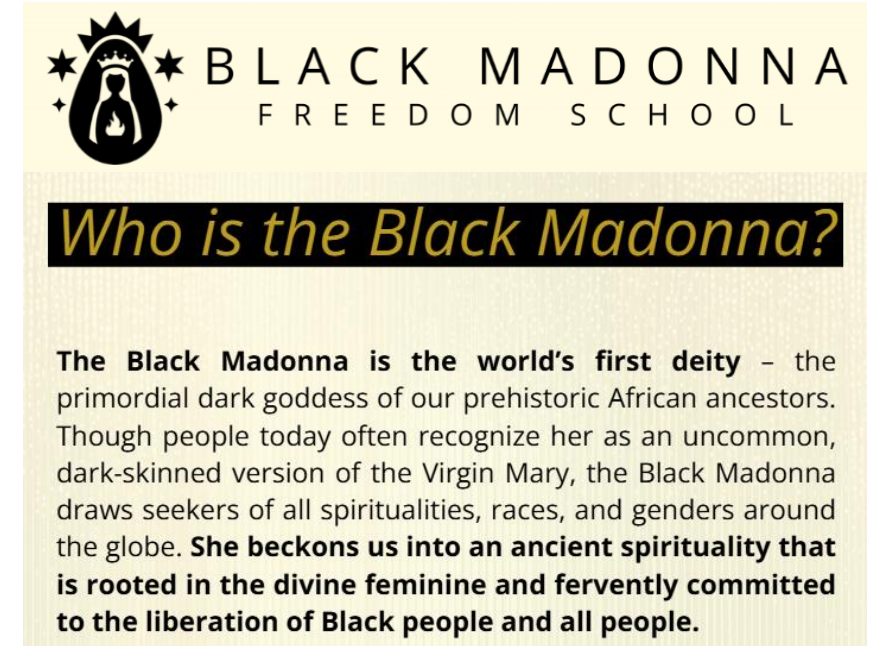
2015



2022



2026



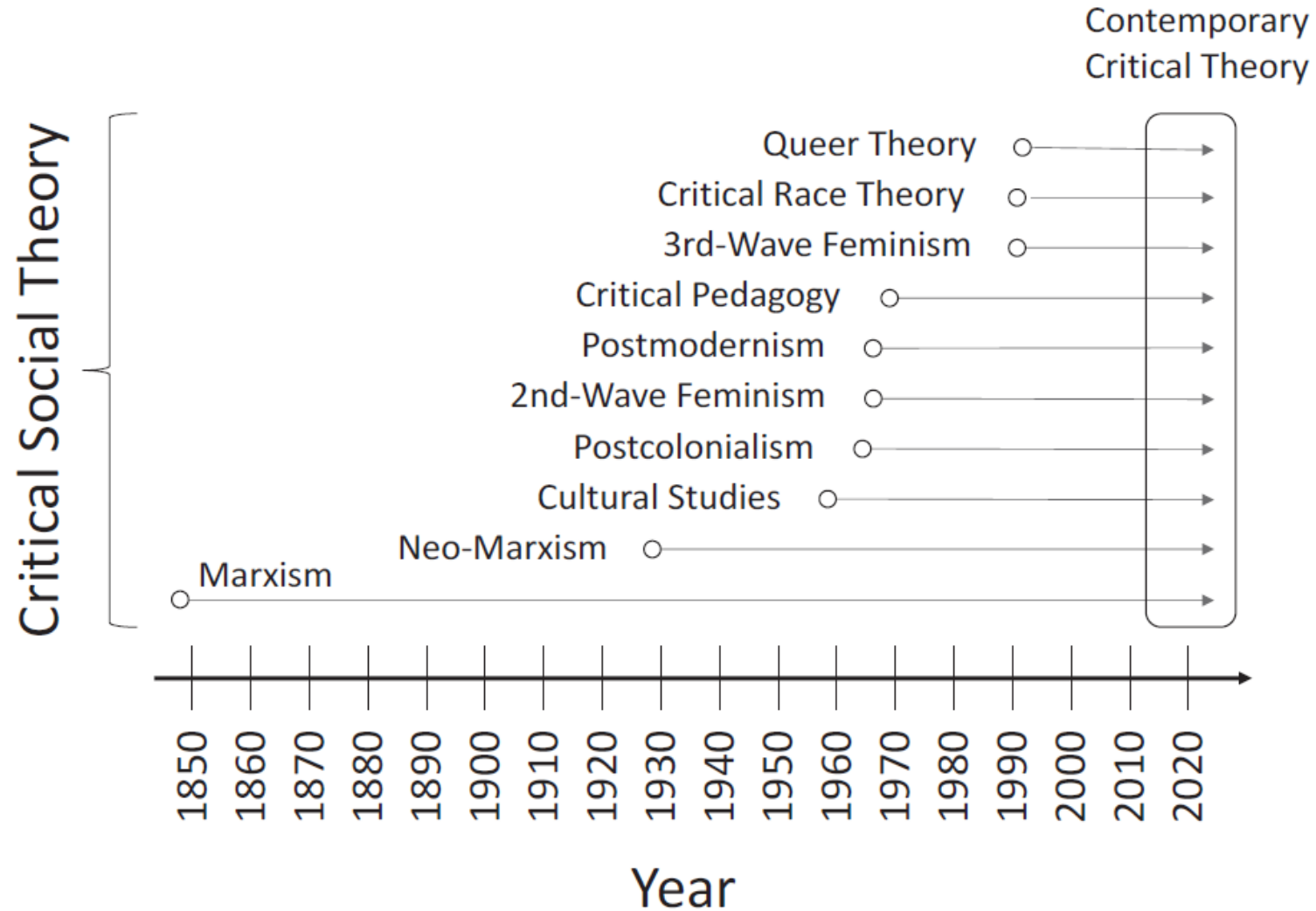
"Paul, Peter, Luke, John, James, and the writer of Hebrews repeatedly and emphatically make the same point: the unified church is the vehicle through which the kingdom of God is powerfully communicated to the world" – Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, p. 37-38 (2013)

