

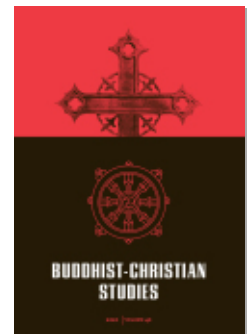


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World

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Critical Race Theory Meets Internal Family Systems: Toward a Compassion Spirituality for a Multireligious and Multiracial World

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to bring together the insights of critical mixed race theory (MultiCrit) along with the wisdom of contemporary psycho-spirituality Internal Family Systems to imagine how various streams of Buddhist and Christian contemplative traditions might be broadly synthesized to support the lives of those who identify as multiracial or multireligious. While the paper focuses primarily on intrapersonal and interpersonal relational engagement, suggestions will also be made to support the transformation of societal structures and systems from a spirituality of compassion. The paper concludes that Buddhist and Christian wisdom traditions aimed at embracing and transforming the Self will be heavily strengthened through dialogue with Critical Mixed Race Theory. Additionally, I propose that the wisdom and practices of Buddhist and Christian spiritualities of compassion can work to guide and sustain those who are committed to actions that foster racial justice in an increasingly pluralistic world.

KEYWORDS: mixed race, practical theology, spiritual care, critical race theory, interreligious

This paper brings together in an introductory and preliminary fashion the insights of critical race theory (CRT) and internal family systems (IFS) from a multiracial perspective in order to reconsider intrapersonal and interpersonal relations in a multiracial and multireligious world. I will suggest that CRT deepens the Self's capacities to embrace Self and others in ways resonant with contemplative streams of both Buddhism and Christianity. I present CRT and IFS separately first, in very brief discussions, before attempting a synthesis broadly described as a spirituality of compassion.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY

CRT emerged in the 1980s within legal studies but has since developed as an interdisciplinary theoretical frame for considering issues of race and ethnicity in society. For our purposes, I will summarize eight tenets of CRT drawing primarily from

educational and Critical Race Scholar, Jessica C Harris, whose conceptualization also includes perspectives from Critical Mixed Race Studies (which critiques processes of racialization and social stratification based on race from the perspective of the mutability and porosity of racial identity).² Such a MultiCrit approach—CRT from a Mixed Race Studies perspective—for thinking about the contemporary meeting of religions mediated by migration and globalization.

The first tenet of CRT posits that differential racialization is a facet of racial logic and White normativity wherein different groups of color are treated in ways that serve White needs and interests. An example of this are the ways in which African Americans have been historically stereotyped as unintelligent to justify their lack of access to education but Asian Americans are stereotyped as smart and competitors with Whites. While African Americans are still vastly underrepresented in higher education, so are Asian Americans when it comes to executive leadership positions. In reflection on this tenet, Harris shows how for multiracial students the racial differentialization actually happens at a micro level. Harris recounts the narrative of one multiracial undergraduate student who shared how in the morning a staff member at her university told her that she was proud of her because she worked hard and “was not like other people” she knew. Harris shows how this treatment is a way of being color-blind to the student’s identity. Then shortly after when it came to seeking marketing material, the same student was approached by a staff member who insisted she be photographed to highlight the “beautiful diversity of the office.” In this instance, the student was treated as another person of color. However, her treatment of both being colorless and being a person of color was to meet the needs of the White establishment.

The second tenet of CRT is that of intersectionality, which holds that oppression cannot be understood through the lens of a single category.³ Kimberle Crenshaw’s article shows how she was minoritized in racial politics due to her being a woman and how she was minoritized in feminist politics because she was Black.⁴ Crenshaw’s claim is that people who live at the intersections do not just experience additive forms of oppression but are multiplied on top of one another. Harris adds that multiracial students experience a doubled intersectional oppression. She shares examples of an Indian Mexican (Punjabi Mexican) student and a Mexican Filipino (who spoke of herself as Mexipino) student. Both students experienced instances of macro and micro aggressions, where they were classified by people as a “half-breeds or muts” or not a “true Mexican.” Harris urges understanding of multiple minority status within race itself.

