ETHICS AND INTERSECTIONALITY SERIES

Critical Race Theology

White Supremacy, American Christianity, and the Ongoing Culture Wars

Juan M. Floyd-Thomas

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Introduction

Making America Possible Again: Toward a Critical Race Theology

In August 1790, President George Washington visited Newport, Rhode Island, in the hopes of generating popular support for the ratification of the Bill of Rights, which included protections for religious liberty. Countless members of the Newport community, including leaders and members of the city's religious denominations, crowded together to listen to the new president. In the audience gathered in Newport's public square that day were members of the city's Jewish congregation, Jeshu at Israel Synagogue (now known as Touro Synagogue). Moses Seixas, the Warden of Newport's synagogue, wrote a letter to Washington on behalf of the congregation and expressed the congregation's elation at having Washington as a leader as well as their joy in living under the political protection of a national Constitution that they were confident would not only prevent the establishment of a national church or religion but also finally guarantee true religious liberty to all people.

That visit occasioned a famous exchange of letters between Washington and the "Hebrew Congregations of Newport," in which the Jewish community of Newport addressed the first president of the newly formed American republic—and he replied. Four days after leaving Newport, Washington wrote a reply to the

congregation. Extending beyond a concisely banal and quaintly polite acknowledgment of their letter, Washington's reply echoed the congregation's belief that the newly established United States was now a nation that would give "to bigotry no sanction, [and] to persecution no assistance" and continued to make a clear distinction that American society and culture's creation of the wall of separation enabled the United States to move from mere religious toleration to true religious liberty.

Religious toleration assumes that government can either give or take away the "privilege" of exercising one's religion. By contrast, religious liberty is an inalienable right that cannot be taken away by the civil state. Washington's letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, has come to be regarded as one of the most important pronouncements of a new philosophy concerning religion, namely, that government exists in part for the protection of religious liberty and matters of conscience. Throughout Washington's presidency, he deemed "religion and morality the indispensable supports of political prosperity and argued that religion was necessary for morality" within the ascendant political culture of the new nation.[1]

As Washington and many of his contemporaries presumed, the interplay between religion and morality can point us to knowledge, principles, and practices that extend beyond mundane human experience. Because of the corruptibility of institutions and the fallibility of human beings, religion and morality were deemed necessary to the social fabric so that each can benefit from incorporating ideas, frameworks, or habits of mind from the other. Above and beyond that, if religion serves as a fundamental cornerstone of both public and private life, it may lead people to intuit the will of the Divine while also inspiring one another to live better, more ethical mundane existences. Many people of this

[1] Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 158.

era concluded that, if the state could constrain the civil power and privilege of established religion, it stands to reason that social equality and tolerance for human difference under the law among all peoples would prevail for churches and society alike.[2]

The disestablishment of a national church or religion in the United States is directly contrary to the contemporary claims of white Evangelicals and their conservative counterparts that America was a "Christian" nation from its inception. Despite the overall influence of the First Great Awakening and impact of the Enlightenment on the post-Revolutionary American society, we witness the emergence of a democratic republic that is neither completely secular nor sacred in its orientation. Upon its ratification in December 15, 1791, the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights read: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." Given the immense worry over the Bill of Rights, the championing of religious liberty alongside these other civil rights, such as free speech, free press, and peaceful protest, as the bedrock of the new nation is a remarkable development.

Though these issues were and remain hotly debated at the state level, the premise that no religious denomination or church would receive explicit federal endorsement and the nation's government would not intervene in anyone's personal experience and public expression, including the right to worship, is quite an amazing promise.[3]

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[2] Henry Steele Commager, *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and Europe Realised the Enlightenment* (London: Phoenix, 2000), 210–11.

[3] Nathan O. Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 95; James P. Byrd and James Hudnut-Beumler, *The Story of Religion in America: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 134; and John F. Wilson, "Religion, Government, and Power in the New American Nation," in

Several sentences from Washington's letter come to mind when faced with many of the dilemmas of our current moment:

> The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to [humankind] examples of an enlarged and liberal policy—a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.
>
> It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.
>
> May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under [their] own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make [them] afraid.[4]

On the one hand, the grandiose exuberance that Washington displays of what we would herein call "American exceptionalism" echoes the best virtues and highest ideals of the newborn society. The idealism espoused by Washington's invocation—the imperative

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Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the 1980s, ed. Mark A. Knoll (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 77–91.

[4] "From George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, 18 August 1790," Founders Online, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-06-02-0135. [Original source: Mark A. Mastromarino, ed., *The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series*, vol. 6, 1 July 1790–30 November 1790 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 284–86.]

that each person should be free and content to live "under their own vine and fig tree"—not only stated in this letter but repeated elsewhere in his writings, including his famous "Farewell Address," is concentrated in an oft-quoted passage from Hebrew Bible, Micah 4:4: "Everybody shall sit under their own vine and fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid"(see also 1 Kings 4:25; Zechariah 3:10).[5] In the wake of the American Revolution, Washington had a duty of care to calm the fears and distress of his fellow citizens of the newly established nation.

