

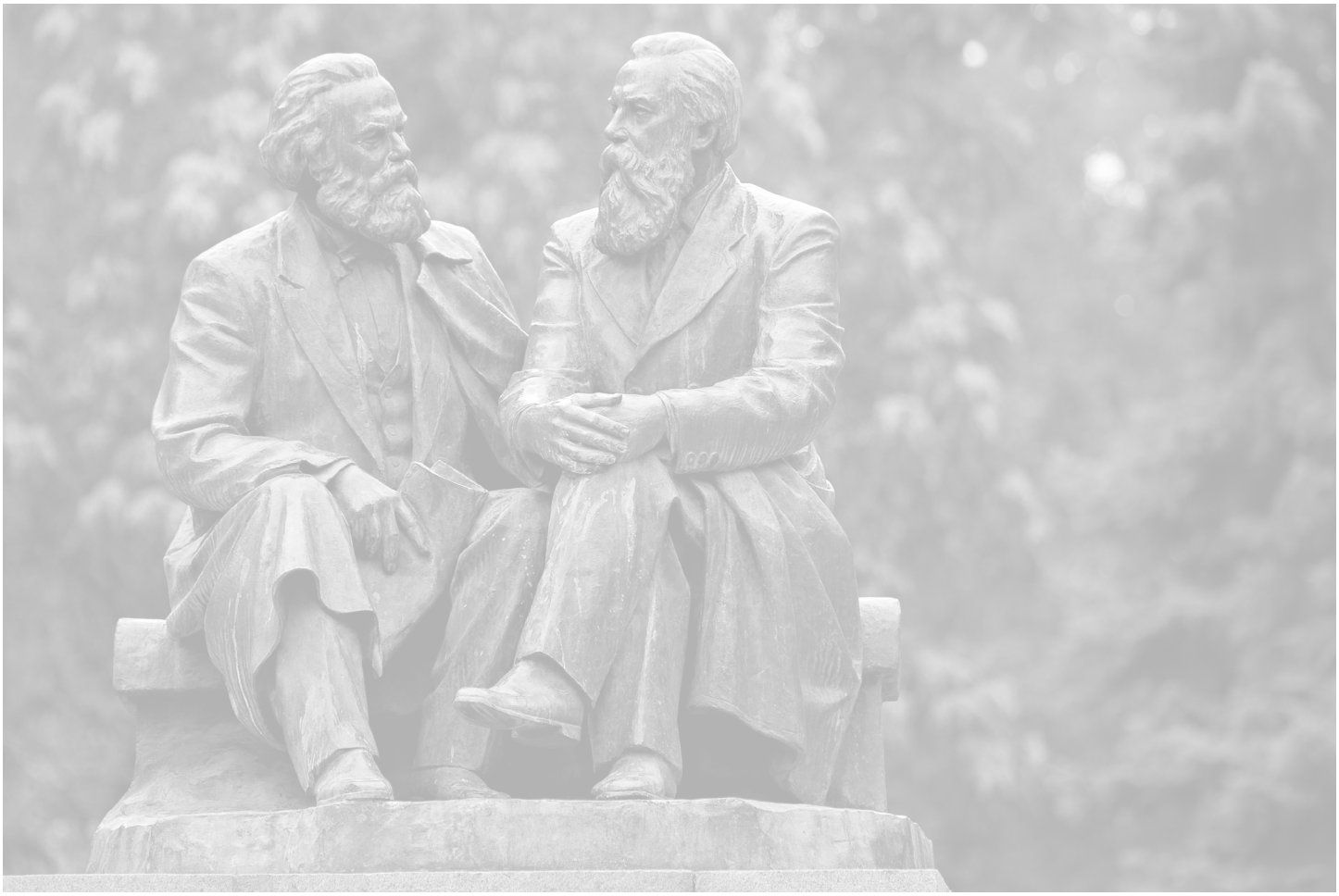
Guide Series

Understanding Wokeness in Christian Higher Education

Center for Academic
Faithfulness & Flourishing

About the Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing

The Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing exists to empower Christian colleges and universities to advance their faith-based missions, equip campus leaders with the resources necessary to flourish in our present age, and encourage broader support for these unique and valuable institutions. To advance this mission, CAFF seeks to accomplish three goals: (1) Reassert institutional faithfulness by developing a cohesive and credible counter-narrative to ideologies that undermine Christian higher education; (2) Redesign organizational networks by helping Christian colleges and universities cultivate ideologically aligned exchange partners; and (3) Reinvigorate institutional flourishing by designing initiatives that strengthen the governance, management, and financial position of faith-based institutions of higher education.



Understanding Wokeness in Christian Higher Education

Allen Mendenhall
Todd J. Williams

Cover image: Monument representing Karl Marx and
Friedrich Engels in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

© 2026 by the Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing

Published by the Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing

P.O. Box 3706, Greenville, SC 29608

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be republished
without the prior written permission of the publisher. The
only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Scripture quotations taken from the (NASB®) New American Standard
Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman
Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. www.Lockman.org

Executive Summary

In recent years, wokeness has become a pervasive and polarizing term within Christian higher education and American society at large. This report seeks to provide the foundational frameworks trustees and campus leaders need to rigorously examine the concept of wokeness, assess its alignment with the mission of Christian higher education, and pursue coherent integration between the philosophical and practical dimensions of institutional life. After describing why in-depth understanding matters and analyzing the theoretical underpinnings of wokeness, the report discusses how wokeism is shaping society, culture, and the wider academy. It then introduces Christian perspectives on wokeness and highlights several warning signs of woke infiltration in the Christian college context, concluding with recommendations to guide all who are entrusted with preserving and advancing Christian higher education.

About the Authors

Allen Mendenhall is Senior Advisor to the American Investor Initiative and Research Fellow in the Institute for Economic Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC. Previously he served as Associate Dean and Grady Rosier Professor in the Sorrell College of Business at Troy University, where he also directed the Manuel H. Johnson Center for Political Economy, and as Associate Dean and Founding Executive Director of the Blackstone & Burke Center for Law & Liberty at Faulkner University's Thomas Goode Jones School of Law. A prolific scholar, Dr. Mendenhall has published across a wide spectrum of academic journals, law reviews, and popular media. He holds a B.A. in English from Furman University, an M.A. in English and a J.D. from West Virginia University, an LL.M. in transnational law from Temple University, and a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University.

Todd J. Williams is President and Chief Executive Officer of Cairn University, where he has served in various roles since 1994, including Professor of Social Sciences, Academic Dean of Undergraduate Education, and Senior Vice President and Provost. An active commentator on issues of faith, learning, and liberty, Dr. Williams chairs the Board of Governors for the John Jay Institute for Faith, Society, and Law and also serves as a member of the Board of Directors for the Association for Biblical Higher Education, of the Advisory Board for the Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing, and of the Board of Directors for Gospel Volunteers, Inc. Earlier in his career, Dr. Williams was Headmaster and Chief Executive Officer of Trinity Christian School in Fairfax, Virginia. He holds a B.S. in Bible from Cairn University and an M.Ed. and Ph.D. from Temple University.

Suggested Citation

Mendenhall, A., & Williams, T. J. (2026). *Understanding Wokeness in Christian Higher Education*. Greenville, SC: Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing.

Table of Contents

Director's Preface 1

Introduction: Why Understanding Wokeness Matters 2

The Theoretical Foundations of Wokeness 5

Wokeness in Society, Culture, and the Academy 19

Christian Perspectives on Wokeness 24

Warning Signs of Woke Infiltration 30

Maintaining Coherent Integration amid Contextual Challenges 35

For Further Reading 38

Director's Preface

Much has been written over the past decade on the topic of wokeness. Beginning as an attitudinal orientation arising from a set of philosophical commitments incubated in the cloistered recesses of the academy, the concept entered mainstream debates in the mid-2010s and rapidly dispersed throughout everyday discourse during the summer of 2020. From doctors to businessmen, athletes to entertainers, and pastors to politicians, Americans of all stripes were confronted with previously unfamiliar constructs such as microaggressions, intersectionality, White privilege, and systemic oppression. By now, most Americans have formed opinions about wokeness, and these perspectives have in turn shaped cultural expressions, consumer preferences, and public policy decisions. Yet even as wokeness has achieved ubiquitous status within the public consciousness, the degree to which most Americans truly understand its underlying worldview remains opaque.

For those serving in leadership roles within Christian higher education, a detailed understanding of wokeness is imperative. On the one hand, the orientation is a threat: the quasi-religious character of wokeness mimics Christian ethics while adopting underlying philosophical frameworks that run contrary to biblical theology. On the other hand, the orientation is a model: the widespread cultural influence of wokeness flows from its participation in the fundamental task performed by every consequential worldview—namely, a serious engagement with problems inherent in the human condition. When leaders in Christian higher education recognize what wokeness is and what it is not, they become both equipped to guard against the orientation's corrosive institutional effects and empowered to cultivate an educational program offering a distinctly Christian response to the pressing issues of our day.

