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### **Cultural engagement without cultural discernment leads to cultural captivity – Ken Meyers**

#### **Awoke, my soul, and sing?**

Are you woke? If by some chance you're not sure what that means, let me bring you up to speed...But first a story illustrating the reality of where we are at, and then a bit of backstory as to how we got here. This will be followed by an explanation of the core tenets of this worldview (with reference to the Gospel) and conclude with implications for cultural mission.

First, the true story which took place at Wellesley College, west of Boston:

*On a recent fall day, a new student began to request she be referred to by male pronouns despite the fact that she had applied as a woman, and that she was indeed a woman. She now identified as "masculine-of-center gender-queer." This was not particularly shocking to her peers, as there were other transgender students on campus. Timothy (as she asked to be called) was accommodated and affirmed easily by the far-left school culture. The problem arose when Timothy decided to run for a student leadership role as coordinator of multicultural affairs. The job was to promote a "culture of diversity" on campus. Students, though generally friendly with Timothy, began to object that she, as a "white man," was not representative of the diversity such a role required. Students coordinated an online campaign to reject Timothy based on the understanding that a "white man" in leadership would perpetuate the patriarchy. When asked how she felt, Timothy confessed to feeling conflicted. She believed herself to be a minority trans student, but also knew that the patriarchy was alive and well, and did not want to be part of the perpetuation of oppression.<sup>i</sup>*

Welcome to the world of woke ideology. It's political correctness on steroids.

Woke used to refer to the state of being awake after sleep, but in 2017 it entered the Oxford Dictionary as being aware of social and political issues, especially racism. You are woke if you have been 'awakened' to the true nature of reality in the dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed, villain and victim. The most prominent movement on the cultural landscape that represents the voice and pushes for wokeness is Black Lives Matter as well as the transgender movement within the LGBTQ+ movement. A useful definition of woke is provided by Mering:

The term woke refers to the state of being alert and attuned to the layers of pervasive oppression in society. While it originated specifically with regard to racism, it has since broadened to include all areas of social oppression commonly considered to be along the lines of gender, race, and sexuality<sup>ii</sup>

It's not without significance that this word 'woke' entered the dictionary after the 2016 Oxford Dictionary word of the year: post-truth.

How did we get to the point illustrated by the story above? How is it that no-one bats an eyelid anymore if a man says 'I identify as a woman'?

It didn't happen overnight. I've come to appreciate more and more the notion that 'people in ivory towers are cut off from reality' simply isn't true. They're the creators of it. Culture is downstream from the ivory towers, because the ivory towers are the places of learning that influence the students who become our professional workforce. What has happened in our institutions of learning over the years has been a shifting in values which has resulted in rethinking and redefining

concepts that we thought were normative, especially in terms of what it means to be a human being.

Our cultural moment today has been framed in the narrative of a culture war. In the liberal political model of western democracy, which is taking strain, this is a war between “left” and “right.” It’s an appropriate description because what we are observing is an increasing polarization, where what used to be more fringe or far wing, is now becoming more mainstream in the two camps. Politics and social media represent the battleground, and the megaphone and the muzzle (cancel culture)\*\* are the weapons of choice. On the modern cultural front, the representative of the two extremes would be Donald Trump on the one end and fictional character Titania McGrath (created by British comedian Andrew Doyle) who is described as a 24-year-old “radical intersectionalist poet committed to feminism, social justice and armed peaceful protest” who identifies as non-binary, “polyracial” and ecosexual” and “a militant vegan who thinks she is a better poet than William Shakespeare”<sup>iii</sup> You can follow ‘her’ on twitter @TitaniaMcGrath. She has over 600 000 followers, and please remember she isn’t real and that it is satire! If you got lost with all those words, know that there are plenty more. The language of woke ideology can be quite bewildering.