On the other hand, Washington's sentiments border on empty political platitudes for a national populace that both directly and indirectly experienced a history of prejudice and persecution. A few years earlier, during Washington's presidential inauguration, the idea of having the incoming president swear an oath on a borrowed Bible was an impromptu decision made by a special congressional committee mere hours before the ceremony. I emphasize the word *borrowed* here because, ironically or not, none of the lawmakers or leaders who made the decision actually possessed a copy of the Bible and had to scurry in madcap fashion to find one in order to accomplish this symbolic gesture.[6] This spontaneous move established a feature of this solemn ritual that has endured for more than two centuries and helped give rise to what sociologist Robert Bellah famously termed "civil religion."[7] Moreover, amid

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[5] See Daniel L. Dreisbach, "'The 'Vine and Fig Tree' in George Washington's Letters: Reflections on a Biblical Motif in the Literature of the American Founding Era," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 76, no.3 (September 2007): 299–326; Walter Brueggemann, "'Vine and Fig Tree': A Case Study in Imagination and Criticism," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (April 1981): 199.

[6] Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 133.

[7] Robert N. Bellah's "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no. 1, Religion in America [Winter 1967]: 1–21) sparked widespread multidisciplinary controversy within the scholarly arenas of religious

their congratulations and celebration of Washington's inauguration, members of the first Congress spoke of their fellow countrymen (note the gender exclusivity) as "the freest people on the face of the earth."[8] Of course, the visionary leaders of this newly formed government did not extend this same spirit of imagination, invention, and ingenuity to the abolition of chattel slavery, the equality of women, the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, and a comprehensive pathway to citizenship for all immigrants.

Leaping forward to our historical moment, much of the discourse about the present state of our nation is permeated with questions and concerns about "white supremacy," "white Christian nationalism," and the "culture wars." First and foremost, what can and must be said about white supremacy? Philosopher Charles W. Mills asserts,

> White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the world what it is today … But though it covers more than two thousand years of Western political thought and runs the ostensible gamut of political systems, there will be no mention of the basic political system that has shaped the world for the past several hundred years.[9]

The recognition that this glaring omission is neither incidental nor accidental in nature haunts so much of our history. This is especially harrowing when giving deep consideration to how this manifests itself in our religious life as a people and a nation. As

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studies, theology, US history, sociology, and American studies for roughly fifty years. See also Robert N. Bellah, Comment: [Twenty Years after Bellah: Whatever Happened to American Civil Religion?], *Sociological Analysis*, Thematic Issue: A Durkheimian Miscellany, 50, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 147.

[8] Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 42.

[9] Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 25th anniversary ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), 1.

founder and CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, Robert P. Jones, notes,

> American Christianity's theological core has been thoroughly structured by an interest in protecting white supremacy. While it may seem obvious to mainstream white Christians today that slavery, segregation, and overt declarations of white supremacy are antithetical to the teachings of Jesus, such a conviction is, in fact, recent and only partially conscious for most white American Christians and churches.

Furthermore, Jones states,

> The unsettling truth is that, for nearly all of American history, the Jesus conjured by most white congregations was not merely indifferent to the status quo of racial inequality; he demanded its defense and preservation as part of the natural, divinely ordained order of things.[10]

According to historian Lerone Martin, white Christian nationalism is "the impulse to make whiteness and conservative Christianity the foundation and guidepost of American governance and culture."[11] Over the course of three centuries—and especially its influence over the last half-century—the emergence of a vocal, virulent white Christian nationalism has animated the rising tide of oppression, exclusion, and even genocide of minority and marginalized groups while also securing privilege for white Protestants.[12]

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[10] Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 6.

[11] Lerone Martin, *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover: How the FBI Aided and Abetted the Rise of White Christian Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 4.

[12] See Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007); Sarah Posner, *Unholy: How*

Before it took on its ubiquitous presence in public discourse, James Davison Hunter reframed the national debate over cultural politics in his 1991 book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. Hunter broached this subject as a raging battle between "traditionalists," who are committed to moral ideals inherited from the past, and "progressivists," who idealized societal transformation. These divergent worldviews, Hunter argues, were responsible for increasingly heated and politicized disputes over such sociocultural issues as affirmative action, abortion, immigration, economics, sexuality, and the overall role of religion in society.[13] Whereas there can be no doubt that there always have been (and probably always will be) dramatic debates and differences of opinion about important issues shaping the fate of the nation, one has to wonder whether a "culture war" must be both inevitable and intractable in nature.[14]

White Christian Nationalists Powered the Trump Presidency, and the Devastating Legacy They Left Behind (New York: Random House, 2021); Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022); Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States,* updated edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Carter Heyward, *The Seven Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism: A Call to Action* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022); Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Pamela Cooper-White, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022); Bradley Onishi, *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism—And What Comes Next* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2023).

[13] See E. J. Dionne Jr. and Michael Cromartie, eds., *Is There a Culture War? A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution and the Pew Research Center, 2007).

