



## **Postmodern Christians and Their Nice Arrangements of Epithets**

**Michael Young**

*As two recent popular books show, progressive Christians are trading traditional rational argument for postmodern irrationality and rhetorical sleights of hand.*

In recent years, evangelical Christian America has seen the rise to prominence of a particular flavor of progressive Christianity animated by a commitment to what Robin Diangelo calls “Critical Social Justice.”<sup>1</sup> Diangelo and her coauthor, Özlem Sensoy, explain that “A critical approach to social justice refers to specific theoretical perspectives that recognize that society is stratified (i.e., divided and unequal) in significant and far-reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Critical social justice recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this.”<sup>2</sup> Recently, an entire cottage industry of books advancing social justice in the language of progressive Christianity has emerged, and many of these books have become prominent in evangelical circles.

The authors of these books appear to be motivated by a deeply held set of ethical and political convictions held together by a moral vision centered around social justice. That in and of itself is not a problem; Americans are free to espouse whatever views they wish. The problem is that in almost every case the authors, while claiming the mantle of Christianity, advance their views by use of a series of methods and strategies which are intellectually bankrupt, with the unhappy consequence that the sorts of bad methods and strategies used in these books are becoming commonplace in the academic and intellectual areas of evangelical culture.

I do not wish to erect a straw man in this essay, and I do not have the space for an extensive intellectual genealogy of social justice-centered Christianity. As such I cannot provide an extensive analysis of the whole of Christian thought oriented around contemporary social justice. So, in what follows my goal will be to provide a sketch of what is going on with the current crop of Christian “social justice” literature that avoids oversimplification without dulling the edge of Occam’s razor. In particular, this essay will take Andrew Whitehead’s *American Idolatry* (2023) and Kristin Kobes Du Mez’s *Jesus and John Wayne* (2020) as representative examples of the genre.

To state the matter succinctly, many of these books use rhetorical and social maneuvers to advance their moral and political positions without providing the necessary *arguments* needed to

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<sup>1</sup> Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo. *Is Everyone Really Equal?: An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, 2 ed. (Teachers College Press, New York) 2017; p.20

<sup>2</sup> Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo. *Is Everyone Really Equal?: An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, 2 ed. (Teachers College Press, New York) 2017; p.20

justify those moral and political positions. The result is a set of books that seek to advance a moral, social, and political agenda, but which fail to provide normative *reasons* why that particular agenda ought to be advanced. In lieu of a normative argument which justify their normative agenda, popular progressive evangelical authors increasingly adopt a pair of rhetorical and social strategies drawn from the postmodern philosophical literature in an attempt to persuade the reader to accept their moral and normative claims.

These rhetorical strategies can be traced to Richard Rorty and Michael Foucault. From Rorty comes the use of rhetorical maneuvers to make an opponent's argument *look* bad. From Foucault is taken the strategy of "cryptonormativity": using morally loaded vocabulary to smuggle in a set of moral value judgements without justifying them, and without making explicit the criteria by which those judgements are made.

Let us look at these strategies in turn.

### **Making You Look Bad**

In his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty set out the following strategy for responding to objections to his postmodern philosophy (emphasis mine): "***my strategy will to try to make the vocabulary in which these objections are phrased look bad, thereby changing the subject***, rather than granting the objector his choice of weapons and terrain in meeting his criticisms head on."<sup>3</sup>

If this is how he wants to engage, perhaps I ought to respond to Rorty's arguments by changing the subject and unleashing a series of clever rhetorical flourishes to give Rorty a good old-fashioned verbal flogging. As fun as that might be, none of this can make me happy.<sup>4</sup> We do not settle intellectual disagreement by making the other side look bad or changing the subject: We have to do the difficult work of meeting the disagreement head on and determining the truth as best we can.

W.V.O. Quine once observed that "decisions in science, as in life, can be difficult. There is no simple touchstone for responsible belief."<sup>5</sup> He was right. Settling difficult disagreements does not always admit of a simple formula and there are no shortcuts to settling difficult issues. As such the responsible thing to do is to go through the difficult process of determining the truth of the matter using "the canons of reason, objectivity, close attention to the facts, and above all, truth."<sup>6</sup> This is how intellectual engagement is supposed to be done, not by changing the subject and making the other side look bad.