In the following report, Allen Mendenhall and Todd Williams provide a robust introduction to the theoretical foundations of wokeness as well as its present expression within society, culture, and the wider academy. They then contrast the orientation's perspective with biblical teachings on freedom, authority, and property to demonstrate its fundamental incompatibility with orthodox Christianity. The report concludes by offering practical guidance for recognizing woke infiltration and taking remedial action. May the contents of this report foster the conceptual clarity necessary for trustees, administrators, and faculty serving in Christian higher education to lead confidently from their unique institutional missions so that their academic programs might offer a clear and life-giving contrast to the false ideologies of our age.

P. Jesse Rine, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing
Greenville, SC
October 2026



Introduction: Why Understanding Wokeness Matters

A critical element of maintaining and ensuring academic faithfulness and flourishing in Christian higher education is coherent integration, both philosophical and practical. This is the necessary infrastructure of institutional fidelity. It is not enough for a college or university to state that it is Christian. It must actually *be* Christian, through and through, in its orientation, ethos, and practice.

Achieving coherent integration is easier said than done. Christian colleges operate within the larger industry of higher education, one replete with robust overlapping networks of regulatory, professional, and academic guild entities. These carry expectations and influences, of which trustees, administrators, and faculty are not perpetually conscious. Additionally, there are complex societal, cultural, and political forces that exert pressure, for institutions of Christian higher learning and the individuals within them do not exist in a vacuum. Indeed, faculty members and students pursue the work of teaching and learning in a broader context of competing ideas and values concerning the nature of the world, humanity, and education itself. Likewise, university trustees make decisions of significant missional, financial, and operational consequence in light of their

own Christian convictions and worldview as well as the influences, pressures, and demands of the broader context in which they operate.

Christian higher education, therefore, must be understood as operating within a larger context whose varied elements may or may not align with the sector's values and commitments. For those tasked with leading Christian colleges and universities, this contextual condition requires contextual awareness. That awareness requires knowledge. That knowledge will beg for reflection. And that reflection should lead to action. All of which make coherent integration—and thus institutional fidelity—possible.

One such contextual factor which Christian college trustees and administrators would do well to examine is the concept of "wokeness." In recent years, wokeness has become a pervasive and polarizing term, one about which many have already formed an opinion. In a recent column in *The Christian Century*, Jennifer Kaalund constructed a case that "staying woke" is not a political slogan imported into Christian life from secular progressive culture but rather a native imperative of the New Testament itself. She opens with a grammatical observation that doubles as a theological argument: the past tense of the verb *wake*, she notes, is *woke*. Drawing on two Greek verbs—*grēgoreō* ("to be awake," appearing 23 times in Scripture) and *egeirō* ("to wake up," appearing 144 times)—Kaalund argues that the biblical corpus is saturated with calls to wakefulness understood as vigilance against spiritual death, alignment with Christ, and restoration to full life. She marshals Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1965 Oberlin commencement address and Toni Morrison's prose alongside Pauline epistles and the Gospels to arrive at a simplified conclusion: "The Bible encourages us to stay woke."[1]

This argument is illustrative precisely because of where it appears and what it attempts. Published in one of American Protestantism's most influential mainline journals, the column exemplifies a rhetorical and theological move that has become increasingly common in Christian academic and ecclesiastical discourse: the reframing of contemporary progressive social consciousness as the authentic and even obligatory expression of Christian awakening. In this framing, only those institutions that embody progressive social consciousness can make a claim to authentically Christian education.

> **It is not enough for a college or university to state that it is Christian. It must actually *be* Christian in its orientation, ethos, and practice.**

In contrast, some Christian colleges have declared wokeness to be antithetical to biblical truth. These public pronouncements, however, do not automatically exempt institutions from the concept's influence, nor do such

1 Jennifer Kaalund, "The Bible Is Clear: Stay Woke," *The Christian Century*, January 27, 2026, https://www.christiancentury.org/online-columnists/bible-clear-stay-woke.

declarations confirm that the college has systematically evaluated the extent to which the concept may have become embedded in the thinking and work of faculty, staff, and administrators. Assessments of this sort require a deep and multifaceted understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of wokeness, how the concept is typically deployed in society and culture, and its signature forms of expression within Christian higher education. Absent that knowledge, leaders within Christian higher education may identify and reject the more explicit surface expressions of wokeness while missing the more subtle signs of the concept's embeddedness within the life of the organization.

This report seeks to provide the foundational understanding trustees and campus leaders need to rigorously examine the concept of wokeness, assess its alignment with the mission of Christian higher education, and—where necessary—implement remedial steps to restore coherent integration between the philosophical and practical dimensions of institutional life. In so doing, the report endeavors to foster a self-determination within Christian higher education that exhibits a proactive and well-informed intentionality in support of institutional fidelity.



Leaders within Christian higher education may identify and reject the more explicit surface expressions of wokeness while missing the more subtle signs of the concept's embeddedness within the life of the organization.



The Theoretical Foundations of Wokeness

Although its cohesive social expression did not proliferate until recent years, wokeness in its many manifestations has long been incubated in the halls of academia. In much of continental Europe, the systematic study of meaning, interpretation, language, and culture is distributed across several established philosophical disciplines: hermeneutics, phenomenology, semiotics, the philosophy of language, and the sociology of knowledge, each with its own methodological standards and institutional homes. In the United States, by contrast, the analogous body of thought has been absorbed primarily into departments of English and comparative literature, operating under the umbrella term "literary theory and criticism." Such institutional housing has shaped, and to a degree distorted, the material. Questions that in a European philosophical context would be subjected to the scrutiny of formal logic, epistemic justification, and competing traditions have been refracted through the lens of textual interpretation, where standards of argumentative validity are often more permissive and rhetorical elegance can substitute for rigorous demonstration.

Wokeness in its many manifestations has long been incubated in the halls of academia.

The result is a body of theory that is simultaneously ambitious and elusive: ambitious in its claims about power, consciousness, history, and the constitution of the self, and elusive in its resistance to the ordinary protocols of falsification and debate. From within this institutional matrix, the contemporary phenomenon of wokeness draws its conceptual vocabulary, its characteristic modes of analysis, and its moral urgency. To understand wokeness, one must understand the theoretical schools that shaped it: Marxist criticism; psychoanalytic theory; structuralism and semiotics; poststructuralism and deconstructionism; feminism and queer theory; postcolonial and race-and-ethnicity studies; and cultural studies and new historicism. Each deserves careful, if necessarily compressed, treatment.

The Bedrock Structure: Marxist Criticism

The most foundational of these traditions—the one that provides, in a sense, the structural skeleton on which the others hang—is Marxist criticism. Its source is, of course, Karl Marx's account of history as driven by successive modes of production: slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and, ultimately, communism. Within each mode of production, social life is organized around the relationship between those who own and control the means of production and those who do not, and whose labor those owners appropriate and exploit. History, on this account, is the record of class struggle, of the collision between the dominant class, which benefits from existing arrangements, and the subordinate class, which it exploits.[2] The capitalist or bourgeois mode of production, according to Marx, pits the bourgeoisie (owners of capital, factories, and financial instruments) against the proletariat (wage laborers who possess nothing but their labor-power).[3]

> **To understand wokeness, one must understand the theoretical schools that shaped it.**

Marx's vision—which retains its activist orientation even when domesticated into academic theory—was that the global proletariat would eventually overcome its fragmentation and false consciousness, recognize its collective interests, and abolish the capitalist order in favor of a communist society in which exploitation

2 "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles," submit Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. They add, "Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes" (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Samuel H. Beer [Wheeling, IL: Crofts Classics, Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1955]), 9.

3 See Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 11-22. Marx and Engels state, "In proportion as the bourgeoisie, *i.e.*, capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed—a class of laborers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labor increases capital. These laborers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market," at 16.



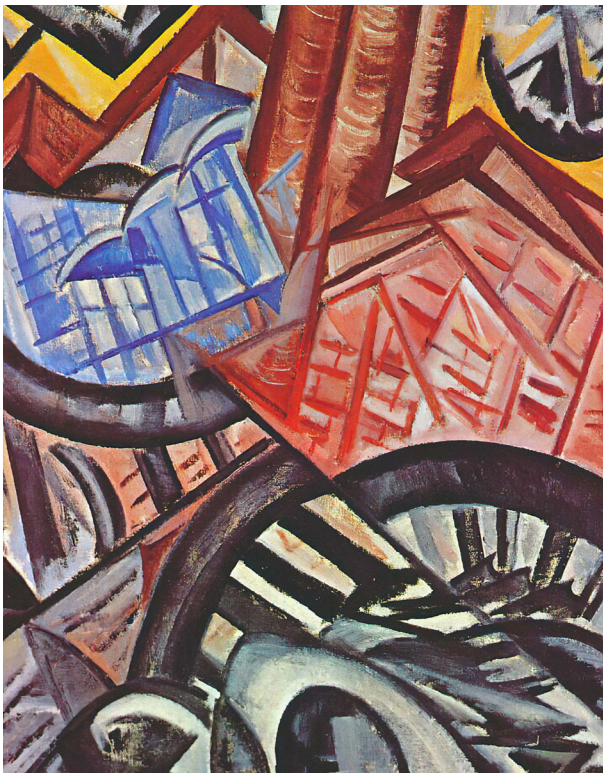
and class hierarchy would be superseded.[4] Within literary and cultural studies, the Marxist inheritance has been transmitted through a succession of thinkers who adapted this framework to the analysis of cultural production. The Italian communist Antonio Gramsci introduced the concept of hegemony: the process by which a dominant class maintains its power not merely through coercion but through cultural consent, persuading subordinate groups to accept arrangements that work against their interests as natural, inevitable, or just. Louis Althusser developed the concept of the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), arguing that institutions such as schools, churches, and the media function to reproduce the dominant ideology and interpellate (or "hail") individuals into subject positions that serve the existing order.

