Christianity and Critical Theory: Are They Compatible?

Dr. Neil Shenvi
Gospel and Social Justice Conference
Ft. Worth, TX
Nov. 9-10, 2018
The Origins of Critical Theory
The Dark Origins of Critical Theory
The Dark, Secret Origins of Critical Theory
The Dark, Secret, but 100% Legit and Completely Believable Origins of Critical Theory
The Origins of Critical Theory
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
• Logical implications
• Advice for dialogue
Why should we care?

Christians should care about social justice!!!

Yeah, that seems reasonable

Because the gospel is about caring for the poor

Wait, what do you mean

Does it really matter whether Jesus is God anyway?

Sexism is a sin. Women are made in God’s image

absolutely!

The church needs to stop oppressing women!

in what way?

SMASH THE PATRIARCHY! WICCA FOR ALL!

I’m must be missing something
Why should we care?
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
  • Premise 1: ‘Oppressed’ vs. ‘oppressor’
  • Premise 2: Oppression through hegemonic power
  • Premise 3: Solidarity in oppression
  • Premise 4: Liberation as moral duty
  • Premise 5: ‘Lived experience’ vs. objective evidence
  • Premise 6: Guise of objectivity
  • Premise 7: Intersectionality
  • The strengths of critical theory
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
• Logical implications
• Advice for dialogue
What is critical theory?
What is critical theory?

**Major premises:**
1. ‘Oppressed’ vs. ‘oppressor’
2. Oppression through hegemonic power
3. Solidarity in oppression
4. Liberation as moral duty

**Minor premises:**
5. ‘Lived experience’ vs. objective evidence
6. Guise of objectivity
7. Intersectionality
Premise #1: Individual identity is inseparable from group identity as ‘oppressed’ or ‘oppressor’

“My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor... I was taught [wrongly] to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will” – Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” in Andersen and Collins, Race, Class, and Gender, p. 72
Premise #1: Individual identity is inseparable from group identity as ‘oppressed’ or ‘oppressor’
Premise #2: Oppressor groups subjugate oppressed groups through the exercise of hegemonic power

“In any relationship between groups that define one another (men/women, able-bodied/disabled, young/old), the dominant group is the group that is valued more highly. Dominant groups set the norms by which the minoritized group is judged. Dominant groups have greater access to the resources of society and benefit from the existence of the inequality” (p. 25) “Hegemony refers to the control of the ideology of a society. The dominant group maintains power by imposing their ideology on everyone.” (p. 50) – Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal*?
Premise #2: Oppressor groups subjugate oppressed groups through the exercise of hegemonic power

Example: U.S. Demographics
Premise #3: Different oppressed groups find solidarity in the experience of oppression

“I, as a Japanese-American, feel a kinship to both Blacks and Native Americans that I do not feel with white Americans. It... comes from our histories as victims of injustice” – David Mura, in Andersen and Collins, Race, Class, and Gender, p. 14

“I realized I could be beaten on the street for being a [lesbian]. If my sister’s being beaten because she’s Black, it’s pretty much the same principle.. The connection is blatant...” Cherrie Moraga, in Andersen and Collins, Race, Class, and Gender, p. 23
Premise #3: Different oppressed groups find solidarity in the experience of oppression

Example: sustainability.ncsu.edu/
Premise #4: Our fundamental moral duty is freeing groups from oppression

“These political times call for renewed dialogue about and commitment to the politics of liberation...Liberation requires a struggle against discrimination based on race, class, gender, sexual identity, ableism and age” – Suzanne Pharr, “Reflections on Liberation,” in Adams et. al., Readings for Diversity and Social Justice, p. 450
Premise #4: Our fundamental moral duty is freeing groups from oppression
Premise #5: ‘Lived experience’ is more important than objective evidence in understanding oppression

