

Christianity & critical theory

Mike Roberts considers a key apologetic question for our times





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the culture wars

Have you felt it? The rifts in our society that have been growing over the past decade? From 'Brexiters vs Remoaners' during the Brexit vote; to the recent Black Lives Matter protests vs far-right protesters in various cities across the UK, USA and beyond; the 'maskers vs anti-maskers', 'pro-lockdown vs anti-lockdown'; the list goes on. There was a brief respite during the peak of lockdown, where it was the NHS vs COVID-19 and over 750,000 members of the public volunteered to help their neighbours.¹ Sadly, this did not last.

These issues are vastly complex; however, there are common denominators. An exacerbating factor has been social media which has created 'echo-chambers' – where algorithms are used to show you content and groups that you might be interested in. How many in your friendship groups have *exactly* the same political opinions as you? Perhaps that is not you and you have managed to forge friendships with people who have differing beliefs and opinions. But if you are anything like me, you've found there is rapidly diminishing space for respectful, courteous dialogue. As discussed in previous *Nucleus* editions, our society has a real identity crisis. In the wake of the New Atheists, many try to construct their identities from scratch. Something that both Christian and secular cultural commentators have identified as a key cause of the cultural divide is 'Critical Theory' (CT). Although we can always trace sin to our human hearts, CT is the most recent ideology that is at the eye of the storm. It appears to have been growing slowly within Western academia, and its thinking and vocabulary have become part of everyday British vernacular. So, what is it? And is it a problem?

we all worship something

Before we examine CT, we need to establish some foundations. Whatever our age, gender, ethnicity or sexuality, we all have a 'worldview'; a lens through which we view the world – the framework of beliefs

we use to navigate life, which ultimately influences our short and long-term decisions, our morals and political views. Therefore, our worldview determines what we decide to devote our time and effort to, and what or who we derive our meaning from – in other words, we all worship something. Jesus put it succinctly, 'For where your treasure is, your heart will be also'.² The reality is, we cannot serve two masters.³ A key question we need to ask ourselves is – how are we viewing the world? Are we viewing the world through the lens of Christianity or through the lens of critical theory?

the roots of critical theory

CT is difficult to define. It has its roots in the philosophies of Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, German philosophers and social theorists who subscribed to a form of Marxism as well as 'Postmodernism'.⁴ Generally, there are four premises to CT:⁵

1. **The social binary** – society can be divided into oppressor and oppressed groups.
2. **Oppression through power** – the dominant group maintains the status quo by forcing their ideology on everyone.
3. **Lived experience** – oppressed groups have special access to knowledge through their personal experiences.
4. **Social justice** – actions that aim to liberate people from all forms of oppression.

CT has been growing and developing over several decades. It has affected many disciplines and created its own subtypes (eg 'queer theory', 'critical race theory'). Due to the increasing proportion of society attending university over the past two decades, these thoughts have become integrated into public thinking.

critical theory as a worldview

So, is CT a problem? Notice the changing definitions over the past decade; for example, 'oppression' is no longer defined as 'prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or exercise of authority',⁶ but in terms of 'hegemonic

power'. Essentially, the dominant people group sets the standard by which all marginalised groups are judged. Much of the new vocabulary and phrases that have become part of the British vernacular have their roots in CT, for example, 'check your privilege', 'heteronormativity', 'as a person of colour...'

It is not only language which has been affected, but an all-encompassing worldview which has been adopted. Although there are some things that CT has shed light on, the danger comes when it is *the way* in which we view the world. According to CT, the most oppressive tribe is the straight, cis-gender, white, Christian male and the most oppressed tribes are transgender, gay, black/Asian minority ethnic (BAME) groups, and Muslim women.

Of course, not everyone fits into extremes, which is where 'intersectionality' comes in. 'Intersectionality' is where different oppressed people share the same oppression in a specific category, eg, a black woman may suffer from both racism and sexism. If she were also a lesbian, that would be another form of oppression and prejudice she experiences.

CT is widely criticised, even by non-Christians; however, it is important to understand that CT is fundamentally a competing worldview to Christianity because it tells a different meta-narrative of the world as below.