In the American academy, the most prominent inheritor of this tradition has been Fredric Jameson, whose monumental work *The Political Unconscious* (1981) advances the claim that all literature and cultural production is, at its deepest level, politically and ideologically charged, that even apparently apolitical texts register, however indirectly, the social contradictions and class conflicts of their historical moment. Jameson's method, which he describes as the analysis of the "political unconscious," treats texts as symbolic resolutions of otherwise intractable social tensions, and his guiding imperative—"Always historicize!"—became something close to a methodological creed for an entire generation of American literary scholars.[5] For Jameson, the proper object of criticism is not the text's surface meanings or the author's conscious intentions but the way in which the text's formal and narrative strategies encode, displace, and manage the ideological pressures of its moment of production.

Other significant Marxist-inflected literary critics studied within the American academy include Terry Eagleton, whose accessible polemical work helped popularize materialist criticism, and Raymond Williams, whose

4 "The immediate aim of the Communists," say Marx and Engels, "is the same as that of all the other proletarian parties: Formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat" (*Communist Manifesto*, 23).

5 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 20; Robert T. Tally Jr., "On Always Historicizing: The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology Today," *PMLA* 137, no. 3 (2022): 489-503.



The key move of Marxist criticism, and the one most consequential for what will become wokeness, is its insistence that culture is not a neutral domain of aesthetic enjoyment or humanistic education but a site of ideological struggle.

concepts of "dominant," "residual," and "emergent" cultural formations provided a more dynamic and less mechanistic account of ideology than classical Marxism posits. A parallel text, probably more widely assigned in education schools than in English departments, is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), which recasts the oppressor/oppressed binary as a problem of consciousness: oppression is maintained through the "banking" model of education, which treats students as empty containers into which teachers deposit dominant ideas, while oppression is challenged through the revolutionary "problem posing" model, which seeks to aid students in recognizing that unequal dynamics are changeable rather than fixed.

The key move of Marxist criticism, and the one most consequential for what will become wokeness, is its insistence that culture (including literature, art, film, and popular media) is not a neutral domain of aesthetic enjoyment or humanistic education but a site of ideological struggle. Texts, from this view, do not simply transmit individual visions of the world; they perpetuate and reinforce the ideological frameworks that sustain existing relations of power. This interpretive disposition—the habit of reading cultural objects as symptoms of power rather than expressions of meaning—provides the foundational gesture from which all subsequent theoretical schools in this tradition proceed.

The First Pillar: Psychoanalytic Theory

Upon the foundation of Marxist criticism arise various pillars that support the theoretical edifice of wokeness. The first of these pillars is psychoanalytic criticism, which traces its ancestry to Sigmund Freud's account of the unconscious mind, the structure of desire, and the mechanisms by which psychic material is repressed, displaced, and sublimated. Freud's contribution to literary theory was the suggestion that texts, like dreams, are structured by processes of condensation and displacement (i.e., by the indirect, figurative expression of material that cannot be confronted directly). The author, accordingly, is not necessarily a sovereign consciousness in full command of his or her creative outputs, which may involve, rather, unconscious fantasies or wishes.[6]

The French analyst Jacques Lacan radicalized this insight by recasting the Freudian unconscious in structuralist terms (a move discussed further below). For Lacan, the human unconscious is not simply a repository of repressed instincts but is structured like a language. However, for those repressed instincts to become the subject of psychoanalysis, they must be constituted through entry into the symbolic order, and this process involves permanent loss of meaning and the perpetual deferral of satisfaction. Lacanian theory, dense and deliberately resistant to paraphrase, became enormously influential in literary studies as a framework for analyzing desire, the construction of subjectivity, and the operations of power in texts and institutions.

Upon the foundation of Marxist criticism arise various pillars that support the theoretical edifice of wokeness.

The most provocative extension of these traditions, however, came from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose two-volume collaborative work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*—comprising *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980)—undertook a sustained critique of both Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist orthodoxy from the perspective of what they called "schizoanalysis."[7] Deleuze and Guattari argued that psychoanalysis, in its emphasis on the Oedipus complex and the family triangle, serves to contain and domesticate the revolutionary energies of desire, to channel libidinal investment back into the structures of the nuclear family, the state, and capitalist accumulation. Their project was to theorize desire as fundamentally productive and anarchic, always tending to overflow and escape the "axiomatics" of capitalism and normative social organization.

6 See, e.g., Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," in James Strachey (trans. and ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 9 (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), 143-153.

7 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).



This fusion of Marxian critique with psychoanalytic categories (the analysis of capitalism as both a regime of desire management and a system of economic exploitation) proved enormously generative for later theoretical work. It provided conceptual resources for critiquing patriarchy, which Deleuze and Guattari (alongside feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous) identified as a structure of psychic and social oppression. Cixous posited that conventional academic prose, with its linear argument and single controlling voice, encodes masculine (or phallocentric) habits of thought. In response, she developed the concept of *écriture feminine* (feminine writing), a mode of textual practice that, in her account, resists and disrupts the male-centered and reason-privileging structures of Western discourse by writing from the body, from fluidity, from multiplicity. The claim is not only that women have been excluded from literary production but also that the very norms of rational, unified, linear discourse are gendered, that what counts as coherent, authoritative writing reflects and reproduces masculine structures of dominance.[8]

The Second Pillar: Structuralism and Semiotics

Another relevant tradition is structuralism, which derives its foundational concepts from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Saussure's most consequential contribution was to distinguish the linguistic sign into two components: the signifier (the sound-image or written mark) and the signified (the concept it evokes). He insisted that the relationship between them is arbitrary: there is no natural or necessary connection between the word "tree" and the concept of a tree.[9] Meaning, accordingly, is not a matter of reference to an external world but of differential relations within a system: a sign means what it means because it is different from other signs, not because it corresponds to some external reality. Saussure also distinguished between *langue* (the underlying system of rules and conventions that makes language possible) and *parole* (individual utterances

8 See generally Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875-889.

9 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), 67-69.

or speech acts), redirecting attention from the surface of communication to the deep structural regularities that govern it.[10]

This structural orientation (the move from surface events to underlying systems, from individual acts to the rules and codes that constrain them) proved enormously productive when applied beyond linguistics to the broader analysis of culture. For instance, Roland Barthes applied semiotic analysis to the codes of fashion, advertising, myth, and popular culture, arguing that cultural practices are systems of signs that encode ideological meanings and naturalize contingent social arrangements.[11] Claude Lévi-Strauss extended structural analysis to myth and kinship, arguing that the former is organized by underlying binary oppositions (nature/culture, raw/cooked, male/female) whose resolution the narrative performs.[12] In literary studies, structuralism gave rise to narratology (the systematic analysis of narrative grammar), associated with figures such as Algirdas Julien Greimas and Gérard Genette.

The broader cultural and political significance of structuralism, and its eventual connection to contemporary forms of identity and power analysis, lies partly in its challenge to the idea of the fully autonomous individual. Rather than treating people as independent sources of meaning, structuralist thinkers emphasized the linguistic and cultural systems that make particular forms of thought and behavior possible in the first place. From this perspective, individuals encounter social codes and categories that already exist before them and that shape how they understand themselves and the world around them. The structuralist subject is therefore less a completely self-determining author of meaning than a participant occupying a derivative position within larger systems of relationships.

The broader cultural and political significance of structuralism, and its eventual connection to contemporary forms of identity and power analysis, lies partly in its challenge to the idea of the fully autonomous individual.

This perspective has important consequences for how social problems are understood. If larger systems shape individual beliefs and behaviors, then social analysis must look beyond individual intentions to the structures, codes, and institutions that produce and reproduce particular ways of thinking. Questions that might once have been framed primarily in terms of individual prejudice, rational choice, or personal responsibility can instead be reframed as questions about the operation of language, culture, institutions, and social power. This

10 Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 9-10.

11 See generally Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 109-159.

12 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 206-231.



If larger systems shape individual beliefs and behaviors, then social analysis must look beyond individual intentions to the structures, codes, and institutions that produce and reproduce particular ways of thinking.

logic would become increasingly important in later theories of race, gender, sexuality, and identity, where the emphasis falls less on the autonomous individual and more on the social structures through which identities are produced and power is distributed.

