

# Book Review

Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022), xxiv + 648 pp.

Reviewed by Daniel Lioy

## Introductory Overview

SINCE THE ENLIGHTENMENT, critical theories like Marxism, Foucauldian thought, and feminist critiques have emerged to dissect various manifestations of power, including economic forces (Marx), pervasive social controls (Foucault), and gendered hierarchies (feminist critiques). These diverse approaches, united by the broad goals of emancipation, progress, and justice often aim to expose and challenge inequitable power dynamics and institutions, particularly those disadvantaging marginalized groups, by employing methods like discourse analysis, historical materialism, and deconstruction.

The preceding observations raise two important lines of inquiry. First, what are the possibilities of finding common ground between critical theory's social criticism and a Christian view of reality? Second, looking broadly rather than narrowly, what are some ways that the central tenets of critical theory could align with the theological perspective of Scripture? These are some of the issues explored in the work *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Narrative Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*.<sup>1</sup> The author, Christopher Watkin, holds a PhD from Jesus College, Cambridge, and lectures in French studies at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia.

In this volume, Watkin maintains that Scripture offers a storied version of a critical theory. Moreover, he asserts that the Bible provides a trenchant and fresh perspective on society that fulfills many of the values and aspirations championed by post-Kantian critical theories. Based on these premises, the author places classical expressions of Christian theology in dialogue with secular critical perspectives, such as Marxist, Nietzschean, and Foucauldian concepts of reality.

Watkin does so by adopting the two-city framework found in Augustine's acclaimed work, *The City of God against the Pagans*. The bishop of Hippo (354-430 ad) begins his treatise by offering a comprehensive overview of late Roman culture, dealing with its religion and philosophy (books I to X). He then explores the Judeo-Christian canon, along with the apostolic tradition (books XI to XXII).

Augustine uses the story of the two cities to analyze and critique his time's predominant societal norms and practices. He argues that the earthly city of man is doomed to imperfection and suffering, whereas the city of God represents the ideal Christian community. This early church leader emphasizes God's ultimate sovereignty over human destiny despite the trials and tribulations occurring throughout human history.

Watkin's approach mirrors that of Augustine, yet the order is reversed. First, Watkin surveys the grand storyline of Scripture, in which he moves diachronically from Genesis to Revelation. Second, while doing so, he interweaves what he considers to be a more compelling narrative about reality (particularly centered around creation, fall, redemption, and consummation) than present-day secular alternatives.

Furthermore, Watkin seeks to articulate a social and cultural theory based on the Bible. He does this by identifying and discussing various worldviews (or, as Charles Taylor puts it in *A Secular Age*, "social imaginaries") and pointing out their strengths and weaknesses. To accomplish this, the author describes and diagrams what he calls "figures." These are essentially recurring "patterns" or "structures" in "language" that can encompass various forms of "content." More specifically, "figures" are indefinable "patterns and rhythms in creation," including "matter, language, ideas, systems, or behavior." The treatise presents 114 of these organizing motifs, with each sketch or illustration representing a significant theme found in Scripture (such as justice, love, mercy, and truth).

Another facet of Watkin's project includes a concept called *diagonalization*. This refers to rejecting erroneous, either-or, ideological alternatives and charting a more coherent, unifying path. It is essentially a third way to engage culture that avoids seeking either to demolish or affirm it. In this approach, the Bible is employed to "diagnose and heal" polarized "cultural" options found throughout Western society (as opposed to the Majority World). The author's intent is to identify resonances between opposing worldviews, as well as to leverage insights gleaned from Scripture (particularly, the redemptive-historical arc of salvation history) to recover a "biblical harmony" between dissimilar perspectives. It is an example of what the author refers to as the Bible "out-narrating its cultural rivals."

Despite Watkin's reservations about using the term *worldview*, this review affirms its ongoing value. Specifically, it denotes a coherent system of thought that shapes people's impressions of reality and their interpretation of the world. Additionally, a worldview encompasses an individual's assumptions, values, and beliefs regarding the nature of existence, knowledge, morality, purpose, and humanity's position within the universe. Furthermore, in this review, the term *society* refers to a complex and organized group of individuals interacting with one another within a shared geographical or social space. In contrast, the term *culture* is a subset of

society, representing the distinct way of life and sense of belonging within a particular community-based context.

