

Evidence Cannot Fill the God-Shaped Hole: Why Social Workers Must Balance “Liberal Science” and Spirituality in the Quest for Social Justice

Melissa Hardesty

Abstract: *Social work has long struggled to square its commitments to social justice with the desire to ground knowledge production in scientific empiricism. Such tensions are magnified in the face of so-called “woke” ideology (Secular Social Justice Religiosity or SSR), an ambient quasi-religious worldview that grew out of postmodern and critical theories and Christianity. Opponents of SSR outside of social work commonly take aim at its religious elements, while critics within the discipline focus narrowly on epistemology. This article explores the links between epistemology, spirituality, and an ethic of social justice grounded in equality and anti-authoritarianism. It frames SSR as one of many secular attempts to meet the human need for transcendent meaning left unfulfilled by political liberalism’s cold rationality and what many view as liberalism’s unmet promise for material equality. While conceding the limitations of rational empiricism in explaining human experience and ameliorating inequality, this analysis contends that the comprehensive philosophical liberal tradition from which it arose is nevertheless superior to SSR because liberalism actually is the anti-authoritarian engine that SSR purports to be. This article ultimately argues that social work ought to reject SSR as a guiding framework, not because it is irrational or religious, but because it is authoritarian, and authoritarian systems bode poorly for most people and most poorly for the most oppressed.*

Keywords: *Liberalism, postmodernism, critical theory, spirituality, authoritarianism, epistemology*

Technocratic Totalitarianism

In the dystopian, near-future world of television series *Black Mirror*, protagonists confront the catastrophic knock-off effects of merging human beings with machines. Each of the characters in the series has a brain implant that networks human consciousness, corporations, and the state. The horror of this soft, dictator-less totalitarianism is laid bare in the episode *White Christmas*. The story centers on a company that makes digital copies of their clients’ subjectivities and uploads them to an egg-shaped personal assistant appliance. This bespoke self-copy easily surpasses Amazon’s Alexa because she anticipates her user’s every desire without explicit instruction. The hardest part of the process is breaking the digital self as one would a feral animal. If she resists her future as a slave to her embodied counterpart, the company simulates days, weeks, even years of solitary confinement. One defiant avatar woman screams and writhes in anger before collapsing in horrid psychological entropy (Brooker & Tibbetts, 2014).

This is the ontological status of life implied in James B. Watson’s mechanistic behaviorism. He envisions a rationalist, blank-slate world in which scientists can understand and shape every facet of the human experience through a careful mapping of cause-and-effect relationships (Watson, 1924). *Black Mirror’s* fictitious world of

Melissa Hardesty, PhD, LMSW, Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, College of Community and Public Affairs, Binghamton University, State University of New York, Binghamton, NY.

Copyright © 2025 Authors, Vol. 25 No. 3 (Fall 2025), 864-887, DOI: 10.18060/28777



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

mechanistic digital slavery dramatizes a longstanding, post-enlightenment existential dread that science will obliterate the distinction between human and non-sentient existence and empty our lives of transcendent meaning. In this well-worn sci-fi genre, human beings “kill” God through technical mastery of the world, then destroy the world by assuming the role of God.

Amid the Artificial Intelligence revolution, algorithms have demonstrated the capacity to interpret symbolic language, create art and music, and form armies of weaponized social media bots designed to manipulate reality (Hunter et al., 2024). Now more than ever, the distinction between human beings and machines is difficult to parse, and reality itself is a point of contention. As Iain McGilchrist argues, the mechanistic worldview that spawns technological innovations is also delusional because it denies life itself. As he explains, “[in the mechanistic worldview] there is no real life. Life is a sort of artifactual emergence from mechanism...which nobody has been able to explain” (Heretics, 2024, 6:40). The mechanistic epistemological frame is too narrow, and the consequences of the hubris it inspires are extreme. The quest to master the world and make reality conform to models is a totalitarian impulse that threatens to level not just transcendent meaning but life itself.

Epistemology is not merely a framework for formal knowledge production, for deciding which papers we will publish in social work, or which interventions we will endorse. It is entwined with the way humans structure society—from the relationship between individuals and the state or culture, to the ideas we are allowed to think and speak, and even what we are allowed to see in the world around us. This paper compares two competing epistemologies and their associated social systems to one another, one that claims to be anti-authoritarian but mirrors *Black Mirror* in its overly-confident faith that it has unlocked the mysteries of the human condition, and another that when enacted faithfully and within appropriate limits can improve life, precisely because it denies authority to its own findings and practitioners.

Science, Spirituality, and Meaning

Knowledge is a paradox that strikes at the heart of the human condition. Science and technology answer questions about human nature and the material world but in doing so underscore the inability of scientific epistemology to offer satisfactory explanations for transcendent and spiritual aspects of human life and its purpose (Rowland, 2012). Is the digital self-copy in *Black Mirror* human? If she is human, her status as such implies that humans are both godlike and mundane; we can create ourselves to our own liking without the vulgar messiness of combining sperm and egg, but this means we are a profane amalgam of parts. The prospect of rational, technocratic mastery of human experience inspires some people to push the limits of innovation, or even dream of world in which humans transcend death itself by becoming one with machines (Harari, 2016; Kurzweil, 2005, 2024; Rothblatt, 2014). Others dread the totalitarian potential of cyborg life and the nihilism it implies (Bilek, 2020; Harrington, 2023; Mendz & Cook, 2021).

Philosopher Stephen Hicks (2004) contends that the philosophical traditions that gave rise to critical and postmodern theories were motivated by a desire to prioritize religion over reason (p. 29). He argues that the enlightenment thinkers who developed modern

science disrupted the then-prevailing theistic notion that God is an omnipresent supernatural force that oversees our daily lives and replaced it with a deist stance in which God is a rational and empirical creator of the universe. Counter-Enlightenment thinkers viewed the deist perspective as cold and immoral and sought to preserve a theistic view of God. So they gave birth to a genealogy of philosophy that began with Immanuel Kant, and eventually led to Georg W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx, followed by the critical theorists and postmodernists (Hicks, 2004, 2024; Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). Critical theory then fused with postmodernism in the early 1990s, giving rise to a set of niche philosophies in universities that later took hold in the public sphere where they came to describe a comprehensive worldview that was first affectionately (McIntosh, 2018), then acerbically, dubbed “woke.” The “woke” worldview, as I will describe in greater detail below, is a utopian belief system that attributes nearly all social and individual problems to systematic defects in the structure and culture of Western societies. Consonant with the Marxist concept of “false consciousness,” the architecture of “woke” understands the liberal social system as an elaborate façade that claims to promote equality, all the while masking a network of intersecting oppressions (Doyle, 2022; Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020; Valentin, 2023).

Hicks’ postmodernism-as-religion argument resonates with contemporary analyses and criticisms of “woke” ideas and practices, many of which draw attention to the ritualistic behaviors of its adherents and their fundamentalist orientation toward their belief system. Examples of these behaviors include public feet-washing at an anti-racism demonstration in the Summer of 2020 (WVTV ABC11, 2020), US Congresspeople cloaked in Kente cloth kneeling in prayer in the Capitol Rotunda (Remnick, 2020), an anti-Dave Chapelle protestor shouting, “Repent, Motherfucker!” at a fan whose “We Like Dave” sign was just destroyed by an angry mob (Lewis, 2022; Vito, 2021, 5:42), and crowds swelling with ecstatic faces and skyward-facing palms splayed as if to “catch the spirit.” Taken together, the behavior and worldview of a highly visible set of social justice activists have led numerous public intellectuals to either compare “wokeness” to religion or to actually categorize it as one (Doyle, 2022; Lewis, 2022; Lindsay & Nayna, 2020; McWhorter, 2021).