What is interesting to note is that amongst various secular culture and political pundits, whilst there is obviously huge concern over increasingly right-wing developments, many argue that the real danger is leftist woke ideology. Popular talk show host in America Bill Maher who regards himself as leftist in political orientation even said in one of his shows “I never left the left...the Left left me.” David Rubin of Rubin Report fame also lamented that far from being progressive, the woke movement is regressive. Academics Pluckrose and Lindsay, in their book *Cynical Theories*, argue that

...we have reached a point in history where the liberalism and modernity at the heart of Western civilization are at great risk on the level of the ideas that sustain them. The precise nature of this threat is complicated, as it arises from at least two overwhelming pressures, one revolutionary and the other reactionary, that are waging war with each other over which illiberal direction our societies should be dragged. Far right populist movements claiming to be making a last desperate stand for liberalism and democracy against a rising tide of progressivism and globalism are on the rise around the world. They are increasingly turning towards leadership in dictators and strongmen who can maintain and preserve “Western sovereignty and values. Meanwhile, far-left progressive social crusaders portray themselves as the sole and righteous champions of social and moral progress without which democracy is meaningless and hollow. These, on our furthest left, not only advance their cause through revolutionary aims that openly reject liberalism as a form of oppression, but they also do so with increasingly authoritarian means seeking to establish a thoroughly dogmatic fundamentalist ideology regarding how society ought to be ordered. Each side in this fray sees the other as an existential threat, and thus each fuels the other’s greatest excesses. This culture war is sufficiently intense that it has come to define political – and increasingly social – life through the beginning of the twenty-first century.

They then go on to say

Though the problem to the right is severe and deserves much careful analysis in its own right...we believe that, while the two sides are driving one another to madness and further radicalization, the problem coming from the left represents a departure from its historical point of reason and strength, which is liberalism. It is that liberalism that is essential to the maintenance of our secular, liberal democracies...the progressive left has aligned itself not

with Modernity but with postmodernism, which rejects objective truth as a fantasy dreamed up by naive and/or arrogantly bigoted Enlightenment thinkers...<sup>iv</sup>

It would take a lot of space to trace the origin of the ideas that we see today. The academic world is akin to a meadow of a variety of flowers (representing ideas), and the lecturers are the bees that engage in much cross-pollination. What we have in woke ideology is a marriage of Marxism, especially Cultural Marxism, and Post-modernism. It's Marxist in that it seeks to destroy the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy it perceives in society, and post-modern in its tools of deconstruction and rejection of any 'meta-narratives' that seek to explain reality. There is an irony at play here because true post-modernism rejects Marxism. Where it gets somewhat confusing for Christians is that in their deconstructing (and reconstructing) of words and their meaning, the woke ideology crusade has been placed under the rubric of Social Justice. That sounds Christian doesn't it?

At the risk of over-simplifying, a significant cross-pollination that happened began with the birth of Critical Theory which originated with what has come to be known as the Frankfurt School, a group of thinkers who applied classical Marxist ideology to the realm of culture (especially in the 1930's), hence the term Cultural Marxism. For an excellent overview of the history and analysis of this school and its influence from a Christian perspective, see [this article](#) by Robert Smith of Gospel Coalition.<sup>v</sup>

One significant pollination to give rise to woke ideology is Critical Theory and Critical Legal Theory to form Critical Race Theory (CRT). Woke ideology encompasses many other areas too, but this article will hone in on CRT. The pollination to other areas of study within scholarship include, amongst others, feminist studies and the lgbq+ movement. Think of a bicycle wheel. The hub would represent Critical Theory, the spokes would represent various branches or manifestations of that theory (eg CRT, Queer theory, postcolonial theory, fat studies etc) and the tyre would represent the term woke which encompasses all these 'spokes.'

In the academic world, a theory is traditionally understood as a way to describe or understand a reality being observed. Critical Theory takes this further and seeks to not just understand or explain, but to identify and subvert what it identifies as problematic societal structures.

