

Critical Theory

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE ABSURD

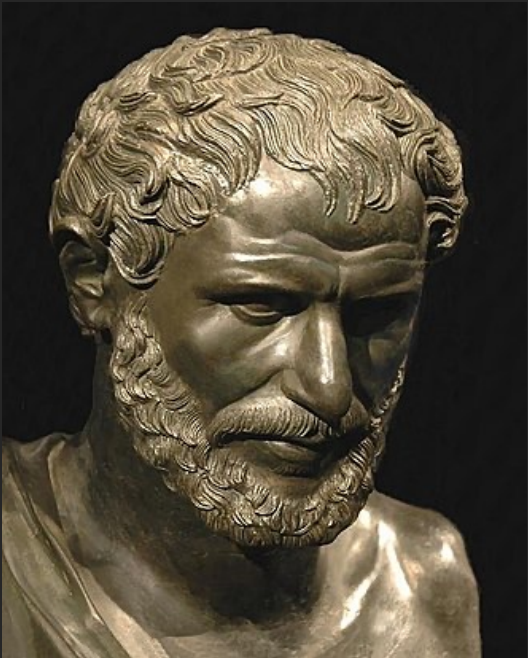
SAINT
JOHN



Heraclitus and John

EPISTEMOLOGY AND HERMENEUTICS

Heraclitus



Listening not to me but to the Logos, it is wise to agree that all things are one.

My translation: “Don’t listen to me! Listen to the Logos!”

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

JOHN 1:1-3

cogito ergo sum
pure reason (or autonomous reason)

Can reason justify itself?

ATTEMPTS AT EPISTEMOLOGY (THE STUDY OF KNOWLEDGE)

