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Introduction

I want to thank the organizers of this conference and Babes-Bolyai University for inviting me back. From 2000 to 2002 I studied Romanian at your Faculty of Letters, taught philosophy seminars in the Faculty of History and Philosophy, and researched Lucian Blaga in your library. In the intervening years I've come back whenever I've been able to, but it hasn't been enough. I thoroughly enjoy being in Cluj and working with the great scholars at this university, and I am very happy to be back. Thank you for the invitation!

Today I want to talk about racism. As an American, my personal experiences of racism are overwhelmingly experiences of racism in America, but thanks to a grant from the Research Institute of the University of Bucharest I've spent the spring semester teaching a course on Race and Racism at the Faculty of Philosophy in your nation's capital. The course has used America's racial problems as a lens through which to study racial issues that could occur in any society, including in Romania. Along the way my students have introduced to me various racial problems that face Romania's minorities. Hence I believe that what I am going to say today has broad application and is not strictly limited to America.

In this paper I will examine an interaction between two influential American intellectuals on the subject of Critical Race Theory. CRT is “an academic movement that emerged in the mid-1970s to critically engage the intersection of race and the law. CRT scholars caution that mainstream civil rights doctrine...is not up to the tasks facing the post-civil rights era wherein new, more subtle varieties of racism, often based on practices that are ostensibly nonracial, remain entrenched.”¹ In short, CRT attempts to shift the focus of civil rights action from individual prejudice and discrimination to the problem of structural racism.

The two intellectuals whose interaction I will examine are David French and Gerald McDermott. David French is an attorney, author, and journalist. He is currently the senior editor of *The Dispatch*, a moderately conservative online news outlet. Gerald McDermott is an Anglican priest, author, and the recently-retired Anglican Chair of Divinity at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School.

¹ Linda Alcoff, "Critical Philosophy of Race." In Edward N. Zalta, ed. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 344.

Both men are theologically, politically, and culturally conservative, and both self-identify as Christians.

French, in an article published in *The Dispatch* this April, provides a brief overview of CRT, interacts with several of its conservative critics, and marshals a brief defense. His thesis is that CRT is a useful tool for investigating and responding to entrenched racial issues and it is not inherently incompatible with traditional Christianity.² McDermott, in an article published on *Patheos* just days later, attempts to repudiate French's position, arguing that CRT is indeed incompatible with traditional Christianity.³ My thesis is that McDermott's attempted critique of French's position is founded upon several mistakes that fatally undermine his argument and therefore his argument fails.

David French

Let me begin by reconstructing French's argument for you. French acknowledges that the US has made tremendous progress in addressing racism: where we are today is a much better place than where we were in the first half of the 20th century and incomparably better than where we were in the 19th century. However, he affirms that there is still important work to do. Eliminating the obvious racial problems that plagued America from the colonial period up through the civil rights movement has not eliminated all racial problems. There are less obvious racial problems that are very important, that impact many people, and that remain unresolved.⁴ This is where CRT comes in: it applies critical thinking and scholarly research skills to the issue of racism in an attempt to understand the problem and find solutions.

² David French, "How the Fight Over Critical Race Theory Became a Religious War." *The Dispatch*, April 10, 2022. <https://frenchpress.thedispatch.com/p/how-the-fight-over-critical-race?s=r>

³ Gerald McDermott, "Christians, Race, and CRT: A Response to David French." *Patheos Evangelical*, April 14, 2022. https://www.patheos.com/blogs/northamptonseminar/2022/04/14/christians-race-and-crt-a-response-to-david-french/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Sharing+the+Gospel&utm_content=46<g=30605&rsid=Legacy. McDermott has a short series of other, more academic articles on CRT that can be found here: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/northamptonseminar/2020/02/05/critical-race-theory-i-what-is-it/>, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/northamptonseminar/2020/02/07/critical-race-theory-ii-is-it-coherent/>, and <https://virtueonline.org/critical-race-theory-compatible-christian-faith>.

⁴ French does not provide very many sources to back up this view, but he does mention two that were eye-openers for him when he was a student: Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1:8, 1989, and Derrick Bell, *Faces At The Bottom Of The Well: The Permanence Of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). There is an extensive body of scholarly literature discussing post-civil rights racism in America. See, for example, Charles A. Gallagher, "Color-Blind Privilege: The Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post-Race America." *RCG Journal* 10:4, 2003.

