



### **Postmodern Thought Seeping into the Public Schools**

For many teachers and school staff across the nation, the return to school has never been more difficult. There is a lot going on and a lot of competing factors to consider.

The most immediate concerns for most school staff are the basic physical arrangements and health and safety considerations brought to bear by the pandemic. [Data indicates](#) that about half of all US school districts are fully opening for face to face learning. For teachers in these districts, concerns about physical safety are foremost. While the health risks for the students may be slight, for teachers, especially older school staff or those with preexisting medical conditions, the health issues are major considerations. Appropriate social distancing and mask wearing by both students and staff may be necessary, leaving teachers with [new rules that may be difficult to enforce](#). For many of those engaged in online teaching, it is a lot of work just to adapt teaching materials for online use. It is even more challenging to develop the type of online classroom community that that needs to be present for the class to collaboratively move forward with the learning goals.

While these COVID-19 restrictions are certainly concerning, at a recent CEAI staff meeting the legal services department staff noted that the most frequent issue that members have struggled with in recent weeks is professional development focused on racial inequities in the schools. Three major resources are being promoted in some public schools to help decrease racial inequities:

First, [The 1619 Project](#) developed by the New York Times, is starting to work its way into many schools. You may have heard that this project recommends that American history should be revised to teach that the critical date for the founding of our nation should be changed from the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 to the landing of the first slave ship in the American colonies in 1619. The project also advocates that going forward from 1619 the history of America should be told as a story of the oppression of black Americans primarily by white males.

Second, [Dr. Robin DiAngelo, the author of White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism](#), is being promoted by some administrators as a guru on reducing racial inequities in

schools. Her ideas are based on the premise that “implicit bias” is inherent in white people and therefore racial inequities have persisted in America.

And third, Ibram X. Kendi, popular author of *How to Be an Antiracist*, has also worked himself into the public-school professional development niche. Leaving no stone unturned, he has even authored [Antiracist Baby](#), a board book for preschoolers. His ideas have been [criticized by some](#) as removing personal responsibility from individuals for racism. He defines antiracism as the belief that all racial inequalities are caused by racist policies—not by people. He would define a racist as anyone who believes that racial disparities have at times been caused, at least in part, by black people.

The first two of these, *The 1619 Project* and Robin DeAngelo’s *White Fragility*, are both grounded in Critical Race Theory, which is rooted deeply in a postmodern world view. Kendi’s work is less grounded in CRT but does exhibit some postmodern ideas, particularly moral relativism and lack of personal responsibility for personal choices. Postmodernism discards the idea that truth is real and knowable; it suggests that the most important aspect of personal identity is membership in cultural groups, and also denies the notion of clear right and wrong, instead postulating that morality is relative and determined by society.

These postmodern ideas are clearly rejected by scripture. We see this in Jesus’ final discussion with Pilate. Jesus tells Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate responds to Jesus with a classic postmodern retort, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). In this [five minute video](#), recently deceased Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias discusses postmodernism and its origins in the Garden of Eden. Douglas Groothuis gives a fuller explanation of how postmodern thought challenges Christianity in [Truth Decay: Defending Christianity From the Challenges of Postmodernism](#).

This is not to say that there is absolutely nothing of value that can come from secular sources, however we should be circumspect regarding their philosophical underpinnings. As Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer writing for the [Journal of Christian Legal Thought](#) have said, “The central ideas of contemporary critical theorists must be rejected by Christians. While we can appreciate and learn from their analyses of particular issues, we must recognize that they have adopted a framework that is fundamentally incompatible with Christianity in numerous ways.” Or, in the words of [David French](#), “Critical race theory can be an analytical tool (one of many) that can help us understand persistent inequality and injustice in the United States. To the extent, however, that it presents itself as a totalizing ideology—one that explains American history in full and prescribes an illiberal antidote to American injustice—it falters and ultimately fails.”

If you are struggling with trainings based on non-Biblical thought, the following may be helpful:

- 1) Even though postmodern philosophy is deeply flawed, there may still be beneficial elements within the trainings. Listen carefully for ideas that may help with racial inequalities. Clearly, we would all like to see reductions in racial disparities in our culture and particularly in our schools. By exhibiting a willingness to hear other’s ideas you will go far to persuading them that your motivations are good, and this will make your Christian witness more appealing.

- 2) Realize that your work in the public schools makes you a missionary to the secular culture. In these days, when everything seems contentious, keep in mind Paul's advice to Timothy, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion"
- 3) (1 Tim 1:5-6). Your best tools to enable you to show Christian love to the fallen world are not your debate skills, but prayer, personal study of scripture, and deep fellowship with other Christians. If you feel that you are being drawn into useless arguments with co-workers or students around worldview issues, you may find Proverbs 15 a source of wisdom and peace.
- 4) One goal of some of these trainings is to [expose racial biases that teachers may not be aware that they have](#). As Christians we should always be open to the conviction of the Holy Spirit regarding areas of needed spiritual growth.
- 5) If you feel that your school administration is requiring you to take actions or say things that violate your conscience, be as respectful as you can and contact [CEAI member services](#) for advice as soon as possible. As you continue through these difficult times in your calling to teach, CEAI wants to support you in your role as "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor 5:20).

If you have been struggling with any of these professional development programs or others, we would be interested in hearing about them. Please share your thoughts on this column that you would like other readers to see by entering them in the form below. Personal comments can be sent to [JMitchell@ceai.org](mailto:JMitchell@ceai.org). John Mitchell is on staff at CEAI and teaches part-time in the suburbs of Washington, DC.