

# WOKE RACISM

*How a New Religion  
Has Betrayed Black America*

JOHN  
MCWHORTER

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*This book is dedicated to each who find it within themselves to take a stand against this detour in humanity's intellectual, cultural, and moral development.*

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## PREFACE

I'M NOT ONE FOR long introductions. However, before we begin I would like to give the reader a sense of the lay of the land.

This book is not a call for people of a certain ideology to open up to the value of an open market of ideas, to understand the value of robust discussion, and to see the folly of defenestrating people for disagreeing with them. My assumption is that the people in question are largely unreachable by arguments of that kind.

Rather, this book is a call for the rest of us to understand that people of a certain ideology are attempting to transform this country on the basis of racism. They do not know it and, when apprised of it, cannot admit it. But the rest of us must.

My main aims will be:

1. To argue that this new ideology is actually a religion in all but name, and that this explains why something so destructive and incoherent is so attractive to so many good people.
2. To explain why so many black people are attracted to a religion that treats us as simpletons.

3. To show that this religion is actively harmful to black people despite being intended as unprecedentedly “antiracist.”
4. To show that a pragmatic, effective, liberal, and even Democratic-friendly agenda for rescuing black America need not be founded on the tenets of this new religion.
5. To suggest ways to lessen the grip of this new religion on our public culture.

I hope my observations will serve as one of many contributions to our debate over what constitutes “social justice.” My aim is not to merely pen a screed to stoke the flames among people who already agree with me. I want to reach those on the fence, guilted into attention by these ideologues’ passion and rhetoric but unable to disregard their true inner compass. I want them to commit with confidence to what I seek: helping make things better for real people.

## What this book is not.

We need not wonder what the basic objections to this book will be. I mischaracterize and/or disrespect religion. I am oversimplifying. The real problem is the militarized right wing. I'm not black enough to write this book. I'm not nice, and so on. I will get all of that out of the way as we go on, and then offer some genuine solutions. But first, what this book is not:

1. This book is not an argument against protest. I am not arguing against the basic premises of Black Lives Matter, although I have had my differences with some of its offshoot developments. I am not arguing that the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and '60s would have been better off sticking to quiet negotiations. I am not arguing against the left. I am arguing against a particular strain of the left that has come to exert a grievous amount of influence over American institutions, to the point that we are beginning to accept as normal the kinds of language, policies, and actions that Orwell wrote of as fiction.
2. I am not writing this book thinking of right-wing America as my audience. People of that world are welcome to listen in. But I write this book to two segments of the American populace. Both are what I consider to be my people, which is what worries me so much about what is going on.



One is *New York Times*-reading, National Public Radio-listening people who have innocently fallen under the impression that pious, unempirical virtue signaling about race is a form of moral enlightenment and political activism, and ever teeter upon becoming card-carrying unintentional racists themselves. In this book I will often refer to these people as “white,” but they can be of any color, including mine. I am of this world. I read *The New Yorker*, I have two children, I saw *Sideways*. I loved both *The Wire* and *Parks and Recreation*.

The other is black people who have innocently fallen under the misimpression that for us only, cries of weakness constitute a kind of strength, and that for us only, what makes us interesting, what makes us matter, is a curated persona as eternally victimized souls, ever carrying and defined by the memories and injuries of our people across the four centuries behind us, ever “unrecognized,” ever “misunderstood,” ever in assorted senses unpaid.

3. This is not merely a book of complaint. My goal is not to venture a misty statement that today’s hyper-wokesters need to understand that a diversity of opinions is crucial to a healthy society. Citing John Stuart Mill at them serves no purpose; our current conversations waste massive amounts of energy by missing the futility of “dialogue” with them. Of one hundred fundamentalist Christians, how many do you suppose could be convinced via argument to become atheists? There is no reason that the number of people who can be talked out of this religion should be any higher.

As such, our concern must be how to continue with genuine progress in spite of this ideology. How do we work around it? How do we insulate people with good ideas from the influence of liturgical concerns? How do we hold them off from influencing the education of our young people any more than they already have? How do we conduct socially gracious existences amid the necessity of engaging with their religious doctrine, presented with Cotton Mather's earnestness and impregnable insistence, when almost none of them will actually understand that they are making religious rather than secular arguments?