French admits that there are things about CRT that he finds troubling, specifically mentioning what seem to him to be a “pervasive pessimism” about classical liberalism’s ability to achieve racial equality, unwillingness to acknowledge America’s progress on racial issues, a tendency toward intolerance of disagreement, and occasional efforts to suppress dissent.⁵ But he argues that these troubling aspects are not an inherent part of CRT and that the benefits of CRT should not be discarded on their account.

Then he turns to studying the conservative reaction to CRT. Some conservatives, including some conservative Christians, have responded to CRT in a cautiously optimistic way. An excellent example of this is the statement “On Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality” passed by the Southern Baptist Convention at the annual meeting in 2019. Using language that is richly informed by Evangelical theology, this document expresses the Convention’s view that CRT is a useful tool for understanding and addressing racism. Here is an excerpt:

“Critical race theory is a set of analytical tools that explain how race has and continues to function in society, and intersectionality is the study of how different personal characteristics overlap and inform one’s experience. Critical race theory and intersectionality alone are insufficient to diagnose and redress the root causes of the social ills that they identify, which result from sin, yet these analytical tools can aid in evaluating a variety of human experiences. While we denounce the misuse of critical race theory and intersectionality, we do not deny that ethnic, gender, and cultural distinctions exist and are a gift from God that will give Him absolute glory when all humanity gathers around His throne in worship because of the redemption accomplished by our resurrected Lord. Southern Baptist churches seek to exhibit this eschatological promise in our churches in the present by focusing on unity in Christ amid image bearers and rightly celebrate our differences as determined by God in the new creation.”⁶

Whereas this is a thoughtfully positive evaluation of CRT, other conservatives Christians have responded to CRT in a thoughtfully negative way. As an example of this, French examines an article by Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer, two conservative Christian scholars who argue that Critical Theory, of which CRT can be viewed as a subset, is fundamentally incompatible with traditional

⁵ French, “How the Fight Over Critical Race Theory Became a Religious War.”

⁶ <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-critical-race-theory-and-intersectionality/>

Christianity.⁷ French summarizes a central aspect of their argument thus: “The authors contrasted what they described as the ‘metanarratives’ of Christianity and critical theory. Christianity ‘provides us with an overarching metanarrative that runs from creation to redemption,’ whereas ‘critical theory is associated with a metanarrative that runs from oppression to liberation.’”⁸ French does not attempt a refutation of this argument, per se, but he does briefly relate how Christians who defend CRT respond to it.

While these two ways of responding to CRT represent attempts to evaluate CRT objectively, French also describes a conservative response whose stated objective is to “poison the well,” to bias the popular perception of CRT so that people will reflexively associate the term with a broad swath of theories, beliefs, and agendas that social conservatives oppose. He gives names of specific perpetrators of this movement, provides incriminating quotes, and shows how their influence has impacted conservative culture.

It is primarily this latter movement, which essentially throws the CRT baby out with the bath water, that concerns French. He writes that because of it, “Immense damage is being done. Centuries of American racism warped and distorted our society in countless ways. And while we’ve made tremendous progress in creating a more just society, the effects of slavery and Jim Crow—and the lingering reality of existing racism—present our nation (and the church) with a profound and complicated challenge.” He goes on to say, “This is the exact wrong time to close Christian hearts and minds to thoughtful voices, including thoughtful voices who offer new approaches to our understandings of race and justice in the United States. You don’t have to agree. You can and should dissent when you sincerely believe ideas are wrong. But when activists shout ‘CRT’ about ideas they don’t like, they’re not defending the faith, they’re often trying to block you from perspectives that Christian believers need to hear.”

In summary, French’s argument is that despite some misuse, CRT is a useful tool that can help us combat racism; that CRT has been misrepresented and misunderstood by conservatives, including conservative Christians; and that Christians should critically embrace CRT rather than allowing themselves to be manipulated by those who are misrepresenting it.

Gerald McDermott

⁷ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/incompatibility-critical-theory-christianity/>

⁸ French, “How the Fight Over Critical Race Theory Became a Religious War.”

Now I'd like to present McDermott's attempted critique of French's position. McDermott says that he can show that CRT is not the helpful tool that French thinks it is through examining its central doctrines and then discussing its contemporary applications. He offers as a useful source for understanding CRT Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's textbook, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*.⁹ This is a standard piece of secondary reading on the subject and both explains and advocates for CRT.