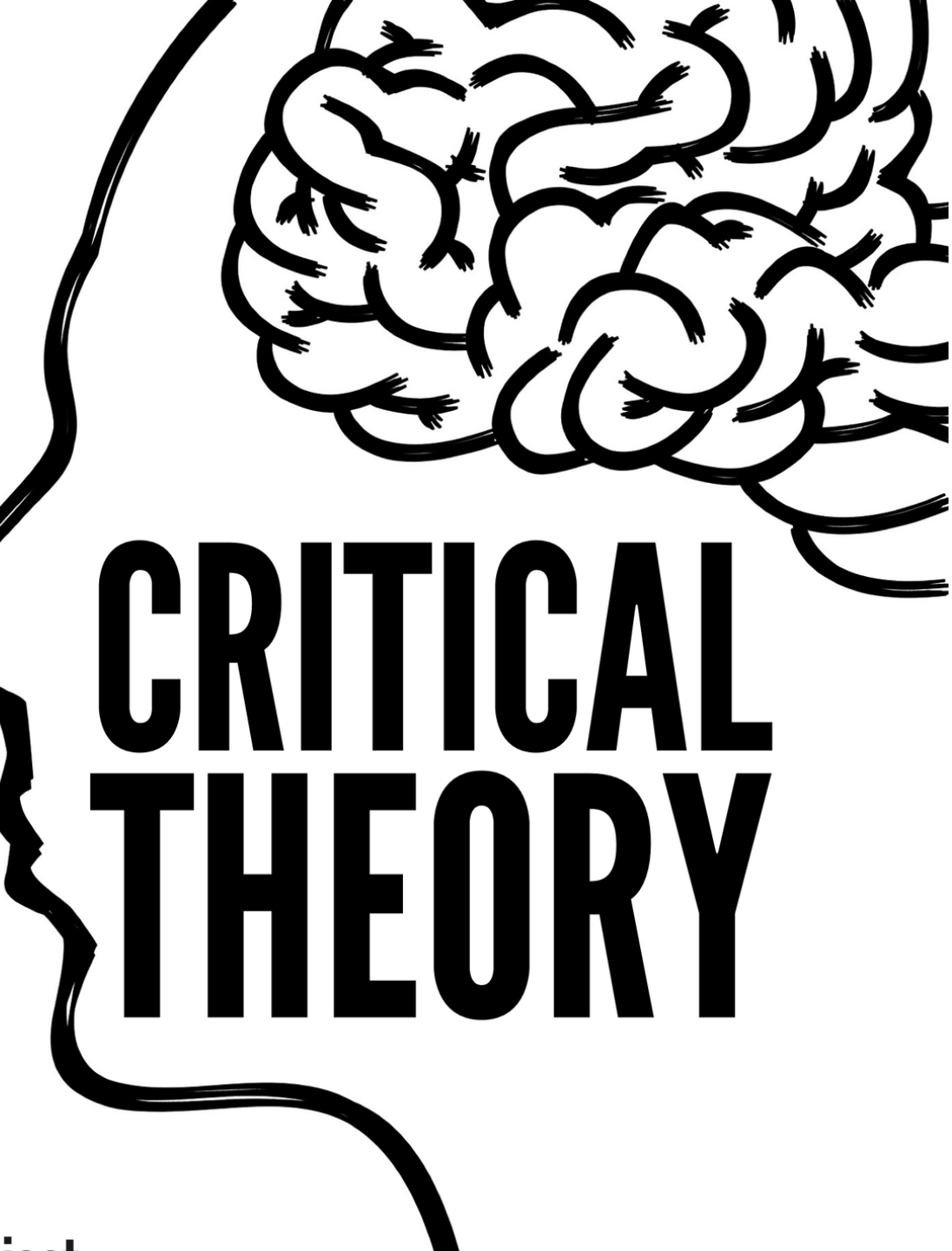
Jacques Derrida



That which I call a text is practically everything... Speech is a text, gesture is a text, reality is a text in this new sense. This is not about re-establishing graphocentrism alongside logocentrism or phonocentrism or text-centrism. The text is not a centre. The text is an openness without borders, of ever-differentiating references.

*A hermeneutic of suspicion (power)
or
logocentrism (Christocentrism)?*

ATTEMPTS AT HERMENEUTICS (THE STUDY OF INTERPRETATION)



Critical Theory

CHARACTERISTICS

“Critical Theory” is an overarching term that refers to a new way of looking at the world (as opposed to traditional theory). It aims to critique and ultimately change society by exposing underlying assumptions and power structures that keep humans from true freedom.

DEFINITION

“Critical Theory” or “Theory” has roots in the Frankfurt School (early 20th Century). Although it grew out of Marxism it was largely critical of Marxism. From Theory comes a multitude of theories such as Queer Theory, other literary theories, and the legal theory Critical Race Theory.

ROOTS

Critical Theory Characteristics



1. Privilege and oppression are permanent and not an aberration (structural and systematic).
Individuals may be oppressed in multiple ways (intersectionality).

Critical Theory Characteristics



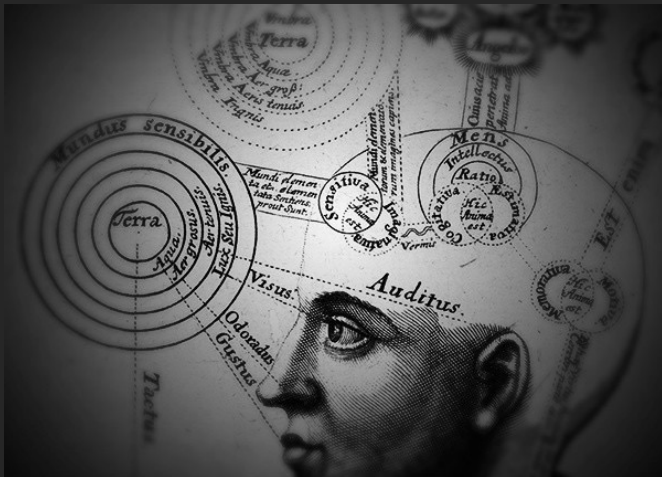
2. Change is needed and desired (action vs inaction). The liberal imagination is poor and has led to previous failed attempts at liberation and even a hardening of power structures. Neutrality is not an option (e.g. silence is violence).

