

The background of the book cover is a dark, textured surface with numerous thin, wavy lines in various colors including blue, yellow, orange, red, and pink. These lines create a sense of movement and depth, resembling a digital or abstract pattern.

**ED USZYNSKI**

**UNTANGLING  
CRITICAL  
RACE  
THEORY**

**WHAT CHRISTIANS NEED TO  
KNOW AND WHY IT MATTERS**



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Taken from *Untangling Critical Race Theory* by Ed Uszynski.

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# 1

## A WHITE GUY'S JOURNEY INTO RACIAL CONTROVERSY

*All I've ever wanted to do is tell (people) that I'm not trying to solve anybody's problems, not even my own. I'm just trying to outline what the problems are.*

JAMES BALDWIN, "DOOM AND GLORY  
OF KNOWING WHO YOU ARE"

**WHEN I FIRST STARTED THINKING** about writing this book, I didn't envision devoting an entire chapter to my own life. But at a certain point I looked up and realized what an unusual combination of experiences I'm trying to steward. It's a strange mix of contrasts and contradictions. Sometimes I don't know how to put all the pieces together myself. Hopefully, this background will not only help readers understand my inspiration for stepping into this hurricane but also locate my current coordinates in it. If nothing else, it gives me an opportunity to explain my intellectual, biographical, and cultural motivations for being here.

This is a book about race and the church, but despite the social and ecclesial chaos marking the last decade, the triggering event that got me writing had nothing directly to do with race. Instead, a few years ago I read something that caused me to reinterpret my whole Christian life.

We'll start there.



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## WHICH CATASTROPHE SHOULD CONCERN US MORE?

It's 1947, a few years removed from the end of World War II and the beginning of unprecedented social prosperity for a significant slice of Americans. Carl Henry, a leading figure in what would become known as the New Evangelicalism, publishes a book called *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.<sup>1</sup> Henry's intellectual and institutional leadership helped shape the evangelicalism so many of us embrace today, and his book presciently anticipates one of the reasons so many continue to leave it.

In the early 1900s, liberal-minded Christians began emphasizing care for the body at the expense of emphasis on the soul. "Fundamentalists" (forerunners of today's evangelicals) rightly rejected this version of a "social gospel" that left out sin and Savior. Instead, they began drawing lines of distinction that separated them from the apostasy they saw capturing some denominations.

But at the midpoint of the twentieth century, Henry grew concerned they'd overcorrected. By wisely separating from a cross-less social gospel, evangelicals drained away responsible social concern that historically accompanied the good news. To correct this imbalance, Henry urged, "Social justice is not . . . simply an appendage to the evangelical message; it is an intrinsic part of the whole, without which the preaching of the gospel itself is truncated. Theology devoid of social justice is a deforming weakness of much present-day evangelical witness."<sup>2</sup> He wasn't saying a person needed acts of social justice to acquire salvation but that new birth should produce a social consciousness that seeks justice wherever injustice exists. Not a "social justice" driven by political ideology but rather the struggle of a kingdom ethic brought to bear in real lives.

But in failing to develop the broad social implications of their own message, too few in the evangelical camp offered gospel-informed solutions to the problems of racism, war, poverty, misogyny, criminal justice, or other social inequities that developed

as a result of sin. They'd created an unbiblical separation between the redemptive cross of Christ and the reforming social consciousness that should accompany discipleship. Henry argued that separating justification from justice not only undermined one of the intentions of gospel transformation but also created an artificial breach unknown to previous generations of Christians.<sup>3</sup> He warned that while "the church must reject trying to politicize an unregenerate world into the kingdom of God; it must also reject interpreting evangelical conversion devoid of active social concern as fulfilling Christian responsibility."<sup>4</sup>

In other words, Christian responsibility requires concern for what justice looks like in the world. It challenges isms, becomes sensitized to racial imbalance, watches out for those most vulnerable to mistreatment, stays alert to labor exploitation produced by both Capitalism and Communism, and other social abuses. It continually considers how to thoughtfully bring spiritual solutions to bear on social problems. Calling it "the most embarrassing evangelical divorce,"<sup>5</sup> Henry warned that "because many churches try to solve the social plight of the masses with individual evangelism as the only alternative, and avoid discussion of the duty and dangers of social involvement, *younger evangelicals are unprepared to confront the socioeconomic crisis [for example] except through socialist ideology*" (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup>

Catch that? When discipleship focuses on individual soul salvation at the expense of challenging a person to consider their Christian responsibility toward the social traumas of the day, it leaves them vulnerable to other non-Christian voices who *will* teach them how to engage those problems. Henry anticipated Christians entertaining secular language and thinking in nonbiblical, hybrid ways about race and other social problems *because their leaders either haven't developed or intentionally ignored what the Bible says about them*. This path creates two groups of Christians related to social issues: those

unaware of the gaps in their preferred theological system when it comes to addressing social sin, and those who, in their desire to confront social sin, rely on secular language (and often secular solutions) to the detriment of their biblical anchor. The chickens Henry warned us about are most certainly coming home to roost.

