

**Shenvi, Neil, and Pat Sawyer. *Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology—Implications for the Church and Society*. Eugene, OR: Harvest, 2023. 486pp. + 15pp. (back matter).**

In the contemporary socio-political landscape, some Christians have become worried about the rise of critical theories, social justice ideologies, “wokeness,” and the like. *Critical Dilemma*, by Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer, aims to clarify what all these words mean, how they appeared in our society, and how they relate to traditional Christian faith. Does it succeed?

It is hard to say. Shenvi and Sawyer assume that most of their readers are going to already agree with them about major points of doctrine, ethics, and political vision. Though a certain level of education and familiarity with scholarly discourse will make reading *Critical Dilemma* easier, the book is not addressed *to critical theorists*. Shenvi and Sawyer occasionally address non-Christian readers, and they include an entire chapter on the basics of evangelical theology, but it is hard to imagine that they expect the book to be widely read outside evangelical circles. Unfortunately, it is not clear whether the book is supposed to explain critical theory to the church or to supply an encyclopedia of resources for debating it. As an explainer, it is too repetitive and, at times, both a little too polemical and a little too scholarly. But as an encyclopedia, it is missing some key elements to make it useful as a reference work. There are some good features of the book, but overall, it is hard to know who would actually benefit from reading it. In this case, the whole is somewhat less than the sum of the parts.

When someone criticizes a scholar, and especially a *popular* scholar, an all-too-common rejoinder is that the critic has not “done the reading.” Shenvi and Sawyer have done the reading. At times their pains to show their work become tedious and contribute to the book’s overall defensive tone. Nevertheless, scanning through the footnotes (and often also the main text) will give the reader an adequate introduction to the core of contemporary critical theory. Specialists in these fields might quibble with the interpretations of various figures’ work, but it is hard to fault the book for trying to articulate something like a consensus view.

Moreover, Shenvi and Sawyer often acknowledge where the critical theorists have a legitimate point. Critical theories often insightfully identify specific problems, including ways in which past generational sins continue to have effects today. They are frequently about genuine issues, even if the treatments of those issues are unpersuasive.

Not everything is great about the book, though. First, it suffers from being neither scholarly nor merely popular. Though there are many footnotes, there is no bibliography and only a minimal topical index. (There is a complete Scripture index.)<sup>1</sup> These criticisms are not complaints about the authors’ work *per se*; this is an editorial problem, but a noteworthy one.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the term *critical social theory* is treated in some detail in pages 61–68. These pages are mentioned in the index. But in chapter 7, entire sections are headed with labels that include *critical social theory*, and the discussion is an important addition to the treatment in the earlier chapter, yet none of these pages appear in the index. Similarly, some thinkers are called “postmodernist” (e.g., Foucault, *Critical Dilemma*, 82), but this term is not defined, and does not appear in the index.

Second, the limited reference tools within the book encourage reading it straight through (even though it is fairly long). However, reading straight through reveals several repetitive parts and several digressions (including two entire chapters labeled “an excursus”). Some sections are borrowed from other works. Again, a stronger editorial hand would help.

There are more substantive issues as well. Treatments of critical theory perennially struggle to define the view. Shenvi and Sawyer make a fair attempt. Their arguments work better if academic critical theory and “popular” critical theory are closely related. But it is possible, perhaps even likely, that academic critical theory and its popular versions are not actually consistent. Critical theory is not just one thing, which the authors acknowledge at times. Thus, it is not always clear where the ideological problems are.

For example, in chapter 13 Shenvi and Sawyer argue that ideas from critical theory will devastate the church. But *which* ideas are problematic? The ones specifically mentioned are the popular ones. Let us grant the warning about them. (As many people are finding, half-baked social theories are devastating to *any* organization.) Yet churches risk pushing away legitimate, faithful scholars simply because they are not strongly opposed to something called “critical theory.” A book like Christopher Watkin’s *Biblical Critical Theory* might receive less engagement than it warrants simply because of the last two words in the title.<sup>2</sup>

As another example, in chapter 12 Shenvi and Sawyer try to establish a link between gender theory and egalitarianism (as a view about the role of women in the church and home).<sup>3</sup> But what is the actual link? Egalitarians and gender theorists sometimes cite the same scholars, and there is a historical coincidence between the two movements (depending on how you look at them). Yet one can be skeptical about traditional roles without doubting the gender binary. Contemporary gender theory is much worse than biblical wisdom, for sure, but not everything that American Christians assert is actually biblical wisdom. It is incorrect to make a one-step inference from someone’s use of terms associated with critical theory to a conclusion about their theological convictions or biblical faithfulness.

Finally, Shenvi and Sawyer’s historical and social analysis is one-dimensional. It is true that ideas have consequences, but so do more prosaic material concerns. Moreover, *popular* ideas—those held by ordinary folk and well-known public figures, rather than by scholars—often exert more influence than academic theories, and their sources are even less intelligible.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, two legitimate and interesting questions seem important: (1) Why does it seem like everyone is “woke” now? (2) Why doesn’t the traditional Christian view have more influence?

