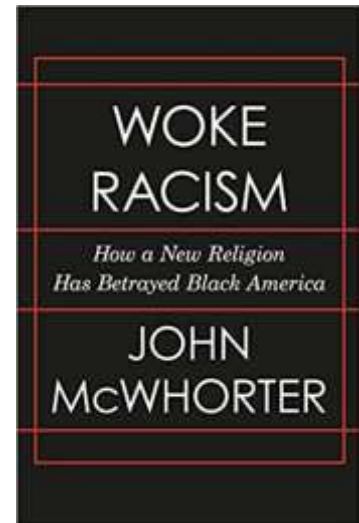


“What is Woke Religion and How to Resist It”
a review by Dick Burkhardt of

Woke Racism

How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black Americans

By John McWhorter (2021)



The black Columbia University linguist and activist John McWhorter really takes the Left to task for promoting a cult-like ideology that exploits the current US moral panic over race. And we thought we'd left Orwellian ideologies behind, like the McCarthyism, totalitarianism, and fundamentalism of the 20th century. This short, eloquent, and timely book is directed at both whites and blacks, though whites – both the new acolytes and the skeptics - have the most to learn.

McWhorter calls this new ideology “woke racism” or “third wave racism” but it’s the same as what many now call “critical race theory”, as broadly conceived. I’d describe it as “the identity politics of race, especially as rooted in postmodern philosophy and race reductionism”. But to McWhorter it’s an actual religion, which he sometimes refers to, tongue-in-cheek, as “KenDiAngelo” religion after its two high priests – Robin DiAngelo and Ibram Kendi. There’s a whole chapter describing the doctrines and rituals of this religion, especially the treatment of heretics, more often called “cancel culture”.

Here’s his trenchant overview of woke racism: “All deemed sufficiently unaware of this sense of *existing while white* as eternal culpability require bitter condemnation and ostracization ... a zealous brand of inquisition that seems to hover over almost any statement, ambition, or achievement in modern society... it forces us to render a great deal of our public discussion of urgent issues in double-talk that any ten-year-old can see through...third wave antiracism forces us to pretend that performance art is politics... did you know objectivity, being on time, and the written word are ‘white’ things?... [and] if that seems off to you, then you are one with George Wallace, Bull Connor, and David Duke?” (p 5-6).

McWhorter begins with a table of 10 precepts that could qualify as the catechism of this new religion, except each precept has a confusing anti-precept. For example, “When black people say you have insulted them, apologize with profound sincerity and guilt” but “Don’t put black people in a position where you expect them to forgive you” (p 8). The point is always to tar “all whites as racist and showing that you know that they are racist”. The problem is that this toxic “reductive and prosecutorial” attitude is taking over not just university culture but American culture at large” (p 12).

McWhorter asks why has this nonsense been allowed to spread? His answer is that today “being called a racist is all but equivalent to being called a pedophile”. That is, the word “racist” is being wielded like a club to bash anyone who dares to object. Or if that doesn’t do the trick, you’ll be labeled a white supremacist. And “to deny it, is to confirm it” (p 13). This sort of “double-bind” is vicious and vile but has a long pedigree in dogmatic and fundamentalist religions and totalitarian ideologies.

What McWhorter doesn’t cite is that contradictions and confusion are a staple of cults seeking converts – see the books by Steven Hassan on how cults operate to break down rational thought and control your mind. In this case they insist on the delusions that white “self-mortification is political activism” while “being black is ever and only oppression from the white man” (p 17). Yet the acolytes who evangelize such concepts “view themselves as having been chosen”, so McWhorter calls them “The Elect” and likens them to the self-righteous inquisitors of old.

McWhorter is serious about the religion thing: “An anthropologist would see no difference between Pentecostalism and this new form of antiracism” (p 23). He begins with “superstitions”, such as that ritual confessions of supposed racial sins will somehow magically dismantle the power structures of society, let alone that these will be rebuilt into antiracist power structures, or the implicit assumption that all this would be relatively peaceful.

Others, such as Toure’ Reed, have pointed out that we could replace the ruling class by ritually purified antiracists and it would make little difference unless there was also a program with formidable popular support to replace our current neoliberal global capitalism with a far more just and sustainable society. There is no such populist program today, so it’s far more likely that our new antiracist rulers would become as corrupted as the current ones. Certainly, the Obama presidency shows how little difference was made by even a brilliantly articulate and compassionate leader of color.

Then McWhorter takes on the “clergy” of this new religion – Ta-Nehisi Coates, Robin DiAngelo, and Ibram Kendi. For example, the Coates’ “Case for Reparations” was “received, rather, as a sermon”, not as a serious political proposition. DiAngelo leads people through ritual confessions, leaving them feeling very satisfied at having “done the work”. Pointedly, she offers no political program or guidance toward doing anything practical for racial justice. Kendi preaches to us about “how to be an antiracist” and convert the “heathen” of racist deniers who have not heard “the Good News”. All this is not the smugness that it seems but normal for religious people” (p 35).

