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Ring The Alarm Bell! Religious Nationalism is in Charge

Patrick Anderson, editor

While I was a doctoral student in criminology at Florida State University, I was invited to speak to the religion department on the subject, "God and Crime: The Intersection of Social Sciences (Criminology) and Religious Studies." At the time, both the School of Criminology and the Department of Religion at FSU were among the most highly regarded graduate programs in their respective fields of study. The lecture was very well attended. Students and professors of religion outnumbered the criminologists by a lot. It seemed that only two of my criminology professors were interested in the subject.

The organizers of the event had not informed me beforehand that one of my professors, Ted Chiricos, had been invited to attend and make a "response" to my presentation. Professor Chiricos was a well-published young sociologist with whom I had an antagonistic relationship, especially in a seminar he had led on "Critical Criminology" which sought to assign the root of crime and delinquency to the structural conditions within a capitalist society. The critique of capitalism by Marx and Engels was a primary source. I was intrigued by the subject, especially as I was familiar with the writings of liberation theologians who also criticized the unbridled capitalism which stemmed from colonialism and greedy U.S corporations in Latin America, causing the unrest and injustices endemic to people living under the governments in the region.

As a seminary graduate and juvenile justice practitioner, I was very attuned to the structural injustices in U.S. society that, in my experience in the criminal justice system, exacerbated the inequities and problems in our society. I was disappointed by what I understood to be the failure of my Baptist religion to understand and address the issues of crime and delinquency. So, in my address, I set about the task of informing the religion folks about what I understood to be the common themes between theology and criminology. I sought to entice the scholars of religion, primarily Christianity, to join the struggle to understand the roots of criminal behaviors and to recognize and reform the terrible injustices found in the juvenile and criminal justice systems in the U.S.

When I had finished speaking, Dr. Chiricos took the microphone. As I remember it, his opening line was: "The last thing we need is for religion to get involved in crime and justice." He went on to outline the horrors of the Eight Crusades of medieval Christian wars to dislodge Arabs from Jerusalem, the doctrine of discovery by which the New World was violently claimed by Europeans in the name of Jesus Christ, the Puritans' stated intention to make America in their image of biblical law, the religious justification for westward expansion and eradication of indigenous populations, defense of slavery by southern preachers, the wars between the nations of Islam and Judaism, and on and on. A hush fell over the place.

Years later, before he died, Ted and I shared a drink

Especially now. Now we are engaged in an undeclared, unauthorized war against Iran which has spread throughout the Middle East and is pitting the three major religions of the region (Islam, Christianity and Judaism) against each other.

at a criminology convention and discussed that day in the department of religion. He told me that he had reached the conclusion that the Christian religion may have more to offer than he had expressed that day. But now, I must say that Professor Chiricos was probably more correct than he was wrong. We religionists sure do have a lot to answer for. Especially now.

Now we are engaged in an undeclared, unauthorized war against Iran which has spread throughout the Middle East and is pitting the three major religions of the region (Islam, Christianity and Judaism) against each other. To make matters even worse, the theology of each religion is represented by its most intransigent, far-right, fundamentalist adherents: In Islam it is Shia nationalism; in the Jewish State of Israel it is the ultra-orthodox Zionists; and in the USA it is Christian Nationalist policy-makers in the White House, Congress, and the halls of government, along with some commanders in America's military leadership. In each side of the war the desire is for government to strictly embody the most literal interpretations of the original texts of their religion. That theology expressed by war leaders of each religion is considered to be uninformed, incorrect, or heretical to a large proportion of non-fundamentalist adherents of each religion.

Christian Ethics Today, along with a host of other publications, has been sounding the alarm bell for years about the threat posed by Christian Nationalism. Many fellow Christians have either not paid attention or considered the warnings to be alarmism, exaggeration, or too partisan. But the evidence of the harm done by the toxic mixture of religious fundamentalism and politics is unmistakable. I believe that Ted Chiricos and I would find ourselves in agreement today about evil that can be wrought by religious militarism but also accept the efficacy of the best teachings and practices of these three religions in social policy.

A major war that is premised on fundamentalist theology of three major world religions, each disinclined to negotiation or compromise, each believing they are following their God Almighty's divine will, will not end well.

A major war that is premised on fundamentalist theology of three major world religions, each disinclined to negotiation or compromise, each believing they are following their God Almighty's divine will, will not end well. I believe that most Muslims, Jews, and Christians know better, and wish to work together to live out the best practices espoused by tenets of their own faith, or no faith at all. ■

We Want the Warhorse

We want the warhorse.
Jesus rides a donkey.
We want the eagle.
The Holy Spirit descends as a dove.
We want to take up swords.
Jesus takes up a cross.
We want the roaring lion.
God comes as a slaughtered lamb.
We keep trying to arm God.
God keeps trying to disarm us.

— Rev. Benjamin R. Cremer from Into The Gray: Substack

Before Venezuela's Oil, There Were Guatemala's Bananas

By Aaron Coy Moulton

In the aftermath of the U.S. military strike that seized Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on Jan. 3, 2026, the Trump administration has emphasized its desire for unfettered access to Venezuela's oil, rather than conventional foreign policy objectives such as combating drug trafficking or bolstering democracy and regional stability.

During his first news conference after the operation, President Donald Trump claimed oil companies would play an important role and that the oil revenue would help fund any further intervention in Venezuela.

Soon after, "Fox & Friends" hosts asked Trump about this prediction.

"We have the greatest oil companies in the world," Trump replied, "the biggest, the greatest, and we're gonna' be very much involved in it."

As a historian of U.S.-Latin American relations, I'm not surprised that oil or any other commodity is playing a role in U.S. policy toward the region. What has taken me aback, though, is the Trump administration's openness about how much oil is driving its policies toward Venezuela.

As I've detailed in my 2026 book, *Caribbean Blood Pacts: Guatemala and the Cold War Struggle for Freedom,* U.S. military intervention in Latin America has largely been covert. And when the U.S. orchestrated the coup that ousted Guatemala's democratically elected president in 1954, the U.S. covered up the role that economic considerations played in that operation.

A powerful "octopus"

By the early 1950s, Guatemala had become a top source for the bananas Americans consumed, as it remains today.

The United Fruit Company owned over 550,000 acres of Guatemalan land, largely thanks to its deals with previous dictatorships. These holdings required the intense labor of impoverished farm workers who were often forced from their traditional lands. Their pay was rarely stable, and they faced periodic layoffs and wage cuts.

Based in Boston, the international corporation networked with dictators and local officials in Central America, many Caribbean islands and parts of South America to acquire immense estates for railroads and banana plantations.

The locals called it the *pulpo* – octopus in Spanish – because the company seemingly had a hand in shaping the region's politics, economies and everyday life. The Colombian government brutally crushed a 1928 strike by United Fruit workers, killing hundreds of people.

That bloody chapter in Colombian history provided a factual basis for a subplot in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, an epic novel by Gabriel García Márquez, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1982.

The company's seemingly unlimited clout in the countries where it operated gave rise to the stereotype of Central American nations as "banana republics."

The United Fruit Company owned over 550,000 acres of Guatemalan land, largely thanks to its deals with previous dictatorships. These holdings required the intense labor of impoverished farm workers who were often forced from their traditional lands.