“The idea that objectivity is best reached only through rational thought is a specifically Western and masculine way of thinking – one that we will challenge throughout this book.” – Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins, “Reconstructing Knowledge,” in Anderson and Collins, Race, Class, and Gender, p. 4-5
Premise #5: ‘Lived experience’ is more important than objective evidence in understanding oppression.
Premise #6: Oppressor groups hide their oppression under the guise of objectivity

“Other [non-critical] forms of thought were seen as affirmative of the existing order in spite of their self-proclaimed neutrality and objectivity... Social interests were hidden within the philosophical discourse.” Stephen Bronner, *Critical Theory*, p. 23
This paper thus proposes a feminist glaciology framework with four key components: 1) knowledge producers; (2) *gendered science and knowledge*; (3) systems of scientific domination; and (4) alternative representations of glaciers. Merging feminist postcolonial science studies and feminist political ecology, the *feminist glaciology framework* generates robust analysis of gender, power, and epistemologies in dynamic social-ecological systems, thereby leading to more just and equitable science and human-ice interactions.

Premise #6: Oppressor groups hide their oppression under the guise of objectivity
Premise #7: Individuals at the intersection of different oppressed groups experience oppression in a unique way

“Imagine a black woman [who may be] a single working mother... She experiences, potentially, not only multiple forms of oppression but ones unique to her and to others like her.” – Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, Critical Race Theory: An Introduction, p. 59
Premise #7: Individuals at the intersection of different oppressed groups experience oppression in a unique way.
Critical theory is an important and influential ideology in today’s culture.
The strengths of critical theory
Strength #1. Emphasis on the sinfulness of oppression

• “Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.” – Is. 1:17

• “Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.” – Zech. 7:20

• “Love your neighbor as yourself.” – Mark 12:30

• “Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts” – James 5:4
Strength #2. Focus on structures, systems, and norms
Strength #3: Recognition of hegemonic power
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
  • Worldview
  • Epistemology
  • Adversarial identities
  • Hegemonic power
  • Moral asymmetry
• Logical implications
• Advice for dialogue
Worldview questions

• Who are we?
• What is our fundamental problem as human beings?
• What is the solution to our problem?
• What is our primary moral duty?
• What is our purpose in life?
Christianity and critical theory are competing worldviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Christianity</th>
<th>Critical theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CREATION</strong></td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FALL</strong></td>
<td>OPPRESSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>REDEMPTION</strong></td>
<td>ACTIVISM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RESTORATION</strong></td>
<td>LIBERATION</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Christianity**
- Creation
- Fall
- Redemption
- Restoration

**Critical theory**
- Oppression
  - Patriarchy
  - White supremacy
  - Heteronormativity
  - Toxic masculinity
- Activism
  - Protest
  - Resistance
- Liberation
  - Equality
  - Power reversal
- Education
- Awareness
- Diversity
## Worldview questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Christianity</th>
<th>Critical theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who are we?</td>
<td>God’s creatures</td>
<td>Members of various groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is our problem?</td>
<td>Sin</td>
<td>Oppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the solution?</td>
<td>Jesus</td>
<td>Liberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is our duty?</td>
<td>Loving God</td>
<td>Liberating the oppressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is our purpose?</td>
<td>Glorifying God</td>
<td>Working for liberation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“In the end, there can be only one”
Critical theory as worldview

I. Scripture

While divinely inspired, we deny the Bible is inerrant or infallible. It was written by men over centuries and thus reflects both God's truth and human sin & prejudice. We affirm that biblical scholarship and critical theory help us discern which messages are God's.
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
  • Worldview
  • Epistemology
    • Adversarial identities
    • Hegemonic power
    • Moral asymmetry
• Logical implications
• Advice for dialogue
Epistemology

Claim

reason, logic, argument

Evidence
Epistemology and Bulverism

Motivation

psychology, economics, politics

Claim

reason, logic, argument

Evidence
Critical theory and Bulverism

Claim

reason, logic, argument

Evidence

psychology, economics, politics

“maintaining supremacy”

“internalized oppression”
An example from abortion

P1) It is morally wrong to intentionally kill innocent human beings.

