



## CRITICAL THEORY AS RELIGION

An Overview by Dick Burkhardt of  
**“A First-Amendment Case for Freedom from Woke Religion”**  
by James Lindsay, Sept 9, 2020

<https://newdiscourses.com/2020/09/first-amendment-case-freedom-from-woke-religion/>

The “Woke” consciousness is rooted Critical Theories of Social Justice, such as Critical Race Theory. Lindsay analyzes how they are like religions in the way they function. That is, they may lack the trappings of traditional churches (buildings, formal organizations, a formal “canon” of readings, hymns, rituals, etc.), but they do operate with a creedal fervor that proclaims revealed truths and tolerates no dissent. Do these ideologies meet a legal definition of “religion”? If so, then they should be protected in the private sphere, as religions, but banned from being taught or practiced in the public sphere – universities, schools, government agencies, etc. Many other organizations, such as businesses and non-profits, would likely take their cue from public policy.

In a postmodern, or Critical, faith, the Christian God is dead, and the forces that work in mysterious ways are sociological. Thus postmodern “deities” are systems of social power defined by (1) social orders equipped with liturgical forms, (2) underlying mythologies and metaphysics, and (3) a system of moral law, giving rise to duties of conscience. Lindsay also adds points about (4) religious fundamentalism, (5) puritanism, and (6) organization of churches and religions. His article digs into these features to show how they fit the functional definition of religion proposed by legal scholar Ben Clements:

“Religion can be defined as a comprehensive belief system that addresses the fundamental questions of human existence, such as the meaning of life and death, man’s role in the universe, and the nature of good and evil, and that gives rise to duties of conscience.”

Note: This definition is still inadequate for progressive religious faiths, such as the Unitarian Universalism I practice, because we don’t have a “comprehensive belief system”. So I would replace this phrase by “a guiding set of principles or beliefs”. But you get the idea.

According to Emile Durkheim, “religion is a moral community with meaning-making, a sense of control, and the capacity to establish, police, and understand one’s place in a community of people with shared values”. Jonathan Haidt notes that this requires a [system](#) of “psychosocial valuation”. That is human beings evolved to be exquisitely sensitive to social valuation of self and others, involving three aspects: (1) “closeness” = kinship or friendship, (2) “reputation”, and (3) “moral stature” = divinity in a religious context. The last is demonstrated by “virtue signaling” according to the liturgical forms of the faith, also by teaching the beliefs by ardent acolytes, and certain practices or duties of conscience by other devotees.

According to this analysis, religions form out of myths and ideologies for several reasons. One is that codification into simple doctrines, stories, language, and rituals is necessary simply to communicate the message, so that adherents think they understand it, can remember it, and can use it to recruit others in to the faith. But these simple doctrines and stories may be at odds with the everyday experience of some and may leave many questions unanswered. So priests, oracles, and prophets are needed to create elaborate mythologies or theologies and more detailed agendas to satisfy the inquisitive or ambitious.

The “ultimate questions” in today’s world would be those that are beyond the realm of science: The nature or meaning of the world (= “ultimate reality”), of life and death, of good and evil, etc. In this context mythology is “a cohesive and totalizing set of morally resonant stories about the world”. Liturgy (sacred language and ritual) becomes “self-reflection, self-critique, and social activism” relevant to the “cause”, which is the moral commitment or “duty of conscience”. Woke liturgy includes calls “either to recognize one’s privilege, to act in solidarity with the ‘oppressed’, or to ‘disrupt and dismantle’ some system of power”. Woke or Critical consciousness must be awakened, and this is the spiritual frame of the entire enterprise.

In Critical Race Theory, important doctrines that have a mythological character are racism and white supremacy culture. Both are presumed to exist “even in the absence of any factual basis or in the face of countervailing evidence”. In fact, asking for evidence “may be construed as proof of racism” or complicity in white supremacy, a typical tactic for making ideological doctrines unfalsifiable, establishing their religious character.

I note that my concept of personal social responsibility, as a natural consequence of a good education and an ethical middle class upbringing, is not acceptable in Woke religion. Woke theology is derived from traditional Christianity, where guilt is the dominant motivator, based on presumed complicity in oppressive systems of power and privilege. For those in oppressor groups, “penitence” becomes confessing one’s sins of power and privilege, then professing one’s “allyship” with the oppressed, all of which earns moral stature, yielding forgiveness or absolution. Yet true holiness is reserved for those who engage in direct action to disrupt or dismantle of the system of oppression.

I further note that social or political actions to reform the current system won’t earn you any brownie points in Woke religion. This kind of activism is actually frowned upon as “incrementalism”, presuming that only revolutionary disruption will yield real change. It is also assumed, all historical evidence to the contrary, that this revolution of consciousness will automatically yield a new utopian “heaven on earth”. In keeping with traditional religions, no credible socio-economic-political program is laid out to accomplish this, undoubtedly because such a program would ruffle too many feathers among the oppressor groups being recruited. When the promised revolution fails to materialize, or is far from heavenly, the stage is set for a future Reformation of a corrupt Church of the Woke.