That is, my interest is not "How do we get through to these people?" We cannot, at least not enough of them to matter. The question is "How can we live graciously among them?" We seek genuine change in the real world, but for the duration we will have to do so while ever encountering bearers of a gospel itching to smoke out heretics and ready on a moment's notice to tar us as moral perverts.

I write this viscerally driven by the fact that the ideology in question is one under which white people calling themselves our saviors make black people look like the dumbest, weakest, most self-indulgent human beings in the history of our species, and teach black people to revel in that status and cherish it as making us special. I am especially dismayed at the idea of this indoctrination infecting my daughters' sense of self. I can't always be with them, and this anti-*humanist* ideology may seep into their school curriculum. I shudder at the thought: teachers with eyes shining at the prospect of showing their antiracism by

filling my daughters' heads with performance art instructing them that they are poster children rather than individuals. Ta-Nehisi Coates, in *Between the World and Me*, wanted to teach his son that America is set against him; I want to teach my kids the reality of their lives in the twenty-first, rather than the early to mid-twentieth, century. Lord forbid my daughters internalize a pathetic—yes, absolutely pathetic in all of the resonances of that word—sense that what makes them interesting is what other people think of them, or don't.

Many will nevertheless see me as traitorous in writing this book as a black person. They will not understand that I see myself as serving my race by writing it. One of the grimmest tragedies of how this perversion of sociopolitics makes us think (or not think) is that it will bar more than a few black readers from understanding that this book is calling for them to be treated with true dignity. However, they and everyone else should also know: *I know quite well that white readers will be more likely to hear out views like this when they are written by a black person, and I consider it nothing less than my duty as a black person to write this book.*

A version of this book written by a white writer would be blithely dismissed as racist. I will be dismissed instead as self-hating by a certain crowd. But frankly, they won't really mean it, and anyone who gets through the book will see that whatever traits I harbor, hating myself or being ashamed of being black is not one of them. And we shall move on.

## WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE?

AS I WRITE THIS in the summer of 2020, Alison Roman, a food writer for *The New York Times*, is on suspension. You might wonder just what a food writer could do to end up temporarily dismissed by her employer. Roman's sin: In an interview, she passingly criticized two people for commercialism, model and food writer Chrissy Teigen and lifestyle coach Marie Kondo. Roman was Twitter-mobbed for having the nerve, as a white woman, to criticize two women of color.

Teigen is half white and half Thai. Kondo is a Japanese citizen. Neither of them are what we typically think of as people of color in the sense of historically conditioned and structurally preserved disadvantage. However, in 2020, the mere fact of a white person criticizing not just one but two (apparently the plurality tipped the scales) non-white persons justified being shamed on social media and disallowed from doing her work. Roman, as a white person, was supposedly punching down—i.e., “down” at two people very wealthy, very successful, and vastly better known than her. Her whiteness trumped all, we were told.

Roman, now typical of such cases, ate crow with an apologetic statement about how she had reflected and realized her error. Teigen even said that she did not think Roman deserved to be sanctioned. But no matter—a kind of

fury, passed off as being “antiracist,” now has a supreme power in our public moral evaluations, and this required that Roman be pilloried in the town square. Her Wikipedia entry will forever include a notice that she was deemed a racist, billboard style, despite that most Americans likely see that she did nothing that remotely deserved such treatment, and despite that she would not have been treated that way as recently as a few years ago. She later left the *Times* permanently.

*What kind of people do these things? Why do they get away with it? And are we going to let them continue to?*

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THE SAME YEAR, Leslie Neal-Boylan lasted only a few months as dean of nursing at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. The problem was that in the wake of statements nationwide after the murder by police officers of George Floyd, Dean Neal-Boylan had the audacity to pen this blinkered, bigoted screed to her colleagues and staff:

I am writing to express my concern and condemnation of the recent (and past) acts of violence against people of color. Recent events recall a tragic history of racism and bias that continue to thrive in this country. I despair for our future as a nation if we do not stand up against violence against anyone. BLACK LIVES MATTER, but also, EVERYONE’S LIFE MATTERS. No one should have to live in fear that they will be targeted for how they look or what they believe.

