

Free Speech, Wokeism & Cancel Culture: Theological Issues and Contemporary Applications

Wokeism and Cancel Culture are much debated today: some deny that they have much substance while others view them as signalling the collapse of Western civilisation. This seminar will analyse the origin of these terms while tracing the concerns they evoke back to key issues in church history, from Puritan emphases on liberty of conscience through more recent Christian contributions to the framing of religious freedom and free speech as core human rights. It will reflect on lessons to be learnt from certain churches' past attempts to cancel dissent and enforce uniformity, while providing practical pointers on how we as Christians today can address and overcome threats of Wokeism and cancellation in the cause of the gospel.

David Hilborn is Hon. Senior Research Fellow in Evangelical Theology at Moorlands College, UK. Moorlands is an interdenominational college based near Christchurch in Dorset, with regional training centres in Birmingham, Torquay and Belfast. David was previously Principal of Moorlands. Prior to that he led St John's College, Nottingham and was Assistant Dean of St Mellitus College, based in London. Earlier he was Head of Theology at the Evangelical Alliance UK for nine years, also serving on the Executive of the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission. He is an ordained Anglican minister and was a member of the Church of England's Faith and Order Commission from 2006-2016. He currently chairs the Evangelical Alliance's Theological Advisory Group. He is a graduate of the Universities of Nottingham (BA, PhD) and Oxford (MA), and has led or served on the ministry teams of five local churches. He has authored or edited several books, including *Picking Up the Pieces* (Hodder), *The Nature of Hell*, *'Toronto' in Perspective*, *One Body in Christ*, *Movement for Change* (Paternoster) and *The Atonement Debate* (Zondervan). He is currently co-editing a book on Anglican-Pentecostal co-operation. He is a Londoner by birth and is married to Mia, a senior hospital chaplain. They have two grown-up children. He loves cricket and enjoys a wide range of music.

1. Introduction

1.1 Woke: Etymology

- African American vernacular: Lead Belly (1938); William Melvin Kelley (1962); Barry Beckham (1971)
- Erykah Badu, *Master Teacher* (2008): "I stay woke"...

1.2 Theological Antecedents & Distinctions:

- *Awakening and Revival*
- Ps. 57:8; Isa. 51:9; Rev. 16
- Revival as 'The work of the Holy Spirit in restoring the people of God to a more vital spiritual life, witness and work by Prayer and the Word after repentance in crisis for their spiritual decline.' (E.E. Cairns)

1.3 Wokeism & 'Cancel Culture': recent foregrounding, radicalisation & contention

- Black Lives Matter from 2013; Ferguson unrest/riots – 2014; George Floyd – 2020
- Dictionary definitions from 2017 (OED; Merriam-Webster)
- White Privilege and Unconscious Bias: Reni Eddo Lodge; Robin DiAngelo
- Critiques of Wokeism from people of colour: Barack Obama, Chloé Valdary; John McWhorter
- Critiques from white conservatives and classical liberals: Douglas Murray, Heather MacDonald, Helen Pluckrose & James Lindsey; Joanna Williams; Rod Dreher

2. Contextualizing Wokeism: Underlying Issues and Trends

2.1 Universality & particularity: secular expressions

- Global rights v. protected characteristics
- Clashes of rights
- Theological responses: one gospel, missionally contextualized; one body, many members (1 Cor. 12); One God, three persons

2.2 Identity as given *and* mutable: secular expressions

- Identity from Latin *idem/identitas* – 'the same'/sameness; continuity & indivisibility: hence 'identical', *but also*...
- Identity as *development* – shaped by experiences, influences; growth and decline
- Theological responses:

- Gen. 1:26-28 – Humanity male and female
- Matt. 19: 3-12 – Marriage as ‘two becoming one’ (cf. Gen 2:24)
- Matt. 19:12 - Eunuchs ‘for the kingdom’ - celibacy (cf. 1 Cor. 7:1)
- 2 Cor. 5:7; Gal. 3:28; Rev 22:2 – new creations in Christ; racial, ethnic and national divisions reconciled
- 1 Cor. 15:12-58; Matt. 22:30 – resurrection: ‘transformed physicality’

Wokeism Case Study A: Racial Identity and Gender Self-ID

2.3 Identity Politics, Equality and Intersectionality

- Distinctions of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion etc.
- Interest groups v. political parties
- Single-issue campaigning v. inequality *but...*
- Intersectionality stresses ‘compound’ disadvantaged identities – e.g. black, female & poor (Kimberlé Crenshaw)
- Theological responses:
 - Scripture acknowledges compound marginalization: Ruth and Naomi - female *and* poor; Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-42); Syro-Phoenician Woman (Mk. 7:24-30); deaf mute (Mk. 7:31-37) *but...*
 - Common identity in Christ supersedes sectional/intersectional identities (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:14-22)
 - Danger of sectional/intersectional identities becoming idols/masking collective sin (Joe Carter)

2.4 Political Correctness

- Marxist-Leninist origins re: prescribed policy
- American New Left use
 - Toni Cade Bambara, 1970
 - ‘PC’ as Leftist self-critique
- Parodic and pejorative applications from 1980s
 - Conservative applications from Allan Bloom; Dinesh D’Souza; Robert Kimball – Highlighting growth of PC in academia...
 - Gramsci; Dutschke: ‘The Long March through the Institutions’
 - ‘Cultural Marxism’ as contested discourse