We *should* be concerned when people in the church start leaning on secular language and secular solutions for spiritual problems, but why are they doing this in the first place? Could it be because we've failed to teach them substantive biblical language to address social sin like racism? Could it be that plenty of black pastors and theologians *were* doing this work from a biblical perspective across the last century, but those voices were never given a seat at evangelical leadership tables to make any difference?<sup>7</sup> Can we recognize where secular concerns and biblical concerns overlap, even if they propose different solutions? Or does every mention of a social issue like racism only trigger political alarms?

A paltry understanding of biblical social justice both precedes and predicts the current dustup about CRT. We're backfilling into a canyon created by our decades-long indifference toward problems the Bible plainly talks about but that get little attention in most white evangelical spaces. I'd argue that decades of denominational minimization of the race problem alongside shallow public evangelical responses to the plight and conditions of African American life in this country not only paved the way for the beginning of CRT in the 1980s but also continue to make its language attractive—and perhaps even necessary—in the face of anemic approaches to matters of race and ethnicity still present today.

So when I read a book by a Christian pastor subtitled *The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe*, I immediately thought of Henry. Which catastrophe should get more of our attention as Christ followers? Church people idolatrously attracted to secular ideas or church people who don't have biblical solutions for

social concerns? If you say both, which catastrophe best represents most people in *your* congregation?<sup>8</sup>

I'm concerned that many of us embrace a form of evangelicalism that encourages us *not* to think substantively about race at all, and the entire church is suffering for it now. Henry was a godfather of modern evangelicalism, but if he wrote this book today, he'd be indicted for smuggling Marxist ideology into the church. That's a bigger problem than CRT.

I didn't meet Henry's writing until twenty-five years into my Christian life, but I understood the consequences of his warning long before I even knew what it meant to be a Christian. Here's how I got there.

### **MY ETHNICALLY DIVERSE, RACIALLY CHARGED ROOTS**

I'm a white male who grew up in an ethnically diverse environment at the western edge of the greater Cleveland region. As a teen, I ran with a mix of working class black, Puerto Rican, and white folks, with rare but occasional exposure to the country club elite of our overlapping communities.

I lived in a conservative, middle-class home in a white neighborhood but went to high school with a racially diverse mix of kids coming from four sides of town and every stratum of socioeconomic reality. I had packs of both white and black friends, dated both, played basketball with both, partied with both. We all knew how to get along, but we also knew where the lines were drawn. It was unspoken but understood: We can all be friends, but there's safety in keeping to your own. Get sloppy making assumptions, and racial truth might unexpectedly appear in painful ways.

One example perfectly captures the bizarre nature of how racism would show up unannounced. I wanted to go to senior prom with one of my best friends who happened to be black and from the other side of town. I hung out at her house all throughout high school. Her mom and dad, solid Christian folks and neighborhood pillars, loved me and

my family. A few weeks before prom, I went over to her house to ask her dad just as a formality. Zero stress. Thought I'd do it just to score some maturity points.

When I walked into the living room where everyone sat waiting, it was spooky quiet. Her dad looked at me and nodded over to her mom as if to say, "Talk with her." So I turned and asked her if I could take their daughter. She started crying and, between sobs, said, "Oh baby, I love you, but you can't take her to prom." Her reason? She couldn't have her daughter going to prom with a white boy. What would her church friends and others on the street say? Prom was forgettable, but I'll always remember the feeling in that room. Race is a *meaning* system, weighing on people in ways you can't always see. My assumption that there was no race problem among us didn't mean there wasn't one.

So ethnicity and race mattered greatly to the people I grew up around, and it became a source of collective identity, pride, and history as well as a way of drawing distinctions between "us" and "them." At the time, not knowing any better, I assumed this was the experience of most people in America, or at least those who lived in proximity to a major city.

But college exposed me to a different reality.

## THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF MY UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

I became a Christian late in my freshman year, and it transformed the way I saw the world, including how I thought about both ethnic identity and the problems associated with it. I met white people from deep rural environments who had never interacted directly with a black person, and black people from deep city environments who'd had almost no contact with white people. I didn't know these categories existed, as I assumed everyone grew up like I did. It was my first realization that my experience was hardly the norm.

