FIRST CHURCH OF INTERSECTIONALITY

*by Elizabeth C. Corey*August 2017 First Things

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"If schools, churches, and families are the primary institutions that have always formed people, and if they are fundamentally shot through with oppression and prejudice, then these institutions must themselves be thoroughly remade… Scholarship is secondary. Activism is what matters most."…

I recently attended an academic conference at the University of Notre Dame called "Intersectional Inquiries and Collaborative Action: Gender and Race." It felt like a return to my undergraduate years in the early 1990s. I saw women with shaved heads wearing ethnic print scarves, Birkenstocks, and baggy black clothes. Many of the participants smelled of curry and incense. I attended the conference because I was researching the concept of "intersectionality" as part of a year-long fellowship to study academic diversity. A year ago, I knew almost nothing about the diversity movement in academia. Now I've learned that it is only the tip of a very large iceberg, and that this movement is more extensive, and more radical, than the anodyne term "diversity" would lead one to believe.

Intersectionality is a wholly academic invention that plays a large role in this movement. Indeed, it stands in the vanguard of the progressive academy, allied with critical race studies, queer studies, women's studies, and ethnic studies. Intersectional scholars proudly proclaim their goal: to smash the neoliberal, corporate, heteropatriarchal academy and then to reinvent it in a way that rejects traditional notions about what universities are meant to do. These scholars also want to redefine the family and to abolish the "binary" of man and woman.

Although the term has been around for almost thirty years, most people—even academics—don't really know what intersectionality means. It originated in a 1989 article about antidiscrimination law, in which black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw made a case for treating race and gender not as separate legal categories but as a new, combined category. In other words, while a woman might claim discrimination on the basis of sex, and a black man might claim it on the basis of race, neither sex nor race alone could capture the discrimination endured by a black woman.

Crenshaw explains the idea by taking up the legal case of *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* (1977). In that case, five black women sued General Motors for discrimination. GM had not hired black women prior to 1964, and had dismissed all but one of its black female employees hired after 1970 on the basis of seniority. The plaintiffs claimed that the harm they suffered could not be addressed by suing as women only, because GM could point out that it had indeed hired women (white women) prior to 1964 and had retained those that were hired after 1970.

Nor were they willing to sue on the basis of race alone. The discrimination they suffered was not merely racial, they argued, but a result of their combined racial and gender identity. The district court dismissed this claim, observing that the prospect of "the creation of new classes of protected minorities, governed only by the mathematical principles of permutation and combination, clearly raises the prospect of opening the hackneyed Pandora's box." Crenshaw rejected that reasoning, pointing out that these women were clearly suffering from compound discrimination for their identity. Neither black men nor white women found themselves in quite the same situation.

Thus the metaphor of "intersectionality" was born. Black women found themselves at the intersection of two different kinds of prejudice—about race and gender—and could not receive remedy by addressing one or the other alone. Writers since Crenshaw have expanded the term to cover studies that integrate the disadvantages caused by sexual orientation, class, age, body size, gender identification, ability, and more. Personal identity results from the combination of these many aspects of identity, they say, and each one signifies a measure of either oppression or privilege. As a whole, these traits determine an individual's position in the "matrix of domination."

Yet intersectionality deals not only, or even primarily, with individuals. Individuality is secondary to group identity. For just as prejudice and oppression define our dominant institutions and social structures, intersectionalists assert, we are formed by the social structures and groups to which we belong. Blacks, women, and others have the distinct disadvantage of being part of nondominant social structures, no matter what other characteristics they possess (wealth, tenure, prestige). They are the inevitable targets of prejudice, discrimination, fear, and hatred. The only solution to this society-wide problem is coalition-building and political action on a large scale. In other words, we need a revolution.

Patricia Hill Collins is distinguished university professor in sociology at the University of Maryland. She has had a long and productive career as a black feminist academic. Her work is cited widely by scholars in gender studies, queer studies, Africana studies, rhetoric, communications, and sociology.
Collins was the keynote speaker at the Notre Dame conference I attended. Though I disagreed with almost all of the substance of her talk, she drew the audience in, made us feel like we were her friends and allies, and effectively recruited us to her cause. She used humor and storytelling to describe her life as a black female academic in an age when she had very few peers who looked like her. (She's currently sixty-nine years old.)

As she spoke, I began to feel that I was not at an academic lecture at all, but at an Evangelical church with a charismatic pastor. She even looked the part, wearing all black with a vibrant green scarf that hung around her shoulders like a cleric's stole. Some of her statements brought approving murmurs from the audience—"Umm *hmm*." At times people broke out in spontaneous applause or acclamation, as if we were at a revival.