[14] James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*

As if speaking directly to contemporary fears of division, demonization, and exclusion, the late religious historian and activist Vincent Harding posed a critical question at the core of his classic text *Hope and History*: "Is America possible?" Framing this query, Harding states,

> For it is a question that has always been at the heart of the … quest for democracy in this land. And wherever we have seen these freedom seekers, community organizers, artisans of democracy, standing their ground, calling others to the struggle, advancing into danger, creating new realities, it is clear that they are taking the question seriously, shaping their own answers, testing the possibilities of their dreams.[15]

Although speaking directly to the history of the civil rights movement, Harding contends that the true story that unfolded throughout much of his life at the nexus of academy, activism, and advocacy was dedicated to the steadfast belief that this saga "for freedom, democracy and transformation is a great, continuing human classic whose liberating lessons are available to all of us, especially those who are committed to work and sacrifice for the creation of a better country [and] a more hopeful world."[16] Despite the vehement disagreements between the Left and Right that have defined the past few decades, a movement to realign politics, faith, and culture in search of common ground is sorely needed.

(New York: Basic Books, 1991); Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021); Dionne Jr. and Cromartie, eds., *Is There a Culture War?*; Robert Wuthnow, *The Struggle for America's Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Secularism* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1989); Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

[15] Vincent Harding, *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 177.

[16] Harding, *Hope and History*, 10.

Harding's question—"Is America possible?"—inspires and invites each of us to work, just as it reminds all of us of the painfully obvious: if any of us are to survive, we all must work toward creating a world where the lives on the margins are no longer intentionally targeted for disease, disaster, destruction, despair, and death. Why bother with hope? Amid the murder and menacing of countless innocent folks by the savagery of conservative politicians, predators, pariahs, law enforcement officers, vigilantes, mass shooters, bigots, and domestic terrorists, the moral imperative to affirm our contributions to this society is upon us. The moral imperative to affirm our humanity is upon us. The moral imperative to affirm our resilience because of—and not in spite of—our faith in the face of deadly modes of oppression is upon us.

I seek a new vision of the Social Gospel that embraces what I am calling *critical race theology*. In this regard, I find critical race theology to be intimately and inextricably linked to its analogue in the legal arena, critical race theory (CRT). Legal scholars, racial theorists, and other academic advocates of CRT have used their insights to focus on how the Constitution and the legal system have been used to perpetuate inequality and injustice throughout US history. In this fashion, CRT has provided a helpful framework for examining, explaining, and exposing how oppressive social dynamics have undermined our laws and societal institutions.

The progenitors and early proponents of CRT, legal scholars, such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Williams, Mari Matsuda, Cheryl Harris, Richard Delgado, Gerald Torres, Charles Lawrence, and Angela Harris among others, emerged within the legal academy in the 1970s and 1980s.[17] Although they had their

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[17] Writer Benjamin Wallace-Wells of the *New Yorker* magazine notes that the origin of CRT dates to roughly forty years ago and is "academic scholarship … by a group of legal scholars who … argued that the white supremacy of the past lived on in the laws and societal rules

own diverse perspectives and priorities, these pioneering figures were unified against the prevailing logic of the dominant system of American jurisprudence. Their work challenged the assumption that the law writ large was disconnected from the creation and cultivation of our society's racial hierarchies.

In his classic text *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, Derrick Bell describes the core premise of CRT:

> I truly believe that analysis of legal developments through fiction, personal experiences, and the stories of people on the bottom illustrates how race and racism continue to dominate society. The techniques also help in assessing sexism, classism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression.[18]

This concept of the overlapping and interlocking nature of identities—race, gender, class, age, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, nationality, education, region, and, yes, religion—discrimination, and disadvantage speaks most directly to intersectionality, a concept developed by pioneering CRT scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw as a central framework for CRT analysis. According to Crenshaw, CRT explains that "the so-called American dilemma was not simply a matter of prejudice but a matter of structured disadvantages that stretched across American society."[19] By offering scrutiny to the vulnerabilities of women of color, specifically those

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of the present." Benjamin Wallace-Wells, "How a Conservative Activist Invented the Conflict Over Critical Race Theory," *New Yorker*, June 18, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-inquiry/how-a-conservative-activist-invented-the-conflict-over-critical-race-theory.

[18] Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 144.

[19] Faith Karimi, "What Critical Race Theory Is—And Isn't," *CNN* online, May 10, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/01/us/critical-race-theory-explainer-trnd/index.html.

from immigrant and socially disadvantaged communities, Crenshaw "exposed and sought to dismantle the instantiations of marginalization that operated within institutionalized discourses that legitimized existing power relations (e.g., law) and at the same time, she placed into sharp relief how discourses of resistance (e.g., feminism and antiracism) could themselves function as sites that produced and legitimized marginalization."[20]

In early 2021, controversy rose about the role of CRT in contemporary US society. Marisa Iati writes that conservative pundits and politicians have used the term pejoratively as a "catchall phrase for nearly any examination of systemic racism in the present."[21] For instance, the *Washington Post* reports that, whereas the phrase *critical race theory* was mentioned about 132 times on Fox News shows in 2020, it was mentioned 1,860 times between January 1 and June 24, 2021.[22] The sensationalism fostered by right-wing pundits and politicians has led to a frenzy of anti-CRT localized protests, as well as numerous bills proposed by Republican legislators in over fifteen states, that would force school districts to end initiatives to acknowledge individual and institutional acts of racism within their curricula.[23] This outrage

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[20] Devon W. Carbado, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Vickie M. Mays, and Barbara Tomlinson, "Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 10, no. 2 (2013): 304.