Two men exposed me to different but aligned highways of Christian experience. Bill Pugh, a white, former college-football-playing



Cincinnati suburbanite, led a ministry on campus called Athletes in Action. Bill was magnetic and charismatic, and he created an environment where people could speak openly, honestly, and directly from their background. Both white and black athletes came to his Bible studies and willingly brought friends. He attended a small, white country church that often gave us an opportunity to testify about what God was doing in our lives as athletes at Kent State University.

When not with Bill, I was with Cecil Shorts, an African American man from East Cleveland who led another campus ministry geared primarily toward black students called the ABCs of Salvation. He also organized a bus ministry that took students to a large church in Akron called the House of the Lord, an urban, black-led conservative church that was integrated, which I attended throughout my college years.

Both men taught me to prioritize the Word of God. Both taught me to think missionally. Both reached across the racial divide, believing the gospel to be every person's greatest need, and integrated the gospel message and concern for social issues as two sides of a coin. Ironically, Bill, who came from conservative political roots, operated as more liberal among his peers, bucking norms and reaching out to people most would ignore. Cecil, who came from the heart of the Democratic ghetto of inner-city Cleveland, sounded like any of the most conservative folks I would ever meet. Together they shaped my biblical, social, and political consciousness.

Freshman year I took a two-semester class called "Interpreting the Black Experience" taught by E. Timothy Moore, a non-Christian man who was nevertheless deeply spiritual and socially insightful. He and I spent hours together parsing the Reconstruction era, discussing debates within the black community about how to address Jim Crow segregation, learning about key figures and moments of the civil rights years, and absorbing the resistance that took place in the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, I met Elder Gilbert Carter, a visiting pastor from Canton who taught an elective called "Evolution of the

Black Church in America,” where I learned of the origin and evolution of the black ecclesial and theological tradition forged on American soil since the eighteenth century. Together we traced its development in slaveholding, segregated America right up through what was then the late 1980s, wrestling to understand the churches’ role and response to all that Dr. Moore and I were also discussing.

All of this accelerated my understanding of the role race played in America as we entered the 1990s. I knew race mattered, but these studies helped me appreciate race as a far more pervasive and problematic subject than I had believed. For the first time, I understood how majority culture framed race in ways that didn’t always do justice to historic realities.

### **MY LIFE WORKING IN A SPORTS MINISTRY AMONG POC**

Since leaving Kent State, I’ve invested over three decades working as an evangelical minister, primarily using sports as a launching point into both black and white athletes’ lives. The very nature of working among college and professional athletes makes race a constant subtext to thinking biblically about the world they inhabit, and I’ve entered those conversations as both a participant and facilitator.

I’ve attended events with predominantly white leadership and audiences and listened to the challenges they experience while trying to live their faith in a broken world. I’ve done the same at events with predominantly BIPOC leadership and audiences, observing where their concerns overlap and split in completely different directions, even under the same banner of relatively conservative evangelical Christianity.

I’ve taught the Bible in front of entirely black audiences, entirely white audiences, and evenly mixed audiences, gaining understanding into how their different subjectivities and social locations produce different questions and responses.

I’ve observed white leadership keeping “race” talk at arm’s length, distancing themselves either because of discomfort or inadequacy or

triggering beliefs that politicize or demonize the subject without discussion. I've listened to BIPOC brothers and sisters lament their lack of access to the leadership circle, and white folks' inability or unwillingness to recognize that the spaces we inhabit together are marked and guided almost entirely by Euro-aesthetics and Euro-concerns. I've listened to white folks trying to be reconcilers yet feeling that their best efforts will never be good enough and walking on eggshells in the presence of POC. And I've listened to black folks who are beyond weary in always playing the role of educator and feeling like they start all over again with each new encounter they have with white folks.

I've watched power plays, insecurity, backstabbing, and proud stubbornness get reduced and mislabeled as racism and seen concern for racially motivated prejudice and neglect reduced and mislabeled as Marxism, Critical Race Theory, and liberal Democratic posturing.

I haven't understood it all, and certainly don't have wise answers for it all, but across several decades these exposures gave me a degree in Christian BIPOC/white racial dynamics I don't take for granted.

### **THE RADICAL DIVERSITY AND UNEXPECTED RELEVANCE OF MY GRADUATE STUDIES**

I completed two master's degrees at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. The first was a master of divinity in systematic theology, which grounded me in the history of primarily white conservative evangelicalism, a degree that for many decades existed as a gateway calling card into evangelical pastoral work.