United Fruit included the Chiquita brand of bananas that it widely advertised, including with this commercial produced in the 1940s.

Guatemala's democratic revolution

In Guatemala, a country historically marked by extreme inequality, a broad coalition formed in 1944 to overthrow its repressive dictatorship in a popular uprising. Inspired by the anti-fascist ideals of World War II, the coalition sought to make the nation more democratic and its economy more fair.

After decades of repression, the nation's new leaders offered many Guatemalans their first taste of democracy. Under Juan José Arévalo, who was democratically elected and held office from 1945-1951, the government established new government benefits and a labor code that made it legal to form and join unions and established eight-hour workdays.

He was succeeded in 1951 by Jacobo Árbenz, another democratically elected president.

Under Árbenz, Guatemala implemented a land reform program in 1952 that gave landless farmworkers their own undeveloped plots. Guatemala's government asserted that these policies would build a more equitable society for Guatemala's impoverished, indigenous majority.

United Fruit denounced Guatemala's reforms as the result of a global conspiracy. It alleged that most of Guatemala's unions were controlled by Mexican and Soviet communists and painted the land reform as a ploy to destroy capitalism.

Lobbying Congress to intervene

In Guatemala, United Fruit sought to enlist the U.S. government in its fight against the elected government's policies. While its executives did complain that Guatemala's reforms hurt its financial investments and labor costs, they also cast any interference in its operations as part of a broader communist plot. It did this through an advertising campaign in the U.S. and by taking advantage of the anti-communist paranoia that prevailed at the time.

United Fruit executives began to meet with officials in the Truman administration as early as 1945. Despite the support of sympathetic ambassadors, the U.S. government apparently wouldn't intervene directly in Guatemala's affairs.

The company turned to Congress.

It hired the lobbyists Thomas Corcoran and former senator Robert La Follette Jr. for their political connections.

Right away, Corcoran and La Follette lobbied Republicans and Democrats in both chambers against Guatemala's policies – not as threats to United Fruit's business interests, but as part of a communist plot to destroy capitalism and the United States.

The banana company's efforts bore fruit in February 1949, when multiple members of Congress denounced Guatemala's labor reforms as communist.

Sen. Claude Pepper called the labor code "obviously intentionally discriminatory against this American company" and "a machine gun aimed at the head of this American company."

Two days later, Rep. John McCormack echoed that statement, using the exact same words to denounce the reforms.

Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., Sen. Lister Hill and Rep. Mike Mansfield also went on the record, reciting the talking points outlined in United Fruit memos.

No lawmaker said a word about bananas.

Lobbying and propaganda campaigns

This lobbying and communist talk culminated five years later, when the U.S. government engineered a coup that ousted Árbenz in a covert operation.

That operation began in 1953, when the Eisenhower administration authorized the Central Intelligence Agency to unleash a psychological warfare campaign that manipulated Guatemala's own military to overthrow its democratically elected government.

CIA agents bribed members of Guatemala's military. Anti-communist radio broadcasts and religious pronouncements about communist designs to destroy the nation's Catholic church spread throughout the country.

Meanwhile, the U.S. armed anti-government organizations inside Guatemala and in neighboring countries to further undermine the Árbenz government's morale.

And United Fruit enlisted public relations pioneer Edward Bernays to spread propaganda, not in Guatemala, but in the United States. Bernays provided U.S. journalists with reports and texts that portrayed the Central American nation as a Soviet puppet

One dictator after another brutally repressed their opponents and fostered a climate of fear. Those conditions contributed to waves of emigration, including countless refugees, as well as some members of transnational gangs.

These materials, including a film titled *Why the Kremlin Hates Bananas*, circulated thanks to sympathetic media outlets and members of Congress.

United Fruit's quest to oust Guatemala's democratically elected government got a boost from this anti-communist propaganda film.

Destroying the revolution

Ultimately, the record shows, the CIA's efforts prompted military officers to depose their elected leaders and install a more pro-U.S. regime led by Carlos Castillo Armas.

Guatemalans who opposed the reforms slaughtered labor leaders, politicians and others who had supported Árbenz and Arévalo. At least four dozen people died in the immediate aftermath, according to official reports.

Local accounts recognized hundreds more deaths.

Military regimes ruled Guatemala for decades after this coup.

One dictator after another brutally repressed their opponents and fostered a climate of fear. Those conditions contributed to waves of emigration, including countless refugees, as well as some members of transnational gangs.

Blowback for bananas

To shore up its claims that what happened in Guatemala had nothing to do with bananas, exactly as the company's propaganda insisted, the Eisenhower administration authorized an antitrust suit against United Fruit that had been temporarily halted during the operation so as not to cast further attention on the company.

This would be the first in a series of setbacks that would break up United Fruit by the mid-1980s. After a series of mergers, acquisitions and spinoffs, the only constant would be the ubiquitous Miss Chiquita logo stuck to the bananas the company sells.

According to many foreign policy experts, Guatemala has never recovered from the destruction of its democratic experiment due to corporate pressure.■

According to many foreign policy experts, Guatemala has never recovered from the destruction of its democratic experiment due to corporate pressure.

Aaron Coy Moulton is associate professor of Latin American History at Stephen F. Austin State University. This article was published on January 15, 2026 *in* The Conversation *and is reprinted here with permission of the author and* The Conversation. *Moulton's new book,* "Caribbean Blood Pacts: Guatemala and the Cold War Struggle for Freedom," *Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2026.*

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"America Never Was America to Me": Telling a Story Fitted for Those Who Have Outgrown American Myths or the Raceless Gospel for Ex- Colored People Who Have Lost Faith in White-Body Supremacy

Starlette Thomas

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

- Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again"

I stopped pledging allegiance to the American flag when I was sixteen years old. The time coincided with my call to ministry, give or take a year. Early on, I figured the two didn't go hand in hand. Hand to the plow as expected in Luke's gospel, it required a singular focus if my work was to be of any use and if ever I was to set my sights on the "kin-dom" of God. Right hand to God, I met with the principal, who agreed with my decision. It was my First Amendment right. Jesus is the "King of kings and the Lord of lords," right (Revelation 19:16)? It also felt right.

One Sunday morning, we sang, "On Christ, the solid rock I stand / All other ground is sinking sand." So, what was I expected to think of American soil given its shifty relationship with African Americans? Do you know this country's history of trapping African Americans? From chattel slavery to sharecropping and convict leasing, the "Reverse Underground Railroad" rerouted them back to bondage through economic and legal coercion. Today, this mass incarceration continues vis-à-vis "the new Jim Crow," as Michelle Alexander explains it.[1]

Besides, my pastor told us we were "pilgrims passing through." The choir sang, "Walking up the king's highway" because we were heaven bound as this world was passing away, a temporal reality. Instead, we pledged allegiance to Jesus and his "kin-dom," affirming the supremacy of Christ, his commandments and his sacrifice. "In baptism, our citizenship is transferred from one dominion to another and we become, in whatever culture we find ourselves, resident aliens," Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon concluded in a book of the same name.[2] This earth was not our home. Instead, we were oriented to see ourselves as strangers who knew nothing of worldly powers or idols. So, forgive me, but Caesar who?