[21] Marisa Iati, "What Is Critical Race Theory, and Why Do Republicans Want to Ban It in Schools?" *Washington Post*, May 29, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/05/29/critical-race-theory-bans-schools/.

[22] Jeremy Barr, "Critical Race Theory Is the Hottest Topic on Fox News. And It's Only Getting Hotter," *Washington Post*, June 24, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2021/06/24/critical-race-theory-fox-news.

[23] Nicquel Terry Ellis and Boris Sanchez, "Turmoil Erupts In School District after Claims that Critical Race Theory and Transgender Policy Are Being Pushed," *CNN*, June 24, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/24/

has been given voice on conservative cable news channels like Fox News, One America Network, and Newsmax. CRT has been condemned on social media outlets spearheaded by the likes of Christopher Rufo, Dick Morris, Steve K. Bannon, and Ben Shapiro. CRT has been portrayed in right-wing media circles as "the basis of race-conscious policies, diversity trainings and education about racism, regardless of how much the academic concept actually affects those efforts."[24]

In 2022, dozens of state legislatures and governors—most of them Republican-dominated—proposed laws and executive orders banning the teaching of CRT; "woke ideology"; or, more broadly, aggressively defunding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Perhaps most noteworthy was newly elected Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin's "day one" executive order banning the teaching of CRT and other allegedly "divisive concepts" that are vaguely targeted in this conservative outcry. When the phrase *critical race theory* was evoked by right-wing politicians and conservative media pundits, it was "intentionally used as a scare tactic to appeal to that base," William H. Frey argues.[25]

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us/loudoun-county-school-board-meeting/index.html; Eesha Pendharkar, "Efforts to Root Out Racism in Schools Would Unravel Under 'Critical Race Theory' Bills," *Education Week*, May 26, 2021, https://www.edweek.org/leadership/efforts-to-root-out-racism-in-schools-would-unravel-under-critical-race-theory-bills/2021/05.

[24] Ben Mathias-Lilley, "The Problem Isn't that Some Republicans Don't Know What 'Critical Race Theory' Is. It's That Many of Them Do." *Slate*, June 25, 2021, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/06/critical-race-theory-republicans-desantis-ben-shapiro.html; Marisa Iati, "What Is Critical Race Theory, and Why Do Republicans Want to Ban It in Schools?"

[25] William H. Frey, "Anti-CRT Bills Are Aimed to Incite The GOP Base—Not Parents," *Brookings*, March 30, 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/anti-crt-bills-are-aimed-to-incite-the-gop-base-not-parents/; Bryan Anderson, "Critical Race Theory Is a Flashpoint for Conservatives, But What

Many high-profile GOP officials are also actively pushing to erode key safeguards at public universities that previously shielded professors from political interference. For example, Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, another outspoken conservative, openly has threatened to terminate tenure at the University of Texas after the faculty leadership reaffirmed their belief in academic freedom as well as the right to teach about racial equality and gender justice.[26] Right-wing groups also have launched defamatory campaigns against school leaders, educators, librarians, and teachers' unions to derail efforts.[27] During a January 2023 inaugural event, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis proudly declared that his state "is where woke goes to die."[28] In the following month, DeSantis stacked the Board of Governors of New College of Florida, a well-known liberal arts college, with right-wing ideologues and has directed universities to report their DEI efforts and CRT classes to his office.[29]

Does It Mean?," *PBS NewHour*, November 4, 2021, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/so-much-buzz-but-what-is-critical-race-theory.

[26] Andrew Schneider, "Dan Patrick's Plan to End Tenure at Texas Universities Could Have Dire Consequences, Experts Warn," *Houston Public Media: inDepth Politics*, March 28, 2022, https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/in-depth/2022/03/28/421924/patricks-plan-to-eliminate-tenure-at-texas-state-universities-could-have-dire-consequences-experts-warn/.

[27] Tyler Kingkade, "In Rare Move, School Librarian Fights Back in Court Against Conservative Activists," *NBC News*, August 13, 2022, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/rare-move-school-librarian-fights-back-court-conservative-activists-rcna42800.

[28] Emily Mae Czachor, "'Florida Is Where Woke Goes to Die,' Gov. Ron DeSantis Says after Reelection Victory," *CBS News*, November 9, 2022, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ron-desantis-florida-where-woke-goes-to-die-midterm-election-win/.

[29] Jonathan Feingold, "Florida Gov. DeSantis Leads the GOP's National Charge against Public Education that Includes Lessons on

Governor Ron DeSantis and Florida's GOP lawmakers worked together to pass the Florida's HB 7, also known as the Stop Wrongs Against Our Kids and Employees (Stop W.O.K.E. Act). This law prohibits educators from teaching or even expressing viewpoints on racial or gender discrimination, especially in addressing the legacies of American slavery, white privilege, sexism, and anti-LGBTQIA+ bias.[30] Following a lawsuit led by a multiracial group, including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Legal Defense Fund (LDF), in late 2022, a federal judge issued an order immediately blocking the Stop W.O.K.E. Act based on its violation the First and Fourteenth Amendments of the Constitution.