This decentering of the subject (the displacement of individual agency by impersonal structures) is one of the defining gestures of high theory and would be radicalized further in the poststructuralist moment. The significance for contemporary "wokeness" lies not in any simple claim that modern identity politics is merely an application of structuralism, but in a shared analytical tendency: social identities and meanings are treated as products of historical and institutional structures rather than as purely natural, individual, or self-generated phenomena. Once that premise is accepted, examining the structures that shape identity becomes central to understanding social inequality itself.

The Third Pillar: Poststructuralism and Deconstructionism

A third pillar for wokeness arose through the development of poststructuralism. Poststructuralism emerges from, and turns against, structuralism's residual claims to systematic knowledge and stable foundations. Its major figures are predominantly French intellectuals of the generation that came to prominence in the wake of the political upheavals of May 1968: Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jean-François Lyotard, Paul de Man (the latter working primarily in the American academy), and

others. What unites these otherwise quite different thinkers is a sustained critique of what Derrida called the "metaphysics of presence," the deep assumption endemic to Western philosophy that language can deliver stable, determinate meanings and that there is some ground of presence or truth to which signs can be anchored.

Derrida's method of deconstruction begins with the observation that Saussure's insight that meaning is differential (rather than referential) has implications that Saussure himself did not pursue. If the meaning of a sign is constituted by its difference from other signs, and their differences from further signs in turn constitute those signs, then as a matter of course, meaning is never simply present in a sign but is perpetually deferred, produced through an endless chain of differences without any final term. Derrida coined the neologism *différance* (a deliberate conflation of the French words for "difference" and "deferral," indistinguishable in pronunciation but distinct in writing) to capture this double movement: meaning is both differentiated (that is, constituted through contrasts, not positive relationships) and deferred (that is, never fully present, always displaced onto further signs). The consequence is that no text can be read as delivering a unified, self-present meaning; instead, every text possesses internal tensions, contradictions, and undecidabilities that a deconstructive reading can expose.

One of deconstruction's central analytical tools is the examination of binary oppositions: the hierarchically organized pairs (good/bad, speech/writing, presence/absence, nature/culture, male/female, reason/madness, White/non-White) that structure Western philosophical and literary texts. Derrida argues that these oppositions are not natural or neutral but are always hierarchically organized (one term is privileged over the other), and that the privileged term's apparent self-sufficiency is parasitic on its suppressed counterpart. Deconstruction works by inverting and then displacing these oppositions, showing that the relationship between their terms is more complex and unstable than the text's surface claims.

The consequence is that no text can be read as delivering a unified, self-present meaning.

Paul de Man, working at Yale, developed a version of deconstruction focused on what he called the "rhetoricity" of language, its irreducible figurative dimension, the way in which texts always say something other than what they appear to say, and the impossibility of distinguishing rigorously between "literal" and "figurative" uses of language.[13] For de Man, literature is precisely the mode of language that is most insistently aware of its own rhetorical condition, and literary reading,

13 Paul de Man, "Semiology and Rhetoric," in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 3-19.

properly conducted, is the unmasking of the gap between what a text grammatically states and what it rhetorically performs.[14]

Both Derrida and de Man were notably cautious about drawing direct political conclusions from their theoretical work.[15] It is, however, through the work of thinkers such as Foucault (whose archaeologies and genealogies of knowledge analyzed how discourse constitutes rather than merely represents its objects) and through the appropriation of deconstructive tools by scholars in cultural studies, feminism, and critical race theory that poststructuralist theory acquired its explicitly political character. Intertextuality—the insight, developed by Kristeva from Bakhtin, that texts are always constituted by their relations to prior texts, such that no text is original and no author is fully sovereign over her material—extended deconstruction's challenge to authorial presence. When binary oppositions are understood not merely as features of philosophical texts but as the organizing structures of social and political life (i.e., when the nature/culture opposition is read as the framework for excluding racialized others from full humanity, or the male/female opposition as the framework for the subordination of women), then deconstruction becomes available as a tool of sociopolitical critique, and the theoretical becomes the political.

The Fourth Pillar: Feminism and Queer Theory

Even before most of the theoretical movements described above were integrated into American academic contexts, feminist literary criticism was establishing itself. In its first-wave iterations, feminist criticism drew upon resources that predate the French theoretical revolution of the 1960s and 1970s (consider Virginia Woolf's essays on women and fiction through Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* to Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*). But second-wave feminist theory was rapidly transformed by its encounters with structuralism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, producing a body of work that synthesized political critique with theoretical sophistication.

For instance, feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter developed "gynocriticism," the analysis of women's literary tradition as a tradition in its own right rather than a deviation from a male norm. Meanwhile, the French feminisms of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva (discussed briefly above)

14 This approach stands in significant tension with traditional evangelical Christian approaches to biblical interpretation, which generally treat authorial intention as an important constraint on the meaning of Scripture. In such approaches, interpretation seeks to recover what the human authors *meant* to communicate while also accounting for the theological conviction that Scripture is ultimately authored by God through the work of the Holy Spirit. Deconstructive criticism, by contrast, calls into question the very possibility that a text can be securely anchored to a single, recoverable intention, whether that intention belongs to the human writer or to a divine author. The result is not simply a different method of reading but a fundamentally different understanding of what makes interpretation valid.

15 The latter was accused, after his death, of having grounded his theoretical skepticism partly in the desire to obscure his own collaborationist writing during the Nazi occupation of Belgium. See Ortwin de Graef, *Serenity in Crisis: A Preface to Paul de Man, 1939-1960* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993); David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991); see also Denis Donoghue, "The Strange Case of Paul de Man," *The New York Review of Books*, June 29, 1989.

drew on Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction to theorize the gendered character of language and representation at a deeper structural level. Irigaray's work, particularly *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), argued that Western philosophy and psychoanalysis operate within a "phallocentrism," an economy of representation organized around the masculine as norm and the feminine as deficient or other. It undertook a deconstructive reading of that tradition designed to expose and unsettle its constitutive exclusions.

Gender, on this account, is not something one *has* but something one *does*; accordingly, the apparent naturalness of the gender binary is, on this view, an effect of regulatory norms that police and discipline those whose performances fail to conform.

In addition, queer theory emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, initially in response to the AIDS crisis and the inadequacy of existing frameworks for theorizing sexuality. It received its definitive theoretical formulation in the writings of Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michael Warner, among others. Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) is the founding text of the field. Drawing on Foucault's genealogy of sexuality, Derrida's deconstruction of binary oppositions, and J. L. Austin's speech-act theory (as refracted through Derrida), Butler argued that gender is not a natural property of bodies but a performative achievement constituted through the repeated, citational enactment of culturally normative acts and gestures (rather than expressive of some underlying biological or psychological essence). Gender, on this account, is not something one *has* but something one *does*; accordingly, the apparent naturalness of the gender binary is, on this view, an effect of regulatory norms that police and discipline those whose performances fail to conform.

Building on this analysis, queer theory extended the critique of naturalized identity categories to sexuality, arguing that the heterosexual/homosexual binary (like all binary oppositions in the deconstructive tradition) is hierarchically organized and ideologically motivated, and that "queer" names not a fixed identity but a critical posture of resistance to all normative identity categories. The influence of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (with its argument that sexuality is not a natural given but a historically produced apparatus of power-knowledge) was decisive here. Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), which argued that the homo/heterosexual distinction structures not just sexual discourse but Western culture more broadly, introduced the concepts of homosociality and the closet that became central to queer analysis.

The Fifth Pillar: Postcolonial and Race-and-Ethnicity Studies

Postcolonial studies emerged as a distinct academic field in the wake of decolonization, or the withdrawal of imperial powers from occupied territories that resulted in colonial political independence. This school of thought drew upon both the political writings of anticolonial thinkers (Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, C. L. R. James) and the theoretical apparatus of poststructuralism. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which applied Foucauldian discourse analysis to the European construction of "the Orient" as a domain of otherness, exoticism, and irrationality, is generally regarded as the foundational text of the field. Said argued that Orientalism is not merely a body of scholarship about the East but a discourse (a systematically distorted mode of representation) that produced the Orient as an object of knowledge in ways that served the interests of colonial domination. The Orient, on this account, exists as a textual and discursive construction before it exists as a geographical or cultural reality for European audiences. The significance of postcolonial theory for contemporary "wokeness" lies in this shift from understanding oppression primarily as a matter of political domination to understanding it also as a problem of representation, discourse, and knowledge. In Said's account, power does not operate only through armies, governments, and economic exploitation; it also operates through the categories and representations by which one group describes and understands another.



Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak extend this concern by emphasizing the instability of supposedly fixed identities and by asking who has the authority to speak, whose experiences are represented, and whose voices are excluded from dominant forms of knowledge. These concerns have become central to contemporary debates about race, gender, colonialism, cultural representation, and institutional power. Drawing more heavily on Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction, Bhabha developed his notion of the ambivalence of colonial discourse—its simultaneous need to construct the colonized as absolutely other (to justify domination) and to transform the colonized through assimilation (to justify the "civilizing

mission").[16] Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the "third space of enunciation" provided a framework for analyzing how colonial subjects can disrupt and unsettle colonial authority within its own structures.[17] Spivak, whose translation of and introduction to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967; trans. 1976) helped introduce deconstruction to American academic readers, brought feminist and deconstructive perspectives to bear on the colonial archive, asking whether and in what terms the subaltern—the colonized subject, particularly the colonized woman—can speak in a discourse that systematically excludes and misrepresents her.

This postcolonial literature helps explain an important feature of contemporary identity politics: the tendency to treat language, representation, and patterns of cultural authority as politically consequential in and of themselves. From this perspective, changing the structures through which groups are represented and understood is not merely a matter of changing vocabulary or individual attitudes; it is part of challenging the systems through which social power is reproduced. Contemporary "wokeness" therefore draws on a broader theoretical tradition in which questions of representation—Who speaks? Who is represented? Who defines the categories by which others are understood?—are inseparable from questions of power.

From this perspective, changing the structures through which groups are represented and understood is not merely a matter of changing vocabulary or individual attitudes; it is part of challenging the systems through which social power is reproduced.

Developing in parallel with postcolonial theory, the American form of race-and-ethnicity studies drew upon both the Black intellectual tradition—W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness," the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement's intellectual legacies—and the theoretical tools of poststructuralism. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) theorized an African-American vernacular tradition of "Signifyin(g)" (an indirect, double-voiced rhetorical practice) as a mode of cultural resistance to and appropriation of the dominant White literary tradition. Critical race theory, developed primarily in legal studies by Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado, argued that racial hierarchy is not an aberration from American legal and social norms but is embedded within them, and introduced

16 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 66-84; Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 125-133.

17 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 36-39, 85-92; Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 19-39.

the concept of intersectionality: Crenshaw's analysis of the way in which race, gender, and class operate not as parallel but as mutually constitutive axes of oppression and privilege.

The Sixth Pillar: Cultural Studies and New Historicism

Two overlapping schools of thought gave rise to a sixth and final pillar for wokeness. The first was cultural studies, which emerged from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, founded in 1964 under the initial direction of Richard Hoggart and subsequently under Stuart Hall. Synthesizing elements of Marxist cultural analysis (particularly Williams and Gramsci), semiotics, and eventually feminism and poststructuralism, cultural studies expanded the object of scholarly attention from the canonical literary text to the full range of cultural practices and products (e.g., popular music, television, fashion, sport, and youth subcultures), treating all of these as sites in which meanings are produced, contested, and negotiated. Hall's model of "encoding/decoding" analyzed the process by which texts are produced within dominant ideological frameworks and may be read in dominant, negotiated, or oppositional ways by differently positioned audiences.[18]

The second was new historicism, which emerged in American literary studies in the 1980s and was associated particularly with Stephen Greenblatt's work on the English Renaissance. Drawing on Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge" and his analysis of discourse and power, new historicists argued against the older historicism that used historical context as a background against which to read literary texts. Instead, they proposed a more dynamic and decentered model in which literary texts and non-literary documents (e.g., legal records, medical treatises, travel narratives, administrative papers, etc.) circulate together in a complex "negotiation" of social power, each illuminating and partially constituting the others. Greenblatt's concepts of "self-fashioning" and "social energy" traced how individual identity is constructed through cultural scripts and how literary texts participate in the circulation of power rather than simply reflect it from a distance.

Grounded in the bedrock foundation of Marxist criticism, cultural studies and new historicism have combined with the five aforementioned pillars—psychoanalytic theory, structuralism and semiotics, poststructuralism and deconstructionism, feminism and queer theory, and postcolonial and race-and-ethnicity studies—to construct the theoretical edifice that animates contemporary wokeness. It is from this superstructure that wokeness draws its key terms and social imaginary, preferred modes of analysis, and moral framework. The next section will move from a theoretical description of wokeness to its practical application, and in so doing illustrate how wokeness typically manifests within society, culture, and the wider academy.

18 Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in Stuart Hall et al. (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-138.



Wokeness in Society, Culture, and the Academy

The term "woke," in its original usage, was African-American vernacular slang signifying an awareness of racial injustice and the social and political structures that perpetuate it.[19] To be "woke" was to be alert to the realities of racial oppression that mainstream culture concealed or naturalized. The word entered broader circulation through its use in Blues music, was famously employed by Lead Belly, and was popularized anew during the Black Lives Matter movement after 2012, particularly following the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. Younger White activist communities appropriated it as a shorthand for a broader state of political consciousness: awareness not just of racial injustice but of the interlocking systems of oppression identified by intersectional analysis.

What "wokeness" names as a cultural and ideological phenomenon, however, is something more than the original folk usage suggests. It is, in effect, the popularization and moralization of the theoretical complex surveyed above: a translation of academic poststructuralist and critical theory into a moral and political vocabulary accessible to lay activists, social media users, university administrators and

19 Allen Mendenhall, "The Right Won 'Woke,'" *DC Journal*, September 14, 2023, https://dcjournal.com/the-right-won-woke/.

bureaucracies, and, eventually, corporate diversity professionals. The synthesis is recognizable in each of its components.

From Marxist criticism, wokeness inherits the analytical habit of reading all cultural phenomena as expressions of power, as well as the reflexive suspicion that apparently neutral practices, texts, and institutions are in fact instruments of ideological domination serving the interests of dominant groups. From psychoanalytic theory, it inherits an interest in the unconscious dimensions of bias (i.e., in how prejudice operates below the threshold of conscious intention, so that individuals can "be racist"—or sexist, or homophobic—allegedly without knowing it).

From structuralism and semiotics, it inherits the analysis of culture as a system of codes that can be read and decoded, and the decentering of the individual subject as the origin of meaning or action. From poststructuralism and deconstructionism, it inherits the critique of binary oppositions (i.e., the insistence that the hierarchically organized pairs—White/non-White, male/female, straight/queer, able-bodied/disabled—that structure social life are not natural but constructed and therefore subject to challenge and dismantling). From feminism and queer theory, it inherits the analysis of gender and sexuality as performative rather than essential and the commitment to disrupting normative identity categories. From postcolonial and race-and-ethnicity studies, it inherits the concept of intersectionality and the analysis of structural racism as embedded in institutions rather than reducible to individual prejudice. From cultural studies and new historicism, it inherits the expansive conception of the political: the insistence that nothing is merely cultural, that all texts and practices are sites of power negotiation.

Wokeness is less a coherent ideology than a moral sensibility and a way of reading the world.

Wokeness, in this light, is less a coherent ideology than a moral sensibility shaped by these overlapping theoretical inheritances. It's a way of reading the world that tends to identify systems of oppression in social arrangements, to privilege the perspectives of those identified as marginalized or oppressed, to regard cultural products as politically implicated, and to treat calls for neutrality or objectivity with suspicion as possible mystifications of existing power relations. The critique such a perspective invites is not merely that it is politically tendentious (though one may find it so), but that it rests on theoretical foundations that regularly: (1) favor interpretive ingenuity over evidential constraint; (2) treat conclusions as given in advance of analysis; and (3) blur the distinction between a compelling reading and a true one.

Ideas incubated in the academy may eventually break containment and enter the popular discourse, and in some cases a theoretical framework can evolve into an influential cultural phenomenon. One of the most illuminating observations about the cultural phenomenon of wokeness is its structural resemblance to religious discourse



Ideas incubated in the academy may break containment and enter the popular discourse, and in some cases a theoretical framework can evolve into an influential cultural phenomenon.

and experience. The philosopher John McWhorter, among others, has argued at length that wokeness functions as a substitute religion complete with original sin (Whiteness, privilege), confession and penitence (land acknowledgements, diversity training), heresy (microaggression, "problematic" speech), conversion experiences (being "called out"), and a teleological narrative of liberation and redemption.[20] This observation, whatever one makes of it as a sociological claim, draws attention to a deeper intellectual genealogy that the theoretical account above does not fully address. In particular, several key concepts circulating in woke discourse are secularized transformations of distinctly Christian theological categories.

For example, social justice, as a term, has a rich history in Catholic social teaching, particularly in the Thomistic tradition as developed by thinkers such as Luigi Taparelli and in the papal encyclicals from Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) onward, where it names the obligations of just institutions toward the common good rather than the obligations of individuals to one another. In its woke appropriation, the term retains the structure of a moral absolute (a demand that brooks no compromise and exposes all existing arrangements as deficient) while detaching from its theological grounding in natural law and divine order. The result is a moral vocabulary of considerable rhetorical power whose foundations are less clearly articulated than those of the tradition from which it derives.

20 John McWhorter, *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America* (New York: Portfolio, 2021), 1-24; see also Andrew Sullivan, "America's New Religions," *New York Magazine*, September 30, 2018, and Joshua Mitchell, *American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time* (New York: Encounter Books, 2020).