McDermott's summary of the central concepts of CRT begins with four quotes from Delgado and Stefancic's book that he seems to take as expressing the heart of Critical Race Theory. They are the following:

1. "CRT questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law. . . . [the merit system] is far from the neutral standard that its supporters imagine it to be . . . [hence] it is unfair to rank people according to [these] mechanical scales."
2. "Only aggressive, color-conscious efforts to change the way things are will do much to ameliorate misery."
3. [Opponents of affirmative action who think it is reverse racism do so because they assume] "innocence on the part of the whites displaced by affirmative action." [But this] "assumption characterizes whites as innocent." [Since] "racism is pervasive, systemic, and deeply ingrained... then no white member of society seems quite so innocent, [for every white participates in] the interplay of meanings that one attaches to race; the stereotypes one holds of other people; the standards of looks, appearance, and beauty. [These, plus] the need to guard one's position all, powerfully determine one's perspective... White people benefit from a system of favors, exchanges and courtesies from which outsiders of color are frequently excluded, including hiring one's neighbor's kids for summer jobs, a teacher's agreement to give a favored student an extra-credit assignment that will enable him or her to raise a grade of B+ to A-, or the kind of quiet networking that lands a borderline candidate a coveted position."
4. [CRT also claims that race has no grounding in] "biological or genetic reality."¹⁰

⁹ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd edition (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

¹⁰ McDermott, "Christians, Race, and CRT: A Response to David French."

These statements become the lens through which McDermott examines CRT. He offers the following summary of the ideas contained in these passages: “CRT asserts that America is systemically racist against minorities, that minorities are better at understanding racism than whites, that we should dispense with legal neutrality and merit-based systems because they are used against minorities, that whites are intrinsically inclined toward racism, and yet race has neither biological nor genetic bases.”¹¹

He then simplifies the central claims of CRT to just three points:

- 1. Racism is evil.**
- 2. Racism can be systemic.**
- 3. Race is a social construct.**

Now we come to McDermott’s critique of CRT, which is the foundation of his disagreement with French. McDermott claims that there has been a “widespread consensus” on the first two of these points long before the emergence of CRT and therefore there is no need of CRT on their account. Regarding the third point, that race is a social construct, McDermott claims that it is incoherent. He offers the following argument in support of this claim:

CRT also claims that race has no grounding in “biological or genetic reality.” Today’s biologists and geneticists agree. For example, genetic background studies are now showing that millions of whites share biological background with blacks and other minorities. But this claim demonstrates CRT’s incoherence. If racial distinctions are social and not biological, and if racism is therefore learned socially, how can CRT know that millions of whites have not learned socially to be color-blind? If race is merely social, why does CRT treat all whites as determined by their white skins to be racists?

Here McDermott, perhaps because he is writing to a popular audience rather than a scholarly one, substitutes rhetorical questions in place of logical arguments. Let’s try to work out the logic behind what he’s saying. First, he seems to agree that race is not biological, since today’s biologists and geneticists tell us that it’s not. Second, if race is not biological but rather is learned socially, then it’s possible that millions of Whites have learned from society not to be racist. Therefore if it’s possible for millions of Whites to be non-racist, it’s not the case

¹¹ McDermott, “Christians, Race, and CRT: A Response to David French.”

that Whites are determined by their skins to be racist. Hence this fundamental doctrine of CRT is incoherent with another CRT position.

The form of this argument appears to be

- 1. If race is not biological then race is social.**
- 2. If race is social then Whites can be non-racists.**
- 3. If Whites can be non-racist then White racism is not predetermined.**
- 4. Race is not biological.**
- 5. Therefore White racism is not predetermined.**

Understood this way, McDermott has used an extended *modus ponens* argument that uses a central tenet of CRT to disprove the CRT tenet that Whites are predetermined to be racists. Since *modus ponens* is a valid argument form, McDermott's argument is logically valid.

Unfortunately for McDermott, or at least for my interpretation of him, there are other problems with the argument. To begin with the most obvious, the idea that what racism is predetermined is not on his list of the three central doctrines of CRT. Nor is it found in his longer summary of the central tenets, although he might argue that it's contained in #3. But what #3 says is not that "whites are intrinsically inclined toward racism," as he put it, but rather that [Since] "racism is pervasive, systemic, and deeply ingrained... then no white member of society seems quite so innocent," in Delgado's and Stefancic's words.

In essence, McDermott is accusing CRT of treating race as a social construct when it helps the CRT narrative and at other times as biological because doing so facilitates another CRT belief. He is accusing CRT of being inconsistent. This is seen most clearly when he describes CRT's position as "incoherent" and asks, "If race is merely social, why does CRT treat all whites as determined by their white skins to be racists?"¹² Unfortunately, he seems to have misunderstood or forgotten that CRT views White racism as a result of social factors just as much as it considers other racial constructs to be the results of social factors. Thus on CRT, Whites are not "intrinsically inclined" toward racism but rather "extrinsically" inclined to racism. On CRT, racism is not biologically determined but rather socially determined. Hence there's no incoherence in CRT's position here, McDermott's claim notwithstanding.

