

America Shared, or Separate?

How Martin Luther King and Malcolm X Illuminate Conceptions of Race Today – and Where
We Go From Here

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Introduction

If asked, many Americans would likely believe that the death of George Floyd at the hands of a white policer changed the United States of America. The subsequent days and months saw thousands of Americans protesting – and occasionally rioting against – police brutality, which many protestors claimed was an extension of continuing white supremacy and systemic racism in America.

More lasting than protests and riots were the cultural shifts that accelerated in the wake of George Floyd's death. New phrases entered the mainstream American lexicon: anti-racism, institutional racism, unconscious bias. Corporate America paid thousands of dollars for anti-racist trainings, in which black people are told to air racial grievances while white people silently listen. Statues of Confederates – and, later, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln – were pulled down by mobs or scheduled for removal by city leaders. School districts across the country have established commissions to rename schools, including those named after Paul Revere and 19th-century abolitionists.¹

Many cultural observers were blindsided. The shift to this radical racial paradigm looked like a 180-degree turn from the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”² Where was this militant focus on skin color, history, and its consequences coming from, and why did it all look so different from the words of Martin Luther King?

In the words of King Solomon, “there is nothing new under the sun,”³ and the new rhetoric results from principles that emerged into American culture with the work of Malcolm X. While King and Malcolm are both considered Civil Rights leaders, they led two distinct factions with diametrically opposed views. King represented the Integrationist movement, which sought to deemphasize race as a divisive factor in American life; Malcolm advanced Black Nationalism, which sought to preserve the unique black identity through separation from whites. Whereas Integrationism reflected Christian theology, Black Nationalism was intertwined with the divisive Nation of Islam. In an analysis of racial paradigms as they exist today, this paper shall seek to demonstrate the ways in which Black Nationalism is the forebearer to Critical Race Theory (CRT), and how CRT's increasing cultural influence is caused by ebbing Christian values in American culture.

Integrationism vs. Black Nationalism

Integrationism and Black Nationalism emerged in the 20th century as different answers to the same question: After the end of slavery in 1865, and with ongoing state-sanctioned segregation in the form of Jim Crow Laws, how would African Americans exist as a free people in America?

Integrationism espoused the belief that black Americans could and should fight, peacefully but insistently, to be recognized as equal to their white neighbors. Integrationists believed that if

¹ Jarrett Stepman, “In the Woke Revolution, Facts are Irrelevant,” *The Daily Signal*, 10. Feb. 2021, <https://www.dailysignal.com/2021/02/10/san-francisco-school-boards-name-purge-reveals-what-the-woke-lefts-war-on-history-is-really-about/>.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream: Full Text, March on Washington Speech,” *NAACP*, 28 Aug. 1963, 2021, <https://www.naacp.org/i-have-a-dream-speech-full-march-on-washington/>.

³ Ecclesiastes 1:9b, The Holy Bible, New International Version.

equal rights were afforded to both black and white people, the promises set forth in America's founding documents would finally be fulfilled.

In contrast, Black Nationalism held that white people would never cede power to African Americans, and consequently, black and white people would never be treated equally in the United States. The leaders of the movement believed Integrationism, if successful, would lead only to surface-level equality that subsumed the unique black identity to a middle-class white one. This would be, in the words of Malcolm X, continued colonization by a modern name.⁴ The only answer, then, was separatism. Influenced by the 19th-century "Back-to-Africa" movement, Black Nationalists sought to establish their own social institutions, from schools to libraries to newspapers, and live as an entirely separate group within the United States. Typically, Black Nationalism was more attractive to lower-income African Americans, and it became intrinsically tied to the Nation of Islam, a religious faction that interspersed elements of mainstream Islam with Black Power.

Integrationism, Christianity, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

While the Civil Rights Movement did not begin with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., he became the best-known Integrationist of the 1950s and 1960s. His Christian beliefs were foundational to his perspectives on race and segregation in the United States. Specifically, his Christian beliefs were expressed as *personalism*, a belief that the personal God has a vested interest in the well-being of His children; therefore, God was deeply concerned about the black community's fight for justice.⁵ Other Integrationists, such as Howard Thurman, expressed the same belief that the fight for justice for all was inextricably tied up with a moral, Godly cause.⁶

Textual Analysis: Letter from Birmingham Jail

Clearly demonstrating King's foundation in Christian theology is his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, penned in 1963 while King was jailed for nonviolent demonstrations against segregation at lunch counters.⁷ He wrote to white clergy who were discouraging support for the protests on the basis of Christian principles, so King sought to respond to them on the basis of their shared faith.⁸

In the letter, King echoed foundational principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, writing, "We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our God-given and constitutional rights."⁹ Only after acknowledging the core truth of those principles could King argue their promise had yet to be fulfilled. Appealing to God further strengthened his point because the white clergy, as well as broader society, recognized God as a common authority.