Soon the church-like atmosphere evolved into a political rally. Collins told us that the academy is filled with "timid people" who are afraid to challenge the status quo. She also asserted that authentic intellectual engagement *requires* political activism. Why should we "take up the words" if we "lose the critical edge" and the ability to put ideas into practice? "Now is not the time," Collins asserted, for "business as usual!" The election of Donald Trump has heightened the need for intersectionality, as a way of protesting the egregious racism, sexism, and homophobia that his administration embodies. She exhorted us to be oppositional. Revolution cannot take place unless we overthrow the existing power structures, and intersectionality requires that all oppressed groups work together. Citing black feminist heroes such as Angela Davis, she charged the audience to form nonhierarchical networks of flexible solidarity, coalitions of conscience, made up of people who would devote themselves to upending the status quo. Everyone loved it. Nobody seemed to notice (or mind) that this was precisely the same language that radicals of all stripes have employed for at least the past fifty years.

At the end there was a question and answer period. I asked whether and how Collins would suggest that intersectionality engage with its adversaries, the hated conservatives. Given the polarization of America right now, did she see some way for the two camps to communicate or find common ground? The vehemence of her answer was startling. “No,” she said. “You cannot bring these two worlds together. You must be oppositional. You must fight. For me, it’s a line in the sand.” This was at once jarring and clarifying.

In 1968, the political philosopher Eric Voegelin published a little book called *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*. In a section of that book entitled “Ersatz Religion,” he argued that modern ideologies are very much like ancient Gnostic movements. Certain fundamental assumptions, Voegelin wrote, characterize both ancient and modern Gnosticism.
The gnostic, Voegelin observed, is fundamentally dissatisfied with his situation and believes that the world is “intrinsically poorly organized” and that salvation from the world’s evils is possible. The gnostic further thinks that “the order of being will have to be changed in an historical process” and that this is possible through human effort. Finally, the gnostic looks for a prophet who shares saving knowledge about how to make the transformation happen. It turns out that the intersectional project accords in every detail with Voegelin’s description.

Intersectional scholars are, by definition, unhappy with their situations in life. From an outsider’s perspective, this seems more reasonable for some than for others, though it’s apparent that everyone feels it to a greater or lesser extent. Most affectingly, at the Notre Dame conference, several black feminist scholars from South Africa described the explicitly repressive measures they had endured at their universities, where the prejudice against them is overt and sometimes results in violence. As one scholar put it, “It’s not like I’m full of despair.” Then she paused and thought for a moment. “But, of course, I *am* full of despair.”

This nearly moved black American women to tears. They detailed their feelings of inadequacy in American universities, confessing that they feel they have no legitimate place, or that they are expected constantly to serve, because this is what has always been expected of black women. A young Hispanic assistant professor explained that United States immigration policy was a systematic attempt “to deny intimacy and family” to immigrants

from Mexico. A self-identified "Chicano gender non-conforming queer Latinx" detailed the exclusion she had felt until she discovered a support group of other transgender people in Los Angeles. And the stories continued.

Expressions of hurt and exclusion were inevitably followed by anger at the system—at the patriarchy, racism, unjust institutions, and structural prejudice—and then by exhortations to *do something* about it. In Voegelin's terms, they were rebelling against the poor organization of the world, and maintained the hope of salvation through human effort.

Voegelin's idea that the order of being must be changed "in an historical process" nicely captures the mandate of intersectionality. If schools, churches, and families are the primary institutions that have always formed people, and if they are fundamentally shot through with oppression and prejudice, then these institutions must themselves be thoroughly remade. In light of such an objective, the self-conscious deconstruction of what we take for granted makes sense. Gender, sexuality, family, hierarchy, capitalism, and, most of all, the university and its "pretense" to objective knowledge must be destroyed and reconstituted. Scholarship is secondary. Activism is what matters most.

Intersectionality is, then, a quasi-religious gnostic movement, which appeals to people for precisely the reasons that all religions do: It gives an account of our brokenness, an explanation of the reasons for pain, a saving story accompanied by strong ethical imperatives, and hope for the future. In short, it gives life meaning. But we cannot leave the matter here. For though my experience at Notre Dame humanized intersectionality for me, its excesses and partial understandings cannot stand unchallenged. Intersectionality assumes without question—indeed, with pride—that the primary purpose of higher education is political indoctrination allied with progressive political activism. In her recent book, *Intellectual Activism*, Patricia Hill Collins simply asserts that "academia *is* activist politics." Or as she put it more expansively in her Notre Dame lecture, "intersectionality investigates how race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, religion and citizenship constitute *intersecting systems of power* that mutually construct one another" and then proposes "broader political and intellectual struggles

for social justice." Or, put differently, sociology and political science = social justice studies and political *praxis*.

But where in this schema is art history? Theology? Math? Philosophy? Constitutional law and literature and Romance languages and ancient Greek? Must these subjects also be reconstructed by race, gender, and all the other favored categories? What about students looking for something besides ideological conscription—for beauty, faith, *humanitas*, and inspiration? If identity and historical disadvantage aren't the only subjects, then the classroom must allow for something besides activist politics—perhaps a refuge from consumer culture, a time away from the world's pressing problems, a place to become familiar with works of genius and moral depth, an occasion to entertain a variety of ideas and values without committing (yet) to any one. Intersectionality, however, sees disinterested inquiry as an illusion fostered by those who already possess social power. They think that such inquiry is irresponsible and useless playing with symbols, language, and meanings, entirely without purchase in the wider world.