Consequently, I had to choose between two stories— the biblical narrative or the collection of stories Americans tell themselves of the "frontier spirit," the "self-made man" and a people reduced to a mixture spooned from a "melting pot." Regarding the latter, all are chapters taken from the story of American exceptionalism—except America never felt exceptional to me. It is likely because this country has never done anything unexpected for me. And I don't expect it to.

This earth was not our home. Instead, we were oriented to see ourselves as strangers who knew nothing of worldly powers or idols. So, forgive me, but Caesar who?

America still owes my ancestors forty acres and a mule. It's the same country that didn't formally apologize for slavery until the 110th United States Congress session in 2008. The Senate, now on the same page, issued more of the same sentiment a year later. Both were sure to make it plain that this did not mean African Americans were entitled to compensation. Neither apology authorized claims for reparations. So, I say, "Save it."

Stories shape people, perspectives and our subsequent lived realities. They are a source of embodiment and for good or ill, a means of transformation. "White Christian nationalism's 'deep story' goes something like this: America was founded as a Christian nation

by (white) men who were ‘traditional’ Christians, who based the nation’s founding documents on Christian principles,” Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry wrote in *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. The authors continued, “Like any story, this one has its heroes: white conservative Christians, usually native-born men. It also has its villains: racial, religious, and cultural outsiders.”[3]

But the story is a myth as the founders were a mix: atheist, deist, Baptist, Congregationalist, Unitarian, and Roman Catholic. The founding documents also weren’t divinely inspired or written with the finger of God but influenced by classical liberalism and civic republicanism. White Christian nationalism is “a cultural framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates for the fusion of Christianity with American civic life,” Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry make plain in *Take America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*.[4] Further, the land was stolen from the peoples indigenous to what became the United States as was the labor from Africans and later African Americans. Still, many Americans live by and die for these conclusions.

They are an organizing principle and a dividing line as stories told in the media about African Americans, those racialized as black, reinforce these largely prejudiced and stereotypical storylines. It also feeds the idols of white Christian nationalism identified by Whitehead as power, fear and violence.[5] Illustrated by mugshots and narrated by persons at a “safe” distance. Likewise, the story told on Sunday mornings is of segregation, a derivative of chattel slavery’s history of control, forced assimilation and the hyper-surveillance of persons racialized as white,[6] who recreated themselves as masters, mistresses and overseers. It is heard in the songs we teach children about the love of Jesus: “Jesus loves the little children / All the children of the world/ *Red and yellow, black and white* / They’re all precious in his sight / Jesus loves the little children of the world.” Color-coded, that’s not how Jesus loves the little children. Instead, it is how American Christians racialized their Christian confession and it is an embodied witness. “In order to protect their whiteness, adults taught children to keep themselves physically separate from blackness at all costs, for sharing any intimate space resulted in an intolerable familiarity between the races,” Kristina DuRocher explained in *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South*.[7] Still segregated at 11 a.m. sharp on Sunday mornings, this includes sacred spaces.

A racialized gospel, God is recreated as a colored human being and somehow an impossible theophany for the progenitors of the faith—to see the face of God and live to draw a picture— is possible (cf. Exodus 33:20). “By wrapping itself with the alleged form of Jesus, whiteness gave itself a holy face,” Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey wrote in *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. The authors continued, “But he was a shape-shifting totem of white supremacy. The differing and evolving physical renderings of white Jesus figures not only bore witness to the flexibility of racial constructions but also helped create the perception that whiteness was sacred and everlasting.”[8] Pseudo- divinity framed in canvas prints, 5x7s and 8x10s, the image of God shrunk to the size of our imaginations. Hung up on church walls for our observation, begging the question posed by William R. Jones, “Is God a white racist?”[9] Here’s a small suggestion: Take them all down.

Race created a social hierarchy, a pigmentocracy and justified what Frantz Fanon described as the “epidermalization—of this inferiority.”[10] In turn, whiteness became pedestalized and after a time, recreated as divine, sanctified even. Though Christians identified as “new creatures in Christ,” our baptismal identity as explained in Galatians 3:27-28, became insignificant, watered-down even (see also 2 Corinthians 5:17). Stephen J. Patterson described it as “the forgotten creed” in his book of the same name, writing, “Baptism exposes the follies by which most of us live, defined by the other, who we are not.” He continued, “It declares the unreality of race, class and gender: there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male and female. We may not all be the same, but we are all one, each one a child of God.”[11] What can I say then to the North American church that mostly practices an imperial religion— except woe unto you, hypocrites!

Color-coded, that’s not how Jesus loves the little children. Instead, it is how American Christians racialized their Christian confession and it is an embodied witness.“In order to protect their whiteness, adults taught children to keep themselves physically separate from blackness at all costs, for sharing any intimate space resulted in an intolerable familiarity between the races.

Some might ask, “Why are you making this about race?” But I’m not forcing a conversation; this is far from a reach as race and white Christian nationalism are inextricably linked. Because “(white) Christian nationalism betrays the life and teachings of Jesus in two important areas: racial inequality and xenophobia,” Andrew L. Whitehead wrote in *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. He wrote later, “White Christian nationalism is closely intertwined with systemic racism. Rather than minimizing this connection, white American Christians can acknowledge our complicity in upholding the systems that maintain racial inequality.”[12] But the North American church has known this from its colonial beginning, a well-informed choice made evident by its embodied praxis of segregation. William James Jennings names the detriment of this decision in *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, writing, “The Christian imaginary that is emerging out of colonialist power naturalized segregationist mentalities and thereby denied one of its most basic and powerful imaginative possibilities, the deepest and most comprehensive joining of peoples.”[13] Accordingly, the members of the North American church cannot effectively practice the ministry of reconciliation because they cannot envision the beloved community—if only in the mind’s eye.[14]

How then shall we preach? No more pulpit swaps and community days, please. No topical treatments of social ills that are more than skin deep. Instead, we’ve got to get our story straight regarding “the false white gospel” as Jim Wallis describes white Christian nationalism as it will inform our character development, our Christlikeness.[15] “If we are to understand how Chistian convictions help us to form our lives truthfully the narrative of our lives must be recognized,” Stanley Hauerwas pointed out in *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*. He continued, “To stress the significance of narrative at the very least helps remind us that the documents crucial to the life of the Christian community take the form of narrative.”[16] A “storied people,” the North American church has never existed apart from segregation, unwilling to turn the page even if it advances the coming “kin-dom.”[17]

The late James H. Evans, Jr. also offers a responsive task in *We Have Been Believers: An African- American Systematic Theology*:

The black theologian must relate the ‘canonical’ story, in its prophetic mode, with the ‘folk’ story of a people who hope against hope. To do this, the theologian cannot be so immersed in the assurance, optimism and myopia of the canonical story (the proclamation of the churches) that he or she is unable to see the challenge of the folk story. Conversely, the theologian cannot become so enchanted by the pathos of the folk story or so disillusioned by the tragic dimensions of African- American experience that the hope expressed in the canonical story is not seen. In sum, the black theologian must tell a story that relates the hope of the biblical message with the realism of the black experience. … [F]rom creation to consummation, black theologians must fashion a story that brings together the twin commitment of African-American Christians to faith and freedom.[18]

Summarily then, tell the truth, shame the devil and hit the support hounds of fear, hypocrisy and hatred “that track the trails of the disinherited” as expressed by Howard Thurman in *Jesus and the Disinherited*.[19]

This is not a step-by-step approach but a lifelong practice of discipleship, the faithful denial of white-body supremacy and its progeny, including white Christian nationalism.

