

“What Is Critical Race Theory? Or Shall The Fundamentalists Win?”

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When I was in seminary, I learned lots of fancy words like eschatology and deontological. But one of the more useful phrases I learned was the “hermeneutic of suspicion.” The term “hermeneutic” just means a method of interpretation, and the phrase hermeneutic of suspicion refers to the way that critical scholars read the Bible: not accepting every word at face value but trying to understand who wrote the text, what audience they were trying to persuade, and how they were influenced by their historical situation. In other words, looking for hidden agendas.

So, for example, some of the letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament were probably written by later authors, addressing organizational issues in the early church that only arose sometime in the second century. So, for example, the historical Jesus didn’t utter every word ascribed to him. Some people were putting words in his mouth for reasons of their own.

A few years back a group of scholars called the Jesus Seminar used a hermeneutic of suspicion to guess at what parts of the gospels could be traced to the original man from Galilee. Short, catchy phrases like “turn the other cheek” were more likely authentic than long, wordy discourses, for example, because they were more likely to survive the generations of oral tradition that preserved his words before they were eventually written down. But not everything could be genuine. In Matthew 16, for instance, Jesus calls Peter the “rock on which I build my church,” but there was no Christian church at that point, so the verse is probably the invention of some later editor. The criteria they used to distinguish the real stuff from the counterfeit could be debated (and it was) but that was the approach.

But what does this have to do with Critical Race Theory? CRT, as it's known, has become a buzzword in America and a flashpoint for controversy. Fox News has bashed Critical Race Theory repeatedly. Several states have passed laws banning it from the public schools. In response, many have felt compelled to defend CRT, which until a year or two ago few people had ever heard of, and in public discourse has become a caricature or bogeyman conjured by certain politicians to whip up their base.

In the cacophony, I became confused. I lost the signal amid the noise. Maybe you did, too. What exactly is Critical Race Theory?

As far as I can determine, Critical Race Theory simply means that American history and its formative documents should be studied with a hermeneutic of suspicion. CRT arose as a critical stance in legal studies and jurisprudence. Scholars like Derrick Bell suggested that statutes and court rulings which appeared on the surface to be race-neutral must be read with skepticism, for their actual effect might be to perpetuate inequality.

So for example, the Thirteenth Amendment appeared to abolish slavery and is usually taught that way. The language reads:

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

But of course slavery was replaced by a system of Jim Crow, economic peonage and mass incarceration that left as many blacks in the penal system today as were in bondage when the Amendment was ratified in 1865. The hermeneutic of suspicion requires us to examine any legal change affecting African Americans as tending to keep entrenched power relations in place. So *Brown v. Board* (in 1954) was intended to desegregate schools; the Fair Housing Act (in 1968) was supposed to result in integrated neighborhoods. Neither panned out. Decades later, public schools are still

pretty much color coded; big cities like Detroit are almost wholly black, while nearby wealthy suburbs like Grosse Pointe are almost all white, despite what the law says. The birth of standardized testing in education (starting with the Education Testing Service, founded 1947) was supposed to create a meritocracy of smart and talented youngsters and end college admissions reserved for the wealthy and well-connected. How did that go? I got high SATs because I'm good at taking tests. And I went to Harvard, despite being a Polack from Oklahoma, so I think standardized testing is a pretty good thing. But a black child's family income is still a better predictor of whether she is college-bound than either grades or test scores. Those on the bottom tend to stay at the bottom. Social and economic mobility in the U.S. is declining. Even conservative publications like *Forbes* report that children born into poverty are likelier than ever to remain trapped there, while all we have to do is look around to see that the rich are getting richer.

So the more things change, the more they stay the same. In this sense, CRT is nothing new. In his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (from 1932), the Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr suggested that modern societies inevitably rest on a centralisation and imbalance of power. Industrial capitalism is characterized by owners and workers, haves and have nots. The powerful habitually use their leverage to maintain their advantage, hiding behind a defense that their privileges are entirely rational, or democratically determined, or perfectly legal, or the result of the impartial marketplace. Niebuhr was writing as the pastor of a congregation in Detroit at the height of the Great Depression, an epoch different than but similar to our own. Then there were soup lines, now there are food banks. Then there were hoboes, now there are homeless. Then there was a rising worldwide tide of fascism, now there is, well, a rising worldwide tide of fascism. Niebuhr considered himself a realist. He doubted that these internal contradictions or power struggles in society could ever be resolved by moral suasion, or better education, or by more intelligent debate to help everyone better understand the issues and find a reasonable consensus. He doubted we could all just be friends. He thought power would never yield without a fight. In a similar fashion, CRT applies a hermeneutic of suspicion to claims that rationality or principles of political or economic

liberalism are enough to solve our problems. Sometimes liberalism is part of the problem.