The notion that mass public events may contain or inspire spiritual or religious fervor is not new. Sociologist Émile Durkheim (1912/1995) famously argued that religion originates in collective rituals, where masses of people move, speak, and sing together, thereby creating the transcendent feeling that he refers to as collective effervescence. John Searle (1971) made a similar point about 1960s campus protests when he argued that their contradictions made sense only when understood as a quest for the sacred, “No one can understand contemporary student unrest who fails to perceive the extent to which it is a religious movement” (para. 6). Searle’s analysis focuses on the behavior of students and the university rather than the theories that informed 1960s activist movements. However, he acknowledges the influence of radical theorists, including critical theorist Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse’s impact on radical left social movements is difficult to overstate. His argument against viewpoint diversity and free speech is threaded through the “woke” worldview, as I describe below. Searle observes that the human impulse to seek something sacred makes the drudgery of everyday life more tolerable, particularly in advanced

Western democracies where formal religious identification is on the decline. In the United States, Christian affiliation dropped from 78% to 60% of the population between 2007 and 2023-24 and self-selection as unaffiliated rose from 16% to 29% (Jones, 2025; Smith et al., 2025). A less dramatic but still significant downward trend in religious identification was documented in Europe between 2010 and 2020 (Hackett, 2025). Yet the vast majority of people still believe in transcendent forces beyond the material world, with 86% of respondents in Pew's 2023-24 US survey on religion reporting that they believe in the existence of a soul or spirit (Smith et al., 2025).

The intense valuation of rationality and empiricism in modern, liberal cultures gave rise to technological progress and relative prosperity for its citizens, but progress is insufficient for creating a satisfying life because it gives short shrift to the near-universal human quest for meaning that was once fulfilled at scale by religion (Armstrong, 2000; McGilchrist, 2021; Rowland, 2012). Whether it is an artifact of our brains or evidence of something bigger than us, humans are spiritual creatures, and any effort to understand and intervene in human life must account for this fact. The quest for transcendent meaning is sometimes referred to as “the God-shaped hole” in the human psyche (Armstrong, 2000; Dawkins, 2025; Johnson, 2024; Kisin, 2022; Loy, 2004).

In the rational, secular cultures of the West, it is not surprising to find critics of “woke” ideas taking aim at this movement’s quasi-religious elements—the sacralization of unverifiable beliefs about the root causes of inequality and injustice (Lewis, 2022; McWhorter, 2021), thought-terminating clichés (Lifton, 1961) used to stifle critical thinking, ritualistic and symbolic behavior that venerates sacralized objects/people, sometimes sincere and sometimes socially-coerced “public apologies” that mimic Protestant confession (Buruma, 2023), and the inability to recognize logical inconsistencies in the sacred ideology (Doyle, 2022; McWhorter, 2021). Though many critics accurately trace this worldview to critical and postmodern theories, the “woke” worldview also has parentage in Christianity (Bottum, 2014; Douthat, 2022; McWhorter, 2021; Peng, 2024; Valentin, 2023); some even argue that “woke” is a mutation of liberalism itself (Kaufmann, 2024). Given the varied seeds of this worldview, I focus broadly on the sacralized amalgamation of postmodern, critical-theoretical, Christian, and mutated-liberal ideas that constitute “wokeness,” rather than the theoretical progenitors of this quasi-religious phenomenon. I refer to this belief system as Secular Social Justice Religiosity (SSR).

Despite the influence of this quasi-religious belief system on Western culture and academia, and the many books and magazine articles that have been written about it, its significance has not been comprehensively interrogated in the social work profession. Drake and Hodge (2022) wrote a useful paper summarizing the origins and structure of postmodern and critical theories and how they stack up against scientific empiricism, but they structured their paper narrowly around epistemology as it relates to formal knowledge production and the social work profession. They briefly mention John McWhorter’s (2021) book *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America* but do not interrogate his argument that “woke” anti-racism is a religion. More recently, a special issue of *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* focused on mandated ideologies in social work, including Marxism, critical theory, and antiracism—all of which are folded into SSR (Jordan the Social Worker, 2025; Lens et al., 2025a, 2025b; Thyer, 2025). In that same

issue Gambrill (2025) briefly points out the quasi-religious elements of SSR and how they are threaded through the Council on Social Work Education's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards; she even nods to science as an anti-authoritarian system, as does Rubin (2022) in his fiery defense of scientific empiricism in response to Drake and Hodge's (2022) article. Many of these authors tacitly or explicitly advocate for freedom of thought and speech, point to a stifling or hostile environment in social work, and recognize the spiritual elements of various facets of SSR. All of these analyses are valuable, but to get beyond an *ala carte* description of why the social work profession seems to have succumbed to an intellectually stifling and quasi-religious ethos, one must understand the links between epistemology, spirituality, and social systems. The problem is not just that science has been eclipsed by less accurate, ideologically coercive modes of knowledge production; it is that the displacement of science is accompanied by a disruption in our entire social system.

Stated succinctly, science is a social system; it is not a decontextualized set of techniques for learning about the world. What Jonathan Rauch dubs "liberal science," and Drake and Hodge refer to as scientific empiricism is entwined with a liberal social system (Rauch, 2013). Attempts to replace it with competing systems reflect a destabilization of the liberal consensus that has characterized the West for hundreds of years. This is the heart of the "culture wars" and the tensions identified in the special issue of *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*. Rather than a battle between political right and left or Democrats and Progressives, the culture wars pit philosophical liberalism against a variety of competing philosophies, several of which are authoritarian. More importantly, because this is not a left-right problem, the social work profession cannot simply wash its hands of culpability and dismiss the culture wars as a right-wing authoritarian attack on our professional values. History shows that the authoritarian impulse is nonpartisan (Versluis, 2006).

Amid widespread concerns within left-leaning institutions about the threat of right-wing authoritarianism, this paper focuses on the logical architecture and implications of SSR, a fundamentally leftwing phenomenon, because this worldview appeals to social work values—particularly those pertaining to redressing inequality, discrimination, and advocating for the oppressed—but is constituted in such a way that it is likely to deliver their opposite. I argue that SSR is dangerous, not because it is spiritual in nature or because social workers should not impose their views of the sacred on students, practitioners, and clients, but because it shares the authoritarian architecture of destructive ideologies of the past. But we cannot neglect the role of spirituality in authoritarian and totalitarian epistemologies because even secular versions cluster around the toxic spiritual belief that human beings either speak for God or are godlike themselves (TRIGGERnometry, 2024b; Versluis, 2006).

Despite the flaws in liberalism and the reality that liberal cultures often fall short of the aspirations of their guiding principles, liberal systems safeguard against the accumulation of power, thus promoting pluralism and freedom. In contrast, philosophies such as SSR that call for actively assembling power structures, even if they do so under the auspices of countering existing power relations, are authoritarian. But liberalism's cold rationality is an imperfect engine for generating relative equality and prosperity, and science's skeptical ethos shirks the importance of meaning in the lives of human beings. The mounds of data

and evidence it generates will never fill the God-shaped hole. Therefore, the question social workers ought to consider is not whether the profession should elevate the scientific over the sacred but how we can best harness the fruits of scientific empiricism while acknowledging the immaterial and unmeasurable search for meaning that makes our lives and those of our clients worth living.

The Liberal Revolution

To adequately appraise SSR, one must understand the history and structure of the liberal system it hopes to supplant. Liberalism refers to a diverse set of anti-authoritarian philosophies that grew out of the Enlightenment and inaugurated the development of egalitarian institutions such as science, democracy, and Protestantism. Jonathan Israel (2019) argues that these seismic institutional shifts were enabled by “a revolution of the mind.” Democracy was a radical departure from monarchy and reflected a then-novel belief that all people are born equal and thereby have the right to govern themselves. Science and Protestantism grew out of the idea that morally-equal people could observe material and spiritual truths for themselves; they need not rely on an authority figure anointed by God, such as a philosopher or priest (Dreger, 2016; Israel, 2019). During the Enlightenment, ideas about knowledge, government, and the sacred shifted together because the ontological and moral foundations upon which society was based changed.