In its woke appropriation, the term "social justice" retains the structure of a moral absolute while detaching from its theological grounding in natural law and divine order. The result is a moral vocabulary of considerable rhetorical power whose foundations are less clearly articulated.

Similarly, intersectionality functions structurally as a theory of compounded original sin, the idea that identity categories carry with them differential burdens of inherited, unchosen guilt (in the case of dominant groups) or victimhood (in the case of marginalized groups), which cannot be expiated through individual virtue but only through collective structural transformation. The framework of privilege—the idea that dominant group membership confers advantages that are invisible to their possessors—recapitulates the theological concept of unconscious sin, the condition of being implicated in wrongdoing without knowing it, which requires not self-justification but continual self-examination and confession.

This structural homology between woke discourse and Protestant Christianity has, paradoxically, facilitated wokeness's penetration into Christian educational institutions. At many religiously affiliated colleges and universities, including those that would identify as theologically conservative, the language of social justice, intersectionality, and systemic oppression has been absorbed into curricular and co-curricular programming, frequently on the argument that it represents a natural extension of Christian concern for the poor and the marginalized. The move is superficially plausible: the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible, Jesus' identification with the poor and the outcast, and the New Testament's radical critique of wealth and social hierarchy do provide genuine resources for a Christianity engaged with structures of injustice.

Despite some apparent overlap, the difficulty is that the theoretical framework of wokeness, as surveyed above, is not neutral with respect to the metaphysical and theological presuppositions of the Christian faith. Poststructuralism's critique of presence and logocentrism (its dissolution of any stable ground of meaning, truth, or value) is fundamentally incompatible with a theological tradition that grounds meaning in a personal God who speaks and creates through language. The Marxist inheritance's reduction of culture, including religion, to ideological expression serving class interests provides no stable position from which to affirm the transcendent claims of Christian faith. The constructivist account of gender and sexuality entails positions on human nature and embodiment that stand in direct tension with most orthodox Christian anthropology. These tensions are rarely confronted directly in Christian educational settings that have adopted woke frameworks; instead, the secular

vocabulary is typically grafted onto Christian themes without systematic interrogation of the underlying presuppositions.

The result is an uneasy and often unstable hybrid: Christian moral concern married to theoretical frameworks whose deepest commitments are incompatible with Christian metaphysics. Whether this hybrid can be stabilized on principled grounds, or whether it represents an institutional accommodation to cultural pressure that will ultimately transform the faith commitments it claims to serve, is a question that many campus leaders have not seriously addressed. The intellectual historian observing this process from a critical distance (however much he may be sympathetic to the Christian tradition's concerns about justice, or to the genuine grievances that animate activist demands) cannot but note the incongruity and suggest that clarity about foundations is a prerequisite for any serious engagement with the tradition's claims.

Concluding that the deepest commitments of the aforementioned theoretical frameworks are incompatible with Christianity requires bringing Christian perspective to bear upon them. As the previous discussion has demonstrated, the theoretical edifice that animates wokeness has resulted from a considerable amount of complexity, history, and dialectic development across various schools of thought. The framework's various inputs, however, possess clear foundational assumptions which lend themselves to practical evaluation. The following section, therefore, will turn to this task by critiquing wokeness in light of the foundations of orthodox Christian teaching.



The structural homology between woke discourse and Protestant Christianity has, paradoxically, facilitated wokeness's penetration into Christian educational institutions.



Christian Perspectives on Wokeness

At a fundamental level, it has been demonstrated that wokeness rests upon assumptions that are incongruous with the biblical and theological commitments of orthodox Christianity. Although this conceptual reality is essential knowledge for campus leaders serving within Christian higher education, it alone is insufficient to ensure faithful practice. This is because administrative action typically occurs within a practical realm that rarely foregrounds theoretical assumptions. Consequently, well-intentioned leaders may unwittingly import underlying frameworks contrary to their institutions' Christian mission when making what appear to be straightforward managerial decisions.[21] For this reason, it is essential to apply basic Christian thinking to the assumptions of wokeness so that trustees and campus administrators may move from awareness and knowledge toward personal reflection and faithful action.

Responsibility for Social Ills

One of the most damning characteristics of Marxist criticism and its various woke offshoots is a systemic misidentification of

21 This is especially true "when a leader internalizes the belief that a main function of his job is to help the institution conform to organizational norms that have been externally defined by the wider field." See P. Jesse Rine, "Cowards, Copycats, and Careerists: How Small-Souled Leaders Homogenize Christian Higher Ed," *American Reformer*, November 9, 2023. https://archive.americanreformer.org/2023/11/cowards-copycats-and-careerists/.



> The problem is not in what we have or do, but in what we personally *are*: sinners in need of a savior.

the problem that plagues humanity and the world which humanity occupies. In virtually all forms of the frameworks undergirding wokeism, responsibility for societal ills is placed squarely on some innate human attribute or some social or cultural human construct, be it wealth, power, privilege, politics, race, sex, ethnicity, or nationality. Moreover, the blame for oppression, violence, exploitation, injustice, poverty, or even illness is assigned to some dimension of material inequity, human privilege, or existing social institution. In the framework of wokeness, the problem is ultimately us—but not all of us, only those who possess a quality, characteristic, or material that others do not.

The Christian perspective on this elemental assumption is quite different. Christianity sees this ominous list of social ills as the result of something far deeper and more sinister, something less material and more metaphysical. The problem is not in what we have or do, but in what we personally *are*: sinners in need of a savior. Orthodox Christianity views original sin and the fall of man as the source of all that plagues humanity and this world. It is sin and its impact upon human nature that renders all of us, regardless of background, inherently corrupt and corruptible.

Perspectives on Authority and Freedom

Consider the woke disdain for authority and even freedom as an example of its misapplication of blame. In the contemporary woke narrative, as well as its theoretical founts, authority and power are what is wrong with humanity. They are responsible for the injustice and exploitation and oppression we see in the world around us. Ergo, according to the woke worldview, if we eliminate earthly authority, power, and the institutions which possess them, the problem will be solved. Likewise, the woke narrative paints freedom as a weaponized construct that allows the strong, who use freedom to advance themselves, to control the weak. Thus, the woke account

argues that freedom must be curtailed to achieve human harmony, equity, and justice, and to provide a base level of security for all.

But to see the problems of this world as stemming from authority and freedom is fundamentally unchristian and inconsistent with the biblical narrative. Genesis teaches that perfect authority and perfect freedom existed in this world prior to the fall and the entrance of sin into the human experience. God created all that was made by His own authority, by His very word, literally speaking something new into existence. Moreover, this perfect authority went beyond the Almighty's creative enterprise to the human agents he made—Adam and Eve, created male and female—who received bestowed authority. Genesis tells us that God said, "Let Us make mankind in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule" (Gen. 1:26), thus granting responsibility to humans to have dominion over the earth and all that was within it.

In addition to bestowed authority, the first humans were given immense freedom in the Garden of Eden, with only one limitation: do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). In their original state, Adam and Eve were perfectly free, created under the perfect authority of God to live and thrive as divinely empowered stewards of all the earth. However, their rebellion and the subsequent entrance of sin into the world has corrupted humanity's ability to enjoy Edenic perfect freedom as well as its capacity to be a perfect steward of God's creation. As a result, human freedom is often used in sinful ways that do not reflect the best interests of the earth and other human beings. The biblical narrative, however, does not teach that our freedom must be curtailed in order to achieve harmony, equity, and justice; instead, it points to the need for a divinely inspired spiritual regeneration that redirects human freedom away from the corruption of sin and toward God's good design for human relations.

The biblical narrative, however, does not teach that our freedom must be curtailed in order to achieve harmony, equity, and justice.

Approaches to Property and Poverty

Consider too the ways in which wokeism approaches the issues of property and poverty. It assumes a zero-sum relationship between the two, with poverty fundamentally arising from the possession of property, such that those who are propertied inescapably cause the plight of the impoverished. Moreover, the woke narrative considers poverty solely a state of victimhood and prosperity solely the result of greedy victimization of others. But biblical Christians should have a more robust appreciation for property as well as a more nuanced understanding of poverty and the responsibilities surrounding it.

The biblical narrative does not present possession of property as an inherently immoral act, but rather a fact of existence whose moral character depends upon the actions of the owner. In the Psalms, for

Poverty in Scripture is sometimes the result of judgment, sometimes the result of injustice and exploitation, sometimes the result of a catastrophic event or illness, and sometimes the result of human laziness.

instance, we are told not only that every beast of the forest is God's, but also that He owns cattle on a thousand hills (50:10), demonstrating that property possession is a divinely sanctioned human activity. Reflecting this reality, the Ten Commandments include two provisions for the protection of property: it is not to be stolen (Exod. 20:15), nor is it to be coveted (v. 17)—emphasizing that private property and the actions of its owners vary in their moral valence. The Christian tradition also teaches that greed, avarice, and economic oppression run counter to God's holy standards, and as such should be confronted and addressed. But the moral failings of property owners are not the result of the property itself; they result from human sinfulness and thus cannot be remedied by economic restriction or redistribution.