What is concerning for us is that the method of engagement laid out by Rorty appears to have become commonplace in progressive Christian thought. The reasons for this are complex and likely there are several, but at least one reason for the prominence of this style of engagement is

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge) 1989. p.44

<sup>4</sup> This is an allusion to Donald Davidson by way of borrowing a turn of phrase and using it in a different context. Must I cite this given that I am borrowing the wording but not quoting the man?

<sup>5</sup> Quine, W. V. and J. Ullian. *The Web of Belief, revised edition*. (New York, Random House) 1978. P.8

<sup>6</sup> John R. Searle, *Rationality and Realism, What Is at Stake?*; *Daedalus*, Fall, 1993, Vol. 122, No. 4, The American Research University (Fall, 1993). P.70

that the influential postmodern “Christian”<sup>7</sup> philosopher John Caputo suggested progressive Christians use exactly this strategy (emphasis mine): “you cannot stop someone from believing in guardian angels, demonic possession or alien abductions. **All you can do, as Rorty said, is try to discourage it by making it look bad and by offering a more persuasive alternative, in this case, a way of reimagining God and reinventing Christianity...**”<sup>8</sup>

Caputo’s claim appears to be that progressives should avoid attempting to make rational arguments altogether and instead try to make orthodox Christianity look bad so they can replace it with a reinvented and reimagined version of Christianity more to their liking. This strategic yeast seems to have worked its way through the dough of progressive Christianity and become part of their general mode of intellectual engagement. Instead of trying to debate with conservative Christians about facts, or how moral principles apply to given facts, prominent progressive Christians have instead adopted the strategy suggested by Caputo and have proceeded to engage by changing the subject, and using rhetorical maneuvers make their conservative opponents look bad.

Let us take a look at an example so you can see what this looks like.

In his book *American Idolatry*, sociologist Andrew Whitehead asserts the following two claims:

1. “Throughout, I will make normative and moral claims flowing from my identification as a Christian. While I ground my beliefs about the harmful nature of Christian nationalism in empirical, scholarly research, this book is also deeply informed by my faith and by historical Christian teachings, the life of Jesus, and the Bible.”<sup>9</sup>
2. “Both parts of my identity have led me to the same conclusion: Christian nationalism betrays the gospel and is a threat to the Christian church in the United States.”<sup>10</sup>

To be as fair as possible to Professor Whitehead, this is as clear a set of claims as one could hope to find. Whitehead tells us exactly what he thinks, and very explicitly states that he is going to make a number of normative claims. The issue is that Whitehead should provide an argument for why his normative claims are justified, and no such argument is to be found.

Whitehead does not provide an argument for his normative moral claims, nor does he provide an argument against the normative moral claims of groups such as politically conservative Christians, economic libertarians, or even Christian Nationalists. Rather, Whitehead adopts as his strategy Caputo’s injunction to, again emphasis mine, “**try to make the vocabulary in which these objections are phrased look bad, thereby changing the subject**, rather than granting the objector his choice of weapons and terrain in meeting his criticisms head on.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Caputo denies that there is any such being as God, but still calls himself a Christian and is embraced by many influential progressive Christians. I have no idea what to make of this, except to say that between him and Richard Dawkins claiming to be a cultural Christian one sees something like a re-emergence of Christianity on the horizon.

<sup>8</sup> John Caputo, *The Return of Anti-Religion*. Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory, Volume 11, No. 2, p.38

<sup>9</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids) 2023, Kindle Edition. p. xiii

<sup>10</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids) 2023, Kindle Edition. p.7

<sup>11</sup> Richard Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge) 1989. p.44

In much of Whitehead's book, what we find is a nice arrangement of epithets where an argument ought to be.<sup>12</sup> At various times Whitehead claims that conservative Christian political goals originating from or otherwise associated with what he says is Christian Nationalism are variously: "Xenophobic," "racist," "idolatrous," "opposed to the way of Christ," "a hollow and deceptive philosophy," "making us bad Christians," "antithetical to the gospel," "about power, control, domination, fear, and violence," "selfish," "self-interested," "A threat to the Christian Church in the United States," and "intertwined with a comfort with violence."<sup>13</sup>

Boy, that sure does make the Christian right look bad.

The problem here is that none of those epithets constitutes an argument. Whitehead is free to describe people however he wishes, but if he is going to make normative claims he needs to have an argument to justify those normative claims. It won't do to accuse his opponents of being animated by self-interest and xenophobia so he can then dismiss them on these bases. What is needed is an argument, and no argument is to be found.