Really, I haven't been able to come up with any better definition of Critical Race Theory that works for me. It's like the historical critical method of studying the Bible, which used to be called the Higher Criticism. It's not a body of content, like teaching about the Tulsa Race Massacre. Rather, it's a perspective that looks behind the stated intentions of lawmakers and others in a position to influence the public square to see how their actions tend to either dismantle or sustain the myth that we live in a completely free, fair and color-blind society. That may be an aspiration or ideal, but as it applies to the real world, it remains a myth.

CRT has some similarities to the religious doctrine of original sin, of which Niebuhr was an exponent. Egoism and tribal loyalties infect all our social relations so that a completely disinterested or impartial benevolence toward our fellow creatures is impossible. Consider this: it's quite hard to follow the Golden Rule of doing unto others. Maybe some of you manage it, me not so much. But none of us are capable of loving others as they love themselves. It's just not humanly achievable. We're not wired that way.

Original sin is a phrase that can make us squirm. But think of it this way. Human beings are born into the world with a moral sense, but also with a moral blind spot. Our moral sense allows us to empathize with others, to feel compassion, to tell right from wrong, to consider the collective good. This is what Jews and Christians and (maybe even) Unitarians mean when we say that men and women are made in the image of God (or have inherent worth and dignity). But alongside that moral sense, our moral blind spot prevents us from ever really walking a mile in another person's shoes. We judge ourselves by our best moments and good intentions, while we judge others by their actual behavior and misdeeds. We make excuses for ourselves. Other people, not so much, especially if they speak a different language or look funny. It's human

nature. This is what Neibuhr meant by original sin, and why the notion has some credibility for me.

In his book *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, Neibuhr suggested that as individuals, we function and perceive ourselves as moral beings. We are kind to our pets. We serve on church committees and support philanthropic organizations.. We're not consciously or deliberately mean. Quite the opposite. But considered *en masse*, as an anonymous collective, we human beings behave in ways that shock the conscience. As members of an immoral society, we acquiesce to wars and indiscriminate slaughter. As members of an immoral economy, we spend and consume in ways that intend no harm but often carry a terrible price for our fellow creatures and the environment. As law-abiding citizens we pay our taxes, funding an apparatus that guards against any instability that might upset the prevailing pecking order.

So we are not necessarily biased or prejudiced on an individual basis, proponents of Critical Race Theory might say. But collectively, insitutionally, we're guilty. Because racism is America's Original Sin.

But if that's even partly true, how then shall we atone? What does redemption even begin to look like?

When the historical-critical method of studying the Bible came to the fore in the late 19th century, it created a schism, a crisis within Christianity. It saw a split and ongoing conflict between modernism versus fundamentalism.

Fundamentalists turned their back on the emerging scholarship. They insisted that every word of scripture was literally true. They took the myths and legends of the Bible to be facts beyond dispute. Jesus really walked on water. He was born of a virgin and really rose to heaven. The gospels were eyewitness accounts and why would they lie?

Then there were the modernists. Modernists distinguished between what they called the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. They admitted that many purported events in the Bible never happened. Jesus probably didn't say "I am the way, the truth, and the life." But nonetheless, we've all experienced guilt and shame. And we also know that the experience of being loved unconditionally can bring a profound sense of healing and self-acceptance into our lives. We've probably all been in that tomb of despair where we can't think our way out, where willpower seems impotent. But we've also been touched by grace when, despite ourselves, the rock was rolled away and we experienced rebirth. These are realities of the mind and spirit.

I think we're now seeing a similar bifurcation. American fundamentalists want to insist on the immaculate conception of the United States, untouched by any impure thought or motive. George Washington really did throw a silver dollar across the Potomac and never told a lie. John Wayne fought at the Alamo and died for our sins. The words of the pledge, "one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all" are taken to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, an actual accounting of the last four hundred years. But this is not history, it's dogma and not only that, it's a dangerous distortion.

And the modernist has to answer. Almost exactly a century ago, the minister of the Riverside Church in New York City Harry Emerson Fosdick delivered a memorable sermon titled "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" It's a question that's more pertinent than ever. And I think our response must be to distinguish the America of history from the America of Faith. The America of history is deeply flawed and has never delivered on its pledge of equal justice under law. But that shouldn't stop us from embracing the Promised Land of Faith, where sisterhood is powerful and brotherhood is real and every child is treated as a legitimate child entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Because all people are created equal, black, white, brown, freckled, female, male and transgender, gay, straight. That is our creed, it's our faith, and it's up to us to live it out, to create a more perfect union.