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Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

a magazine of theological and ethical inquiry

Spirit and Politics: Finding Our Way



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I think we can say that democracy is a form of government that demands more virtue of its citizens than any other form of government, but I do not think we can say that democracy guarantees that the virtue will be exercised. So let us term freedom of choice less a virtue than a necessity, a precondition to real freedom, which is the ability to make choices that are generous, loving, and wise. Our wills are not free when they will what is bigoted, narrow, ungenerous. Our wills are only free when they can will the will of a loving God. "Thy will be done on earth."

—William Sloane Coffin '49 B.A., '56 B.D.

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Gregory E. Sterling — Dean and Publisher
Tom Krattenmaker — Director of Communications
Ray Waddle — Editor-in-Chief
Peter Johnson, YPPS — Graphic Designer
Campbell Harmon — Online Coordinator

From the Dean's Desk



Gregory E. Sterling
The Reverend Henry L. Slack
Dean of Yale Divinity School
& Lillian Claus Professor
of New Testament

The first presidential election that I recall is 1960. I do not remember the Kennedy-Nixon debates that swung the election. Instead I remember the anti-Catholic statements made by individuals who opposed JFK. Fortunately, most Americans did not share that prejudice. It was, however, a real prejudice openly expressed.

From that moment to the present, I have not experienced another presidential campaign quite like this one. Two of the leading contenders in the primaries – one from the left and one from the right – shared a populist sentiment that voiced anger at the political establishment. One of them has been patently candid about his prejudices – a move that reminds me of statements that I heard as a young boy.

Their anti-establishment critiques could be heard echoing elsewhere this summer. I was at a conference in Oxford, England, the week of the Brexit vote. Though my Oxford colleagues predictably did not share in the populist surge, the majority of their compatriots did.

In both the US and the UK there is great frustration with the governments in charge – and fear of changes within society. Candidates or causes that have played to these sentiments have kindled a passion in their supporters that their political rivals have not.

How should we respond in such circumstances? Dwight Andrews, an alum and a good friend, recently wrote me and said that our country lacked moral leadership. He is right. We need Christians – ministers, educators, lay leaders – to provide a moral compass, a framework for thinking through the issues that confront us. It is embarrassing – it is beyond embarrassing – to see the blatant racism that exists within the US. We need – as Willie Jennings, Stanley Hauerwas, and others remind us in this *Reflections* issue – to imagine a different society, a society that does not privilege one race.

As Christians we need to do this for moral reasons. As Americans we need to do this for political

and practical reasons. In 1960, 85 percent of the US population was white; in 2010 that percentage had dropped to 64 percent. Demographic trends suggest it will fall to 43 percent by 2060 (Paul Taylor, *The Next America*, Pew Research Center, April 10, 2014). We need to recognize what some corporations have: “the new us.”

It is not, however, race alone that we must address. As Martin Luther King Jr. pointed out long ago, economic disparities underlay the privilege of one race over another. These disparities have grown across our society: In 1971, 25 percent of Americans lived in the lower-income bracket; in 2015, this had grown to 29 percent. The obverse is also true: in 1971, 7 percent of Americans lived in the upper-income group; in 2015, this had risen to 21 percent. The group that has diminished is obviously the middle-income group, which fell from 61 percent to 50 percent in the same time period (D’Vera Cohn and Andrea Caumont, “10 Demographic Trends that are Shaping the US and the World,” Pew Research Center, March 31, 2016). There will be no simple solutions, but there will be no solutions without a moral compass.

We must also offer a model of how to think through the issues that divide us. We will never make progress if we simply champion one candidate or one ideology over another. We must find a way to debate crucial issues candidly without polarization. Churches should be venues for such ethical debates that move us forward.

Unfortunately, we have too often politicized the debates ourselves. I attended the general conference of one major denomination this summer and saw such political polarization openly displayed. We must understand that we will have no voice in the larger world if we cannot model moral debate ourselves.

This issue of *Reflections* offers the perspectives of informed Christians who are trying to do just this. Some are intensely personal. Others frame the questions in broader terms. We hope that these essays and interviews will provoke readers to pick up the gauntlet and risk conversations – conversations about the complexities of issues, not debates about candidates. People can make up their own minds about candidates, but first need a moral compass to help them see through the smoke of political sloganeering in contemporary elections and their aftermath.

A handwritten signature of Gregory E. Sterling in dark ink.

Gregory E. Sterling, Dean



A George Wallace presidential campaign rally in Michigan, 1968

Photo by Hiroji Kubota

© Hiroji Kubota/Magnum Photos

Days of Reckoning



By Lane Heard '73 B.A., '78 J.D.

What is to be done? Other than voting, donating, and working for my candidates – we all do that, after all – what should I do? Is there something more that I should expect of myself as a Christian layman in a national political culture that has turned unusually contentious and mean-spirited?

I am a lawyer in a law firm sometimes called “the Marine Corps of litigators.” We pride ourselves on toughness and tenacity on behalf of our clients. Our founding partner preached a creed of “contest living,” which marked down every enterprise in life, every effort, as a win or loss. We think of ourselves as *trial* lawyers, not litigators, and we plan and hope for trial, not settlement. So it’s natural for me to think about election seasons and their aftermath solely as a matter of winning and losing.

On the summer Sunday that I am writing, the lectionary gives us the words of the prophet Amos, who told the prosperous people of Israel that the time was coming when the Lord God would send a famine on the land – not a craving for bread or thirst for water, but a hunger for “hearing the word

What, then, to do? First, be honest with myself. Acknowledge what in my own positions is little better than convenient rationalization.

of the Lord.” The people would range from one end of the country to the other in search of the word of the Lord – from “north to east,” said Amos, or as we might say, “from California to the New York islands” – but “they will not find it,” he prophesied, because they “grind the poor and suppress the humble.”

Basic Decency

Where amid today’s nationalist rhetoric is there a hint of awareness that it is the poor in spirit and the meek who are blessed and that Christ’s strength is made perfect in weakness? Where is there concern

for the outcast, the marginalized, and the discriminated against? Where is basic decency?

But such questions, such screeds, about the Republican candidate (and Republicans broadcast their own screeds about the Democratic candidate) have become, whatever their accuracy, the coin of the political realm. And they are the currency of “contest living” – words as weapons. They bludgeon more than they persuade.

Columnist David Brooks called the Republican convention in July “a convention of loss,” because it showcased parents who have lost children, policemen who have lost colleagues, and retirees who have lost a place of certainty and superiority in a diversifying America. It is easy to disparage this sense of loss as nostalgia for a mythic America that dominated a world still on its knees after World War II. The nostalgic indulgence is real, but so is the loss.

Recession Confession

I work in Washington, DC, which was probably less affected by the Great Recession of 2007-09 than any city in America. My law firm continued to grow, and housing prices in my neighborhood continued to rise. Snug among other members of the one percent, what I know about the effects of the Recession comes from reading the newspaper, not experience. But I know that the weight of the Recession fell most heavily on men, and it can be no surprise that the core of Donald Trump’s support came from older white male voters.

Older white men suffered three-quarters of the eight million job losses caused by the financial crisis. Male-dominated industries (construction and manufacturing) were the hardest hit; almost 20

percent of men in their prime working years were not working by 2011. Fewer such men are employed now than at any time since the US Bureau of Labor Statistics began tracking that category in 1948. And when men stop doing paid work, or even when they work less than their wives, marital conflict follows. Unemployed men are far more likely to commit domestic abuse. As hard times cause marriage and relationships to unravel, they also inhibit long-term commitment; it's not considered respectable to marry if you don't have a job, and so a higher and higher percentage of children are born outside stable homes.

These harsh economic realities – financial strain, partner conflict, single parenting, and troubled children – have affected minority communities for decades. The Great Recession, however, confronted working-class white communities with these same difficult conditions.¹ Donald Trump was speaking to these hurting folk – white working-class men, in particular – when he said in his GOP convention acceptance speech, “Every day I wake up determined to deliver a better life for the people all across this nation that have been ignored, neglected, and abandoned.”

Talking vs. Doing

With all the opportunities Jesus had to tell us what to believe and what to say, he told us instead what to do.² What might Christian *doing* rather than Christian *talking* look like in this political climate? Christian doing often requires being with, or stand-

Our recent political drama has shown how many of those who are drawn to what is evil in the body politic are the very persons who are closest to God's heart – the poor and humbled.

ing alongside, those who are hurting. But to stand in the civic arena with the “ignored, neglected, and abandoned” and love them, although they are political enemies, seems saccharine and ineffectual. To appreciate them seems wishful when so many are angry or venomous.

What, then, to do? First, be honest with myself. Neither my preferred candidate nor preferred party has a fully consistent, wholly adequate set of solutions to the nation's problems. And the arguments I make on their behalf are, like arguments in the courtroom, far from airtight, although I can make them with complete conviction. It is therefore important for me to make the effort to appreciate what is good or true in the position of those who

oppose, even hate, my candidate. It is important to acknowledge what in my own positions gives me trouble – to recognize, if I am honest with myself, what about those positions is little better than convenient rationalization.

Second, recognize and name “evil,” but remember always that the supporters of the political opposition, even when they express repugnant attitudes, are not themselves evil. We confess, in the words of

What might Christian *doing* rather than Christian *talking* look like in this political climate?

The Book of Common Prayer, “the evil done on our behalf” – those many familiar and popular appeals to hate, racism, and xenophobia. Our recent political drama has shown me how many of those who are drawn to what is evil in the body politic are the very persons who are closest to God's heart – the poor and humbled who have been ground down for a half century. They are not fools. They are not stupidly voting against their own interests. Their angry shouting has a prophetic dimension, for they have been left behind and they know it. The elite, like me, live in a world apart, and they know that, too.

This has been a discouraging and troubling political cycle. The post-election period will be no less so. The vote will not purge the fear and hatred; it will focus it anew. The challenge, I believe, is to remain vigilant in naming and condemning the evil, to confess our complicity, and to hear the word of the Lord, which calls us to change those policies and systems that grind the poor.

Lane Heard '73 B.A., '78 J.D. is an attorney in Washington, DC, a member of the Dean's Advisory Council at Yale Divinity School, and senior warden of St. Columba's Episcopal Church in DC. He serves as a literary executor of the Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr., papers at the Library of Congress.

Notes

- 1 Dan Peck, *Pinched: How the Great Recession Has Narrowed Our Futures and What We Can Do About It* (Crown, 2011), pp. 122-23, 128-29, 134.
- 2 See Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (HarperOne, 2009), p. 118.

STARDUST AND CENTURIES

*We listen for so long in our lives, until one day
We push back our chairs and stand to speak.*

By Alberto Ríos

As things turn out, as a man,
I am half woman on my mother's side.

I am as well all the women
Before her, the women who were me before me –

My grandmothers, and their mothers –
We are all women, and finally we are all

Men, but more than that, we are
What the best of us does.

Today, let us all count ourselves worthy,
Let us number ourselves as so many

Standing, not sitting, courage-filled and ready
To move onto the firm ground of *forward*,

To speak our minds every time
Our voices need to be heard.

We are made of stardust and centuries,
Of gills and wings both.

We fly and we swim and we think.
We move through, over, and around the fierce

Horde of real and imaginary animals that stop us.
We are big world-solvers and little thread-pullers,

Partners to immense ideas quietly built on
The love we had for the smell of clay in second grade.

We fly and we swim and we think – and we lead.
We do it all. We always have.

Politics of the Soul



By Lyn G. Brakeman '82 M.Div.

In the small Episcopal parish church in Boston where I serve, there is a stained glass image – an apse window rising up behind the altar – that startles me every time. I've been in many churches – Anglican, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Unitarian, Eastern Orthodox, monastic, and non-denominational. I'm used to seeing images of Jesus crucified, hanging on a wooden stick, sometimes with chubby cherubim in happy attendance, or as a plainclothes shepherd holding a crook in one hand and a restless lamb in the other.

This image of Christ is different. It shouts welcome. Jesus stands in colorful garb holding out bread and cup. It towers over the whole community, and when I preside at the altar, this Christ literally has my back.

Even more astonishing than its beauty is its politics, a politics I'd been searching for since childhood. By politics I do not mean elections and party platforms. I mean something deeper: the politics of the soul.

Soul politics energizes people to interact with each other in respectful ways, to value all living things, and to argue when necessary for common truth. Such politics compels us to stand back and get perspective, the way impressionist art invites us to step back just to see what is pictured.

God Under a Table

When I was three years old, I met God under a huge dining table where I sought refuge from my parents' eternal cocktail hour and the reign of the omnipotent martini glass. I snatched Ritz crackers from the tray and crawled under the table, where I lined up my crackers on the cross beams and settled cross-legged on the worn maroon carpet. There I chattered and lamented to my three imaginary friends and a fourth friend called God. I'd heard of God from my mother who'd told me I was a gift from God. In my favorite book at the time, *The Little Book About God* by Lauren Ford (Doubleday, 1934), God was pictured

sitting in a lovely garden listening and cataloguing all the sounds of earth with care – even a tod-

My question to the group was: Which Christian idea is more difficult to believe, Incarnation or Resurrection? Incarnation, they all said.

dler's tiny sounds like mine. Unlike my inattentive disruptive imaginary friends, God listened – and I mattered.

This early experience was foundational to my Christian formation – the first stirrings of divine welcome and care. I was important to this God, and so was everybody else.

Christian religion has something to contribute to the shaping of soul politics. It's not a PAC, not a caucus or program, not money, not best intentions, not even preaching or prayer or beauty. It's a doctrine *and* a practice, and both are elemental to the health of the polis. The doctrine is Incarnation. The practice is Eucharist.

Incarnation: Divinity animates all living things. Years after I'd graduated from Yale Divinity School, I got in touch with some of my former refectory buddies to ask one question. In seminary, we ate lunch together, swapped favorite heresies, giggled



Juvenile home, Alameda County, CA., 1953

Photo by Wayne Miller

© Wayne Miller/Magnum Photos

and fretted our way through mysteries we solved one day and dissolved the next. My question now: Which Christian idea is more difficult for you to believe, Incarnation or Resurrection? Incarnation, they all said. To imagine God in one's own flesh was, well, too scary.

Incarnation is a magnificent and scary idea when you let it get under your skin. To me, it is the only idea that provides hope enough for what Judaism calls *tikkun olam*, mending the world – in an era

We seem to have no idea right now how to use our diversity to shape our politics in a positive way. The doctrine of Incarnation tells us we share a soul politics.

so embattled by violence, discontent, pollution, and political bile. What if it's true that we *all* are incarnate?

Reservation Not Required

If soul politics is undergirded by Incarnation, it is equally strengthened by Eucharist. In its simplest form Eucharistic practice is a community meal. Theologically, it is a sacramental ritual through which divine grace is communicated to all who come to the table. In many restaurants you need a reservation to secure your table. At the table of Eucharist no reservation is required.

Over many years I have presided at Eucharist in congregational settings. At the altar, I am a priest but also a communicant, experiencing this meal in three profound ways. It provides radical, almost implausible hospitality – open to all who desire to eat. It discloses radical justice – everyone gets the same, no more or less, a miracle of distributive economics. And it offers radical intimacy – the sharing of body and blood. The Eucharist is as good an enactment of God's nature and politics as I can imagine.

In Sunday school I'd memorized many words for God, yet the only one that my early experience confirmed time and again was Omnipresence. It stuck, later reinforced by Eucharist and Incarnation – which are given not just for me, as it turned out, but for every living thing everywhere in this travailing cosmos. This is no abstraction. We can discern it in our scriptures. We can honor it by adjusting our behavior, our talk and walk. We can teach, preach, write it.

And we can loosen it from its strictly Christian history in order to expand it. One does not have to be a Christian to be a christ. That's a hopeful politics – the soul kind.

I imagine every creed, even the secular sort or the none kind, has at heart the same idea and practice, the same impulse. If we scrape away the cultural, linguistic, and religious details from our different perspectives, we will discover that we hold something precious in common: the idea of divine goodness omnipresent within and among us.

Honest Conversations

To seek and find such commonality will mean lots of honest and soul-stretching conversations – and lots of shared meals. Such conversations will likely be much more difficult than fighting over our cozy, isolating ideologies, which are the disastrous opposite of soul politics. Risking connection takes more courage than shouting in place – or hiding in place.

Can you imagine a world in which all of us see ourselves and each other as incarnate? In American politics we embody pluralism and claim to value diversity, yet we seem to have no idea right now how to use our diversity to shape our politics in a positive way. Our democratic ideals become empty, giving us cause to hate and fight. The doctrine of Incarnation grants us freedom from the fear of diversity. It tells us we share a soul politics beneath the incessant pluralism and invites us to imagine a more open communion and community.

If we do not love the God of life in all things for all its worth, it will be worth nothing to anyone.

Lyn G. Brakeman '82 M.Div. is a retired Episcopal priest in Cambridge, MA. She is the author of a new memoir, God Is Not A Boy's Name: Becoming Woman, Becoming Priest (Cascade Books, 2016). She ministers as a spiritual director and parish priest associate and blogs at spirituallemons.blogspot.com.

Aiming the World Toward Hope



By Willie James Jennings

Political elections are about our imagination. They are less about our real life in the world and much more about our perception of our life in the world. In a democracy, they provide astounding moments of creativity that get used in ways both breathtaking and disturbing.