Why does any of this appreciation of intersectional realities matter? It matters because it is vitally important to understanding what it means to be fully and freely human. When trying to make sense of the various dynamics and dilemmas that shape people's lives on an individual or collective basis, it is insufficient to view people strictly through an external lens that gazes upon superficial distinctions while ignoring the myriad permutations and possibilities that brought them into existence and truly define their sense of being. We must be ever mindful of what shortcomings and omissions happen when the worldviews of women have always only been dictated by the experiences of men, the historic achievements of non-white racial ethnic people solely defined by whites, the terms of

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Race and Sexual Orientation," *The Conversation*, January 18, 2023, https://theconversation.com/florida-gov-desantis-leads-the-gops-national-charge-against-public-education-that-includes-lessons-on-race-and-sexual-orientation-196369.

[30] American Civil Liberties Union, "Judge Blocks Florida's 'Stop W.O.K.E.' Censorship Bill from Taking Effect in Higher Education," *ACLU: Press Releases*, November 17, 2022, https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/judge-blocks-floridas-stop-woke-censorship-bill-taking-effect-higher-education#:%7E:text=The%20court%20order%20found%20the,expression%20of%20the%20opposite%20viewpoints.

happy, meaningful lives for LGBTQIA+ folks derived solely from the perspective of cis-gendered, heteronormative folks, and the most basic functioning of society for the working poor and needy determined by and favoring the rich and greedy.

As will be discussed in this book, this is not an attempt to advance a saga of retrograde notions of the overly simplistic markers of identity that serve to make us one-trick ponies. Rather, I recognize the complex humanity and messy spirituality that dwells within every one of us if we dare look within ourselves and our fellow humans. Recognizing and regarding intersectionality for the marginalized and oppressed creates a bulwark against the dominant culture's desire to enact its "divide and conquer" mandate even in the attempts to set each person against their very own soul. As Black feminist philosopher Audre Lorde succinctly states, "There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives." Acknowledgment of shared histories, similar struggles, and systemic exclusion is the first and most vital step in repairing the damage done by a dominant society that has sought to eradicate the bodies and erase the memories of those who have been trampled underfoot by the powerful.

The scholarship of Derrick Bell is pivotal to envisioning the synergy between law and religion that makes CRT not just feasible but fertile. As the first tenured Black professor at Harvard Law School and godfather of CRT, Bell was a towering figure in the burgeoning field of CRT, dedicating his writing and teaching career to bearing witness to how people of color, especially Black folks, were consistently marginalized and oppressed by practically every metric and index of social well-being. In his final law review article, "Law as a Religion," Bell states that many people hold superficial beliefs about religion and law but fail to question where these ideas come from or whether they are worthy of respect.[31] Advocating

[31] Derrick Bell, "Law as a Religion," *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 69 (2018): 265. Also, see George H. Taylor, "Racism as 'The Nation's

the value and vitality of both sides, Bell contends "religion and law are each great and mostly unacknowledged mysteries. People gain basic religious beliefs at an early age and simply accept what they are taught. Some recognition of law comes later but again there is more learning than challenging" of established doctrines.[32] He was driven by the conviction that religious values and spiritual virtue inform the overall quality of public life in America, especially within our political culture, and he worked to stop the terrible drift away from both common ground and common sense.

As Reinhold Niebuhr once declared, "The sad duty of politics is to establish justice in a sinful world." Religion and the law have been the two great ordering principles of human experience, yet Bell firmly believed these two forces needed to keep their safe distance from one another for the good of society in a responsible and respectful manner. Bell attests that advocates of both religion and law

> claim to elevate human conduct. Law claims to pursue justice (including racial justice) while religion claims to inspire love and good will among humans (including racial good will). Each also relies on blind faith that it achieves its fundamental goals. It calls upon this faith in defiance of evidence and reason. We know, for example, that the Resurrection of Christ could not and did not happen as a matter of science; yet, Christian religion calls upon the faithful to accept the Resurrection. Similarly, we know from history and experience that law will never deliver justice and that law in America will

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Crucial Sin': Theology and Derrick Bell," *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 9, no. 2 (2004); George H. Taylor, "Race, Religion and Law: The Tension Between Spirit and Its Institutionalization," *University of Maryland Law Journal of Race, Religion, Gender, and Class* 6, no. 1 (2006); Jean Stefancic, "Law, Religion, and Racial Justice: A Comment on Derrick Bell's Last Article," *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 69 (2018).

[32] Derrick Bell, "Law as a Religion," 265.

> never deliver racial justice; yet, we are called upon to believe somehow justice is just around the corner.[33]

In the case of both CRT and critical race theology, the power of narrative is a central driving force for both of them.