Don’t tell a long, winding tale of how they all managed to get away.

This is why counter narratives of resistance, subversion and reclamation are so important. It’s also the reason why two-sided stories are questionable as they support false binaries, dyads and oppositional ways of being. Consequently, positions like “take all the world and give me Jesus” can be used to spiritually bypass the victims of Jesus’s followers. Instead, Christians need to take a long, hard look at their church’s history and complicity with the North American empire. This is not a step-by-step approach but a lifelong practice of discipleship, the faithful denial of white-body supremacy and its progeny, including white Christian nationalism.

Take the American flag out of the sanctuary. How’s that for starters? Stop putting your hand over your heart and singing, “God bless America.” It’s political propaganda, a patriotic prayer that promotes exclusive nationalism and blurs the lines between religious and national allegiance. Separate the church from state

celebrations. See the church as "the body of Christ"—not a 501 (c)(3) organization. Churches don't pay taxes for a reason (Ephesians 4:15-16). Follow Jesus's instructions to "render under Caesar what is Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25) and the president's hands should come up empty.

Because you can't tell two stories without talking out of both sides of your mouth, without being two-faced and double-minded even. So, here's the story I needed to hear, aptly titled, "The Raceless Gospel for Ex-Colored People Who Have Lost Faith in White-Body Supremacy." My magnum opus, the *Raceless Gospel* assumes race is a sociopolitical construct without biblical or biological basis and is inspired by the re-creation narrative of baptism in Galatians 3:27-28.[20] This text is also the biblical response to the marginalization of people groups, the patriarchal domination of women and the economic exploitation of persons who were enslaved. It is a counter to the ancient cliché: "I thank God every day that I was born a native, not a foreigner; free and not a slave; a man and not a woman." This baptismal creed was the early church's response to divisiveness and today, would include white Christian nationalism.

Not a colorblind lens or a post-racial vision, Jesus followers are invited to remember their baptism and consider how this watermark informs their self-understanding barring the power-grabbing identity of whiteness as well as the subsequent practice of discipleship and Jesus's ministry apart from what Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes as "relationships of ruling."[21] The work and witness of the Raceless Gospel is the result of deconstructing Christianity from race, decolonizing identity, decentering whiteness, and questioning racialized narratives about human being and belonging. The result is semantic and somatic sovereignty, which frees me to say race and white Christian nationalism are both tools of neocolonialism. Baptism as a reflection pool would trouble and perhaps, transform American society, delivered from the capitalist inspired categories of somebodies and nobodies.

Still, Langston Hughes is right: "America never was America to me" so I had to go and prepare a place for me, free from white-body supremacy in preparation for a "kin-dom" coming. This is the *Raceless Gospel.* ■

Rev. Starlette Thomas, D.Min., is the director of The Raceless Gospel Initiative, named for her work and witness and the associate editor at Good Faith Media. She is also the author of *Take Me to the Water: The Raceless Gospel as Baptismal Pedagogy for a Desegregated Church*.

The work and witness of the Raceless Gospel is the result of deconstructing Christianity from race, decolonizing identity, decentering whiteness, and questioning racialized narratives about human being and belonging.

The Old, Forsaken Republican Party's Opinion

Abraham Lincoln, warning his generation about the idea of a small government that serves only the needs of a few wealthy people.

This is **"…the same old serpent that says you work and I eat, you toil and I will enjoy the fruits of it. Turn it whatever way you will—whether it come from the mouth of a King, an excuse for enslaving the people of his country, or from the mouth of men of one race as a reason for enslaving the men of another race, it is all the same old serpent."**

Depolarizing Ourselves, Our Conversations, and Our Communities by Pluralizing Identities

Jacob Alan Cook

Among those who study and work with conflict, a hopeful and constructive edge has emerged under the banner of "conflict transformation." To be fair, practitioners have been continuously sharpening the transformational edge over the last several decades, but their work has generally occurred outside the awareness of US American seminaries and churches.[1] This developing field's pivotal, fundamental insight is: Conflict is an everyday, everywhere phenomenon that holds not only destructive but creative potential. Not every conflict is an intractable level 5, even if key players can access neither the skills nor the structures to engage with confidence.[2] Conflict first appears in the form of problems to solve and disagreements about (a) where we hope to go, (b) which path to take to get there, or (c) how to distribute our resources along the way. With social worlds as diverse as ours, we should not be surprised by the commonplaceness of such disputes.

Not only is conflict *normal*, but as Ellen Ott Marshall has convincingly argued, it is also *normative* in the church for at least two fundamental reasons. First, "Christians should be in conflict with one another because the Christian faith is a dynamic, historical development."[3] Second, the church is comprised of individuals called together from a wide variety of contexts and patterns of formation with a shared calling to follow Jesus and cultivate the beloved community.[4] Since the world itself is a dynamic, historical development, our goals and pathways as Christians and church communities are not always clear, hence we practice discerning faithful postures and strategies together. Why should we idealize conflict prevention or limit our imaginations to merely managing or resolving it in such a community? In a community bound together by the very Spirit of God, we are free to contemplate the creative potential of healthy conflict for deepening social bonds and facilitating positive transformation.

Over the last ten years, US Americans have witnessed many churches and denominations sorting ideologically—a culture-wars trend that accelerated in the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic—and this process can have alienating, chilling, and other negative effects on dissenting members.[5] While there is a rising sense of shared identity in many places of worship, when congregants do take up peace and justice values, they more regularly engage in, avoid, or otherwise feel the heat of conflict with beloved others who disagree. And the outcomes of this conflict strike many of us as entirely beyond our control. Among the predictable behaviors of persons in polarized environments that curtail positive results from tough conversations are splitting or social sorting into discrete affinity groups in which "any encounter with different opinions or perspectives is viewed in win/lose terms" and disregarding "any information that does not support one's 'position.'"[6] Often enough, these dynamics in a society backflow into smaller-scale relationships like families and congregations.

In this article, I will present a posture and some strategies that could lead us in this direction, with a special focus on diffusing polarized, us-versus-them dynamics, starting with the self.

At a time when there seems to be more than enough conflict to go around, we are at risk for either withdrawing to avoid the risks and discomfort of open conflict or venting our moral energy through strong feelings about media accounts, and by generating our own accounts via social media, of adaptive challenges that we cannot (or will not) actively engage rather than putting that energy to creative use. But if we are ever to fulfill the call to become a thermostat in society and not merely thermometer, we must tune ourselves to be the instruments of peace and experiment with skills and structures that can accurately read and make good use of the conflict in our systems. In this article, I will present a posture and some strategies that could lead us in this direction, with a special focus on diffusing polarized, us-versus-them dynamics, starting with the self.