Elections in America always construct and stage-manage a world where people are either friends or enemies, partners or competitors. American political theater has expanded in recent decades to cover the entire American social landscape: It has become almost impossible for us to imagine political and social worlds beyond the categories of right and left.

Public Fictions

These categories of left and right have never done any real analytical work in the United States. Their work is profoundly novelistic – they plot individuals and groups in narratives that minimize or dismiss the importance of their specific ideas, and they invite us to fantasize about a center that we might finally inhabit if we can get both sides to compromise. The journey toward that center is a fictitious journey, because all three positions – left, right, center, and anything in-between – are public fictions.

Many people insist on envisioning life inside the template of right-center-left, but historically a more fundamental set of conditions shapes American life and still drives our political rhetoric – the divide between those who imagine shared life and those who desire segregated existence. The root of that imagination in America is race, more specifically whiteness. When W. E. B. Du Bois used the powerful metaphor of the color line more than 100 years ago, he captured both the colonial past and a future that extended through him to us in the 21st century. We yet live the color line, and it profoundly informs our social and political imagination.

The color line has always involved more than the interactions and struggles between white and

black people, and between those of European descent and non-Europeans. It has been most centrally about how white Americans daily configure their space and imagine their future. The tragedy at play in American politics today is the power of the racial imagination to construct fear and let it dictate the future.

That fear has always been a byproduct of whiteness. It reaches back to the first encounters of proto-Europeans with the peoples of the world outside old Europe. It was refined through centuries of murder, theft, and conquest. It also caused white fear of retribution and revenge to grow with each generation, settling like a virus within the guilt-inducing main-

At its best, Christian faith disarms fear. God creates a space that distances us from fear. Fear is not God's weapon of choice.

tenance of their power and privilege. Whiteness is not a given, it is a choice. Whiteness is not the equal and opposite of blackness. It is a way of imagining oneself as the organizing reality of the world. It is an interpretative principle that narrates, sustains, and makes sense of the world. The fear that dogs whiteness circles around loss – a looming loss of possession, loss of control, and loss of the power to narrate the future of others. The focus of that fear has most often been nonwhite bodies.

Changing our politics for the better requires that people learn how to imagine better. Here churches and religious communities have a crucial task – to

challenge the racial imagination by showing us how to reconfigure a space of hope. We should think of this new space both geographically and existentially, aesthetically and intellectually. Up to now, the work of racial configuration in the US has been painfully, unrelentingly segregationist. And this election cycle, like every election cycle before it, exposes the always-fomenting racial imagination at work to reinforce the habits and patterns of segregation.

At the Site of Threat

How do we learn to imagine life freed from the power of fear and aimed toward a life-joining hope? In truth, no religious community has mastered this work. Christianity, like other faiths, has struggled with fear. Indeed Christianity was progenitor of the whiteness that shapes modern ecologies of social control. Out of the rich soil of theologies of divine vengeance and wrath, it nurtured the white fear of divine punishment for sin, promoting a vision where everything could fall apart at any moment unless we exercise relentless surveillance of ourselves and others. Fear has been a marvelously seductive technology for religions.

Christian faith at its best, however, always disarms fear. Such faith forms in the space that God creates, a space that distances us from fear. Fear is not God's weapon of choice. The care and attention that God intends for the ecology of life ought to draw us toward each other in mutual concern and longing for the well-being of all creation.

But are there not real dangers in this world, dangers that get highlighted during elections? Of course there are. Yet Christian faith places us inside the actions of a God who faces our dangers and yet refuses to yield to fear. God offers the divine life at the site of threat and invites us to gather courage there, making it a place where God creates community. Yielding to fear destroys community: In the face of danger, we imagine ourselves separate and displaced from our surroundings, thrown back on our own individual efforts to save ourselves from harm. Yet Christian faith claims the power of life together precisely at the site of threat and fear.

A New Calculus

Such an invitation to life together may seem ridiculous in face of the brutal operations of statecraft, where threat and counter-threat are the shared currency of nations and groups. What we need now, however, is a different calculus of the imagination. Configuring a space of hope has real-world consequences. It begins with people who acknowledge the strong connections of whiteness and fear and

who renounce the seductive power of fear to achieve desired ends.

This election cycle has shown our politics severely straining under the weight of the racial imagination. We need relief from this crushing weight.

The most important test of an election season is: Do the candidates and proposed policies promote a shared life, or do they draw us toward segregationist ways of living and thinking?

Ironically, people have yet to be convinced that this burden is something they need not carry.

A capacity to dream a world where my hope is *aimed at* life with people very different from me – and with whom my life and identity expand outwardly in new ways – is more than a political hope. It is fundamentally a religious one. Such hope opens the possibility of a politics that finds the latest election season less a time of cynicism and despair and much more a time to imagine and work toward the good.

What has always undergirded the right to vote, like a mother supporting her child, is the capacity to imagine changed conditions for a better life. Without dreaming, even holy dreaming, voting loses its compass and can be driven by anxiety, anger, or the desire to harm others. Such holy dreaming is not utopian – it is absolutely crucial to civic action that resists the powers of death.

People of faith should remind everyone that they vote not simply to elect officials but to aim a world toward hope. The most important test of an election season should always be: Do the candidates, the proposed policies, the platform agendas, the bonds or propositions all promote a shared life, or do they draw us toward segregationist ways of living and thinking?

The best politics invites us to dream our hopes and hope through our dreams, and bring both to the ballot box.

*Willie James Jennings came to YDS last year as Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies. His book *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale, 2010) has won awards from the American Academy of Religion and from the Crawemeyer Awards. He is at work on a commentary on the Book of Acts for Westminster John Knox. An ordained Baptist minister, Jennings is a Calvin College graduate, receiving his M.Div. from Fuller Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in religion and ethics from Duke.*

ANYONE WHO IS STILL TRYING

By David Hernandez

Any person, any human, any someone who breaks
up the fight, who spackles holes or FedExes
ice shelves to the Arctic to keep the polar bears
afloat, who talks the wind-rippled woman
down from the bridge. Any individual, any citizen
who skims muck from the coughing ocean,
who pickets across the street from antigay picketers
with a sign that reads, GOD HATES MAGGOTS,
or, GOD HATES RESTAURANTS WITH ZAGAT RATINGS
LESS THAN 27. Any civilian who kisses
a forehead heated by fever or despair, who reads
the X ray, pins the severed bone. Any biped
who volunteers at soup kitchens, who chokes
a Washington lobbyist with his own silk necktie –
I take that back, who gives him mouth-to-mouth
until his startled heart resumes its kabooms.
Sorry, I get cynical sometimes, there is so much
broken in the system, the districts, the crooked
thinking, I'm working on whittling away at this
pessimism, harvesting light where I can find it.
Any countryman or countrywoman who is still
trying, who still pushes against entropy,
who stanches or donates blood, who douses fires
real or metaphorical, who rakes the earth
where tires once zeroed the ground, plants something
green, say spinach or kale, say a modest forest
for restless breezes to play with. Any anyone
from anywhere who considers and repairs,
who builds a prosthetic beak for an eagle –
I saw the video, the majestic bird disfigured
by a bullet, the visionary with a 3-D printer,
with polymer and fidelity, with hours
and hours and hours, I keep thinking about it,
thinking we need more of that commitment,
those thoughtful gestures, the flight afterward.

American Myths in Eclipse



By Richard T. Hughes

It is beyond dispute that America faces a national crisis fed by racial tensions at home and terrorism both at home and abroad. Not coincidentally, the crisis parallels the decline of white, Christian dominance in the United States.

A few years ago I wrote a book in hopes of grasping more fully some of the dynamics that undergird our current anxiety. I called the book *Myths America Lives By*.

The book doesn't name every American myth, but it deals at length with five myths that have profoundly shaped American self-understanding over several centuries.

Five Myths, Plus Another

The first is the myth of the chosen nation – the notion that God chose the US for a special, redemptive mission in the world.

The second is the myth of nature's nation – the conviction that American institutions such as de-

Many conservatives sense what liberals and progressives typically fail to grasp – that the mythic structure that has sustained the American nation is collapsing around them.

mocracy and free enterprise are grounded in the natural order of things.

The third myth is that of the Christian nation – the belief that American ideals are grounded in bedrock Christian values.

The fourth is the myth of the millennial nation – the notion that the US will usher in a golden age for all humankind.

And the fifth is the idea of the innocent nation – that while other nations may have blood on their hands, the US always preserves its innocence in even the bloodiest of conflicts by virtue of its altruism and its righteous intentions.

In 2012, in a review of James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* at the national meeting of the American Academy of Religion, I suggested that I had absorbed those five American myths as a child growing up in West Texas and that those myths had contributed in powerful ways to my own racial bias.

When I concluded my remarks and took my seat alongside the other panelists, the late James Noel, a black professor of American religion at San Francisco Theological Seminary, leaned over and whispered, "Professor, you left out the most important of all the American myths – the myth of white supremacy."

After much introspection, I have concluded that Noel was correct and that, in fact, the myth of white supremacy undergirds all the other myths that I explore in my book.

In the white imagination, the America chosen by God was not black America or red America but white America.

When the Founders argued that "self-evident truths" had underpinned "nature's nation" and guaranteed the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" for "all men," they understood "all men" to mean all *white men who owned property*.

Dissenting Voices

When whites argued that America was a Christian nation, African Americans knew better. They flatly rejected that claim on the grounds that white Christians routinely supported slavery, segregation, lynching, and Jim Crow discrimination – practices utterly foreign to Christian ideals.

Blacks rejected as well the vision of America as a millennial nation that brings freedom and justice

to the rest of the world. How could a nation that enslaved and marginalized its own people bring millennial blessings to the rest of the globe?

And in light of the crimes that white America had committed against its black citizens, the notion of America as an innocent nation – a vision defiantly maintained to this day by many American whites – seemed utterly ludicrous to African Americans.

No wonder Professor Noel counseled me that white supremacy was at the root of the entire mythical structure that has informed so much of our national self-understanding.

The question we now must raise is this: How do these myths, including the myth of white supremacy, help illumine today's national crisis?

Cause of Death

It is precisely here that Robert Jones' new book, *The End of White Christian America*, is so useful. Jones shows empirically that white Christian America (WCA, as he calls it) has died, and several factors contributed to its death.

Demographic changes were crucial, along with the failure of WCA to adequately address the concerns of younger Americans – LGBTQ rights, for example – in the early years of the 21st century.

But above all else, white Christian America secured its own demise through its centuries-long participation in the structures of white supremacy – slavery until the Civil War, then Jim Crow segregation, resistance to the civil rights movement, cre-

In *The Courage to Be*, Paul Tillich describes "the mass neuroses which usually appear at the end of an era ..." That is precisely what we are witnessing today.

ation of "Christian" academies as alternatives to integrated public schools, and most recently the refusal of many white Christians to acknowledge the legitimacy of America's first black president.

We can best discern the relevance of Jones' conclusions to the great American myths by linking his work to that of Robert Bellah. In *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (Seabury, 1975), Bellah argued that the American nation had been threatened by disintegration on three distinct occasions – at the founding, during the Civil War, and in the 1960s. If Bellah were alive today, my guess is he would view today's crisis as perhaps more grave than any that has preceded it.

Bellah wrote the foreword to *Myths America Lives By* (Illinois, 2004), but only after I had made sub-



Alisa Clark, whose work is featured on the cover of this *Reflections* issue, is an artist, illustrator, teacher, and author who lives in Milford, Mich. She believes people can learn empathy and find a healing space for political action by sharing their stories. She worries that national habits

and habitats of empathy are eroding.

"When people I love find out my (usually liberal) leanings, they lose their composure," she says. "That's a bad sign."

Regarding the front cover art, "Joined Together," she doesn't consider it a portrait in idealism but a theological and pragmatic statement.

"Holding hands – that's a potential answer," says Clark, author of a memoir, *Testimonies: The Power of Inspirational Christian Stories*. "These days, an election means someone's going to win and the other side will pitch a fit. But we can approach the result in a different way and say: Half of us aren't happy, but it's still possible to make America better together. We as a people don't want children starving and going without opportunity. We have that in common: the desire to make our nation a better place for its children."

Unity accomplishes something else, she says: a stronger, world-changing prayer front.

"I fear our joined prayers are weak today – not strong enough to even begin to reach the place where they can be heard. Still, I hold fast to the idea that we can join together. Imagine that somehow our prayers make a noise that reaches the heavens. The greater the sound, the more likely our petitions will reach the feet of God. 'Joined Together' is about our united prayers being strong enough to reach God's ears. Nothing is required but the simple, peaceful act of holding hands and asking for help.

"This God I speak of is not just my God. He is everyone's God. In my heart, He does not divide by ethnicity, faith, sex, social status, or political view. This God is *our* shared hope. Joined with Him, I imagine a world where our prayers are not silent. I hear a sound loud enough to change the world."

See more at journeyoncanvas.com.

stantial changes to the manuscript. When Bellah read the first draft of the book, he responded that I had rightly identified the nation's defining myths, but that I had eviscerated them. "Those are the only myths we have," Bellah protested. He wanted me to show that they had some redeeming qualities.

Today, I would argue that these five American myths, with the single exception of the myth of the innocent nation, still hold at least some promise. But they will collapse unless we can find some way to extricate them from the notion of white supremacy that has always sustained them.

Learning to Listen

We can accomplish that liberation, but only if we will listen carefully to people of color – groups like Black Lives Matter, for example – who are telling the nation that white supremacy must come to an end.

Yet the prognosis is not good when leaders like Rudy Giuliani trivialize the Black Lives Matter message. "When you say black lives matter," Giuliani told *Face the Nation* in July 2016, "that's inherently racist. Black lives matter. White lives matter. Asian lives matter. Hispanic lives matter. That's anti-American, and it's racism."

And the prognosis is not good when opponents accuse President Obama – a man who has attempted time and again to help the nation understand the real issues that face black Americans on a daily basis – of using the presidential pulpit to "divide us" by color.

But the prognosis is discouraging for a much deeper reason as well. Many conservatives sense what liberals and progressives typically fail to grasp – that the mythic structure that has sustained the American nation is collapsing around them. For proof, conservative Americans typically point to what they view as "persecution" of Christians in their own country, and according to a *New York Times* report (July 21, 2016), "white people think racism is getting worse – against white people."

No wonder that 78 percent of white evangelicals have cast their lot with a GOP political vision that promises political salvation, but one at odds with what John Howard Yoder called "the Politics of Jesus." Indeed, many conservatives are hell-bent to preserve the great American myths in their current form, rooted as they are in a deep-seated conviction of the superiority of white culture and religion.

In *The Courage to Be*, Paul Tillich describes "the mass neuroses which usually appear at the end of an era" and which "make the average man a fanatical defender of the established order."¹ That is precisely what we are witnessing today as the great American myths disintegrate in front of our eyes.

In the face of this crisis, how might the church respond? The Christian response must be rooted in the radical teachings of Jesus. It will exalt the poor above the rich, the marginal above the privileged, the oppressed above the oppressor, and the dissenter above the one who seeks to crush dissent.

It will reject bigotry and racism of every kind and seek to liberate America's national myths from the

A renewed commitment to Jesus' teachings will mean a time of uncertainty. But those who take up the task will help preserve the integrity of the Christian witness.

threads of white supremacy that have been woven into our tapestry of identity from an early date.

This new commitment will likely mean entering a time of uncertainty, even insecurity. But those who take up that task will help preserve the integrity of the Christian witness – and may well enrich the future of the American soul.

*Richard T. Hughes has been a teacher and scholar of religion and culture for more than 40 years. He has taught at Pepperdine University, Abilene Christian University, and Messiah College, and is currently scholar in residence at Lipscomb University. Besides *Myths America Lives By*, his books include *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* (Eerdmans, 2001) and *Christian America and the Kingdom of God* (Illinois, 2009). He speaks regularly about American politics and the role of Christians in peacemaking and social justice.*

Notes

- 1 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Yale, 2000), p. 70. The book is based on Tillich's Terry Lectures at Yale in 1951.

TIME FOR DEEP LISTENING:
An Interview with Rita Nakashima Brock



Theologian Rita Nakashima Brock has been a voice for social conscience for decades. She is director of the Soul Repair Center at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, TX. She is widely known for her work in moral

*injury – a dimension of trauma that refers to the shame or turmoil one feels for the morally compromised part one might have played in an episode of extreme violence in wartime or other conditions. She is co-author of *Soul Repair: Recovery from Moral Injury After War* (Beacon, 2012) and *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Beacon, 2009), among other books. A native of Japan, she received a Ph.D. from Claremont Graduate University, the first Asian-American woman in the US to earn a doctorate in theology.*

REFLECTIONS: *Many old racial and economic conflicts have been churned up this election season. Are we learning to face our problems?*

RITA NAKASHIMA BROCK: From our western European heritage we have a deeply embedded way of thinking about ethics: Goodness is subjective. We evaluate an action based on whether we feel good about it inside. If you don't have evil intent when you harm someone else, then it's easy to feel you have done nothing wrong and don't have to make amends. This way of thinking dominates how we look at legacies of harm in the US.