Critical Theory Characteristics



3. Power replaces truth (oppressor vs victim). Historical narratives are written to oppress groups of people. The group identity in this scenario is privileged over the individual.

Critical Theory Characteristics



4. Truth is a construct. Words are unreliable at attaining truth. Race and gender are examples of constructs that should be deconstructed.

Critical Theory Characteristics



5. Equality:

All are treated equally.

Equity:

All have the same
opportunity.

Justice:

Barriers to opportunity
and outcome are
eliminated.



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Critical Theory Characteristics

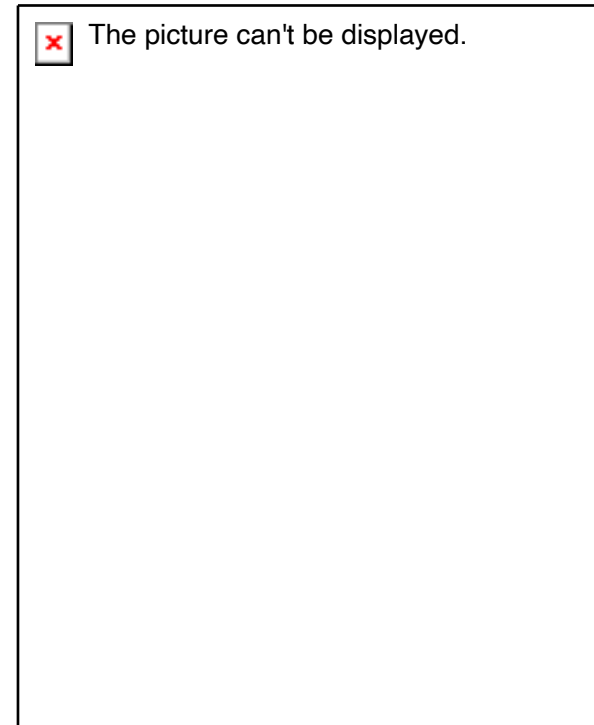
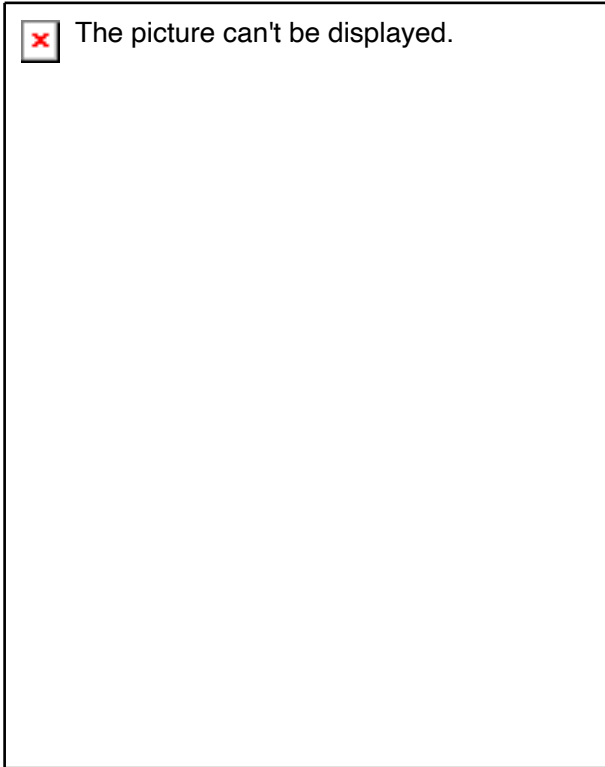


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6. Only oppressed voices should be allowed to speak because a non-oppressed person cannot see outside the power structure. Depictions of minorities serve existing power structures.

1. If we say we have no sin, the truth is not in us (1 Jn 1:8).
2. Charity is a virtue that pays dividends (1 Pt 4).
3. Every –ism and –ology has a kernel of truth in it (1 Co 13:12).
4. Every –ism and –ology is deeply flawed because of its humanity (1 Co 1).
5. Do not let anything get in the way of seeing the humanity of the “other” (Mt 5:44).
6. Do not let anything get in the way of gospel (literally all of Galatians and really the whole Bible).

