

## CORH Values – Season 2, Episode 1

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### *Chris Crews on Social Justice in the Age of Digital Media*

Chris Crews talks about social justice movements in contemporary times. We discuss how social media and other digital technologies are affecting the shape of these movements, and examine the role of religion in both motivating people to fight and justifying oppressive structures. We compare the dynamics in today's America to those of the 1960s and highlight awareness of intersectional identities as one of the differences.

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### **Transcript:**

Hello, Welcome to the religion and humanities podcast produced by the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities at California State University Chico. I'm your host and chair of the departments, Daniel Veidlinger, welcome to season two of our podcast series. This season, we're going to be focusing on social justice, the Black Lives Matter movement, and their relationship to religion and humanities more generally. This is the first episode in our second season. So we hope you'll enjoy. Our guest today is Dr. Chris Crews, who came to us with a PhD in political science from the New School for Social Research and teaches courses on religion, the environments, and eschatology here at Chico State. His scholarship focuses on the intersection of social and environmental justice. And he's a prolific blogger and social media personality. I highly recommend that you take a look at his blog at ChrisCrews.com, you can find links to a plethora, a fascinating material. So I'd like to welcome you, Chris. So our podcasts, how you doing today. I'm good. Thanks, Daniel. I'm glad to be doing your good, Nice to have you. So social justice is a really important feature of American life. Americans had been fighting for social justice for a long time. I think it's something that kind of defines America in a way. Let's start with the role of religion in the night 60s. Do you feel that the religious beliefs of many of the leaders, like Martin Luther King and some of the Jewish leaders. I know Rabbi Heschel, Abraham Heschel was involved. How much do you think religion played a role in their sense of the injustice going on at the time? Well, I think definitely for Dr. King, it was central. In fact, I think it's hard to disentangle his theology and religious beliefs from his own experience. I mean, if you look at his life, there was a moment when he was younger, he I felt like he didn't want to follow in his father's footsteps. He didn't want to be a Baptist preacher and he wanted to kind of break ranks with that and thought maybe this isn't my future. But then actually kind of found his own political identity and came back to the church. And that's kinda really where he moved into what we think of him today as this firebrand, pulpits, civil rights leader. So I think for Dr. King, but also many people in the mid to late fifties and early sixties, the role of religion played this kind of very both supportive, intense role. So a lot of the African American communities in the South, religion was central to the civil rights struggle. The same time for many whites in the South, the church was a bastion of white supremacy and racism. And coming out of this legacy of post-Civil War Jim Crow, where the church and Christianity were very much about a particular vision of racial hierarchy, where the Bible said who was and wasn't, the ideal sort of human being. So I think you have both of these very confrontational and oppositional dynamics within religion and civil rights movement. And I think in some ways that we can talk about this later, but I think that dynamic is still very much there today. Where race and religion cut both against each other and sort of work in parallel at different moments in time. But I think that early moment in the mid fifties and sixties, It's hard to separate kind of civil rights movement and religious politics, at least within black communities in the South, because the church was really just such a center of community. And the community was the source of political and cultural ancient Sumer 8. And at time, one thing that we talked about in our religion classes all the time is the multivocal way that the religious texts speak. All religions have so many different possible interpretations you can make of the various passages. And it is interesting that you had, or they just support for the slave owners and freedom fighters at the same time, right? Because on one hand, the Bible theory says that all human beings descended from Adam and E, right, the original one, so that there is a central commonality amongst all people. And it's very clear in the Bible. And of course there's other creation myths and other religions that don't talk about that,