Enlightenment thinkers differed with respect to their radicalism and stance on God, but they shared the conviction that rational, empirical knowledge about the world would fuel the steady march of human progress (Israel, 2019). Italian physicist and astronomer Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) is often cast as an Enlightenment martyr representing the triumph of rationality over ignorance and illegitimate church authority. Though Galileo’s most substantive intellectual contributions were in physics, he is most remembered for his clash with the Catholic Church in 1633. According to modern accounts of the incident, Galileo, having trained his homemade telescopes at the sky, found empirical evidence in support of Copernicus’s theory that the Earth rotated around the Sun; this stood in contrast to Church teachings which situated the Earth at the center of the universe. Consequently, the truth-telling Galileo was deemed heretical by the Inquisition and was put under house arrest just outside Villa Medici (Rowland, 2012).

For a modern audience socialized into a liberal worldview, the dismissal of empirical evidence by religious authorities and the imprisonment of a man for telling the truth is a moral offense. Wade Rowland argues that this account of Galileo’s trial is more myth than reality and that the actual conflict between Galileo and the Catholic Church had to do with his metaphysical claim that the Earth and the heavens were both mathematical entities and that science was the sole arbiter of truth (2012). If the entire cosmos can be rendered by unlocking its mathematical structure, and humans are capable of harnessing their rationality do to so, human beings are effectively God. Again, this is one person’s technocratic dream and another’s sci-fi nightmare.

Scaling back from overtly metaphysical claims about the ontology of the cosmos, two principles from the diverse body of liberal philosophy are of particular relevance to this discussion: the first proposition is that there is a knowable material reality that exists

outside of human subjectivity; the second is that human beings are connected to this reality through their senses. The nuances of these points were and still are widely debated, but they were central in arguments for universal human rights and individual freedom in the eighteenth century. Thomas Reid, the father of Scottish Common Sense Realism, posited the existence of “self-evident truths.” His ideas informed the intellectual climate of the Founding Fathers (Ahlstrom, 1955) and resonate with language in the United States Declaration of Independence, “*We hold these truths to be self-evident*, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (emphasis mine, 1776). Reid was writing against the skeptical current in philosophy evident in philosophers such as David Hume, who questioned whether we can know anything at all. In simplistic terms, Reid’s response was that all of us are innately equipped to understand rational and moral truths; we don’t need philosophers to reveal truths to us (Curry, 2015). If one accepts these assertions, there is no rational or moral basis upon which one person can tell another what to do or how to live life; therefore, unjustified authority of one person over others is illegitimate. Liberal epistemology is thereby entwined with the radical, anti-authoritarian liberal social systems that many in modern Western cultures now accept as inherently and unquestionably moral.

SSR’s Response to Liberalism

Having long accepted the Enlightenment-derived idea that human beings are fundamentally equal, the continued persistence of social inequality in liberal Western countries creates an intellectual and moral dilemma. How can inequality persist or even grow under a liberal system if that system is not inherently flawed? Aren’t we supposed to be equal? The answers to these questions depend upon how one construes equality. Several influential liberal thinkers, including John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, John Stuart Mill, and Isaiah Berlin differentiated between equal moral worth, which they saw as the bedrock of liberalism, and unequal capacities, which they accepted as part of reality that cannot not be eliminated (Berlin, 1969; Courtland & Schmidz, 2022; Locke, 1689/1988; Mill, 1859/2003). Isaiah Berlin (1969) worried that attempts to achieve equal outcomes would require an authoritarian consolidation of government power antithetical to the ethos of liberalism. Other thinkers, such as John Rawls, asserted that liberty requires each person to have a minimum cache of resources, which would be ensured through government redistribution (Rawls, 1999).

The version of equality endorsed in SSR can be understood, perhaps in overly simplistic terms, as a ratchet effect of Rawls’ redistributive justice; it extends the redistributive principle to mean equal outcomes (not just putting a finger on the scale) and includes social and cultural resources alongside material resources. The sacralization of equal outcomes and equal social status in the SSR worldview led Eric Kaufmann (2024) to argue that “woke” is a mutation of liberal values rather than their abandonment. Despite its resonance with some aspects of liberal philosophy, the SSR worldview posits that the liberal social system has failed to deliver on its radical promise of equality because it is an authoritarian system in disguise (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Marcuse, 1969). Proponents of these theories argue that in order to right the wrongs of liberalism and redress inequality

and injustice for good, we must erect a counter-authoritarian system in which the oppressed ascend to the top of the hierarchy in order to dismantle it. Their call is for a radically reorganized social world; they believe that such a reorganization is possible because the SSR worldview is strongly social constructionist, and it attributes nearly all inequality to flawed but changeable social arrangements.

A decade before these ideas percolated into the public sphere, literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall (2008) referred to this way of thinking in academia as “the liberationist paradigm.” Associated with radical activism of the 1960s and 1970s and the critical and postmodern theories that animated these movements, the liberationist paradigm entails using scholarship as a mode of activism, rejecting naturalistic beliefs about the world (embracing “nurturism” as opposed to “biological essentialism”), and post-structuralist epistemology (Gottschall, 2008, pp. 5-6). Post-structuralist epistemology posits that we can remake reality by altering the words and concepts we use to understand the world. Liberationist ideas are diametrically opposed to modernist, post-enlightenment principles such as naturalism, reason, and individualism (Hicks, 2004). Importantly, the moniker “liberationist paradigm” identifies common ground among the competing perspectives that fall under the critical and postmodern theory umbrella. Whereas the liberationist paradigm was mostly confined to a handful of disciplines in the humanities from the nineties until the early 2000s, SSR has since percolated through social work, scientific disciplines, and spilled into the broader culture. See Table 1 for a summary of the distinctions between SSR and Liberalism.

Table 1. *Key Features of Liberalism and SSR*

Feature	Liberalism	SSR (Secular Social Justice Religiosity)
Authority	Limited; no one has privileged access to reality.	Concentrated in the oppressed, but in practice is usually invested in those claiming to speak for the oppressed.
Ontology	Reality exists independent of humans; humans are part of & connected to reality in the same way.	Reality is an intersecting network of oppression created by the powerful to uphold their privilege.
Epistemology	Reality (evidence) & debate (through logic) arbitrate provisional truth claims; free speech & dissent are indispensable.	Truth claims are mediated by power; dissident speech is harmful.
Morality	Equal moral worth for all humans; grounded in natural rights.	Stratified: the most oppressed have the greatest moral worth — but only if they affirm SSR ontology.
Sacred/God Concept	All humans are fallible & constrained by reality, over which they will never have complete control.	Humans with the right ideas are godlike & can create a morally pure utopian reality.

Like any comprehensive worldview, one does not have to have read the complex and diverse theories from which SSR originated to accept its core tenets. In fact, the tenets of SSR often conflict with specific points made by postmodern and critical theorists, and elements of the SSR worldview have taken hold among people who do not participate in radical politics or hold radical political views. One student's remark to me during a course on community social work in 2019 illustrates this point, "I'm struggling to figure out how to help people while working within a system that was designed to marginalize and oppress people." Those around her nodded their heads in agreement. When prompted to explain why she believed that the system was designed to oppress people, the student stated simply that that's what she had been taught. The program in which she was enrolled is not particularly radical, nor is the student. However, she was able to pithily summarize the perspective around which SSR coheres, and she viewed it as factual; it never occurred to the students that they could question these ideas.

In fact, questioning the SSR worldview in some environments may lead to severe social sanctions, so many either remain silent—a risky endeavor because silence in the wrong situation can be construed as complicity (DiAngelo, 2018)—or performatively endorse SSR values. A recent study of undergraduates at Northwestern University and the University of Michigan found that 88% of students pretended to be more "progressive" than they actually were (Abrams, 2025). If faulty speech and concepts are the scaffolding upon which the matrix of oppression is built, it makes logical sense to suppress dissident speech. This is why we see the "deplatforming" of speakers whose ideas do not align with SSR (Flaherty, 2021), doxing of people whose ideas are deemed harmful or hateful (Bowles, 2017; Cullinane, 2017), and "cancellations" of those whose offenses may be as minor as a poorly worded social media post or joke (Camp, 2023). The existence of *Journal of Teaching in Social Work's* special issue on mandated ideologies in social work demonstrates the chilling effect that SSR has had on the social work profession. One student published their article under a pseudonym, Jordan the Social Worker (2025), a move that would hardly be necessary if dissent were not so dangerous.