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT



A -ISM OR -OLOGY OFTEN ASKS THE RIGHT QUESTION BUT PROVIDES FAULTY ANSWERS. DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE QUESTION EVEN IF YOU DISAGREE WITH THE ANSWER.

The Good, The Bad, & The Absurd

DIAGNOSIS



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1. Privilege and oppression are permanent and not an aberration.

The Good

Of course. We believe in the total depravity of man. If you have ever said “the system is broken” you also, at the very least, know that structures and systems can be corrupt even if the individual is just “doing her job”. Am I not privileged? If I called myself “blessed”, would that be better?

The Bad

It is a category mistake to label inanimate things like structures or systems with moral or immoral adjectives. This often lets the individual off the hook. “It is not neighborhoods that are bad but the people in the neighborhoods.”

The Absurd

We have all heard someone say something like this, “I have been married three times and marriage doesn’t work.” As if there wasn’t another common denominator that could be blamed! We can also blame a structure (e.g. marriage) for an immoral result (e.g. misogyny) and miss the good of that estate (e.g. love).

2. Action over inaction. Illiberal over liberal.

The Good

We are called to action, no doubt about it, and a sin of omission (silence), is still a sin. Each culture emphasizes certain sins (and virtues) over others. Vacuums occur when the church is silent. The postmodern critique of modernism is often valid. Modernity promised the moon but has not always delivered.

The Bad

Progress is slow. Blowing up structures that are imperfect may produce even worse results. And who gets to decide what is good and true? Revolution without a plan is worse than a reformation based on liberal ideals (e.g. freedoms, free trade, existence of truth, human dignity, blind law, etc.).

The Absurd

The civil rights movement is sometimes seen as not only inadequate for not going too far but even allowed for regression. Instead of basing progress on human dignity afforded to all there must be a forcible taking of power even if it means violence. So violence is not violence but silence is violence.

3. Power replaces truth.

The Good

Power is most certainly evident in the history of the world. The abuse of power is wrong. Hagiography is a problem. It is good to ask the historical question, “who got a bad deal?” Remaining in power is often more important than ideals or the pursuit of truth. This is true in politics, the church, and in our individual lives.

The Bad

Truth is truth. Without a Logos-grounded-truth we are left with a vacuum filled with pragmatism (what works is true), solipsism (the self is true and that is it), skepticism (nothing can be known), or a hermeneutic of suspicion (power is bad and untrue, the oppressed are good and true).

The Absurd

Rewriting history for the sake of power only replaces one power with another. Many Confederate statues were erected long after the Civil War with nefarious intentions. And yet, rewriting history to only highlight the sins of the fathers is also a show of power. Both treat history as a means of power.

4. Truth as construct. Words cannot mediate truth.

The Good

We do construct meaning. Words are approximations of the truth. Humans do not have the perspective and knowledge of the divine. We are “babbled”. In a limited way gender can be a construct (sex is not). Race is a post-Enlightenment concept that is largely based on naturalism and social evolutionary thought.

The Bad

We use words to describe how words are not reliable! We are in, with, and under words. We cannot escape words and the Word. Even the atheist lives under the Logos. Our attempts at deconstructing meaning and then constructing our own meaning is fighting against the tide. You cannot escape the Logos.

The Absurd

I am not a cat.

5. Equality, equity, and justice.

The Good

Every good educator knows that you need to meet the students where they are. Equality was lost at the Fall and remains elusive this side of heaven. We are not rugged individuals, we are part of a collective and that comes with advantages or disadvantages. Equity and justice are good.

The Bad

Biblical justice is righteousness. Righteousness is always a gift. It is never earned. Biblical justice is about salvation. And yet human dignity means a person is called to work and love. To be truly Christological means to suffer for others. Charity is good but handouts can also be dehumanizing.

The Absurd

Being called to pinch run on on third base doesn't mean that you hit a triple.

Blaming a school for your kid's personal failures and your failures as a parent is only an attempt at self-justification.