To reiterate, Watkin puts Christianity and other theoretical approaches to life in conversation with one another. For example, critical theory maintains that people hold beliefs or values contrary to their best interests, often resulting from societal ideologies or structures that obscure underlying power dynamics. The author connects this notion of false consciousness with Christianity's teachings that individuals may be ensnared by worldly influences, face spiritual separation from God, and experience a sense of estrangement from their true purpose.

Additionally, Watkin explores whether Christianity's idea of redemptive awakening (whereby individuals are freed from sin and deception through the Spirit's transforming work) parallels critical theory's concept of being emancipated from societal distortions (whereby awareness is fostered about power structures, ideologies, and biases that shape and constrain individuals' comprehension of reality). Furthermore, he considers the potential for Christianity's theological understanding of human nature and purpose to fulfill critical theory's aim to free people from restrictive social controls.

In his analysis, Watkin considers possible areas of agreement between competing views while being careful not to force connections or endorse incompatible perspectives. He also examines opposing ideologies to find ethical common ground. By offering a summary of antithetical philosophies, the author demonstrates how grappling with rival accounts can refine, rather than undermine, one's core assumptions. This irenic approach has the potential to emphasize and develop shared values despite also risking polarized reactions by detractors.

Watkin utilizes a balanced methodology by engaging with critical theory, without freely accepting all its presuppositions. He argues that the inspiration and authority of Scripture, along with the efficacy of the apostolic tradition, are affirmed not through polemics against opponents but through open dialogue to achieve mutual understanding. Also, rather than further reinforcing the views of opposing camps, the author identifies potential avenues to renew discourse as a collaborative search for truth.

As Watkin acknowledges, his project is neither new nor novel, especially in its consideration of such perennial topics as science, art, politics, human dignity, multiculturalism, and equality. He builds on the work of other academics and intellectuals who have attempted to interrogate social theories and their theorists from diverse perspectives. These luminaries include Alasdair MacIntyre, Robert Jenson, Charles Taylor, and Carl Trueman (among many others).

Tim Keller (before his death, a prominent Christian pastor and author) notes in his Forward that responses to Watkin's work tend to align with preexisting view-

points. For instance, more conservative perspectives deem engaging with critical theory as provocative and perilous. Conversely, supportive audiences praise the author's attempt to build common ground. Regardless of one's position, the author's treatise emphasizes the value of promoting meaningful dialogue between opposing ideological camps.

The review that follows first deals with a positive assessment of *Biblical Critical Theory*, after which is an overview of cautions and concerns, and ends with some concluding observations. As a disclaimer, given that Watkin's treatise is 672 pages and spans 28 chapters, it is beyond the scope of this review to provide a comprehensive, granular appraisal. Instead, the goal is to offer a high-level, objective, and selective assessment of the author's work so that readers can make their own decisions about the publication's overall merit.

## Positive Assessment

WATKIN'S INFORMED EXAMINATION of critical theory's origins and core concepts is noteworthy. By tracing ideas through pivotal thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and the Frankfurt School, the author discusses how notions of emancipation and progress shape critical theory's ideological appraisal of power, social conditioning, and revolutionary consciousness.

For instance, Watkin delves into Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, which unmasks what it perceives as exploitative capitalist relations promoted under equality's guise. On one level, Watkin argues that Marx's political remedies prove to be deeply misguided. Yet, on another level, the author retrieves Marx's impulse to expose systemic injustice. This evenhanded orientation allows critical theory to indict structural oppression without glossing over critical theory's totalitarian excesses.

Likewise, Watkin explores Foucault's theory of diffuse "capillary" power circulating through institutions. The author deliberates how "power/knowledge" dyads classify, partition, and regulate populations, which, in turn, shape identities through normalization of judgment. By registering principled objections, Watkin attempts to wrestle with complex questions about the body and self while avoiding an all-out reactionary dismissal of these queries.

Also commendable is Watkin's ability to maintain a theological perspective in a secularized world. For instance, with respect to human nature's fixedness, the author affirms original sin while accepting critical theory's questioning of natural social arrangements as necessarily just. He tends to evaluate specific power structures on their own terms, as well as hold universal depravity and socially constructed hierarchies in dynamic tension.