"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

- Contemporary Critical Theory
 - Social Binary
 - Hegemonic Power
 - Lived Experience
 - Social Justice
- Contemporary Critical Theory vs. Christianity
 - A False Worldview
 - A False Understanding of Oppression
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- Conclusions

The history of contemporary critical theory



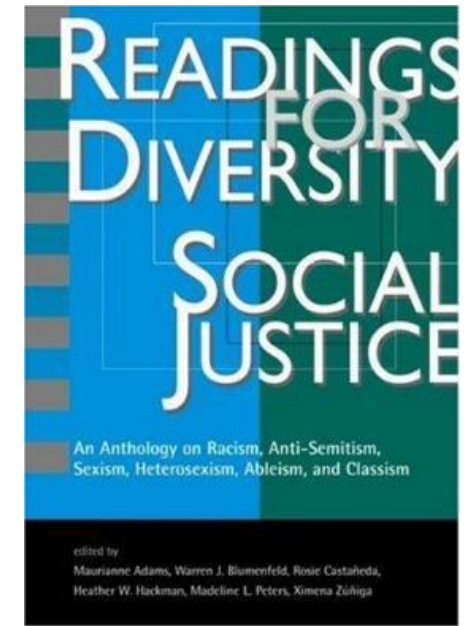
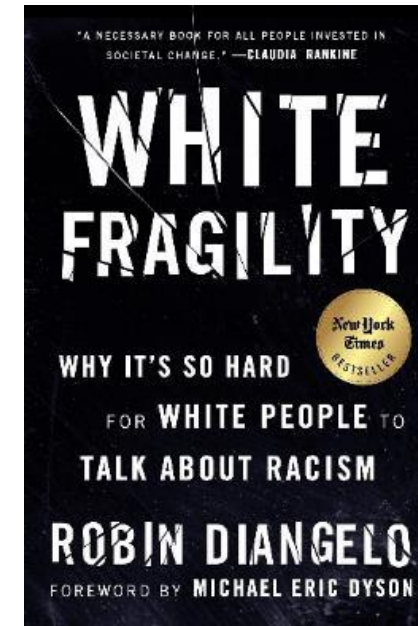
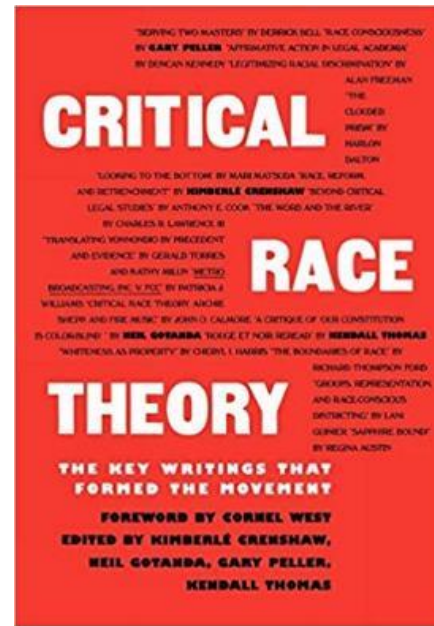
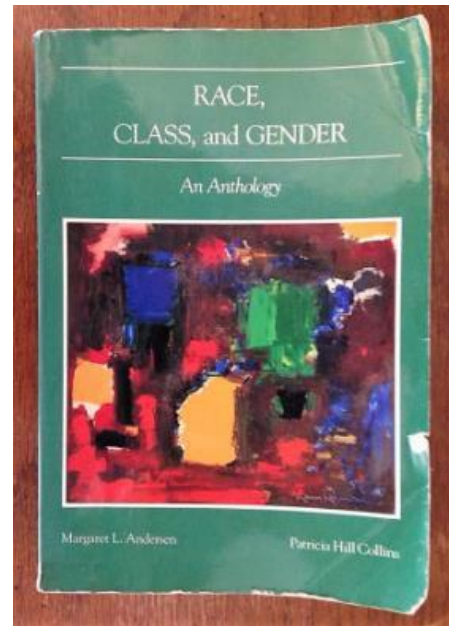
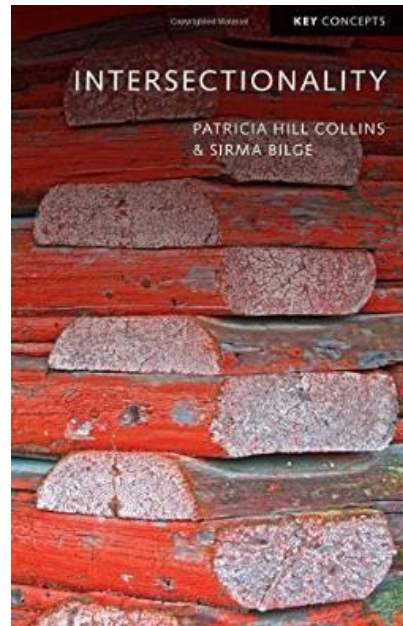
The central ideas of contemporary CT

