

I Celebrate Being ‘Woke’

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

A new “curse word” has recently emerged in the conservative lexicon. Whenever alt-right or extreme conservatives want to say something bad about liberals and progressives, they talk about “being woke.” They don’t like the “woke agenda,” and so they sneer at people with whom they disagree.

The technical name for this behaviour is that it is an ad hominem attack. Instead of addressing the substance of someone’s argument, you attack the character, motive, or integrity of that person. Why? Because it’s so much easier to call someone names than it is to engage them in legitimate debate. This age-old technique is always false and is most often used to deflect attention from themselves.

I mention this because someone recently accused me of being woke. My first impulse was to sputter in dismay or anger, and to dismiss it as an ad hominem attack. Then it occurred to me to ask about the meaning and origin of “being woke.” When I found out, I decided that I like being woke. I celebrate it.

What does “woke” mean? Google took me to Wikipedia, which indicated that it’s “an English adjective meaning ‘alert to racial prejudice and discrimination which originated in African-American Vernacular English.’ In the 2010s, the meaning was expanded to “encompass a broader awareness of social inequalities such as sexism ... and social justice [issues] such as white privilege and slavery reparations for African Americans.”

So far so good.

The Oxford English Dictionary indicates that it originally meant “well-informed, up-to-date,” and now it chiefly means “alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice.” Merriam Webster makes the same point, and quotes Barbara Lee (US representative for a California): “we have a moral obligation to ‘stay woke,’ take a stand and be active [by] challenging injustice and racism in our communities and fighting hatred and discrimination wherever it rises.”

All good for me.

So, I went to a right-wing source. Fox News (or Faux News as I call it—that’s my ad hominem attack) defines woke as a slang word which “has come to represent an embrace of progressive activism.” Fox really seems to hate that kind of activism. They only want conservatives to engage in any kind of activism. They have been busy excusing the democracy-breaking activism of the past year by their allies. It strikes me that they and others like them are simply terrified of progressive activism in movements such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter.

Fox claims that “instead of just being a word that signaled awareness of injustice or racial tension, it became a word of action,” and that the term has become an ideological tool. Partly, I suppose, it has. But the reason Fox can’t stand it is because it counters their own mostly false ideology. They use “woke” as a term of derision because they oppose the movements with which it is associated.

So go ahead and call me woke. I welcome the label and will not take it as an insult. Being woke is far preferable to being asleep when it comes to the injustices which have been and continue to be perpetrated.

In my case, I was called woke because of my stance on the history of out treatment of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and the Every Child Matters movement. “It’s all in the past,” they said. “They just need to get over it. After all, we fought them, and we won. Now it’s our land.”

That argument completely misreads history. The argument was essentially that “might makes right” and that the strongest ones will always come out on top. So, I asked, “Would it be ok then if I came into your house, beat you up, and claimed it as my own place?” To which they naturally responded, “Well, no!” To which I responded, “So what makes it all right for white settlers to come to a land inhabited for tens of thousands of years by Indigenous Peoples and forcibly take it from them?” They had no answer.

If that’s what it means to be woke, then I pray that a multitude of people might wake up, become alert to historical injustices, and understand more deeply the basis of white privilege. White people have come to assume that they are better than others and they simply accept their favoured position in society as their due.

That, by the way, is what critical race theory is all about. It’s not about finding ways to criticize white people. It has to do with taking a more honest look at the origin stories of our two nations in North America, and all the ways in which white people have subjugated other people such as Indigenous people and the enforced slavery imposed upon people of colour. It involves an honest acknowledgement of the harm settlers have done in our hunger for land and resources.

Part of the reason I celebrate being woke is that for me, it is in full accord with the teachings of Jesus. Jesus urges us to care deeply for our siblings on earth. The great commandment is to “love God and love your neighbour,” and sums up the whole law. In John’s gospel, the last thing Jesus does before his execution is to show and tell his disciples that they are to serve each other, commanding that they are to “love one another as I have loved you.”

At the end of Matthew, Jesus explicitly names “those who are hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or a stranger, or sick, or imprisoned.” (Matthew 25) It’s not an exhaustive list; it is illustrative. We might easily add others—refugees, the homeless, migrant workers, LGBTQ+ folks, those addicted to alcohol or drugs, survivors of Indian Residential Schools and the 60s scoop, and so on.

So yes, please call me woke. I celebrate it. I welcome it.