P2) The unborn is an innocent human being.

P3) Abortion is the intentional killing of the unborn.

C) Abortion is morally wrong.

You would say that. You're just trying to control women's bodies.

P1) It is morally wrong to intentionally kill innocent human beings.

P2) The unborn is an innocent human being.

P3) Abortion is the intentional killing of the unborn.

C) Therefore, abortion is morally wrong.

You're suffering from internalized oppression.
Critical theory, Bulverism, and the Bible

Claim

psychology, economics, politics

"maintaining supremacy"

"internalized oppression"

reason, logic, argument, exegesis

Scripture
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
  • Worldview
  • Epistemology
    • Adversarial identities
  • Hegemonic power
  • Moral asymmetry
• Logical implications
• Advice for dialogue
Identity and solidarity
Identity and solidarity

Creation

Sin

Redemption
Sin and human relationships

“assimilation”

“segregation”

Critical theory
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
  • Worldview
  • Epistemology
  • Adversarial identities
    • Hegemonic power
    • Moral asymmetry
• Logical implications
• Advice for dialogue
Christianity as hegemonic discourse

Religion

Morality

Sexuality

Gender

etc...
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
  • Worldview
  • Epistemology
  • Adversarial identities
  • Hegemonic power
  • Moral asymmetry
• Logical implications
• Advice for dialogue
Moral Asymmetry

professional twiter name
@sarahjeong

Dumbass fucking white people marking up the internet with their opinions like dogs pissing on fire hydrants
8:41 PM - 28 Nov 2014
7 Retweets 25 Likes

professional twiter name
@sarahjeong

Are white people genetically predisposed to burn faster in the sun, thus logically being only fit to live underground like groveling goblins
6:23 PM - 23 Dec 2014
21 Retweets 87 Likes

https://archive.is/byEMf

professional twiter name
@sarahjeong

1) white men are bullshit
2) no one cares about women
3) you can threaten anyone on the internet except cops
5:43 PM - 31 Dec 2014
4 Retweets 26 Likes

professional twiter name
@sarahjeong

oh man it's kind of sick how much joy I get out of being cruel to old white men
6:20 PM - 24 Jul 2014
8 Retweets 21 Likes
Moral Asymmetry

• “What makes these quasi-satirical generalizations about “white people” different from actual racism is, yes, the underlying power structure in American society. There is no sense of threat associated with Jeong making a joke about how white people have dog-like opinions. But when white people have said the same about minorities, it has historically been a pretext for violence or justification for exclusionary politics.” – Zach Beauchamp, “In Defense of Sarah Jeong” Vox, 8/3/18
Moral Asymmetry

“Privileged people who are committed to listening well will eventually encounter oppressed people who are angry (and rightfully so). Most of the time, this anger will seem directed at the privileged person or at privileged people in general... Now is not the time for privileged folks to be a “prophetic voice” in the lives of oppressed people by speaking hard truth about what (privileged people think) oppressed people should be doing to improve their situation. Privileged people lost their right to the prophetic megaphone when they knowingly or unknowingly participated in societal systems that benefit some people and oppress others. Sorry folks - you can’t be a prophet and an oppressor at the same time.” – Christian professor
Moral Asymmetry

“Don’t chastise POCs (or dismiss their message) because they express their grief, fear, or anger in ways you deem “inappropriate.” Understand that historically, we white people have silenced voices of dissent and lament with our cultural idol of “niceness.” Provide space for POCs to wail, cuss, or even yell at you. Jesus didn’t hold back when he saw hypocrisy and oppression; POCs shouldn’t have to either.” – Christian racial reconciliation group
Biblical commands to particular groups