- Our identities are not rooted in the image of God, but are self-constructed through race, sexuality and gender identity.
- Our problem isn't sin, but oppression. We need atonement for our privilege, not something arbitrary like 'sin'.
- The final solution isn't Jesus but activism.
- Our aim isn't to glorify God, but to liberate all oppressed people and create a social utopia of pure equity.

However, it would be wrong not to acknowledge the positives of CT. There is a legitimate recognition of the sin of oppression and injustice, which is repeated throughout Scripture⁷ and liberation is a recurring theme – from God's actions in Exodus, to Jesus' atonement on the cross. Crucially, CT has made us acutely aware of the ongoing racial injustice in our

society. As self-proclaimed followers of Jesus, we should be ashamed that we have not been one of the leading voices constantly striving for justice. Secondly, CT correctly points out how power can corrupt – with examples throughout human history and in the present. Irrespective of our background, demographics, or worldview, we all have our blind-spots and can be susceptible to confirmation bias. As Christians, our sanctification is ongoing, therefore we need to approach topics like racism and sexism with genuine humility; whilst constantly testing everything against God's perspectives and standards.⁸

comparing Christianity & CT

However, there are irreconcilable differences between Christianity and CT:

difference in epistemology (the philosophy of knowledge):

Classically we would discover truths using reason, logic and providing objective evidence – whether that be in the sciences, history, philosophy, or theology. If we want to ascertain truth, these are the necessary tools God has given us, especially when approaching his Word. However, critical theorists do not need to provide any sort of objective evidence, they simply need to appeal to their 'lived experience', which has given them special access to truth. They insist that we must accept the marginalised groups' perspective, and if anyone disagrees they can be accused of wanting to 'cement their privileged position' (if they are deemed to be part of an 'oppressor group') or accused of having 'internalised oppression' (if they are deemed to be part of an 'oppressed group'). Any appeal to 'reason' or 'objective evidence' is viewed as white, heteronormative, male methodology, which is part of the 'hegemonic power' that dominates the West and is therefore invalid. There is no room for debate within this worldview. It usurps the Christian idea that we must test all our knowledge against what Scripture says.

CT denies our common identity:

Christianity does not deny that there are and have been

oppressed individuals and groups – in fact, we are called to help the weak and the vulnerable.⁹ But that does not equate to dividing up the population into rigid, unalterable group identities (oppressed/oppressors or good/evil). If this becomes the primary lens with which we view the world, it undermines our common humanity. Conversely, according to Scripture the simple fact that we are *homo sapiens*, means we are all ‘image-bearers’ which means that we all have intrinsic value irrespective of our gender, race, age, or sexuality.¹⁰

CT denies our common sinfulness and states that there must be a ‘moral asymmetry’ between the oppressors (perpetrators) and the oppressed (victims). CT ignores the individual’s beliefs or actions and states that they are guilty simply by belonging to certain group and by perpetuating a status quo, although unknowingly. This creates a volatile imbalance between certain groups. Conversely, the Bible teaches that sin is universal and pervasive. Every culture has their specific sinful idolatries, and no race or people group is more sinful than another. With our common humanity comes our common sinfulness.

Furthermore, if we are no longer responsible for our personal sins, we become victims of our environment and the ‘system’. As remarked by Neil Shenvi, ‘If we are only the victims of sin and not the perpetrators, then we will see no need for a Saviour’.¹¹

CT makes forgiveness and reconciliation impossible – under CT, some actions are viewed as ‘unforgivable’. ‘Unforgivable actions’ lead to the likes of ‘cancel culture’. A recent example includes JK Rowling over her stance on transgender conversations.¹² According to CT, if atonement for social sins cannot be made in the present, then activism is required – if you are not with us, then you’re against us. CT promotes a ‘performative’, self-righteous identity and encourages performance-based salvation. Only by proving how much of a social justice activist you are, or how much you renounce your privilege, or hold the correct views about certain issues; maybe then you will be righteous. This is in contrast to the Gospel, where we acknowledge that we can never do enough to save ourselves and are only saved through having faith in Jesus’ victory on the cross.¹³

medicine & critical theory

medical ethics:

Are men allowed an opinion on abortion? Poor women (who are subject to classism and sexism) who want abortions are viewed as oppressed, by (historically) rich, white male doctors (who are oppressors). Therefore, the doctor refusing to abort a fetus is not merely making an ethical decision but is now using their privilege to create barriers for a woman. The decision has been complicated and there’s a shift from a purely ethical decision, to a matter of ‘discrimination’ and ‘the perpetuation of oppression’.

