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# The New Religion

FAIR ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

# The New Religion

## Excerpt from *The Elect: The Threat to a Progressive America from Anti-Black Antiracists*

By John McWhorter

### One can divide antiracism into three waves.

First Wave Antiracism battled slavery and segregation. Second Wave Antiracism, in the 1970s and 1980s, battled racist attitudes and taught America that being racist was a flaw. Third Wave Antiracism, becoming mainstream in the 2010s, teaches that racism is baked into the structure of society, so whites' "complicity" in living within it constitutes racism itself, while for black people, grappling with the racism surrounding them is the totality of experience and must condition exquisite sensitivity toward them, including a suspension of standards of achievement and conduct.

Third Wave Antiracist tenets, stated clearly and placed in simple oppositions, translate into nothing whatsoever:

1. When black people say you have insulted them, apologize with profound sincerity and guilt. **But** don't put black people in a position where you expect them to forgive you. They have dealt with too much to be expected to.
2. Black people are a conglomeration of disparate individuals. "Black culture" is code for "pathological, primitive ghetto people." But don't expect black people to assimilate to "white" social norms because black people have a culture of their own.
3. Silence about racism is violence. **But** elevate the voices of the oppressed over your own.
4. You must strive eternally to understand the experiences of black people. But you can never understand what it is to be black, and if you think you do you're a racist.
5. Show interest in multiculturalism. **But** do not culturally appropriate. What is not your culture is not for you, and you may not try it or do it. But—if you aren't nevertheless *interested* in it, you are a racist.
6. Support black people in creating their own spaces and stay out of them. **But** seek to have

black friends. If you don't have any, you're a racist. And if you claim any, they'd better be *good* friends—in their private spaces, you aren't allowed in.

7. When whites move away from black neighborhoods, it's white flight. **But** when whites move into black neighborhoods, it's gentrification, even when they pay black residents generously for their houses.
8. If you're white and only date white people, you're a racist. **But** if you're white and date a black person you are, if only deep down, exotifying an "other."
9. Black people cannot be held accountable for everything every black person does. **But** all whites must acknowledge their personal complicity in the perfidy throughout history of "whiteness."
10. Black students must be admitted to schools via adjusted grade and test score standards to ensure a representative number of them and foster a diversity of views in classrooms. **But** it is racist to assume a black student was admitted to a school via racial preferences, and racist to expect them to represent the "diverse" view in classroom discussions.

I suspect that deep down, most know that none of this catechism makes any sense. Less obvious is that it was not even composed with logic in mind. The self-contradiction of these tenets is crucial, in revealing that Third Wave Antiracism is not a philosophy but a religion.

The revelation of racism is, itself and alone, the point, the intention, of this curriculum. As such, the fact that if you think a little, the tenets cancel one another out, is considered trivial. That they serve their true purpose of revealing people as bigots is paramount—sacrosanct, as it were. Third Wave Antiracism's needlepoint homily par

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Battling power relations and their discriminatory effects must be the central focus of all human endeavor, be it intellectual, moral, civic or artistic. Those who resist this focus, or even evidence insufficient adherence to it, must be

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Third Wave Antiracism is losing innocent people jobs. It is coloring, detouring and sometimes strangling academic inquiry. It forces us to render a great deal of our public discussion of urgent issues in doubletalk any 10-year-old can see through. It forces us to start teaching our actual 10-year-olds, in order to hold them off from spoiling the show in that way, to believe in sophistry in the name of enlightenment. On that, Third Wave Antiracism guru Ibram X. Kendi has written a book on how to raise antiracist children called *Antiracist Baby*. You couldn't imagine it better: Are we in a Christopher Guest movie? This and so much else is a sign that Third Wave Antiracism forces us to pretend that performance art is politics. It forces us to spend endless amounts of time listening to nonsense presented as wisdom, and pretend to like it. I write this viscerally driven by the fact that all of this supposed wisdom is founded in an ideology under which white people calling themselves our saviors make black people look like the dumbest, weakest, most self-indulgent human beings in the history of our species, and teach black people to revel in that status and cherish it as making us special. Talking of *Antiracist Baby*, I am especially dismayed at the idea of this indoctrination infecting my daughters' sense of self. I can't always be with them, and this anti-humanist ideology may seep into their school curriculum. I shudder at the thought: teachers with eyes shining at the prospect of showing their antiracism by teaching my daughters that they are poster children rather than individuals.