One way or another, virtually every non-European who lives here has been touched by white supremacy – the history of slavery or the theft of native lands, forced labor, or colonialism. But if the nation says we didn't intend harm, then the nation deems itself innocent. That innocence plays into our deep sense of exceptionalism. Every day, we talk about goodness in a way that protects our innocence. We need to be asking, What harm has been done, and how do I attend to it?

REFLECTIONS: *How do you regard our racial politics today?*

BROCK: In some ways we've been witnessing the last gasp of white supremacy. What I see, though, is white people who once were dominant and now feel increasingly marginalized. Many are good-hearted people who are struggling economically and watching their world slip away. Human beings want to feel respected. That's why I think there's a bigger problem here: the skewed power of corporations and wealth.

Working-class income has slipped, with low-paying jobs that make a person feel worthless. The

economy has shifted to make rich people richer. They own the government now. You have to be a millionaire to run for high office. There's no magic fix for our problems and divisions. But if we don't take care of the common good, we will go into terrible decline.

REFLECTIONS: *What would a healthier public life look like?*

BROCK: We need to learn what it takes to be a society and not just a collection of angry individuals. We've been taught for decades to hate the government, but I think we must attend far more to certain fundamental rights, expectations, and responsibilities in society where we need good government – for instance, universal single-payer health care and free college tuition.

Connected to this would be universal conscription – compulsory service to the country, a young person's two-year commitment to serve in some way. It could be the military or the Army Corp of Engineers or Americorp or the Peace Corps. In return, they would get free education at a college or a trade school.

This would serve many purposes. One good result would be interaction with others – people who you'd otherwise shun or never meet. This kind of interaction happens in military service, which is why the military has been an agent of social change. It was the first US institution to integrate, in 1948, and it recently dropped all barriers against women and gay and trans people too, and it allowed gay marriage before the Supreme Court acted.

There's so much to be done that universal conscription could address! It would teach us the power of common goals. We'd discover that personal success is such a paltry ambition. Why not make a difference for the good of others?

REFLECTIONS: *Does the church have a role?*

BROCK: Churches could become places where honest conversations and deep listening can happen and where we don't have to make everything a political debate that derails trust.

The easiest thing to change is the discourse. It's much harder to change our embedded feelings like fear or hostility and embodied ritualized behaviors that protect ourselves from an honest encounter with someone else. Look at what the 24/7 news cycle does to us. It is relentless bad news; the non-stop images of terrorism, violence, angry politics are so corrosive. I've been watching the Olympics, and I feel the time is a spiritual break. Just to be able to cheer for something beautiful and excellent is uplifting.



At the Washington Monument, Washington, DC, 1963
Photo by Hiroji Kubota
© Hiroji Kubota/Magnum Photos

What Would the Prophets Say?



By Gregory Mobley

What do the Hebrew prophets have to say to us in these days of noisy and fascinatingly unpredictable politics? The 8th-century BCE religious geniuses whom we know as Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah had a brand in common, a phrase that would fit on a bumper sticker: mishpat u-tzedeqah, “justice and righteousness.”

Singly, these are cardinal virtues: “justice,” doing what’s fair, and “righteousness,” doing what’s right. Occasionally they could clash, as the early-bird workers in Jesus’ parable about the vineyard would tell you (Matthew 20:1-16). Though each word has its own depths, what is most interesting is their conjunction:

- Let *justice* roll down like waters, and *righteousness* like a mighty stream (Amos 5:24).
- Zion shall be redeemed by *justice*, and those in her who repent, by *righteousness* (Isaiah 1:27).

Hosea and Micah add a dose of love (*hesed*) to their phrases:

- Hold fast to love and *justice* (Hosea 12:6).
- Do *justice*, love kindness, and walk humbly before your God (Micah 6:8).

The political platform of these Classical Hebrew prophets emphasized the conjunction – “justice and righteousness,” a phrase that means “care for

Joshua Heschel, the prophet registered “the secret obscenity of sheer unfairness, the unnoticed malignancy of established patterns of indifference. ... The prophet’s ear perceive[d] the silent sigh.”¹

The prophets returned from the 8th-century Chamber of Commerce tour of Samaria and Jerusalem unimpressed. They advocated for those who didn’t have rich relations, social networks, or legacy admission status. So whatever US political party takes charge next (and by the way, say adios to the two major ones; the next generation will have no more use for them than morning newspapers, traditional denominations, or college hoops stars who stay all four years in school), the prophets would demand that our culture – any culture – make as its chief barometer of economic health the conditions of the least of these, not how many people buy shiny useless products the day after Thanksgiving.

World Wide Web

I am joining Yale Divinity School from Andover Newton Theological School, a seminary composed mainly of congregational communities of faith – the United Church of Christ, the American Baptists, and the Unitarian Universalists. The latter group’s seventh principle is “the interdependent web of all existence,” a phrase that captures the prophets’ view of the salvific destiny shared by humanity and nature.

For Hosea, the ritual and ethical corruptions of his 8th-century Ephraimite society were approaching a watershed: His indictment in Hosea 4:1-3 cites

In their late-Iron Age laboratories, the prophets made an amazing discovery: The universe is ultimately a unified cosmic field.

the poor,” as Israeli biblical scholar Moshe Weinfield argues. For the prophets, the truest measure of societal health was, as their inspired heir put it in Matthew 25:45, the way it treated “the least of these,” the widow, the stranger, the orphan, the prisoner, the disabled. In the words of Abraham

violations of fully half of the Ten Commandments. The result?

“Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.”

His society’s ethical failings, according to Hosea, endanger the entire created order. Faithlessness to Torah lead to the very undoing of nature.

A couple of centuries later, prophet Jeremiah contends that the Judahites’ wayward doings have caused creation to revert back to the primeval chaos.

“I looked on the earth and, lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and, lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked and, lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked and, lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins” (Jeremiah 4:23-26).

Jeremiah’s poem, composed at the time of the Babylonian assault on Judah and Jerusalem around 600 BCE, takes us through creation week, echoing and yet reversing Genesis, uncreating the world one day at a time. The disintegration continues until with the final line – “and all its cities were laid in ruins” – we are back before Enoch built the first city (Gen. 4:17).

Leviathan Redux

The author of Isaiah 24-27 begins along the same arc – sketching the undoing of creation that results from human trespass – but amps up the rhetorical intensity until his poem ends with the return of the chaos monster Leviathan. Once again, the entire cosmos, heavens and earth, hovers dangerously on the brink of the abyss because of violations of “the everlasting covenant.”

“Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left (Isa. 24:6).”

It was Iron Age magical thinking that led the prophets to assume direct causality between ethical trespasses by humans and the suffering of the natural and geological world. That link is now based on scientific thinking. However, the pre-scientific words of the prophets captured an intuitive truth that has never been more timely in our day of polarization, terrorism, and climate change. In their late-Iron Age laboratories, the prophets made an amazing discovery: The universe is ultimately a unified cosmic field. It is uncanny how the ancient personification

of chaos, as Leviathan, has surfaced so vividly in the postmodern world of contemporary narrative: In our apocalyptic imaginations, everywhere zombies are on the loose.

But the question remains: By what sequence of phonemes should we address the One who demands justice and righteousness, and with what repertoire of symbols should we adorn the sanctuary of this One?

The prophets were dedicated to an austere Mosaic monotheism. Their critique of idolatry and their bloody-minded insistence on sole worship of the deity known by YHWH presents a problem for their heirs who treasure the religious pluralism of contemporary life. The Hebrew prophets could not imagine the kind of pluralism that characterizes our interconnected world. This is unfinished business – to find the Middle Way between the narrow particularity of our commitments and the full amplitude of the Creator of a universe light years across.

Theological DNA

The prophets would have fiercely opposed religious tolerance. They counted an ancient warrior named Jerubbaal as a hero and renamed him Hack (the Hebrew meaning of “Gideon”) because he demolished the temples of other peoples.

But it is not my purpose here to take issue with the ethical sensibilities of my spiritual ancestors who, when they weren’t bringing forth children in

Prophetic truth breaks in. Do or die, now or never: Act! The truth of wisdom flows from the inside out: Be patient, take a deep breath.

pain and eating bread by the sweat of their faces, bequeathed to us a literary legacy that can seem one moment so parochial and small-minded and in the next broad enough to bear our dreams. Thanks to their uncompromising convictions, their theological genes survived for us to critique.

If, if, if there is anything for us to honor in the prophetic devotion to the One and concomitant hatred – yes, hatred – for what they would call idolatry, it is this single-minded belief in the Creator and the ethical commands that go with it. The prophets condemned self-celebratory, self-centered worship in the strongest terms. As best we know, neither Ba’al nor Asherah demanded care for the poor.

I admit I have some sympathy for ancient idolaters; it’s my own idolatries I loathe. Aaron and the camp did not wake up one morning on the Sinai

outback and fashion a golden calf just for fun; Moses was taking too damn long (Exod 32:1). Facing 30 percent infant mortality, who in Hosea's day

The prophets returned from the 8th-century Chamber of Commerce tour of Samaria and Jerusalem unimpressed.

would not offer a sacrifice to a fertility deity such as Ba'al or Asherah if that might help beat the odds? Modern idolators seek so much more – enhancements, enrichments, enlargements. Religion that doth not require of thee, that makes no demands, is idolatrous.

Yet prophecy is not the only current flowing through the river of Bible that we can draw on during the latest election cycle. In a political season of frenzied discourse, more than ever we need to hear another voice: Wisdom.

“Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out, at the entrance of the city she speaks” (Proverbs 1:20).

Prophetic truth breaks in from the outside. The prophets claimed to have been in the heavenly throne room or on the very rock where Moses stood. Prophetic truth breaks in pointedly. Do or die, now or never: Act! The truth of wisdom flows from the inside out: Be patient, take a deep breath. If the prophets would have me hold tight, the voice of wisdom reminds me that there is a time under Heaven as well for letting go.

A Cry in the Street

Wisdom does not yield an answer quickly. “It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings to search them out,” says Proverbs 25:2. Yet when the truth comes, it arrives as something we already knew, something that had been in front of us the whole time: Consider the lilies. Or as the Preacher famously observes:

“What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us” (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10).

The prophets frequently referred to the Day of the LORD, the Day of Judgment, the Day of Kingdom Come, the Day when the proud are abased and the humble exalted. Choose this day whom you will serve. Redeem the day. But in addition to marking the sun – don't let it set on your anger! –

we should consider the moon that the LORD also established. Prophecy lived in the day of the LORD. Wisdom took her sweet time and marked the lunar cycle, swaying to the tidal waltzing ebb and flow of seasons and forces beyond our control. In the wake of a historic election, let us welcome a Sabbath rest from problem-solving and control and knowing the answer. Just now, we need a Serenity-Prayer embrace both of prophecy and wisdom.

Gregory Mobley arrives this fall at YDS as Visiting Professor of Congregational Studies and Hebrew Bible. He is the author of The Return of the Chaos Monsters – and Other Backstories of the Bible (Eerdmans, 2012) and co-editor of My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation (Orbis, 2012). He graduated from Campbellsville College (B.A. 1979), Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div. 1984), Harvard Divinity School (Th.M. 1986), and Harvard University (Ph.D. 1994).

Notes

- 1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper, 1962), p. 11.

“A DREAM DEFERRED”

Langston Hughes

By Charles H. Harper

Finally
exhausted

too broken to pursue
this way further

we burn
our old maps

begin again
at the beginning

our long deferred
journey

into the dream

FROM VULNERABILITY TO POWER

By Neichelle R. Guidry '10 M.Div.



Day in and out, most of us walk around with a stifling awareness of vulnerability. No matter who you are or what you do. Past a certain age, that sense of invincibility wears off, and it becomes only too clear that our wellness, security, and stability rely upon many factors beyond ourselves.

For people of color, this vulnerability is magnified by ongoing reports of a political system that was not built to serve our interests or protect us, and continues to devastate lives and communities. We know what it means to be susceptible to risk, not only by virtue of our humanity but also the color of our skin. We know ontological vulnerability. It is a weight under which we live daily.

The black church has helped black Americans live with this burden, and even lay it down. The church has assisted us spiritually, emotionally, and economically. It has served as hospital, financial institution, rehabilitation center, school, and psychiatric ward. Many of these roles are perhaps lost on the current generation, but I have seen the church's courage and influence with my own two eyes. I have seen countless individuals turn to the church with a multitude of needs and the church attempt to meet them.

In discouraging times, how should a church show up in this world? I might simply say, "just be the church," yet there are so many ideas and speculations about what that really means. So let me suggest three concrete ways the church can *be the church*.

First, we can provide safe spaces for people to be. To ask. To grieve. To play. If your church is not a *safe* place to be, nothing else matters. Churches must go out of their way to be safe from all forms of violence: sexualized violence, ideological violence, domestic violence, racialized violence, gun violence.

Every summer, our church collaborates with community organizations to host local teens and young adults for job training on our grounds. They work in every department. In the end, we inevitably hear stories from many participants who say how much they enjoyed the experience, just because they had a safe place to go to every day. In the long run, even if they never attend a worship service or give a tithe, I believe we've accomplished a lot by providing sanctuary to our vulnerable youth, if but for one summer.

Second, the church must provide political education so people can learn more about the policies that

affect their lives and converse with elected officials without photo ops and politicizing.

To be clear, there must be a certain level of objectivity in such spaces. Facts need to be presented truthfully, transparently, and without bias, so citizens can make informed decisions for themselves. The time of simply propagating slanted ideas, preying upon ignorance and coercing people to think and vote a certain way, has come to a hard stop.

The church owes it to people to keep them meaningfully abreast and clued in. Forums and teach-ins can illuminate the policies and politicians that are shaping our realities. In our own congregational efforts, we have built relationships with young activist groups who are brilliant and powerful and creatively convey critical information to us.

Finally, the church can't rely on Sunday morning to fulfill average needs of belonging and togetherness, whether with God and with one another. These days call for the church to stretch itself out and create alternative spaces for building bonds and bridges.

Debate watch parties can increase political engagement. Interfaith gatherings can dispel Islamophobia. Peace circles bring healing during times of tension. Movie outings and concerts stir levity and joyfulness. Finding a community, a place where you can go and *belong*, helps an individual manage and even dismantle that sense of vulnerability, stress, and isolation that plagues so many.

If the church is going to be a site of hope, clergy must take very seriously the work of dealing with *souls* by preparing thoughtful, empowering sermons. Worship must speak to difficult real-life conditions, while pointing us to God's divine possibilities in this world. We embody liberation by teaching people what the evil "isms" look like (racism, sexism, ageism, and others), and how to defy them. We embody liberation by connecting the dots between local, national, and international freedom movements, between those happening in, for instance, Puerto Rico and Palestine and the US.

The church *can* be a site of hope, even in the post-election hereafter. It takes vision, planning, and work to transform vulnerability into empowerment.

The Rev. Neichelle Guidry '10 M.Div. is associate pastor to young adults and liaison to worship and arts ministries at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. She leads workshops, preaches widely, and is founder of shepreaches, an organization devoted to inspiring African-American millennial women in ministry. She was named one of Time magazine's "12 New Faces of Black Leadership" last year.



Richard Nixon campaigning for president, Boise, Idaho, October 1968

Photo by Raymond Depardon

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A New Search for the Good Life



By Stanley Hauerwas '65 B.D., '67 M.A., '68 M.Phil., '68 Ph.D.

*In his beautiful memoir published last year, *The Shepherd's Life: Modern Dispatches from an Ancient Landscape*, James Rebanks helps those like myself who know nothing about sheep to have some sense of what it means to be a shepherd. Rebanks is well prepared to perform this task since he comes from a lineage of shepherds in England's Lake District.*

I confess I was stunned to discover how many different kinds of sheep there are, and to learn that sheep have been bred to negotiate different topographies. Romantic conceptions of what it is to be a shepherd cannot survive Rebanks's honest account of the hard work required to make a barely sustainable living raising sheep.

Stories of Endurance

Rebanks is a wonderful storyteller. As one who hated formal schooling he improbably ended up doing a degree at Oxford. Although he left secondary school as soon as it was permissible, he discovered he loved to read. Every night after a hard day of working on his grandfather's and father's farm, he read. Taking a continuing education course, he was encouraged to pursue the tests necessary for him to go to a university.

And having gone to Oxford, Rebanks could have pursued a very different vocation and forsaken the life of a shepherd. But he chose to return to the farm. He did so because, as he observes, he had learned from his grandfather the classic worldview of the peasant. He identified it as the worldview of a people who though often battered yet endure, and through such endurance they come to believe they "owned the earth." They are a people – farmers, laborers – who always manage to be "there," a confident people who are "built out of stories" embedded in the everyday necessities of life, he writes.

In the last paragraphs of *The Shepherd's Life*, Rebanks, now a good deal older, recounts the story

of a crucial realization. It is springtime, and he is returning his flock to the hills. These sheep are bred to fend for themselves in rocky terrain. He enjoys watching the sheep find their way in the rough fields; they are evidently happy to be "home." Rebanks then imitates his flock's sense that all is as it should be by lying down in the grass to drink the sweet and

"This is my life. I want for no other" – an extraordinary declaration that one rarely hears today.

pure water from the nearby stream. He rolls on his back to watch the clouds racing by. His well-trained sheepdogs, Floss and Tan, who had never seen him so relaxed, come and lay next to him. He breathes in the cool mountain air; he listens to the ewes calling to the lambs to follow them through the rocky crags, and he thinks, "This is my life. I want for no other."¹

This Is Your Life

"This is my life. I want for no other" – an extraordinary declaration that one rarely hears anyone make. As odd as it may seem, I want to suggest that the scarcity of this declaration in contemporary life is a clue to understanding our cultural moment. Stated differently: The fact that many people feel forced to live lives they do not want helps explain the politics surrounding Donald Trump. Let me try to explain.