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

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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:

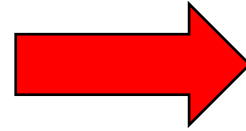


Privilege



Internalized oppression

Lived
experience

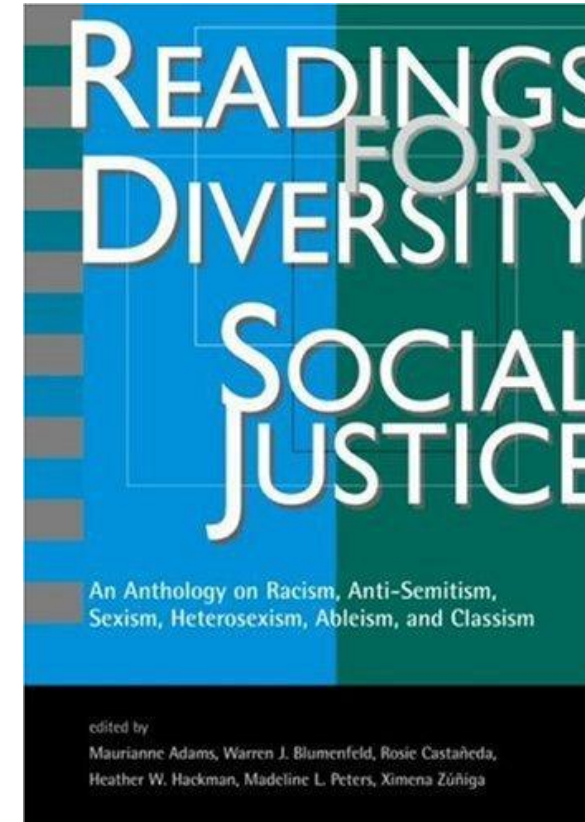


Liberatory consciousness

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

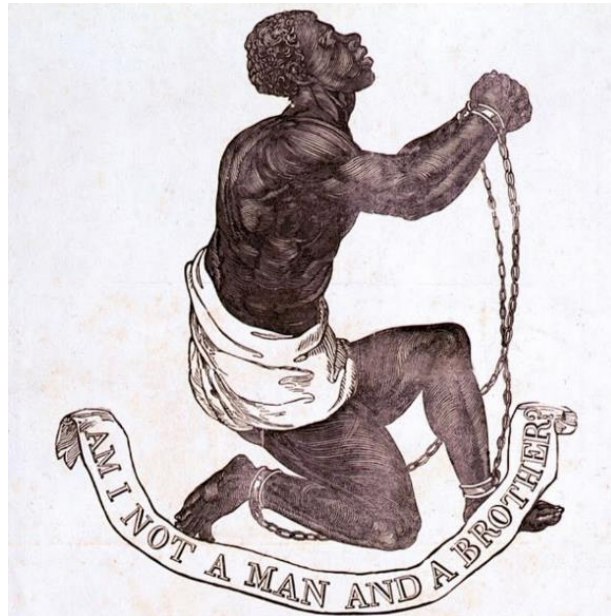
Definition of social justice:

“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



Positives of contemporary critical theory

- Emphasis on sinfulness of oppression
- Focus on structure, systems, and norms
- 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
How do we know truth?	Scripture and reason	Lived experience and embodied knowledge
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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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

Redefining oppression

Oppression =
Unjust, tyrannical
treatment

Oppression =
Hegemonic
norms

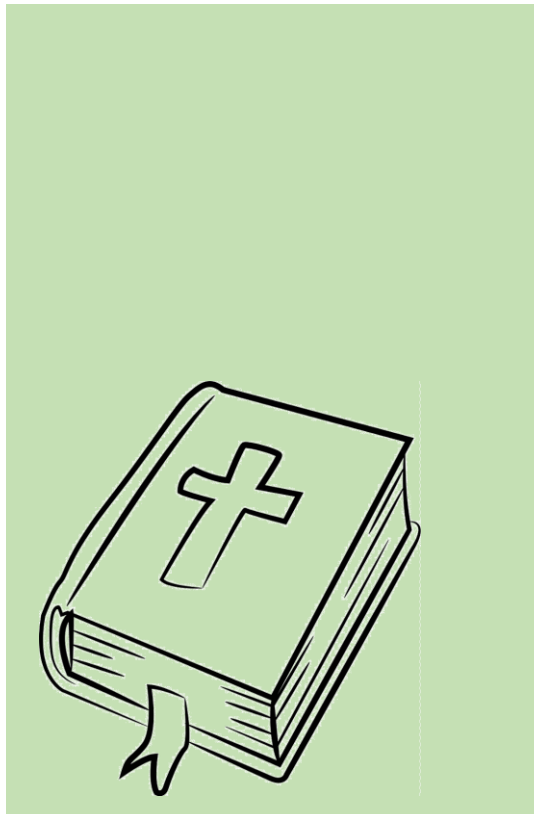
Whiteness =
oppression

Gender roles =
oppression

Heterosexism =
oppression

Cisgenderism =
oppression

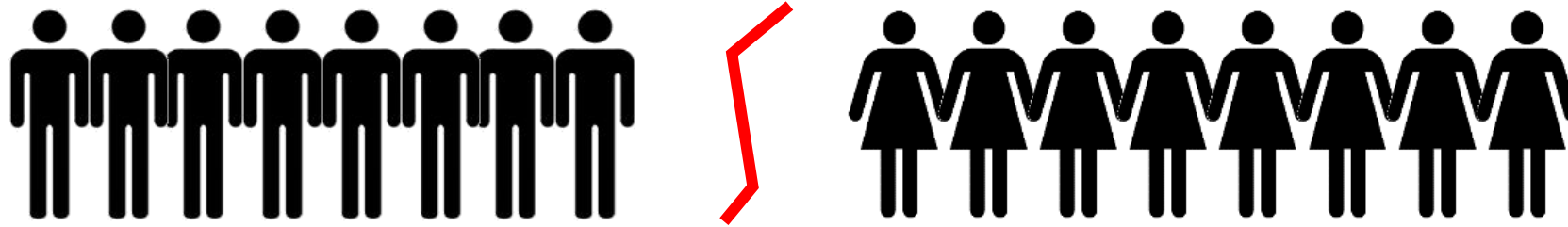
Adultism =
oppression



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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



