WOKEISM AS NEO-PURITANISM
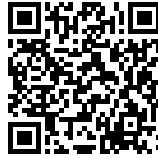
"To be woke," in the vernacular of the predominantly youthful members of this group, means to be aware of or awake to the central parameters of Wokeism, especially concerning the virulence of racism and its effects, and of the myriad ways in which all contemporary societies endeavor to champion whites and oppress non-whites.

It is now frequently noted that the brand of contemporary elite leftist identity politics that is dominant in much of American academia, mass media, and tech industry corporate culture—a phenomenon some have named "Wokeism" --bears some of the characteristics of a religion. Wokeism is certainly on the ascendant in the US and in some other Western countries at present, and in its emotive and moralistic mode of action the comparison to religious life seems at least superficially viable. For the Wokeist, virtually everything in the seemingly complex modern and multicultural societies in which we find ourselves is reducible to one fundamental fact that shapes virtually everything: whites as a group, and whiteness as their social identity and in the forms taken by a connected set of cultural symbols extending from that identity, are unjustly privileged and dominating, and non-whites—especially blacks--are systematically and vigorously excluded from full participation in the life of their societies by virtue of their lack of whiteness. Every institutional and social space in modern society—from schools to the realm of employment to the criminal justice system to medical institutions—is fundamentally warped by white supremacy and antiblackness, and the properly moral response to this is expressive outrage at this fact and a concentrated effort to achieve social change that would demolish white privilege and produce utopian racial equality. The symbolic power of these sacred entities of Wokeism works at a level of emotional intensity that approaches the fervor found in religion.

Some have endeavored to hone this classificatory idea still further, describing Wokeism as a New Puritanism, though typically with little in the way of sustained comparative analysis. There is significant viability in this classification, and elaboration on it can perhaps help us to further understand where Wokeism fits in the broader history and evolution of religious culture in the West.

Let us start with differences. Puritanism was deeply concerned about spiritual matters, specifically, with the nature of God, the eternal nature and fate of the human soul, the existence of Heaven and Hell. Any supernatural element in Wokeism's religious practice is at best occluded, and much evidence suggests that it simply has no concern for matters outside the social and political spheres. Whereas the Wokeists orient themselves entirely to a worldly politics of progressive transformation, Puritanism had no vision of earthly progress and had no hope for humankind outside of the imminent return of the Christ. American Puritans believed that God would bring them back to England in victory, and this would be

followed by the Apocalypse, probably sometime in the mid-1600s. And though the Puritans embraced a variety of individualism, as does Wokeism (though not at all the same variety), they nonetheless adhered to embodied collective worship and rite, which seems absent in Wokeism outside of the ephemeral virtual rituals of social media.

But Wokeism does share a good deal with Puritanism, or perhaps more accurately we should say that it can be readily understood as a phenomenon situated in the same religious evolutionary trajectory that swept along the Puritans. Wokeism is a development that is in fact broadly consonant with the overall drift of Christianity in the West over roughly the past 500 years, or since the Protestant Reformation produced fundamental shifts in the nature of Christian belief and practice. The Reformation signaled an all-out assault on ritual and on the pre-existing Christian recognition that sacredness was located not only outside the world in God's majesty but also in the world humans inhabited. The Church the Reformation challenged understood that sacredness manifests on something of a continuum, God himself occupying the polar, pure absolute of sacrality while angels, saints, and holy relics, all sacred entities, are nonetheless located at some distance from that pure sacredness, somewhere closer to the profane pole at which humans uncleansed by ritual reside. The Protestants established a stark, total, and unalterable distance between God and man, the sacred and the profane. While it is arguably true that all religion recognizes the magnetic repulsion of sacred and profane, in much primitive religion, as well as in the Christianity dominant in Europe before the Reformation, entities can move and be moved, through ritual, from one category to the other, and sacred things do indeed inhabit the profane world without catastrophe or contradiction.

For the most radical among the Reformers, this was a central blasphemy of the existing Church. God and the sacred are unchanging and ever-lasting, forever beyond the ken and the approach of man, and mysteries by which miracles such as e.g., transubstantiation can be made to systematically occur on command, with prescribed rites and prayers, or mortal humans can become saints by actions of the Church, were anathema to them. Historically, the Roman Catholic Church has been tremendously effective at incorporating elements of indigenous faiths that were based in animistic principles into Christian practice, and the pantheon of the saints has been one of the most effective mechanisms for doing this. Thus, the Marian cult has proven a very efficacious means of bringing populations with local indigenous beliefs concerning sacred mother figures, real and mythical, into the Church.