In the same spirit, King argued that when a nation's laws contradicted God's moral law, moral law should always win out.¹⁰ King further expounds on this with an Old Testament example

⁴ Alex Haley, Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1964, pp. 277.

⁵ "Personalism," *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, Stanford University, 2021, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/personalism>.

⁶ Clarence B. Jones, "Remembering Ten Black Christian Leaders," *HuffPost*, 25 May 2011, <https://bit.ly/36LZ4J0>.

⁷ "The Letter from Birmingham Jail," *Britannica*, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Martin-Luther-King-Jr/The-letter-from-the-Birmingham-jail>.

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 16 April 1963, <https://letterfromjail.com/>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who were legally obliged to bow down to the human king in lieu of praying to God. Their peaceful resistance led to their intended execution, but “because a higher moral law was involved,” they were miraculously saved.¹¹

Demonstrations against segregation appealed to a morality that transcended American legal codes. If any law violates moral law, it must be strenuously resisted until the law is brought back into accordance with God’s moral code. King’s words show here the centrality of Christian belief to the Civil Rights movement: bringing American law into accordance with Biblical values was foundational. Outside sources also recognized the centrality of God to Integrationism. In 1972, *The New York Times* described the Civil Rights “movement [as] very much a moral one... The integrationists... were on the side of justice, goodness and God.”¹²

Strengths and Limitations of Christianity as Integrationist

Integrationists made the Bible central to their rhetoric, and verses from both the Old and New Testament were foundational to Integrationism:

- *Isaiah 40:4a-5a*: “Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low... And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and ***all people will see it together***” [emphasis added];
- *Acts 17:26*: “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands;”
- *Galatians 3:28-29*: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”¹³

So central was Christian theology to the Integrationist Civil Rights Movement that some historians now credit black congregations as sustaining the movement. While Integrationism had political, legislative objectives, without the “religious fervor” and commitment of black churches, the movement likely would have fizzled.¹⁴

However, not every Christian was an Integrationist. Some Christian leaders in the South appealed to the Bible to support continued segregation. Bob Jones, a South Carolina preacher, gave a 1960 sermon entitled, “Is Segregation Scriptural?” In it, he argued that Acts 17:26, above, was a foundation for Biblical segregation because if God appointed the times and boundaries for specific people, it was not His intention for them to integrate.

Jones missed the context of the chapter. The Apostle Paul, who is traveling from city to city preaching the Good News of Christ, is describing the Creation story to the Athenians, explaining how God is the God of all nations and that all people are his “offspring.” Indeed, Paul’s argument in verse 26 is that *despite* the boundaries between lands drawn up by human hands, God “commands all people everywhere to repent” because we are all his children (verse 30). Any appeal to Biblical authority must be taken in context, and the Bible’s overall message is God’s pursuit of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Charles V. Hamilton, “The nationalist vs. the integrationist,” *The New York Times*, 1 Oct. 1972, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/10/01/archives/the-nationalist-vs-the-integrationist-ideological-foes.html>.

¹³ All verses from the Holy Bible, New International Version.

¹⁴ Paul Harvey, “Civil Rights Movements and Religion in America,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, Oxford University Press, 31 Aug. 2016, <https://bit.ly/2YOL0db>.

all of humankind, without regard to race, creed, or homeland, a vision into which Integrationism fits squarely.

Black Nationalism, the Nation of Islam, and Malcolm X

Meanwhile, Black Nationalism agitated for a different approach. According to Black Nationalists, black people would only achieve full dignity, pride, and human rights if and when they lived apart from white people. Thus, they advocated for self-sufficiency and separatism, seeking to build entirely separate communities from white people.¹⁵ Every institution would necessarily be run and occupied only by black people, for according to Black Nationalists, white people by nature would seek to dominate black people in any shared spaces.

The roots of Black Nationalism trace to the “Back to Africa” movement of the early 20th century, which argued that black people would only be free from white domination if they returned to their ancestors’ homeland in Africa. The Black Nationalists later recognized not only the physical impracticality of the movement, but also its cultural impracticality. African Americans had been shaped by their presence in the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean, and they would not identify with the cultures on the African continent. Thus, Black Nationalists sought to establish communities alongside, but separate from, their white neighbors.