Regardless of whether one accepts the preceding attempt at rapprochement, Watkin models judicious, critical sympathy while sustaining his argument. Yet, he does so without manifesting a reactive animus (i.e., a combative stance that simply opposes on principle whatever is being contended). His willingness to foster good-faith dialogue stands in contrast to the polarized, inflammatory exchanges prevalent in society now.

Another positive aspect of Watkin's treatise is his illumination of critical theory's religious impulses. For example, he foregrounds emancipatory ambitions to unshackle consciousness from constraint. In turn, the author exposes leftist soteriological quests to unmask idols of power, which results in destabilizing secular assumptions about truth's rational accessibility. Specifically, he explores the possible affinity between Marxian hopes to spark revolutionary awareness and the gospel's liberation of souls, which societal, aggrandizing powers have exploited.

Just as constructive is the analogy Watkin draws between Marxian surplus value extraction and the biblical category of greed as soul-destroying idolatry. The author affirms the importance of the fair exchange of goods and services within society. Yet, he argues that extreme forms of capitalist accumulation give rise to avarice, which depends on the exploitation and dehumanization of people to bring about the amassing of wealth and power.

Moreover, Watkin's effort to surface idolatry's hidden operations—regardless of their secular or religious origins and manifestations—enables the testimony of Scripture to facilitate a disruptive emancipation from all worldly forms of indoctrination. The author's attempt to show how contemporary appeals to piety and sanctimonious worship perpetuate injustice is comparable to the Hebrew prophets from long ago excoriating self-serving religious ideologies. Likewise, this parallels Jesus' challenge to the elitist authorities of his day, who misrepresented divinely revealed truth to advance their self-serving agendas.

Watkin carefully examines the ideological assumptions behind certain leftist theories. For example, he questions postmodern gender theory (inspired by Foucault) that does not consider relevant medical and ethical issues. This shows how some activists have pushed further than is prudent. In cases like this, Watkin tries to separate secular truth from falsehood. He also resists extreme stereotypes that drive the bitter arguments between opposing groups today.

Furthermore, Watkin aspires to establish a fruitful dialogue amid seemingly irreconcilable worldviews. Rather than forcing an artificial synthesis or retreating into parallel silos, the author models *faith seeking understanding* across ideological divides. His desire to nurture an earnest yet critical engagement recalls Paul's attempt to do something comparable when he delivered a speech to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers at Athens (Acts 17:16–33). Overall, the goal is to find common

ground between secular ideological frameworks and biblical categories of thought. These attempts at bridge-building discourse encourage principled engagement while avoiding reactive attacks between opposing groups of interlocutors.

Watkin does not shy away from acknowledging critical theory's indictment of Christianity's occasional legitimation of corrupt power structures. For example, the author is aware that throughout the centuries, distorted interpretations of Scripture have played a tragic role in the justification of institutional slavery. Yet, rather than become defensive at the exposure of this atrocity, Watkin models the potential that such candor holds for cultivating greater understanding and reconciliation between oppressor and oppressed (or victimizer and victimized). This exemplifies how honest self-discernment can be restorative, especially against the sullied backdrop of human fallenness.

This review has drawn attention to how polarized arguments are distorting modern-day discussion. Watkin's conciliatory approach to dialogue could provide balance. Specifically, by demonstrating active listening, the author shows a potentially effective way forward. It is a path which prevents the mutual misunderstanding that happens when opposing groups rhetorically attack each other. His writing invites readers to see how such a strategy can create shared wisdom, avoiding an overly simplistic battle of enemies that resembles gladiators trying to kill each other in an ancient Roman colosseum.

Watkin skillfully avoids forcing a choice between materially confronting corrupt institutions and being spiritually liberated from distorted reasoning. He rejects problematic "either/or" thinking by recognizing that rival worldviews can offer valid insights. His analysis shows how Christianity can address both current earthly realities and eternal horizons. Additionally, his discourse highlights the gospel's power to free people from bondage to harmful, unbiblical doctrines. Overall, the author provides a thoughtful model for affirming multiple perspectives rather than insisting on a single ideological framework.