A certain crowd decided to read Neal-Boylan as chiming in with those who resist the slogan “Black Lives Matter” by answering that “All Lives Matter,” as if BLM is somehow claiming that black lives matter *more*. However, one could read Neal-Boylan as meaning this only via not reading well. She started out by lamenting “a tragic history of racism and bias,” and no, she didn’t mean that it existed only in the past and that black people need to get over it, because she also wrote that the racism and bias “continue to thrive in this country.”

However, because her composition included the three words “everyone’s life matters,” she was reported to her superiors and quickly out of a job without even being allowed to defend herself. Why was Leslie Neal-Boylan’s email deemed a missive from someone unfit to supervise people dedicated to healing and giving comfort? A child would wonder why—as would a time traveler from as recently as 2015. But Neal-Boylan’s detractors were deemed authoritative.

*What kind of people do these things? Why do they get away with it? And are we going to let them continue to?*

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ALSO IN THE SAME YEAR, 2020, David Shor, a data analyst at a progressive consulting firm, lost his job. He had tweeted a study by a black Ivy League political science professor, Omar Wasow, showing that violent black protests during the long, hot summers of the late 1960s were more likely than nonviolent ones to make local voters vote Republican. Shor’s intent was not to praise this, but to disseminate the facts themselves as a glum announcement—one that had been covered eagerly by liberal media shortly before this.

Certain parties on Twitter, though, didn't like a white man tweeting something that could be taken as criticizing black protest in the wake of George Floyd's murder. The consulting firm took heed and expelled Shor.

*What kind of people do these things? Why do they get away with it? And are we going to let them continue to?*

## What kind of people do these things?

All of these cases occurred because of the influence of a frame of mind we could term Third Wave Antiracism, a movement whose adherents are more often termed "social justice warriors" or "the woke mob."

One can divide antiracism into three waves along the lines that feminism has been. First Wave Antiracism battled slavery and legalized segregation. Second Wave Antiracism, in the 1970s and '80s, battled racist attitudes and taught America that being racist is a moral flaw. Third Wave Antiracism, becoming mainstream in the 2010s, teaches that because racism is baked into the structure of society, whites' "complicity" in living within it constitutes racism itself, while for black people, grappling with the racism surrounding them is the totality of experience and must condition exquisite sensitivity toward them, including a suspension of standards of achievement and conduct.

Under this paradigm, all deemed insufficiently aware of this sense of *existing while white* as eternal culpability require bitter condemnation and ostracization, to an obsessive, abstract degree that leaves most observers working to make real sense of it, makes people left of center wonder just when and why they started being

classified as backward, and leaves millions of innocent people scared to pieces of winding up in the sights of a zealous brand of inquisition that seems to hover over almost any statement, ambition, or achievement in modern society.

So one might ask why I seem to consider it such an issue that some food columnist, some nursing school dean, and some data analyst have had their lives derailed by this movement. But I write not of something happening to a few unlucky people, but operating within the warp and woof of society. No one can know just when or how Third Wave Antiracist proselytizing may blindsides them while they are going about their business.

It is losing innocent people their jobs. It is coloring academic inquiry, detouring it, and sometimes strangling it like kudzu. It forces us to render a great deal of our public discussion of urgent issues in double-talk any ten-year-old can see through. It forces us to start teaching our actual ten-year-olds, in order to hold them off from spoiling the show in that way, to believe in sophistry in the name of enlightenment. On that note, Third Wave Antiracism guru Ibram X. Kendi has written a book on how to raise antiracist children, called *Antiracist Baby*. (You couldn't write it better—are we in a Christopher Guest movie?) This and so much else is a sign that Third Wave Antiracism forces us to pretend that performance art is politics. It forces us to spend endless amounts of time listening to nonsense presented as wisdom, and pretend to like it.