This is not the only argument that McDermott marshals against CRT. He uses what seem to me to be slights and innuendo to express disapproval of CRT, I'm

¹² McDermott, "Christians, Race, and CRT: A Response to David French."

sorry to say, but these are rhetorical devices rather than logical arguments, so I am not going to respond to them. However, he does have two additional philosophical arguments against CRT that I would like to discuss, though somewhat more briefly than I discussed the first one.

Argument Two: CRT is Redundant

The first of these is that CRT is redundant and therefore unnecessary. McDermott argues that the two defensible doctrines in his summary of CRT's foundational principles are both found in the historic teachings of Christianity, they have long been a matter of general consensus, and therefore CRT isn't needed. Here are his actual words: "Scripture and church tradition have already taught us that racism is evil, and we already know from slavery and Jim Crow that racism can be systemic. Sure, Christians have failed in these matters, but there was a widespread consensus about these truths long before CRT became a byword."¹³

I agree that the Christian scriptures, while perhaps not extremely clear on the problem of racism, do present an egalitarianism and a universalism that undermine racism. However, Church tradition is far from univocal on the issue. Regarding the supposed "widespread consensus," he does not provide any documentation of its existence. The frequency of both individual and group acts of racism in contemporary America suggests to me that, rather than there being a general consensus that racism is bad, there is still much racism in America. In fact, I'm surprised that this even needs to be stated. And scientific research on the topic bears out my suspicion. For example, one study released by the University of Virginia found that over 6% of Americans hold to the central tenets of Alt-Right ideology, which are given as "1) a strong sense of white identity, 2) a belief in the importance of white solidarity, and 3) a sense of white victimization."¹⁴

Perhaps, though, McDermott intends his statement about a consensus to be limited to Christians. Maybe what he means is that there is a general consensus among American Christians that racism is evil and that it can be systemic. And perhaps that would be a true statement, though of course many slave owners prior to emancipation were professing Christians and it appears that there are still people today who self-identify as Christians who are White

¹³ McDermott, "Christians, Race, and CRT: A Response to David French."

¹⁴ George Howley, "The Demography of the Alt-Right," Institute for Family Studies, 8/9/2018, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-demography-of-the-alt-right>.

supremacists.¹⁵ Hence I am not convinced that even this more limited claim is correct.

Regarding systemic racism, I'm glad that McDermott himself, at least, grants the theoretical possibility of its existence. However, he stops short of granting the actuality of systemic racism in our time. Since systemic racism is one of the primary targets of CRT, I'd really like to know whether McDermott believes that systemic racism still exists and how much of a problem he considers it to be. Reading between the lines a little, and comparing his response to French with his several other articles on CRT, I believe that McDermott considers systemic racism to exist both against minorities and also against the White majority, but he seems to see the former as being fairly moderate, and perhaps the latter is, too. Hence he may consider CRT to be unnecessary because he sees systemic racism as only a minor problem.

The question of the existence of systemic racism against White Americans is interesting. McDermott gives affirmative action policies as an example of such systemic racism. I'm tentatively inclined to think that McDermott is correct in this assessment: affirmative action policies do seem to meet the criteria of systemic racism. However, if such policies have been enacted in order to counter the White privilege that results from systemic racism against Blacks, then anti-White systemic racism is merely leveling the playing field. Since I believe the antecedent to be true, I also accept the consequent. McDermott would disagree with this, though, since he denies the existence of White privilege.¹⁶

However, McDermott's thinking on White privilege is flawed. He argues that the behaviors that are often pointed to as examples of White privilege, such as White hiring managers giving jobs to their White friends and relatives, are behaviors also found in minority groups, and therefore they are not a specifically White phenomenon.¹⁷ But while it's true that minorities sometimes share these behavior patterns, McDermott seems to have overlooked the very important fact that in American society, Whites hold the overwhelming majority of such power-wielding positions. Whites are the "gatekeepers." Thus the understandable practice of preferring those whom you know and already have confidence in (to view the practice in its most positive light), even when not intended to hinder minorities, results in preferring Whites over minorities simply because the

¹⁵ Documentation?

¹⁶ See Gerald McDermott, "Critical Race Theory II: Is It Coherent?" Patheos Evangelical, 2/7/2020, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/northamptonseminar/2020/02/07/critical-race-theory-ii-is-it-coherent/>.