There are a number of definitions of CRT, which is at this stage primarily a highly emotive American phenomenon (but making itself felt in South Africa), but in essence the argument goes that racism is legally entrenched in society through its various cultural institutions, and that this serves to benefit white supremacy. The goal then is to expose the power structures (institutionally, social constructions and language) and subvert them in order to bring about change. It also goes further to state that all white people, especially heterosexual (and especially Christian) males are inherently racist as part of being white. This means you are currently reading an article written by a natural enemy of CRT.

In their book *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Delgado and Stefanic set the stage for introducing the theory by posing some questions centered around ordinary daily interactions, where you are to imagine yourself being treated differently from other people within the same context. How do you feel about the negative interaction? How do you feel about it when you become aware that you got treated that way simply because of your skin color? They then go on to describe CRT movement as:

A collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power.<sup>vi</sup>

It is distinctive from the civil rights movement as CRT questions the notion of meritocracy within the liberal political model.

Unlike traditional civil rights, which embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundation of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principals of constitutional law.<sup>vii</sup>

They lay out the broad basic tenets of CRT as follows<sup>viii</sup>:

- 1) Racism is ordinary (i.e an everyday normal occurrence for people of color). This makes it difficult to cure.
- 2) The white-over-color serves important purposes that advantage white people, which means there is little incentive to eradicate it
- 3) Race and races are products of social thoughts and relations (called the social construction thesis)
- 4) Intersectionality and anti-essentialism
- 5) The concept of 'voice of color' in which ones minority status brings competence to speak on race and racism (if you hear terms such *standpoint theory* or *positional self*, this is where it primarily relates to)

At the risk of oversimplifying, in terms of the first tenet above, I don't think anyone would deny the reality of racism. The question is whether it is pervasive to the extent that it is claimed by CRT. Within the worldview of CRT, since I am a white heterosexual Christian male (or a WASP – white anglo-saxon protestant), my very act of questioning the extent of racism would be considered proof of my inherent racism, as I have not been in the position of the lived experience of racism as a black person. It is worth commenting at this point that within CRT, racism is redefined in terms of power dynamics, and so only white people are by definition racist, since, within this paradigm, white people have the institutional power. Black people may be prejudiced, but they cannot be racist because they are on the victim end of power dynamics, although one significant voice that disagrees with this is Ibram X Kendi, a very popular and widely read Critical Race Theorist in USA. In his view however there is no neutrality in the racism struggle, and argues that the opposite of racist isn't 'not racist' but rather antiracist.<sup>ix</sup> In a very real way, being black is no longer about referencing skin colour, but in itself becomes a political identity. In terms of the second tenet above it would be wrong to deny that there are instances where there would be great reluctance to change policies when white interests are being served, but what is up for debate again is the extensiveness. Critics are quick to point out that other minority groups surpass white people in terms of accomplishments within the USA (the focal point of CRT critique). With tenet number three, history speaks for itself on how race has been used as a means of social identification, and there are socially constructed stereotypes that exist. South Africa with its apartheid history is testimony to that. The frustration here however is that in highlighting how diverse people can be within their own framework so as not to be reductionist in using only race, (through tenet number 4 & 5 which we shall explore below), CRT then resorts to using the category of race as a construct to be used.

The first forming of CRT is credited to the first tenured African American professor at Harvard Law School Derrick Bell (back in the 70's, he passed away in 2011)<sup>x</sup>, along with his former student and now Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, who is a key figure in understanding CRT. Crenshaw, who is also African-American, serves as Professor at UCLA School of Law and Columbia law school. It's important to note the genesis of this theory as arising within the context of law, and as an attempt to address concerns that were still prevalent despite the gains made through the civil rights

movement led by Martin Luther King Jr, although Bell's radical proposal was that even these changes were allowed to happen because it suited white interests to do so.