Graduate students and professors write me and my podcast sparring partner, economist Glenn Loury, in droves, frightened that this new ideology will ruin their careers, departments, or fields, as they also do to other organizations, often on private email accounts to avoid



being smoked out by anyone at the institutions they work for. People in positions of influence are regularly being chased from their posts because of claims and petitions that they are insufficiently antiracist. School boards across the country are forcing teachers and administrators to waste time on “antiracist” infusions into their curricula that make no more sense than anything proposed under China’s Cultural Revolution. Did you know that objectivity, being on time, and the written word are “white” things? Did you know that if that seems off to you, then you are one with George Wallace, Bull Connor, and David Duke?

As recently as 2008, Christian Lander wrote with wry humor in *Stuff White People Like* of “being offended” as something a certain kind of “white” person enjoys doing, alongside their film festivals and vintage T-shirts. Just over a dozen years later, one reads that chapter with a shudder that the kind of person Lander was referring to will see it over your shoulder and launch into a hissing tirade about how there is nothing funny about people trying to dismantle the prevalence of white supremacy and all whites’ “complicitness” in it. If he were to write that book today, Lander would be unlikely to include that joke, which is an indication of the extent to which there is something in the air that we hadn’t seen until quite recently. A critical mass of the people he was referring to no longer just quietly pride themselves on their enlightenment in knowing to be offended about certain things, but now see it as a duty to excoriate and shun those (including black people) who don’t share their degree of offense.

To some, all of that may sound like mere matters of manner and texture. But Third Wave Antiracism also outright harms black people in the name of its guiding impulses. Third Wave Antiracism insists that it is “racist”

for black boys to be overrepresented among those suspended or expelled from schools for violence, which, when translated into policy, is documented as having led to violence persisting in the schools and lowered students' grades. Third Wave Antiracism insists that it is "racist" that black kids are underrepresented in New York City schools requiring high performance on a standardized test for admittance, and demands that we eliminate the test rather than direct black students to resources (many of them free) for practicing the test and reinstate gifted programs that shunted good numbers of black students into those very schools just a generation ago. That the result will be a lower quality of education in the schools, and black students who are less prepared for exercising the mind muscle required by the test taking they will encounter later, is considered beside the point.

Third Wave Antiracism, in its laser focus on an oversimplified sense of what racism is and what one does about it, is content to harm black people in the name of what we can only term dogma.

For example, the Third Wave Antiracist is deeply moved by a collection of tenets that, stated clearly and placed in simple oppositions, translate into nothing whatsoever:

1. When black people say you have insulted them, apologize with profound sincerity and guilt.	Don't put black people in a position where you expect them to forgive you. They have dealt with too much to be expected to.
2. Don't assume that all, or even most, black people like hip-hop, are good dancers, and so on. Black people are a conglomeration of disparate individuals. "Black culture" is code for "pathological, primitive ghetto people."	Don't expect black people to assimilate to "white" social norms, because black people have a culture of their own.
3. Silence about racism is violence.	Elevate the voices of the oppressed over your own.

4. You must strive eternally to understand the experiences of black people.	You can never understand what it is to be black, and if you think you do you're a racist.
5. Show interest in multiculturalism.	Do not culturally appropriate. What is not your culture is not for you, and you may not try it or do it.
6. Support black people in creating their own spaces and stay out of them.	Seek to have black friends. If you don't have any, you're a racist. And if you claim any, they'd better be <i>good</i> friends —albeit occupying their private spaces that you aren't allowed in.
7. When whites move away from black neighborhoods, it's white flight.	When whites move into black neighborhoods, it's gentrification, even when they pay black residents generously for their houses.
8. If you're white and date only white people, you're a racist.	If you're white and date a black person, you are, if only deep down, exotifying an "other."
9. Black people cannot be held accountable for everything every black person does.	All whites must acknowledge their personal complicitness in the perfidy of "whiteness" throughout history.
10. Black students must be admitted to schools via adjusted grade and test-score standards to ensure a representative number of them and foster a diversity of views in classrooms.	It is racist to assume a black student was admitted to a school via racial preferences, and racist to expect them to represent the "diverse" view in classroom discussions.

I suspect that, deep down, most know that none of this Catechism of Contradictions makes any sense. Less obvious is that it was not even composed with logic in mind.