Likewise, Christ taught that there will always be poor people in this world as a result of its broken and fallen nature (e.g., Matt. 26:11). He did not, however, reflexively attribute poverty to the actions of property owners. Thus, in the Christian worldview, poverty is a more nuanced reality that should be neither ignored nor celebrated. Biblical exhortations to care for those in need, especially widows and orphans, exist alongside encouragements to be industrious, diligent, enterprising, and good stewards of the material blessing we enjoy by hard work and God's grace. In the Proverbs, Solomon warns that the sluggard's negligence and indolence will subject him to poverty, which will descend upon him like a thief in the night (6:11; 24:34), while the industry and enterprising nature of the woman described in chapter 31 are celebrated because her good character protects her family from poverty. Poverty in Scripture is sometimes the result of judgment, sometimes the result of injustice and exploitation, sometimes the result of a catastrophic event or illness, and sometimes the result of human laziness. Regardless, all of those manifestations of poverty are sourced ultimately in sin and the fall, not in the earthly dimensions of property and prosperity, or privation and poverty.

The Need for Gospel Clarity

As elucidated by the preceding discussion, gospel clarity is fundamental to a Christian critique of wokeness. It is far too easy to confuse or even conflate the seemingly generous and moral claims of wokeness in its apparent compassion for the underprivileged, disempowered, or oppressed with Christian good works, justice, and the gospel itself. In the Christian tradition, it is not that the gospel does not have social impact, but that the gospel is not synonymous with social activism. The implications of the gospel are multifaceted, including a commitment to care for the widows and orphans, to seek and do justice and righteousness, and to live at



In the Christian tradition, it is not that the gospel does not have social impact, but that the gospel is not synonymous with social activism.

peace with others. But these things are the outworkings of the transformation of putting faith, by God's grace, in Christ's atoning work. They are not salvation themselves.

To conclude otherwise would be to suggest that those who are in need of justice, benevolence, and deliverance from oppression are without sin and therefore without a need for true salvation. But in Christian theology, sin and salvation are not apportioned by race, by socioeconomic status, or by gender or ethnicity, nor are they assigned on the basis of the groups into which individuals might be categorized. Sin and salvation are not calculated according to the number of intersecting privileged or underprivileged groups with which a person is associated. In Christian theology, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23), regardless of their social, economic, or chromosomal state.

In contrast, the assertions of wokeism in such constructs as intersectionality, diversity, equity, and inclusion do not put human beings on equal footing regarding their sin—or their salvation—but rather judge people according to their station in life and other dimensions of humanity. The arbitrary bifurcation of wokeism that divides human beings into one of two categories—oppressor and oppressed—is an affront to the gospel, which claims that every man and woman will face the judgment of God on the basis of sin and sinfulness, yet all are afforded personal forgiveness, redemption, and the promise of eternal life solely on the basis of faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Simply put, the degree and nature of justice and equality proclaimed by the Christian gospel proceed in direct opposition to the contemporary claims of wokeness. For this reason, Christians and Christian institutions must maintain utmost gospel clarity to avoid a pernicious misunderstanding and misapplication of the gospel. Activism is not atonement. Social engineering is not salvific. The human categorizations of the Bible are simple—believers and unbelievers,

the godly and the ungodly, the wise and the foolish, the sheep and the goats. Faith and obedience are owed to the One in whom our faith is found, not to some earthly identity.

From Knowledge to Action

Christian perspectives must be diligently applied to the woke worldview and all of its subtle assertions, whose prescriptions often appear to be good and fair but are actually built on assumptions counter to biblical justice and equality. Christians base their view of human beings and humanity upon the belief that all are made in the image and likeness of God, all are found wanting on the basis of their sin, and none will be denied salvation through Christ because of any human or earthly criteria. Developing this more robust Christian perspective on the underlying theoretical frameworks, assumptions, and assertions of wokeness, however, will ultimately be insufficient without institutional intentionality. To ensure coherent integration between mission and practice, awareness and knowledge must lead not only to reflection but also to meaningful action. Moreover, this action will require intellectual honesty, philosophical



vigilance, and a willingness to respond to the warning signs of wokeism. To equip leaders within Christian higher education to guard institutional mission and strengthen institutional practice, this report will next turn to a description of common warning signs as well as related remedial actions.



Warning Signs of Woke Infiltration

Any Christian college or university that endeavors to remain faithful to its founding commitments will view the possibility of ideological capture as a serious threat. Oftentimes, however, leaders within Christian higher education are expert at recognizing longstanding threats but less adept at detecting the corrosive effects of emergent frameworks. This is especially true for ideological schemes—such as wokeness—that are typically deployed as practices to be adopted rather than theoretical propositions to be believed. In many cases, these practices may be reflexively accepted because wokeness uses moral language that appears on the surface to be in harmony with Christian ethics. Given these dynamics, it is imperative that campus leaders understand how wokeness typically takes root within the Christian college context.

Declarative Commitments

The most obvious warning signs of woke infiltration can be found in declarative commitments. During the woke revolution of the last decade, many institutions and individual educators have felt pressure from various quarters to make statements and overtures demonstrating their understanding of and deference to the vigorous claims of wokeism from those advocating its ideals. In the name of conscience, many faithful Christian institutions began to borrow—or adopt outright—the language, policies,

During the woke revolution of the last decade, key constructs from the theoretical framework of wokeism became embedded in many Christian institutions.

and philosophical positions of the secular academy and the broader culture, which, at the time, were aggressively promoting the claims of cultural Marxism and woke ideology. As a result, key constructs from the theoretical framework of wokeism—such as multiculturalism, moral equivalence, relativism, and subjectivism—became embedded in many Christian institutions as they attempted to find a peaceable way to exist within the broader academic community.[22]

In addition to the language of formal foundational statements, language used in more episodic externally facing institutional products such as public relations materials and press releases can reveal a second front of woke incursion. When addressing current events, social crises, or external criticisms of their own positions, actions, or personnel, well-intentioned institutions may borrow the vocabulary of the woke narrative to blunt the edges of their convictions as a means of deflecting anticipated external criticism. For example, the fear of being viewed as homophobic or racist frequently leads institutions to choose language more acceptable to the wider culture. The objective is to avoid being labeled as intolerant, which has become a sort of "scarlet letter" that woke activists apply to organizations that affirm biblical truth, with the ultimate goal of disqualifying such groups from participating in the court of public opinion.

Christian colleges and universities may also find themselves pressured by student groups to issue a statement in solidarity with a certain social or cultural cause around which the proponents of wokeism have gathered. Statements addressing a particular cultural event, social issue, or campus situation are relatively rare and usually issued in response to outside forces; as such, their essential purpose is less about affirming institutional commitments in an intentional way—on the college's preferred timeline and using its preferred language—and more about taking action to quickly diffuse acute pressure. Consequently, these situations present a ripe terrain for institutional affirmation of woke frameworks and sentiments.

Curriculum and Co-Curriculum

The second area of potential woke incursion—the curriculum and co-curriculum—may be more insidious than that related to declarative statements because it directly undermines a Christian college's mission to educate students in accordance with biblical teaching and the Christian intellectual tradition. American higher education operates according to principles of academic freedom, faculty autonomy, and shared governance, all of which not only empower faculty with

22 See P. Jesse Rine, "The Diversity We Need: Nonconformity in an Age of Capitulation," *American Reformer*, September 22, 2023. https://archive.americanreformer.org/2023/09/the-diversity-we-need/.

an outsized voice in institutional decisions and direction but also can place them in a position beyond immediate accountability for teaching in ways inconsistent with an institution's commitments. Moreover, a significant proportion of faculty members serving in Christian colleges are themselves products of the secular academy, where many academic disciplines have become rooted in elements of the woke worldview, such as deconstructionism, subjectivism, and relativism. Furthermore, even after landing a job teaching at a Christian college or university, most scholars locate their professional identity and academic credibility within the disciplinary guild that trained them as graduate students, and this guild continues to serve as a source of professional norms and a community of academic discourse that shapes teaching and research. Thus, without scrutiny in faculty hiring, robust professional development in the integration of faith and learning, and an ongoing vigilance in curricular matters, the prevailing sensibilities trending across the academic disciplines of the broader secular academy will regularly find their way into Christian institutions.[23] While students attending Christian colleges must be exposed to ideas and schools of thought that run contrary to the Christian worldview, a clear distinction must be made between teaching *about* secular concepts such as wokeism and teaching subject matter *in light of* these frameworks. The former stands outside the secular framework and offers critique from a Christian perspective, while the latter adopts its concepts as the frame of reference for interpreting reality. Deploying the latter approach invites woke incursion within the Christian college classroom.



A clear distinction must be made between teaching *about* secular concepts such as wokeism and teaching subject matter *in light of* these frameworks.