Black Nationalism was also influenced by the Nation of Islam (NOI), a religious sect that incorporates elements of mainstream Islam but also teaches black superiority and whiteness as evil.¹⁶ A mythological creation story called “Yacub’s History” grounded the Nation of Islam, in which a black scientist named Yacub spitefully created the “unnatural” white race 6,600 years ago.¹⁷ When the “devilish” white people infiltrated Mecca, inhabited exclusively by black people, they caused war and were exiled to Europe; according to the myth, they later enslaved black people out of hatred and envy.¹⁸

By the mid-20th century, Malcolm X had become the most famous and influential Black Nationalist and NOI member. Born Malcolm Little, he converted to NOI while he was in prison for committing crimes across New York City and Boston.¹⁹ After his conversion, he gave up his “hustler” lifestyle and changed his last name to “X,” representing a stand-in for the African surname of his “paternal forebears” that had been replaced with the white slavemaster’s (Little).²⁰ Malcolm X explosively grew the Nation of Islam, founding new temples, recruiting adherents, and bringing Black Nationalism out of obscurity and into the public eye.

Textual Analysis: The Autobiography of Malcolm X

A textual analysis of Malcolm X’s autobiography provides insight into the foundational principles of Black Nationalism. First, Black Nationalism rejected the foundational American principles of liberty and equality, and in their place, they taught that white people have an immutable sense of supremacy over black people. Malcolm X had no regard for an individual’s

¹⁵ “Black Nationalism,” *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, Stanford University, 2021, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/black-nationalism>.

¹⁶ Alex Haley, Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1964, pp. 184.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 192.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 192.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 183.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 229.

choices, personalities, or values, and he echoed the NOI “history” of the generalized white man as the literal devil.

Malcolm’s characterization of the United States, even until his death, was that America is a racist society.²¹ With the half-century since Malcolm’s death, it is worth asking if he would feel that American society remains steadfastly racist today. The framing of Black Nationalism suggests he would. As opposed to the Integrationist advocating to join and perfect broader American society, Malcolm led a movement that sought to separate from it entirely. Foundational to his views was that he saw no hope for the black man in America.²²

Also central to Black Nationalism is its clear and intentional opposition to Integrationism and Christianity, which were viewed as intertwined philosophies. According to Black Nationalists, Christianity was forced upon African Americans to anesthetize them to their inhumane, brutal treatment during slavery. A key teaching in NOI sermons was that Christianity was used to “brainwash” black people.²³ Malcolm refers to Christianity as “mentally dead,”²⁴ “piratically opportunist,”²⁵ and merely an expression of “the white man’s love for himself.”²⁶

Even deeper was Black Nationalists’ anger towards Integrationism and the black people who encouraged it. While NOI followers tended to be lower-income and former prisoners because of NOI’s recruitment tactics, Malcolm described Integrationists as “well-dressed and well-educated” whose “profession is being a Negro for the white man.”²⁷ He called Integrationists “black bodies with white heads,” and he compared them to slaves who had worked in the house and were, therefore, closer to the white slaveholders than the “yard slaves.”²⁸ The division and strife between these groups drew attention from large, influential news publications at the time, including *Life*, *Look*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *Reader’s Digest*.²⁹ The division between these movements was not accidental: foundational to Black Nationalism was tearing down Integrationist structures.

Black Nationalism in Mid-Twentieth Century America

As a counterclaim to Black Nationalism as an oppositional framework, Malcolm was initially instructed not to publicly deride Integrationists. It was only when the Integrationists’ attacks on Black Nationalism intensified that he was given permission to begin “returning their fire.”³⁰

Indeed, as Malcolm insinuates, Integrationists publicly called Black Nationalism a force for extremism. In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, King wrote that he felt he was standing between two forces in the black community: one of complacency and one of “bitterness and hatred [that] comes perilously close to advocating violence:”

“It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups... the largest and best known being Elijah Muhammad’s Muslim movement. This movement is nourished by the contemporary

²¹ Ibid, pp. 439.

²² Ibid, pp. 283.

²³ Ibid, pp. 231.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 257.

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 204.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 272.

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 279-80.

