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HOW ISLAMIC IS CRITICAL RACE THEORY?

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Critiquing ideologies is often mired by oversimplification. And, such critiques, likewise, result in the terms under scrutiny being stigmatized along with their advocates. This applies to ideological targets like Marxism, socialism, feminism, and critical race theory. Whenever one wants to make short work of another's perspective, all one needs to do is scream, "Marxist", "Feminist," or "Critical Race Theorist."

The problem with *ad hominem* aspersions is that these ideologies contain ideas, which conform with the values of their audiences. Had those ideas not been present, the ideologies would not be attractive. Take, for instance, the fact that feminism, especially in its earliest waves, promoted women's agency, self-determination, suffrage, and the right to own and earn wealth. There's no fundamental or valid reason to believe that Islam is opposed to such aims. So, it makes sense that many Muslim women, unwittingly, refer to themselves as feminists. One, however, must take care not to assume that such a label sufficiently summarizes the mission of the Prophet Muhammad in light of his embrace of the betterment and social well-being of women. Such characterizations are a danger, which could lead one to blasphemy.

One must, also, remain skeptical of the putatively inherent and universal applicability of such overarching ideologies since one can mistake the forest for the trees, considering that their epistemic foundations often clash with Islam's moral vision and truths. Like other egalitarian ideologies, critical race theory has its own metaphorical wheat and chaff. And, there seems to be a growing interest in CRT among Muslims in activist circles. Many have adopted its assumptions unwittingly, completely oblivious to what guides the decisions of their so-called political "allies." For these reasons, I've decided to pen together a few words that will, hopefully, provide a shimmer of guidance on this topic.

Critical race theory (CRT) is an analytical approach employed by certain activist scholars, such as CRT's intellectual father, Derrick Bell, professor of law at New York University. CRT theorizing started during the mid 1970s. Its main goal is to transform the way race, racism, and power in Eurocentric cultures interact. CRT is concerned with creating an egalitarian sociopolitical, cultural, and economic order, while taking direct aim at white cultural imperialism and deconstructing its philosophical foundations. CRT builds on the efforts and insights of a number of minority civil rights activists; critical legal studies; radical feminism; and European philosophers, such as Antonia Gramsci and Jacques Derrida.¹

According to scholars Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, CRT is founded upon the following six moral assumptions:

- Racism against “colored” people is endemic to Eurocentric societies (“colored” being a synonym for “non-white i.e. non-European” peoples, rather than its original reference to indigenous, Black and Native Americans).
- White over “colored” ascendancy serves important purposes, physic and material.
- Races are social constructions, not biological facts.
- Differential racialization, i.e. the calculated alternation of discriminatory policies between one racial minority to another depending upon time and circumstance, happens “in response to shifting needs in the labor market.”
- Intersectionality and anti-essentialism, which means that “each race has its own origins and evolving history” and no individual member of a racial group can be presumed to be the same as any other group member. Rather, one is always distinguished by a multiplicity of factors that contribute to one’s identity such as sex, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and social class. (These facets of one’s “identity” in today’s world determine the degree of severity of one’s oppression on a continuum of “least” to “most oppressed.”)
- The “unique voice of color” thesis which posits that every “group” due to their experience with the white supremacist order has developed a unique stand point for explaining one’s socio-political and economic status. That standpoint is considered superior to that of whites, who are presumed to, generally, lack the capacity to see the privilege with which they live.²

CRT's greatest utility, like certain other aspects of postmodern philosophy, is its ability to deconstruct and identify “problems” and “social inequities.” Also, like other postmodern philosophies, it is not good at re-constructing after it deconstructs. In other words, the fixes offered to society’s problems are almost always superficial and fundamentally undermine the very project of CRT.

¹ For more information, see Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2001, pp. 6-8).