Trump has given voice to a widespread discontent in our culture, and it is mistake to discount or

disregard those who support him. Theories abound about why they embrace him. I suspect there is something to most of these theories. I am sure, for example, that racism plays a role for some. Surely the shock occasioned by September 11 is a factor that attracts some to his claim to “Make America Great Again.”

Unease in Zion

Yet the racism and anxiety that Trump has exploited are, I believe, manifestations of an even deeper pathology, namely, the profound sense of unease that many Americans have about their lives. That unease often takes the form of resentment against

A “good life” now means our second marriage turned out all right, the children did not become addicts, and we had enough savings to retire.

elites, but even more troubling it funds the prejudice against minority groups and immigrants. Resentment is another word for the unease that seems to grip good, middle-class – mostly white – people who have worked hard all their lives yet find they are no better off than when they started. They deeply resent what they interpret as the special treatment some receive in an effort to right the wrongs of the past.

In short, Americans are angry but they are not sure at whom to direct that anger appropriately. Their anger needs direction and Trump is more than happy to tell Americans, particularly if they are white, who their enemy is and who they should hate. There is a therapeutic aspect to this rhetoric. He gives people an enemy that obscures or delays any acknowledgment that the object of our anger might or should be ourselves.

Reasons for Churchgoing

All this is happening at the same time the church, at least the mainstream church, is struggling against a culture of consumption. Americans find they have no good reason for “going to church.” The statistical decline in the number of Christians has led some church leaders to think our primary job is to find ways to increase church membership. At a time when Christians are seeking to say something confident and useful about “church growth,” what we communicate is superficial and simplistic. You do not need to come to church to be told you need to be nice to those with less.

Of course, that is not the only way the church has responded to our current disruptions and disap-

pointments. Drawing on the spirit of the civil rights struggle, many black and white Christians have again joined with those who would represent the progressive forces of history to transform American democracy. Many Christians now try to be identified with the effort to seek justice. They take this to be their primary witness. Though it may be a very good thing for Christians to support these campaigns to make our social order more just, there is a problem with the attempt to recover the moral authority of the church: It is not clear how the pursuit of justice so understood helps us theologically to know how to live.

The church has failed to help people live in such a manner that we would want no other life than the life we have lived. Such lives – like Rebanks’s – may well be filled with suffering and failures, but suffering and failures are not blocks to having lived a good life. To have lived a good life is to have lived in a manner that we hope we can be remembered by those who have found our lives crucial for making it possible for them to want no other life than the one they have been given. To be happily remembered is to have lived with a modesty that indicates our dependence on others, making possible the satisfaction of doing the right thing without regret or notice.

Lives of Consequence

“This is my life. I want for no other” is an expression of what in the past was called a good life. The language of the good life is still used, but now its meaning has altered: It refers to lives that have not been unduly burdened. To have had a good life now means our second marriage turned out all right, the children did not become addicts, and we had enough savings to retire. Such an understanding of the good life too often produces people who regret the life they have lived, because they feel it has been

Many Christians now try to be identified with the effort to seek justice. They take this to be their primary witness.

a life without consequence. I suspect the reason so many men and women want mentioned in their obituary their military service is because they believe that service was of consequence.

If any people should know what it means to envision a good life surely it must be Christians. Yet I do not think we have emphasized sufficiently why it so important to live well and, perhaps even more significantly, what living well looks like. I am not, of course, suggesting that what it means to live a good

life will be the same for everyone. But I do believe that to have lived well makes it possible to want no other life than the life I have lived. To want no other life than the life each of us has lived, a life that often has moments of failure or betrayal, is made possible by what we call the forgiveness of sins.

The sense of outrage that currently grips so many in America is, I think, an indication that people are profoundly unhappy with the lives they are living or have lived. If what I am suggesting has merit, it

To want no other life than the life each of us has lived, a life that often has moments of failure or betrayal, is made possible by what we call the forgiveness of sins.

is hard to know where even to begin. But surely as Christians we have at our disposal language that can help us say to one another why it is so important that we live lives that can be called good. A people so constituted, I think, would be the first line of defense against the politics of resentment that defines our times.

Stanley Hauerwas '65 B.D., '67 M.A., '68 M.Phil., '68 Ph.D. taught at Notre Dame for 14 years before joining the Duke Divinity School faculty in 1983. His book, A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic (Notre Dame, 1991) was named by Christianity Today as one of the 100 most important books on religion of the 20th century. Other books include Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir (Eerdmans, 2010) and The Work of Theology (Eerdmans, 2015).

Notes

- 1 James Rebanks, *The Shepherd's Life: Modern Dispatches from an Ancient Landscape* (Flatiron Books, 2015), p. 288.

In a furious election year, politics and religion find a way to mix in American worship services — at least some of the time.

According to a Pew Research Center survey, about two-thirds of churchgoers said they've recently heard clergy address social and political issues. Only 14 percent said they heard their clergy directly speak for or against a specific presidential candidate.

"Most people surveyed say political speech is the exception, not the rule, in their churches, synagogues, mosques or other houses of worship," said a Pew report, which was released in August.

When they do surface, political issues break along familiar ideological lines.

- Nearly half of worshipers have heard clergy talk about homosexuality. What they hear depends on the congregation. "About as many mainline Protestant churchgoers have heard clergy encourage the acceptance of gays and lesbians (19 percent) as have heard religious leaders speak out against homosexuality (17 percent)," said the report, which was based on polling in June and July. "But white evangelicals and black Protestants are more likely to say they have heard clergy preach against homosexuality than speak out in favor of acceptance."

- About 30 percent said their clergy have talked about abortion. The same percentage holds for immigration. About 20 percent of churchgoers said ministers brought up the environment and economic inequality.

- Regarding immigration, about 20 percent said they've recently heard their clergy urge welcome and support of immigrants. By contrast, 4 percent said their clergy expressed the need for stricter immigration enforcement.

- 16 percent said clergy have spoken in favor of earth protection, while 1 percent said they heard their religious leaders speak against environmental regulations.

- About 60 percent of African-American Protestant worshipers said their clergy encouraged them this year to vote in the general election. Among white evangelical Protestants, 47 percent said they have been so encouraged. Fewer white mainline Protestants and Catholics say their clergy urged them to vote, the survey reported.

The US Internal Revenue Code limits political activities of churches and other tax-exempt nonprofit organizations. "They are prohibited from coming out in favor of one candidate over another (though not from discussing political issues) if they wish to retain their tax-exempt status," Pew reported.

Source: Pew Research Center (pewforum.org)

TENDER
By Camille Rankine

Dear patriot

Dear catastrophe

None of this means what we thought it did

Dear bone fragments

Dear displacement

Dear broken skin

I am in over my head

Dear prisoner

Dear, dear wounded

You have earned our respect

Dear glad hands, curbed dog

Dear perfect object

The same night awaits us

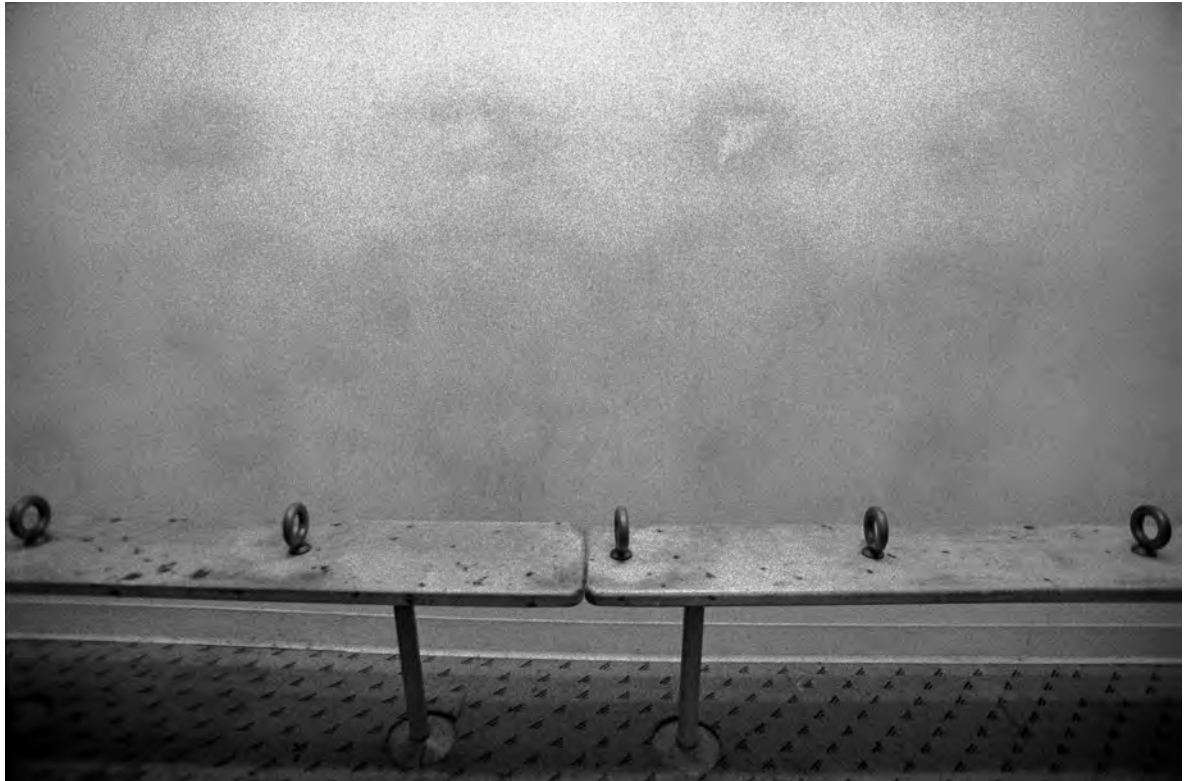
Dear put upon

The day folds over and begins again

Dear bad animal

Dear caged thing

There was something about you



Detectives' questioning room, where silhouettes of grime are left behind by countless accused felons who have been manacled to the bench for interrogation over the years, Times Square, New York City, 1997

Photo by Larry Towell

© Larry Towell/Magnum Photos

WHAT ARE OUR VALUES?:

An interview with Carlos Correa Bernier



Carlos Correa Bernier is an American Baptist Church minister, clinical psychologist, theologian, environmental justice advocate, radio broadcaster, and director of Centro Romero, a United Church of Christ-related educational center near the San Ysidro Port of Entry, the world's busiest international land border crossing. Located on the US-Mexico border in San Diego, Centro Romero is a place of community-building, ministry, education, and prayer that annually serves hundreds of passengers and immigrants. Correa Bernier teaches psychology at the CETYS Universidad in Tijuana, Mexico, and has a private counseling practice. He has a doctorate in family therapy with specialization in violent behaviors and is completing a Ph.D. in psychology of religion at Oxford University. He spoke to Reflections in July.

REFLECTIONS: *Do you see a pressing challenge coming out of this historic political season?*

CORREA BERNIER: The urgent question is, What are our values? That is, who are we, and who do we want to be in the future? America — its music, movies, culture, spirit — has global influence. But it seems we have forgotten how to globalize ourselves and recognize and accept our own diversity. We still have difficulty with the “other,” how to relate to the stranger, how to welcome them, how to be changed by them. We are having trouble deciding who we are as a nation in this globalized world.

REFLECTIONS: *What should we be standing for?*

CORREA BERNIER: I think of freedom and democracy. Those ideas are central. And many people use the words. But if we are going to celebrate those values, we must place them at the center of every single decision we make through our government. I don't hear much about that commitment. The political mood has been to invite hate and condone physical violence. Psychologically speaking, this isn't an embrace of freedom and democracy but an anxious attempt to assert power and control.

REFLECTIONS: *US immigration history has always been turbulent. Is anti-immigration sentiment today any worse than previous decades or centuries?*

CORREA BERNIER: Think about the many migrations from Europe that helped shape American history. The Irish, Italians, and others went through struggles to get settled into their own communities — then they made efforts to assimilate. It often took a generation or longer. That's how the nation understood assimilation: The new group was given time to organize its communities and neighborhoods, then assimilation would happen from there.

But something different is happening now, as new others arrive not from Europe but from elsewhere. They face a demand that they assimilate from day one. The nation's attitude has shifted from valuing community-building to focusing on individuals. An anti-immigration viewpoint regards new immigrants not as communities, not strengthened by community structures, but as individuals who must change who they are right now if they are going to earn our respect in the US. Or they are scapegoated.

It seems that modern culture's emphasis on individualism has had an effect on our attitude toward immigration. We've become impatient with structures of community. We put the burden on individuals to do it alone.

REFLECTIONS: *Can the churches' good news change this climate?*

CORREA BERNIER: As my good mentor Leonardo Boff says, “the church carries within itself constant tension,” since we proclaim what can never be put into practice, the utopia of the Kingdom of God and radical fraternity. I'm part of a binational base community that contains many nationalities, and we try to embody the Kingdom and practice what we teach and preach. It's a struggle, but we are committed to it. It involves being sincere and authentic with each other, welcoming the poor, the other, while acknowledging the tensions within us.

Throughout all of it, the church is in a position to experience the joy of this Kingdom, connecting our *ekklesia* as an institution to the struggle of folks out there, in the world. In our situation we concentrate on communal theological reflections on all the experiences that define our daily lives. Our worship time begins after this discussion together is over.

What is the alternative to facing the struggle within? Compartmentalization, an all-too-familiar strategy: limiting our church exposure to Sunday between 10 a.m. and noon, then disengaging from the togetherness, and concentrating on daily isolated lives of individualism.

REFLECTIONS: *What is the next move?*

CORREA BERNIER: We have a choice. We can embrace a future of absolute nationalism and isolation or a future of commitment to inclusivity and social justice. I think it is crucial to ask ourselves two questions, as citizens and as churchgoers: What is it that I believe, and what am I going to do with that? These questions have a deep spiritual character, and it gets us back to that first point of our conversation, “Who are we, and who do we want to be in the future?” Our answer should inform, constantly, not only our behavior and but also our politics.

Reject the Idols



By Kathryn Lofton

Lately the tenor of politics has been so disconcerting that even those far afield from scriptural thinking ask whether apocalypse is upon us. Weekly mass shootings and videotaped executions, reckless candidates on the national stage, suspicious backroom machinations, financial tumult, climate trouble, technological takeover — is this our reality? Or is this a reality competition that we find ourselves in?

I am a scholar of religion who studies popular culture, which means I am a student of smoke and mirrors. Did that magician actually cut the woman in half? Will that AsSeenOnTV.com™ product really solve my cleaning problem? Is Taylor Swift as nice as she seems?

Dialectic of Entertainment

Studying popular culture means that you are always thinking about fraudulence. Not because you seek to unveil the lie. No, the intellectual work is to explore misdirection as the commodity we cannot

In the 21st century, religion appears optional, but popular culture is inescapable. We choose religion, but we drown in a world the culture industry makes.

stop consuming. It has always been unclear whether we admire the maker of smoke or the destroyer of mirrors. Reality television is a genre that exhibits this ambivalence, since few viewers watch it without doubting everything it contains. They watch, again and again, because skepticism is the commodity this reality produces.

When Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), they were hardly neutral about popular culture and its consequences. “Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism,” they wrote. “It is sought by those who want to escape

the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again.”¹

We imagine that blockbuster films or pop songs offer relief from our working lives, but Adorno and Horkheimer argued that popular culture is the handmaiden of labor. “This is the incurable sickness of all entertainment,” they explained, pointing to our need to keep consuming (binge viewing, video gaming, and online shopping) in order to cope with working. We don’t work to earn leisure; our leisure is the drug that keeps us working. “The culture industry presents that same everyday world as paradise,” they wrote. “Entertainment fosters the resignation which seeks to forget itself in entertainment.”²

Critics of religion speak similarly, arguing that religion distracts us from confronting reality, and religious leadership suppresses resistance in part through the declaration of our salvation. “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions,” Karl Marx (1818-1883) famously wrote.³ The critique of religion resonates with Adorno and Horkheimer’s assault on consumer culture: A demoralized public uses spectacle to believe life could be other than demoralizing. And yet these very spectacles seem to do nothing but deliver us back to our dispiriting labor.

Roman Prime Time

Marx, Adorno, and Horkheimer were not the first intellectuals to question whether our entertainments served as our imprisonments. The 1st-century poet



A man being forced aside by police, New York City, 1963

Photo by Leonard Freed

© Leonard Freed/Magnum Photos

Juvenal described the system of state bribery imposed by Emperor Augustus as “bread and circus-es.” Augustus provided free grain and free entertainment to plebeians to quell rebellion. If nobody starved, nobody would riot; if there was a chariot race to attend, nobody could complain.