Let us take a look at Whitehead's treatment of immigration to further illustrate the point. Whitehead takes issue with the right's position on immigration, and he makes the moral judgement that it is misguided, wrong, bad, and otherwise immoral. However as there is no actual argument in play it is difficult to figure out just what exactly his *justification* for that moral judgement is.

He writes:

"Why do we discriminate against other children of God just because they were not born here by historical accident? Even if we assented to the idea that God chooses the nationality of every human being, how does that excuse us for selfishly holding on to the blessings and comforts of being an American citizen?"

If God truly chose some of us to be Americans and enjoy living in arguably the wealthiest country in the history of the world, shouldn't we be trembling with fear that we might cruelly withhold sharing our undeserved blessing and grace with others? Consider the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:21–35). Blessed with a gift of mercy he could never repay, he fails to extend even a shred of such blessing to those in need. What if American Christians applied this lesson to ensure that we do not likewise hoard blessings at the expense of others?"<sup>14</sup>

Here we find no explicit claim, but rather a series of questions which taken together suggest that, since America is rich and migrants coming from other nations tend to be poor, is it selfish for America to prevent immigrants from poor countries from entering the US and obtaining relative wealth. Perhaps there is an argument here that could be constructed from the material contained in these questions, but Whitehead does not construct it.

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<sup>12</sup> This is an allusion to the title of a paper by Donald Davidson

<sup>13</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids) 2023, Kindle Edition.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids) 2023, Kindle Edition. p.18

Whitehead simply gestures at the existence of rich people and poor people, and then suggests that Americans have some sort of obligation to allow economic immigration in order to ameliorate the gap between rich and poor. Worse yet, he does not state his position outright; he insinuates that a particular conclusion should be reached by using questions that are assertions in sheep's clothing. In doing so he leaves the moral intuitions, values, and normative tenets that give this passage its rhetorical force unstated, unexplained, and unexamined.

Whitehead leaves us unable to properly examine his moral intuitions, values, and normative tenets to see if they are valid in this context and applied in a correct way. And this is exactly the problem with not providing explicit arguments for one's conclusions: It leaves everyone unable to properly adjudicate the reasoning one used to come to their conclusions. Of course, often this is the whole point.

In another statement on immigration Whitehead says:

“Our country’s various military and economic quests have led us to pursue policies that impoverished and, in some cases, destroyed the native lands of those coming to our shores. Acknowledging our complicity in that history is vital, and it can lead us to take more seriously our responsibility to follow the commands to love and serve the immigrant and refugee among us.”<sup>15</sup>

The idea here is that the poverty of other nations is in some significant way the fault of the United States, and this implies that America ought to reconsider its posture toward immigrants and refugees. The problem, again, is that this is not an argument. Whitehead would need to show that it is indeed true that the United States is responsible for the poverty of the immigrants and refugees in question, and then he would have to show how that fact, in conjunction with the correct normative framework, creates a moral obligation for America to adopt a different posture toward immigration and toward refugees. No such argument is made. It is simply asserted that the US is complicit in causing poverty and that acknowledging this will help us take our responsibilities more seriously. This statement as presented is not a good reason to change our posture toward immigration.

Whitehead continues elsewhere:

“Calling undocumented immigrants illegal immigrants suggests an inherent criminality; only through physically leaving our nation would such immigrants cease to be criminals in our eyes. However, undocumented presence in the United States is a civil, not criminal, offense.

As many others have pointed out, criminalizing undocumented presence is ironic given that the ancestors of white Americans were originally immigrants to the shores of North America. Just because some of us have been here longer than more recent immigrants makes this no less true. This reality escapes us, however, and we continue to consider ourselves “true Americans” who have a God-given right not only to reside here but also to limit who else can move to these shores.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids) 2023, Kindle Edition. P.162

<sup>16</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids) 2023, Kindle Edition. P.163

Here we see an argument via suggestion and insinuation, with the additional strategy of playing games with the terminology. There are several threads to untangle here.

To begin, the term “illegal immigrant” is not about claiming immigrants are inherently associated with criminality; the term “illegal” refers to the fact that the immigrant in question *broke the law* by entering or remaining in the United States in an illegal manner. The claim that the term “illegal” is somehow wrong, bad, seedy, or inappropriate for this context is just another example of trying to make the vocabulary in which objections to progressive views are phrased look bad.