Finally, Watkin often presents conflicting viewpoints side by side. This indicates that one of his goals is to encourage insightful discussion and analysis of theories. Related objectives include preventing oversimplification of complex topics and broadening the readers' awareness by placing different perspectives next to one another. As a result, the ongoing, productive debate between opposing concepts can lead to increased awareness and understanding.

## Cautions and Concerns

THE ABOVE POSITIVE ASSESSMENT notwithstanding, there remain inherent shortcomings to Watkin's treatise. To begin, though he endeavors to integrate philosophy, theology, and biblical studies, the synthesis he attempts between these disciplines is negligible

in its usefulness. This is especially due to the developmental shortcomings noted later in this section.

Moreover, Watkin's effort to diagonalize antithetical worldviews does not accomplish its intended goal of articulating a plausible third way of identifying resonances between the two perspectives. For instance, the author's use of diagrams (or "figures") to distill layered, complex concepts strips away important nuances, contextual details, and caveats. In turn, this creates an incomplete, reductionistic, and distorted portrayal of the concepts being sketched.

To further develop the above assessment, consider Watkin's effort to amalgamate Marxist philosophy and Christian theology. On the surface, doing so appears viable. Yet, at a more focused level, there remain irreconcilable differences in outlook with respect to such issues as authority, identity, and salvation. This is a place where, even though the author's project offers a helpful overview of Marxist ideology (along with the other secular perspectives mentioned earlier), it does not fully engage with the practical economic analysis central to Marxism.

There is a potential downside in Watkin's attempt to incorporate secular assumptions at odds with God's Word. Specifically, concepts like "consciousness raising" poorly align with Scripture's teachings on human fallenness and renewal. Here, the author faces the challenge of drifting towards a Marxian view of false consciousness rather than aligning more closely with biblical hamartiology. He also risks subtly diverting the focus away from Christ and more toward secular social theories.

In some ways, Watkin's deliberations fall short of putting forward a seminal response to pressing modern challenges. Instead, his treatise tends to be a broad, derivative, and (at times) fragmented survey of biblical and secular ideas. The emphasis is more on breaking down concepts rather than offering well-integrated, practical insights into real-world concerns. This shortcoming is ironic, given the author's stated intent of wanting to deal with the "so what" of Christian belief. For example, the author mainly focuses on theoretical ideas instead of providing a constructive analysis of important, pressing issues like privilege, marginalization, and exploitation.

It remains unclear how Watkin's treatise might shape substantive engagement about such volatile matters as racial justice and gender identity. On the one hand, could legitimizing post-structuralist views about identity undermine appeals to share a common humanity under God? Or, on the other hand, does questioning socially constructed categories create space for affirming both difference and unity? In either case, the author's discourse, by glossing over such specifics, comments on abstractions without delineating the ways in which biblical truth might either renew hearts or transform lives.

The preceding observations highlight the limited capacity of theoretical discourse to establish conceptual bridges and find common ground between divergent worldviews. Admittedly, on one level, the author avoids disseminating caricatures and stereotypes. Yet, on another level, his endeavor to assimilate secular assumptions within classical expressions of Christian theology fails to resolve enduring ideological divides and tensions.

Furthermore, Watkin does not spend most of his time examining and explaining the biblical texts he overviews. Instead, much of his writing draws extensively on observations gleaned from popular culture, social media, personal experience, and publications dealing with ancient mythologies, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, sexuality, history, science, and politics. Perhaps this approach reflects the author's attempt to emulate Augustine's disquisition, *The City of God*, where he deals with a wide range of religious, philosophical, and historical themes.

Concededly, Watkin's divergent sources of information *occasionally* have their place, especially to illustrate a main point or line of argumentation. Yet, they end up being an inadequate substitute for a more direct, sustained, and substantive engagement with God's Word. As such, despite some endorsements, the volume would likely not suffice either as an introduction to or a thorough treatment of biblical theology.

There is also a serious lack of balance in the way Watkin moves diachronically through his survey of Scripture. For example, in his asymmetrical approach, he devotes ten chapters to discussing topics, themes, and individuals showcased in Genesis. In contrast, he only spends one chapter dealing with Moses, the Exodus, and the Torah.