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 280.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 279.

frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination. It is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incurable devil.”³¹

Still, key differences prevent Integrationism from being “oppositional” in the same sense that Black Nationalism was oppositional. Unlike Integrationism, Black Nationalism emphasized revolution. In the “Message to the Grassroots,” Malcolm explicitly described, “If you’re afraid of black nationalism, you’re afraid of revolution. If you love revolution, you love black nationalism.”³² Revolutions necessitate the destruction of the system in place. Malcolm rejected the foundational principles of America as lies from white people, and he sought, along with every Black Nationalist, to remove black people from their system and create something entirely separate. Tearing down that which Integrationists and Christians, between whom Malcolm drew little distinction, were trying to build was essential to bringing more black people on board to the separatist project. However, it was not essential to the Integrationist project to destroy Black Nationalism; it was only essential to destroy segregation.

Black Nationalism at the Root of Critical Race Theory

The Integrationist movement may have won the political and cultural moment of the mid-1960s, but Black Nationalism did not disintegrate with the death of Malcolm X in 1965. Instead, it further radicalized. In 1972, *The New York Times* reported that the “primary goal” in the minds of contemporary black leaders was “for blacks to try to control as many of the political, economic, educational and social institutions as possible.”³³

To gain cultural prominence, Black Nationalism would need a centralized vision and mission. Law schools served as the necessary incubator, “bringing together issues of power, race, and racism to address the liberal notion of color blindness.”³⁴ Under the legitimacy of law schools, critical race theory was born.

Critical race theory derives from the broader study of *critical legal theory*, or simply *critical theory*. Critical theorists posit the centrality of social issues in the law, concluding that laws naturally and necessarily promote the interests of the people who create, enforce, and interpret them.³⁵ Therefore, according to critical theorists, the law creates a system of power in which the historically privileged party “wins” and the historically underprivileged party “loses.”³⁶ Because of its emphasis on power and an “oppressor versus oppressed” narrative, critical theory is widely acknowledged to have emerged from Marxist thought in Europe.³⁷ Rather than emphasizing power shifts through swift revolution, critical theory aims to lob unceasing criticisms at the power

³¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 16 April 1963, <https://letterfromjail.com/>.

³² “Black Nationalism,” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, 2021, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/black-nationalism>.

³³ Charles V. Hamilton, “The nationalist vs. the integrationist,” *The New York Times*, 1 Oct. 1972, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/10/01/archives/the-nationalist-vs-the-integrationist-ideological-foes.html>.

³⁴ Aja Y. Martinez, “Critical Race Theory: Its Origins, History, and Importance to the Discourses and Rhetorics of Race,” *Frame* 27 no. 2 (November 2014): 9. <http://blog.richmond.edu/criticalracetheory/files/2019/01/CRT-Origins-History-Importance.pdf>.

³⁵ “Critical Legal Theory,” *Legal Information Center*, Cornell Law School, 2021, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/critical_legal_theory.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

hierarchy to ensure its destruction. Critical theory advocates for structural change slowly, but certainly: death by a thousand cuts.

Accordingly, critical race theory (CRT) posits that race is ultimately a social construct. However, its lack of biological basis does not deemphasize its social importance; CRT scholars argue that precisely because it is a social construct, racism is a central, systemic fact in societies built by white people.³⁸ Under the CRT paradigm, social systems are designed to privilege white people at the expense of black people. According to journalist Christopher Rufo, who has extensively studied CRT, there are three key concepts in the CRT paradigm,³⁹ and all of them are rooted in the ideals advanced by Black Nationalism, articulated by Malcolm X.

First is the concept of **race essentialism**. Under CRT, every individual of any race “can be reduced to a racial essence.”⁴⁰ This core belief is manifesting in today’s classrooms with “identity maps,” in which elementary-aged children are instructed to map every aspect of their race, gender, and other characteristics; some teachers then instruct the children to arrange themselves in order of their “power” based on their identity maps.⁴¹ Whiteness sits at the top of these taught power hierarchies.

Race essentialism, especially for white people, was foundational to Black Nationalism and NOI. The NOI creation myth is racial essentialism in itself, with the generalized white man cast as the devil without shades of individual characteristics. Boiling down entire categories of people to their race was a central rhetorical tool used by Black Nationalists. It has been redeployed for the same reason by critical race theorists: It is highly effective and emotive, and its broad, collective categorization is designed to close off any debate or divergence of views.