6. Only oppressed voices should speak.

The Good

I know (cognitively) what it is like to be a teenager in 2023 but I do not know (experientially) what it is like to be a teenager in 2023 because I am not a teenager anymore. The pursuit of knowledge demands these voices to be heard. It is also hard to gain perspective of a system when one is in the system.

The Bad

Truth is truth no matter from what mouth it comes. If the oppressed come to power, is their truth then not true anymore? Can a minority be authentic to self without being depicted as a minority?

The Absurd

How can one be an ally of the oppressed but not speak for the oppressed? How can one avoid “silence is violence” if one is not allowed to speak? How can I know the oppressed if I am told that I cannot know the oppressed? The ultimate cultural appropriation is both the Enlightenment and Theory using the *imago dei*.

Bound choice

An understanding of conscience

A theology of suffering

A mechanism for forgiveness

WHAT IS MISSING IN BOTH CT AND MANY CRITICISMS OF CT?




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Reaction

THE GOSPEL

Epistemology

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Kata Christon

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority (Co 2:6-10).

Anthropology

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Homo iustificans

We are the types of beings that seek to be justified.

Homo liturgicus

We are the types of beings that worship (and believe).

Identity

Our true identity is found in the Logos, the great “I AM” (Moses).

Eschatology

Penultimate vs Ultimate

I am the Alpha and the Omega,
the First and the Last, the
Beginning and the End (Rv
22:13).



Ecclesiology



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Two Kingdoms

“Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mk 12:17).

Unsolicited
advice from
this idiot.



Hone the ability to see the difference between the political and the theological (seatbelts).

Eliminate sloppy and media terms (cancel “cancel culture”).

Don’t be a martyr (we are made for drama).

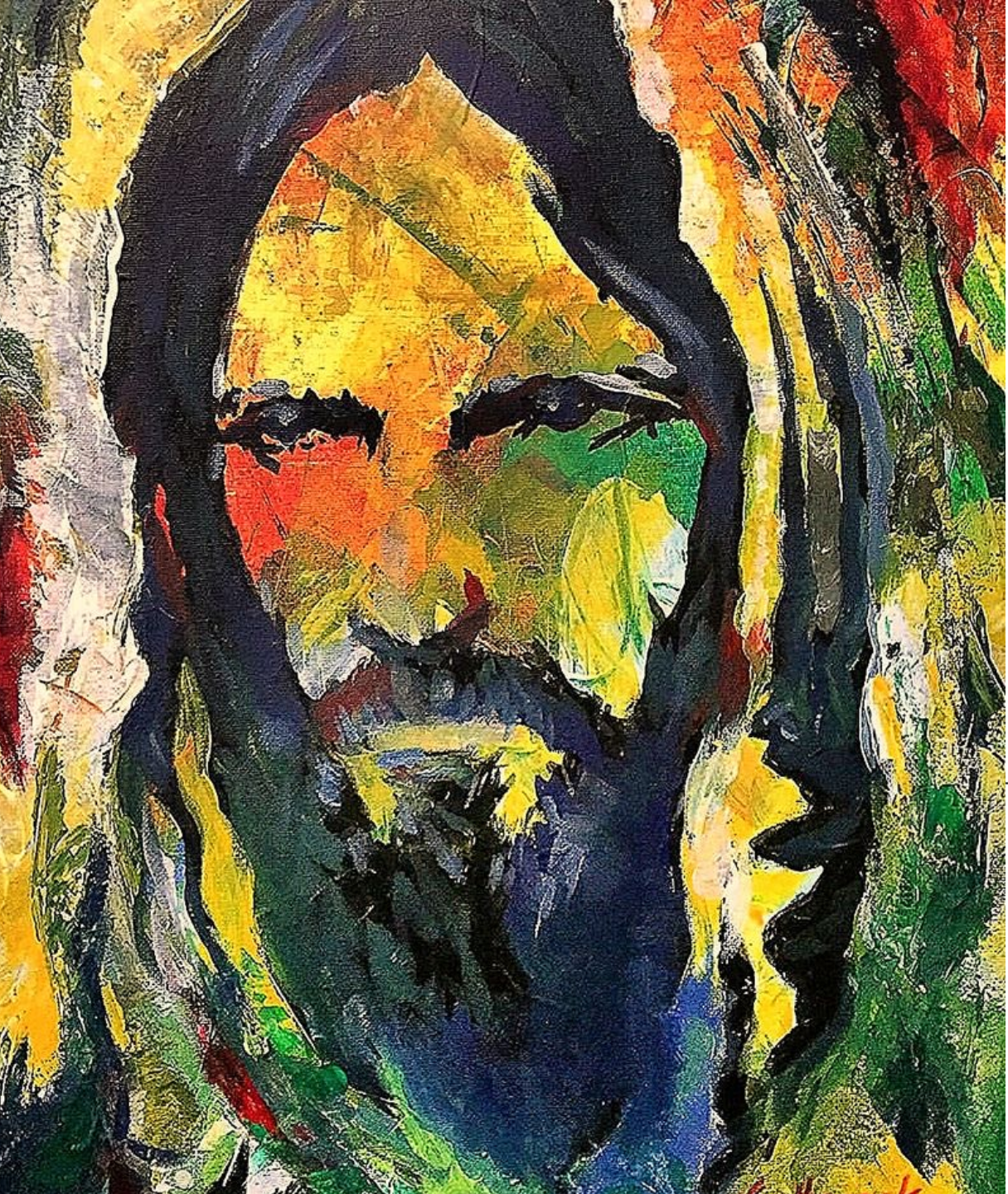
Don’t fall into power-plays (live by the law, die by the law).