right? The three different groups create a different time, right. So this is kind of not something that had to be the case, right? Not all religions believe that all human beings respond from a two original people. On the other hand, the Bible does talk about slavery and has laws about how it should operate, which means that it can exist, right? So you wouldn't have laws governing. So you can get two very different understandings of this. Text. And that's a perennial problem when it comes to using religion to justify anything really can always get the other side using the same text to justify their weapon in the same time? Yes, Exactly. Rate. In the sixties you had a number of very prominent and very charismatic leaders. Martin Luther King, of course, and Malcolm X and others. I'm wondering, how important do you think charisma, like an individual that's a really gifted leader and Speaker. How important do you think that is as somebody who's also start a lot of political science in the organization of these movements into we have that day is that kind of lacking in today's civil rights? Well, but I know it's kind of lacking today's politics in general. When one doesn't really see great inspiring people on the world States today I find it. Do you feel that that's also the case in the civil rights community? It's tricky. I have wrestled a lot with thinking about that. I think there's certainly always been a role for the end kind of a traditional sense, the strong man figure, whether that's on the left or on the right. And whether that strong man is more inspirational leader or more authoritarian leader varies by time and geography. But I think figures like Dr. King and Malcolm X, Huey Newton, the Black Panther Party. Someone like Ella Baker or Fannie Lou Hamer or Rosa Parks all play really important roles as inspirational figures, kind of in their moments of time and in their spheres of influence. And I think that, that kind of dynamic is always there. I'm not sure that it never really goes away in time, but I'm not sure that we have the same parallels I was trying to think about. Now who are the equivalent sort of fingers today in, at least in the context of movements for social and racial justice. And you know, some people that might come to mind would be someone like Colin Kaepernick from the 49 hours, you really brought political sports culture back that harkens to the 960 racial politics for the Olympics and the kind of politicization of sports figures. Someone like Alexandria Ocasio Cortez from New York, who has been really a part of that. The team, the League of firebrands in Congress in this current last four years of political transition. You have people like someone would point to Bernie Sanders, although I'm skeptical of him as kind of a, a major figure in social justice movements, but he certainly speaks to some of that kind of left progressive politics that supports that broader base. And then you have figures like maybe the Dalai Lama or Greta Thunberg who have been put in certain social spheres, gotta more as an environmentalist, Dalai Lama is more of a, say, an advocate for peace. But they still speak to certain broader social justice issues. But I have a really hard time thinking about who is a king or Malcolm X in this moment because I just, I don't see that same cultural power of one individual. And I think maybe this is one of the changes we've seen from the sixties to today, is thanks to technology, the decentralization of organizing makes it a lot easier to not have to have that central leader in a way that Dr. King was able to play in his period of time. Right? That's a really good point that I hadn't thought of because of social media. We don't need a single figure around which everybody coalesces. Because often they would communicate what's going on to everybody because people had to hear about what's going on from somebody's not, right. But nowadays they can hear about it from everybody's social media one also, I think this is maybe a dynamic that we wouldn't have thought about in the past. But when you think about snake and some of the NAACP and the early civil rights groups, you either were there in person or you got a newsletter or a phone call been what was happening. Those are basically maybe you heard something on the radio. So I think in some ways a social movements have responded and changed to the very way we process median information. And maybe that's less conducive to a single authoritative figure in the same way that Dr. King and Malcolm X plane. I've been a student of Marshall McLuhan for some time, who famously said that the medium is the message. That in general, we don't consider the power of the medium itself to shape the message. Enough people think, well, you're saying what you're going to say, and whatever medium you choose to get that the people doesn't really make much difference. If you say something on television or write the same words they would've said on television in a newspaper, it's all the same, but it's not the medium that you use to get the message across effects the message itself. And I think that's, that's certainly occurring Nowadays with politics and social justice movements. That's a good point. Much it, this is something I was discussing with some friends recently since you brought it up. I will ask you your opinion on this. Do you think that the shortness of the messages that are delivered on Twitter, for example, necessarily affects the quality of the message. Is it damaging? The potential of these movements to influence people. And that's a good question. I think it, I think it has an overall effect of dumbing down conversation because it forces you to reduce the nuance to the bare minimum. So in that sense, I think it's counterproductive to promoting civic discourse and dialogue. But