Sociologists of early Christianity have spilt no small amount of ink evaluating the church’s critique of this feature of Roman society. Within this scholarship, disputes abide about the ethnic and class demographics of early churches and the determining theological and ritual impulses of the first believers. Yet it is unquestionably true that the first centuries of Christianity were defined by inquiries about what was true and what was false, who was manipulated and who could be truly free. Almost always religions begin with instructions about how to deconstruct the deceptions of a given world.

Truth or Consequences

Teaching religion in the 21st century means facing students who cannot decide if they think religion and popular culture are good or bad. They know only this: Religion seems optional, but popular culture is

The first centuries of Christianity were defined by inquiries about what was true and what was false, who was manipulated and who could be truly free.

inescapable. We choose religion, but we drown in a world the culture industry makes. In the classroom I hope to suggest the divide between religion and culture is less stark than they presuppose. The work of comprehending culture and the work of understanding religion have the same aim: to think about truth and falsity, to squint and see the origin of the smoke and the arrangement of the mirrors, to fight for a skepticism that isn’t an ironic punch line but a ceaseless process of inquiry and engaged listening.

Adorno and Horkheimer ask us to doubt the fabricators of culture, all those reality TV producers, pop programmers, and infomercial evangelists who tell us their quick pleasures are forms of enlightenment. “Society is made up of the desperate and thus falls prey to rackets,” they observed. They might have been talking about 21st-century politics, too.

As we watch the latest presidential election season unfold, think about how the staging of the election itself, and its coverage, might be understood as part of the culture industry, and therefore something we must work to resist. To what extent are the candidates like Augustus’ gladiators? How much of

our participation in this election is more akin to consumer activity than political engagement?

We take these prepped candidates as inevitable; we take, too, the political conversations they establish as reasonable and true. Yet there is plenty of evidence that these figures are not the real and the truthful that we should be searching for. The Book of Habakkuk asks us to think about what we do when we attend to idols:

What use is an idol
once its maker has shaped it—
a cast image, a teacher of lies?
For its maker trusts in what has
been made,
though the product is only an
idol that cannot speak! (2:18)

The prophet looks askance at those who would say to such an idol, “Wake up!” How foolish must we be to imagine that the idol that has “no breath in it at all” could possibly reply (2:19).

Habakkuk suggests we have become like the woodcarver Geppetto, hoping to breathe into our idols the possibility of real life. But this is the stuff of Disney, the matchless manufacturer of culture. As citizens our task is to resist idols and forge in our communities the honest life we seek from our politics. There is no higher calling for any of us than to resist the stories our idols sell. This is the work of our time: to insist on reality in the era of its most brilliant fraudulence.

Kathryn Lofton is Professor of Religious Studies, American Studies, History and Divinity at Yale and also Chair of Yale’s Department of Religious Studies and Deputy Dean of Diversity of Faculty Development in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. She has written extensively about capitalism, celebrity, sexuality, and the concept of the secular.

Notes

- 1 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, 2002), p. 52.
- 2 Adorno and Horkheimer, p. 55.
- 3 Karl Marx, “From the Paris Notebooks,” *Marx: Early Political Writings*, edited by Joseph O’Malley (Cambridge, 1944), p. 90.

IMPULSES OF COMMON PURPOSE:

An Interview with Mark Silk



Mark Silk is a writer, scholar, and a preeminent commentator on the religious scene. In the 1980s he coined a term – spiritual politics – to describe the ever-changing interplay of American religion and political life.

*See his book *Spiritual Politics: Religion and America Since World War II* (Touchstone, 1988). Today he is director of the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. His Religion News Service column, “Spiritual Politics,” can be found at religionnews.com/columns/mark-silk. He is co-author of *One Nation, Divisible: How Regional Religious Differences Shape American Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008) and co-editor of the Columbia University Press series, *The Future of Religion in America*. He spoke to Reflections in August.*

REFLECTIONS: *In the US, Protestants are now a statistical minority. How significant is this?*

MARK SILK: It’s being called a post-Protestant time, but the fact is there are still millions of non-Catholic Christians – neo-Pentecostals, evangelicals, non-denominational churchgoers. They simply don’t call themselves Protestant anymore, even though their theology or structure is often Protestant.

Nevertheless, there is a sense of decline. So many churches have been part of the majority culture so long, they don’t know how to reverse it. Many feel as if they are strangers in their own country: “This isn’t America anymore.” Interest in Calvinism is increasing, and my hunch is it’s a way for many to make sense of the decline – as if to say, we’re in a time when only the elect, a remnant, can survive to carry the faith forward.

REFLECTIONS: *How do evangelical politics today compare to the days of the Moral Majority in the 1980s?*

SILK: We’ve seen some startling changes. I can understand that it makes sense to go with the political party that you’ve affiliated with for decades, but by now it’s striking how partisan that world is. Perhaps the issues of abortion and same-sex marriage have cast the Democrats into the outer darkness. Perhaps many want a war of religion – two, really – one against secularism and another against Muslims. Overt anti-Muslim public comment was off the table when George W. Bush was president. He held the line against that kind of talk. The second decade of the century has departed from that. The controversy about a mosque at Ground Zero in New York – also the debates in various states about Sharia law – brought anti-Muslim opinion into the open.

REFLECTIONS: *Can mainline churches keep a national presence in reform politics?*

SILK: Mainline churches still play a significant role in cities and towns all over – they continue to feel their social responsibility. In Connecticut, churches have partnered with other organizations to underwrite Syrian immigrant families.

Having gotten past the same-sex debates, a lot of denominations might find an opening on issues that will give churches a role.

One looming issue is global: All of humankind is facing climate change, which could reanimate a spiritual impulse of common purpose, both here and everywhere.

Up to now, what’s lamented across the board, mainline or otherwise, is an inability of American Christianity to generate figures who are real leaders. It’s not a matter of, “Where are the Reinhold Niebuhrs of yesteryear?” There was only one Reinhold Niebuhr. No, the very idea of a person of the cloth as a voice on the national scene seems to be falling away, even on the evangelical right. People should feel that their institutions matter for these huge problems we face. You can’t do that with just a gathering of 60-somethings.

That’s the real freak-out, which cuts across all religious traditions: young adults. They just aren’t joining. It’s disturbing. For so long, these institutions were expected to set young families on the right path. But what if the young families don’t show up?

REFLECTIONS: *Are we on the brink of change in our spiritual politics?*

SILK: I think it’s possible to be optimistic that the next period will see a new rallying around some important themes. I think we’ll see a lessening of tensions regarding Islam. In this country, a “war on Muslims” doesn’t poll well. The nation is resistant. Pluralistic ideology is pretty deeply rooted. It has been part of the American civil religion from the beginning of the Republic. Pushback against recent anti-Muslim rhetoric has been strong, reflecting some hard-won principles of religious diversity.

Further, with Pope Francis we’ll continue to see a deeper focus on global poverty and climate change. More people are asking how we human beings will live on this planet together. I think we’re going to see a shift in all parties around climate change. I mean, if you live in certain parts of Florida or other coastal regions, you are going to see the changes. You’re going to be under water. Climate change mobilization – on a World War II scale – isn’t some 50-year project that we can delay. It needs to happen now, and it will require a moral, spiritual mobilization if we are going to succeed.



A 7:30 a.m. arrest of undocumented workers by US Border Patrol in downtown San Diego, 1989
Photo by Susan Meiselas
© Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

KNOWLEDGE NEIGHBORS

By Alberto Ríos

You and I, my friend, we lend what we have to each other,
Handsaws and tree pruners, cars sometimes, and sugar.

But we lend as well to each other what we know – The Library,
It tends our voices – it speaks for us in words as many as stars,

All to make sense of the world and the worlds we share.
The new century is its newest book, and this book is our lives.

It is our own chance to be new, to be surprised, to see what it is
We are all going to do. Today, we lend ourselves to each other,

Our big hands to the small hands of the mighty race of children,
Our big words to their small syllables, our ideas awaiting theirs.

This book of ours together has no ending written for it yet.
Its stories have unfamiliar faces, but not unfamiliar hopes.

It is a book of many colors with a binding stitched from dream.
When we enter a library, we open the first page of imagination,

The last page of memory, and the webpage of today.
Tomorrow's page has not yet been printed, and may not be –

Perhaps it will be made of flying things, pages that come to us
Like bird wings through the air. This page might be anything.

However it makes itself, however we read, or hear, or taste it,
Let us think that it will be good, because we were good.

Achieving the Black Social Gospel



By Gary Dorrien

The phase of the black freedom movement usually called “the civil rights movement” – 1955 to 1968 – was incomparably beautiful and searing in modern US history. It abounded with noble visions, resounded with magnificent rhetoric, and ended in nightmarish despair.

It put on global display the ravages of racism and racial caste in the United States. It rebelled against a century of racial abuse that followed upon 246 years of chattel slavery. It sang and preached and marched for a better world. It won legislative victories and had a profound impact on US American society, but it failed to break white supremacy.

Historic Neglect

The symbol of the movement, Martin Luther King Jr., became a global icon by assailing his country's racial prejudice, condemning its economic injustice, opposing its war in Vietnam, standing with the poor and oppressed, expounding a vision of liberation, and being assassinated for doing so. King soared so high that he tends to overwhelm anything associated with him. Yet the tradition that best describes him and other leaders of the civil rights movement has been strangely overlooked.

Long before King burst upon the national scene in December 1955, there was an African-American tradition of social gospel Christianity that preached social justice politics in the same way that King later personified. Historically it emerged from four groups that asked what a *new* Abolitionism would look like after Reconstruction was abandoned.

The first group identified with Booker T. Washington and his program for political accommodation and economic uplift. The second group espoused the nationalist conviction that African Americans needed their own nation. The third group advocated protest activism for racial justice, strongly opposing Booker Washington. The fourth group implored against factional division, calling for a fusion of pro-

Washington realism and selective anti-Washington protest militancy.

All four of these ideological factions existed before W. E. B. Du Bois emerged as the intellectual leader of the protest tradition and influenced black social gospel ministers such as Reverdy C. Ransom and Richard R. Wright, Jr. The full-fledged black social gospel emerged mostly from the third and fourth groups. It combined an emphasis on black dignity and personhood with protest activism for racial justice, a comprehensive social justice agenda, an insistence that authentic Christian faith is incompatible with racial prejudice, an emphasis on the social ethical teaching of Jesus, and an acceptance of modern scholarship and social consciousness.

This tradition of social justice religion, until recently, was wrongly neglected. King did not come from nowhere. The founders and their successors had much at stake in claiming that black churches should support social justice politics and social gos-

The King movement must be continually re-narrated. It is our greatest historical treasure – but so often robbed of its relevance.

pel theology. Many of them would today be justly honored and their names familiar had scholars not ignored the black social gospel for decades.

When the black social gospel is recognized as an important tradition, certain long-regnant conventions about black religious history no longer



Thurgood Marshall, chief counsel to the NAACP during the integration crisis, Washington, DC, 1958. He later became a US Supreme Court Justice.
Photo by Eve Arnold

© Eve Arnold/Magnum Photos

hold up. Supposedly the early black social gospel had only a few proponents, it was a mere imitation of white social Christianity, and it did not produce significant public intellectuals. Supposedly it had little influence, so it was not an important tradition, or perhaps not a tradition at all. Supposedly it was a species of something best left for dead – Progressive-era idealism.

A Font of Progressive Theology

On the contrary, the early black social gospel had numerous proponents. It was a self-standing tradition with its own identity and integrity. It produced public intellectuals. It had a tremendous influence by providing the theology of social justice that the civil rights movement espoused. And it remains important as a wellspring of black theology, liberation theology, progressive Christianity, postcolonial criticism, and every form of Christianity that appeals to the witness of the civil rights movement.

The black social gospel had many blinders and deficiencies. It was led almost entirely by male ministers, and few of them advocated for the public agency of women. Ransom, William Simmons, Henry McNeal Turner, and Howard Thurman were notable exceptions. King was not. Ida Wells-Barnett, Nannie Burroughs, and Pauli Murray are major figures in the black social gospel story, and Molly Church Terrell, Ella Baker, Diane Nash, and Fannie Lou Hamer made important contributions to it. But all fought constantly against being excluded, and Baker's bar from a leadership role in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference symbolizes exactly the clerical-gender problem at issue. For similar reasons, black social gospel leaders had no progressive inklings concerning gay and lesbian sexuality, a subject that Adam Clayton Powell Sr. and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. vehemently opposed from the pulpit. Pauli Murray, had she attended Abyssinian Baptist Church when either Powell preached about sexuality, would not have felt welcome. She spent decades puzzling over what excluded her most from the career she deserved: being female, or black, or gay, or queer.

The black social gospel thus had deficiencies on the very issues that roil churches today. Nevertheless, it commends our attention because it defied white America's refusal to relinquish white supremacy or even discuss white racism.

King, Revised

During his lifetime King became, like Gandhi, a global symbol of nonviolent resistance to oppression. After he was gone he left an incomparable legacy and an immense void. Well into the 1970s, King Day

celebrations called for a King holiday. King's reputation in white America climbed ever higher, putting a national holiday in reach. People who had spurned or reviled King while he lived now claimed to admire him as an icon of racial integration; many "forgot" having reviled him. The campaign for a King holiday lost a House of Representatives vote in 1979 and won a veto-proof majority in Congress in 1983, compelling President Reagan to sign it. The campaign fixed on "I Have a Dream" imagery and race-blind ideals. King's views about capitalism and militarism were still out of play, smacking of way-out-there Leftism, best not mentioned. It was considered bad form to dwell on such things or what he actually said about Black Power; only reactionary warhorses did that. To win the iconic status that King deserved, he had to be domesticated, and was.

History Calling

King became safe and ethereal, registering as a noble moralist. His later emphasis on economic justice was routinely ignored, obscuring why the social gospel mattered. Before the King era, the black social gospel had not been recognized as a credible or important force of social Christianity. After he was gone, it still got little credit as a full-throated tradition, much less as the shaper of King's idea of prophetic Christianity. But without the black social gospel, King would not have known what to say when history called on December 3, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama.

The King movement must be continually re-narrated. It is our greatest historical treasure – but so often robbed of its relevance. I feel deeply my numerous inadequacies in narrating its significance and yet the imperative to try. King's social gospel radicalism is distinctly valuable as a weapon against white supremacy – a structure of power based on privilege that presumes to define what is normal. The fact that so much history has to be overcome to make the point confirms the necessity of trying.

Gary Dorrien is Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary and Professor of Religion at Columbia University. He is the author of The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel (2015) and the forthcoming Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel (2017), both published by Yale University Press. This article is based on themes from both volumes. His many other books include Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit: The Idealistic Logic of Modern Theology, which won the Association of American Publishers' PROSE Award in 2013.

LOVING YOUR (POLITICAL) ENEMY

By Tom Krattenmaker



How might we achieve real victory in politics? A good place to start is by wrestling with arguably the most perplexing and challenging thing Jesus ever taught – love your enemies – and what it might mean to apply it to our politics.

Good luck trying to get me and my liberal comrades to love whomever we are hating in a given week, whether it's the candidate who just said something awful about women or the high-profile pastor who just demeaned gay people (again). Not feeling any love there. Nor, I suspect, are our conservative fellow citizens feeling much love after they have witnessed the latest outrage-inducing act of what they like to call political correctness, or inconsistent application of that favorite liberal principle of tolerance.

I am like most everyone else on this score. Yet I also find myself in conversation with Republican partisans from time to time, making the point that both sides need each other – to keep ourselves sharp, honest, and aware of our worst flaws. If we're left too much to our own devices, we will probably screw things up ...

As we ponder "love your enemy," as we imagine how it would look in practice, we might begin to realize this: While it's good to find so much interest in politics in our country today, it's often the wrong

A funny thing happens to your enemies when you love them. What happens is that they shape-shift. They morph before your eyes. They are still your political opponents, but not your enemies.

kind of interest – more like the way we follow sports, where we track who won and who lost, who's moving up and down in the standings, where we root, root, root for our home team and *who the hell cares* what consequences are suffered by the losers.

We might begin to realize that our shared public life in the ethnically and politically and every-other-way diverse United States of America is not a game of football, where I am on one particular team and I can slough off responsibility for the well-being of the rival team that mine is attempting to pummel at the moment.

I suggest that our responsibilities ought to extend beyond our group and our team when it comes to the kind of political engagement that's required if our society is going to rise to the challenges that face us.

We don't have to be part of a particular political movement or party to take its concerns seriously. We can dig beneath the rhetoric and policy ideas that make us mad and try to understand where they're coming from and what legitimate principles or objections are driving them – and how these might somehow be accommodated.

Isn't it possible to be thankful for our political opponents? At least those who are sincere and operating in good faith? Thankful for the effect they have of putting a check on our own side's excesses and improving our vision in the areas where we have blind spots? For helping form the creative tensions that often lead to fruitful solutions while forestalling the possibility of our doing really stupid things? For bringing out the best in our side – if only we can stop wishing for the elimination of those pulling in the other direction? Isn't it possible to want the best for our political adversaries, however that might be defined?

This train of thought, I suggest, bends toward an understanding of "love your enemy" that not only promises theoretically to transform our politics for the better but is actually doable. Think about it, and you realize there is some nuance, some interpretive give, in the two key words of that Jesus imperative, *love* and *enemies*. To my conservative friends, I would point out that this doesn't mean you will vote for my side's candidates, adopt all our ideas and policy prescriptions, or show up at our events and go around hugging everyone, purring, "You were right all along. Let's have more big government!" But it does mean that you and I might strive to understand each other a bit better, and come to view each other as more than cardboard cutout figures representing everything we hate. We might even develop a measure of empathy.