A third tenet of CRT is that of the Black/White binary. CRT holds that racism shapes the world as either White as good or Black as bad. You can choose either to be complicit with the regimes of White supremacy or to be in solidarity and resistance with those who are deemed “black.” While understanding Black–White relations is foundational to comprehending oppression in the United States, they do not include every form of discrimination such as that of language or other ethnic—for example, Latin—experiences. Harris agrees that CRT should be expanded when considering the multiracial experience to understand that White supremacy operationalizes itself on

the monoracial paradigm of race. In other words, because racism is built off the progression from essential difference to supporting hierarchy, it does not create any room for the reality of those who do not fit into the essentialized categories. This is an affirmation of CRT's commitments to anti-essentialism and argues that when centering the multiracial person, monoracial and binary views of race need to be examined and critiqued.

A fourth tenet of CRT is that of racism as endemic or ordinary, what CRT scholar, Derrick Bell, calls "racial realism."⁵ This tenet holds that racism is always at work in every social situation. Harris further observes how multiracial persons are constantly assigned into monoracial groups, that relative privilege is given to those who operate in its logic, and those who do not are delegitimized and marginalized.

A fifth tenet of CRT concerns the task of challenging the dominant ideology. Each non-White racial or ethnic group develops specific resources for this undertaking. Multiracial students, however, lack institutional and structural support for their own identity formation because they complicate the neat categories of race and hence find themselves also on the margins of monoracial student clubs and organizations. They thus have to work harder to develop tools needed to challenge dominant racial constructions that perpetuate White supremacy and normativity.

A sixth tenet of CRT is that which challenges ahistoricism. CRT scholars name how racism functions through the erasure of history and how forgetfulness allows White ideology to deny effects of racism and the structural oppressions that persist. Ahistoricism contributes to White ways of being in the world that include: whiteness as property (where those who were White were given "naturally" material advantages and thus gave motivation to lose ethnic identity and subscribe to being "white"); White innocence (where Whites always see themselves as good moral people while being racist); and White fragility/White rage (where race conversations come up and Whites are defensive and then enraged when their privilege is contested). Harris sees multiracial persons as also committed to critically remembering history and ways their experience has been marginalized, but do so against the reality of the *hypodescent* or "one-drop rule," where multiracial people were considered as a person of color if they had even the slightest appearance of being non-White. This rule plays off the racial logic of White purity and leads people of color to internalize White beauty and thus also desire to be White and to look as light as possible. The one-drop rule remains in effect where multiracial students are constantly asked "what are you?" and then automatically assigned as an "other" to those who are racially pure.

A seventh tenet of CRT is that of interest convergence. CRT highlights how "racial progress" in the post-civil rights era always seemed to be just at the right slow pace so that no change actually takes place. CRT scholars have shown that the ruling to stop segregation of schools was not due to sympathy of the Black experience but rather served nationalistic purposes of preventing members of the military who were persons of color to return home to a nation that as the civil rights pointedly described, "treatment that is sub-human." CRT thus insists that racial progress is not substantive, and any steps toward racial justice are often taken to serve White interests. This persists when multiracial students are often depicted by university marketing campaigns as

being part of a “inclusive, diverse, and welcoming community” and to show how “we” are past racism.

The eighth and final tenet of CRT is that of experiential knowledge. CRT proposes the power of counter storytelling, which centers around “questions from the other side” that serve as a mode of resistance to dominant ways of thinking. CRT poses that to overcome dehumanizing racism, persons of color should be committed to self-determination and agency even when lacking institutional or structural support. Hence, the emergence of multiracial narratives in American universities launches multiracial student organizations that in turn serve as spaces where multiracial persons can become critically self-conscious.

In conclusion, similarly to LatinCrit, TribalCrit, AsianCrit, and QueerCrit, who have all modified CRT to center their experiences, Harris advocates for MultiCrit as a powerful tool of analysis to understand the ways in which White supremacy operationalizes at the expense and detriment of multiracial people. While mixed-race study is still in an early stage of development as it relates to its acceptance in the academy, a number of scholars across disciplines recognize its value and potential contributions it can make to understanding how race functions in the U.S. society and life.

INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS

I now wish to complement the critical multiracial theoretical perspective by preceding with a discussion of Richard Schwartz’s IFS theory,⁶ in particular as developed by practical theologian, Frank Rogers. To understand how IFS works, one must understand a few basic assumptions: interior multiplicity of “parts,” the core “Self,”⁷ and that every part is nonpathological with good intentions. The first assumption describes how each person has an internal system that governs how they act. This internal system is comprised of a multiple “parts” or subpersonalities that play one of two ways for a person. Parts can be either “protectors” or “exiles.” Protector roles are also split into two different roles, which are that of *managers* or *firefighters*. Managers’ parts are those throughout the day that influence a person to action such as being driven, caretaking, and an internal critic. Firefighters are parts that come up when managers are tired and are characterized by more extreme and erratic behavior such as addictions, compulsions to binge eating, or watching TV. Both managers and firefighters exist to protect the person from their exiled parts. These parts are often younger parts that come from a pain of the past they carry, Schwartz calls their pain “burdens.” These burdens were developed at a time when the person did not have ability to handle a trauma or difficult situation and thus the part becomes exiled and remains out of consciousness until it is safe to be dealt with and heard.

The second assumption is that of the core Self. The core Self is an inherent capacity that every person is endowed with that has within it healing and restorative capacities. Schwartz describes the Self as having eight characteristics: creativity, confidence, courage, clarity, compassion, calmness, connection, and curiosity. I will go more into describing these characteristics and how they play out when it comes to

understanding Self-led activism. Self-leadership is the primary goal of IFS: which is that persons would become more aware of their internal world and would be able to be influenced primarily by their Self and accompanied by the wisdom of their parts. The problem for most people is that they are not Self-led but parts-led. The Self has a way of bringing harmony back into one's own internal system when it is leading the way. The Self cultivates internal harmony through two primary ways and that is through "unblending" and "unburdening." Unblending happens when the Self recognizes that a part has become extreme or impulsive and has taken over consciousness of a person. The Self creates connection and understanding with the part and invites it to relax, be heard and understood, and subsequently tended to in care. When the person's parts have been tended to, they naturally relax and allow the Self to regain primary influence on the person's behavior. Unburdening is a restorative capacity of the Self that happens when the Self tends to the unresolved suffering and/or pain that an exiled part may be carrying. This exiled part is often frozen in time and has extreme beliefs about the world through the lens of their suffering. The Self has innate wisdom of knowing what this part needs so that the suffering can be alleviated and the part can become free to trust the inherent goodness and love of reality. When this happens, the part is unburdened.

The last assumption is that our internal world is inherently good and that each part is valuable to a person. People are often at war with their internal conflict and see extreme parts to them as evil and should be avoided at all costs. IFS proposes instead that all parts mean well and simply need to be reintegrated into harmony through the Self to capture the wisdom they possess. The radical nonpathologizing way of IFS creates a compassionate and open curiosity within a person to relate to their inner world with care and kindness. This could also be described as a radical hospitality that rejects no movement but rather seeks to understand and connect to it.

In understanding IFS, Frank Rogers has shown how this intrapersonal compassion practice can lead a person to social activism in ways that are grounded, restorative, and embody justice. Rogers connects the eight characteristics of the Self to various skills and sensibilities that are needed when pursuing social activism. As IFS promotes, when a person is Self-led these qualities naturally arise in difficult situations that allow a person to move with compassion. I will go through each of the characteristics and highlight the connections Rogers makes with MultiCrit reflection and activism.

With regard to *confidence*, Rogers talks about how a person needs to set firm boundaries in their pursuit of justice. IFS leads people to an awareness of what is right for them and they might extend action in ways that are restoring. This helps prevent things like compassion fatigue and invites persons to actions of self-care and reflection so that they do not compromise their spiritual well-being while engaging in social justice. The Self-led characteristic of *courage* is about self-empowerment. Rogers admits it takes serious courage to speak truth to power and to stand in solidarity with those who are oppressed. This has serious ramifications for those who are already minoritized and engaging resistance to evil because it grounds the participants to their own self-worth and dignity. It reminds those who are under oppression that