Crenshaw, through her landmark legal essay in 1989 entitled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", introduced a key concept in CRT: Intersectionality. Intersectionality represents a lens through which to view and map layers of oppression within persons and groups. A person may have an intersection of multiple layers of oppression. For example, let's say Susan is a black woman. Susan may be experiencing discrimination and harassment at work, but may find it difficult to get justice because the courts would recognize that the company hires both black people and women, and not recognize that Susan is in a unique position because she experiences a double discrimination on the grounds that she is both black and a woman, especially if the blacks in the company are all men and the women are all white. If she was furthermore a lesbian, that would be another layer of oppression. If in addition to that she was Muslim, then her minority status increases even more, and as the levels of oppression increase, so Susan would be even more qualified and competent to speak authoritatively on the issue of racism and oppression than if she were a heterosexual black woman (see also the 'voice of color' notion below). Because of her lived experience, she is regarded as more authoritative than say a Harvard law professor.

What is anti-essentialism? As the term implies, it is against essentialism. Essentialism is a philosophical concept which has its roots in Plato, which holds that 'things have a set of characteristics which make them what they are, and that the task of science and philosophy is their discovery and expression; the doctrine that essence is prior to existence.'<sup>xi</sup> In the context of categories of groups of people, essentialism would maintain that there is a common experience or shared qualities within the group that enables membership of that group. Anti-essentialism denies this and instead argues that to take such a position is to universalize experience based on social constructions, and that this is hurtful because, as Nunn explains:

to make an essentialist claim about a person is to deprive the person of agency in selecting the aspects of their identity that are important to them and that they desire to perform or foreground at any given moment<sup>xii</sup>

The inherent contradiction within this non-essentialist position has been noted and is a source of much debate within the CRT community.

The 'voice of colour' notion which co-exists "in somewhat uneasy tension with anti-essentialism"<sup>xiii</sup> argues that because of different histories and experiences with oppression, various minority groups are able to communicate to their white counterparts on matters that the whites are unlikely to know. Your level of minority status in terms of oppression brings greater authority and competence to speak on these issues.

So, on the surface, the ideas of CRT represent a legitimate exploration into the dynamics between race and power. What's the big deal?

Jesus said in Matthew 7:16 "You will recognize them by their fruits." This is the big deal: the fruit of woke ideologues are not fruits of the Spirit, because the roots are not in good soil. As one explores deeper the ideas conveyed above, so one begins to recognize more and more that as Christians we should be concerned about this theory, not only because of its incorrect ideas, but because of its destructive fruit in taking people captive. As Chuck Colson used to say, ideas have consequences, and bad ideas have victims.

The fruit of woke ideology in how it gets displayed is through the megaphone and the muzzle, terms used by author Michael Anton. As Mering explains:

The megaphone amplifies the preferred narrative through mass media, agenda-driven fact checkers, big business, and incessantly repeated talking points. When combined, they work to launder the ideology and baptize it with institutional gravitas. The muzzle serves to suppress alternative narratives through de-platforming, cancelling, demonizing, and rampant big tech censorship. Within the woke climate – which rejects critical thinking in favor of critical theory – an emotionally driven narrative becomes all-powerful and unassailable<sup>xiv</sup>

In a word, woke ideologues ironically behave as bullies. Woke ideologues thus have a very different approach to what Jesus taught. Jesus taught that we are to love our enemies and do good to them (Matt 5:43-48), and that we are to treat others the way we want to be treated (Matt 7:12). Woke ideologues focus more on doing unto others. High profile figures who utter statements that cause offence to woke ideology are immediately targeted, and the goal is nothing less than to ruin that person’s life. On the South African scene, Helen Zille is but one example of someone who experienced the full force of wokeness against her, and recounts it in her book *#Stay Woke Go Broke: Why South Africa won’t survive America’s Culture Wars*. Whilst I personally do not agree with many of her ideas, her understanding of the woke ideology and methodology is on the whole fair, and I respect her for being willing to fight for my right to disagree with her and for actually coming through it. Her advice for how to handle being under ‘woke attack’ is spot on.