The idea is to strike a happy medium between the poles? But there's no way that the people promulgating this "race thing" litany would ever allow that anyone had. One way we know it is that over several decades the promulgators never have. Another way we know it is more straightforward: There simply is no logical "medium" to be

found between these alternates. One could not perform any pair of them simultaneously.

Why do so many wise people elevate these tenets as wisdom? The reason simply cannot be logic, because there is none to be had. The reason is because these tenets serve a purpose other than the one they are purported to serve.

Namely, each component by itself serves to condemn whites as racist. To apologize shows your racism; to be refused the apology, too, shows your racism. To not be interested in black culture shows your racism; to get into black culture and decide that you, too, want to rap or wear dreadlocks also shows your racism. The revelation of racism is, itself and alone, the point, the intention, of this curriculum. As such, the fact that if you think a little, the tenets cancel one another out is considered trivial. That they serve their true purpose of revealing people as bigots is paramount—sacrosanct, as it were.

Or, as it *is*. Specifically, these tenets serve the purpose of expressing the central pole, the guiding watchcry, of Third Wave Antiracist religion. It is rarely stated explicitly, but decisively steers its adherents' perspective on existence and morality. Third Wave Antiracism's needlepoint homily par excellence would be the following:

Battling power relations and their discriminatory effects must be the central focus of all human endeavor, be it intellectual, moral, civic, or artistic. Those who resist this focus, or even evidence insufficient adherence to it, must be sharply condemned, deprived of influence, and ostracized.

It can seem an oddly particular perspective, this rigid focus on battling differentials in power. Power is rampantly abused and creates endless suffering, to be sure. An enlightened society must be always addressing this and trying to change it. However, given the millions of other things that constitute human life and endeavor, to impose that undoing power differentials must *center all possible endeavor in what we call life* is a radical proposition.

I began encountering this worldview early in my academic career, and it took me a long time to perceive that various conflicts I have encountered in my work on linguistics (as well as race) have been variations on the same problem. The humanities and social sciences in academia have long harbored many people who see their discipline's goal as to Fight the Power. I recall my first taste of it, when a graduate student gave a guest lecture on *My Fair Lady*, in which she noted that Higgins talks more than Eliza and therefore wields power over the narrative. *Who's talking?* she taught us to ask. This perspective is certainly correct, but a part of me couldn't quite wrap my head around her general implication that to savor *My Fair Lady's* music or wit is to be taken in, that an enlightened person looks down on the piece as the story of a lower-class female's self-expression brutally suppressed by a bullying oldish man of letters.

But back then, this kind of analysis was a minority view. Alarmist journalism depicted college campuses as being overrun by "tenured radicals," but this was a cartoon. At the time, that kind of ideology was one of many dishes one sampled at the university buffet. The problem is that today, this reductive, prosecutorial, and ultimately joyless kind of thinking actually is taking over not just university culture but American culture at large.

In any case, one of the main power differentials in our society is the one conditioned by racism. It is this Salem-style religious commitment to “battling” it that made the excommunications of Alison Roman, Leslie Neal-Boylan, and David Shor make sense to so many perfectly sane people.

Of course, the “race thing” Catechism of Contradictions makes no sense, but then neither does the Bible. To the Third Wave Antiracist, the sense our society must make above all other kinds is tarring whites as racist and showing that you know that they are racist. Any cognitive dissonance this occasions is “not what we need to be talking about,” because antiracism is everything—*regardless of logic*.

## Why do they get away with it?

Third Wave Antiracism’s claims and demands, from a distance, seem like an eccentric performance from people wishing they hadn’t missed the late 1960s, dismayed that so much of the basic work is done already. Seeking the same righteous fury and heartwarming sense of purpose and belonging, their exaggerations and even mendacities become inevitable, because actual circumstances simply do not justify the attitudes and strategies of 1967.

In an alternate universe, these people would be about as important as the Yippies were back in the day, with marijuana on their “flag,” applying to levitate the Pentagon and smacking pies in people’s faces. They were a fringe movement good for a peek, and occasionally heightened awareness a tad. But they were unimportant in the grand

scheme of things, and justifiably so. What makes the difference is that today's Third Wave Antiracists have a particular weapon in their arsenal that lends them outsized power, much more impactful than a cream pie.