Shifting Postures toward the Self and Others

There is little wonder, however, that many are distressed when they (we!) register conflict within our

local congregations. Theological systems tend to assume we are, or at least ought to be, on the same page as our fellow church members. And if we share core faith commitments (already a live question in our churches), it is reasonable to suppose that our moral values would align—what values in the first place, how we define them, and which ones take priority. So, one may be caught off guard by conflict among those with whom they presume to share so much, disappointed by conflict oriented around (d) values—the fourth kind of conflict in the list that I started in the first paragraph.[7] Amplifying this sensibility, recent US American Christianity has been suffused with Evangelical Worldview Theory (EWT), which presents "worldviews" as the cognitive frameworks that shape the way people understand, interpret, and respond emotionally and morally to life's most important questions.[8] EWT proponents claim there is a fundamental difference between an all-encompassing moral world- and life-view grounded in the Bible versus one grounded in other assumptions. This theory inspires subscribers to fill out their life-organizing theoretical system (or at least to imagine that it could be filled out with well-reasoned details) and channels their critical-thinking energies into evaluating others' worldviews accordingly. So, it fuels simplified naming, antagonistic framing, and thought policing to persist on the straight and narrow path, as in "the biblical worldview" versus "cultural Marxism."

While EWT emerged and has flourished within fundamentalist circles—passing unquestioned because it claims to be grounded in the Bible, understood via the prevailing "plain-sense" hermeneutics—some progressives exhibit a similar tendency. The moment someone starts talking—in the church hallway, around the family dinner table at holidays, online—we sort the incoming data according to expected patterns. In a sense, we "profile" other each other based on what we know about their position on specific social issues or who they voted for, predicting how they appear as ideological objects in our mental landscape. In any case, a worldview-oriented posture presumes that all true Christians (which the worldview-er takes to imply "like myself") agree about most or all things, thus engendering dismay about dissenting coreligionists. As thoughts give way to actions, we may objectify these "opponents" (even family and friends) in terms of our own ideals as so many others who are wrong and whose lives would benefit from being re-ordered according to our own perspective. Here we find the smoldering embers of polarization and coercion.

But individuals' social and cognitive lives—including the thinking and feeling structures that fuel our moral judgments and actions—are vastly more complex than worldview thinking allows. Reflecting on the "othering" of misconceived Muslims in the wake of the September 11 attacks as well as the targeting of "Western values" by terrorist groups, Amartya Sen identified this simplistic thinking about human identities as "the miniaturization of people."[9] This term describes the human tendency to oversimplify her or his neighbor by seeing only a single identity and to project an enlarged sense of oneself and one's people in singular terms, distorting and misunderstanding everyone involved. The homogeneity of many Western churches lends to the sort of singular thinking and partisan politics that create incredible polarities within "Christian" communities. One might simply understand their identity as "I am a Christian, and nothing else matters," but to overidentify oneself and likeminded others with Christ risks both self-deception and an evasion of the living One who calls us into deeper repentance and all manner of truth. Moreover, when a person is living into a solid self-story directed toward making a difference based on their worldview, self-evaluation and thus perceived growth normally occur *within* that worldview and *without* considerable reflection upon or adjustment to it.[10] In other words, few highly generative people actively examine where their worldview may, in itself, entail some unreflective, less reasonable, and possibly problematic ideas.

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If we are to depolarize our conversations and our communities, I submit that we must examine and eschew the dynamics that drive us to conceive of ourselves as faithful adherents to discrete, singular, coherent worldviews that necessarily set us in tension, if not open conflict, with all "others." So, I turn now to offer some research about and practicable strategies to experiment with pluralizing our sense of self.

Strategy One: Pluralizing the Self-Concept[11]

Current social-scientific research suggests people actually, unconsciously process their daily experiences of life through a bundle of selves. Psychologist Hazel Markus, in many co-authored works since the late 1970s, theorizes "self-schemas" to illuminate how "individuals attune themselves to their significant social contexts, . . . provid[ing] solutions to important existential questions such as *who am I, what should I be doing, and how do I relate to others*."[12] These self-representations range from personality traits and characteristics, like self as "a good student" or "conscientious," to sociocultural contexts, including "specific collectives in addition to the nation of origin, such as the family or workgroup, as well as contexts defined by gender, ethnicity, race, religion, profession, social class, birth cohort, and sexual orientation."[13] Markus and company use the term "working self-concept" to refer to that set of self-schemas which is presently active and operating and thus lending "structure and coherence to the individual's self-relevant experience."[14] In their research, they could use a person's self-schemas to predict how easily one would judge self-relevant information, retrieve evidence for those judgments, forecast their own future behavior based on their self-concept, and resist feedback to the contrary.[15]

When a person is committed to a certain way of seeing themselves, including in polarized and singular ways, they will strive for "completeness," and tension will build within them while they perceive themselves to be "incomplete." What they do with such tension depends heavily on their character, which includes coping and defense mechanisms. To this end, "symbolic self-completion theory" describes the tendency to seek symbolic routes to validating one's self-concept, including: doubling down on describing themselves as complete, attempting to enlist others to affirm that one is, in fact, who they say they are, being unwilling or unable to admit to transgressions of the ideal self, and relying on external signs and symbols to bolster this self-image.[16] This is true of any conception of the self, not only singular ones. But add into this mix the strength of one's commitment to certain ideal selves—for instance, the lofty ideal self of one's real or imagined faith community or otherwise the tidy, heroic self of one's personal myth—and we have a recipe for self-deception, social sorting, and ill-informed conflict with others perceived to be opponents.

Social-scientific research also suggests that singular concepts of self are particularly brittle because all opposition feels like an attack on one's whole self, yet persons who understand their self to be plural (i.e., "have a complex self-concept") demonstrate an improved ability to integrate or otherwise weather self-critical information. "Failure in a single self-domain does not imply failure in all domains. Complexity thus permits maintenance of positive self-esteem despite specific failures."[17] Criticism is then perceivable not as an attack on the singular, core identity we believe ourselves to be (my true self, my total worldview) but as addressed to a specific element or tension within our confident, plural self-concept.

One exercise for exploring plural selfhood that has proven useful both in private reflection and as priming small group conversations starts with some time to identify numerous salient parts of one's self-concept and social location that likely inform how one sees the world—and perhaps differently than those who identify differently. Whether starting with a visual organizer like a "power flower"[18] or an identity-focused word cloud or simply generating a list, participants tend to do their best work when provided with a clear example or, at very least, prompts for specific categories to consider (from personality traits and important relationships to aggregate and voluntary social groups). While this exercise can be edifying on its own, it can be quite effective when used to prime either further reflection or conversation about what influences our moral convictions on specific issues. Did our parents participate in antiwar demonstrations? Has my experience as a US citizen precluded me from reflecting much on the experience of immigrants? A more content-rich framework can be found in the "four dimensions of moral agency" offered by ethicists Glen Stassen and David Gushee in their beloved textbook *Kingdom Ethics*.[19] For example, they list perceptions of what is a "threat" as a key variable in our "ways of seeing," as in differing understandings of what is at risk when we consider more accommodating immigration policies.