Additionally, the suggested shift in terminology is a sleight of hand. Adoption of the term “undocumented” in lieu of the term “illegal” obscures the issue of whether or not the person in question is following the law and foregrounds a separate question of adequate documentation. The problem here is that the moral, legal, and normative point at issue is not whether or not the person is “documented”; the issue is whether or not the person has a moral or legal right to enter or to remain in the United States. What is at issue is not merely whether or not there is an adequate record of a person’s presence in the United States, the issue is whether that person broke the law in entering or remaining in the United States.

You can’t change the facts by changing the vocabulary to make something look bad. This is not how language works; it is also not how reality works. “Confusion of sign and object is original sin coeval with the word,”<sup>17</sup> and it is a mistake to think that changing the words used to describe a situation somehow changes the reality of that situation. Switching the description of illegal immigrants from “illegal” to “undocumented” does nothing to change the facts in question or the normative, moral, and legal concerns in play. The only thing accomplished by Whitehead’s suggested change in terminology is to reframe the issue and hide the fact that the law, whether civil or criminal, is being broken.

Whitehead makes a similar move elsewhere in his book:

“Dehumanizing language and negative discourse surrounding immigrants and refugees translate to policy agendas supported by many white Christians. . . . For instance, white Christians are more likely than any other religious group to agree that all immigrants living in the United States without proper documentation should be deported. White evangelicals and white Catholics are the least likely to agree that undocumented immigrants or any children brought to the United States without proper documentation should be given a path to legal citizenship.”<sup>18</sup>

Again, there is no argument here. Whitehead simply asserts that certain language is dehumanizing, and then suggests that “white Christians” endorsing deporting all immigrants who reside in the US illegally is the result of that dehumanizing language. Whitehead makes the policy of deporting illegal immigrants appear to be fruit from the poisonous tree of supposedly dehumanizing language, with the suggestion being that the policy of deporting all illegal immigrants is very bad, without providing a normative argument to justify the claim that deportation is, in fact, very bad.

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<sup>17</sup> W.V.O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, (Columbia University Press, New York) 1969. p.15

<sup>18</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids) 2023, Kindle Edition. p.165

In fact, to the implicit question at hand—“What is the justification for deporting this immigrant?”—the simple answer, “this immigrant has entered the United States in a manner which violates the law and deportation is the legally proscribed remedy for such a violation,” seems like a perfectly reasonable answer. If Whitehead thinks it is not a good answer, or that deportation as a prescription for illegal entry is unjust, he owes us a normative argument as to why. Asserting that people who seek deportation as a remedy for entering or dwelling in the United States in violation of the law are using bad, mean, ugly, or dehumanizing language, or are influenced by such language, does nothing to resolve the normative moral and political questions around deportation.

Even when Whitehead seeks to make his own case look good, he does not provide a normative argument. Here are a couple of his positive claims about the values we ought to hold:

“the Bible clearly shows the values we should hold dear—neighbor love, welcoming the immigrant and stranger.”<sup>19</sup>

“We can turn from our idols of power, fear, and violence. We can commit to viewing everyone—whether immigrant or refugee—as fellow travelers deserving of any privileges our American citizenship might provide.

Only then can we stop betraying and begin to fulfill the gospel command to love our neighbors.

All our neighbors.”<sup>20</sup>

Again, there is no argument here. What we have is the assertion that the values that govern our policy ought to be neighbour love and welcoming the immigrant and the stranger, and that adopting said values will help Americans see that immigrants and refugees are deserving of the privileges of American citizenship. This is so bad as to be irresponsible. There is an enormous gap between treating immigrants and refugees fairly while loving them, on the one hand, and granting them American citizenship on the other.

Further, if Whitehead wants to conclude that immigrants are “deserving” of citizenship, then he is going to have to provide an argument that citizenship is actually *deserved*. No such argument is provided. It is simply asserted that if Americans stop having fear and love their neighbors they will see that immigrants and refugees deserve any privilege American citizenship provides. This is not how any of this works.

One might object that what Whitehead is proposing here is not giving out citizenship, but that American citizens ought to use their citizenship for the benefit of immigrants and refugees. Perhaps that is what he means, but if that he still needs to provide an argument to justify that position. No such argument is to be found.