on the upside, maybe it forces you to think in sound bites in the way that an activist might be trained in a school of political communication. And so you have to really kind of pare down what is the core message, right? Because my friend was saying that although we might jump to the conclusion that it's bad, maybe in a way it's good because it helps you to distill your message into its purest form. In fact, it's being the friends and Asian studies they were pointing out that well, to greatest books in the history of ancient thought are the Analects of Confucius and the time apart by the Buddha. And both of them are just short collections of reasons. Maybe a 100 characters long rate is like a Twitter, just like a tweet. So how come those regarded as the most profound wisdom that humanity has created? But yet, a tweet of the same length is poo-pooed by people and they say, Well, what, what sort of meaning can you really encapsulate that? So just interesting to think about it in those terms. Social media make us more tolerant of others, more tolerance of differences, or less tolerance and more tribal. I mean, this is the big question that's going on right now in America today. How much is social media contributing to the problem? And how much is it contributing to the solution? I think it's I would say maybe 550. And I say that in part because I think we have to put social media in sort of the broader context of digital technologies and communications and those kind of changes that have happened really since the nineties when the internet became sort of a phenomenon beyond someone on AOL chat board or an MIT computer lab. So I think it's, it's destructive in the sense that as we were talking about before, it reduces conversation in it. It creates a way to basically put yourself in a media bubble where you can select and filter out dissonant voices and critical ideas and conversation so that you just have an echo chamber where you're hearing the same thing over and over. And that actually reinforces nativism and all the negative kind of in-group thinking in other things that go on. In that sense, it's dangerous, I think. But on the other hand, before social media, if that rumor got started, it would have been virtually impossible to find. I said with social media, it's easy for the lies, the spread, but it's also just as easy for you to kinda get to the truth if you really want that. One, I think too, if you look at I mean, this kinda goes back to what you're talking about with the last episode on memes. The function of hashtags has been a really powerful one for the Black Lives Matter movement, for say her name, for me to, for a lot of contemporary social justice movements. And that's only possible because of social media and that's only possible because of the Internet. And in some ways you think about the responses to yet another police killing that was recorded on an officers body cam itself is also only possible because of these new digital technologies. So they feed off each other and we've used them to our advantage to highlight injustices. Do you think that there is a solution to the kind of extremism that we had been seeing. They are in fact, is the extremism rather have things always been like this where the two sides are just completely don't understand each other and at each other's throats all the time and we just didn't notice or is it different nowadays? I mean, I think to a certain degree that tension has been there, but I would say it's, it's not that the wings of the right and left political spectrum have been growing, but we've been slowly shifting sense, I would say probably the seven late seventies maybe kind of beginning of the Reagan era. We, as a country we've been moving increasingly more and more to the right. And so the center of American politics has become more and more conservative every decade from the seventies onward. Yes, right? Okay. And so now what we're seeing is a much more vibrant and robust conservative politics that's dominated a lot of political and social discourse. And when we're starting to see a little bit more pushback on kind of the progressive left. The kind of response has been to demean these organizations is in TIF. Some people would put black lives matter in that same category. A decade or two before it was the black block and Seattle and kind of West Coast politics. But there was always enough space in the center to have kind of, I guess, decent public discourse and civic discourse that could keep the government in society moving forward. But I think that space has been shrinking. In some ways. You could maybe tie it back to the emergence of the Tea Party in the early mid 2000s, where you started to see a much more visible and vocal political right emerging. And I think that unwillingness to negotiate. Politics and capture more of the center to the right is actually raise the stakes more. So if you think about the insurrection on January 6th that we just saw, it's not that those politics weren't there before Trump or weren't active during Trump's period of presidency. But they were much more subdued in the sense that they were people, kept them much closer to the vest. Now people are very comfortable, at least white folks to play their cards openly on the table for everyone to see. And I think that's part of what we're seeing now. That is a substring of that. As we're seeing that will weight is America a little different than we actually thought it was all a lot? Yeah. Right. And some of that's also a, I would say, at least from a political perspective, the over-optimism or the naivete of white liberals that these politics have somehow made it fits into the larger story. Colorblind America. We elected Obama is our president. And so, if you look at some of the surveys last couple of years, particularly among religious communities. Now something like maybe 1