Similarly, a 2023 survey of 55,102 college students conducted by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) found that more than half of respondents worried that their reputations would be damaged if somebody misunderstood something they said or did; twenty-seven percent agreed that some degree of violence is justified to stop some campus speech (Stevens, 2023). On September 10, 2025, just two years after that survey was published, conservative activist Charlie Kirk was assassinated in front of thousands of students while engaged in a public debate at Utah Valley University. To explain his actions to his romantic partner, the alleged shooter texted, "Some hate can't be negotiated out" (Upadhyay, 2025).

Although perceived threats to open discussion can come from across the political spectrum, the vast majority of social science faculty members (76%) in high-ranking universities in the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom are politically left. Nearly twice as many of these faculty identify as far left (21%) than as right wing (11%) (Goodwin, 2022). Though I am not arguing that left-wing faculty members are authoritarian, I suspect that the political monoculture of academia has created a blind spot when it comes to the authoritarian structure of SSR and the unassailable ideas it posits as

truth. In fact, the notion that authoritarianism was a right-wing phenomenon endured in academia for nearly seventy years after Theodor Adorno, a Frankfurt School critical theorist, and colleagues published *The Authoritarian Personality* in 1950 in an attempt to identify the psychological substrate of fascism in the wake of the Holocaust. In 2022, Costello and colleagues identified a leftwing version using updated constructs; the authors of this work argue that political bias may have prevented psychologists from identifying the common traits of authoritarian personalities in the past because they aberrantly conflated such traits with political leanings (Costello et al., 2022). Zúquete (2023) points to a handful of factors that may contribute to the dearth of research on leftwing extremism: a drop in leftwing violence in the early part of the twenty-first century, a collective cultural memory in the West that construes Nazism as the epitome of evil extremism (and all other modes of extremism as lesser evils), and the resonance of leftwing extremism's values—anti-racism, equity, diversity, etc.—with many academic researchers and the broader culture. By this account, common values lead the general public and academics to discount the radical goals and violent tactics endorsed by leftwing extremist movements. Even Drake and Hodge's (2022) paper comparing postmodern and critical theories to empiricism soft-pedals the excesses of leftwing extremism and violence when they remark that Marxism, a major theoretical progenitor of SSR, did not gain traction in the West because of “the perceived failings of ‘Communism’ in the Soviet and Maoist states” (pp. 364-365). To be sure, political scientist R. J. Rummel (1997) estimated communism's death toll as 110 million between 1900 and 1987. And, despite the widespread argument among various proponents of communism that its carnage is attributable to flawed implementation of the doctrine, it shares common ground with other authoritarian ideologies, as I will describe below.

The Spiritual-Religious Structure of SSR

The SSR worldview is strikingly similar to the plot of the science fiction movie, *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999). In *The Matrix*, human beings are suspended in a false digital reality so that their machine overlords can placate them while harnessing their physical bodies for energy. The evil machines of *The Matrix* are akin to the pernicious social structures and dominant groups that SSR blames for human suffering and alienation. According to SSR, the social and material world that we take to be self-evidently real in the West was created by sinister institutional forces (cisheteropatriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism), operating through dominant groups, in order to oppress large swaths of the population. Most people are blind to the oppressive nature of existence, but some groups have special knowledge and can liberate humanity from the social-structural chains that bind us by getting others to view the world in the same way. A similar awakening occurs in *The Matrix* when the protagonist, Neo, takes a “red pill” that allows him to break out of the algorithm and see reality accurately for the first time. Having acquired the right consciousness, he joins a group of rogue reality-oriented fighters on a mission to liberate humanity. SSR posits a similar form of consciousness-raising to cure humanity's ills. Proponents argue that most social problems would be solved if everybody shared their awakened consciousness. Those who cannot see the sinister underbelly of the social structure have flawed perceptions or false consciousness. Of note, the intellectual

architecture of SSR is a fusion of Marxism's bourgeois/proletariat dichotomy applied to multiple axes of oppression and the postmodern proposition that knowledge claims are power moves.

The Matrix gave birth to some of the most popular internet memes used to describe political awakenings, most importantly "the red pill." The phrase is commonly used by the dissident right in America to describe one's realization that many social institutions are controlled by the left (Versluis, 2023b). The "red pill" metaphor also shows up among the online disaffected left to describe the shift in perspective that caused them to become "politically homeless." The film in its entirety is recognized by commentators on the right and left to contain gnostic religious themes (Kwiatkowski, 2021). These are the grounds upon which anti-woke critics assert that the phenomenon I have been calling SSR is a gnostic religion. I will revisit this argument in a later section.

In an article titled "More Christian than the Christians," Sheluyang Peng (2024) argues that a proper genealogy of wokeness must also account for its Christian/liberal roots. By this account, wokeness is the secular cultural successor of Puritanism's heretic-hunting ethic of spiritual superiority grafted onto Quakerism's egalitarianism and open-mindedness. Such connections have motivated an illiberal movement on the right calling for a return to pagan, pre-Christian Western values on the grounds that Christianity inaugurated the downfall of Western culture. Peng (2024) explains this viewpoint,

While the Romans worshiped gods known for their vitality and beauty, Christians worshiped a God that taught altruism and was portrayed in the form of an emaciated figure nailed to a device used to execute slaves. Nearly two millennia later, Friedrich Nietzsche would interpret Christian morality as 'slave morality' for its veneration of the weak over the strong: the progenitor of today's woke oppressor-oppressed dichotomy. (para. 27)

Such a genealogy shows that tidy distinctions between religious and secular ideas are perhaps a fiction and that an ideological culture war about liberalism is also a spiritual conflict.

In popular parlance, being "woke" means having one's consciousness awakened to this disturbing state of affairs. Despite the pithy accuracy of the term "woke," it is too politically freighted and contested to be useful in this analysis, and it is, ironically, too religious to capture the secular mooring of its adherents. SSR is not quasi-religious because its proponents believe in a particular rendering of God (they do not), but because it coheres around a sacralized set of beliefs that one is not allowed to question, it involves ritualistic behavior with little bearing on the material world, and when faced with contradictions between the SSR worldview and reality, the prior must prevail. In contrast to liberalism's grounding assumption that all human beings can access reality through common senses, SSR posits that reality is not self-evident, that only a subset of people with the proper consciousness understand the actual state of human affairs, and that much or all of what we take to be the natural world is created by human beings and is therefore changeable. The oppressive historically-created prison that the liberationist paradigm aims to liberate humanity from is liberalism itself.

Common Features of Totalitarian Ideologies

Anti-Marxist social critic, James Lindsay (2021), recently mainstreamed the argument made more than a half century ago by philosopher, Eric Voegelin (1968), that Marxism is a gnostic religion. Lindsay is a strong proponent of viewing SSR as a form of Marxism that will lead to widescale human suffering and misery if not stopped, and many of his podcasts and public lectures focus on its purported gnostic roots. Gnosticism refers to a collection of ancient religious beliefs among Christians and Jews in the first century AD. Gnostic beliefs include the idea that the material world is a prison created by an evil God (the Demiurge), and that those who become enlightened by proper knowledge will transcend the prison of the material world and become one with the true divine. While comparisons between the general SSR worldview and Gnosticism are too complex to cover here, the topic warrants brief treatment because gnostic ideas are surprisingly common in American culture (Versluis, 2023a), and references to Gnosticism are popular in arguments against various facets of SSR.

Religious studies professor Arthur Versluis objects to Voegelin's argument that Marxism is gnostic and argues instead that Marxism, fascism, and Nazism all have intellectual roots in the inquisitional logic and heretic hunting of the Catholic church, the same body that put Galileo under house arrest in the seventeenth century. During the Inquisition, the church also attempted to root out Ancient Gnostics because they held dissenting religious views (Versluis, 2006). Versluis asserts that Voegelin's perspective is flawed because the spiritual ideas and concepts central to Gnosticism are inconsistent with the architecture of heretic-hunting and later totalitarian movements.