23 For more on the importance of aligning faculty hires to the Christian mission and identity of the institution, see Robert B. Sloan, "Evangelicalism and Christian Education," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 68, no. 2 (Spring 2026), 125-142, https://equipthecalled.com/swjt-journal-article/evangelism-and-christian-education/. For more on faculty development in the integration of faith and learning, see Paul Kaak, *Academic Faith Integration in Christian Higher Education* (Greenville, SC: Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing, 2026), https://www.faithfulcolleges.org/resources#academic-faith-integration-in-christian-higher-education.

While recent years have witnessed rollbacks of DEI initiatives, the philosophical architecture of intersectionality, equity, and social justice remains firmly entrenched in the quality standards of many institutional and program accreditors.

Co-curricular programs represent another site of potential woke incursion. The co-curriculum encompasses the formal student activities that occur outside the classroom context, such as student life programming and spiritual life activities. Just as faculty are professionally socialized into the values and commitments of their academic guilds, student affairs professionals are regularly trained according to the professional standards of national associations that have been shaped by the woke worldview. For example, one prominent association proclaims that it has "worked to boldly transform higher education since 1924" by "promot[ing] leadership at all levels through a racial justice and decolonization lens,"[24] while the most widely used set of standards for professional practice in student affairs includes a "Social Justice and Inclusion" competency that incorporates the "knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to create learning environments that foster equitable participation of all groups and seeks to address issues of oppression, privilege, and power."[25] Absent special care, these underlying values can be imported into the policies that govern student conduct as well as the regular activities that shape campus culture, such as new student orientation, resident advisor training, and university-sponsored "theme weeks." When animated by subversive content, student life policies and programming can quickly remake campus culture because they are deeply embedded in the day-to-day life of residential students yet largely hidden from public view. Finally, the activities surrounding the Christian college's spiritual life program are susceptible to woke incursion as well, particularly when ministry partners and volunteers are not appropriately monitored or outside speakers are not sufficiently screened to ensure alignment with institutional commitments.

Responses to Regulatory Bodies

A final vector for woke infiltration comes in the form of regulatory bodies charged with ensuring the legality and quality of higher education. The woke revolution that swept through the academic guilds and professional associations over the past decade has also gained purchase within many government agencies and accreditors. While recent years have witnessed rollbacks of DEI initiatives and policies by the federal government, the philosophical architecture of intersectionality, equity, and social justice remains firmly

24 American College Personnel Association, "We're Here for Your Career," https://myacpa.org/.

25 *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators* (ACPA/NASPA, 2015), 30, https://www.naspa.org/files/dmfile/ACPA_NASPA_Professional_Competencies_1.pdf.

entrenched in the quality standards of many institutional and program accreditors.[26] Because access to federal financial aid depends upon maintaining institutional accreditation, some institutions will discover theological justifications for adopting these constructs in order to demonstrate compliance. Others will attempt to maintain their distinctive commitments while signaling that they are sensitive to the issues raised by wokeness, often by adopting woke terms or acronyms but providing a "Christian" definition. Although it seeks to deflect external criticism in a low-cost manner, this "signaling" approach regularly introduces official rhetoric that shifts the ethos and pathos of the institution toward the woke worldview. Examples of new rhetoric that does not align with the historic commitments of the institution include DEI statements found in student handbooks and course syllabi, department or course objectives that perpetuate woke categories of analysis,[27] and more "inclusive" gender or pronoun categories added to institutional forms such as admissions applications and email signatures.



26 For an example of how accreditation standards can come into conflict with the values of a Christian college, see Todd J. Williams, "At Cairn University, a Program-Accreditation Nightmare," The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, July 22, 2022, https://jamesgmartin.center/2022/07/at-cairn-university-a-program-accreditation-nightmare/.

27 For instance, an accreditor may seek evidence of teaching effectiveness related to a diversity or intercultural competence standard. In response, academic departments may revise their general education courses to include objectives such as "students will exhibit greater sensitivity to cultural diversity and power structures." Professors designing courses may then adapt their instruction, assignments, and/or assessments to ensure that students exhibit "improvement" in this area, recording their efforts as evidence that the institution is meeting the accreditation standard.



Maintaining Coherent Integration amid Contextual Challenges

Philosophical and practical integration is the bedrock of academic faithfulness. For this reason, rival worldviews with an insistent emphasis on praxis—such as wokeness—present an acutely corrosive threat, one that must be taken seriously by all entrusted with preserving and advancing Christian higher education. Indeed, achieving and maintaining academic faithfulness is a shared enterprise, one requiring the commitment of trustees, senior administrators, faculty, and staff to practice the following three missional virtues.

The first and most foundational missional virtue is *awareness*. Those charged with implementing a Christian college or university's mission should possess a deep understanding of the institution's founding theological commitments and their philosophical and practical implications, as well as an awareness of the rival worldviews currently contending for dominance within American higher education. To effectively safeguard the Christian college's historic character, trustees must understand differing schools of thought and how they manifest within academic settings. Moreover, faculty and staff who operationalize that mission must be able to draw distinctions between

Philosophical and practical integration is the bedrock of academic faithfulness.

what the wider academy may promote as best practice and what will actually promote philosophical and practical integration within the institutions they serve.

Once they have gained awareness, the second missional virtue that campus leaders should exhibit is *action*. First, trustees should take up the practice of overseeing an annual review of the college's foundational statements and declarative commitments. Those who understand the underlying theoretical frameworks of wokeness, Marxist criticism, and all related philosophical and ideological matters should be given the responsibility of reviewing and revising these documents where necessary to ensure that they are aligned with biblical Christianity. This includes verifying that such statements do not inculcate the assumptions and assertions or the values and pathos of wokeism, whose presence gives social and political leverage to those who would push a woke agenda within the institution. Second, faculty members should review how their courses present content that does not promote a Christian worldview, paying particular attention to instances where trendy academic concepts may function as Trojan horses for rival schools of thought if not clearly defined and addressed, or where subject matter representing alternative worldviews has been inserted into the curriculum without a sufficient Christian response. Finally, administrators should examine institutional policies and programs within their respective functional areas to assess alignment with the theological and philosophical commitments of the college and take remedial actions where necessary.[28]

Lastly, once informed action has been exercised, campus leaders must maintain the ongoing missional virtue of *alertness*. An organizational posture of proactive vigilance is necessary to counter threats to academic faithfulness, whether they be the present incursions of wokeness or future challenges posed by new rival schools of thought. Alertness requires not just attending to the college's surface expressions—as important as those are—but also practicing intentional observation of the ways in which those expressions are—or are not—animating daily practice. This virtue also requires a willingness to be more explicit in certain institutional commitments than what may have been needed in the past, as emergent threats often challenge new elements of Christian orthodoxy and practice. This may require pairing long-standing statements of faith with new documents that elucidate the implications of biblical authority for all areas of Christian community and human flourishing.[29] The

28 For an example of the institutional action recommended here, see Grove City College Board of Trustees, *Report and Recommendation of the Special Committee*, April 13, 2022, https://www.gcc.edu/Portals/o/Special-Committee-Report-and-Recommendation_0422.pdf.

29 For example, see Cairn University's Foundational Statements (https://cairn.edu/about/foundational-statements/), Colorado Christian University's Statement on Critical Race Theory (https://www.ccu.edu/about/position-statements/statement-on-critical-race-theory/), and North Greenville University's Statement on Human Flourishing (https://www.ngu.edu/about/fast-facts/human-flourishing/).



The more robust, coherent, and integrated these foundational statements are, the stronger the institutional position will be for maintaining its distinctive Christian character.

more robust, coherent, and integrated these foundational statements are, the stronger the institutional position will be for maintaining its distinctive Christian character.

Because of its embedded nature, Christian higher education will always face various forms of pressure to conform to the values and practices of its wider industry. This reality renders imperative that campus leaders maintain both a comprehensive understanding of their institution's theological commitments and a keen perception of philosophical and practical trends within the American academy writ large. Indeed, whether or not Christian colleges and universities will remain Christian in any meaningful sense depends upon the actions of campus leaders who can ascertain areas of alignment with the wider academy, exercise courage in cases of philosophical divergence, and remain confident in the legitimacy of this particular form of higher education in all situations.

For Further Reading

Baucham Jr., V. T. (2021). *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe*. Washington, DC: Salem Books.

Mering, N. (2021). *Awake, Not Woke: A Christian Response to the Cult of Progressive Ideology*. Charlotte, NC: TAN Books.

Pluckrose, H., & Lindsay, J. (2020). *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody*. Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing.

Shenvi, N., & Sawyer, P. (2023). *Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology—Implications for the Church and Society*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers.

Strachan, O. (2021). *Christianity and Wokeness: How the Social Justice Movement Is Hijacking the Gospel—and the Way to Stop It*. Washington, DC: Salem Books.

Trueman, C. R. (2024). *To Change All Worlds: Critical Theory from Marx to Marcuse*. Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic.



faithfulcolleges.org



Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing

P.O. Box 3706 | Greenville, SC 29608