their story matters and has significant value in being heard. This is a remedy for the internalized self-hatred that is often birthed from dehumanizing treatment. The third characteristic of *calmness* is about nonreactivity to violence. This is about one's ability when they are Self-led remain nonanxious in the midst of violence. Marcus Borg talks about how one of the greatest answers to violence is the nonanswer and is a tactic Jesus used when being questioned by Pilate. The nonanswer to violence is a refusal to play by the opponent's rules and resist the evil of creating enemies and contending for the redemption and repentance of the opponent. The fourth characteristic is that of *creativity*. Creative action comes through an ability to think outside the box and participate in subversive social action that turns dominant ideologies upside down and disarming their power. A Self-led activist will find alternative paths and solutions to issues where there is no "victory over another" but rather is collaborative, cooperative, and connecting. A fifth characteristic of *clarity* is about assurance, decisiveness, and strategy that are required when dismantling multiple systems of oppression. This can include intersectional and intercultural partnership wherein multiple groups and social identities are represented and paired together in the resistance against injustice and applies sustained, intentional, and conscious engagement from the Self-led activist. A sixth characteristic is that *compassion*. Rogers describes this as the affirmation of love for the opponents. In Self-led activism, one is not able to exist in the us/them binary but sees the pursuit of justice as benefitting to all and desires to see reconciliation take place. In the next section, I will go further into what I mean by reconciliation in compassion practice. The seventh characteristic is that of *curiosity*. When a person is Self-led in activism it will allow them to remain open to all parties involved. This is in juxtaposition to being judgmental or defensive to the positions of others and seeks understanding above all. The eighth characteristic is that of *connection*. Rather than being closed or fixated on self-interest, this characteristic is one that is inclusive, humble, and recognizes the importance of interdependence in the pursuit of justice. All eight of these characteristics are dynamic skills that activists can embody to further their goals of liberation from oppression and self-determination.

TOWARD A COMPASSION SPIRITUALITY FOR A MULTIRELIGIOUS AND MULTIRACIAL WORLD

In the final section of this paper, I would like to focus very briefly on how a blending of MultiCrit and IFS perspectives prompts forms of compassion spiritualities that, in a multiracial and multireligious world—especially where Christianity and Buddhism meet—enable focus on intrapersonal awareness, generate liberation from internal turbulence, and catalyzes love, compassion, peace, and justice. To do so, I highlight mindfulness meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh and the compassion found within Jesus's life as described by Frank Rogers.

In mindfulness meditation, Thich Nhat Hanh advises participants to become fully aware of what one is doing while doing it. He often starts his teaching by talking about washing dishes.⁸ Nhat Hanh mentions that most people wash dishes in order that they are clean. He says this is not mindfulness, because mindfulness never does

anything for a result but does it simply for doing it sake. Rather than washing the dishes so that they might be clean, wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes. He mentions how much suffering comes from our attachment to results, expectations, and moments that are not the present. Nhat Hanh proposes that life can only be lived in the presence and without the distractions and suffering of the past that often preoccupies us. Nhat Hanh also uses an example of eating an orange. He tells a story of how he once noticed a person peeling an orange and eating so fast that before they were done with a bite they would already stuffing their mouth with the next one. Nhat Hanh responds to the person that it would be wise to finish their bite before engaging the next one. The person he critiqued responded back saying they were not even aware that was happening. Nhat Hanh advocates that if a person cannot be present to what they are doing, such as eating an orange, the orange is actually not even there, and the person is not alive but rather asleep. Nhat Hanh advises practices of mindfulness that are based in breathing to recenter and reground people to the present moment. He says all activism must come from a meditative mindfulness otherwise “activism that is not meditative will be crippled.” The activism will be stunted by anger, impatience, or violence that has been unresolved in a person’s inner life. In contrast, when a person is fully aware of him or herself in the present, they will be free to respond to injustice with compassion and creativity.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s efforts to teach people to see each moment it is, is complementary to on the one hand, IFS’s opening us up to the multiplicity of our turbulent inner world, and on the other hand, to MultiCrit’s objectives of seeing race and its manifold operationalization in human society. If Nhat Hanh invites us to see the full picture of the world as it is before I respond compassionately, such converges with both IFS and MultiCrit’s windows into the depths and complexities of race and how it permeates our subjective worlds, especially for multiracial persons and people of color. (White persons who practice mindfulness and familiarize themselves with Critical Whiteness Studies will also be awake to the full picture of their own racialization.⁹) A person exercising and practicing mindfulness will be able to hold all of the complexities of the multiple oppressions that race produces, since mindfulness will cultivate the emergence of the grounded and core Self that will know how to be, act, and resist as appropriate.