As for your enemies, a funny thing happens to them when you love them, whatever that "love" might look like. What happens, you'll see, is that they shape-shift. The instant you change the way you regard them, they morph before your eyes. They are still your political opponents, but not your enemies. And that's when the larger opportunity opens to make progress.

Tom Krattenmaker is communications director at YDS and a USA Today contributing columnist. This essay is excerpted and adapted from his new book Confessions of a Secular Jesus Follower (Convergence Press), with permission from Random House.

The Long Road to Solidarity



By Ray Waddle

Two existential forces defined daily life in the USA when I was growing up: worship attendance and nuclear weapons. Churches were everywhere in my neighborhood – three within walking distance, along with a Reform Jewish temple and the Masonic lodge. People had a stake in these very visible outposts of meaning and ethics.

The nuclear threat was everywhere too. All of America felt it, of course, but our neighborhood could hear it and see it daily. At the US Air Force base across the river from my Louisiana town, B-52s roared off regularly into the Cold War skies, carrying their nuclear payloads to the four winds.

These two facts of our lives – nukes and religion – were fixed and unquestioned. And they acutely contradicted each other. The many congregations –

The American dream gave everyone a chance, but it required a team effort based on human-scale fairness, mutual respect, a balance of economic power.

their steeples, regular services, and exciting bustle – announced the presence of God. Memories of victory over Nazi fascism were still vivid. Much of America felt in sync with divine providence. A covenant with the Lord was in force. Yet the menace of the hydrogen bomb suggested something else entirely. We now had godlike power – a million Nagasakis – to undo what only God had made. We could destroy creation and ourselves, any minute now.

The dread contradiction – never discussed – grinded on and on.

Staring at the Sky

Even in grade school, we kids felt the weight of this, and we tried to resolve it by gazing at the sky. Dur-

ing school recess, amid kickball and jungle gym, many of us would glance up at the racing clouds and muse: News of the end of the world will arrive right there, either in nuclear fire or the coming of Jesus. The Book of Revelation and the Russians seemed to be running neck and neck.

The adults, not given to skyward ponderings, relied on a third force to ease the stressful paradox – prosperity. Good jobs and comfortable routine were reassuring in every spiritual sense. God was blessing us. Surely God wouldn't allow us to blow it all up. The Lord's hand would stay the missiles, we prayed.

Prosperity confirmed our superpower status, emboldened our religious instincts, and lent confidence to the national psyche. It shored up the stability of every establishment of power, local and national.

It also caused new magnitudes of hubris and tragedy.

A Sacred Order?

Abroad, America went to Vietnam because it was our job to be vigilant against communism everywhere. At home, that vigilance took a different turn: We were reluctant to extend prosperity to others, notably African Americans, because the prosperous "we" were mostly white and always had been. Many were determined to keep this sacred order intact.

Presiding at the time of these difficult dramas was the Protestant establishment. It stood for centrist politics, mild reform, emotional restraint, and education. It had been a great numerical baby-



Draft card burning, New York City, 1965
Photo by Hiroji Kubota
© Hiroji Kubota/Magnum Photos

boom success after World War II. The arrangement seemed touched by God. Surely it would continue indefinitely.

This long stretch of years offered the purveyors of the gospel a crucial opportunity, the chance to conduct an extended teaching moment for a new kind of solidarity, if they dared. Such a vision of unity would see the Risen Christ in all people, and preach from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and other fearless scriptural epiphanies of empathy. It would reject the idols of race and status. It would convert hearts on behalf of a solidarity larger than the suburbs, more ambitious than nationalism. A few congregations, at least, did teach this.

Unchallenged Hierarchy

The suburban mainline Protestant church I grew up with was a worthy exemplar of a certain kind of postwar rectitude and achievement. In a time of obsession with the USSR, our church leaders were even-tempered. Sermons focused on the Golden Rule, not Armageddon. The congregation was municipally minded. Members were mostly from the managerial echelons of local businesses or government or the air base.

But like thousands of others, my church left something unchallenged: white hierarchy. Officially, we placed our security in Jesus. But in an unspoken way our confidence also relied on the assumption that God blessed our color, our prosperity, even perhaps our atom-bomb ingenuity. A larger portrait of human solidarity was politely passed over.

By now, prosperity is an embattled and fragile thing, elusive, out of balance, dependent on distant forces of globalization that no one can predict or control. Millions of Americans feel betrayed by an economic system that was supposed to produce

Officially, we placed our security in Jesus. But in an unspoken way our confidence also relied on the assumption that God blessed our color and prosperity.

dividends for everyone. That's what the unofficial social contract preached: The American dream gave everyone a chance, but it required a team effort based on human-scale fairness, mutual respect, a balance of economic power.

In the 1960s, the average ratio of CEO compensation to worker pay was about 20-1. Today it reaches 300-1 or higher. Something went wrong. Inhuman asymmetries were at work, the cold math of the modern market. Elites cast off an old sense of

public responsibility. Digital technology empowered individualism, yet it led to an unexpected result: Social trust declined and tribal identities intensified. The social contract was breaking.

A fund of civil and spiritual good will that we should have been adding to over the decades wasn't there to draw on now. This good will might have been used to ease class distrust, sectional suspicions, and racial conflict. It would have helped prepare us better for the unstoppable pluralism and multiethnic facts of contemporary society, the real

Human beings long for a sense of "vertical attention," transcendence, grandeur. For some 2,000 years, spiritual fulfillment was largely tied up with hierarchy.

America. The 50 states honored the late Dr. King with a national holiday but not a deep commitment to King's themes around a beloved community.

American Christianity meanwhile lost weekly churchgoers. The Protestant establishment diminished. So did gospel progressivism alongside it. Two generations after King's death, we face a political climate disfigured by mob theatrics, rhetorical violence, and plutocratic might.

The eclipse of the contract — post-industrial, post-*Seinfeld*, post-Great Recession, post-Protestant — wasn't sudden. By the early 1990s, soon after the Cold War ended and US power was uncontested, commentators were alarmed to note new waves of youthful nihilism, public petulance, a shortage of reliable adults.

Gratitude and Grandeur

In *The Sibling Society* (1996), Robert Bly worried that habits of gratitude were giving way to envy. Sacred imagination was weakening. Powerful hierarchies had done damage to individuals over the centuries — their collapse was inevitable — but something was missing in the aftermath, he argued. Human beings long for a sense of "vertical attention," transcendence, grandeur. For some 2,000 years, spiritual grandeur was largely tied up with hierarchy — institutional structures of political and church power. If hierarchies are left behind or reconceived, spiritual codes must be reimagined too.

"Vertical attention," Bly wrote, "implies the ability, or at least the longing, to look downward; or the ability to look upward, at the stars, at the energies beyond the stars, at angels."¹

Also: "The Native American view that whenever one makes a decision, one should think of its ef-

fect down to the seventh generation, is a vertical thought. The opposite of that would be a decision based on short-term profits, which often means refusing to invest in the plant or in the people who work in the plant. In vertical thought there is no distinction between men and women; one becomes an elder when one learns to think vertically.”²

Spiritual Bewilderment

What we’ve often seen instead are pockets of intense political yearning for the restoration of a Christian or Islamic or Jewish past or a utopian dream of the techno future. The result: The present itself is disdained. Inattention to the present made it easier to ignore dire trends in actual political life – the scale of personal debt and fragility of the markets, the overreach of our military ambitions, the depths of racial inequality, a boastful contempt for pragmatic governance.

The power of contemporary liberty, as Bly and others noticed, enhanced the individual’s power to withdraw from relationships. With the wall-to-wall ascendancy of social media comes the temptation to dwell in alternative realities, including armed fantasies of revenge.

Before his death in 1987, James Baldwin wrote much about the possibilities of a new solidarity but also warned against the poisons of self-deception. He said we’d get nowhere until we first conquer our own emotional evasions around race and power. Perhaps true egalitarianism was a fraud, he suggested. Maybe it was too hard to believe in: To feel good about themselves, people need to keep someone nearby who is worse off. White America, for instance, has never answered why it was so important to feel superior to black Americans. When African Americans stopped believing what whites were saying about them, many whites entered a time of spiritual bewilderment. Baldwin said this 50 years ago.

Baldwin grew up in Harlem and for a time was a teenage Pentecostal preacher. He would soon reject the faith and move – flee – to Europe to escape the brutality of American racism. But a fierce biblical

The 50 states honored the late Dr. King with a national holiday but not a commitment to his themes of a beloved community.

eloquence never left him. Neither did a vision of love and redemption, a tenderness that managed to whisper: We must not give up on each other.

Americans continue to sort out how they feel about the role of faith in politics, at a time when religious non-affiliation is rising.

Most citizens still say it is important for a president to have strong religious convictions, but that percentage has been waning for the last two election cycles, according to a Pew Research Center poll.

“In 2008, 72 percent said this was an important characteristic,” Pew reported in July. “That share dipped slightly in 2012 to 67 percent, and now 62 percent say that having strong religious beliefs is an important presidential trait.”

Black Protestants and white evangelicals remain especially committed to the idea of a president with strong religious commitments. Nones are least inclined to say they want a religiously minded president, the report said.

Those who identify with the GOP are more likely than Democrats to say religious convictions are important in a president. But in both groups this view is declining, the report said.

Even so, being an atheist remains one of the biggest liabilities that a presidential candidate can have, Pew reports. Half of American adults say they would be less inclined to vote for a hypothetical presidential candidate who does not believe in God; 6 percent say they would be more likely to vote for a nonbeliever.

Other Pew findings:

- 68 percent of Americans believe religion is losing influence in the US. Most who hold this view say that’s a bad thing for American society.
- Some 40 percent of Americans think there has been too little expression of religious faith and prayer by political leaders, compared with 27 percent who say there has been too much religious expression by politicians.
- 51 percent of Americans believe religious conservatives have too much control over the Republican Party, while 44 percent think liberals who are not religious have too much control over the Democrats.
- 26 percent say they would be less likely to vote for a gay or lesbian presidential candidate, while 69 percent say it would make no difference to them. This latter figure has been steadily rising since 2007.

Source: Pew Research Center (pewforum.org)

Baldwin struggled to hope that Christian churches could move beyond racism and jingoism and prove to be a humanizing beacon for more and more people. He put it starkly in *The Fire Next Time* (1963): “If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.”³

This wasn’t easy for a society to hear. Baldwin argued that love is greater than skin color, and humanity is more important than race. This would re-

Spiritual need will seek divine truth as “larger, freer, and more loving.” The current moment, moving irritably toward fragmentation, isn’t sustainable.

quire challenging ancient sociological arrangements and idols of convenience, baggage from olden days – not only racial separation but the subordination of women and the rejection of LGBTQ dignity.

Churches can’t run the political show, not in the US. But the body politic today needs balm and healing despite all the tough talk and roar of the 24/7 engines of division. Christian faith remains a source of salt and light. But the present capture and retailing of Christian identity – making it synonymous in the public mind with deregulation, traditional gender roles, and biblical apocalypse – will have to give way to a bigger circle of care, some larger embrace.

We’ll have to become fluent enough again to speak to vast and opposing sectors and subsets of culture beyond the church – to deteriorating neighborhoods, intellectual elites, football fans, mavens of the dance floor, operatives of the political opposition. There’s a lot of mutual suspicion to overcome.

New Public Faith

A revised public faith might have to identify far more strongly with global currents of nuclear arms reduction and earth care, step up the fight against the roots of terrorism, and speak up for fair economic policies at home. Maybe a new social gospel, a vivid beckoning of the Kingdom of God, will find its moment, just as the old social gospel gave moral heft to bold reforms in its day: the New Deal, the Marshall Plan, the civil rights movement.

Such kingdom belief will force us to face the truth about ourselves and grant us a new freedom to greet each other with grace. Spiritual need and propulsion will stir more and more people to seek divine truth as “larger, freer, and more loving.” The current moment, moving irritably toward everyone-for-himself, isn’t sustainable. A new spiritual

politics will find salvation not in the past but the usable future.

There’s a little book of meditations that I keep handy. *Always We Begin Again* by John McQuiston II is a restatement of sixth-century Benedictine wisdom and sensibility.

“When we rise from sleep let us rise for the joy of the true Work that we will be about this day,” he writes, “and considerably cheer one another on.”⁴

That’s something I don’t hear much these days: *Let us considerably cheer one another on.* We might wonder why this is so hard to do. But something more urgent presses in: the need to defy conditions and dare to take a new step. McQuiston’s book declares what the church undergirds and the heart confirms:

“Each day carries the potential
to bring the experience of heaven;
have the courage to expect good from it.
Be gentle with this life,
and use the light of life
to live fully in your time.”⁵

Ray Waddle is editor of *Reflections*. His books include *Undistorted God* (Abingdon, 2014) and *Against the Grain: Unconventional Wisdom from Ecclesiastes* (Upper Room, 2005).

Notes

- 1 Robert Bly, *The Sibling Society* (Addison-Wesley, 1996), p. 213.
- 2 Bly, p. 211.
- 3 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Vintage International, 1963), p. 47.
- 4 John McQuiston II, *Always We Begin Again* (Morehouse, 1996, revised edition 2011), p. 20.
- 5 McQuiston, p. 20.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

By Charles H. Harper

I don't know about your world,
but in mine, as currently arranged,
there is always something to be done

for instance, peace
in the Middle East or mop
the kitchen floor or prayer

the first highly improbable
the second indefinitely delayable
the third imponderable

I don't know about you,
but I devote big chunks
of worry-time to the impossible

delayable and imponderable.
That's why you find me lying
in the hammock this morning

being schooled by chickadees
as they flit about in their flighty
elegant and achievable task

just being alive

Driving Hate Away



By Charles King '83 M.Div., '89 J.D.

I grew up in south Texas believing homosexuality was a sin worthy of death. It is what my father preached from the pulpit. After years of earnest prayer, asking God to save me from being gay, I finally realized my father was wrong, that God actually made me who I am and loved me for it. That lifted a heavy burden. But having been called to the ministry, I feared that, even though God accepted me, that didn't mean that God's people would.

So as a Baptist minister I kept my sexuality in the closet for years – until I went to visit Bill, our New Haven congregation's music minister, in the hospital. Bill was living with AIDS, end stage, with lesions all over his frail body and thrush lining his mouth. But when I offered to pray with him, he told me it wouldn't do him any good: God was punishing him because he was a homosexual.

A Fateful Sermon

Four months later, preaching at my church, I spoke of that emotional visit to the hospital. I preached that Sunday on the text found in three of the Gospels about the woman with the issue of blood. Perhaps because of a fistula, this woman had been bleeding vaginally for 12 years. This continuous hemor-

I might not be able to do anything about the HIV virus, but I could surely do something about the fear and loathing of gay people.

rhaging surely had many medical consequences, but clearly the worst consequence came under the religious code, which deemed her "unclean." It was socially unacceptable for anyone else to touch her. For 12 years she had been shunned. In my sermon I compared this woman's condition to that of persons living with AIDS – and the shunning that so many

people experienced once their families and friends learned of their condition. This exclusion was often compounded by shame, guilt, self-loathing.

And I told the congregation that day that I could no longer live my life in the closet. I might not be able to do anything about the HIV virus, but I could surely do something about the fear and loathing of gay people that allowed someone as wonderful as Bill to die all alone, believing God was punishing him – because that is what he had heard from God's people.

It was my last sermon as the assistant pastor of that Missionary Baptist church.

That was 31 years ago. My encounter with Bill at Yale New Haven Hospital has propelled me in the fight against AIDS ever since. For me, even after I became HIV-positive myself, the fight was never about the virus. The real fight has always been against the hatred that allows the virus to thrive.

49 in Orlando

I first learned of the June massacre at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, on Facebook. It took time for the enormity to sink in. A man filled with hate, possibly fueled by religion, shot more than 100 people in cold blood and killed 49 of them, people who had just a few minutes before been happily dancing and full of life.

The 49 murder victims aren't just a statistic. They are real people with names, young people,



A police officer checks on a man's condition on the street, New York City, 1978.
Photo by Leonard Freed
© Leonard Freed/Magnum Photos

mostly Latino, their lives destroyed in a terrifying few hours of rage.

Almost immediately, the media began looking for the cause. A hate crime against gay people? A terrorist attack by an ISIS loyalist? A madman with access

I had to wonder: Is Christian hate any different from Muslim hate? Is public hate different from private hate?

to assault weapons? A self-hating gay man committing a violent form of suicide? All of the above? Then some right-wing Christian voices used the slaughter to say once again that legal acceptance of LGBTQ will bring God's judgment on America.

I had to wonder: Is Christian hate any different from Muslim hate? Is public hate different from private hate? When a candidate spews hate against immigrants from a particular country or practitioners of a specific religion, or blatantly demeans women, and millions roar their approval, what does that say about us as a people? When a state passes a law that singles out transgender people for discrimination, why is that not a hate crime?