I will not settle the issue of immigration here; that is beyond the scope of this essay. I will only remark that setting a policy regarding how many immigrants can be taken in, and what to do with migrants who refuse to follow the rules, cannot be established even in part by saying “love you neighbor.” Setting a responsible immigration policy for the world’s most powerful post-industrial

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids) 2023, Kindle Edition. p.173

<sup>20</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids) 2023, Kindle Edition. p.178

nation requires that we, following the lead of John Searle, use “the canons of reason, objectivity, close attention to the facts, and above all, truth.”<sup>21</sup>

Rather than taking that lead, what we get from Whitehead is the insinuation that conservative Christians are motivated by greed and selfishness and are not sufficiently loving. Whitehead paints his opponents as xenophobic, racist, unloving, un-Christlike, and uncaring, as if his opinion of them settles the issue. The fact that he does this without feeling the need to provide a robust normative argument is indicative of the fact that, as Joseph Heath has written, “it has become all too easy to dismiss all resistance to migration as merely an effect of racism or xenophobia. This tendency is particularly pronounced among academics and other elites, whose job security is not threatened, and for whom the major welfare impact of multiculturalism is that the quality of local restaurants improves.”<sup>22</sup>

Just so.

Let us now turn to the other postmodern rhetorical strategy increasingly common in progressive Christian discourse, cryptonormativity.

### **Cryptonormativity And Arguments Left Unmade**

A nice summation of cryptonormativity comes to us from an essay by the aforementioned Joseph Heath, a professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto:

“Habermas wrote a critical essay on Foucault, in which he accused him of ‘cryptonormativism.’ The accusation was that, although Foucault’s work was clearly animated by a set of moral concerns, he refused to state clearly what his moral commitments were, and instead just used normatively loaded vocabulary, like ‘power,’ or ‘regime,’ as rhetorical devices, to induce the reader to share his normative assessments, while officially denying that he was doing any such thing. The problem, in other words, is that Foucault was smuggling in his values, while pretending he didn’t have any.”<sup>23</sup>

A ready example of this sort of cryptonormativity can be found in the book *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, by Kristin Kobes Du Mez. The title of the book clearly has a normative dimension to it. The claim that a faith is “corrupted” and a nation is “fractured” is a normative claim. So the normative claim is on the cover of the book for all to see. Du Mez then proceeds to end her book with the following: “What was once done might also be undone.”<sup>24</sup>

The questions of course suggested by this are, “What must be undone? And why must it be undone?” Du Mez clearly thinks white evangelicals and what she calls their “militant

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<sup>21</sup> John R. Searle, *Rationality and Realism, What Is at Stake?*; Daedalus, Fall, 1993, Vol. 122, No. 4, The American Research University (Fall, 1993). P.70

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Heath, *Cooperation and Social Justice*. (University of Toronto Press, Toronto) 2022. p. 227

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Heath. *The Problem with Critical Studies*. Online blog at “In Due Course,” Jan 26, 2014. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220127194902/http://induecourse.ca/the-problem-with-critical-studies/>)

<sup>24</sup> Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. (Liveright Publishing, New York, 2020)



masculinity” ought to be undone, because these white evangelicals and their militant masculinity are, she alleges, responsible for corrupting Christianity and fracturing a nation.<sup>25</sup>

The catch is that in between the front cover and the final sentence of *Jesus and John Wayne* there is an entire book in which not a single argument is presented to justify Du Mez’s normative assertions. So, how does Du Mez make her the case for her normative assessments without making normative arguments? The answer is, in a word, cryptonormativity.

Consider the last paragraph of *Jesus and John Wayne*:

“Although the evangelical cult of masculinity stretches back decades, its emergence was never inevitable. Over the years it has been embraced, amplified, challenged, and resisted. Evangelical men themselves have promoted alternative models, elevating gentleness and self-control, a commitment to peace, and a divestment of power as expressions of authentic Christian manhood. Yet, understanding the catalyzing role militant Christian masculinity has played over the past half century is critical to understanding American evangelicalism today, and the nation’s fractured political landscape. Appreciating how this ideology developed over time is also essential for those who wish to dismantle it.