Secondly, CRT advances a key concept of **collective guilt**: white people today remain guilty for how a faction of white people treated a faction of black people in centuries past. In CRT-inspired workplace trainings, white people are often asked to sit silently while their black friends and colleagues are asked to share their personal experiences with racism, and while white people are encouraged to apologize for actions they did not personally commit, the trainer informs black people they are under no obligation to accept the apology.⁴²

The concept of collective guilt is directly pulled from Black Nationalist rhetoric espoused by Malcolm X in his autobiography:

“Do you know why the white man really hates you? It’s because every time he sees your face, he sees a mirror of his crime... Every white man in America, when he looks into a black man’s eyes, should fall to his knees and say, ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry – my kind has committed history’s greatest crime against your kind; will you give me the chance to atone?’ But do you brothers and sisters expect any white man to do that? No, you know better!”⁴³

Thirdly, CRT advocates for a revival of **neo-segregationism**. Under euphemisms such as “black spaces” or “affinity groups,” CRT scholars and trainers advocate for separating black and

³⁸ Joanna Williams, “Critical Race Theory: a ruling-class ideology,” *Spiked*, 27 Nov. 2020, <https://www.spiked-online.com/2020/11/27/critical-race-theory-a-ruling-class-ideology/>.

³⁹ Megyn Kelly, featuring Christopher Rufo, “59. Race and Schools with Jodi Shaw and Christopher Rufo,” *The Megyn Kelly Show* podcast, Devil May Care Media, 3 Feb. 2020.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Megyn Kelly, featuring Christopher Rufo, “59. Race and Schools with Jodi Shaw and Christopher Rufo,” *The Megyn Kelly Show* podcast, Devil May Care Media, 3 Feb. 2020.

⁴³ Alex Haley, Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1964, pp. 234-5.

white people into different rooms to discuss issues related to race.⁴⁴ While CRT trainings are commonly separated, “black-only spaces” are increasingly seen on college campuses as well. Yale, Columbia, and MIT today are offering black-only residence halls, black-only orientation classes, and black-only graduation ceremonies.⁴⁵

Needless to say, neo-segregationism or separatism is a key component of Black Nationalism; indeed, it is the most distinct feature from Integrationism. In his autobiography, Malcolm says, “For the black man in America, the only solution is complete *separation* from the white man!”⁴⁶ Like critical race theorists, Black Nationalists reject any mutual benefits to black and white people coexisting; they posit that the immutable characteristics of “whiteness” will always result in white people dominating “integrated” spaces.

In their rebuttal, both critical race theorists and Black Nationalists reject the similarity of segregation and separation, as articulated by Malcolm X:

“No! We reject segregation even more militantly than you do! We want separation, which is not the same!... [S]egregation is when your life and liberty are controlled, regulated, by someone else... But separation is that which is done voluntarily, by two equals – for the good of both!”⁴⁷

Later CRT scholars captured Malcolm’s point by distilling the difference between segregation and separation down to power dynamics. Gary Peller, an early advocate of CRT and today a professor at Georgetown Law, posited that the understanding of separation as equal to segregation has emerged only because of Integrationism’s cultural dominance.⁴⁸ According to CRT, black people choosing to separate themselves from white people confers equal power to both parties, rather than white people subjugating black people to separate spaces under segregation.⁴⁹

However, what Peller and other critical race theorists do not address is impact and outcome. Ultimately, whether under forced segregation or co-equal separation, the result is separate spaces for white and black people, which breaks down trust, friendship, and understanding between people of different races. Socially and biologically, humans trust what is familiar with and mistrust what is unfamiliar. The more the “separate spaces for different races” mentality proliferates, the more stereotypes, mistrust, and division will as well. That reality is unanswered by critical race theorists and Black Nationalists, presumably because they do not seek improvements in race relations because they view whiteness as immutably “devilish” and supremacist.

The Erosion of Christianity and the Rise of CRT

Much has changed since Integrationism was the primary cultural paradigm for American race relations. In the half-century since Martin Luther King, Jr. lived and worked, Christianity has eroded as the moral foundation of mainstream culture. In the past decade, the number of people

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Dion J. Pierre, “Demands for Segregated Housing at Williams College Are Not News,” *The National Review*, 8 May 2019, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/05/american-colleges-segregated-housing-graduation-ceremonies/>.

⁴⁶ Alex Haley, Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1964, pp. 283.

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 284.