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible’s Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> “Some Christian readers will likely reject a traditional view of gender and sexuality. . . . [They] argue that the Bible does not require a distinction between the roles of men and women either in the family or in the church. This position is known as egalitarianism” (*Critical Dilemma*, 376). Note the opposition between egalitarianism and “traditional” views.

<sup>4</sup> See Hunter for a critique of the “idealist” view, according to which the ideas a culture holds are the most important factors for determining its character. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Everyone is woke now because they think it is in their interest to be so. Many professional spaces are explicitly left wing and privilege those who are willing to adopt its language. Consider academia. For a scholar who is not yet firmly established in professional life—in academia, this is almost everyone, or so they think—refusing to go along with the ideological culture could jeopardize an entire career. It is far easier to just play along, and it is often advantageous to be the most forceful proponent of the dominant ideas.

A related phenomenon occurs in the broader culture, where a natural explanation for the rapid growth of critical theory is social media, abetted by smartphones. Shenvi and Sawyer barely acknowledge these circumstances. They trace the “Great Awakening” to 2012, when the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was created in the aftermath of the killing of Trayvon Martin. The technology itself is noteworthy. In the year before and after this event, both Facebook and Twitter had experienced enormous growth, driven primarily by smartphone usage. A few months earlier Twitter had added a feature showing public engagement with each post, and Facebook added hashtag functionality a few months later. This confluence of technologies makes social media function like the academic world, where participating according to dominant ideological norms is a key step to higher status.

The decline of religious practice matters too. In contemporary society, wokeness partially fills the cultural void left by the decline of historic Christianity. Public righteousness remains essential, but reconciliation is elusive. The new purity culture is just the old purity culture, but with different taboos. The woke religion has all the same Pharisaical impulses<sup>5</sup>—these are default reactions among sinners—but with new names for its sins and no place for forgiveness and absolution.<sup>6</sup>

But if wokeness is a substitute religion, why doesn't traditional Christian social thought have more influence? First, at least in the American evangelical world, pietist impulses are strong and tend to limit careful, systematic thinking about secular human affairs. Second, the decline of merely traditional, cultural Christianity isn't all bad. It is easier to see the difference between mere tradition and the religion of the NT. Those who find contemporary culture distasteful and oppressive may find that of all the masters one might have, Jesus is the easiest.

Third, and sadly important, is (inadvertently) illustrated by Shenvi and Sawyer's book. Critical theory is most visible in discussions about race and gender. But why these two fields? Here we need to review an argument from a generation ago: Christians were wrong about interracial marriage; now they are wrong about homosexual marriage. As a bit of logic, this argument is clearly invalid. But as a point of rhetoric, it is devastating. In the middle of the twentieth century, traditional sexual ethics were often bound up with a racist ideology and cloaked in the language of Scripture. Now, when gender theorists reject creational norms, they say Christians misused the Bible to defend racism, and now they are misusing it to defend heteronormativity. Again, the point is not that this is a good argument—it isn't—but that it is a socially and rhetorically effective way of excluding Christian witness.

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012; reprint, New York: Vintage, 2013.)

<sup>6</sup> See Marilynne Robinson, “Puritans and Prigs: An Anatomy of Zealotry,” *Salmagundi* 101/102 (1994): 36–54.

Often what is needed is a thorough, patient, and honest statement of what Christians actually believe the Bible says. Shenvi and Sawyer model this discipline well in *Critical Dilemma*. American Christians would do well to become better at saying what they believe on various social matters without simply resorting to biblical proof texts or parroting a political party platform.

Sometimes ideological movements collapse under their own self-contradictions. Sometimes they are dismantled and resisted by effective argument. Often it is a mix of both. But choosing a strategy is hard: should we just leave the error alone to collapse of its own accord, or should we actively resist (Prov 26:4–5)? If the latter, we risk spending time and energy on something that might not really be worth it. But if we are wrong about the former option, then we will have simply yielded to a destructive ideology.

Shenvi and Sawyer’s book seems caught in this dilemma. There is evidence from the broader society that the cartoon versions of wokeness have outlived their usefulness.<sup>7</sup> Yet while the tides of intellectual fashion rise and fall, sometimes even a temporary bulkhead against a dangerous error is necessary. Thus, even though this review has emphasized some limitations of *Critical Dilemma*, the book itself contains plenty of wisdom and insight, along with tools to resist the pull of either the woke or the anti-woke. Though contemporary critical theory is not Christianity, neither are many of the cultural alternatives to it. Discerning the truth remains critical.

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<sup>7</sup> E.g., Rachel Poser, “Ibram X. Kendi Faces a Reckoning of His Own,” *The New York Times Magazine*, June 4, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/04/magazine/ibram-kendi-center-for-antiracist-research.html>.