Ta-Nehisi Coates in *Between the World and Me* wanted to teach his son that America is set against him; I want to teach my kids the reality of their lives in the 21st rather than early-to-mid-20th century. Lord forbid my daughters internalize a pathetic—yes, absolutely pathetic in all of the

resonances of that word—sense that what makes them interesting is what other people think of them, or don't.

Many will see me as traitorous in writing this as a black person. They will not understand that I see myself as serving my race by writing it. One of the grimmest tragedies of how this perversion of sociopolitics makes us think (or, not think) is that it will bar more than a few black readers from understanding that I am calling for them to be treated with true dignity. However, they and everyone else should also realize: I know quite well that white readers will be more likely to hear out views like this when written by a black person, and consider it nothing less than my duty as a black person to write it.

A white version of this would be blithely dismissed as racist. I will be dismissed instead as self-hating by a certain crowd. But frankly, they won't really mean it, and anyone who gets through my new book on this subject, which I am now publishing in serial, will see that whatever traits I harbor, hating myself or being ashamed of being black is not one of them. And we shall move on. As in, to realizing that what I am documenting matters, and matters deeply. Namely, that America's sense of what it is to be intellectual, moral, or artistic; what it is to educate a child; what it is to foster justice; what it is to express oneself properly; what it is to be a nation—all is being refounded upon a religion.

This is directly antithetical to the very foundations of the American experiment. Religion has no place in the classroom, in the halls of ivy, in our codes of ethics, or in deciding how we express ourselves, and almost all of us spontaneously understand that and see any misunderstanding of the premise as backward. Yet since about 2015, a peculiar contingent has been slowly headlocking us into making an exception, supposing that this new religion is so incontestably good, so gorgeously

can only bow down in humble acquiescence.

But a new religion in the guise of world progress is not an advance; it is a detour. It is not altruism; it is self-help. It is not sunlight; it is fungus. It's time it became ordinary to call it for what it is and stop cowering before it, letting it make people so much less than they—black and everything else—could be.

### **Third Wave Antiracism exploits modern**

**Americans' fear** of being thought racist, using this to promulgate an obsessive, self-involved, totalitarian and unnecessary kind of cultural reprogramming. One could be excused for thinking this glowering kabuki is a continuation of the Civil Rights efforts of yore, the only kind of new antiracism there could be. Its adherents preach with such contemptuous indignation, and are now situated in the most prestigious and influential institutions in the land—on their good days they can seem awfully “correct.”

However, there is nothing correct about the essence of American thought and culture being transplanted into the soil of a religious faith. Some will go as far as to own up to it being a religion, and wonder why we can't just accept it as our new national creed. The problem is that on matters of societal procedure and priorities, the adherents of this religion—true to the very nature of religion—cannot be reasoned with. They are, in this, medievals with lattes.

We need not wonder what the basic objections will be: Third Wave Antiracism isn't really a religion; I am oversimplifying; I shouldn't write this without being a theologian; it is a religion but it's a good one; and so on. I will get all of that out of the way as we go on, and then offer some genuine solutions. But first, what this is not.

1. *It is not an argument against protest.* I am not arguing against the basic premises of

Black Lives Matter, although I have had my differences with some of its offshoot developments. I am not arguing that the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s would have been better off sticking to quiet negotiations. I am not arguing against the left. I am arguing against a particular strain of the left that has come to exert a grievous influence over American institutions, to the point that we are beginning to accept as normal the kinds of language, policies and actions that Orwell wrote of as fiction.

2. *I am not writing this thinking of right-wing America as my audience.* I will make no appearances on any Fox News program to promote it. People of that world are welcome to listen in. But I write this to two segments of the American populace. Both are what I consider to be my people, which is what worries me so much about what is going on. One segment is the *New York Times*-reading, National Public Radio-listening people of any color who have innocently fallen under the impression that pious, unempirical virtue-signaling about race is a form of moral enlightenment and political activism, and ever teeter upon becoming card-carrying Third Wave Antiracists themselves. The other is those black people who have innocently fallen under the misimpression that for us only, cries of weakness constitute a kind of strength, and that for us only, what makes us interesting, what makes us matter, is a curated persona as eternally victimized souls, ever carrying and defined by the memories and injuries of our people across four centuries behind us, ever “unrecognized,” ever “misunderstood,” ever unpaid.
3. *This is not merely a complaint.* My goal is not to venture the misty statement that a diversity of opinions is crucial to a healthy society. Citing John Stuart Mill at Third Wave Antiracists