Protestantism rejected all this categorically, and Wokeism embraces the same exaggerated, exclusivist binary system established by the radical Protestants, though it has been moved into the secular sphere

of cultural politics. The thrust of Protestantism, especially in what became known as the mainline denominations in the US, has been toward individualism and the desacralization of the world. Sociologists such as Peter Berger have long recognized that an evolution of religious practice in a direction that deemphasizes collective ritual and the mystical properties of sacred things is essentially a guarantee that the religious body in question will decline in its ability to attract members. Some of the Protestant denominations unabashedly embraced the secularizing momentum and turned the evangelizing, otherworldly project of traditional Christianity into a this-worldly political project of the progressive left. These mainline Protestant groups in many cases have explicitly built the notion of social justice into their church doctrines. They have been shrinking in membership for decades now, as is well documented, and some are next to extinct. Their existing membership skews heavily toward the social elite of American society as defined by education and income, the same groups that are heavily overrepresented among the ranks of Wokeists. The processes of rationalization corrosively melted the glue of their former religious denominations, but these social classes still had and have the same innate need for a symbolically meaningful universe that is a deep aspect of human nature. So, they left their old churches and they transferred the symbolic categories of their former Protestant faiths into the new schema of Wokeism, its sacred object of the suffering black victim of racism, and the opposed anti-sacred symbol of whiteness.

Although they outwardly claim tolerance as a primary value, Wokeists share with Puritanism a practical intolerance that is unflinching and all the more rigid for the fact that those at which it is directed are defined, in a kind of collective psychological projection, as hostilely intolerant. This necessarily means that there is an unavoidable self-contradiction at the heart of Wokeist doctrine: it champions tolerance while acting systematically with violent intolerance. It also shares with Puritanism a belief that childhood is a corrupt state, at least as infected by sin (or in the case of Wokeism, racism) as adulthood. The Puritans preached incessantly to the very young about the terror of death and damnation and the need for full-blooded spiritual fervor in even the youngest. They built frank discussions of the grave into elementary school grammar primers. For their part, Wokeists cheerlead for psychological tests that purport to show "implicit racism" in even the very young and enthusiastically advocate for educational measures at the earliest level to combat "white privilege" and force those in whom the energy of the anti-totem inheres to repent and be reeducated.

The most profound similarity between Puritanism and Wokeism has to do with the doctrine of predestination. For the Puritans, this was a ferocious doctrine that threw the believer into a radical inner loneliness, unprotected by any Church hierarchy or ritual, where the most profound decision in his life had already been settled before his birth. In Weber's famous formulation, the withering psychological

burden of understanding that the single most important question of one's fate was entirely out of one's hands is the pressure that drove the emergence of the Protestant work ethic. Though Puritans did not believe that one could demonstrate convincingly one's elect status by adhering to the tenets of this notion of work in a calling, one could at least assuage to some degree the ultimately unlivable tension of total ignorance of one's fate by acting in a way that would be understood by self and others as most consonant with the actions of a member of the elect rather than one of the damned. These measures might decrease the unbearable uncertainty and anxiety to some degree, though accounts of Puritan founders in America on their death beds still tortured by the agony of not knowing their status demonstrate its limits. For the Puritan, the best, though still not foolproof, way of knowing one was elect was precisely the gnawing anxiety and uncertainty about one's fate, and conversely the most powerful evidence someone was not among the elect was his convinced belief that he was.

Wokeism has its own version of this dogma and its convolutions, though to date it has not worked out an equivalent of the Protestant work ethic as a tool to decrease the psychological burden of the harsh belief. The inconclusive efforts of white Wokeists to manage this dilemma can take on an extremity that makes the self-abnegation of Puritanism pale by comparison. Ali Michael, who directs a center for race equity in education at the University of Pennsylvania, expressed this effort in neatly condensed form in the title of an article in which she reflected on the story of Rachel Dolezal, a white woman who identified as black: "*I Sometimes Don't Want to Be White, Either*." Michael explains that her realization of the fact that Wokeism is based on a symbolic binary so uncompromising that all whiteness necessarily must be classed as directly antagonistic to the sacred her to reject the very idea of having her own children, as "everything I learned about the history of racism made me hate myself, my Whiteness, my ancestors… and my descendants…[and] I remember deciding that I couldn't have biological children because I didn't want to propagate my privilege biologically." The full acceptance of the totemic opposition of Wokeism is this: "[T]he lesson for me is remembering how deep the pain is, the pain of realizing I'm White, and that I and my ancestors are responsible for the incredible racialized mess we find ourselves in today." Total self-effacement is perhaps the only way forward from such a realization, though Michael would seem not to have arrived at this position yet, as she continues to make a living as a widely sought-after white antiracist speaker and activist.