I truly believe we will see an end to AIDS in my lifetime, and I am committed to that goal. But it will be a hollow victory if we haven't addressed the homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and racism that drive this disease. I am not so naïve as to believe we can end these prejudices. We can, however, employ tenacious advocacy to ameliorate the rejection and disfavor that people experience every day. We now have drugs to treat the virus. But only lovingkindness can cure the impact of hate.

What Works, What Doesn't

How do we combat that? I do know what doesn't work. You can never fight hate with more hate and expect to win. That strategy makes losers of us all. And yet it is trite to suggest love is the answer unless you are prepared to talk about what that love means. Too many times I have heard preachers say, "hate the sin; love the sinner." I can tell you, it didn't feel very helpful to be the object of that kind of love as a young gay man trying to find his way. So I will not be so hypocritical as to suggest such an approach toward those who attack us.

But if love means embracing recipients of hate without adding our own judgments on them, and if love means creating a force of protection and resilience, and if enough people join, I think we stand a chance at shaming hate and driving it away.

Housing Works is a secular organization, yet we believe in something that I think is spiritually profound. We believe in radical inclusion, accepting people where they are without condemnation. We believe we are all broken people living in a broken world and that through kindness we offer each other healing. We stand against hate in all its manifestations, particularly against homophobia, transphobia, and Islamophobia too. We stand for love that heals.

It is love, coupled oftentimes with anger against injustice, that has brought us this far in the fight against AIDS. It is love that will bring us to the end of the epidemic.

Charles King '83 M.Div., '89 J.D. is president and CEO of Housing Works in Brooklyn, NY, an organization dedicated to ending the dual crises of homelessness and AIDS through advocacy, the provision of lifesaving services, and entrepreneurial businesses that sustain its efforts.

THE BROKEN

By Alberto Ríos

Something is always broken.

Nothing is perfect longer than a day —

Every roof has a broken tile,

Every mouth a chipped tooth.

Something is always broken

But the world endures the break:

The broken twig is how we follow the trail.

The broken promise is the one we remember.

Something changed is pushed out the door,

Sad, perhaps, but ready, too ready, for the world.

Something is always broken.

Something is always fixed.

“RENEW THE GRIEVING WORLD”:

An Interview with Teresa Berger



Robert Lisak

Teresa Berger is Professor of Liturgical Studies and Thomas E. Golden Jr. Professor of Catholic Theology at YDS. A native of Germany, she holds doctorates in both liturgical studies and constructive theology, and she writes about how these disciplines intersect with gender theory. She also posts at the liturgy blog Pray Tell. After the Brussels terrorist attack in March 2016, she contributed a prayer at praytelltellblog.com. She described it as “merely one attempt to pray in the face of human-made catastrophes.” The prayer has since been requested by various congregations and other organizations for liturgical use after any number of tragedies. The first four lines cite or quote hymn-writer Isaac Watts, paraphrasing Psalm 90, and the final lines echo Psalm 104.

REFLECTIONS: *This prayer attracted immediate interest. How did you come to write it?*

TERESA BERGER: As a scholar of liturgy and a person of prayer, my intention was to momentarily move out of our fast-paced barrage of media analysis, which exceeds anything that anybody really needs, and express lament. I wanted to avoid any quick-fix prayer, the kind that asks God to make everything better suddenly. There are times, in moments of grief, when we need other ways to stand before God.

REFLECTIONS: *You posted it after the Brussels attack, then again after the Orlando mass killings in June.*

BERGER: Yes, but I stopped posting it after that. I didn't like the idea of trying to figure out when to bring it out again. So many tragedies were occurring. Do we pray when 32 die in Belgium but not when 50 die in Afghanistan? We can't say certain tragedies “merit” a prayer and others don't! These days, as part of my morning prayer, I pray for those who will die that day, with special words about those who may face death by violence.

REFLECTIONS: *You've given much thought to liturgical practices in cyberspace. Did you write this prayer with the internet in mind?*

BERGER: No, I simply wrote it with my own turmoil in mind. It was a way of shutting myself off from the media frenzy in order to find out what it was I might legitimately pray. I began to ponder what such a prayer would need to look like for it to bear the burden of the day's violence. I wasn't planning to share it necessarily. I wanted to force myself to wrestle with words instead of just verbalizing aloud.

REFLECTIONS: *Prayers of lament appear to be rare. Why?*

BERGER: The challenge after a tragedy is always, What do we pray for that won't sound illegitimate? I do think there is such a thing as illegitimate prayer. Jesus thought so – the kind that says, Dear God thank you for letting me survive even while others did not, or, Thank you that I'm not like those others.

The prayer I posted has some guiding convictions behind it. Simply standing in lament is not nothing. After all, we have a whole biblical book, the Book of Lamentations, that addresses this mood. It's important to own that posture. And when the prayer addresses real human beings who were affected, I try to broaden it as much as possible. The quick-fix prayer never takes seriously what Jesus encouraged us to do: to pray for our enemies.

“A Prayer for Days of Terrorist Attacks, Mass Shootings, and Other Human-Made Catastrophes”

Eternal, All-Compassionate God:
You are our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast,
and our eternal home.

We lift our hearts and voices in lament
to you this day as we grieve the violence,
the loss of life, and the destruction
in Brussels ...

Have mercy, O God, have mercy.

We entrust to your infinite compassion
all those who have died.
May they rest in your eternal peace.
We pray for those who are fighting for their lives,
and for those who are maimed and injured
in body, mind, and soul.
Grant them easing of their pain and healing.
We pray for those tasked with
responding to this catastrophe.
Give them steadfastness and wisdom.
And, as you commanded us to do,
we pray for our enemies.
Let them not be lost in violence and hatred.

To all of us, grant deep compassion
for all that lives, and an abiding longing
for your peace.

Lord, send out your Spirit
And renew the face of
our marred and grieving world.

Amen.



Women are held in the Leesburg, GA., stockade, with no beds or sanitary facilities, after their arrest for demonstrating in Americus, GA., 1963.

Photo by Danny Lyon

© Danny Lyon/Magnum Photos

Wishes, Hopes, or Promises?



By Jaco J. Hamman

Ever since Adam and Eve disclosed their longing to be transformed into the likeness of God, we find ourselves driven by three powerful desires: promises, wishes, and hopes. These forces intensify in times of crisis – and during election seasons – when we urgently seek creative solutions and new outcomes. Yet these three practices are distinct, and their differences have consequences in the life of faith and the work of democracy.

Promises are pledged verbal assurances, declarations of responsibility for our future commitments and actions. We promise ourselves and we promise others, though prudently enough we do not promise the moon. We work to build realistic futures on the foundation of promises, even though we know they often fail.

Wishes direct the mind toward something we believe will satisfy, something typically not attainable by our own power. To wish is to disclose a craving or yearning for an object or situation that someone else has to provide. Because wishes are tied to personal

powerful than either promises or wishes. It is one of the three foundations of the Christian life, along with faith and – greatest of all – love (1 Cor 13:13).

The boundaries between wishes, hopes, and promises are often confusing. When my daughter says: “I hope to get an iPad for my birthday,” as she recently did, she is actually expressing a wish cloaked in hope language, while anticipating the promise of a gift.

Hope vs. Optimism

For Christians, hope is more than a mere optimistic attitude or buoyant confidence about a positive outcome. Rather, to hope is a risky affair – I am asking God to enter into my reality, my life. I can trust that the experience will be loving or blessed, but otherwise I do not know the specific ways God’s intervention will unfold. *Who would have imagined a Savior in Jesus who turned the other cheek and loved his enemies?*

The British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes helpfully about the dynamic between promises, wishes, and hopes. He identifies these powers and desires as “forms of persuasion” that enable “us to see how we could think and feel otherwise than we do.” They are rhetorical devices and emotional practices that describe our preferred worlds. For Phillips, a passion for literature and the pursuit of psychoanalysis are two rhetorical practices to help us feel “otherwise.” Sports, money, politics, and religion also function in this way.

Promises can fail and wishes often reflect fickle personal desires. Hope asks something different from us: We are called on to invite God into our future.

need, *wishing knows exactly what it wants*, or thinks it does. We keep wish lists. We communicate our wishes to others. Despite being warned to be careful what we wish for, our wishing abounds.

Hope, as a third powerful desire, shares traits with promises and wishes. All three combine desire and expectation. To hope is to have confidence that a future scenario will unfold. Like wishing, hoping has an object or a situation in mind. Unlike wishing, however, hope keeps an openness, possibly even an uncertainty, about the outcome. Hope is more

As forms of persuasion, promises and wishes especially induce tension within us. They awaken both our desire for change and yet our resistance to future uncertainty – who has ever embraced change without misgivings? Here hope is superior: It gives courage to overcome unexpected obstacles.

Phillips warns that forms of persuasion easily spill over into forms of intimidation when mutuality breaks down and coercive and unilateral power enters into relationships. Hope also “intimidates”: God’s vision for the world rarely reflects our own, but God’s covenant with God’s people is never coercive. A people with hope, history has shown, always intimidates the principalities and powers of this world.

Promises, wishes, and hopes directly address the moral arc of future time. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann writes that we are poised to experience the future in two different ways, either as *futurum* or as *adventus*.² *Futurum* speaks to *what will be*, whereas *adventus* speaks to *what is coming*. As Moltmann describes it, *futurum* is driven by our own specific planning, predictions, and programs – endeavors that rarely call upon or inspire a sustaining hope, for they create a future outcome that soon becomes a past, passé, out-of-date.

God Breaking In

Adventus indicates a very different future expectation. In *adventus* moments, what is coming is something we can scarcely conceive or expect, something qualitatively different from the familiar present: God breaks into our reality. *Adventus* moments have staying power – a decisive experience of transcendence that fuels hope, for it redefines both the past, the present, and the future. It is not that we minimize or reject the *futurum* to embrace the *adventus*, but rather we recognize that the *futurum* – the *futurum* of our well-honed wishes – is not the force that truly determines our lives. Rather, God breaking in is what we long for.

“What about dreams?” you may ask, for dreams are closely tied to promises, wishes, and hopes. “I have a dream ...,” Martin Luther King Jr. said, hoping for the liberation of entire peoples in a democratic society. By contrast, the dreams that accompany us in our sleep or the visions we receive are deeply personal and so often apolitical. Phillips sees our personal dreams as the working out of a “relationship conducted in silence ... Democracy, by definition, is very noisy.” Democracy thrives when all voices are honored at the table.

Ultimately, promises, wishes, and hopes disclose contrasting moral universes. Since politics literally means “the shape of the city,” we should discern

carefully the forms of persuasion that reach us in times of great public yearning or pain. We recognize that promises fail and wishes often reflect fickle personal desires rather than communal need. Living faithfully, we are compelled to see that hope asks something different from us: We are called on to invite God into our future.

There was a time when the shape of the city was discerned with God in mind, when being true to oneself meant being true to God, and for God. Today’s public forms of persuasion lack such vulnerability, trust, and wisdom. Politicians often promise

A people with hope, history has shown, always intimidates the principalities and powers of this world.

the rainbow’s pot of gold and sound persuasive by tapping into our deepest longings – our wishes – without ever having the means or know-how to bring about a changed, hope-filled future. Few leaders open themselves to a future shaped by acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly (Micah 6:8).

A politician who can risk stepping out of a carefully planned *futurum* is more likely to create the possibility for a hopeful future of *adventus* moments. Today’s forms of persuasion, not unlike the fateful moment Eve and Adam experienced, demand our careful scrutiny.

Jaco J. Hamman is Associate Professor of Religion, Psychology, and Culture at Vanderbilt Divinity School, where he is director of the Program in Theology and Practice. A native of South Africa, he lectures widely on research interests that include the formation of pastoral leaders, psychology of religion, and humanity’s deepening relationship with technology. His books include A Play-Full Life: Slowing Down and Seeking Peace (Pilgrim Press, 2011) and Becoming a Pastor: Forming Self and Soul (Pilgrim Press, revised 2014). Growing Down: Human Nature for Virtual People is forthcoming from Baylor University Press. Hamman is also co-founder of the Nashville Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Housing Group (<http://www.nashvilleiddhousing.org/>).

Notes

- 1 Adam Phillips, *Promises, Promises: Essays on Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 365.
- 2 Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, the Gifford Lectures, 1984-1985 (Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 132-34.

GENEALOGY
By Camille Rankine

I was born in a forest.
I don't know my name.
I was born on a mountain but changed
my mind. I was born
in the desert. All my people died
in the fire and left me
with the gods. They called me dust.
How it burned me. I come from the sea,
I believe. I come from beryl,
aquamarine. All my people
rode their horses off
the edge of the world and left me
on your doorstep. They called me
sorrow. I don't know my name.
I come from wartime. How it burned me.
I was born aflame, I believe. A sun
so intentional. A sun in repose, a sun
in continuous sunset, sinking into the ground.



AIDS Walk, San Francisco, 1995
Photo by Paul Fusco
© Paul Fusco/Magnum Photos

Piety, Politics, and Convictions



By Christopher B. Chapp and Paul Goren

Rift. Polarization. Red. Blue. Culture war. Political buzzwords paint a picture of a country being pulled apart over values and morality. Few would suggest that the unifying “civil religion” of the 1950s in any way defines contemporary American spirituality.

Our view is that the characterization of a nation divided along religious, cultural, and political lines is more or less accurate, but it is also incomplete in its diagnosis of the causes of societal fracturing. Accounts of political schisms in the US typically assume religion as the culprit. Religious differences, the story goes, lead to fundamentally different political worldviews, which lead to an absence of political compromise and a deficit in civility.

Rather than regarding religion as the source of this conflict, we see it as a casualty of a larger political battle raging. More specifically, many citizens are updating their religious convictions in order to be

Many citizens are updating their religious convictions in order to be consistent with their relatively stable preferences on abortion and same-sex marriage.

consistent with their relatively stable preferences on sexuality issues – namely abortion and same-sex marriage, which have been intensely politicized for decades. If we want today’s political buzzwords to shift from “division” to “consensus,” change needs to begin with our politics.

A Closer Look

In an article forthcoming in *The American Political Science Review*, we take on the question of religious and political change by examining opinion polls dating back to 1992 – the year Pat Buchanan delivered his infamous “culture wars” speech at the Republican National Convention. A key feature of

our analysis is the use of “panel data,” in which the same individuals are re-interviewed years later. This allows us to examine how the same individual might change her religious and political preferences over a number of years, and, just as important, identify those preferences that are unchanging.

The assumption has long been that one’s religiosity (whether denominational affiliation or frequency of worship attendance) is relatively stable over the course of life, and serves as a foundation for political issue positions. The notion that religion is the origin of our political judgments has been advanced in numerous academic works, and is also a staple of political rhetoric. As Mike Pence remarked when he introduced himself as the 2016 Republican vice-presidential candidate, “I’m a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican, in that order.”

Though no doubt some people do update their views on LGBTQ rights and abortion to mesh with their religious moorings, it is just as likely, if not more so, that the opposite happens.

Imagine a woman who, in 2008, attended worship services regularly and viewed the Bible as inerrant, but also held left-of-center attitudes on women’s reproductive rights. The data suggests that by 2016 she probably attends church a little less often, espouses a less literalist interpretation of scripture, and is more likely to identify as a Democrat, while her attitudes on abortion continue to look a lot like they did in 2008.

Likewise, a pro-life Democrat who was relatively secular in his religious practices would likely move in the Republican direction over time and begin oc-

casionally praying before meals, while his abortion attitudes would waver less. In contrast to Pence, many of our survey respondents were likely to be conservative (or liberal) on social issues, Christians (or not), and Republicans (or Democrats), in that order.¹

Why do our survey respondents typically update their religiosity to mesh with their issue preferences on sexuality? Though we can only speculate, several things are clear. First, there is something unique about the so-called “culture war issues.” We tested a range of other issues for their power to shift individuals’ religiosity. Most other issues – from economic

Religious identities have mapped onto political ones, such that it is increasingly unacceptable to be a secular “none” who is pro-life or an LGBTQ-rights advocate who is evangelical.

judgments to opinions about civil rights – actually shift a great deal over time. The unique status of abortion and LGBTQ rights fits with emerging evidence in psychology that says responses to issues involving human sexuality have a biological basis.²

Partisan Persistence

Some therefore conclude that the partisan politics of sexuality is here to stay and we simply need to live with the consequences. The pressure to politicize such issues is partly due to a media environment that is increasingly devoid of countervailing signals. Political science has documented the effects of partisan echo chambers on one’s political thinking. We tend to self-select into ideologically reinforcing media markets, and dismiss dissonant information as either biased or false if we encounter it at all.

However, we suggest an alternative. Though attitudes on matters involving human sexuality tend to be quite stable over time, they need not be universally politicized.

There is likely a role here for leaders of faith communities to help abate the endemic ideological feuding in the current political climate. As many political observers have noted, the past few decades have produced more consistent ideologues who are homogeneously liberal or conservative. Nearly gone are the days of the liberal Republican or the conservative Democrat. Our research suggests that religious identities have mapped onto political ones, such that it is increasingly unacceptable to be a secular “none” who is pro-life or an LGBTQ-rights advocate

who is evangelical. Religious leaders are not leading the flock to political conformity. Rather, the flock is fragmenting and finding political pastures that suit them best. If communities of faith are to remain approachable and welcoming, they need to embrace a degree of political pluralism or neutrality. The key is to avoid political prerequisites for membership.