> *Did our parents participate in antiwar demonstrations? Has my experience as a US citizen precluded me from reflecting much on the experience of immigrants?*

Many Christians in the West have been formed toward the expectation of integrity, of a settled fit

within one's story and values system, such that identifying oneself with Christianity would come with a full deck of values and positions. Without the experience of being brought up short, we may proceed in just this way, imagining maturity as greater conformity to what we already know is true. Identity mapping can prime us to explore the complex ways we see, feel, and reason about issues. In other words, once we crack open the possibility of internal complexity, we can direct our conscious attention and reflection on other aspects of or moral lives—not just intuitions, but also fixtures of our way of seeing, loyalties and practices, ways we hope to apply reason.

Strategy Two: Cataloging Competing Values

In the early 2000s, a team of researchers working in various psychological fields, with Jonathan Haidt emerging as their leading public voice, began publishing their data-based endeavor to identify basic, innate "moral foundations" that could be recognized to varying degrees across diverse human populations.[20] Their earliest research offered five candidates for human moral *intuitions*, which Haidt described as something like "moral taste buds."[21] Their list has since grown to eight, possibly nine candidates: care (which is related to empathy), equality (of treatment, outcomes, etc.), proportionality (meaning: "intuitions about individuals getting rewarded in proportion to their merit or contribution"), loyalty, authority ("including deference to prestigious authority figures and respect for traditions"), purity, liberty, honor (especially defense of one's family reputation), and perhaps ownership (namely, respect for property).[22]

The metaphor of taste can help us understand this list as somewhat neutral and descriptive, even as we may immediately register affinity for only some of these values. We may enjoy any number of the basic flavors (salty, sweet, bitter, sour, and savory)—and we may wonder why "spicy" does not count—but we can readily tell when flavors turn us off or even when some we like separately do not go well together. "Taste" can also help us understand how cooking and eating with certain people in particular places might impact what we prefer or crave or dislike and even imagine accommodating those with different tastes or dietary needs. We can recognize these values in our own moral thoughts and feelings, and this recognition can prime us to understand and connect with others' values and interests even if they do not match our own.

Because these values are *intuitions* in the first place, we are often unaware and otherwise unwilling to acknowledge that our own moral sensibilities sometimes clash with each other within ourselves. But picturing these tastes together as a proposed set of values can help us imagine why they might coalesce or contradict, generating a moral paradox when considering specific issues or events. Sometimes an awareness of inner conflict emerges in a conversation when we state a position that surprises even ourselves, perhaps attempting to resonate with something a friend has said. Other times we may push back too hard on a colleague not only because we value some other commitment more highly but also because we are horrified to find some part of ourselves resonating with an opposing view.

One exercise for exploration could begin with some kind of review of Haidt and company's proposed list of moral foundations, whether in a brief summary, filling out an online questionnaire,[23] or even watching Haidt's TED Talk on moral foundations and political partisanship.[24] With such a list in hand and introduced, I have often invited congregational leaders and laypersons alike to consider their own moral tastes, in the first place, and then to reflect on the story around Jesus' healing of the man born blind in John 19 in small groups. Many biblical stories lend themselves to an analysis of the values in play, including as an attempt to empathize with particular characters within the stories and thereby better understand the matter of the text and a multiplicity of interpretations. John 19 is an exceptionally interesting story example because it explores a conflict unfolding among several distinct parties, who lead with different priorities: Jesus' disciples inquiring after the man's purity and family honor, as related to the merit (proportionality) of his affliction, Jesus himself offering care, some neighbors leading the healed man to their religious authorities for answers, some Pharisees disparaging the purity of both Jesus and the healed man (and ultimately expelling the latter for questioning their authority), not to mention the possible conflict among these same values within the healed man and his parents. The strong sense of differing moral intuitions here can enable a small group to explore possible resonances with each character's intuitions or possible motivations within their own moral centers. One could even assign roles within the small group, asking each person to try empathizing with a specific character or group.

I have often invited congregational leaders and laypersons alike to consider their own moral tastes, in the first place, and then to reflect on the story around Jesus' healing of the man born blind in John 19 in small groups.

Other values-oriented group exercises could prompt reflection and conversation on how the same set of values apply, in general or within ourselves, to particular issues or events. We can reflect on our affinities with this list to grow in self-understanding, which can enable better self-management when engaging others. When turning to engage others, lower weight exercises include practicing self-management while listening to a podcast with an opposing view and exercising curiosity about what values the speaker expresses (or suppresses). Heavier weight exercises would carry the same commitments into a live conversation with someone who holds an opposing view. "Deliberative dialogue" is an example of a specific, structured style of conversation that focuses on how specific values yield different positions on particular issues, generating conversations around not two opposing views but at least three or four different value-laden possibilities.[25]

Conclusion

"There was a time when the church was very powerful," wrote Martin Luther King Jr. from Birmingham city jail to local white clergy who had been critical of the direct-action campaign there. "It was during that period that the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society."[26] We may wonder about King's reading of history—and feel concerned about the current power of some Christians (namely nationalists)[27] to transform 21st-century American mores—yet affirm his insight that people of faith could do better than merely reading and reflecting the societal temperature. The posture and strategies outlined above can create openings for us to grasp and come to terms with a plural selfhood, exploring how this reality shapes our thinking and feeling—in actuality, even if this typically occurs without our conscious awareness. Reflecting on this inner diversity can help us become aware of our triggers and our affordances, enabling us to better manage ourselves when the heat rises in a conversation, share honestly and vulnerably from our own formative experiences, and make the most of moments when some aspect of ourselves does resonate with "others." ■

Jacob Alan Cook is an ordained Baptist minister and assistant professor of Christian ethics at Eastern Mennonite Seminary. He directs EMS's Doctor of Ministry in Peacemaking and Social Change Program and co-directs the Shalom Collaboratory, which offers training programs for theologically informed conflict transformation skills.

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Two Book Reviews:

Believe: Why Everyone Should Be Religious

by Ross Douthat (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2025),

Witness to Belief: Conversations on Faith and Meaning

by Russell J. Levenson, Jr. (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2025)

Reviewed by Fisher Humphreys

Christianity, like other world religions, provides its adherents with a community, a set of worship practices, a moral code, and a set of beliefs. Today some churches, often in reaction to fundamentalism, emphasize the importance of the community, its moral values, and its worship of God at the expense of its beliefs. They call us to live the Christian life but not be too concerned about believing the Christian beliefs.

The authors of these books don't see things that way. They think that beliefs are important. I agree. It makes a huge difference in our lives whether we believe that there is a God, just as it makes a huge difference whether we believe that vaccines work, or that forgiveness is possible, or that education is worthwhile, or that keeping our promises is important, or that expertise should be respected.

Religious beliefs fall into two broad categories. Some are this-worldly. They concern the world we see around us. An example is the Christian belief that all persons have been created in the image of God.

Other religious beliefs are supernatural or otherworldly. An example is the Christian belief that there is a God who transcends this world and is the Creator of this world and is present throughout this world.

The subject of these two books is supernatural beliefs. When Christianity was born, the questions that were asked about its supernatural beliefs concerned their content. Is there just one God, or are there many gods? Did God create the world out of nothing, or did God simply shape pre-existing material into the world as we know it? Does God communicate with human beings, or is God silent? Is God friendly to human beings, or indifferent to them? These questions are still with us.

But modernity has added some new questions. Is there a God at all, or is God a projection we humans make in order to bind societies together or to help individuals cope with the challenges of life? Is God perhaps just a personification of our highest values?