What was once done might also be undone.”<sup>26</sup>

Cryptonormativity is all over this final paragraph. Du Mez says, “Evangelical men themselves have promoted alternative models, elevating gentleness and self-control, a commitment to peace, and a divestment of power as expressions of authentic Christian manhood,” without ever giving us a normative argument for why that model of masculinity is superior to any other. She simply calls “evangelical masculinity” a cult, and then she presents a progressive vision of masculinity to us, using framing and language that suggests that the progressive vision is in fact better without actually making that claim explicit. Du Mez doesn’t actually state that the progressive vision of masculinity is superior, or that it ought to be adopted; she simply frames the presentation in a way that induces the reader to adopt this conclusion.

In this way Du Mez’s value judgments about masculinity are smuggled in linguistically without ever being explicitly argued for or justified. Read the last sentences of the final paragraph of her book again:

“Appreciating how this ideology developed over time is also essential for those who wish to dismantle it.

What was once done might also be undone”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> . (again, a fractured nation and political landscape really does seem to be the sort of thing that requires some help from across the spectrum, but I digress)

<sup>26</sup> Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. (Liveright Publishing, New York, 2020) p.363

<sup>27</sup> Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. (Liveright Publishing, New York, 2020) p.363

Why? Why ought we undo this ideology or this militant masculinity? Why not instead assume that militant masculinity is a good thing, and if the nation fractured it is because evil people are resisting militant masculinity, or that militant masculinity is a good thing that was hijacked by bad actors? Clearly Du Mez thinks militant masculinity is bad, wrong, flawed, and otherwise not a good thing. The problem is that she provides no normative argument for why militant masculinity is bad, and she refuses to tell us the normative standards that uses to make her moral judgments.

The word “militant” itself here is a word that functions cryptonormatively because the term “militant” is formally neutral by definition while also being rhetorically loaded with negative connotations. This allows Du Mez to use the term “militant” to smuggle in a value judgment about the conservative vision of masculinity without arguing for that value judgment or making the criteria for that value judgment explicit. This is the same way Foucault used the word “regime.” In his essay referenced earlier, Joseph Heath mentions a number of terms within social justice literature that function cryptonormatively: racialized, stigmatized, neo-liberal, colonized, and so forth. These are terms that are neutral by definition, but in social justice circles have negative connotations associated with them.

Du Mez’s entire book is full of this sort of thing. She uses morally loaded language and various forms of insinuation, allusion, irony, and “free indirect discourse” to insinuate that such things as “militant masculinity,” whiteness, Republicans, complementarianism, the pro-life movement, and so on are misguided, out of order, wrongly prioritized, or just plain bad. The problem is that she never explicitly *argues* for any of that. Du Mez wrote a book from a normative perspective, with a normative conclusion, full of normative insinuations, with a normative call to action, all without ever actually ever making an argument to justify any of her normative assertions or giving an explicit account of the standards she is using in making her moral claims.

### **Logic and Conversation in Debate**

I am not sure why these sorts of non-arguments have become popular among liberal evangelical Christians, but I would like to make a suggestion as to what may be going on. All of these arguments are taking advantage of a mechanism of language noted by H.P. Grice as “conversational implicature.” This is where the content of what a speaker means is not part of what is explicitly said.<sup>28</sup> Examples of this are insinuation, innuendo, hints, allusions, and so forth. Typically we use these sorts of conversational implicatures in everyday life. If I am asked, “is it raining,” I might respond with “you’ll definitely need an umbrella.” In this case I have not explicitly stated that “it is raining,” but I have indicated that it is in fact raining by virtue of the fact that I have responded to the question of whether or not it is raining by telling the questioner to bring his umbrella.

We do this all the time, and most of the time it is only a matter of linguistic cooperation. However, conversational implicature also has the effect of allowing us to say things while avoiding having to say them explicitly. When the mafia want to make a threat without being explicit about it they say things like “this is an offer you can’t refuse,” or “believe me, you won’t

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<sup>28</sup> Grice, H.P., *Logic and Conversation*, From *Syntax and Semantics*, vol.3 edited by P. Cole and J. Morgan, (Academic Press, Cambridge) 1975 p.41-58

want to turn this offer down.” In doing this they are able to communicate the consequences for ignoring them without having to make an explicit threat.

What we see in so much of the literature coming out of social justice-oriented Christianity is exactly this sort of move. So much of what is being advanced is being advanced via suggestion, hinting, insinuation, innuendo, subtext, undertones, connotation, tone, and other implicit maneuvering. For this reason it is often very easy to know exactly what social justice-oriented Christians believe, but very difficult to find an explicit statement of those beliefs. That is, they are using conversational implicature to communicate implicitly certain things which they seem unwilling to say explicitly. The question is, why are they doing this?