Ironically, the weapon is so lethal because of the genuine and invaluable change that has occurred in our sociopolitical fabric over the past decades. That change is that to the modern American, being called a racist is all but equivalent to being called a pedophile. A lot of very important people fought to make it that way, and few of us would wish they had not. But the problem is that the Third Wave Antiracists now piggyback on it. A key part of their tool kit is that they call those who disagree with them racists, or the more potent term of art of our moment, "white supremacists." That kind of charge has a way of sticking. To deny it is to confirm it, we are taught; once the charge is hurled, it's like you're caught in a giant squid's tentacles. At least you can wash a cream pie off.

We need not suppose Third Wave Antiracists do this cynically to amass power. Take a look at, or listen to, that family member, neighbor, or co-worker you know who thinks this way and ask yourself whether they really give any indication of being a power seeker. The Third Wave Antiracist genuinely reviles racism, as do most of us. They also seek a great deal else in the name of this that seems hopelessly impractical, idealist, or just plain mean. But under our current conditions, the shakiness of their platform does not get in their way. This is because they can at any time shout out that you are a racist—and they do.

And to all but a very few, being called a racist is so intolerable today that one would rather tolerate some cognitive dissonance and fold up. This wouldn't have worked as well in, say, 1967. In that America, many white

people called racists by this kind of person, for better or for worse, would have just taken a sip of their cocktail and said, “I don’t think so at all.” Or even just “Fuck you!” Today—because of progress, ironically—things are different. Now most cringe hopelessly at the prospect of being outed as a bigot, and thus: In being ever ready to call you a racist in the public square, the Third Wave Antiracist outguns you on the basis of this one weapon alone. Even if their overall philosophy is hardly the scriptural perfection they insist it is, that one thing they can and will do in its defense leaves us quivering wrecks. And thus they win.

The people wielding this ideology and watching its influence spread ever more are under the genuine impression that they are forging progress, that reason and morality are in flower. However, society is changing not because of a burgeoning degree of consensus in moral sophistication. What is happening is much cruder. Society is changing not out of consensus, but out of fear—the fear of the child cowering under the threat of a smack from an angry parent, the serf cowering under the threat of a disfiguring smash from the knout. The statements of solidarity from seemingly every institutional entity, the social media selfies of people “doing the work” of reading *White Fragility*, anyone pretending to entertain notions that the hard sciences need to “open up” to “diverse” perspectives by pulling back from requiring close reasoning—all of this is a product of not enlightenment, but simple terror. We have become a nation of smart people attesting that they “get it” while peeing themselves.

Unbeautiful but real. Third Wave Antiracism exploits modern Americans’ fear of being thought racist to promulgate not just antiracism, but an obsessive, self-involved, totalitarian, and utterly unnecessary kind of



cultural reprogramming. One could be excused for thinking this queer, glowering kabuki is a continuation of the Civil Rights efforts of yore, the only kind of new antiracism there could be. Its adherents, now situated in the most prestigious and influential institutions in the land, preach with such contemptuous indignation that on their good days they can seem awfully “correct.”

## Are we going to let them continue to?

The question is: Will we knuckle under to this and pay-to-play? Or will we assert that these people are gruesomely close to Hitler’s racial notions in their conception of an alien, blood-deep malevolent “whiteness,” in their simplistic conception of what it means to be “black,” in their crude us-versus-them conception of how society works, as if we were all still rival bands of australopithecines?

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MANY REVIEWS WILL DISMISS this book as being about something that doesn’t really matter. But if that’s true, why are you reading it? You are reading it because this religion has started to drive you crazy and you want to know what the hell this is and what to do about it.

You get First Wave Antiracism and think of segregation as an ancient barbarity.

You’re right.

You get Second Wave Antiracism—i.e., roughly equivalent to what Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan did

for feminism—and think we should all work to truly see black people as equal to whites and deserving of all that whites get.

You're right.