• Never violate God’s universal commands to all Christians
• Are based on roles, not on power differentials
• Affirm the legitimacy of authority (Rom. 12, Eph. 5:21-6:9, Col. 3:18-4:1, Titus 2:1-10, 1 Pet. 2:18-3:7)
• Do not contradict God’s commands to judge impartially (Lev. 19:15, Deut. 1:17, Prov. 20:11)
Christianity and critical theory are competing worldviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Christianity</th>
<th>Critical theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CREATION</strong></td>
<td>OPPRESSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FALL</strong></td>
<td>Classism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>REDEMPTION</strong></td>
<td>Protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RESTORATION</strong></td>
<td>Equality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Patriarchy
- White supremacy
- Heteronormativity
- Toxic masculinity
- Classism
- Ageism
- Ableism
- Cisgenderism
- Protest
- Resistance
- Education
- Awareness
- Equality
- Power reversal
- Justice
- Diversity
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
• Logical implications
  • “We should never challenge ‘lived experience’.”
  • “We need to liberate our theology from privileged groups.”
  • “We should dismantle all structures which perpetuate privilege.”
• Advice for dialogue
Claim #1: “We should never challenge ‘lived experience’”
Claim #1: “We should never challenge ‘lived experience’”

“As a woman, I know that our society is deeply sexist.”
“As a black man, I know that our society is deeply racist.”
“As a lesbian, I know that sexual orientation is fixed from birth.”
“As a Sufi Muslim, I know that Islam is true.”
“As a polyamorous man, I know that sex outside of marriage is okay.”
“As a Hindu, I’ve had religious experience that show me how all religions are paths to the divine.”

Truth claims must be evaluated on the basis of Scripture and objective evidence.
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
• Logical implications
  • “We should never challenge ‘lived experience’.”
  • “We need to liberate our theology from privileged groups.”
  • “We should dismantle all structures which perpetuate privilege.”
• Advice for dialogue
Claim #2: “We need to liberate our theology from privileged groups”

- “We need to de-center ‘white theology’ and platform the theology of people of color.”
- “We need to de-center ‘Western theology’ and platform non-Western theology.”
- “We need to de-center male theology and platform feminist theology.”
- “We need to de-center the Eurocentric creeds of the Reformation, and platform liberation theology.”
- “We need to de-center the all-male books of the Bible and platform the extra-biblical books written by women.”
Outline

• Why should we care?

• What is critical theory?

• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity

• Logical implications
  • “We should never challenge ‘lived experience’.”
  • “We need to liberate our theology from privileged groups.”
  • “We should dismantle all structures which perpetuate privilege.”

• Advice for dialogue
Claim #3: “We should dismantle all structures which perpetuate privilege”

• “We should dismantle capitalism, because it perpetuates economic privilege.”
• “We should dismantle male eldership, because it perpetuates male privilege.”
• “We should dismantle the institution of marriage, because it perpetuates heterosexual and monogamous privilege.”
• “We should dismantle anti-abortion laws, because they perpetuate male privilege.”
• “We should dismantle the connection between sex and gender, because it perpetuates cis-privilege.”
• “We should dismantle all Christian moral norms, because they perpetuate Christian privilege.”
Positives and negatives

Claim #1: “We should never challenge ‘lived experience’”
- Positive: Lived experience can give us unique insights
- Negative: ...but must still be subjected to the scrutiny of Scripture and evidence.

Claim #2: “We need to liberate our theology from privileged groups”
- Positive: We should constantly reexamine our theology to recognize where our identity has biased our interpretation
- Negative: ...but the truth or falsehood of a claim does not depend on the identity of the person making it.