Before I attempt to answer that question, there is a very important logical point to make here. John Searle pointed out in his wonderful book *Mind Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World*, that exposing the motives for someone’s adopting a view is not a refutation of that view. In discussing a view called “Anti-realism” he says that “it would be a genetic fallacy to suppose that by exposing the illegitimate origins of Anti-realism that we somehow refute the arguments.”<sup>29</sup> What Searle says of anti-realism also applies here. We can’t prove that Caputo, Rorty, and Foucault are wrong by pointing at their motives. Claims have been made and judgments have been advanced and those claims and judgments need to be made explicit and then argued against. What follows here is merely a diagnosis for why I think the tactics outlined in this paper have come to prominence.

In 1993, the John Searle wrote an essay about attacks against the western tradition of education. In that article he wrote:

“In spite of their variety, most of the challengers to the traditional conception of education correctly perceive that if they are forced to conduct academic life according to a set of rules determined by constraints of truth, objectivity, clarity, rationality, logic, and the brute existence of the real world, their task is made more difficult, perhaps impossible.

For example, if you think that the purpose of teaching the history of the past is to achieve social and political transformation of the present, then the traditional canons of historical scholarship - the canons of objectivity, evidence, close attention to the facts, and above all, truth- can sometimes seem an unnecessary and oppressive regime that stands in the way of achieving more important social objectives.”<sup>30</sup>

I think this is exactly correct. Many of the academics working in social justice dominated fields perceive, correctly, that their views will fail when measured according to the standards of reason, logic, objectivity, close attention to the facts, and truth. As such, they have jettisoned the canons of the Western rationalistic tradition in favor of rhetorical moves like cryptonormativity and making the other side look bad in an effort to achieve their social and political objectives. That said, I think this is only part of the story.

The other part comes to us from Joseph Heath, who made this observation about social Justice literature a decade ago:

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<sup>29</sup> John Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World*, (Basic Books, New York) 1998 p.20

<sup>30</sup> John R. Searle, Rationality and Realism, What Is at Stake?; *Daedalus*, Fall, 1993, Vol. 122, No. 4, The American Research University (Fall, 1993). p.70

“In any case, it seems to me fairly obvious why these books are written in the way they are. The authors feel a passionate moral commitment to the improvement of society – this is what animates their entire project, compels them to write a book – but they have no idea how to defend these commitments intellectually, and they have also read a great deal of once-fashionable theory that is essentially skeptical about the foundations of these moral commitments (i.e. Foucault, Bourdieu). As a result, they are basically moral noncognitivists, and perhaps even skeptics. So they turn to using rhetoric and techniques of social control, such as audience limitation, as a way of securing agreement on their normative agenda.”<sup>31</sup>

Social justice oriented scholars have accepted a move that is common in the academic milieu of postmodernism. The move is to try to discover the various social, historical, linguistic, political, and psychological phenomena responsible for the emergence of rationality, reason, logic, thought, and so forth, and then claim that the objectivity of reason, rationality, logic, and so forth are corrupted by the phenomena from which they emerge.

The result is “political and sociological explainers, including Marxists, Marxist revisionists, Frankfurt School disciples, and ‘power’ archeologists (after the fashion of Foucault). This group specialized in explaining how various kinds of consciousness are shaped or constrained by social, political, and economic pressures, with the result that the ideas formed by consciousness can mostly be dismissed as the bits and pieces of an ideology.”<sup>32</sup> If a view cannot be dismissed on the basis of social, political, and economic pressures, the view can be dismissed as being the product of the structural position in society as defined in terms of their race, class, gender, and so on.<sup>33</sup>

The result of accepting this line of thinking is that all thoughts and opinions (including all truth claims, moral values, knowledge, as well as the forms of reasoning, logic, and standards rationality) are viewed as simply being the product of various social, cultural, linguistic, historical, institutional, economic factors. The idea is that thoughts and opinions are not the product of objective reason, rationality, or logic, but rather they emerge owing to various pre-rational social structures, and so the postmodern critic races to uncover all the pre-rational structures which are *actually* responsible for the thoughts, opinions, views, values, and ideas people hold. “Eventually Critics succeeded in identifying a variety of structures and processes, which they hoped might be regarded as absolutely constitutive of all writing, all thinking, all cultural expression and so on.”<sup>34</sup>

Once these structures and processes are “discovered,” it is argued that all thoughts, ideas, views, and opinions are downstream of these pre-rational structures, and that rationality, reason, and objectivity are little bubbles floating on a much larger sea of social, political, historical, and

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Heath. *The Problem with Critical Studies*. Online blog at “In Due Course,” Jan 26, 2014.