Versluis contrasts the concepts of gnosis, which refers to direct spiritual knowledge via transcending subject/object dualism with the historicist perspective of heretic hunters and totalitarians who believe that they hold the metaphorical keys to the kingdom of heaven on earth. The belief that Heaven will be established on earth in the foreseeable future is associated with Christian millennialism. The word millennialist has also been used to describe secular versions of this quest (Nash, 2000). Examples include the Nazi desire to create a master race or the quest for a Communist utopia. By Versluis' account, Gnostics trying to achieve spiritual enlightenment by transcending the material world on an individual level do not pose a threat to others, while those attempting to seize control of a populace in order to "perfect man" or create paradise on earth share the inquisitional logic of heretic hunting. Versluis posits that heretic-hunters of the Inquisition who rooted out what are essentially thought crimes, are the historical predecessors of the totalitarian states of the twentieth century,

[O]ne had to profess belief in the historical Church or in the triumph of history in the New State—or be deemed heretical and subject to the most horrendous penalties. Mysticism, transcendence, even art and literature—all that encouraged people to look inward into the heights of what humanity can achieve—in such a system represents a great threat. (Versluis, 2006, p. 10)

Some of the conditions and ideas associated with the phenomenon of heretic hunting include a fusion of the sacred ideology with the state, dualistic us-versus-them thinking,

millenarian beliefs, and intolerance for pluralism and dissent (Versluis, 2006). With its oppressor/oppressed dichotomy, utopian desire to transform life on Earth by imposing its sacred ideas, and intolerance for dissent, SSR shares three of these characteristics. These parallels by no means indicate that SSR is as violent or destructive as twentieth century totalitarian states, but it does explain the social aggression and cruelty that characterize the campaigns of public humiliation and Kafkaesque bureaucratic punishments sometimes visited on SSR dissidents (Bacon, n.d.; Dickey, 2015; PBS NewsHour, 2018).

One overarching point in Versluis' argument is that rationality is not an antidote to authoritarian and totalitarian abuse, nor is irrationality the cause of such horrors. Instead, Versluis (2006) posits that actual and pseudo-religions share the same operating system but that the cold instrumentalism of the latter may be the source of modern totalitarianism's unprecedented scale of destruction and death, since the ideologies that drive them are unmoored from the moral strictures provided by religion. If the Inquisition was heretic-hunting in the name of human beings coercively enacting their interpretation of God's word, modern totalitarianism (fascism, Nazism, communism) is what happens when human beings create secular pseudo religions in which they assume the role of God. The sci-fi nightmare of *Black Mirror* is a fictitious manifestation of this anxiety and serves as a cautionary tale about the limits of human rationality. The notion that religion may serve as a bulwark against the worst of human impulses stands in strong contrast to the perspective advanced by atheist intellectuals such as Steven Pinker that religion is a primary driver of intolerance, war, and ignorance (TRIGGERnometry, 2024a; Pinker, 2018). This is not to say that all religions are a bulwark against negative human impulses. The point here is that the structure of the ideology or worldview is more important than whether that framework is spiritual, religious, or secular.

“Liberal Science” as a Bulwark Against Sacralized Authority

One technique for insulating a society against the threat of coercively imposed sacred ideologies is to reject attempts to sacralize any person, group, or idea. The liberal social system does precisely this. In his book, *Kindly Inquisitors: New Attacks on Free Thought*, Jonathan Rauch (2013) incisively referred to Enlightenment epistemology as “liberal science.” The phrase pithily connects science to the comprehensive social philosophy out of which it grew and prompts a more nuanced understanding of how knowledge production relates to institutional arrangements and morality. Rauch (2013) contends that questions about how a society will separate valid knowledge from opinions, delusions, misperceptions, and the like are inherently political because they involve elevating the claims of some above those of others (p. 38). Truth-seeking is tricky business given the diversity of perceptions, opinions, and beliefs that dwell within groups of humans; such differences fuel minor disputes and sometimes escalate into violent attacks and full-scale wars. At the same time, if we cannot agree on a strategy for separating valid from invalid truth claims, society may devolve into chaos and violence.

Rauch describes Plato's seemingly sensible solution—of investing authority over truth with the wisest people, the philosophers—as a fundamentalist nightmare because it belies a totalitarian social structure in which most people are forced to filter the world through

the dictums of a cadre of elites, who may even lie to them “for their own good” (Rauch, 2013, pp. 31-35). Such a knowledge system is strictly and unquestionably hierarchal. The primary flaw with this system is that it anoints a special class of people whose truth claims are beyond question by those who do not share elite status. If even a subset of very smart human beings were always rational and capable of self-correction at the individual or group level, such a hierarchy might produce superior knowledge and greater prosperity than rival systems. But even smart people make mistakes and are prone to irrationality.

The liberal answer to the knowledge question is brilliantly counterintuitive because it balances human rationality with bias and fallibility: we should listen to “nobody in particular” (Rauch, 2013, p. 52). This means that anybody, regardless of their background, morals, and social status can make a knowledge claim. Competing knowledge claims are then discussed and critiqued publicly; those claims that withstand every counterargument that can be leveled against them are provisionally deemed truthful. If something that was once deemed truthful is later refuted, it is replaced by an updated but still provisional truth claim. This process repeats over and over.

Rauch condenses “the game of liberal science” into two principles: “No special authority, and no final say” (p. 46). Nobody’s ideas are ever insulated from criticism, and nothing is sacred. The constant skeptical questioning of ideas in liberal science is a painful process; it is difficult to have one’s deeply-held convictions challenged or debunked. As Rauch remarks, “To advance knowledge, we must all sometimes suffer. Worse than that, we must inflict suffering on others” (p. 19). An important point here is that the pain and harm caused by words is less traumatic than the physical violence and bloodshed that awaits if people attempt to either implement bad ideas that have not been carefully vetted, or resolve conflicts through physical rather than verbal means. By this account, the old “sticks and stones” adage is untrue but socially-productive; words do cause pain, but this pain is less destructive than the alternative.

SSR is Liberalism’s Black Mirror

Rauch’s astute rendering of liberal science stands in subtle contrast to popular definitions of scientific objectivity and in strong contrast to the standpoint epistemologies threaded through SSR. A common criticism of scientific objectivity is that it is impossible for a scientist to be disinterested or have what feminist scientist Donna Haraway (1988) referred to as “Godlike vision from nowhere.” But according to Rauch, liberal science does not require individual scientists to be value-free and unprejudiced; it puts these human flaws to use. Here we see that the liberal argument for viewpoint diversity is much different than the SSR tenet that invests authority in the historically marginalized and those who claim to speak on their behalf.

The genius of liberal science lies not in doing away with dogma and prejudice; it lies in *channeling* dogma and prejudice—making them socially productive by pitting dogma against dogma and prejudice against prejudice. Science remains unbiased even though scientists are not. (Rauch, 2013, p. 67)

Construed this way, science is not a set of techniques but a conversation grounded in anti-authoritarian social conventions and beliefs. In contrast to liberalism, SSR asks adherents to reject belief in a knowable external world and replace it with a status-based knowledge production system on the grounds that the liberal system is an authoritarian system in disguise. The ethos of this worldview is captured in Herbert Marcuse's (1969) essay *Repressive Tolerance*, in which he argues that true freedom requires the suppression of ideas that are contrary to liberation. Though Marcuse is not usually cited in SSR-related scholarship today, he is perhaps the most influential critical theorist in the United States, and the logic of repressive tolerance survives in scholarship in the form of critical race theory, whiteness studies, and intersectionality theories, all of which critique liberal values such as free speech, institutional neutrality, and tolerance of viewpoint diversity. Conduits of Marcuse's thought include his former doctoral student, activist-scholar Angela Davis, who expanded upon his ideas and applied them to race and gender, and student radicals of the 1960s who drew heavily on his ideas and translated them into activism (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020; Mounk, 2023). At the cultural level, Marcuse's ideas are evident in activist slogans such as "silence is violence" and the notion that "platforming" conservative or heterodox speakers causes harm to oppressed people.

