

# On the intersectionality of RSSIs and other identities

Crenshaw (1991) originally defined the term “intersectionality” by discussing the overlapping ways Black women’s race and gender interact and how racism and sexism are not experienced separately. Over the intervening decades, interpretations of intersectionality have expanded to include many other forms of identity and their related oppressions. Notably, religious, secular, and spiritual identities (RSSIs), and even the more simplistic phrasing of religious identities, are quite often left off lists and analyses of intersectional elements (Small, 2020, p. 46). In order to fully advance equity and inclusion for all in society, intersectionality must dig deeper both to consider RSSIs and to understand how Christian supremacy is, in many ways, the foundation upon which other oppressions have been built.

## The impact of leaving RSSIs out of intersectional analyses

Research that ignores RSSIs and is centered on other forms of identity and oppression is not simply focused in a different direction. The lessons that intersectional analyses have taught scholars and practitioners over the past 30 years indicate that, in addition, results and implications are compromised when intersectional oppressions are not considered. To that end, intersectional analyses that overlook Christian supremacy are not just incomplete; they may be inaccurate or insufficiently theorized. One cannot simply focus on one form of oppression while setting another aside; oppressions are interlocked and cannot be understood alone. Therefore, the following considerations should be made when integrating RSSIs into intersectionality analyses:

1. Religious, secular, and spiritual identities may be as fundamental (or more so, in some cases) to an individual’s sense of self and place in society as other forms of identity such as race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, socioeconomic class, and immigrant status;
2. Oppression and marginalization based upon white Christian supremacy are pervasive in society and cannot be understood separately from other forms of oppression; and
3. Failure to address oppression and marginalization based upon RSSIs adversely impacts efforts to stem the other, interrelated forms of oppression in society.

## On RSSIs as fundamental

Whether self-identifying as religious, secular, or spiritual, many individuals feel deeply connected to this element of their identities. Indeed, one’s RSSI often contributes substantially to beliefs, values, behaviors, political ideologies, and more. In addition, those from minority religious and non-religious backgrounds may experience this connectedness in the strongest way, due to society’s constant reminders of their lack of majority status. The marginalized often have a heightened awareness of the identity that places them at this social disadvantage. This applies even to those individuals who have consciously



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rejected the religions of their families and cultures, as external viewers may judge and reject them based on their physical appearance, be that identity based (i.e. race and gender) or not (i.e. clothing and behaviors).

## On the pervasiveness of white Christian supremacy

White Christian supremacy and its related phenomena of Christian privilege, hegemony, and normativity, conspire daily in a system that keeps people of color, non-Christians, and non-Christian people of color in a marginalized position in society. This marginalization began before even the founding of the United States, and it takes many forms, including legal, economical, educational, and more (Joshi, 2020). Religious oppression's ties to other forms of oppression are clearly visible throughout U.S. history, such as when Christianity was utilized as a key tool for colonizing Native lands and justifying the enslavement of Black people. Further, Christian supremacist ideas, in interaction with non-Christians through colonial conquests, were the origin of and precursor to racism (Maldonado-Torres, 2014).

## On the adverse impact upon efforts to stem other forms of oppression

Failure to interrogate white Christian supremacy as a part of intersectional analyses leaves scholars open to missing critical, overlapping oppressions. This may result in inaccurate theorizing and insufficient programmatic interventions. For example, as the field of higher education student affairs focuses on decolonization efforts, it would be remiss to overlook the confounding influence of Christianity when analyzing how white people conquered and stole Native lands. Christianity was both a central justification for colonization and a strategy for implementing it; therefore, its continued influence in society must be accounted for in decolonization strategies.

The definition of intersectionality and its related applications have expanded since Crenshaw's introduction of the term. It is now the time for scholars of intersectionality to dig more deeply into it to understand how white Christian supremacy underscores and remains intertwined with other forms of oppression. Doing so will allow scholars and practitioners to further the work of making society fully equitable and inclusive for all.

## References

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