A similar case could be made in the arena of euthanasia. How can an able-bodied doctor have an opinion or make any ethical decision on a patient who’s disabled? The critical theorist might state that any sanctity of life argument is based on a Judaeo-Christian ethic which has oppressed other minority cultures. This could bleed into recruitment and retention of doctors and medical education – if you do not agree with the CT assessment, then you could be prohibited from entering medicine or be forced to leave.

feminist theory & medicine:

In 2019 the *Lancet* published a review describing the benefits of applying ‘Feminist theory’ to medical education. To quote the review, ‘Understanding power and privilege has the potential to allow practitioners to connect with their students, humanise their collective practice, and provide better care to their patients. Feminist scholar Bell Hooks notes ‘Feminist perspectives in the classroom [affirm] **the primacy of critical thinking**, of linking education and **social justice**’.¹⁴ Feminist perspectives are not merely useful but are suddenly needed for the ‘primacy of critical thinking’ and to the ultimate goal of ‘social justice’. Again, social justice isn’t bad, however there’s danger in concluding that it’s ‘the Way’ to create the utopian society which this worldview aspires to.

medical elitism:

Should doctors (categorised as oppressors) be able

to give health advice to patients who are deemed to be working class? Despite the empirical evidence demonstrating the link between obesity and several diseases, a critical theorist could argue that it is fatphobic and medical elitism for doctors to provide management plans for obese patients. In the same vein, is it classist for healthcare professionals to provide smoking cessation material to working class patients who statistically are more likely to engage in smoking?

Of course, as future medical professionals, this might seem irrational and highly implausible. However, if culture at large is unknowingly imbibing this worldview, then these hypotheticals quickly become plausible. It's important to restate that I'm not saying that classist or sexist or racist doctors do not exist or that medicine can never be an 'old boys club' at times. I believe that as Christians we ought to rail against these ideologies and create equality of opportunity. However, this goal does not equate to statements emerging within our society that are directly against this approach, such as 'no uterus, no opinion', or 'all men enable or contribute to toxic masculinity'.

towards solutions

There is no substitute for Jesus. It's easy to dismiss or become desensitised to a message we hear frequently – a message that some of us have been hearing our whole lives. The reality is that the Gospel is for Christians and non-Christians alike.¹⁵ Therefore, it's paramount that we don't butcher the basics. We should have that sacrificial, Christ-like love for all people – for those who agree or

further resources:

Neil Shenvi

- Necessary viewing – bit.ly/3jphjY7
- Notes from his talk – bit.ly/3kuywkk
- Book – bit.ly/3odyEXs
- bit.ly/2IYhKfs
- bit.ly/31wod7G
- bit.ly/3dUANTo
- bit.ly/2IZX7j1 – if we see ourselves as victims of sin we will see no need for a saviour
- bit.ly/3medZRb
- bit.ly/3ogIsPj
- bit.ly/31vBw8v

Tim Keller

- bit.ly/3jq9r8F
- New discourses bit.ly/3ojeviG
- Gender + sex in medicine: bit.ly/3dPlpr8
- bit.ly/2HrO75m

disagree with us.¹⁶ Keep reading broadly – this article is merely a beginner's guide to CT, which is complex, and it's important to read the primary texts to grasp it well. Try not only *Is everyone really equal?* by DiAngelo and Sensoy, but also *Cynical Theories* by Pluckrose and Lindsay.

Justice is an important Biblical concept¹⁷ and therefore we shouldn't be surprised that it is a primary part of another worldview, and that we are immediately attracted to it as Christians. Justice is an integral part of sharing the gospel¹⁸ and, as Christians, we need to stand by those who are oppressed and love those who do not think like us.¹⁹

But Jesus is clear²⁰ – if people do not know him, then they will face God's judgment without Jesus as their intercessor.²¹ Are we more passionate about Jesus than whatever opinion we may hold during the next culture clash? ■

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