The proliferation of scholarship on race, racism, and religion over the last half century provides much of the *raison d'être* for this present study. Though I arrived at this concept on my own terms, the phrase *critical race theology* is not original to me alone. In his 2017 doctoral dissertation, "A God Worth Worshiping: Toward a Critical Race Theology," Duane Terrence Loynes Sr. asserts a precondition of critical race theology, contending,

> Any theology that seeks to speak to the marginalization of people and systems of inequity—especially when these conditions are interwoven with particular narratives of Christianity—*must* be avowedly and unapologetically political … Critical race theology, like all theology should be, is concerned with a faithful explication of the Christian Scriptures that is accountable to the Christian tradition. However, it does not see its prophetic task in challenging racism to be in any conflict with its alethic aims.[34]

As will be addressed throughout this text, it will be useful to interrogate this concept of alethic truth—that there is an objective reality in the world above and beyond the scope of subjectivity.[35] According to Loynes, there are at least two key features that are integral to the overall project. First, critical race theology is

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[33] Derrick Bell, "Law as a Religion," 265.

[34] Duane Terrence Loynes, "A God Worth Worshiping: Toward a Critical Race Theology," Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017), 8.

[35] See Ruth Groff, "The Truth of the Matter: Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realism and the Concept of Alethic Truth," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 30, no. 3 (2000): 407–35.

necessary because normative theology and the theologians who advance its goals "fail to name the pervasive ways in which White supremacy has shaped and sustained the Christian theological tradition, they are unaware of and unable to halt the theological perpetuation of a racially hierarchized culture." Second and more importantly, because normative theologians have not only been inattentive to this problem but are largely indebted to its propagation, Loynes argues, "They do not (indeed, cannot) engage in the liberating project of systematically reimagining theology in a manner that includes those who were formerly marginalized."[36]

Recognizing these conditions, we must also recognize how there has been a default mode of thinking that the attention to racial inequality and social injustice is somehow incompatible with the "real" work of normative Christian theology. Issues of human differences and diverse identities are always being kept at arm's length rather than wholeheartedly embraced as a means of overturning oppression and ensuring empowerment for our fellow humans. If any consideration is given to these pressing social concerns at all, they are dismissively dubbed as "contextual theology" and rendered as a lesser, subordinate form of theological writing and thought, or they are reframed as a subfield of ethics as if theology and ethics are mutually exclusive. While Christianity upholds belief in one God, so-called contextual theology at least recognizes that there are infinitely different ways that people of diverse backgrounds may understand and relate to God based on their own cultural perception and historical experiences. Arguably, any theology that ignores these realities would ring false and cannot be seen as valid.

Historian of religion Charles Long reminds us,

> Theologies are about power, the power of God, but equally about the power of specific forms of discourse

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[36] Loynes, "A God Worth Worshiping: Toward a Critical Race Theology," 5.

> about power. These discourses are about the hegemony of power—the distribution and economy of this power in heaven and on earth—whether in the ecclesiastical locus of a pope or, more generally since the modern period, the center of this power in the modern Western world. It is this kind of power which is attacked in the opaque theologies, for this power has justified and sanctified the oppression rendering vast numbers of persons and several cultures subject to economic-military oppression and transparent to the knowledge of the West.[37]

Whereas the original iteration by Loynes understands this power *implicitly*, the "fierce urgency of now" demands that we recognize the uses and abuses of said power explicitly and directly. To this point, postmodern theorist Michel Foucault reminds us that "power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to an ability to hide its own mechanisms."[38] While the initial iteration of critical race theology has been envisioned as theological methodology, this book is loudly and proudly a work of moral theology. In this regard, dealing with critical race theology according to the presumable standard goals of theological discourse as "God-talk," we can recognize how so much of the constructions of theological responses are preoccupied with how we talk about these crises rather than deliberately and decisively debating the crises themselves.[39]

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[37] Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 209.

[38] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

[39] This assessment corresponds to Theodore Jennings's insight that "there is a growing danger that the work of theology is being replaced by the work of preparing to do theology." Theodore W. Jennings, *The Vocation of the Theologian* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 2–3.

Advancing critical race theology as a specific mode of moral theology pays strict attention to the actual convergence of theology and ethics as an attempt at positive societal transformation rather than scholarly lip service. As an academic discipline, moral theology studies the nexus of human thought, being, and action. The emphasis here is on deliberate acts, development of moral principles and ethical norms, and their application to human actions in general, as well as in particular situations, in light of divine revelation and human reason.

By reframing critical race theology to focus on the moral rather than methodological dimensions, I argue that we contend with *why* critical race theology operates as a mode of discourse instead of *how* it operates. This reorientation serves as the basis for an informed dialogue about human freedom, justice, equality, and dignity as the crux of Christianity as a liberating faith. In Luke 4:18–19, there is a simple but direct prophetic command to all so-called followers of Christ: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because [God] has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. [God] has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In his reflections on the nature and task of Christian theology, James Cone instructs us:

> Christian theology is a theology of liberation. It is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ. This means that its sole reason for existence is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God's activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ. There can be no Christian theology that is not identified unreservedly with those who

> are humiliated and abused. In fact, theology ceases to be a theology of the gospel when it fails to arise out of the community of the oppressed.[40]

As troubling as the CRT debate has been within the broader society, it has become an equally pernicious dilemma within the church. Contrary to serving as a divinely inspired beacon of hope to guide us toward a better, brighter future, it appears that the contemporary church is sliding into the muck and mire of the world without a clear vision of how to save anyone from despair, including itself. Communications scholar and pastor Andre E. Johnson observes, "The belief that CRT and Intersectionality are problematic comes not only from a lack of understanding of the terms, but how conservatives and white evangelicals have positioned them as anti-faith—and more particularly, anti-Christian."[41] To Johnson's point, many of the folks fighting so ardently against CRT seem to be doing so not because it is inconsistent with the actual life, lessons, and legacy of Jesus Christ, but rather because it is inconvenient to how they preach, teach, and do outreach based on their interpretation of the faith. In times like these, I often reflect on the English writer G. K. Chesterton's refrain: "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."[42]

The narrowmindedness on race and ethnicity in many US ecclesial settings mirrors a similar animus by predominantly white

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[40] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 1.

