

## EDITORIAL

**Woke Sociology, Woke Jesus***Acknowledgment:*

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In January 2024, the Florida Board of Governors, most of whom had been appointed by Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, removed Principles of Sociology as a general education core course option in all twelve Florida public universities. The verdict came a week after the Florida State Board of Education had already unanimously voted to remove sociology as a core course offering in all twenty-eight Florida public colleges. As Florida Education Commissioner and former state Republican lawmaker Manny Diaz, Jr. insisted, “students should be focused on learning the truth about our country instead of being radicalized by woke ideologies in the college classrooms” (Papenfuss 2024). These rulings followed Florida legislation in 2022 that its sponsors termed the Stop WOKE Act, and escalated what DeSantis had termed his “war on woke.”

The American Association of University Professors denounced both rulings as a further assault on academic freedom, intellectual pursuit, and knowledge. The American Sociological Association retorted by writing that the actions were “outrageous,” and that “Failure to prioritize the scientific study of the causes and consequences of human behavior is a failure of Florida’s commitment to providing high-quality civics education and workforce readiness.” Heather Gautney, a sociology professor at Fordham University, noted that “It’s not surprising that people in power would actively suppress efforts to question their power and expose the dynamics underlying it. What’s surprising is the ease through which that suppression is happening today” (Corbett 2024).

In the same January meeting of the Florida State Board of Education, they also decided to prohibit spending on diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, and replace sociology with a new American history course which, according to its press release, would “provide students with an accurate and factual account of the nation’s past, rather than exposing them to radical woke ideologies.” As board member Ryan Petty posted on X, “Florida is where DEI goes to DIE.” Ironically, the Board had two days earlier honored civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. for his “dedication to service and equality” driven in part by his major in sociology at Morehouse College (Moody 2024).

These political actions resonate with similar perspectives taken earlier further north when two men were arrested and accused of conspiring to carry out a terrorist attack on a train near Toronto in 2013. When asked what the root causes of terrorism might be, then Conservative Prime Minister of Canada Stephen Harper famously said, "This is not a time to commit sociology," as if sociology were an error, a sin, or even a crime itself. As then Member of Parliament and current leader of the Conservative Party of Canada Pierre Poilievre explained, "The root cause of terrorism is terrorists." Any explication would be woke.

Today, seemingly any program, person, or political position can be disparaged and dismissed with the single four-letter word "woke," the update of "politically correct." But the concept of "waking up" to social and political realities is not new, dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The original meaning of being "woke," before its critics transformed it into derision, was to be awakened to the empirical reality and effects of inequality of conditions in society. Then, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, African American communities urged each other to "stay woke," meaning to stay vigilant and keep watch for systemic racism in general, and for police brutality in particular. Moreover, "the #StayWoke hashtag arguably served an equally important emotional and spiritual purpose: It allowed Black citizens to unite around a shared perception and experience of reality — and to galvanize themselves and each other for a very long fight for change" (Romano 2020).

However, today "woke" has been co-opted and weaponized into a pejorative term of laughable derision, a mocking insult *du jour* for anyone awakened to multiple forms of social injustice beyond racism. In response, proponents such as Steve Rose observe that "Criticizing 'woke culture' has become a way of claiming victim status for yourself rather than acknowledging that more deserving others hold that status." Perry Bacon Jr. suggests that an "anti-woke posture" is a product of the long-standing promotion of backlash politics by conservatives who fear social activism and changing cultural norms.

True, even most of the political left is leery of and frustrated with the radical fringe of woke culture who damage their own cause, as is true of every political camp. Previously labelled social justice warriors, these extremists include those who take an overzealous, performative, and ultimately disingenuous approach to social justice. As Aja Romano rightly observed, their claim to wokeness "is often about maintaining the superficial trappings of progressive idealism without doing the real work to understand and change systems of oppression" (2020). One egregious example is the woke capitalism or "woke-washing" of corporations that use insincere progressive messaging as a substitute for genuine reform.