Don’t feed the beast (CT is passé).

Submissive love is the ethic not a curved inward morality (virtue for the sake of virtue).

We are not post-Christian, ask the Hindu immigrant to America. We might be post-shallow Christianity. For that we should thank God. Its an open marketplace of ideas and that is to our advantage. This is our home turf. We have the Logos. Our reaction to the current culture should be sadness not anger, optimism not pessimism. It is time to say something profound.

THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE



A Lutheran Moment

A REEVALUATION

Sola Christus



Theology of the Cross

Incarnational & Sacramental Theology

First Order Gospel Proclamation

I do not fear any movement. I fear that the gospel will be hidden, that the church would not be able to pick the gospel out of lineup of shallow aphorisms or political strategies.

Finally, I am confident because Christ is the ultimate iconoclast.

Thomas Oden



To all sufferers from decadent modernity, I bring greetings on behalf of the young classicists of the postliberal underground that abides patiently in the crevices of our heartsick modern culture. They bear good news to harassed Christian believers who may be tempted to despair over the momentum of these times. My purpose in writing this is to provide reasons why despair is not the appropriate response to these times.

Thomas Oden



I shall describe the impassioned values of an emerging group of young orthodox cultural renovators who, having understood the values and methods of modern inquiry, and been disillusioned by their consequences, are now turning in earnest to classical Christianity. They are young in spirit because they are not intimidated by modernity.