At the same time, I completed a master's degree in Christianity and contemporary culture, which amounted to a "current issues in urban ministry" degree. It concerned itself with asking and answering how Christianity confronts questions related to both modernity and post-modernity, focusing attention on social ethics, how public policy affects the human condition in both history and real time, and the social crises that arise given the brokenness of the societies we create. We focused

on biblical justice and considered its implications both for city life and for living in a technologically driven, post-Christian age, all from an orthodox Christian perspective. Racial dynamics played a significant role in these discussions, and we took field trips to places like Lawndale and Circle Urban Ministries in Chicago to understand how the gospel intersects the lives of people in settings of poverty and hopelessness.

A decade later, I entered a PhD program in American culture studies at Bowling Green State University, a degree focused on asking “eternal questions in new ways, and new questions using refined methods from a variety of disciplines.” I wanted to dig deeper into the meaning of America, how it changes over time, and how we understand it from different perspectives depending on our gender, race, or class alignment. What I didn’t anticipate was learning all of this through the lens of a Marxist worldview along with my baptism into the completely new and foreign language of Critical Theory.

Over the next five years, I was the politically conservative, white, male, hetero, evangelical Christian in classes where each of those labels was anathema. Through hundreds of hours of conversation and debate, I began to understand not only the thinking behind forms of radical progressivism but also the theory and application of Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory, two streams of thought I never imagined would become relevant in my future ministry.

## **TRANSLATING THE RACIAL DIVIDE**

I present that background to establish that the subject of race has never been far from my consciousness. Between growing up in the ethnic melting pot of western Cleveland, receiving discipleship from both white and black folks, and pursuing graduate education in both conservative evangelical theology and Marxist Critical Theory, I’ve been in these conversations on all sides, among the progressive “woke” and regressive “unwoke,” conservative and liberal, Christian and non-Christian. This book is my attempt to make some sense of it all.

People don't often take time to ask themselves, "Why do I think the way I think about people?" They haven't taken inventory of who and what shaped their belief system or reflected on how it's changed through the years or what caused it to change. But like submitting airport luggage to a customs agent for inspection, it's helpful to intentionally open our own bags and not only regularly scour the contents we find inside but also ask how they got there and whether they should stay.

As I assess my own life and consider how to steward the experiences God has given me as a white male, I have often played the role of translator on both sides of the racial divide throughout my time in ministry. To be clear, since I happen to be white myself, I'm writing primarily to help a white audience sort through the language and ideas circulating about race. But I'm writing as a translator from somewhere closer to the middle, meaning any Christian trying to understand what is happening in conversations around race—regardless of ethnic heritage—may benefit. I'm not lecturing either side, though I'd like to sound a few alarms that might be of Christian use, especially if those sirens point to exit doors we can all pass through safely.

### **WHY CHRISTIANS WINNING A CULTURE WAR ISN'T MY PRIMARY CONCERN**

Before going any further, I need to put a few more cards on the table. If you try talking about race today—or really any social issue—you're stepping into a war zone. Two secular worldviews are at each other's throat. Right-leaning populist (i.e., conservative) movements see themselves as the final solution to preserving philosophical liberalism and democracy and the Western values supporting them. They're trying to prevent what they see as the destruction of American society. Meanwhile, leftist activists (i.e., progressive) believe the current ordering of society makes the language of democracy hollow. They desire revolutionary upheaval because the status quo maintains inequality and oppression in the lives of everyone not at the top.

I know Christians on both sides of this disagreement. I understand many of my friends' concern that radical Progressivism is taking over American institutions. I also appreciate other friends' arguments for why modern forms of Conservatism feel oppressive. I can even see why those committed to philosophical and social liberalism reject radical leftist solutions and wind up sounding like and siding with conservatives as a result. But understanding aside, I don't spend much energy fretting about which side is winning or losing the ideological war, and the reasons are an important foundation of this book.

First, for my Christian friends concerned we're losing the culture war, if progressive ideology "wins," it won't be because Christians failed at resisting it. Rather, it will be because God is using the spread of pagan ideology to discipline his church. It could be judgment for a flippant disregard regarding economic and political injustice, perhaps even for our treatment of immigrants, contempt for "the least of these," or our participation in all sorts of moral, sexual, and relational apostasy. I'd say the same thing to those few I know who are more concerned about radical Conservatism "winning." "It is time for judgment to begin with God's household" (1 Peter 4:17), and throughout the Bible God often uses people promoting godless ideology to deliver it.<sup>9</sup> But demonically fueled fascist movements never succeed without God's permission.