Marcuse's argument is curious intellectual territory. He is essentially arguing that a system whose logical architecture diffuses power and denies any individual authority is authoritarian, while one that grants authority to ideas and people that he agrees with is anti-authoritarian. Instead of checking one's ideas against external reality and against one another, *repressive tolerance* asks us to hew to a cache of ideas created by a group of self-appointed intellectual elites allegedly acting on behalf of the oppressed. Marcuse magnifies an analytic move that also appears in Marxism and many of its offshoots; these theories claim that the oppressed have authority over the truth, but concepts such as false consciousness allow adherents of the theory to dismiss and override the perspective of any oppressed person who disagrees with them. In effect, Marcuse arrogates the role of philosopher king all the while arguing that he is a vanguard of freedom. Yet history suggests it is a pipe dream to imagine that institutionalized authority will serve the oppressed or anybody other than those who seek power for power's sake. *Repressive tolerance* is a black mirror through which reality mutates into its opposite. Up is down, authority is an antidote to power, freedom is oppression. And like the world depicted in the television show whose title is a metaphor for what we see when we stare into a cell phone screen, *repressive tolerance* claims to give us an image of humanity unencumbered by the distortions of entrenched power—a purified and optimized self and society; in reality it reflects only what its totalitarian creators condone.

Several points are worth highlighting. First, systems designed to prevent the accumulation of power and authority are anti-authoritarian and those designed to give power to any individual or group are authoritarian, regardless of their stated intentions. Second, scientific epistemology is not a standalone set of techniques and principles; it is entwined with a liberal social system and dependent on liberal norms. Thirdly, in abandoning the fallible principle and implicitly casting all social evils as an effect of the social structure, SSR ignores the existence of individual characterological deficits and institutionalizes "para-social" reactions to people who are harming others and society at

large. Para-social reactions are behaviors that are normally socially-adaptive but become pernicious when directed at people with irremediable character deficits. For example, the assumption of good intentions in others makes sense when interacting with the average person but not with people who strategically manipulate empathy for their own gain. The para-social reaction was identified by Łobaczewski (2006) who posits that macrosocial evil, which he experienced in the form of Nazism and Soviet Communism, occurs when psychopaths and others with dark personalities leverage toxic ideologies to gain power over a society. This leads to the last point: in abandoning the existence of a knowable external reality, dogmatic offshoots of postmodern and critical theories in the form of SSR create the social conditions for abuse by bad faith actors. SSR is an epistemology of gaslighting on a macro scale. If truth is construed as infinitely malleable, relative, and rooted in power, the powerful (even if they were once oppressed) are granted comprehensive control over the populace. This is the situation for Winston Smith, the protagonist of George Orwell's fictitious novel *1984*; his job is to manipulate the truth on behalf of a totalitarian state. Throughout the novel, Smith is slowly coerced into rejecting his sense perceptions and accepting that $2+2=5$. Smith's eventual conversion means that he cannot think for himself (Orwell, 1949). This is the essence of totalitarianism—forced belief in a fabricated reality (Arendt, 1951/2017).

The Search for Truth and Meaning

The metaphor of the “God-shaped hole” has been used to describe the often-irrational search for meaning that motivates so much of human life. I use this phrase not to endorse the religious claim that only God can fill this hole, but to succinctly describe the persistence and pervasiveness of religious and quasi-religious systems through which people sacralize particular objects, people, or ideas. Though some atheist empiricists, such as Steven Pinker, have argued that religion is irrational and harmful and that people can find meaning in secular endeavors such as improving the world and the human condition (TRIGGERnometry, 2024a), it is not clear that empirically-demonstrable global progress does meet this need for most people. Satirist Konstantin Kisin argues that atheists are deluded to think that the absence of God makes human beings less tribalistic and cruel. He explains,

The central positive feature of the religious worldview is to ensure that human beings do not see themselves as the sole arbiters of truth and justice. That having torn God down from his pedestal, we do not put ourselves in his place. Yes, of course, atheist mass-murderers like Stalin and Hitler weren't motivated to kill millions because of religious differences, but their ability to rationalize their actions and to persuade other people to support them was a product of the sense in which in the absence of God we get to make up any rules we want. This is precisely why we had to invent the concept of human rights in the immediate aftermath of World War II; without a worldview in which we're all worthy of dignity and respect by virtue of being children of God, you have to reinvent that particular wheel through the United Nations. (TRIGGERnometry, 2024b, 4:35)

The fictitious totalitarian dystopia of *Black Mirror* illustrates this principle; it is a world in which human beings accrue God-like status through technocratic mastery of hybrid digital-material human bodies. In this narrative, the post-enlightenment quest for truth is unshackled from the moral boundaries imposed by a deity, leading to a dark pit of meaninglessness and cruelty. In an alternative tale, this one not fictitious, the Enlightenment's logical assault on God leads to a replacement religion rendered through secular philosophy (fascism, Marxism, and Nazism), in which human beings believe that they can create their own utopian reality on earth, but only if their sacred ideology is imposed on those around them. The two stories are not so different, except that *Black Mirror* blames cold rationality for totalitarianism and immorality, and critics of totalizing secular ideologies take aim at the irrationality of faith-based systems.

I began this paper with a tale of technocratic totalitarianism to show that a society's knowledge-producing system is inseparable from the moral and philosophical principles upon which it is based, and summarized the now-common argument that SSR is effectively a political religion cast out of an amalgamation of critical and postmodern theories, Christianity, and perhaps, the sacralization of liberalism's egalitarianism (Buruma, 2023; Bottum, 2014; Douthat, 2022; Doyle, 2022; Kaufmann, 2024; Lewis, 2022; Lindsay & Nayna, 2020; McWhorter, 2021; Peng, 2024). Nevertheless, it is SSR's authoritarianism and not its irrationality, its place on the political spectrum, or its metaphysical claims that pose a threat. The crux of the issue is that authoritarian knowledge-production systems are effectively authoritarian social systems even if their architects claim otherwise. As journalist Tim Reiterman (2008) cautioned in his preface to a comprehensive account of the 1978 cult massacre at Jonestown, "People who surrender their worldly resources, their offspring, and the most basic decisions of their lives to a man, a cause, or an organization do so at their own peril" (p. xi). Ceding the authority of truth to an anointed person or class is a recipe for complete domination because it means that people cannot even think for themselves.

Rauch's descriptor "liberal science" aptly conveys the often-overlooked point that science is a social process reliant on norms such as egalitarianism and pluralism. It is arguably the best knowledge-producing system because it leverages human bias and fallibility to create more accurate models of reality while forestalling the accumulation of power. Paradoxically, it is these power-leveling attributes of liberalism—namely the ethos of skepticism and the lack of a central knowledge-production authority—that create the conditions for this philosophy's undoing. Neither God nor liberal principles are sacred. Given this dynamic, it is not surprising in a liberal context to observe so many people caught up in the secular search for something sacred. Ending racism, patriarchy, and poverty, giving voice to the oppressed; all of these endeavors are sacred to many social workers and understandably so.

The question is how we distinguish, if at all, between the sacred and the profane, the search for empirical truth versus moral truths. And when, if ever, are we justified in imposing our view of the sacred on others? The answer to the latter question, according to liberalism, is never. Like all of the people who lived before us, social workers are fallible humans with an imperfect grasp on empirical and moral truths. With its ethos of skepticism and anti-authoritarian structure, liberalism accounts for human imperfection and cautions

us to abandon the temptation that secular or religious knowledge can give any one of us the recipe for salvation or utopia. My contention is that social work should continue to embrace liberalism with its privileging of empiricism and rationality without dismissing the search for transcendent meaning that motivates our lives and those of our clients. Embracing liberalism and rational empiricism does not mean lionizing particular research methods or hierarchies of evidence, which is tantamount to sacralizing a phantasm of science. It does mean recognizing that science is one part of our social system and an important but incomplete strategy for rendering the human experience.