² *Ibid.*

The most glaring example of this is in CRT's insistence upon redefining "racism." The oldest definitions of racism in English posit that any "race" can be guilty of racism and that it is fundamentally the "belief" in one's superiority to another on the mere basis of race or color. While one may agree that contemporary "race" is "largely" a social construct (biology does play a limited role), CRT's definition conflicts with Islam in that after rejecting notions of race or color-based behavioral determinism for "coloreds", CRT's proponents suggest and sometimes aver that to be white is to be "privileged" and "racist", knowingly or unknowingly. In other words, while it is a goal of CRT to dismantle white supremacy and white privilege, it reinforces and solidifies it by claiming that the members of one "race" of people are motivated and guided by things the other races are not and cannot be. This solidifies the otherization of "whites" who cannot truly be white without the existence of their "colored" opposite(s) who in turn become permanent counterpart(s) also.

This is both racist and essentialist. It is racist because it reinforces biological race and behavioral determinism, two things that CRT alleges to disavow. It is essentialist because it lumps all "whites" together into a shared experience vis-à-vis "coloreds" such that there is no distinction between the English, Scottish, French, German, Russian, Slav, Irish, Italian, Swede, Jew, etc.³ They are all equally complicit in the oppression of "colored people." They all enjoy white privilege as a birthright. This is so even though the critical theorist claims to be opposed to essentialism. It seems that one is allowed to be an essentialist if it relates to allegations against "whites." That's not to mention the essentialism involved in considering the counterpart of "whites" to be a single unified collective as well.

A critical race theorist would never accept the notion that he/she is being racist against white people. That's because the theorist has convinced him/herself that only whites can be racist due to the fact that only whites have power. That is to say that racism can only be racism if and when you have the power to oppress others. And, since only white people have this power according to the critical race theorist, only *they* can be racist. This means that even if I were to say, "White people are born with tails"; "The white man is the devil incarnate"; Or, "White people smell like dogs when they're wet", none of that is racist because I'm black. And, black people have absolutely no power to oppress others (sigh). The lack of sincerity to this principle is exposed every time blacks or others cry foul, demanding punishment for whites who accost them using racial epithets such as calling black female basketball players things, "Nappy headed hoes."

"All" power is wielded by white people "absolutely." If a colored person is ever in a position of power, he/she is wielding "borrowed" power, not inherent power. So, they can never bear full culpability for any crimes they commit. That's because all might and power belong to the "white man." Of course, this last sentence is meant to show how absurd and idolatrous this belief is to the Islamic teachings. The truth is that colored people all around the world have power, many of them significantly more than millions of white people. If the teachings of CRT are taken to their

³ Keep in mind that many of those considered "white" were inducted into whiteness between 19th and 20th centuries.

logical end, this would mean that not one dictator in the Arab world is responsible for the carnage they create every time they massacre their people. Nor are the Chinese, Burmese, or any other person, group, or government represented by a particular ethnic enclave. This is not to say that the European political elite are not in fact culpable for great carnage, oppression, and savage treatment of others for many centuries. They are responsible for what they did and do. However, every soul is mortgaged for it earns. And, no bearer of burdens bears another's burden.

In Islam, all human beings are the children of the same mother and father, Adam and Eve. Our only permanent and avowed enemy is Satan. And, Satan is not a man. We all are susceptible to the same forms of vice and shortcomings; Our impulses, appetites, and emotions make us malleable. And, our ignorance of objective fact and the moral path expose us to manipulation. In other words, Islam assigns the same nature to every human being. And, it considers every individual to be redeemable regardless of race, color, sex, sin, religion, or political affiliation. Every person regardless of race can be guilty of racism, even if we acknowledge that a racist with power is more dangerous than one without that power.

All societies have a conception of race. And, that conception influences very much how one differentiates between outsiders and insiders. As Muslims have embraced the legitimacy of their status as citizens of western countries, many have also taken on some of the baggage of racial polarization. Does Islam have something unique to offer societies plagued by ethnic bigotry? If so, will Muslims employ that perspective to heal humanity? Or will they contribute to the widening rift between racialized factions in society? When did this racialization process begin? What parallels exist in the Islamic tradition? And, will Muslims redeem their faith before it is permanently rendered into a race and drained of its transformative and conciliatory spirit?

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