There is even an apocalyptic aspect – that great day when America “owns up to” racism and finally fixes it. Yet McWhorter observes that in the year after the murder of George Floyd, “America has become conscious of racism ... to a degree so extreme, so sustained, and so sincere that history offers no parallel”. Instead, the Elect act like Eric Hoffer’s “True Believer” – “appealing to an idealized past, a fantastical future, and an indelibly polluted present” (p 37). For the Elect “actual progress on race is not something to celebrate but to talk around. This is because, with progress, the Elect lose their sense “purpose” (p 40).

Most visible of all, “The Elect Ban the Heretic ... What the Elect call *problematic* is what Christians call *blasphemous*” ... They are posing as injured in order to demonstrate the ‘violence’ of the views with which they disagree and thus prove that those views are evil” (p 44345). This harkens back to the primordial concept of *taboo*. “We’ve been taken from the “political activism of Martin Luther King to the faith-based commitments of a Martin Luther” (p 50).

Vulnerable older religions are often subverted or divided up by religious upstarts. McWhorter cites the current turmoil within Unitarian Universalism, which I know all too well as a life-long UU and seasoned activist for justice. The UU hierarchy is predominantly white, well-educated, affluent, liberal and now quite feminized. Thus it is highly vulnerable to the white-guilt messaging of the Elect, despite the long and honorable commitment of leading UUs to racial justice, especially the solidarity they demonstrated, even martyrdom, during the Civil Rights era.

Recently several of senior justice ministers have been branded as heretics for fictitious “harms” when they offered measured words of dissent from doctrines or practices of the Elect who had taken over positions of authority. The UU principle affirming our “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” was simply

ignored. McWhorter cites two of those targeted, the well-regarded Rev. Richard Trudeau and Rev. Todd Eklof, the latter being subjected to a veritable witch-hunt.

But it's not just white males who've been persecuted by this inquisition – the list also includes a senior white female a senior black male. I find the abuse of elders who object to woke language or doctrine to be particularly repugnant. On a personal note, I am a member of group which supports UU dissidents and opposes the woke takeover.

Another chapter focuses on the attraction for blacks of “therapeutic alienation”, or “noble victimhood”, especially those still feeling insecure, learning how to navigate the new freedoms since desegregation. South Africa saw something like this after the collapse of apartheid – with freedom comes opportunity and responsibility, but with few cultural cues as to how to proceed.

Post-colonial societies face the same dilemma – people inexperienced in governing often learn in the school of hard knocks. I'm also reminded of the moral and civic immaturity of the US ruling class compared some European countries, who've had a thousand years of hard knocks behind them.

In addition, McWhorter takes on the lowering of standards for blacks as counterproductive, even condescending racism. Permitting more violence in the schools hurts blacks the most, even if comes from other blacks, not whites. Sending unprepared blacks to Yale just means that few of them will succeed, whereas they might do far better in a second-tier university.

Declaring that critical thinking and study skills”, even STEM studies, are “acting white is nonsensical. And Kendi's dogma that disparities in racial outcomes must be due to racism, really takes beating at McWhorter's hands. He points out that dysfunctional black cultural characteristics are real and can't be erased overnight by blaming and shaming whites. Or that many statistics for Asians and Jews are better than those for whites, with select black statistics being better too.

As to solutions, McWhorter restricts himself to three actions that would be relatively quick and easy: (1) End the war on drugs. (2) Teach phonics. (3) Reinvigorate vocational education. The first two of these are already happening in places, whereas the third has gotten little attention from the elites. Note that Peter Turchin cites “elite overproduction” as a key historical factor in the fall of overextended and corrupt regimes, now manifested by too many underemployed and dissatisfied college graduates, ripe for the demagoguery of the Elect. Better

funding and more respect for voc-ed would also help liberal politics to regain traction with the working class.

McWhorter concludes that for whites woke racism “forces us to think like people of the Dark Ages without knowing it. It’s scary, it’s unfair and regressive, and it’s just plain wrong” (p 58). While for blacks, “the Elect’s harm to black people is so multifarious and rampant that anyone committed to this religion and calling it antiracist walks in a certain shame” (p 137).

His advice if you’re attacked by the woke: The Elect are true believers who won’t be convinced by argument. But nonetheless, stand your ground – state your moral principles and the facts as best you know them. Then refuse to be vilified - ask for evidence, citing the normal meanings of words and the damaging social and political consequences of woke ideology, until they realize that you can’t be intimidated. If necessary, find allies and consult a lawyer to fight back. Don’t apologize for fictitious harms just to placate.