Converts are Rare

This election season, we have seen stump speeches, talking heads, and party platforms send well-scripted signals about an unending culture war and declare where archetypal Republicans, Democrats, believers, and nonbelievers ought to land on the issues. Make no mistake: Few will be persuaded. The number of new converts to the cause – left or right – is minimal. Instead, these issue-based appeals will reinforce existing cleavages. For those interested in refocusing the conversation on shared values and pluralism, the challenge is to create a space where religious adherence and community are allowed to grow without the distraction of posturing on political issues.

Christopher B. Chapp is assistant professor of political science at St. Olaf College. He is the author of Religious Rhetoric and American Politics: The Endurance of Civil Religion in Electoral Campaigns (Cornell, 2012). Paul Goren is Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of Minnesota. He is the author of On Voter Competence (Oxford, 2013).

Notes

- 1 Readers will note that in the past decade, public opinion has shifted toward greater acceptance of LGBTQ rights, which, at first glance, is inconsistent with the claim that these attitudes are stable. We offer two explanations: First, macro-level change does not necessarily mean individual change. Part of the reason for the liberalization of LGBTQ attitudes is liberal young people are replacing more conservative older Americans in the electorate. Second, all attitudes change over time. Our data merely suggests that attitudes involving the politics of human sexuality are quite stable compared to religious belief and behavior. Clearly, this is a question that calls for additional research.
- 2 We point to recent work by Koleva et al., <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0092656612000074>, and Hibbing, Smith, and Alford, *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences* (Routledge, 2013), as evidence.

ALL-AMERICAN
By David Hernandez

I'm this tiny, this statuesque, and everywhere
in between, and everywhere in between
bony and overweight, my shadow cannot hold
one shape in Omaha, in Tuscaloosa, in Aberdeen.
My skin is mocha brown, two shades darker
than taupe, your question is racist, nutmeg, beige,
I'm not offended by your question at all.
Penis or vagina? Yes and yes. Gay or straight?
Both boxes. Bi, not bi, who cares, stop
fixating on my sex life, Jesus never leveled
his eye to a bedroom's keyhole. I go to church
in Tempe, in Waco, the one with the exquisite
stained glass, the one with a white spire
like the tip of a Klansman's hood. Churches
creep me out, I never step inside one,
never utter hymns, Sundays I hide my flesh
with camouflage and hunt. I don't hunt
but wish every deer wore a bulletproof vest
and fired back. It's cinnamon, my skin,
it's more sandstone than any color I know.
I voted for Obama, McCain, Nader, I was too
apathetic to vote, too lazy to walk one block,
two blocks to the voting booth. For or against
a woman's right to choose? Yes, for and against.
For waterboarding, for strapping detainees
with snorkels and diving masks. Against burning
fossil fuels, let's punish all those smokestacks
for eating the ozone, bring the wrecking balls,
but build more smokestacks, we need jobs
here in Harrisburg, here in Kalamazoo. Against
gun control, for cotton bullets, for constructing
a better fence along the border, let's raise
concrete toward the sky, why does it need
all that space to begin with? For creating
holes in the fence, adding ladders, they're not
here to steal work from us, no one dreams
of crab walking for hours across a lettuce field
so someone could order the Caesar salad.
No one dreams of sliding a squeegee down
the cloud-mirrored windows of a high-rise,
but some of us do it. Some of us sell flowers.
Some of us cut hair. Some of us carefully
steer a mower around the cemetery grounds.
Some of us paint houses. Some of us monitor
the power grid. Some of us ring you up
while some of us crisscross a parking lot
to gather the shopping carts into one long,
rolling, clamorous and glittering backbone.

And So Our Work Begins



By Josh Williams '08 B.A., '11 M.Div.

Maybe it is masochistic for a black person to pay money to see a film featuring the police killing an unarmed black man. Yet 2013's Fruitvale Station, which depicts 22-year-old Oscar Grant's last hours, compelled me.

As a black man who had “the (police) talk” with his parents early and often, I wanted to view the film as a tribute to all the names of those who had died after similar horrors, names I had heard growing up: Sean (Bell), Amadou (Diallo), Rekia (Boyd), Trayvon (Martin), and Oscar himself. Somehow, these names had become like family. I could trace their faces if you asked, recite biographical details, locate their places of death on a map. That’s what led me to a film to view something I’ve seen all too often: unjust black death.

Afterward, as the closing credits rolled, my wife and I found ourselves crying. We were not alone. Eight or 10 others sniffled along with us. The screen

We wanted to act. We realized we had to dig into the spiritual reservoir of our faith. We dared to believe that mourning together could spark new empathy.

finally went dark. We all remained, as if waiting for something. I whispered to my wife, “I think this is where we are supposed to mourn.” Unable to muster the courage or clarity to call my fellow strangers into an ancient spiritual practice, I watched people quietly leave the theater. The moment had passed, but the thought remained: Might mourning be a way to cope with the spate of killings of unarmed black people?

Wounded and Numb

Three years later, I have become pastor of a multi-ethnic church called Elm City Vineyard in New Haven. Since that night in the theater, unfortunately,

the list of unjustified black deaths at the hands of police has multiplied. By now, the roll call cries out for a public response, not just private reflection. Eric Garner ... Michael Brown ... Sandra Bland ... Freddie Gray. Our congregation began to say their names. They brought them to me as questions, accusations, open wounds. I realized we had to take time to mourn these lives – mourn them like family.

What keeps us from grieving with those who grieve? Numbness. Across our diverse congregation, this numbness is rooted in different personal histories. For some, it is the shock of so much raw, murderous videotape in this social media age. For others, it comes from white shame that is unable to break through to solidarity. Others remain wounded and numb from the horrible loss of dignity after their own contentious encounters with law enforcement. Whatever the reason, intentionally or not, paralysis results in a lack of compassion.

Opening Eyes and Hearts

Our church’s vision includes the cultivation of compassion. We were unsure how to practice that after the 2014 non-indictments in the cases involving Eric Garner and Mike Brown. We wanted to act. We wrestled with big ideas that felt unattainable and small ideas that felt hollow. Finally, we realized we had to dig into the spiritual reservoir of our faith. We had to open our eyes to the power of public repentance and public calls to lament and mourn sins, individual and systemic. We dared to believe that mourning together could spark new power in our compassion.

And so our work began. Each Sunday we set aside a time to mourn. We start by naming a loss

HOLY DISCONTENT

By Ryan McAnnally-Linz '10 M.A.R., '16 Ph.D.

or a wrong. This implies a claim about the truth of things. One member stood and declared black children are robbed of the joy of childhood as a picture of Tamir Rice smiling appeared nearby. An Asian-American woman, in tears, confessed she is afraid of black men and prayed the fear would end.

These public accounts are short but often heart-rending. In a political moment that flagrantly disregards truthfulness and features opposing camps with contradictory accounts of how things are, the



An image used during worship at Elm City Vineyard

simple telling of stories is a dramatic act. It confronts everyone present with a charged, authentic claim about the world. The challenge, the difficulty, is to learn to listen without instinctively dismissing these claims as invalid or ideologically distorted.

There is no easy solution for this problem, but there is something powerful about a story coming from a fellow follower of Christ during worship together. It defies the tendency to reject the speaker as an inferior witness to the truth.

We beseeched God to open our eyes. Something in us needed to change. Many of our white members, for instance, needed a new way of looking at the world, a way shaped by the pain of others. In biblical tradition, sackcloth and ashes can be a sign of both mourning (e.g., Esther 4:1–3; Jer. 6:26) and repentance (e.g., Jonah 3:5–8; Matt. 11:21). For anyone who is complicit in wrongdoing, the call to mourning is necessarily a call to repentance.

Repentance strikes an odd chord in public discourse today. Faux apologies and evasions of responsibility are a more recognizable tune, a thriving art. Our culture remains marred by racism without repentance. Perhaps the church can be both a school and a model of repentance leading to many more open eyes and open hearts.

The Rev. Josh Williams '08 B.A., '11 M.Div. is lead pastor at Elm City Vineyard Church in New Haven, CT.



In late 2014, after a grand jury declined to indict Darren Wilson for killing Michael Brown, a small group of us at Elm City Vineyard hosted a night of lament open to all. We read from the Psalms, prayed traditional collects, devoted time to silence.

The language of mourning is severely underdeveloped in our broader cultures. Faced with loss or wrong, we tend to fall mute or reach for inarticulate platitudes. But our congregational experience reminded me that the church's scriptures (especially those inherited from the Hebrew Bible) and liturgies offer a rich language of mourning, lamentation, and repentance that could be adapted to the public pain of racial injustice.

Christian liturgy gives us words so we can walk alongside those who grieve, even if we ourselves are not yet grieving. In our service of lament, the liturgy urged us to “mourn with those who mourn” (Rom. 12:15). For white Americans like me who might tend (often unconsciously and without malice) to dominate conversation, assume that our speech is always and everywhere relevant, or interpret events into a self-excusing narrative, yielding expressive autonomy to others is a salutary, if sometimes uncomfortable, balm.

These practices of mourning join us in compassion. But compassion is not just feeling others' pain. It is an impetus to action. Whenever the Gospels say Jesus has compassion for someone, the next thing they record is what he does for them, how he cares for them in their need.

Our church is experiencing this turn toward action. Our eyes are open, but what do we do now that we see? We are convinced that part of our work is to mobilize the broader church to mourn and mourn well. We pray that holy discontent with the status quo will continue to reverberate and lead to change that “does justice, loves mercy, and walks humbly with our God” (Mic. 6:8). If churches could help society learn to mourn – to lament injustice and the taking of life and repent of our part in them – they could shape us into compassionate people prepared to act for interracial healing and justice.

As those who believe in a God who turns mourning into dancing, we witness to a hope that gives grief its proper time yet transfigures the difficult path we face. Mourning, repentance, and compassion offer a realistic way for people to flourish again in the wake of wrongs both suffered and committed.

Ryan McAnnally-Linz '10 M.A.R., '16 Ph.D. is co-author, with Miroslav Volf, of Public Faith in Action: How to Think Critically, Engage Wisely, and Vote with Integrity (Brazos, 2016) and associate research scholar at the Yale Center for Faith & Culture. He is an elder at Elm City Vineyard.

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BOOK EXCERPT

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POETRY

Charles H. Harper '61 S.T.M. is a poet and retired United Church of Christ minister living in Las Cruces, NM. His latest volume of poetry is *Odyssey* (Powder Horn Press, 2016). His work can be seen at www.harperpoetry.com.

"Continuing Education" from *Odyssey* and "A Dream Deferred" from *Fragments* (Powder Horn Press, 2014). Copyright © by Charles H. Harper. Reprinted with permission of the author.



David Hernandez's poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Southern Review*, and *The Best American Poetry* series. He teaches creative writing at California State University, Long Beach. His poetry collections include *Dear, Sincerely* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016) and *Hoodwinked* (Sarabande Books, 2011). See davidhernandez.com.

"All-American" and "Anyone Who is Still Trying" from *Dear, Sincerely* by David Hernandez, © 2016. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press. See upress.pitt.edu.



Poet **Camille Rankine** is the author of *Incorrect Merciful Impulses* (Copper Canyon Press, 2016) and the chapbook *Slow Dance with Trip Wire*. Her work has appeared in *American Poet*, *The Baffler*, *Boston Review*, and other publications.

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Alberto Ríos, the inaugural poet laureate of Arizona (2013-15), is the author of several books, including *A Small Story About the Sky* (2015), *The Dangerous Shirt* (2009), *The Theater of Night* (2006), and *The Smallest Muscle in the Human Body* (2002), all with Copper Canyon Press. He is a professor of English at Arizona State University.

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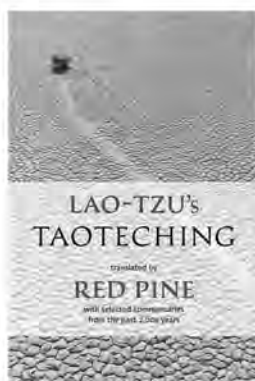
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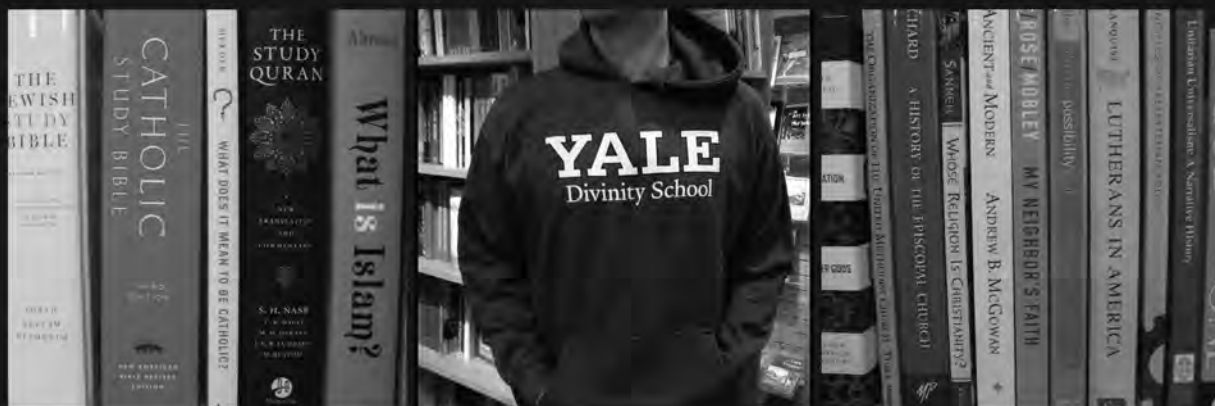
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From the Editor: Uncivil Religion

By Ray Waddle



These days bring to mind the line from William Carlos Williams' poem "To Elsie":

"The pure products of America go crazy –"

Williams was writing in the early 1920s, gazing out on a despoiled Jersey landscape, tenderly lamenting the daily grind that so many Americans faced to the point of desperation and derangement. Nearly a century later, his words echo.

Lately the national catalogue of "pure products" and their human cost has expanded. The list includes a fascination with certain runaway abstractions – a nostalgia for the 1950s, the fever dream of an armed citizenry, a creedal loyalty to market freedom or racial superiority. These body politic visions of purity go crazy.

Writer Peter Schjeldahl once said the USA is an idea that stands on three legs: "first, a set of 18th-century political documents, which we argue about continually; second, the cautionary example of the Civil War, which fates us to stick together no matter what; and, third, daily consumption of mass culture. That's it. Everything else, however tremendous, is secondary."¹

Relegated to his secondary list is religion. That demotion looks doubtful. An American civil religion, a belief that this pluralistic nation is blessed by the Creator, is a historic marker of our identity and exceptionalism. An old thought – God is watching – always did egalitarian work over here. It was a way of saying we're all equal, and equally vouchsafed, in the economy of salvation.

The assumption of God's providence is now under strenuous reassessment. The pressure of events – economic pessimism, gun slaughters, the rages of ideology – is rattling the confidence of many. On the big plasma screen, enchantment surrounds the powerful celebrity, as if to fill a spiritual void. Extremes of rhetoric and violence carry a dark glamour. And so the will of God gets an updated rival – the human will to power – stockpiled with firepower to enforce a perfect isolation inside the castle of individualism. Ideas that stand up for a functioning public life scatter in retreat.

American Christianity often gets defined as a religion of individualism. When that happens, little is expected of it in the arena of public solutions. The

faith, however, teaches a wisdom that has consequences for political reform: an abiding affection for creation, a love of the things God has made.

What God has made is exceedingly, unnervingly diverse, and evidently it flourishes only if a balance is struck, a system of mutual courtesy. That seems to be the point of the much-repeated scriptural commands about Golden Rule, love of neighbor, and forgiveness. This group of commands isn't there to flummox people with guilt. It arrives each moment as a practical principle.

And it applies everywhere. Golden Rule, regard for neighbor, the power of forgiveness – the world couldn't manage without them. Daily business transactions depend on them. So does all the unglamorous work of organizing a neighborhood, launching a bond issue, or improving police-community relations. The everyday world is messy and plural. It resists our quaint impositions of ideological purity. Things go wrong when militant zeal becomes a spellbound fixation.

In his new book *Putting God Second*, Rabbi Donniel Hartman suggests what happens when the pure products of devotion hold sway: They lethally distort religion's best values, and then faith is dishonored and the public is harmed. It's possible to be so consumed with pious intoxication that one becomes morally blind to God's will, which is always to respect what God has made. The corrective is, as Hartman provocatively puts it, to "put God first by putting God second." Serve God by repairing the world and greeting the divine image in others. Here the theological and the political meet.

"Creation in the divine image is not merely a statement of value but one of purpose: a special charge to humanity to engage in *tikkun olam*, 'repairing the world,' grounded in the responsibility to be God's partner in governing and managing creation," he writes.²

In its marrow, faith is a pragmatic force for sanity – people working for a humane future, feeling solid earth underneath. Politics too is about getting things done, and doing it together, after the bluster of ideology moves on to its next self-defeat, away from the hybrid surprises and graces of real life.

Notes

- 1 Peter Schjeldahl, *Let's See: Writings on Art in The New Yorker* (Thames & Hudson), p. 14.
- 2 Donniel Hartman, *Putting God Second: How to Save Religion From Itself* (Beacon, 2016), p. 165.



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