⁴⁸ Gary Peller, “Race Consciousness,” *Duke Law Journal* 39, no. 4 (1990): 778.
<https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3122&context=dlj>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

who identify as Christians declined 12 points to 65%, and the percentage who respond as agnostic or as religious “nones” increased nine points to 26%.⁵⁰ Culturally speaking, more significant than the decline in individual Christian practice is the decline in broad recognition of the United States as a “Christian nation.” Supreme Court decisions to eliminate school prayer⁵¹ and remove the Ten Commandments from the classroom⁵² are part of this story, as are increasingly secular images and values in Hollywood, the media, and the political class in Washington, DC. This is not to say that there has been a mass exodus from America of Christians – people who have a personal relationship with Christ and who generally attend church on a regular basis. Rather, the moral principles undergirding the country have changed, having been once inspired by Christian texts – for example, Americans recognized a Biblical understanding of the family, or a “Golden-Rule” morality inspired by Jesus’ teaching. Not every American professed a Christian faith, but the broad understanding of morality had a Christian origin. That cultural morality is on an accelerating decline.

The erosion of Christian-inspired morality has had consequences: 67% of religious “nones” report concern about the nation’s moral condition.⁵³ There are signs the trend is increasing; while 38% of Elders agree with the statement, “Whatever is right for your life or works best for you is the only truth you can know,” 74% of Millennials do.⁵⁴ Into the void of morality left by Christianity’s decline has stepped a confusing, sometimes contradictory amalgam of post-modernist relativism, a focus on collectivism as determinant of morality, and a militant “cancel culture” around anything deemed unsatisfactorily progressive.

Because of the intertwined relationship between Integrationism and Christianity, it stands to reason that the Integrationist spirit dominated the country’s cultural space while the accepted moral code was still Christian-inspired. As Christianity has declined in cultural prominence, Integrationism has suffered as well, for the new cultural vanguards see fatal flaws that make it incompatible with their relativistic collectivism.

First, America’s principal foundation is in individualism, espoused in Constitutional law as well as God-given individual rights and equality. All of these foundational principles are incompatible with the “new” culture’s preference for collectivism. Therefore, the focus on Western and American ills, from slavery to colonialism, is far more compatible with CRT, which posits that American individualistic principles of equality and human dignity are fundamentally a lie.⁵⁵

Furthermore, Integrationism rose up out of black churches and retains Christian principles as its basis, which is an uncomfortable view for the “new” cultural view of religious relativism. Integrationists recognized that equality under the law derived from equality before God, in which a core concept is individual culpability for our own sin. In the CRT paradigm, individualism and individual choices are not relevant to the broad categories of “oppressor” and “oppressed” based on immutable characteristics of race. Therefore, CRT fits far more easily into “new” cultural structures devoid of Christian principles than does Integrationism.

⁵⁰ “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” *Pew Research Center*, 17 Oct. 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

⁵¹ *Engel v. Vitale* (1962)

⁵² *McCreary County v. ACLU* (2005)

⁵³ “The End of Absolutes: America’s New Moral Code,” *Barna Group*, 25 May 2016, <https://www.barna.com/research/the-end-of-absolutes-americas-new-moral-code/>.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Jeffrey J. Pyle, “Race, Equality and the Rule of Law: Critical Race Theory’s Attack on the Promises of Liberalism,” *Boston College Review* 40, no. 3 (1999): 788. <https://bit.ly/3daXbt7>.

Conclusion

When race exploded onto the national scene with the horrific death of George Floyd in May 2020, the foundation had already been laid for the CRT paradigm as the dominant cultural force. Since mainstream American culture began abandoning Christian principles in the mid- to late-20th century, a Christian and Integrationist answer to the turmoil would naturally not be the answer. The academic paradigm of Critical Race Theory that emerged some 30 years ago had already successfully trickled down into broader American culture, institutionalized by a media apparatus sympathetic and acculturated to its ideas and values. Thus, the tinder had been set long before. George Floyd's tragic death at the hands of a white police officer would become the crisis that blew the cover off ideas that had long been in the background, simmering in a relativist, collectivist, and secular American culture.

There is nothing new under the sun. Black Nationalism, the philosophy that Martin Luther King tied to "hatred and despair," laid the groundwork for CRT and its divisiveness between Americans of different races. The roots of this ideology demonstrate its foundational opposition to Christian values and America's founding principles. A surface-level understanding of CRT has caused too many Americans to see it as an extension of the Civil Rights movement. It is not: as this paper has demonstrated, it is fundamentally opposed to Martin Luther King's Integrationist values. Americans must have broad knowledge of CRT, its roots in Black Nationalism, and the world it seeks to create in order to evaluate if it truly encapsulates the culture we wish to leave to our children.

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