For Wokeists, all whites are, by the very nature of their state, guilty of racism and "white privilege," which cannot be undone by any action that person takes. The white Wokeist's position can only be acknowledged, not changed. Adoration of the non-white virtuous victim and disgust at one's own racist white nature are the existential result of this doctrine. For the Puritan, faith and its manifestation in work in a calling might lighten the psychological burden, even if it could not modify the decision already

made by God. The white Wokeist does not even have this limited mechanism for addressing his suffering. His faith in the purity of the non-white victims of white racism and in the impurity of racists and the systemically racist system they have created does nothing to alleviate his mental state, and it certainly cannot change the determination of his state as a racist oppressor.

Sacrifice as alimentary communion between the god and the members of the cult was still recognized in Puritanism as an essential rite, but it was here already diluted to the form of a sign of the bond between god and cult member, rather than a substantial meal in which the god is literally consumed to replenish sacred power in the bodies of followers. However, this rite, attenuated as it was, undoubtedly provided some significant integrative power for Puritans. It might be argued that a symbolic sacrificial rite is present in Wokeism in the form we saw in the US in the wake of the George Floyd protests/riots in the spring and summer of 2020, when white Wokeists were seen performing oblations to virtuous victim blacks in the form of prostrating themselves before them, sometimes washing their feet or cleaning their shoes.

Another core of difference between these two doctrines—and perhaps the most significant—resides in the fact that, for the Puritan, the resolution of the mystery does take place, finally, if in a supernatural world outside this one, and so it can at least be pointed to with anticipation and, provided faith is strong, confidence. Wokeism, as a fundamentally corrupted trajectory in the history of religion, has rejected the supernatural entirely in its theology, and given that this world is the only one, ultimate racial justice cannot be deferred to the next. It demands endless repentance and self-flagellation on the part of the white Wokeist who understands his inescapable position as oppressor of the sacred victims of racism, indeed, as *the incarnation of the anti-sacred*. Whiteness as symbol is despised with such ferocity precisely *because the despisers recognize in it their own inevitable natures and are predictably unable to fathom that in a way amenable to the reins of reasoned dispassion*.

Freudianism has been effectively decimated as an explanatory system for human behavior by scientific research into the brain, but one is almost tempted here to invoke the Freudian doctrine of trauma, the unconscious, and neurosis. Unbearable, awful knowledge (one's own racist whiteness) proves too painful to keep in the conscious mind, so it is stored away in the unconscious, where it nonetheless still acts on the conscious self in occluded ways in the form of neurotic behaviors (the sheer violence and irrationality of antagonism to the anti-sacred). But there is no need for outmoded Freudian categories to understand the seriousness of the problem here. In psychological terms, fervent adherence to an uncompromising moralistic set of beliefs about the world that frame self as irrevocably on the side of

unmitigated evil cannot indefinitely be maintained. Escape from the Wokeist system is one possible resolution for white Wokeists. I see no others that do not in the end lead, as self-hatred almost inevitably does, in the direction of unsustainable psychological anxiety.

It is not clear how Wokeism will ultimately make this workable for its troubled white members, or indeed if it can. We have historical models for some of the ways mercilessly moralistic, self-contradictory, self-despising political religions work themselves out, e.g., in the late 1960s and 1970s in the form of the homicidal and suicidal Weather Underground. Whether Wokeism, or some significant number within its ranks, will take up this path is yet to be determined. Wokeism's white members cling fervently to the chiliasm of the results of the "Browning of America" they endlessly reiterate, but they can derive no obvious comfort from this anticipated End Time, as they seem to recognize, in their heart of hearts, that there is no squaring this circle and their status cannot be changed even by that millennialist conclusion.

There is in the end no making amends for white Wokeists. They stand condemned, *by their own beliefs*, with no hope of redemption. Here, religion in the history of the evolution of the Christian West has become a merciless moralizing enterprise for self-punishment (and punishment of others) and status pursuit on a hierarchy in which victimization according to a rigorously identitarian calculus is the coin of the realm. This may be one of the future, corrupted paths of religion in the West, and we would do well to learn more about its inner workings.

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Featured: "The Fallen Woman," by Henri de Caisne; painted in 1852.