The authors of these two books set out to help readers answer questions like these. They do so in two quite different ways. Douthat does it by an extended, reasoned argument for belief in the supernatural and in God. Levenson does it by interviewing a dozen famous people about their Christian belief in God.

Douthat, who is a traditional Roman Catholic and a columnist for the *New York Times*, argues that everyone should embrace belief in the supernatural. His argument includes five components. The first is that the universe as a whole is "structured, ordered, seemingly artistically created and mathematically

Douthat, who is a traditional Roman Catholic and a columnist for the New York Times, argues that everyone should embrace belief in the supernatural.

designed." He argues that modern science has reenforced rather than undermined this understanding of the universe. He says that science, in its quest to acquire a fuller understanding of how the universe operates, brackets out the supernatural, but that it's a mistake to think that this bracketing out means that science has shown that the supernatural doesn't exist. It has done no such thing.

Then he turns to the mystery of human beings. Neuroscience has shown that there is a correspondence between activity in particular regions of the human brain and certain mental states, but "location is not causation," and no one has any idea how the activity and the mental states are related. Consequently, the subjective self is "supernatural in the colloquial sense—meaning 'super-material' or 'super-physical,' not just another arrangement of atoms but a distinct irreducibility of some kind … Look closely, and even the attempts to explain consciousness in materialistic or physicalist terms tend to tacitly concede the supernaturalism."

So far as I'm aware, it is an original move to draw on the mind/brain issue in support of belief in God. I think Douthat has a point. The belief that there is a Mind or Person behind the universe is similar in some ways to the belief that there is a mind or person behind the human brain.

Next Douthat reminds readers that modern people experience the world as enchanted. They have visions, see ghosts, sense the numinous in nature, try to contact deceased friends, say they have been healed by prayer, report strange experiences on the threshold of death, and have mystical experiences of God, all at about the same rate as people in the past. Douthat insists that it isn't the universe that is concealing God from modern people. It's modernity's "Official Knowledge" that is doing that, and it's doing it because it has mistakenly assumed that science has shown that God doesn't exist.

The fourth component of Douthat's argument is that people must make a religious commitment and act on it in order to grasp the reality of the supernatural. The problem, of course, is that there are many religions, and Douthat devotes much of the book to helping readers navigate issues such as whether to return to one's childhood religion or look elsewhere, or whether to affiliate with one of the great world religions or with some other religious group.

Finally, Douthat urges readers to intentionally decide about God, and here he sounds like an evangelist giving an invitation: "Life is short and death is certain, and what account will you give of yourself if the believers turn out to have been right all along? That you took pointlessness for granted in a world shot through with signs of meaning and design? That you defaulted to unbelief because that seemed like the price of being intellectually serious or culturally respectable? That you were too busy to be curious, too consumed with things you knew to be passing to cast a prayer up to whatever eternity awaits?"

Douthat's argument is formidable, and his book is well-written. Since I think there is a place for argument about these matters—not everyone agrees—, I have added his book to the list of books I would recommend to people who are searching for resources to help them believe. Other books on that list are *The Reality of God* by Louis Cassels, *The Untamed God* by George W. Cornell, *On Being a Christian* by Hans Küng, and of course *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis.

Douthat's book is structured as an argument, and it contains some stories of people who believe scattered throughout it. Levenson's book is the inverse of that. It consists of interviews with a dozen people about their Christian belief, and it contains arguments for belief scattered throughout it.

Levenson, who was Rector of St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston until his recent retirement, is a thoughtful and caring interviewer, and as a result his interviewees speak in an open, personal, down-to-earth way about their Christian belief. They are a diverse group. Two of them, Jane Goodall and Francis Collins, are scientists. Two were Secretaries of State, Condoleezza Rice and James A. Baker, Jr. There is a sports commentator, Jim Nantz, and a news journalist, Brit Hume. Denzel Washington, Sam Waterston, and Gary Sinise are three of the most beloved and respected actors working today. Nikki Haley was governor of South Carolina and then U. S. Ambassador to the United Nations. William McRaven was a four-star admiral and later Chancellor of the University of Texas System, and Amy Grant is a beloved singer.

The interviewees came to their belief in God in different ways. Jane Goodall grew up believing in Jesus as naturally as believing in her mother. Jim Nantz said, "I have always had God in my heart." Nikki Haley, on the other hand, converted from Sikhism to Christian

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belief while attending her husband's Methodist church. Francis Collins converted from atheism in part through the intellectual case that C. S. Lewis made for Christian belief in *Mere Christianity*.

Levenson asked the interviewees about experiences in their lives that threatened their belief in God. Most of them have had trying experiences such as divorce, setbacks in their professional lives, poor health, accidents, or the death of a spouse or a child or some other loved one. During their darkest days the interviewees turned towards God rather than away from God. For example, Nikki Haley was governor of South Carolina in 2015 when a shooter murdered nine members of Mother Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston. Haley was determined to attend all nine of

the funerals, and it overwhelmed her: "I remember one day, being so broken, and so sad, that I honestly … I came home, and fell on my knees and I said, 'God, I can't do this by myself … I need you to help me."

The phrase "religious belief" in these interviews carries richer connotations than in Douthat's book. Douthat tried to help readers just to believe that there is a God. Levenson's interviewees talked about more than belief that there is a God. They talk about their trust in God, their confidence that God loves the world and that it is in the God of love that the meaning of our human lives is to be found.

Sam Waterston summarized his Christian beliefs this way: "I believe God is, before all things; I believe God is Love; I believe in the principles 'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 'Do unto others what you would have them do to you.'" Then he added self-deprecatingly: "Smart alecks like me have a tough time living with all that simplicity."

The interviewees' trust in God is apparent when they talk about prayer in their lives. All of them pray, and their prayers are diverse. Some set aside a time for prayer, others offer brief prayers in response to events in their daily lives, and some do both. Some gravitate towards written prayers such as the Lord's Prayer. Some sit in silence in the presence of God. Amy Grant says some of her prayers are "wordless."

Condoleezza Rice is organized about her prayers. Each morning she prays a short prayer such as "Guide my feet in ways that will glorify your kingdom." Throughout each day she prays "tiny prayers" such as "Give me wisdom" or "help me get through this." She begins her evening prayers with thanksgiving for her parents and others. She then prays for her family and friends. Next, she prays for current concerns such as the people of Ukraine. Then she prays, "Help me to be an instrument of Your peace, a better disciple and to be a blessing to others as You have been a blessing to me." She ends her evening prayers with the Lord's Prayer.

The interviewees' trust in God is also apparent when they talk about their hope for this world and for life beyond this world. None of them offers a blueprint for how God's kingdom will come on earth, nor does any of them offer a description of the life everlasting, but all of them look to the future with trust that God's love for the world will prevail. James Baker puts it forcefully: "I do believe I will go to heaven. I don't know what it's going to be like." Jane Goodall puts it poetically: "Well, when you die, there is either nothing, or there is something. And if you believe there is something, as I do, then I can't think of a greater adventure than finding out what that something is! … My next great adventure is dying, and finding out what that is will be the most exciting adventure ever!"

Six months after Dr. Levenson interviewed her, Dr. Goodall set out on her "most exciting adventure ever."