You see Third Wave antiracism telling you that you are morally bound to conceive of ordinary statements that once were thought of as progressive, like “I don't see color,” as racist. That if you are white you are to despise yourself as tainted permanently by “white privilege” in everything you do. That you must accept even claims of racism from black people that make no real sense, or, if you are black, must pretend that such claims are sacrosanct because the essence of your life is oppression. Whatever color you are, in the name of acknowledging “power,” you are to divide people into racial classes, in exactly the way that First and Second Wave antiracism taught you not to, including watching your kids and grandkids taught the same, despite that progress on racism has been so resplendent over the past fifty years that an old-school segregationist brought alive to walk through modern America *even in the deepest South would find it hard not to turn to the side of the road and retch at what he saw.*

You don't get it. *You are right again.*

You wonder what in God this new thing is that you are expected to bow down to at the PTA meeting, or when you open up websites of what were once your favorite news sources, or when you listen to callers on National Public Radio, or when you submit to “diversity training” at work that leads to nothing you can perceive except the mouthing of vacuous mantras, or when you stay quiet when somebody at a jolly gathering with you and your kids casually roasts as today's fifth-grade outcast some writer

you actually have always agreed with and you decide to stay silent.

All of that nags like an eyelash caught behind your contact lens. They insist that self-mortification is political activism—*fail*. They insist that being black is ever and only oppression from the white man—*fail*. That black people labor under threat of the return of disenfranchisement as a people because Republicans try to depress black turnout to lower Democrat tallies, even though black women were central in determining the election of Joe Biden as president along with a black American vice president? *Fail*. Yet if you venture any genuine pushback, you are tarred on social media as a racist.

You, black or not, are not crazy to get that this glowering double-talk doesn't wash. And your job is to learn to cover your ears against what feels like verbal jiu-jitsu from those whose sense of significance is founded in denying reason and teaching people who have already been through enough to build their identities around a studied sense of victimhood.

Of course, they say they are pursuing "social justice," thus telling the rest of us that we are resisting social justice. Don't get tripped up. They are using the term to refer to their very specific and questionable sense of what social justice is, and as such, to ask us whether we are "against social justice" qualifies as a dirty trick along the lines of being asked if you still beat your spouse.

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WE WILL NEED A CRISPER label for these problematic folk. I will not title them "social justice warriors." That and other labels such as "the woke mob" are unsuitably dismissive.

One of the key insights I hope to get across in this book is that most of these people are not zealots. They are mostly thoroughly nice people. They are your neighbor, your friend, possibly even your offspring. They are friendly school principals, people who work quietly in publishing, lawyer pals. Heavy readers, good cooks, musicians. It's just that, sadly, what they become, solely on this narrow but impactful range of issues, is inquisitors.

I considered titling them the Inquisitors. But that, too, is mean. I'm not interested in mean; I want to get around these people so we can actually move ahead. But I intended it as an accurate metaphor—this ideology directly impedes getting ahead.

Author and essayist Joseph Bottum has found the proper term, and I will adopt it here: We will term these people the Elect. They do think of themselves as bearers of a wisdom, granted them for any number of reasons—empathic leaning, life experience, maybe even intelligence. But they see themselves as having been chosen, as it were, by one or some of these factors, as understanding something most do not. “The Elect” is also good in implying a certain smugness, which, sadly, is an accurate depiction. Then too, it challenges the people in question to consider whether they really think of themselves as superior in this way. Of course, most of them will resist the charge. But with it sitting in the air, in its irony, they may feel moved to resist the definition, which over time may condition at least some of them to temper the excesses of the philosophy—just as after the 1980s many started disidentifying from being “too PC.”

But most importantly, terming these people the Elect implies a certain air of the past, à la *The Da Vinci Code*. This is apt, in that the view they think of as, indeed,

sacrosanct is directly equivalent to views people centuries before us were as fervently devoted to as today's Elect are. The medieval Catholic passionately defended persecuting Jews and Muslims for reasons we now understand were rooted in lesser facets of being human. We spontaneously "other" those antique inquisitors in our times, but right here and now we are faced with people who harbor the exact same brand of mission, just against different persons.

In 1500 it was about not being Christian. In 2020 it's about not being *sufficiently* antiracist, with adherents supposing that this is a more intellectually and morally advanced cause than antipathy to someone for being Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim. They do not see that they, too, are persecuting people for not adhering to their religion.