third of weights. Think that there's racial problems in America if you look at kind of white religious communities and their surveys. But if you'd like an African American community, Zell a overwhelming a 75% of them are more will say, yes, America has a problem with discrimination and racial justice. So you get these really, It's like we're living in two worlds in an effect and we're seeing that now with a QAnon politics and other social tensions in the United States. It does feel like we live in to political worlds even though we are one country. Well, I'm wondering, with the victory of Biden and the Democrats generally, is that going to strengthen the social justice movement or maybe weaken it's because it gets some of its strength through its opposition to people like Trump. I wondered about that. My might, my sense both from thinking about historical examples as well as kinda the moment we're in today is that I don't see it weakening kind of movements for justice. I think obama had a bit of a melting effect because people hoped. Here we have the first African-American president and he will bring a decisive political shift even if he's still a bit of a conservative liberal in many people's eyes, at least within the racial justice community. And I don't think there's any illusions that Biden is going to be the white savior in America. I think that shipped long ago sale and but I think there is hope that he's more committed to some progressive political changes that the Democratic Party in it's younger wing, the AOC. Bernie is not the younger wing, but the folks that support bernie on the younger. See Ilhan Omar and others that there's a hope that maybe we're seeing a growing movement within the Democratic Party in kind of progressive politics to push the country back towards the center. And in some ways maybe that's also energizing the right. Try to push back and hold there the territory more dynamic that's gone on since time immemorial. One last quick thought that I mean, if you think about Dr. King's letter from Birmingham Jail and 63, part of his whole point in that letter was to critique these white pastors who were saying, Wait, Now's not the right time. Do it a different way. Tie as if there was this magic progressive unfolding of history that would write all past wrongs. And I think there's a danger thinking, you know, the Democrats and Biden coming back into offices. Part of this natural unfolding of the world getting slightly better. And we know that that's just, it requires struggle and sacrifice for things to get better, not hope and dreams. Well, one thing that I've noticed in the last ten years is that it seems to me that a lot of what they would call religious Christians, or maybe even evangelicals, are changing their traditional positions and are actually holding some that are identified with the Democrats and the liberal side of things, right? So it used to be like in the eighties, somebody identified as an evangelical Christian, that they were pretty much across the board going to agree with the various republican policies at pro-gun, anti-abortion, environmental skepticism in particularly, I guess I see it in environmentalism. I see a lot of people who call themselves religious or even identifies evangelical being actually on the environmental activism side of things. And also, let's say they don't normalize homosexuality. Certainly can be more accepting of it. And I mean, it definitely is happening. I think you've seen in some ways that evangelical tent has been expanding. I think there was a contraction throughout the maybe fifties to seventies, maybe even up to the eighties, where it was much more about maintaining a kind of main lining conservative Evangelical politics. And that has definitely expanded, I think one reason if you go back to the 1980s, early 90s with the environmental justice movement, you had religious communities in the Carolinas and Texas and other areas playing an important role in calling for environmental justice. And this is where you get there early. Church reports about racism and environmental toxins and some of the policies that came out of that at the federal level, setting up environmental legislation around environment and justice instead of just environment itself and civil rights as if they're unconnected, disparate issues. And I think that kind of put a wedge into the church where a lot of people who had environmental or nature leanings. I mean, this gets into the hunters and outdoor enthusiasts who were otherwise conservative, but felt some natural alliance. And I think that provided one wedge into even juggle politics that now has expanded much more. Pretty much every Christian denomination at this point has statements on the climate no matter how conservative they are, you've got things like the Pope's legato see in silico hole that makes it a Catholic value to not only care about the poor but the Earth. And I think that itself has helped feed into a lot of the contemporary Black Lives Matter and social justice movements because it's bringing back this kind of gospel of the poor. And it gets backed even some cases to the liberation theology of earlier decades and the charge, right exactly. Yeah, I was thinking about that. Just one other quick thought there. If you look, that was watching an interview a while back between pinterest colors, who's one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement. And Molina Abdulla, who was a co-founder of Black Lives Matter and LA. And they were talking after an art exhibit about ritual and kind of African spirituality within the Black Lives Matter movement and the kind of growth of non traditional religious practices within social justice movements and the way that they were talking, it was really fascinating