2.5 Culture Wars

- James Davison Hunter (1991); Pat Buchanan (1992)
- Trump presidency (2017-2021)
- Environmentalism as well as race, sex and gender: Extinction Rebellion

2.6 Critical Theory, 3rd Wave Feminism, Trans & Queer

- Judith Butler: Gender as Free-Floating (after Foucault)
- Queer as Critiquing Heteronormativity
- Consciously anti-theological corollaries: Critical Theory. Roland Barthes: Poststructuralism; Jacques Derrida: Deconstruction

2.7 Anti-Racism and Critical Race Theory (CRT) as direct progenitors of Wokeism

- CRT assumes intersectionality (Crenshaw, Bell etc.)
- More specifically indebted to Critical Theory
 - E.g. Richard Delgado, Mari Marshall, Patricia J. Williams
- Analysis of power-structures: ‘hegemony’, cf. Foucault
- Constructivist view of language shaping the world
- Race as social construct *but* rooting cultural identities
 - Hence Progressivist backlash v. Rachel Dolezal and Jessica Krugg
- Speech codes and strictures
 - Hence conflicts over free speech *and religious liberty...*

3. Wokeism, Free Speech & Religious Liberty

3.1 Christian concern and critique

- Carl R. Trueman: parallels with 2nd Century church
- Rod Dreher: public vilification of Christian sexual ethics post-Obergefell

Wokeism Case Study B: Conversion Therapy

3.2 Woke as 'New Puritanism'?

- Nigel Jones; Anne Applebaum
- Theological responses: freedom with regard for others (Gal. 5:1-13)

3.3 Theological reflections:

- Paul, equality, diversity & unity (Larry Sidentop)
- Christendom: the paradox of state regulation of doctrine and freedom
- Puritans as *advocates* of religious freedom liberty and free expression (John van Til)
- John Locke and toleration
- John Stuart Mill and the Harm Principle
- Speech as a 'site of violence': Wokeist expansions of harm & victimhood
- Religious liberty as a right v. Christ-like servanthood and sacrifice (John Stott) (Gal 5:13)

4. Christianity, Freedom and Wokeism

4.1 Potential convergences:

- Regard for others/neighbours (Gen 1:26; Mt. 7:12; Eph. 4:9)
- Regard for weak & dispossessed (Lk. 4:18-22)
- Humility towards 'the other' (Phil. 2:1-4)
- Rejection of injustice (Isa. 58:6-11; Amos 5:24; Lk. 4:18-22)
- Rejection of racism (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-22; Acts 8:26-40)
- Church discipline (Matt 18:15-19; 1 Cor. 5-6)

4.1 Potential Divergences

- Judgmentalism v. discernment (Mt. 7:5; 1 Cor. 2:15)
- Anthropocentrism v theocentrism (Col. 2:8)
- Microaggressions v. sins
- Objective harms v. subjective offences
 - Safetyism v. resilience (cf. Haidt; Lukianoff) (Jn. 17:11; Mt. 5:11-12; 7:14)

Conclusion: Awakening and Revival v. Wokeism

To Consider

Do you agree with these suggested convergences and divergences? If so, why, and to what extent; if not, why not? What further convergences and divergences might you want to add?

Selected Reading:

- J.B. Bury, *A History of Freedom of Thought* (2nd. Edn). IDEBATE, 2007.
- John de Witte Jr & F.S. Alexander (eds), *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction*. CUP, 2010.
- Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. Sentinel, 2017; *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*. Sentinel, 2020.
- Andrew Doyle, *Free Speech, and Why It Matters*. Constable, 2021.
- Evangelical Alliance UK, *Speak Up: The Law and Your Gospel Freedoms*. EA, 2017. <https://www.eauk.org/assets/files/downloads/Speak-Up-FULL.pdf>
- Michael Farris, *The History of Religious Liberty*. New Leaf, 2015.
- Bruce L. Fields, *Introducing Black Theology: Three Crucial Questions for the Evangelical Church*. Wipf & Stock, 2001.
- Timothy Garton Ash, *Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World*. Yale University Press, 2017.
- Dan Kovalik, *Cancel this Book: The Progressive Case against Cancel Culture*. Hot Books, 2021
- Joseph Loconte, *God, Locke, and Liberty: The Struggle for Religious Freedom in the West*. Lexington, 2014.
- Esau McCauley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*. IVP Academic, 2020.
- Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity*. Bloomsbury, 2019; *The War on the West*, Harper Collins, 2022.
- Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories; How Universities Made Everything About Race, Gender and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody*. Swift, 2020.
- Jonathan Haidt, *the Righteous Mind: Why God People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. London: Penguin, 2012.
- Jonathan Haidt & Greg Lukianoff, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. Penguin, 2019.
- John McWhorter, *Woke Racism. Forum*, 2021.
- Owen Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*. Salem, 2020.
- Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. Crossway, 2020.
- John Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience: The History of a Puritan Idea*. P&R, 1972.
- Nigel Warburton, *Freedom: An Introduction with Readings*. Routledge, 2000.