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20220127194902/http://induecourse.ca/the-problem-with-critical-studies/>)

<sup>32</sup> Carl Rapp. *Fleeing the Universal: The Critique of Post-Rational Criticism*, State University of New York Press. (new york, 1998) P. 35

<sup>33</sup> Carl Rapp. *Fleeing the Universal: The Critique of Post-Rational Criticism*, State University of New York Press. (new york, 1998) P. 44

<sup>34</sup> Carl Rapp. *Fleeing the Universal: The Critique of Post-Rational Criticism*, State University of New York Press. (new york, 1998) P. 13

economic factors which are actually responsible for the views one holds. And thus we end up with a sort of criticism which allows one to dismiss a view, opinion, thought, or idea without having to actually engage with the substance. Any idea can be dismissed as being nothing more than the expression or articulation of a particular culture or groups, unjustified ideology, values, or interests; or as the product of bigotries, biases, and interests inherent to the sociological, cultural, or political situation from which the idea emerged.<sup>35</sup>

The thing is, the thoughts, opinions, and ideas of the social justice advocate can also be dismissed using this sort of reasoning. This leaves us in the awkward position of having to point out that by their own standards, the views of the social justice advocate must also be either the expression of the unjustified values, ideology, and interests of the groups to which they themselves belong; or as the product of bigotries, biases, and interests inherent to the sociological, cultural, or political situation from which social justice advocacy emerged. The social justice scholars' own positions are undercut by their own arguments. When this is pointed out, the social justice scholars' response tends to amount to something like, "We are the only ones who are willing to acknowledge that all knowledge is contaminated, including even our own."<sup>36</sup> Which means we are having to engage with people who question the validity of knowledge (even their own) on the basis of arguments that depend on knowledge about language, culture, economics, interests, bias, social structures, and so on.

In a postmodern perspective such as this, all views, thoughts, ideas, claims, values, and so forth are at the very least corrupted and contaminated by various elements of the social situation from which they emerged. As such, the social justice scholar who has accepted the postmodern view is left without any justification for their position that they can claim is objectively true, valid, legitimate, or correct. The person who accepts this sort of postmodern thinking is thus forced to use alternative methods of persuasion like changing the subject, making the other person look bad, linguistic sleight of hand, cryptonormativity, and the like.

Steeped as they are in the academic milieu of postmodernism, it should come as no surprise to us that social justice-oriented scholars in the Christian world are unable, and therefore unwilling, to rationally defend the moral view that they are so passionate about. After all, what would the Christian social justice scholar say in response to the accusation that they are privileging Christian moral values in some unjustified way?

What would be the justification for elevating the contingent and socially constructed morals and values of some Christians over and above the contingent and socially constructed morals and values of some opposing group? Of progressive Christians over conservative Christians? On a postmodern view there is no justification for the privileging of Christianity in any way at all, because on a postmodern view the moral values and norms of both the Christian and the non-Christian are socially constructed and therefore the contingent product of social processes tainted by ignorance, social conditioning, self-interest, power dynamics, and the like. There is no way to defend objective, absolute, universal, moral values or truth claims once one has accepted

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<sup>35</sup> Carl Rapp. *Fleeing the Universal: The Critique of Post-Rational Criticism*, State University of New York Press. (new york, 1998) P. 15

<sup>36</sup> Carl Rapp. *Fleeing the Universal: The Critique of Post-Rational Criticism*, State University of New York Press. (new york, 1998) P. 11

these postmodernist propositions. So what option does the postmodernist have but to use alternative methods of persuasion, such as making the other side look bad?

Progressive Christians can deny it all they want, but the fingerprints of postmodernism are all over their work, and we and they have to confront this fact. They undermine the revealed truth they claim to serve. If we do not confront this head on and forthrightly, if we cower and allow the sort of bad argumentation exemplified by Whitehead and Du Mez to advance, it will not only allow the onward march of a set of views which we find to be wrong, but also affirm the validity of a style of scholarship that poisons the intellectual well of Christian thought.