that the hashtag itself has become a way to kind of invoke ancestors and those who have died in the past in a way to kind of bring their spirits into contemporary practices. And some of them specifically referenced the West African religious traditions and the importance of pouring libations and honoring the dead. So I think you're also seeing diversification of the religious communities and rituals that are active in social justice movements in a way that's a bit broader, I think, than we saw in the 1960s. If you had to characterize the difference between the social justice movements now in the sixties. Well, I think one big important difference is that in part because of the new sort of social media technologies, we're seeing a lot more decentralized political organizing. And if you think about the Black Lives Matter movement, compared to, let's say, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, where you had very clear organized kind of planning committees and individual towns, but also a national structure. But with Black Lives Matter for the most part. This is very much about local communities just mobilizing sometimes out of preexisting networks. And so I think that gives it that kind of strength and vitality to respond to immediate urgencies that is more flexible than the older model of the sixties and seventies where you have an overarching natural leadership who is deciding what campaign everyone's working on? This. I think there's a different kind of dynamism this come with that decentralization of communication and organizing thanks to digital technologies. I think that's one important difference. I think the second one is culturally, the United States is in a very different place today than we were in the 1960s. Mean, if you think about from the mid-fifties to the early 70s, just how much was going on politically in the United States. People were fighting for desegregation, the right to have a mixed race spaces, integrating schools, passing things like Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, Vietnam war going on. There was a whole range of kind of political struggles that have played themselves out. Now. We've got 30 to 50 years of hindsight from those moments. I think that really creates a different political dynamic because we're not fighting those fights again, we're fighting a different fight that came out of both the winds and the losses on that earlier moment. And I think that's important too because we're, we're seeing common themes, but we're not repeating that same history. One, Here's the term intersectionality a lot in reading about social justice nowadays. And probably many of the listeners aren't quite sure what it is. In fact, the host is the 100 percent sure on whether it is either. So could you maybe explain a little bit more about that? Sure. So the term itself goes back to an article I'm Kimberly Crenshaw wrote in 1989, Columbia Law professor D, marginalizing the intersection of race and sex. And really what she was looking at was mostly through a series of legal cases, but also a little bit in the context of how rape and feminist politics were kind of playing out in this period, in the late eighties that there was a problem where the old Civil Rights Movement and the feminist movement of the eighties wanted to see things either as about sex or is about race. So it's kind of a single lens understanding of discrimination. And her argument through the law cases and other things was that. From a black feminist perspective, that doesn't work because black women are experiencing both kind of the racial segregation and discrimination and the sort of gendered sexualized discrimination. And if you don't put those two together, then you're missing an important analysis. And she looked at certain cases. One with the number of black women against Goodyear, who were basically saying in the case that there are discriminate as black women. But the courts were saying, well, under title 7 of the Civil Rights Act, you have to pick either you're discriminated because your women are discriminated because of your race, you can't be both black and women and claim discrimination because this is a super category that the law didn't understand. And her argument was, well, this is why intersectionality matters because it's not just one or the other. It's kind of both of those together. And I think that initial argument that we have to understand the intersections of our different political identity is, has in some ways become a bit muddled since early writings and late 1980s and early 90s. But the core of it is really, I think, part of what's driving the Black Lives Matter movement today, which is, we're seeing black feminist and queer politics playing an increasingly important role in movement organizing and sort of raising up and centering black feminist voices. As partly a critique of this old idea that somehow white women can speak about feminism and capture everybody. But also because the discrimination was so much about black men. And then erase the experience and the challenges that black women face. And so you're seeing a lot of black women and many cases queer black women in leadership roles and Black Lives Matter. In fact, at least two of the three founders identified as queer when BLM was founded. And that politics, you know, queer black lives, trans black Lives Matters becoming increasingly important part of the conversation. And, but interestingly, that's also part of what the religious communities have been pushing back on because they see this as their entire family there anti-life, the anti-Christian. In some cases, they're invoking spirits from African traditions and they're calling demons forth into the social justice movements. But I think that initial underlying idea of intersectionality as requiring us to