Furthermore, issues surrounding biblical prophecy are covered in just two chapters, and all the wisdom literature has only one chapter assigned to it. Two chapters highlight distinctive aspects of Jesus' incarnation, while a sole chapter deliberates his entire earthly ministry (as recounted in the four Gospels). Two chapters cover Jesus' crucifixion, followed by one chapter on his resurrection. Lastly, four chapters discuss various aspects of the last days, followed by four more chapters deliberating themes related to eschatology.

Notwithstanding Watkin's stated aspirations for the long-term influence of his project on the work undertaken by other academic specialists, what he says with considerable verbosity is unlikely to become a cornerstone for future research. Also, despite the author's effort to canvas the entire Judeo-Christian canon (albeit in a disproportionate manner), he ends up saying little that is either pioneering or pathbreaking.

The situation is worsened by a considerable unevenness in the writing style of Watkin's discourse. For example, in some places, the prose is either conversational,



autobiographical, or sermonical in tone. Then, it can abruptly switch to being either excessively technical and academic or filled with a list of bullet/numbered points, such as one might encounter in an undergraduate university lecture or chopped up with a mixture of quotes. Furthermore, the author embeds these extracts at infelicitous places, with many quotes being quite lengthy and from an array of dissimilar sources. Rather than clarify and illumine the volume's overall line of argumentation, the recited information often comes across as interruptive to the main flow of thought and lacks tight integration with Watkin's discussion.

The preceding observations suggest that the author's work needs more editorial refinement. It would also have been prudent for him to drastically shorten the length of his project. In turn, the result would have been a treatise that examines the topics he includes with greater depth, clarity, and effectiveness. As it stands, Watkin's project never realizes its potential of being an important update to *The City of God*, in which Augustine explores human history and destiny through a Christian lens.

## Concluding Observations

WATKIN HAS AUTHORED an intriguing volume that attempts to bring secular critical theories into meaningful dialogue with classical expressions of Christian theology. His overview traces the development of key concepts in critical theory, such as false consciousness, emancipation, and ideological critique. The author also explores potential areas of agreement between these notions and biblical categories, such as captivity, redemption, and idolatry.

While avoiding outright embracing or dismissing critical theory, Watkin endeavors to chart a middle path that models principled engagement across ideological divides. By resisting polarizing rhetoric, he upholds the possibility for shared understanding between opposing worldviews. The author's winsome tone, centered on deliberating complex ideas, contrasts with the fractured state of contemporary discourse.

Yet, despite Watkin's attempts at a merger, the inherent differences between critical theory and classical expressions of Christian theology remain stark. For instance, at a conceptual level, the two frameworks clash on basic assumptions about authority, identity, and salvation. Also, translating the author's theoretical analysis into practical application proves challenging. Ultimately, the treatise falls short in delineating how a dialogue between biblical revelation and numerous critical theories could renew hearts, transform lives, and guide responses to volatile social issues.

As noted in the preceding section, the scale of Watkin's project remains unwieldy. Put another way, he tries to do too much and ends up not achieving the goals he

has adopted. For instance, his attempt to offer a genuinely biblical critical theory does not deliver on what the volume title promises. Similarly, the author's attempt to unfold the biblical story, as well as to make sense of modern life and culture, is not convincingly attained.

To sum up, Watkin's volume, while limited in practical import, nonetheless models a thoughtful path. On the one hand, his discourse attempts to bridge understanding, yet without ignoring enduring differences between rival schools of thought. On the other hand, his observations tend to be unoriginal and lack sufficient development in examining disparate ideas in a cohesive, persuasive manner.

Moreover, while the effort to span ideological divides has some merit, lasting progress requires grounding discourse in the biblical values of love, repentance, and restorative justice. Ultimately, Christ-centered renewal of both hearts and social structures is essential for dismantling oppression in all its forms.

**Daniel Lioy** is Professor of Biblical Studies, Christ School of Theology, Institute of Lutheran Theology. He holds the Ph.D. from North-West University (South Africa) and is theologian -in-residence at Our Savior's Lutheran Church (NALC) in Salem, Oregon. He is widely published, including scholarly monographs, journal articles, and church resource products.

## Note

1. The Logos Research Edition of *Biblical Critical Theory* was used for this book review.