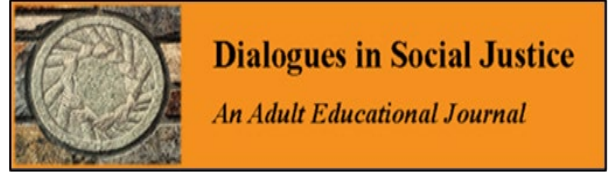


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Book Review

Critical Faith: What It Is, What It Isn't & Why It Matters

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This is an unusual volume: it is heartfelt; it is personal; it is powerful, insightful, and informed; and, I would guess, for many readers of books on discrimination, racism, and social inequalities in the United States, it presents a vision and a lens with which we are less acquainted. As its author, Joni Schwartz-Chaney, associate professor of humanities at the City University of New York-LaGuardia Community College and “lead editor” of this journal writes, “This book is an act of obedience to that Christ [“Christ as a liberator”] and to the church community. Critical faith matters” (x-xi). If academics still hold onto some version of the so-called “fact/value” distinction, or at least make some effort to bracket our deepest beliefs in the hope of achieving more “objective” conclusions in a secular spirit, Schwartz-Chaney says “No.” Her message is clear: “Our best hope is a critical faith—anchored to the courage of the spirit of Christ—that drives radical and revolutionary love” (xiv). We have been invited into new territory.

There are many familiar elements in Schwartz-Chaney’s excavation of what she sets out to build: a deeper, more all-encompassing, and thus incisive criticality—tools to penetrate systems of racism that are “part of the social fabric” (61). Indeed, a very useful component of the book is the author’s detailed description and analysis of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a “broad lens through which we can study the role of race in America beyond individual success or failure” (21), and her discussion of the life and legacy of Derrick Bell, a “prophet” (41)—a “great champion of equality for all Americans” (37). How valuable it is not

only to see how CRT has offered us a significant analytical tool toward “truth-telling and inclusive accounts of American history” (9) but, importantly, too, how, and why CRT has been vilified and its tenets disparaged.

Another important theme of Schwartz-Chaney’s presentation, one that is central to most critical analyses of racism in the United States is that race is a “powerful and long-lasting social construct” (46) that permeates social and institutional life. From this critical angle, to focus on individual prejudice as the core of the racist ideas and practices that penetrate our personal and social existence is inadequate, problematic, and too quickly pushes us away from recognizing that individual and institutionalized racism are inextricably intertwined. (This vital insight is at the heart of Chapter Six.) As the author effectively argues, “whiteness,” for example, is a “racialized commodity of advantage” (95) that has seeped into our “narrative habits” (95)—individual change cannot alone get at the systemic nature of the collective damage that we must face.

And then there is the relatively new territory of Critical Faith, at least for those of us more accustomed to the language of the social sciences (and even of CRT); and here Schwartz-Chaney encourages us to appreciate and really grapple with the ways in which her own Christian faith and the “subversive speech” (108) and “social teaching of Jesus” (123) provide another valuable and trenchant tradition of critical theory and critical thinking that can locate and help us puncture a “collective sin of racism” (85) that plagues our lives. For the author, the theological (particularly the Christian theological; there is no mention of Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, or other faith systems) and the socio-political-cultural realm are already and must be melded. The “revolutionary themes” of “exodus, promise, resurrection” (108) that have been championed by so many liberation movements have another powerful source. As she forcefully argues (a point of view that she clearly recognizes places her in a long and rich tradition of Christian “critical faith”-thinkers including Bonhoeffer, King, Merton, Gutiérrez, and currently Jim Wallis and William Barber II), “Christianity and anti-racism are deeply connected. Anti-racism is an outgrowth of faith in Christ” (146). No doubt as she concludes, “...Jesus would have protested, holding up a Black Lives Matter sign for all to see” (131).

It is incredibly significant to recognize that Schwartz-Chaney is attentive to the ways in which the Christian church, even with its legacy of “counter story-telling” (106) and its calls to fairness and freedom for more than two millennia has both accented “individual salvation at the neglect of collective engagement in racial justice” (164), and, even more problematically and painfully (look around us right now) helped to reproduce a foundation of domination—of racism and inequalities that this book is dedicated to ending. “With few exceptions,” she writes, “the American church, whether in willful ignorance or overt racism, has historically practiced a complicit Christianity rather than a brave one” (62). Why not so “brave”? Even with these ideas about and visions of freedom right in front of us, why such “complicity”?

Critical Faith personally, honestly and forcefully leaves us with a conundrum regarding the most basic issue regarding race and discrimination of all kinds: What are the potential sources of social change--change in our institutions (including laws and policies and socio-economic structures), and change in our individual attitudes and behaviors (including,

what the author would not want us to neglect, healing our very “souls”)? And most directly relevant to this volume: What critical language, what lenses, what tools of understanding (including CRT and critical faith) can we add to our theoretical repertoire and use to effectively and, undeterred, enter the battle? Schwartz-Chaney wants us to consider what for many of us may be this new territory--to hear that “It is listening to the call of Jesus to be present in America’s current struggles” (157). “The wound festers” (174) unless we act.

What can we believe? Can our “critical faith” (from whatever tradition we might come) make the difference? When does any critical theorizing become what it never was intended to be? When and why do the ideas themselves and the models they have handed down to us become complicit? Thanks to Joni Schwartz-Chaney for continuing to pry open these central questions for us. They won’t go away, nor will our desperate need for new sources of “radical and revolutionary love.”

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