Where the Church of the Woke differs somewhat from most modern religions is in its focus on power. All religions include means of directing or controlling individual behavior, in addition to establishing and enforcing social norms. In Woke religion power (individual, social, and political) is identified as so deeply intertwined with knowledge and language, that it centers

liturgy, meaning-making, and moral activities. Power is “the object of mystical and perhaps even spiritual interest”, akin to the visible powers of nature venerated by the animistic mythologies of yore. This concept is so magical that societies are believed “to be racist, sexist, homophobic, white supremacist, misogynist,... even if no bigots or bigoted attitudes exist ...at all”.

There is even a creation story, deriving from postmodern philosophy: “Certain human beings ... identified rationality and empiricism, then individualism and universal humanity, as founding principles for a new system of thought and governance. That is, the Enlightenment was the Fall”, leading directly to “conquests, colonization, enslavement, genocides”, with “scientific inquiry, whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity... as the Marks of Cain”.

“God” is replaced by “The omniscient eye at the end of history”, whose judgement day “will correctly identify all oppressors and victims and acts of oppression or liberation”. This judgment will be in a context of the “intersectionality” of oppressions, requiring, as a “moral duty”, the “practice of ‘interrogating’ identity and its relationship ... to systemic social inequalities.” All “are called to confess to their racism, even at the level of biases said to be implicit and unconscious. ‘No one,’ we’re told, ‘is ever done’”. This is a hallmark of religious thinking – moral law must be totalizing”.

“There is no neutral” is a clear sign of fundamentalism – “Believe in Jesus or Go to Hell” or you’re either a “racist or anti-racist” (Ibram Kendi). Another sign of fundamentalism is when “adherents defer to the ‘[authentic](#) victims’ of oppression, what the literature refers to as ‘authoritarian submission’ and ‘authoritarian aggression’ are immediately discernible” The rejection of criticism or authority, unless from outside sacred texts or anointed interpretations, is another key feature of fundamentalism. And if you refuse to toe the line (authoritarian submission), you’ll be cancelled (authoritarian aggression).

The parallels of Wokeness with Puritan spiritual purity are “almost uncanny”. Just compare DiAngelo’s concept of “white fragility” with Puritan “humiliation” in this quote from Frances’ Bremer’s book on Puritanism: “Contrition was followed by humiliation [=fragility] when the sinner came to terms with his inability to break away from sin”.

Note that there are many casual followers of the Critical Theories who are unaware of their puritanical and fundamentalist nature. They only hear the “justice and equity” messages and “wouldn’t have the faintest idea that Theory openly problematizes [science](#), [objectivity](#), productivity, loyalty, reliability, civility, niceness, and many other virtues as [white supremacist](#)”. But this ignorance is dangerous in regard to fundamentalist faiths, like Critical Theories, that are “untamed” or unfettered; that is, have not been subjected to secular checks and balances. Such faiths may achieve state and institutional power by stealth and cause great damage before provoking sufficient opposition to curb their bigoted and authoritarian ambitions.

Besides dissecting the religious elements of the doctrines and practices of Critical Theory, Lindsay also takes an in depth look at the legal argument for Critical Theory as religion. He begins by noting that “The point of the First Amendment is to protect individuals from infringement of their religious liberty”. This means both freedom to adopt new and unorthodox religious beliefs and practices and to be free from the imposition of the religious beliefs and

practices of others. There is, of course, a perennial tension between the two because some religious groups seek state and institutional power, as part of their belief system, to impose their beliefs or practices on the larger society. A secular state establishes civic norms, duties, and regulations to curb aggressive, power-seeking religious groups, but first they must be legally recognized as religious.

A key problem is that "Critical Social Justice as an ideology is ... "explicitly hostile to the value of [individualism](#), which it sees as an ideology used to enforce the hegemony of dominant groups". Instead it is centered around identity politics. Without enforcement of the separation of church and state, this built-in hostility to the First Amendment means that granting state or institutional power to Critical Theory would be "guaranteed to fail to protect individuals from encroachment on their own self-determination and values".

Another problem of Critical Theory as ideology is that "it has fallen back upon the model of special revelation by prophets rather than the cautious inquiry of professionals, rendering it more religious than scholarly or more theological than technological." Some acolytes even claim that "any act of bigotry whatsoever is proof that the relevant system of oppression exists and remains a fully pervasive problem in society", a typical example of bigotry in itself.

Another example of bigotry is "allowing absolutely no possibility for legitimate disagreement... and no possibility of admitting ... error are certain signs ...of absolute conviction." "The only difference here is that the Christian [looks up](#) to God and his Glory, while the Wokester looks down at systemic oppression and how terrible it has made the world". Robin DiAngelo and Ibram Kendi are only the most recent prominent "oracles or prophets" of this religion.

"One might as well be under the influence of the devil as having been socialized by the dominant discourses into [internalized dominance](#) or [oppression](#), but by getting right with the Lord (= [Social Justice](#)) and adopting a critical consciousness, the scales can fall from one's eyes, and freedom of will can be bestowed." "The difficulty arises because to an outsider, the Theory of Critical Social Justice is simply unbelievable, if not blatantly self-contradictory, flatly ridiculous, and transparently unethical."