Grammar lessons in how we will use this term:

We are confused and hurt by *the Elect*.

The person who threatens us is *an Elect*.

We must learn to glean when someone is *Elect*. Is he *Elect*?

Did he say something *Elect*? Take heed, and if he says more *Elect* things, disengage.

He went all *Elect* on me.

They were up on some *Elect* shit.

Electism manifests itself in degrees, of course. There are especially abusive Elect ideologues. Some are comfortable ripping into people in person; others largely restrict the nastiness to social media. Still other Elect do not go in for being actively mean but are still comfortable with the imperatives, have founded their sociopolitical perspectives firmly upon them, and are hard-pressed to feel

comfortable interacting socially with people in disagreement. They allow the openly abusive Elect to operate freely, seeing their conduct as a perhaps necessary unpleasantness in the goal of general enlightenment.

In this book, I do not wish to imply that the Elect are all of the especially abusive type; the vast majority are not. It is a frame of mind compatible with all variations of human temperament, not a fanaticism. Fundamentalists hope their Good News reaches the whole world someday, but they encompass all personality types, as do all Christians, Muslims, and Baha'is. Thus we must not imagine that the Elect is prototypically a picketing shouter. Just as plausibly, they are an easy-mannered sort with some kids and a quiet grin, who you would never imagine subscribing to something extremist, unempirical, and tribalist. They may well even play the ukulele while singing Odetta songs and sipping Knob Creek. Yet this selfsame person will, with no hesitation, sign a letter requesting the firing or public shaming of someone who has contravened the Elect's doctrine.

Thus, in working with the Elect, we must not be on the alert for hotheads. The challenge of the Elect is precisely that they are no more pushy, arrogant, or otherwise socially unschooled than anyone else—they are just folks. The problem is the degree to which the more hostile adherents have come to influence, robustly, so very many less argumentative but equally devout others, whose increasing numbers and intimidating buzzwords have the effect of silencing those who see Elect philosophy as flawed but aren't up for being mauled. The Elect are, in all of their diversity, sucking all of the air out of the room. It must stop.

We will hear that this is a book “against antiracism,” and thus racist (cue the fist bumps). But as most of us can see, there is a difference between being antiracist and being antiracist in a hostile way, where one is to pillory people for what, as recently as ten years ago, would have been thought of as petty torts or even as nothing at all, to espouse policies that hurt black people as long as supporting them makes you seem aware that racism exists, and to pretend that America never makes any real progress on racism and privately almost hope that it doesn’t, because it would deprive you of a sense of purpose. We must conceive of such people as adherents of a sect called the Elect.

And more to the point:

*What kind of people do these things?* Religious fundamentalists.

*Why do they get away with it?* Because they scare us in calling us heretics in the public square.

*Are we going to let them continue to?* Not if we want to keep our intellectual, moral, and artistic culture from being strangled by what is not a sociopolitical program but a religion. The Elect are operating on the basis of a new religion emerging before us here in our own times. The next chapter will expand on this point.

Do not heed those who say that this religion isn’t important. Make no mistake: These people are coming after your kids.

## THE NEW RELIGION

**S**OMETHING MUST BE UNDERSTOOD: I do not mean that these people's ideology is "like" a religion. I seek no rhetorical snap in the comparison. I mean that it actually is a religion. An anthropologist would see no difference in type between Pentecostalism and this new form of antiracism. Language is always imprecise, and thus we have traditionally restricted the word *religion* to certain ideologies founded in creation myths, guided by ancient texts, and requiring that one subscribe to certain beliefs beyond the reach of empirical experience. This, however, is an accident, just as it is that we call tomatoes vegetables rather than fruits. If we rolled the tape again, the word *religion* could easily apply as well to more recently emerged ways of thinking within which there is no explicit requirement to subscribe to unempirical beliefs, even if the school of thought does reveal itself to entail such beliefs upon analysis. One of them is this extremist version of antiracism today.

With the rise of Third Wave Antiracism we are witnessing the birth of a new religion, just as Romans witnessed the birth of Christianity. The way to get past seeing the Elect as merely "crazy" is to understand that they are a religion. To see them this way is not to wallow in derision, but to genuinely grasp what they are.