understand how our different social identities come together In, both to create opportunities, but more importantly, to create complicated forms of discrimination that can't just be pulled apart by one individual part of our identity. And bringing that kind of awareness forward into all of the sort of social justice organizing today. I think that's really an important part of what that original idea, intersectionality helps us see today. But also as part of why I think organizing has changed a little bit today because of those critiques, both of the civil rights movement in the sixties and early feminist politics and that sort of second wave, a third way of transition. Then we're kind of in that final space now that's of social groups processing these critiques for 20 or 30 years. Right? But of course, the criticism is often heard that in this subdivision of one's identity in some more and more kind of granular silos. Doesn't that end up damaging the power of a united front. I mean, even from the left eye, of course, people on the right criticized, but even on the left, the traditional I can maybe this is one of the big differences actually between the 60s now is in the 60s you still have the classic workers of the world unite by one of the first great slogans of the left. But now there's a lot of emphasis on separate granular identity of queer black women of the world unite. And Jewish man of the world unite like that. There's a division that kind of going to weaken the power that the movement as well. I mean, I've heard that critique a lot. I think I would push back and a lot of people would push back and say actually, if you can think about the most marginalized intersection of these different identities and getting justice for, let's say, a queer, black, differently abled, undocumented immigrant. If you can get justice for them, everyone else. The justice comes along with it because the already faced the most forms of discrimination and lack of opportunities. So it's not that just by focusing on kind of the sub constellation of identities that we're ignoring all the others. But if you can address sort of the very margins of injustice, then when you address that, everything from the margin to the center is also being addressed. So in a sense, part of what countries rich argument was, you have to address the far margins of exclusion in order to address any of the injustices in between there. That's certainly makes a lot of sense. But of course, that would require that people feel comfortable with those who don't belong to that particular intersexual. I Fighting on their behalf, right? So do you get because sometimes you do hear some criticism of white suburban teenagers suddenly going out there and feeling that this is my struggle too. But they don't really have any real connection to the people that the striking for which is, and you can again, as we've been talking about this whole podcasts, everybody can see different things from totally different side by one person might say, Oh, isn't that wonderful? That this white suburban teenager feels solidarity with these urban black queer people. But another person might think that this is posturing and that it's inappropriate or let's say appropriative event rate and that it's not right. Yeah, So I wonder what you think about those arguments. Well, I mean, I think there are legitimate arguments and I think the responses, solidarity without action is meaningless. And so it's fine to kind of say that you believe in these things and they matter. But if you don't put that belief into a practice, whether that's being involved in community organizing in your local community or bringing these ideas into your classrooms like in our context as educators. I think if you're trying to understand and engage these ideas genuinely and putting your own kind of time and effort and money into kind of trying to achieve the vision of these. I think it's an authentic move, not just of allyship, because it's not that we want to be allies with the press groups, but it's rather that our struggles are all bound up together. And so I can't ever fully be free when someone else's imprisoned. And so my own kind of freedom struggle is tied up with others. Obviously, we start from different positions and we have different obligations and opportunities. But ultimately if our goal is to have a free and just society, me saying it matters but not doing anything about it is just a sort of token move. So I think that's the transition is from speaking why it matters to actually putting your energy and time into proving that matters in trying to bring that in reality. Well, that's a really nice positive note to end the podcast. And let's hope that the future brings a freer and more just society with more environmental awareness. I think that is definitely something that we all need right now. And I really appreciate your insights on these matters. It really helped me to place the headlines and context of their recent history in America. So Chris, thank you very much, Chris Crews, Thank you very much for coming. I really at the time you took and I hope that you have a good year or at the beginning of our view here, Let's hope the 2021 goes a little bit better than 2020. Absolutely. And I'm an optimist at the end of the day, so I think we will continue to push for to make changes. And I'm optimistic about that. If you'd like to learn more about the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities, please go to our website at [CSUChico.edu/slash/CORH](http://CSUChico.edu/slash/CORH). That's [CSU CH ICO.edu/slash CORH](http://CSUChico.edu/slash/CORH) I want to point out the opinions expressed here in do not necessarily reflect those of the faculty and staff of our department.