So the fruit leaves a lot to be desired. What is the soil that leads to this fruit? This table, in addition to what has so far been shared, will hopefully provide insight<sup>xv</sup>:

	Christian	Woke-ism
What is ultimate reality	Defined by God (Gen 1:1)	Defined by human mind
Who are we?	Image bearers of God, made by Him	Socially constructed identities
What is wrong with the world?	The sinful human heart	White oppression
Source of Evil	Satan; the human heart	White Oppression
What is sin?	Rebellion against God	Causing offence
How does the mess get fixed?	The Cross	Subversion and revolution
How can we be saved?	Through the Cross	Victims are morally innocent and don’t require salvation Oppressors cannot be pardoned, but can only engage in perpetual penance
How do we know truth?	Divine revelation/conscience/applying skills of reason	Objective truth, logic etc are discredited as tools of oppressor. Victims reveal truth.
Who is final authority	God	Victims
What is the goal	A redeemed heaven/earth, after judgment taken place	No final judgment, injustice must be dealt with now

How are we as Christians to respond to CRT?

As already experienced by many Christians, this is something of a minefield. A missionary friend of mine commented that their organization was arranging sensitivity training for all its members, because, as he put it, “we don’t know how racist we really are.”

In his blog on CRT, James Emery White highlights the nature of this minefield:

while in agreement with many of the concerns surrounding CRT, I am also concerned with the demonization of many important dynamics integral to working against racism in the name of CRT. Akin to the McCarthy era recklessly naming anyone and anything “Communist,” Christians are doing the same with CRT.

For example, acknowledging systemic or institutionalized racism should not automatically put you into the CRT camp, any more than wanting to denounce aspects of CRT should mean you are denying systemic or institutional forms of racism.<sup>xvi</sup>

But why have many within the church taken on these ideas? The simple answer is that if the church is not perceived to be dealing with issues society faces, then solutions will be sought elsewhere. In this instance, if the local church was known for dealing with the sin of racism, and disciplining people into a different way of relating based on the doctrine of being made in the image of God (Imago Dei), then just maybe people would have looked at the church and gone: *‘hey – look at them – perhaps they can show us the way forward out of this mess!’* Having said that, isn’t it exciting that there are indeed so many gospel communities that are living out, by God’s grace, the values that God calls us to live.

In fairness, it would be naïve to totally write off CRT. There are legitimate issues raised, such as the reality of racism both at individual and institutional level. But having said that, there are, from my perspective, serious concerns.

How you frame a problem impacts how you address it.

What are the concerns?

Firstly, whenever post-modernism forms the basis for a perspective, the legitimate question to ask is: Why should we believe you? This is because post-modernism by definition rejects explanatory narratives and objective truth. In this vein, why should your subjective experience be more valid than mine?

Secondly, the lens is too simplistic. It reminds me of the adage that to the person with a hammer everything is a nail. To simply reduce all social interaction to villain-victim is to deny many other factors that come into play in social relationships. What is true however is the human tendency, which woke ideology really serves to reinforce, to create us-them dichotomies.

Thirdly, CRT doesn’t offer a solution. You cannot solve racial issues by reinforcing racial categories and by seeing it everywhere. The Bible references only one race, the human race, with a myriad of tribes or culture groups, which is what makes Revelation 5:9&10 so exciting:

And they sang a new song, saying,  
“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation,

and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth.”

Former woke activist who advocated Critical Race Theory for over two decades, Monique Dison, who is co-founder of The Center for Biblical Unity, reached a point of rejecting this theory as it contradicted Christian teachings. She said that “leaving wokeness is never done alone, and it’s rarely done without a fight.” She offers the following counsel in an interview:

If your friends or loved ones are wrapped up in the critical social theories, critical race theory or social justice, don’t get mad at them...It’s usually done or embraced from a posture that is very compassionate and wanting to do good. They’ve just not been (given) a proper exegetical framework...if someone in your life is espousing critical race theory or the social theories, know that it is not too late for them to walk out. Your participation is going to be desperately needed.<sup>xvii</sup>

