

ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

AUGUST 2025 | 29.2

Biblical Critical Theory

Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 672 pp.

BRUCE R. ASHFORD

A critical theory is any approach to social philosophy that sets forth to reveal, critique and challenge the hidden biases, unexamined assumptions and latent power structures of a society and culture. With roots in literary criticism and sociology, critical theory presupposes that society's problems stem more from "systemic" perversions than individual sins. It has found extensive application in American legal studies, literary criticism, history, sociology and communication theory, among other fields.

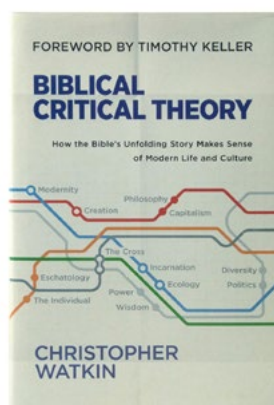
Specifically, critical theory is a school of thought and a methodological approach fostered by the Frankfurt School of philosophy, originating in Germany and based on the work of theorists such as Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Early critical theory drew primarily upon the work of Marx, Freud and Hegel, and soon migrated across the ocean to the United States, where its progeny include Postcolonial Theory, Queer Theory, Critical

Race Theory and Intersectionality, Feminism and Gender Studies, Fat Theory and Disability Theory.

But critical theory, as such, is not new, having a rich albeit underrecognized Christian heritage. The Bible itself is, in part, an exercise in critical theory, unmasking as it does the root idols and ideologies that bring corruption and misdirection to societies. Likewise, church history is replete with examples of Christians who expose the idolatrous "deep structures" of secular society; Augustine's *City of God* is perhaps the earliest and most successful example, exposing

Rome's quest for "justice" as a mask for its lust for power and its philosophy and religion as hopelessly inadequate.

Against this backdrop, Christopher Watkin offers *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*, an exercise in biblically informed critical theory. Like Augustine, Watkin seeks



to out-narrate Christianity's competing cultural rivals, foregrounding the biblical narrative as the true story of the whole world and exposing rival narratives as inadequate. In most respects, *Biblical Critical Theory* is an extraordinarily perceptive and successful exercise. Four aspects are especially noteworthy.

First, Watkin's ascription of primacy to the biblical narrative. Like *City of God*, Watkin engages in extensive biblical and cultural exegesis. Yet, unlike his forebear Augustine, who separated the tasks of biblical and cultural exegesis into two parts, exposing the inadequacies of the Roman narrative in Part One and tracing the contours of the biblical narrative in Part Two, Watkin structures the entirety of *Biblical Critical Theory* along the lines of the biblical narrative, with the threads of Western cultural exegesis and criticism woven in along the way. The strength of this approach is that it allows each moment in the storyline to have its say rather than unduly privileging one moment over another. Yet, as we will see, this approach also has its weaknesses.

Second, Watkin's rejection of the "engagement" model. The author prefers not to speak of "cultural engagement" because we are not able to choose to engage or not to engage. Our culture is not entirely distinct from us and we can't help being affected by it. Indeed, as Watkin points out, the West's cultural assumptions and values contain a significant amount of Judeo-Christian residue even though the Bible's teachings are largely misunderstood or condemned. This makes for an odd situation in which the Western social imaginary opposes Christianity but does so by unconsciously drawing upon Christian assumptions (15).

Thus, Watkin eschews the notion of engagement in favor of "diagonalization," by which he means an attempt to demonstrate that with regard to any given social, cultural, or political debate, the Bible frequently presents us with a third way, an understanding that is richer and

subtler than the reigning alternatives. Thus, Watkin avers, Christians should seek to cut across competing views and rearrange false cultural dichotomies. The author's strategy of diagonalization is thus similar to Milbank's "counter-fulfillment," Augustine's subversive mimesis, and Lewis' "blessedly two-edged character" of Christianity.



By diagonalizing, Watkin is countering the temptation to embrace unwittingly the flawed Western social imaginary, on one hand, or to engage in a demolition of it, on the other hand. Instead, he wishes to expose Western maladies so that they can be diagnosed and healed. In other words, Watkin rightly recognizes that no ideology is without some merit. Indeed, Satan doesn't have his own "facts" and must thus perpetrate his lies by misconstruing the truths and goods of God's world. Therefore, Watkin's goal is to diagonalize for the purpose of healing and redirection rather than denunciation or humiliation.

Third, Watkin's diagonalization of the West's dominant theories and theorists. As previously noted, Watkins ascribes primacy to the biblical narrative, structuring his book along the lines of the Bible's story and doing his cultural exegesis and critique in an *ad hoc* manner, interweaving it along the way. While this approach enhances the author's biblical exegesis and holds forth promise for a deep examination of dominant Western alternatives, the practical result leaves the reader wanting more.

To be clear, Watkin's grasp of Western intellectual history is masterful, his observations about individual thinkers and historic ideologies salient and perceptive. The reader will admire the author's deft and sustained critique of his primary targets—Nietzsche, Marx, Freud and Foucault—as well as more secondary targets such as Sartre and Rousseau. Yet, the reader is left wanting with regard to any holistic or sustained diagonalization of the forebears of critical theory, to whom there are virtually no references. Similarly, there is no direct or sustained diagonalization of successor theories such as Queer Theory and Critical Race Theory, or emerging ideologies such as transhumanism.

Fourth, the author's employment of a doxological conclusion. Watkins notes that the Bible ends with a powerful chorus of praise, with the implication that a Christian critical theory should also culminate in doxological delight. For that recognition, we can give thanks to Watkin and to the Lord whose imprint is on every page of this book.

Bruce Riley Ashford is Senior Research Fellow at the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology and CEO of [The Ashford Agency](#).