When do we reach the tipping point? When will God have had enough? I don't know, but I do know the tide of oppressive expressions of Progressivism or Conservatism won't be pushed back by shouting louder on social media or hosting conferences to fight with one another. The Bible recommends personal and corporate repentance as an antidote, not another social post to get the last word in.

Second, I refuse to be limited by binary-driven politics and their meager solutions. Unfortunately, we're living in an age where the political climate doesn't allow for a person to be labeled both "conservative" and concerned about capitalist excess or the mistreatment of

immigrants. We don't have tidy labels for the person who is both against abortion and critical of structural and systemic sin patterns. We can hardly imagine a person being against promoting gender fluidity but also for racial justice. But Christians don't have to settle for that sort of reductionistic tyranny. We need more Christians who transcend binaries and not only see the brokenness in both camps but also apply a more sophisticated understanding of biblical praxis in the face of social evil. This won't happen if we've been disciplined more by news networks than the Bible.

I'm not an advocate for putting our heads in the sand, but I see the futility of a world trying to fix itself without Jesus, and I'm not impressed with any of their solutions. So I don't align with the radical progressives, the philosophically liberal, or the staunchly conservative and don't care to spend much time arguing about any one of them as the "right" option. I want to be detached enough to discern what's wrong, what's right, and what's insightful in these worldviews, and I won't do that well if I'm coming to them as a partisan rather than as an "alien and stranger." The world desperately needs to see kingdom solutions as alternatives to those of secular progressives, secular liberals, and secular conservatives. When we start sounding too much like any of the three, we undermine our Christian witness. At the same time, all three have common-grace kernels of the kingdom, and Christians need discernment to sift them out.

Third, let's talk about "wokeism," perhaps the most politically loaded word of our day. I have vague recollections of African American kids using the word *woke* during high school in the 1980s, but I'm guessing none of them knew the source of its first use in the 1930s.<sup>10</sup> That's when blues singer Lead Belly wrote a song about the Scottsboro Boys, nine African American teenage boys accused of raping two women in Alabama in 1931, whose arrest and trial became one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in American history.<sup>11</sup> Belly said if you were black in Alabama in the 1930s, you needed to "stay woke," and the

term has been a mainstay of black vernacular ever since. My west Cleveland classmates used it the way Lead Belly intended: to stay aware of what is really going on. Be careful. Keep your eyes open. Stay informed and don't get taken advantage of by anyone (especially white folks) who may not have your best interests in mind.<sup>12</sup> As far as I can tell, it's still a proactive, protective, and positive word in black culture today.

In 1962, perhaps prophetically, William Melvin Kelley highlighted "woke" in a *New York Times* essay about white people appropriating black slang terms and changing their meanings.<sup>13</sup> He died in 2017, but I'm guessing he wouldn't be surprised at what's happened since with the term *woke* outside black culture.

More recently, the term has been co-opted as a negative political buzzword, denoting a militant supporter of equality, diversity, and social justice issues.<sup>14</sup> It's a dog-whistle canopy for any identity-based social justice issues that Democrats and Progressives promote. Wokeism means blaming outcomes on systemic racism, affirming gay marriage, promoting transgenderism, canceling free speech, and focusing on victimization. That's probably how most evangelicals understand the word as it shows up now.

But in years of conversations with real Progressives, I've learned something important that goes beyond ideology: wokeism is primarily a retaliation. Political aggression that leverages race, gender, sexuality, and ableism is usually the inflamed response of human beings who've been deeply wounded by others. Politics aside, wokeism is an intentional overreaction weaponized for the purpose of reversing the pain of feeling mistreated or misunderstood. It's an ideological response to histories of real abuse, real domination, and real marginalization experienced in people's real narratives, a secular response to living amid the brokenness of the godless world we've created for ourselves as humans.

I know it's a poor fix. I'm not naive to the results. I'm just saying wokeism represents leftist solutions devised by hurting people who



need gospel healing, not Christian judgment. Plenty of commentary exists on how to respond to the ideology, but are we giving attention to the pain behind it? I'm convinced that poorly lived Christianity plays a significant role in the formation of radical Progressivism. How we respond to hurting people matters.

So as I write this book, I'm not primarily interested in staking ground against one culture war ism or another. I won't align myself with any political side, though I am trying to correct inadequacies I've experienced in my own more conservative version of evangelicalism. And while I understand the political threat represented by the motives and results of wokeism, I'm more concerned with the brokenness of the people behind it. I'm driven by a desire for Christians to have more social empathy, a deepened understanding of the issues, and where necessary, an action-producing conviction regarding our current role in the race conversation.

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