¹⁷ Gerald McDermott, "Critical Race Theory II: Is It Coherent?"

gatekeepers are White. Hence McDermott's argument against White privilege fails, and therefore his view of systemic racism is inadequate.

Looking at the logic behind McDermott's second argument, it seems to be another extended *modus ponens*:

- 1. If CRT is redundant, then CRT is unnecessary.**
- 2. If CRT is unnecessary, then CRT should be discarded.**
- 3. CRT is redundant.**
- 4. Therefore CRT should be discarded.**

I believe that I've shown that the antecedent of the major premise is false and thus the argument, while logically valid, is not sound. However, it's also possible to attack the consequent of the minor premise: not all that is redundant should be discarded. Sometimes intentional redundancy is useful. In this case, since racism seems to be such a tenacious problem, I think that redundancy, if it were to exist, would be very useful.

Argument Three: CRT is Racist

McDermott's third argument is that CRT is itself racist, and therefore since racism is bad, CRT should be abandoned. He makes this argument somewhat indirectly, stating merely that "Most Americans would say that any perspective that judges others by their skin color is decidedly unhelpful, and in fact returns us to the very racism that CRT pledges to eradicate."¹⁸ What he's referring to when he writes "judges others by their skin color" are the conclusions that CRT draws that Whites are inherently less able to understand racism than are minorities and are "intrinsically" (McDermott's term) inclined toward racism.¹⁹ As discussed earlier, I think the latter is a misunderstanding on his part, but still, it does seem that CRT is making judgements about Whites based on their color, and since color and race are often closely connected, I can understand why McDermott would see that as being a form of racism.

However, there's no real problem with making observations about a given race, especially scientific ones. For example, it's not a problem to make a comparative study of the household income levels of various races and then to observe that the average White American family is much wealthier than the

¹⁸ McDermott, "Christians, Race, and CRT: A Response to David French."

¹⁹ Two paragraphs earlier he wrote, "CRT asserts that America is systemically racist against minorities, that minorities are better at understanding racism than whites, that we should dispense with legal neutrality and merit-based systems because they are used against minorities, that whites are intrinsically inclined toward racism, and yet race has neither biological nor genetic bases." McDermott, "Christians, Race, and CRT: A Response to David French."

average Latino American family, which is considerably wealthier than the average Black American family.²⁰ Similarly, there's nothing wrong about observing that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted minority workers more severely than White workers.²¹ Such observations involve race, but that doesn't make them racist.

Someone is a racist if he or she believes that one race is inherently superior or inferior to another. Similarly, beliefs are racist if they involve the inherent superiority or inferiority of one race over another. But believing that members of the Black race have a better first-person understanding of the Black experience in America than do members of other races is not based on belief in the inherent superiority of the Black race over other races. After all, this belief is perfectly compatible with the belief that Whites have a better first-person understanding of the White experience in America. Likewise the belief that Whites Americans could be so thoroughly immersed in White culture that they are blind to their own racist views is does not involve the belief that Whites are inherently inferior to Blacks, since Blacks could be just as immersed in Black culture. These are not racial "judgments" but rather conclusions that sociologists have drawn after examining the relevant data. Here McDermott's argument seems to fail simply because he has misconstrued observations as judgements.

Conclusions

My thesis in this paper has been that Gerald McDermott's attempted critique of David French's defense of Christian appropriation of Critical Race Theory is founded upon several mistakes that fatally undermine his argument and therefore his argument fails. McDermott's strategy was to show that CRT is mistaken, incoherent, and bad, and therefore French is wrong to advocate Christian espousal of this approach to racism.

In examining McDermott's article, I found that he employs at least three distinct arguments. After examining each of these, I found that none of them succeeds in proving its point. Hence I conclude that McDermott's attempt to repudiate French's position is unsuccessful.

As a closing remark, I'd like to mention something that McDermott doesn't but perhaps should. This is that David French is himself critical of some aspects of CRT. In his article "On the Use and Abuse of Critical Race Theory in American Christianity" French evaluates both the strengths and the weaknesses of CRT. He admits that it has weaknesses, and he also grants that it is sometimes misused.

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However, he finds that these weaknesses and abuses of CRT are not intrinsic to CRT and therefore he argues that they can be discarded without discarding CRT's benefits.²²

²² David French, "On the Use and Abuse of Critical Race Theory in American Christianity," *Patheos Evangelical*, 8/13/2020. <https://frenchpress.thedispatch.com/p/on-the-use-and-abuse-of-critical>