When Paul spoke at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-34), he met the learned philosophers where they were at. As Christians we can do the same. Christians and Critical Race Theorists have in common a desire for justice in the areas of poverty, the marginalized and oppression. And while to our disgrace many Christians have indeed been complicit in these social ills, it can also be shown from history that Christians who were truly gripped by the gospel fought about social change, especially because of the powerful truth of Imago Dei. For example, in the ancient world, cruelty was the norm for enforcing power. Atheist historian Tom Holland writes about the Greco-Roman world:

It was not just the extremes of callousness that unsettled me, but the complete lack of any sense that the poor or the weak might have the slightest intrinsic value<sup>xviii</sup>

It was Christianity that fought about the difference, with its recognition that because we are made in the image of God, every single human being had intrinsic worth and dignity, no matter what their race and gender, and so oppression of the poor and weak was condemned.

And that really is the answer to dealing with all these ideas in terms of cultural mission: be the church.

And that’s just one spoke of woke.

Finally, if level of oppression is the litmus test for accuracy of perception, knowing truth and moral authority, then within this paradigm Jesus of Nazareth must be listened to. He experienced multiple layers of oppression which no other human being has experienced.

He was a Jew under Roman rule.

As a child He was a refugee.

He was despised by the religious leaders.

He was conspired against by the religious leaders to be put to death.

He was betrayed by his own friend.

He was innocent of crime, and yet put to death by cruel crucifixion by Roman authorities. This is the ultimate in cancel culture. The crowds observing the trial used their megaphone to shout “crucify Him!”

Whilst on the cross he was oppressed by receiving upon Himself all the sin of humanity.



Whilst on the cross he was oppressed by the full forces of evil.

Whilst on the cross he was oppressed by the anger of God placed upon Him, which was due to us.

In short, Jesus experienced oppression at a personal, societal and supernatural level.

And yet He rose from the dead. Society at every level tried to cancel Him: political, religious and grass roots. They couldn't.

And He has a message to share: the gospel alone has the power to transform.

*Awake my soul and sing  
Of Him who died for thee!  
And hail Him as thy matchless King  
Through all eternity*<sup>xix</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> Mering, Noelle (2021) *Awake, not Woke: A Christian Response to the Cult of Progressive Ideology*, p13.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, p19

<sup>iii</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Titania\\_McGrath](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Titania_McGrath)

<sup>iv</sup> Pluckrose, Helen & Lindsay, James (2020) *Cynical Theories: How Universities Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity – and why this harms everybody* (p10)

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/cultural-marxism-imaginary-conspiracy-or-revolutionary-reality/>

<sup>vi</sup> Delgado, Richard & Stefanci, Jean (2001) *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York University Press, p 2

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid. p3

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid p8

<sup>ix</sup> Duson, C Monique The Father, Son and Antiracism – accessed at <https://stream.org/the-father-son-and-antiracism/>

<sup>x</sup> Pluckrose, Helen & Lindsay, James (2020) *Cynical Theories: How Universities Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity – and why this harms everybody* (p135)

<sup>xi</sup> Oxford Languages

<sup>xii</sup> Nunn, Kenneth B (2019) *“Essentially Black”: Legal Theory and the Morality of Conscious Racial Identity*. University of Florida Law Faculty Publication

<sup>xiii</sup> Delgado & Stefanci – *Critical Race Theory* – p9

<sup>xiv</sup> Mering, Noelle (2021) *Awake, not Woke* - p65

<sup>xv</sup> Adapted from Allen, David Scott (2020) *Why Social Justice is not Biblical Justice*, Credo House Publishers, Grand Rapids, p56-58

<sup>xvi</sup> White, James Emery Church & Culture blog – Critical Race Theory – Vol 16, No.99

<sup>xvii</sup> [www.christianpost.com/amp/former-woke-activist-shares-how-she-grew-to-reject-crt.html](http://www.christianpost.com/amp/former-woke-activist-shares-how-she-grew-to-reject-crt.html)

<sup>xviii</sup> <https://breakpoint.org/why-woke-ness>

<sup>xix</sup> From hymn “Crown Him with many Crowns” – Matthew Bridges and Godfrey Thring