Thomas Oden

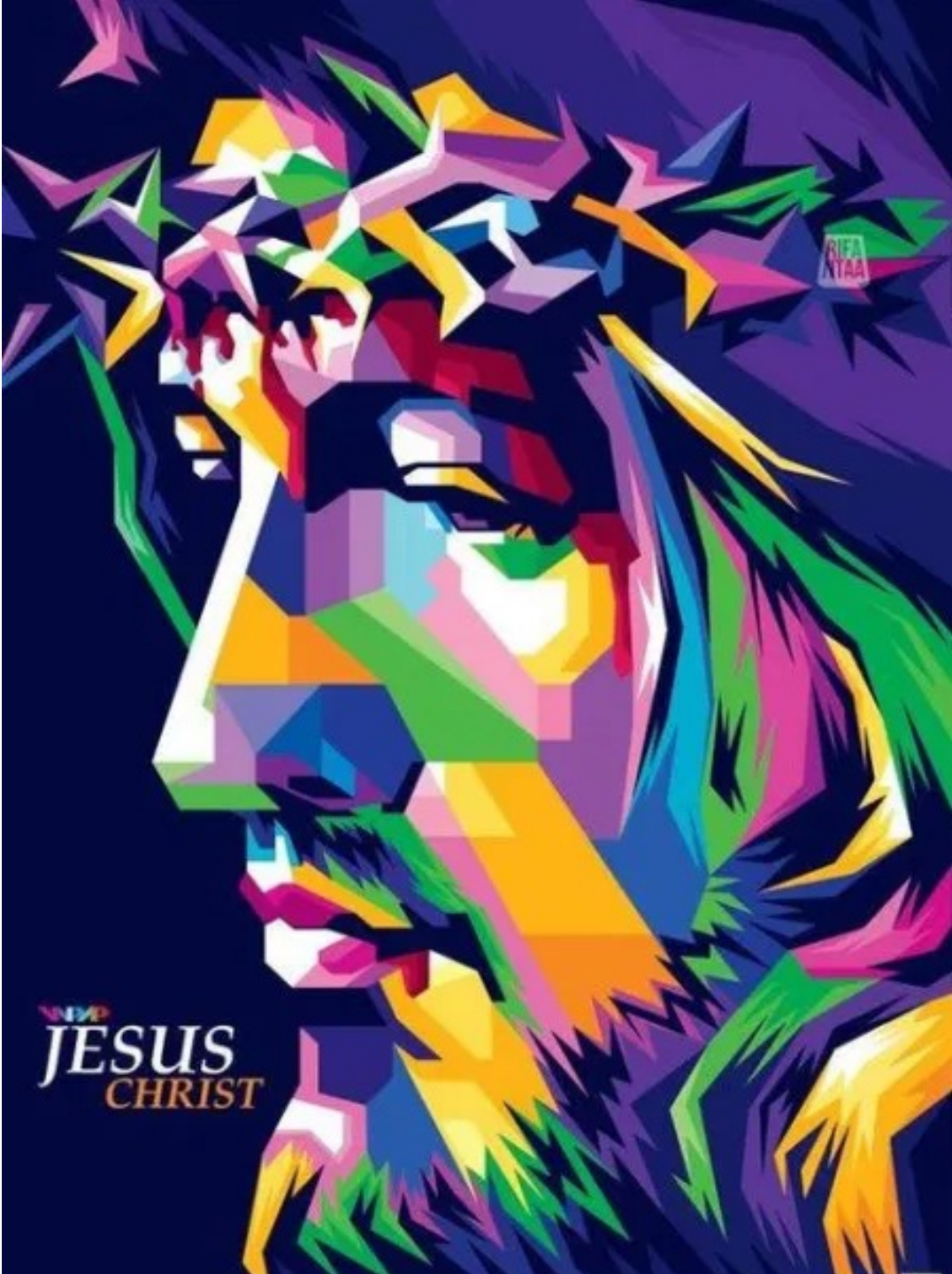


I like to call them young fogeys to distinguish them as postmodern pacesetters from the “old fogeys” who remain bogged down in the quagmire of liberal Protestant pietism... They understand that the surest form of cultural renovation begins one by one with personal religious conversion, the turning of the heart away from arrogance and folly and toward faith in God. They are the newest work of the Holy Spirit. My own generation of liberated theologians consisted mostly of novelty-fixated sixties revolutionaries. We applied our radical chic imagination to everything that seemed to us slightly old or dated.

Thomas Oden



The emerging young classicists are critics of my generation's modern chauvinism, which assumes that newer is better, older is worse. As I emphasize with and speak for and about this spirited, emergent generation of young classic Christian men and women, I find myself ironically entering into a kind of resistance movement in relation to my own generation of relativists, who have botched things up pretty absolutely. I will explain how I made this winding transit from being a sixties radical to a young-at-heart-fogey, happy to be thrown by providence into this singular, wonderful, historical moment.



VDMA

THE WORD OF GOD REMAINS FOREVER