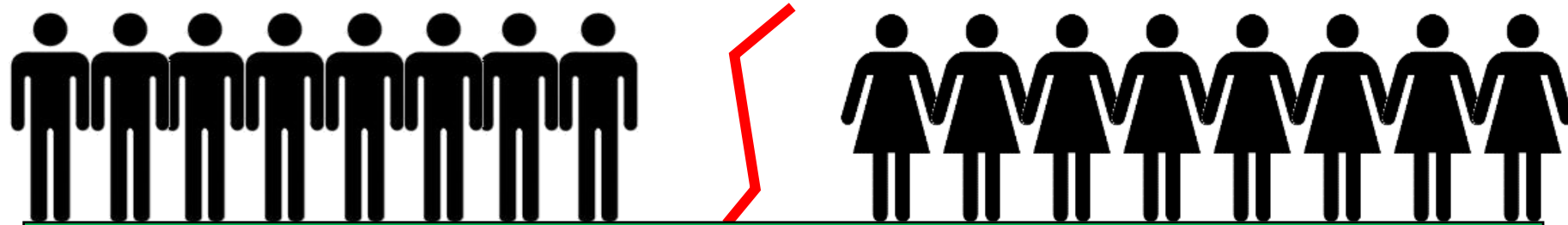
Adversarial identities

“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



Creation

Sin

Redemption

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

Oppression and epistemology:

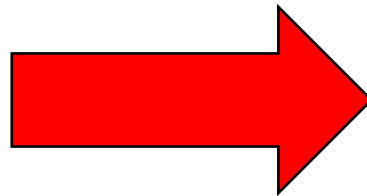


Privilege



Internalized oppression

Lived
experience



Liberatory consciousness

Deferring to lived experience

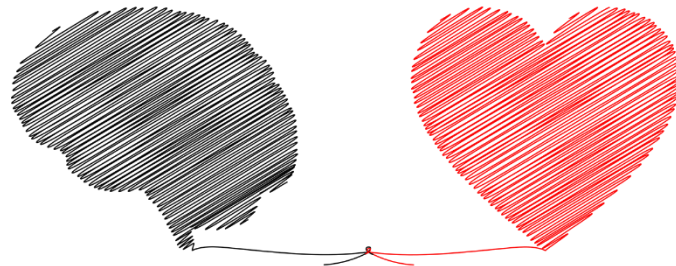
“It is about race if a person of color thinks it’s about race. This may sound at first like I’m asking you to just take every person of color’s word for it, as if they are infallible... But the truth is, whether or not someone is fallible is beside the point. We are, each and every one of us, a collection 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



Should we defer to lived experience?

- “As a woman, I know that our society is deeply sexist.”
- “As a Black man, I know that our society is deeply racist.”
- “As a lesbian, I know that sexual orientation is fixed from birth.”
- “As a Sufi Muslim, I know that Islam is true.”
- “As a polyamorous man, I know that sex outside of marriage is okay.”
- “As a Hindu, I know that all paths lead to God.”



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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.



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Pro-life Implications

- “If feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression, and depriving females of reproductive rights is a form of sexist oppression, then one cannot be anti-choice and be feminist. **A woman... cannot be anti-abortion and an advocate of feminism.**”
- “there [can be] no genuine sexual liberation for women and men without better, safer contraceptives — without the **right to a safe, legal abortion.**”
- “[Power feminists] were the group that began to suggest that one could be feminist and anti-abortion. This is another misguided notion. Granting women the civil right to have control over our bodies is a basic feminist principle... **it is a feminist principle that women should have the right to choose.**”



Outline

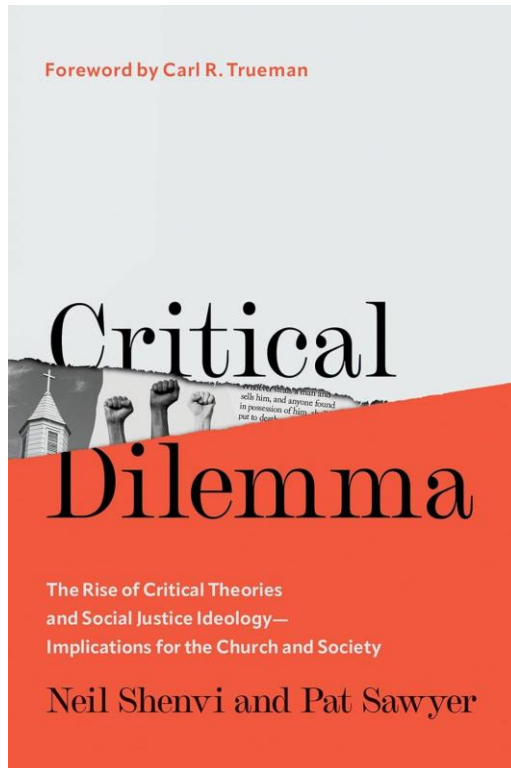
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Christianity and contemporary critical theory are competing worldviews

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

Additional resources

- Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer, *Critical Dilemma* (2023)



- Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer, *Post Woke* (2026)



Acknowledgements

Dr. Christina Shenvi



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

Dr. Pat Sawyer