A holistic understanding of humanity requires that we acknowledge rational and irrational facets of the human psyche without aberrantly attributing everything good to rationality and everything bad or evil to irrationality. In fact, social work may cease to exist if the profession attempts to root out all concepts that cannot be justified rationally and empirically—for example, the notion that people have inherent dignity and worth. I am also skeptical that a rational understanding of human irrationality, if that is even possible, will fill the God-shaped hole. My best guess, based on history and current social dynamics is that it will not. As Herbert Blumer (1969) observed, human beings are symbolic creatures who continuously create and search for meaning. Like the concept of gnosis, the experience or feeling of holding something meaningful or sacred cannot be aptly captured by abiding science's subject-object distinction. One can document the hormone spikes that accompany falling in love, but this is a shallow understanding of the experience. That is why liberal societies that embrace science still require and manifest other pathways for capturing the human experience, including art, music, literature, and religion. In addition to more traditionally scientific pursuits, social work knowledge must also document human experiences and people's accounts of those experiences; attempts to render these through "thick description" or even more artistic media are distinct from efforts to shoehorn this complexity into a preferred ideological or pseudo religious aperture. The former is necessary; the latter, to the degree that it impinges on individual self-determination and truth-seeking, is antithetical to social work ethics.

Implications

This analysis has a handful of implications for social work teaching and practice. One is that we should contextualize the theoretical and moral frameworks we teach students so that they can develop a comprehensive understanding of their benefits and tradeoffs. To fully understand SSR-related theories, students must also understand the core tenets of the liberal framework that SSR interrogates and attempts to replace. Another point seems overly simplistic but is not: this is the recognition that bad ideas and malicious actors often cloak themselves in a mutated form of the sacred values of those they aspire to control. Among these bad ideas is the well-intentioned impulse to rid the world of all problems and injustices. Though a noble aspiration, the delusion of mastery and perfectionism is bound up with authoritarianism at best and totalitarianism at worst. All people, including the world's best social workers, are fallible. Despite well-founded fears of cancellation and even violence, we must be willing to ask ourselves and others—what if you/I/we are wrong? The truth-seeking process is rife with error, but as Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1974/2006) observed, truth-telling whether public or private is an antidote

to totalitarianism. Finally, despite the importance of truth-telling, we should not succumb to the scientific belief that humans can solve all of life's riddles through a careful program of research. Like an impossible game of whack-a-mole, the human need for transcendent meaning will inevitably pop up in varied forms and locations. Social workers work with people, so we have to work with this facet of the human condition, whether we are religious, atheist, or agnostic. We do not and should not sign onto any secular or religious framework that claims absolute knowledge and attempts to impose its designs on the world around it.

Conclusion

Social work's longstanding epistemology debates and more recent concerns about mandated ideologies are but a microcosm of a much bigger issue. The actual dilemma facing the social work profession, and the West more generally, is whether we will continue to be liberal or adopt a different comprehensive social philosophy. Many of the doctrines vying to replace liberalism are authoritarian or totalitarian. I focused on SSR because it is the most enticing to social workers and poses a formidable threat in America because it has taken hold in some form in a variety of cultural institutions. Ultimately, we should reject SSR as a guiding framework for social work, not because it is irrational or religious, but because it is authoritarian, and authoritarian systems by design bode poorly for most people and most poorly for the most oppressed.

References

- Abrams, S. J. (2025, August 18). [The price we pay for performative progressivism in higher education](#). Minding the Campus.
- Adorno, T., Frankel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. Harper & Row.
- Ahlstrom, S. E. (1955). [The Scottish philosophy and American theology](#). *Church History*, 24(3), 257–272.
- Arendt, H. (1951/2017). *The origins of totalitarianism*. Penguin Classics.
- Armstrong, K. (2000). *The battle for God*. Ballantine Books.
- Bacon, J. (n.d.). [Matthew Carroll's Kafkaesque journey through woke purgatory](#). The Jefferson Council.
- Berlin, I. (1969). *Two concepts of liberty*. In I. Berlin, *Four essays on liberty* (pp. 118-172). Oxford University Press.
- Bilek, J. (2020, July 2). [The body industry: Are big profits driving trans activism?](#) Institute of Arts and Ideas News.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Prentice-Hall.
- Bottum, J. (2014). *An anxious age: The post-Protestant ethic and the spirit of America*. Image.

- Bowles, N. (2017, August 30). [How “doxxing” became a mainstream tool in the culture wars](#). *The New York Times*.
- Brooker, C. (Writer), & Tibbetts, C. (Director). (2014). [White Christmas](#) (Season 2, Episode 4) [TV series episode]. In C. Brooker (Executive Producer), *Black mirror*. Netflix.
- Buruma, I. (2023, July). [Doing the work: The Protestant ethic and the spirit of wokeness](#). *Harper’s Magazine*.
- Camp, E. (2023, April 24). [How an ill-informed internet mob ruined a UVA student’s life](#). *Reason*.
- Costello, T. H., Bowes, S. M., Stevens, S. T., Waldman, I. D., Tasimi, A., & Lilienfeld, S. O. (2022). [Clarifying the structure and nature of left-wing authoritarianism](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 122(1), 135-170.
- Courtland S. D., & Schmidz, D. (2022). [Liberalism](#). In E. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Online). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
- Cullinane, M. (2017, October 12). [The ethics of doxing Nazis](#). Center for Digital Ethics & Policy.
- Curry, R. (2015). *Common sense nation: Unlocking the forgotten power of the American idea*. Encounter Books.
- Dawkins, R. (2025, January 28). [The myth of the God-shaped hole](#). Free Inquiry.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). [Critical race theory: An introduction](#). NYU Press.
- DiAngelo, R. J. (2018). *White fragility: Why it’s so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.
- Dickey, J. (2015, November 8). [A costume drama at Yale](#). *Time*.
- Douthat, R. (2022, June 1). [A gentler Christendom](#). *First Things*.
- Doyle, A. (2022). *The new Puritans: How the religion of social justice captured the Western world*. Constable.
- Drake, B., & Hodge, D. R. (2022). [Social work at the crossroads: The empirical highway or the postmodern/critical off-ramp?](#) *Research on Social Work Practice*, 32(4), 363-373.
- Dreger, A. (2016). *Galileo’s middle finger: Heretics, activists, and one scholar’s search for justice*. Penguin Books.
- Durkheim, É. (1995). *The elementary forms of religious life* (K. E. Fields, Trans.). Free Press. (Original work published 1912)
- Flaherty, C. (2021, October 5). [A canceled talk, and questions about just who is politicizing science](#). *Inside Higher Ed*.

- Flannery-Dailey, F., & Wagner, R. L. (2016). [Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in the Matrix](#). *Journal of Religion & Film*, 5(2), 1-32.
- Gambrill, E. (2025). [How strategic ignorance contributes to missed opportunities to enhance social justice](#). *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 45(2), 276-297.
- Goodwin, M. J. (2022). [Is academic freedom under threat?](#) Legatum Institute.
- Gottschall, J. (2008). [Literature, science, and a new humanities](#). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hackett, C., Stonawski, M., Tong, Y., Kramer, S., Shi, A. F., & Fahmy, D. (2025). [How the global religious landscape changed from 2010 to 2020: Muslims grew fastest: Christians lagged behind global population increase](#). Pew Research Center.
- Harari, Y. N. (2016). [Homo deus: A brief history of tomorrow](#). Harper.
- Haraway, D. (1988). [Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective](#). *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599.
- Harrington, M. (2023). *Feminism against progress*. Regnery Gateway.
- Heretics. (2024, February 29). [How our brains tricked us - Dr. Iain McGilchrist](#) (Episode 33) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Heretics* (Andrew Gold, host). YouTube.
- Hicks, S. R. C. (2004). *Explaining postmodernism: Skepticism and socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*. Scholargy Publishing.
- Hicks, S. R. C. (2024, August 23). [The rise of "woke": From postmodernism and critical theory to identity politics](#) [Video]. The Atlas Society, Ltd.
- Hunter, L. Y., Albert, C. D., Rutland, J., Topping, K., & Hennigan, C. (2024). [Artificial intelligence and information warfare in major power states: How the US, China, and Russia are using artificial intelligence in their information warfare and influence operations](#). *Defense & Security Analysis*, 40(2), 235-269.
- Israel, J. (2019). *A revolution of the mind: Radical enlightenment and the intellectual origins of modern democracy*. Princeton University Press.
- Johnson, M. (2024, May 15). [The God divide within the heterodox community: Nom, we don't need religion to "save the West"](#). Persuasion.
- Jones, J. M. (2025, April 17). [Religious preferences largely stable in U.S. since 2020](#). Gallup.
- Jordan the Social Worker [Pseudonym]. (2025). [Out of balance: Moving beyond anti-racist & anti-oppressive education](#). *Journal of Social Work Education*, 45(2), 216-232.
- Kaufmann, E. (2024). *The third awakening: A 12-point plan for rolling back progressive extremism*. Bombardier Books.
- Kisin, K. (2022, March 15). [The age of religion is upon us](#). Author.
- Kurzweil, R. (2005). *The singularity is near: When humans transcend biology*. Viking.