1. conversations waste massive amounts of energy in missing the futility of “dialogue” with them. Of a hundred fundamentalist Christians, how many do you suppose could be convinced via argument to become atheists? There is no reason that the number of people who can be talked out of the Third Wave Antiracism religion is any higher. As such, our concern must be how to continue with genuine progress in spite of this ideology. How do we work around it? How do we insulate people with good ideas from the influence of the Third Wave Antiracists’ liturgical concerns? How do we hold them off from influencing the education of our young people any more than they already have?

My interest is not “How do we get through to these people?” We cannot, at least not enough of them to matter. The question is “How can we live graciously among them?” We seek change in the world, but for the duration will have to do so while encountering bearers of a gospel, itching to smoke out heretics, and ready on a moment’s notice to tar us as moral perverts.

**One more thing: We need a crisper label for the problematic folk.**

I will not title them “Social Justice Warriors.” That, and other labels such as “the Woke Mob” are unsuitably dismissive. One of the key insights I hope to get across is that most of these people are not zealots. They are your neighbor, your friend, possibly even your offspring. They are friendly school principals, people who work quietly in publishing, lawyer pals. Heavy readers, good cooks, musicians. It’s just that sadly, what they become, solely on this narrow but impactful range of issues, is inquisitors.

I considered titling them The Inquisitors. But that, too, is mean. I’m not interested in mean; I want to get these people off the bottom of our shoes so we can actually move ahead. Whoops—that was mean. But I intended it as an accurate metaphor—this ideology impedes moving ahead.

The author and essayist Joseph Bottum has found the proper term, and I will adopt it here: We will

term these people The Elect. They do think of themselves as bearers of a wisdom, granted them for any number of reasons—a gift for empathy, life experience, maybe even intelligence. But they see themselves as having been chosen, as it were, by one or some of these factors, as understanding something most do not.

“The Elect” is also good in implying a certain smugness, which is sadly accurate as a depiction. Of course, most of them will resist the charge. But its sitting in the air, in its irony, may also encourage them to resist the definition, which over time may condition at least some of them to temper the excesses of the philosophy, just as after the 1980s many started disidentifying from being “too PC.”

But most importantly, terming these people The Elect implies a certain air of the past, *à la* Da Vinci Code. This is apt, in that the view they think of as sacrosanct is directly equivalent to views people centuries before us were as fervently devoted to as today’s Elect are. The medieval Catholic passionately defended prosecuting Jews and Muslims with what we now see was bigoted incoherence, rooted in the notion that those with other beliefs and origins were lesser humans. We spontaneously “other” those antique inquisitors in our times, but right here and now we are faced with people who harbor the exact same brand of mission, just against different persons.

In 1500, it was about not being Christian. In 2020, it’s about not being *sufficiently* antiracist, with adherents supposing that this is a more intellectually and morally advanced cause than antipathy to someone for being Jewish or Muslim. They do not see that they, too, are persecuting people for not adhering to their religion.

But there is a difference between being antiracist and being antiracist in a religious way. Following the religion means to pillory people for what, as recently as 10 years ago, would have been thought of as petty torts or even as nothing at all; to espouse policies that hurt black people as long as supporting them makes you seem aware that racism exists; to pretend that America never makes any real progress on racism; and to almost hope that it doesn’t because this would deprive you of a sense of purpose.

Elect ideology affects people in degrees. There are especially abusive Elect ideologues. Some are comfortable ripping into people in person; more restrict the nastiness to social media. Other Elect do not go in for being mean, but are still comfortable with the imperatives, have founded their sociopolitical perspectives firmly upon them, and are hard-pressed to feel comfortable interacting socially with people in disagreement. They allow the openly abusive Elect to operate freely, seeing their conduct as a perhaps necessary unpleasantness in the goal of general enlightenment.

I do not wish to imply that The Elect are all of the especially abusive type; the vast majority are not. The problem is the degree to which the perspective

has come to influence so many less argumentative but equally devout people, whose increasing numbers and buzzwords have the effect of silencing those who see Elect philosophy as flawed but aren't up for being mauled.

The Elect are, in all of their diversity, sucking all the air out of the room. It must stop.

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