What is more, the excessive emphasis on activism means that intersectionality implicitly assumes that young people arrive at college with fully formed, mature views about politics and social dynamics. How else can we explain the underclassmen at Oberlin who demanded last year that all semester grades below C be wiped from their transcripts so that they could feel fully supported in being absent from class to do activist work? They already know what justice requires. According to a more traditional view, the purpose of higher education is not simply to have one's opinions and biases confirmed and strengthened, nor is it to adopt a fashionable, ready-made political identity upon arrival on campus. Instead, it often means undergoing the spiritual and moral transformation that comes with challenge, and even at times with pain and disorientation.

The youthful libertarian, for example, must realize that Ayn Rand's philosophy is not all he thought it was, and the activist for reproductive rights must reconsider her views in light of what she can no longer ignore from her biology courses. All of this is part of the college experience. And it often goes in the other direction, too: The conservative Southern Baptist realizes she's more liberal than her parents, or the sheltered homeschooler realizes he really wants to work for Amnesty International. The problem with intersectional scholars is that they have already made determinations about purpose not just for themselves, but for everyone. This is part of the

Gnosticism inherent in the movement. Those who disagree are not potential interlocutors. They're heretics. "For me, it's a line in the sand," as Patricia Hill Collins observed.

Finally, intersectionality makes deterministic assumptions about human identity that run counter to almost all of Western philosophy—not to mention to the commonsense self-understanding most of us possess. Intersectional theorists begin their work on the basis of a debatable (though never debated) set of characteristics that supposedly constitute personal identity: race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and sometimes others (weight, attractiveness, age). Women are collectively, and as individuals, oppressed. So are gays, lesbians, Hispanics, blacks, the disabled, the aged, the very young, the obese, the transgender—and the list goes on, becoming more complex with the addition and subtraction of multiple traits. It doesn't matter to intersectionalists that many women (and gays, lesbians, Hispanics, and so on) may dispute their status as victims of oppression. The answer to any individual protest is always (a) false consciousness, (b) "internalizing the oppressor," or, if all else fails, (c) the structural oppression argument that makes our self-assessment irrelevant.
Actually, far from seeing their "difference" as a problem, many women, blacks, gays and lesbians, and others see these characteristics as neutral, or even as advantages. They refuse to be categorized as oppressed by the benevolent despots of intersectionality. Instead, they think in individual terms about what matters most to them.

One of my African-American colleagues was recently asked to give an interview about what it felt like to be a black professor at a largely white university. He refused. As he said, "I don't identify as black." The student who had approached him was perplexed, because the professor is indisputably black. But he was making a point that should be underscored: He does not choose to allow his membership in a particular racial group to determine who he is. He is not in denial about being black; he's well aware of his skin color and origins. But he sees himself through other characteristics: He is a prolific writer, a religious person, a father.

If this seems radical, it is because we have been so beaten about the head with the assertion that identity *fundamentally* consists of ascriptive characteristics, especially ones that have become politically salient in recent

decades. We would do well to revisit Michael Oakeshott's insights about human identity and the moral life from the first essay in *On Human Conduct*. There he observes that the beginning of human action "is a state of reflective consciousness, namely, the agent's own understanding of his situation, what it means to him." Our capacity for self-knowledge and self-interpretation is crucial, and it's an element of our freedom. A genetic inheritance, or even a personal history composed of particular episodes, never determines who we are. All such inputs are subject to human *understanding*.

Ironically, despite all its calls for solidarity, intersectionality may ultimately yield separation and conflict rather than cooperation. One major goal of intersectional theorists is to distinguish increasingly fine-grained markers of oppression, separating people into ever smaller classes with distinct interests. To wit: While women may constitute a large group, the group of disabled black women is far smaller. This group's interests are not necessarily the same as those of Latinx lesbian women. Indeed, these groups may even be at odds in significant ways. In this respect, then, intersectionality divides rather than unites. There are already signs of such division among the movement's more radical members, who view elite white feminist women with a contempt that nearly matches their contempt for white men.

In demonizing non-radical political views, white men, and tradition in general, intersectionality theorists make precisely the same mistake they so vehemently abhor: They classify people in terms of names and characteristics that they often have not chosen, and then write them off as enemies. The intersectional project of oppositional, activist scholarship demands it, for nothing brings people together like a common enemy. When that enemy must be eradicated in a quasi-religious movement of destruction, we are in for a long and bitter fight.

Elizabeth C. Corey is associate professor of political science in the Honors College at Baylor University. She is a Robert Novak Journalism Fellow for 2016–2017.