- Kurzweil, R. (2024). *The singularity is nearer*. Penguin Publishing Group.
- Kwiatkowski, F. (2021, January). [Eric Voegelin and revolutionary gnosticism in “The Matrix” franchise](#) [Conference paper]. Eric Voegelin Society.
- Lens, V., Farber, N., & Fram, M. (2025a). [Editorial](#). *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 45(2), 179-187.
- Lens, V., Farber, N., & Fram, M. (Eds.). (2025b). [Beyond ideological mandates: Critical reflections on anti-racist and anti-oppressive social work education](#) [Special issue]. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 45(2), 179-297.
- Lewis, H. (2022, August 18). [How social justice became a new religion](#). *The Atlantic*.
- Lifton, R. J. (1961). *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism: A study of "brainwashing" in China*. Norton.
- Lindsay, J. (2021, May 28). [Hegel, wokeness, and the dialectical faith of leftism](#). *New Discourses*.
- Lindsay, J., & Nayna, M. (2020, June 18). [Postmodern religion and the faith of social justice](#). *New Discourses*.
- Łobaczewski, A. M. (2006). *Political ponerology: A science on the nature of evil adjusted for political purposes* (A. Chciuk-Celt, Trans.). Red Pill Press.
- Locke, J. (1988). [Two treatises of government](#) (P. Laslett, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1689)
- Loy, D. R. (2004). [Terror in the God-shaped hole: A Buddhist perspective on modernity's identity crisis](#). *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 36(2), 179-201.
- Marcuse, H. (1969). Repressive tolerance. In R. P. Wolff, B. Moore Jr., & H. Marcuse (Eds.), *A critique of pure tolerance* (pp. 95-118). Jonathon Cape.
- McIntosh, K. (2018, August 11). [My search for Mr. Woke: A dating diary](#). *The Guardian*.
- McWhorter, J. (2021). *Woke racism: How a new religion has betrayed Black America*. Penguin Random House.
- McGilchrist, I. (2021). *The matter with things: Our brains, our delusions, and the unmaking of the world*. Perspectiva Press.
- Mendz, G. L., & Cook, M. (2021). [Posthumanism: Creation of “new men” through technological innovation](#). *The New Bioethics*, 27(3), 197-218.
- Mill, J. S. (2003). [On liberty](#). Yale University Press. (Original work published 1859)
- Mounk, Y. (2023). *The identity trap: A story of ideas and power in our time*. Penguin Press.
- Nash, D. (2000). [The failed and postponed millennium: Secular millennialism since the Enlightenment](#). *Journal of Religious History*, 24(1), 70-87.

- Orwell, G. (1949). *Nineteen eighty-four*. Penguin Classics.
- PBS NewsHour. (2018, January 7). [Evergreen copes with fallout, months after “Day of Absence” sparked national debate](#) [Video]. Author.
- Peng, S. (2024). [More Christian than the Christians](#). *American Affairs Journal*, 8(1), 222-240.
- Pinker, S. (2018). *Enlightenment now: The case for reason, science, humanism, and progress*. Penguin Books.
- Pluckrose, H., & Lindsay, J. (2020). *Cynical theories: How activist scholarship made everything about race, gender, and identity—and why this harms everybody*. Pitchstone Publishing.
- Rauch, J. (2013). [Kindly inquisitors: New attacks on free thought](#). University of Chicago Press.
- Rawls, J. (1999). *A theory of justice* (Rev. ed.). Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Reiterman, T. (2008). *Raven: The untold story of the Reverend Jim Jones and his people*. Penguin.
- Rothblatt, M. (2014). *Virtually human: The promise—and the peril—of digital immortality*. St. Martin’s Press.
- Rowland, W. (2012). *Galileo’s mistake: A new look at the epic confrontation between Galileo and the Church*. Arcade.
- Rubin, A. (2022). [The postmodern/critical perspective: Off-ramp or off the rails?](#) *Research on Social Work Practice*, 32(6), 622-623.
- Rummel, R. J. (1997). *Statistics of democide: Genocide and mass murder since 1900*. LIT Verlag.
- Searle, J. R. (1971). [The campus war: A sympathetic look at the university in agony](#). World Publishing Company.
- Smith, G., Cooperman, A., Alper, B., Mohamed, B., Rotolo, C., Tevington, P., Nortey, J., Kallo, A., Diamant, J., & Fahmy, D. (2025). [Decline of Christianity in the U.S. has slowed, may have leveled off: Findings from the 2023-2024 Religious Landscape Study](#). Pew Research Center.
- Solzhenitsyn, A. I. (2006). [Live not by lies](#) (Y. Solzhenitsyn, Trans.). The Solzhenitsyn Center. (Original work 1974)
- Stevens, S. T. (2023). [2024 college free speech rankings: What is the state of free speech on America’s college campuses?](#) The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.
- St. Félix, D. (2020, June 9). [The embarrassment of Democrats wearing Kente-cloth stoles](#). *The New Yorker*.

- Thyer, B. A. (2025). [Mandated ideologies are harmful to social work practice and research](#). *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 45(2), 298-316.
- TRIGGERnometry. (2024a, July 24). [Is this the death of Harvard? – Steven Pinker](#) [Video]. YouTube.
- TRIGGERnometry. (2024b, April 30). [The atheism delusion – Konstantin Kisin](#) [Video]. YouTube.
- Upadhyay, B. (2025, September 16). [Read the text messages between Charlie Kirk accused and roommate](#). BBC News.
- United States. (1776). [Declaration of independence](#). National Archives.
- Valentin, P. (2023). [The woke phenomenon: Its impact and different responses](#). In J. Pedro Zúquete (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of left-wing extremism* (vol. 2, pp. 313-326). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Versluis, A. (2006). *The new inquisitions: Heretic-hunting and the intellectual origins of modern totalitarianism*. Oxford University Press.
- Versluis, A. (2023a). [American gnosis](#). Oxford University Press.
- Versluis, A. (2023b). [Neo-gnosticism and the American dissident right](#). *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 17(1), 159-189.
- Vito. (2021, November 11). [ATTACKED at the Netflix protest: The complete story \(Uncensored\)](#) [Video]. YouTube.
- Voegelin, E. (1968). *Science, politics, and Gnosticism*. Regenery.
- Wachowski, L., & Wachowski, L. (Directors). (1999). *The Matrix* [Film]. Warner Bros.
- Watson, J. B. (1924). [Psychology: From the standpoint of a behaviorist](#) (2nd ed.). J. B. Lippincott.
- WTVD ABC11. (2020, June 6). [Cary faith leaders effort to tackle race relations with Unity Walk](#) [News article]. ABC11 Raleigh-Durham.
- Zúquete, J. P. (Ed.). (2023). [Introduction](#). In *The Palgrave handbook of left-wing extremism, Volume 2* (pp. vii-xx). Springer Nature.

Author note: Address correspondence to Melissa Hardesty, Department of Social Work, Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY, 13903. Email: hardesty@binghamton.edu

ORCID: Melissa Hardesty  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7518-4276>