Nonetheless, wokeness as a religious awakening is a powerful concept, despite having become an epithet. Wokeness is indeed akin to enlightenment, in that those once blind now see. When used knowingly and respectfully by its proponents, "woke" can overcome its cultural

misappropriation by Whites of an idiom of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in pursuit of social justice. When used unknowingly and disrespectfully by its critics, it becomes little more than sneering juvenile name-calling.

The core concern for Christians is their recurring debate about social justice (Hiebert 2022). Coined in the 1840s by the Jesuit priest Luigi Taparelli based on the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, the most respected and referenced definition of social justice is from John Rawls, the leading 20<sup>th</sup> century political philosopher, in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), who basically equated it with fairness. In contrast to retributive, restorative, or procedural justice, social justice is a form of distributive justice, the pursuit of fairness in the distribution of social goods (empowerment, wealth, rights, privilege) and social “bads” (disempowerment, poverty, disprivilege) within a social system. And as the *Handbook of Social Justice Theory and Research* states on its opening page, “[t]he origins of the old-time notion of justice in Western civilization can be traced to the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition” (Sabbagh and Schmitt 2016:1).

It is therefore at best ironic that some Christians today are vehemently anti-social justice, contending that it has now become a new religion unto itself (Murray 2019). Recent book titles tell the tone of their tale: Scott David Allen, *Why Social Justice is Not Biblical Justice: An Urgent Appeal to Fellow Christians in a Time of Social Crisis* (2020); Ronnie Rogers, *A Corruption of Consequence: Adding Social Justice to the Gospel* (2021); Voddie Baucham, *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe* (2021); Owen Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness: How the Social Justice Movement is Hijacking the Gospel – And How to Stop It* (2021); Lucas Miles, *Woke Jesus: The False Messiah Destroying Christianity* (2023).

However, in *Christian Faith and Social Justice: Five Views* (McCracken 2014), each scholar takes a different approach to social justice, but all take it to be a biblical imperative. Notably, the Hebrew Bible separates *mishpat* (justice) from *tsedaqah* (righteousness), which occurs less than half as often. Yahweh is a “God of justice [*mishpat*]” (Isa. 30:18). In contrast, New Testament Greek utilizes the single word *dikaioσύνη* which can be translated with equal validity as either “righteousness” or “justice.” That *dik*-stem words are regularly translated as righteousness is a product of Western pietistic individualism.

For example, Isaiah makes multiple references to justice, including “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice?” (Isa 58:6). Quoting Isaiah 42:1-4, Matthew later declares Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy who will “proclaim justice to the Gentiles” (Matthew 12:18). Reading from Isaiah, Jesus confirms that scripture has been fulfilled in him. Regarding personal salvation, Matt 25:31-46 is the Synoptic gospel equivalent to John 3:16 in soteriology. The sheep who inherit the kingdom will be separated from the goats who do not,

based on who has acted compassionately toward the least. Overall, in the original language of Matthew's gospel, "social justice *is* biblical justice" (Allen 2019:8, emphasis in original).

Conservative Christian cultures are rooted in individualistic orientations to religious commitment, along with skepticism of structural analyses of social inequalities and injustice. For the privatized religion of many conservative Christians, social justice is too political for the church, as if the church could be apolitical. Sociologically, both theological individualism and collectivism fail to grasp the duality of individual agency and social structure. Consequently, though conservative Christians may imagine otherwise, it is impossible to exist without the social structures of social (in)justice. The heart of the problem is locating evil exclusively either in the individual agent or the social structure, because it resides in both (Williams 2020).

The late Timothy Keller insisted that Christians "take up their birthright and do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God (Micah 6:8)." Will Christians yet "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent [them] into [post-Christendom] exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare [they] will find [their] welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7)? In I Corinthians 13:13, Paul listed the three virtues that remain after all else fades – faith, hope, and love. The greatest undoubtedly is love, but as Christian public intellectual Cornel West has repeatedly explained, "Justice is what love looks like in public."

Unlike many with power and privilege who perpetuate unawakened hegemony, sociology wakens learners to the realities of social structure, just as Jesus called everyone to wakefulness. Would that more, not fewer, students of human social life waken, listen, and learn. Indeed, as Jesus exhorted us all, "Let anyone with ears listen!" (Matt. 11:15 NRSV)

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