From a Christian perspective, Frank Rogers shares about the cultivation of compassion in Jesus’s life and ministry and the rhythms he sees as evident.¹⁰ Rogers writes that the threefold rhythm of compassion that Jesus engaged was one that knew God to be at the center of reality and holding all things in infinite compassion, that he was restored to a fully alive humanity, and that he became an agent of radical compassion to the wounded persons around him. First, Jesus was developed intrapersonally through his own awareness of the infinite compassion of God. This is clear in the story of Jesus’s baptism where God speaks from heaven and says to Jesus, “this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.” In this mystical and formative moment, Jesus became more aware of the infinite nature of God’s compassion and how Jesus was a recipient of this. In response, Jesus was able to exercise this same compassion to his own life of prayer. Constantly in Jesus ministry, we see Jesus taking time away

from ministry to rise up early in the morning to pray. Howard Thurman goes so far to say that this was probably the most precious time of the day for Jesus,¹¹ because it was a moment to become silent before God and extend compassion to his own experience in the way he experienced it from God. Finally, this compassion spilled over from Jesus to care for the outcast of the world. Jesus is found breaking societal norms and boundaries to show kinship with the suffering in the world. Examples of this include conversations with the Samaritan woman, those with leprosy, those possessed by demons, and the despised tax collectors. This culminates in Jesus death on the cross where he exclaims “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” in reference to the Roman soldiers who murdered him. This intrapersonal compassion spirituality that informed Jesus could be summarized in what Rogers calls The Compassion Practice. This involves getting grounded and catching one’s breath, taking one’s PULSE, taking another’s PULSE, and discerning what action to take. These intrapersonal movements guided Jesus in his ministry of peace and justice for all that he called “the Kingdom of God.”

Whereas IFS and Buddhism do not necessitate a divine presence that extends compassion to the Self, Christianity does: Christian spirituality is a path of receiving compassion from God, internalizing the gift of compassion in relation to the Self throughout life, which then generates a natural response of compassion from the Self in relating to the world. So, when the contemplative traditions of Christianity are resourced with tools from MultiCrit and IFS, then the pains of internalized racism will be uncovered and dealt with in compassion. This rhythm of compassion, in turn, enables response to the realities of racialization without defensiveness or expression of destructive behaviors. Buddhist mindfulness practice may cultivate deeper and clearer consciousness of how intrapersonal compassion works in the Christian’s life, while Christian contemplation may prompt greater awareness of the transcendent horizon within which human creatures exist. Both, in turn, receive invaluable help from both IFS and MultiCrit. The former provides richer vocabulary and conceptualization for the manifold parts of human subjectivity and condition even as these established contemplative traditions provide IFS with a more expansive perspective on the what and the who of the core Self (the no-self or the image of God, for instance), beyond IFS’s eight characteristics. Last but not least, MultiCrit illuminates the racialized and intersectional subjectivities of late modernity that these historic contemplative traditions are much less equipped to name and identity, even as the latter both enhance and sustain the pursuit of justice that is sought by multiracial people and people of color.

NOTES

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2 Jessica C. Harris, “Toward a Critical Multiracial Theory in Education,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29, no. 6 (2016): 795–813; Harris engages the CRT literature in her paper and provides a working synthesis that serves our purposes in this paper.

3 See also Jessica C. Harris and Chris Linder, eds., *Intersections of Identity and Sexual Violence on Campus: Centering Minoritized Students' Experiences* (Sterling: Stylus, 2017).

4 See 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, no. 8 (1989): 139–167.

5 Derrick Bell, "Racial Realism," *Connecticut Law Review* 24, no. 2 (1992): 363–379.

6 See Richard C. Schwartz, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, rev. ed (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995); also *Introduction to the Internal Family Systems Model* (reprint; Ireland: Trailhead Publishing, 2001).

7 All references in the rest of this paper to the IFS core Self will be capitalized.

8 Thich Nhat Hanh has widely published, including many books on various aspects of mindfulness practice; our own discussion springs off his *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*, trans. Mobi Ho (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

9 See Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

10 Frank Rogers, Jr., *Practicing Compassion* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2014), and *Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2016).

11 See Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949; reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).