[41] Andre E. Johnson, "Where Did White Evangelicalism's Hatred of Critical Race Theory Really Begin?" *Religion Dispatches*, June 23, 2021, https://religiondispatches.org/where-did-white-evangelicalisms-hatred-of-critical-race-theory-really-begin/.

[42] G. K. Chesterton, "The Unfinished Temple," in *What's Wrong with the World* (1910), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1717/1717-h/1717-h.htm#link2H_4_0006.

male leadership toward gender and sexuality. Put another way, if the church can be shamelessly racist in the name of God, it is not mutually exclusive that we have also been self-righteously sexist.

Unfortunately, the constant ways that conservatives misinterpret, manipulate, and mangle the Holy Bible and the US Constitution to justify beliefs and behaviors not addressed in either text are the chief resemblances between the Holy Bible and the US Constitution in too many of our public debates. Derrick Bell argues that, far too often, "both the Bible and the Constitution are more honored than read, more accepted than understood, more quoted than respected."[43] In the face of the sociopolitical transformation that recently led to Trumpism, a resilient spirit of social justice has been rooted in the recognition that every human being should have an undeniable right to share in the common good of God's creation. Toward that end, this book is an effort to imagine and proclaim a reawakening of the social gospel, one intending to redeem American Christianity in our time.

Henry David Thoreau argued, "To speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every [one] make known what kind of government would command [his/her] respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it."[44] I write an invitation to reclaim the soul of a people and a nation. Even now, we are still struggling to give voice to a grounded public theology that fully recognizes the deep yearning for what Harding recognizes in Langston Hughes's phrase "the land that has never been yet."[45]

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[43] Derrick Bell, "Law as a Religion," 269.

[44] Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience" (1849).

[45] Vincent Harding, "The America That Has Not Yet Been, Trying to Be Born" (lecture, Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning, and Dialogue, Cambridge, MA, September 20, 2008), https://www.ikedacenter.org/resources/vincent-harding-america-has-not-yet-been-trying-be-born.

As the visionary leader of a much earlier Social Gospel movement, Walter Rauschenbusch declared,

> The social gospel . . . is the religious reaction on the historic advent of democracy. It seeks to put the democratic spirit, which the Church inherited from Jesus and the prophets, once more in control of the institutions and teachings of the Church. The social gospel is the old message of salvation, but enlarged and intensified. The individualistic gospel has taught us to see the sinfulness of every human heart and has inspired us with faith in the willingness and power of God to save every soul . . . But it has not given us an adequate understanding of the sinfulness of the social order and its share in the sins of all individuals within it. It has not evoked faith in the will and power of God to redeem the permanent institutions of human society from their inherited guilt of oppression and extortion.[46]

As such, Rauschenbusch proclaims, "The social gospel seeks to bring [people] under repentance for their collective sins and to create a more sensitive and more modern conscience."[47] We must remain hypervigilant of our total well-being at micro- and macrolevels in these chaotic times. Susan Hill Lindley gives a more recent definition of the Social Gospel that challenges Rauschenbusch's theological vision and hopes to change it into a more holistic and total gospel of well-being. Lindley explains, "The Social Gospel was distinguished, on the one hand, from general charity and humanitarian work by the religious motivation behind its ideas and activities and its insistence on connecting social ideals with the Kingdom of God, at least partially realizable in the world."[48] Toward this end, she

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[46] Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, reprint ed. (1917; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 4–5.

[47] Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 5.

[48] Susan Hill Lindley, "Deciding Who Counts: Towards a Revised

strives to recognize the merit of the Social Gospel's earliest iteration while also demonstrating the need for historical integrity and the inclusion of previously neglected and ignored voices. Much like their counterparts in the ranks of the American Evangelical movement, Lindley observes that newly recovered perspectives of more diverse social gospellers beyond the white church-based urban labor activists, Christian socialists, and theological liberals would ostensibly have to be woven into the traditional narrative so that it became "a new story for all, not simply the old story with a few more footnotes."[49] This new social gospel is a proactive, if not preventative, measure and is born out of a duty of care for ourselves and all others with whom we share God's gift of Creation.