Claim #3: “We should dismantle all structures which perpetuate privilege”
- Positive: Power can be abused and misused
- Negative: ...but power is not inherently evil and power imbalances are not necessarily unjust.
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
• Logical implications

Advice for dialogue

• Acknowledge and fight racism
• Avoid the M-word
• Read broadly
• Put the gospel first
Advice for dialogue
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
• Logical implications
• Advice for dialogue
  • Acknowledge and fight racism
  • Avoid the M-word
  • Read broadly
  • Put the gospel first
Acknowledge and fight racism

20% higher response rate for whites with criminal record compared to blacks with no criminal record
Acknowledge and fight racism

Mean callback rate by potential employers, by racial soundingness of names

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name Type</th>
<th>Callback Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White-Sounding Name</td>
<td>10.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American-Sounding Name</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Bureau of Economic Research

THE HUFFINGTON POST

50% higher response rate for whites with identical resumes
Acknowledge and fight racism

Meta-analysis of field experiments shows no change in racial discrimination in hiring over time

Lincoln Quillian, Devah Pager, Ole Høvel, and Arntfinn H. Midtbøen

40% higher response rate for whites has not changed in at least three decades
Acknowledge and fight racism

White bus drivers were 2x more likely to give a free ride to white passengers than to black passengers

Mujcic and Frijters, 2013
Acknowledge and fight racism

Approval of Black-White Marriage Among Whites and Blacks

Selected trend

- Whites
- Non-Hispanic blacks

16% of whites do not approve of intermarriage between whites and blacks

1958 wording: "... marriages between white and colored people"
1968-1978 wording: "... marriages between whites and nonwhites"
^ Trend from 1968-2003 includes Hispanics; trend from 2004-2013 is for non-Hispanic whites only

GALLUP
Acknowledge and fight racism

14% of non-blacks would oppose a relative marrying a black person
Acknowledge and fight racism

28% of Republicans think interracial marriage is ‘morally wrong’
Acknowledge and fight racism

“Among Evangelicals... we see no evidence of prejudicial attitudes decreasing with church attendance.” – Bradley Wright, *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites... and Other Lies You’ve Been Told*, p. 170

34% of white Evangelicals would oppose a close relative marrying a black person
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
• Logical implications
• Advice for dialogue
  • Acknowledge and fight racism
  • Avoid the M-word
  • Read broadly
  • Put the gospel first
Don’t be that guy

CONSERVATIVES

LITERALLY ANYTHING

IS THIS MARXISM?
Avoid labels

I think immigration laws should exist.

AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM is captive to CONSERVATIVE, FASCIST, WHITE SUPREMACIST, NATIONALIST ideologies that have more in common with the philosophy of AYN RAND than the teachings of Jesus!!!!
Avoid labels

I think immigration laws should exist.

**AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM** is captive to **CONSERVATIVE, FASCIST, WHITE SUPREMACIST, NATIONALIST** ideologies that have more in common with the philosophy of **AYN RAND** than the teachings of Jesus!!!!

I think affirmative action laws should exist.

‘**WOKE’ EVANGELICALISM** is captive to **PROGRESSIVE, SOCIALIST, THIRD-WAVE FEMINIST, GLOBALIST** ideologies that have more common with the philosophy of **KARL MARX** than the teachings of Jesus!!!!
Beware of polarization

Critical theory

Biblical orthodoxy

Civil religion

I think Christians should care about justice.

GO PEDDLE YOUR CULTURAL MARXISM SOME PLACE ELSE YOU AVOCADO TOAST-EATING SJW!!!!
Beware of polarization

Critical theory

Biblical orthodoxy

Civil religion

I won
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
• Logical implications
• Advice for dialogue
  • Acknowledge and fight racism
  • Avoid the M-word
  • Read broadly
  • Put the gospel first
Read broadly
Read broadly
Outline

• Why should we care?
• What is critical theory?
• Conflicts between critical theory and Christianity
• Logical implications
• Advice for dialogue
  • Acknowledge and fight racism
  • Avoid the M-word
  • Read broadly
  • Put the gospel first
Put the gospel first
Two crucial questions

• Is **social justice** a Christian imperative? Does God command it? Is it our moral obligation? Is it something we *ought* to do?

• Is **the gospel** an imperative or a pure indicative? Is it a statement of what we *ought* to do, or what God *has done* in Christ?