Church leadership from every walk of life must confront white supremacy and its cognate forms of oppression everywhere they manifest in our so-called civil society, most especially within our churches. Despite the tidal wave of frustration and fears the very idea of this confrontation might incite for some readers, we must combat white supremacy, white Christian nationalism, and their progeny at work in American society because they have done a great deal in terms of undoing our declarations of the unconditional love and acceptance of God for all human beings. As many scholars of race and racism in the United States context have argued, the persistent and pernicious roots of "America's original sin" sadly continues to define our society's investment in systematic and systemic modes of oppression that still haunt us to this very day.[50] It seems that the dogged persistence of racial inequality and

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Definition of the Social Gospel," in *The Social Gospel Today*, ed. Christopher Hodge Evans (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 24.

[49] Lindley, "Deciding Who Counts," 17–26.

[50] Although countless African American scholars, clergy, journalists, artist, political leaders, and activists have espoused and advanced this concept of racism as "America's original sin" for generations, this idea has been popularized by White antiracist scholarship such as Gunnar Myrdal,

social injustice within "Christian America" remains a mandatory hypocrisy embedded within our fragile democracy.

Toward this end, it is incumbent upon white clergy and theologians to help break the silent complicity about white supremacy within church, academy, and broader society. Throughout American society, we often find it incredibly difficult to engage in conversations much less resolve conflicts based on matters of human difference and cultural diversity. Thus, white supremacy will never vanish from society until white people see it as their own peril that needs to be addressed for their salvation rather than a plight befalling people of color that whites need to empathize with for their own liking. Confronting this reality vis-à-vis critical race theology gives clergy, scholars, and laity opportunities to develop antiracist theologies that go beyond simply condemning racism in a distant, dispassionate manner. Antiracism, feminism, and other liberationist endeavors are works of love and justice because they engage in labor that enhances our humanity.[51]

There needs to be a similar, if not greater, effort to pursue an antiracism enterprise within the related fields of religion and theology. Toward this end, the *critical race theology project* outlined herein is influenced by the prolific work of critical race theorists (thus no longer making it the exclusive or rarified property

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An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); Jennifer Harvey, *Whiteness and Morality: Pursuing Racial Justice through Reparations and Sovereignty* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Chris Crass, *Towards the "Other America": Anti-Racist Resources for White People Taking Action for Black Lives Matter* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2015); Jim Wallis, *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016); Jones, *White Too Long*; Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

[51] James H. Cone, "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy," *Black Theology* 2, no. 2 (2004): 139–52.

of legal scholars) and infused with the pioneering efforts of Black liberationist, womanist, feminist, and queer theologians. As such, critical race theology is concerned with the ways in which the scripture and our churches have been responsible for perpetuating oppression and exclusion. Both in form and function, critical race theology demands that church scholars, ordained ministers, and lay leaders interrogate how oppressive social dynamics have corrupted the mission and ministries of our ecclesiastical institutions to the detriment of both church and society. Furthermore, critical race theology welcomes all adherents of the gospel who are moved by true conscience and a liberating faith—especially white Christians—to be contributors and collaborators to advancing a renewed vision of the Social Gospel that emphasizes all modes of human difference, particularly racial–ethnic diversity, as a blessing rather than a burden within the contemporary church.

What do race and religion *together* have to do with being "American"? Since its inception as a nation, the identities of Americans as a people have been constituted through ever-evolving religious and racial imaginaries, conflicts, and lineages: forging ideological stances, symbols, and myths that rival traditional "religions." The ability to teach, to write, to discuss, and even to think about what and how we coexist with one another as part of God's Creation within US society thoroughly depends upon the ability to embrace the freedoms established in the Constitution's First Amendment. The ability to voluntarily assemble in a peaceful and productive manner, independently select and share the resources and references deemed most significant and substantive for examining, exploring, and expanding the intellectual capabilities of our fellow human beings as active, engaged learners who also expect to be citizen-leaders in the world, should never be taken for granted. And yet these enlightened enterprises are being further complicated by the intrusion of politicized debates and performative debacles of the "cultural wars" in classrooms,

courtrooms, convention centers, and congregational spaces in ways that must be addressed in a strenuous, straightforward manner.

Using a moral historical approach, this book explores the racial and religious imperatives encapsulated within concepts of "Americanness" and the racial ideas and religious ideals that define the cultural, historical, and sociopolitical boundaries of American identities. In addition to examining how claims to American identities have altered the religiosity of historically marginalized racial "Others," we will also consider the ways racial concepts have resembled and drawn upon religious forms in their operations in America. This is especially important in a society and culture defined by freedom of religion as it has been embedded in both the US Constitution and multiculturalism typified by *E Pluribus Unum* ("Out of many, one"). Finally, we will discuss how people's responses to racial and religious imperatives challenge, nuance, and expand concepts of the American nation-state and the American as a citizen-subject. At root, too many folks—scholars and nonscholars alike, are either afraid or ashamed to admit that, if they look too closely at the substance of their heavenly faith, they may also be staring at the scene of a horrible crime.

Embracing one's yearning to live in accordance with the will of the revealed and yet-still-revealing God entails confronting honestly and condemning wholeheartedly the biological descendants and behavioral dependents of white supremacy and white Christian nationalism in all their varieties based on prophetic witness and urgent utterances. Those who believe that the Divine still has miracles and mysteries beyond measure will also recognize that the aforementioned challenge is the desperately necessary work of our present era.