These are hopeful people. They are grateful people. And they are for the most part happy people. Some words of Denzel Washington are representative:

"I know I've been blessed beyond measure, and I want to use my abilities for the glory of God. You know, there's nothing more I want. I don't want anything material, … I don't want money, … I just want to do God's will, and I want to help other people."

I recommend both of these books to readers of *Christian Ethics Today*. I think that Douthat's will be helpful when you are speaking to people who are searching for reasons to believe. Levenson's will be helpful when you are speaking about the difference it makes in our lives whether or not we trust in God to be our friend and to ensure that in the end God's kingdom is going to come and God's will is going be done on earth as it is in heaven. I think people today need both a defense of belief (such as theologians Paul Tillich and David Tracy provided in the past) and a witness to belief (such as theologians Karl Barth and James Wm. McClendon provided in the past).

These are hopeful people. They are grateful people. And they are for the most part happy people.

As you think about whether to buy and read these books and to recommend them to others, you may want to keep in mind that they aren't equally readable. Douthat's argument is rigorous and his prose is dense; I calculated his opening paragraphs to be an astonishing 17.9 on the Flesch-Kincaid grade level (this review is grade level 9.0). Levenson's book is much more readable than Douthat's. It's also winsome and wise, and reading it is enjoyable and inspiring as well as informative. ■

Fisher Humphreys is Professor of Divinity, Emeritus, of Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama.

Special Half-Issue on Ecological Ethics

Three Reorientations for Communities Facing Planetary Polycrisis

Cody J. Sanders, guest co-editor

The only two responses to the ecological and climatological crises we face as a planet at present are either denial – typically for the purposes of economic or political benefit of those manufacturing the denial narratives – or facing the reality of our lives on the brink with fear and trembling. The latter is the only realistic response.

Both responses can lead to immobilization. In denial, we refuse to act because we're convinced there's nothing wrong. In fear and trembling, we can struggle to know where to start, or what response could rise to the mammoth occasion that we face. Three reorientations are needed to help us engage more fully and meaningfully in our current era as communities of faith. None of them are easy. But all of them, I believe, are necessary.

Reorienting Our Perspective from Climate Crisis to Planetary Polycrisis

The ecological and climate crises we face are multiple, not singular. And they cannot be understood in an additive fashion (crisis + crisis + crisis = bigger crisis). The framework of "polycrisis" helps us to get a realistic grasp on the ways in which the crises we face multiply in their effects and severity. Climate collapse and artificial intelligence and far-right political movements and nationalism and migration patterns are not distinct crises, but each one touches and changes the others in ways that make the outcomes of all of them harder to predict.

Polycrisis is a framework that helps us see the systemic nature of the ecological crises we face. They involve multiple systems: from government, to economic systems and supply chains, to ecological systems, to technology, and even religious and theological systems that shape our perspective on all these areas.

In polycrisis, each crisis is not independent of others, but all are interconnected. One crisis intersects with and often exacerbates other crises, often in cascading ways. For example, war exacerbates the climate crisis while certain technologies and disinformation make it difficult for humans to respond to the climate crisis and often to situations of war and conflict as well. The pressures of climate change increase global migration realities, which, when interpreted through xenophobic political narratives, fuels far-right nationalism. These crises are not cumulative or linear, but cascading, amplifying, and operating with complex feedback loops.

Churches are often oriented toward technical, solution-oriented responses to crises. These often work very well when addressing a specific local crisis like a natural disaster that mobilizes the relief efforts of faith communities. But polycrisis is ongoing and has no clear "end" in sight, no simple solution that will bring resolution. The pathway for addressing the multiple outcomes of polycrisis are as non-linear as the crises themselves.

Amid our polycrisis, technical solutions are insufficient. Yet faith communities have deep wells of wisdom to draw upon in the soul craft that is necessary to cultivate congregations of care and rugged hopeful practice.

Amid our polycrisis, technical solutions are insufficient. Yet faith communities have deep wells of wisdom to draw upon in the soul craft that is necessary to cultivate congregations of care and rugged hopeful practice. A few of these tasks of soul craft involve helping people to shift our sense of life in the world away from philosophies of scarcity and individualism toward theologies of abundance and communal care, away from endless growth as a model for preferred futures toward living withing the limits of the planetary community, and diminishing the sway of the human supremacist, separation-from-nature story toward richer theological and biblical narratives of

human entanglement within the wider web of life.

While many different interlocking technical approaches to the various outcomes of polycrisis are also necessary, this moment requires an overhaul of our philosophies and theologies of what it means to live life on this planet, how to practice our humanity in an ecologically interconnected way, and the ways that our theological traditions lead us in that path of planetary relationality and away from the myth of human supremacy and separation.

Reorienting Our Posture toward Relationship with the Web of Life

We are in a relationship with the larger ecological web of life. That is the Christian story of humanity's relationship with the wider earth. We can see it from the outset of the scriptures in the primordial story of creation. Genesis 2:7 portrays it with beautiful wordplay in the Hebrew: It is from the dust of the ground, *ha'adamah*, that God forms the human, *ha'adam*. From humus to human is our theological origin story of embodiment.

Earth creatures and celestial bodies are portrayed throughout the Bible as co-worshipers of God alongside humans and repositories of wisdom. We see it in texts like Job 35:11, "Who teaches us more than the animals of the earth and makes us wiser than the birds of the air?" (NRSVue), or the voiceless speech of the heavens and the day and the night in Psalm 19. Or Psalm 148's cacophonous chorus of praise from the sun, moon, and stars, hail, snow, frost and storm, mountains, tress, sea monsters and animals and, *finally*, the human.

This is the only way we have ever been related to plants and animals and trees and mountains and bodies of water. But we have long pretended that we are separate from this eco web. And this is a very sophisticated game of pretend using theological, philosophical and even scientific justifications to bolster our belief in human supremacy over the rest of creation. But our pretend separation and our theologies and philosophies and scientific theories of human supremacy are killing us and the ecological web in which we are enveloped.

We face our current ecological context with the larger web of life in a fragile but resilient, connected but not singular, interdependent earth community. While many churches have come to understand the gravity of our current ecological and climate crises, we have often only tweaked our human supremacist orientations toward "creation care." It's a good start, but *care for* is not quite as profound a relationship as *bound up with* the wider web of life.

To make this reorientation, we must shift from seeing the ecological web of beings and landscapes that enfold us as repositories of natural "resources" that we and our future generations need, or even landscapes and beings of "beauty" that call for our appreciation and care. We must recover our sense of being in relationship with the larger web of life that enfolds us, and the other-than-human creatures who inhabit the planet alongside us, with their fates and ours bound up with one another. This relationship is what we see portrayed in Ecclesiastes 3:20 where the teacher reflects on both the *origins* and the *fate* shared by humans and animals alike in death, saying, "All are from the dust, and all turn to dust again" (NRSVue).

In a recent issue of the *Journal of Pastoral Theology* (Vol. 35, No. 2, 2025), I theorized a concept I termed, "ecopneumastalgia," to describe our longing for these lost relationships with spiritually alive earth others. (*Eco* designates the ecological setting. *Pneuma* is the Greek word for "breath" or "spirit" used throughout the New Testament pointing us toward that inspiritedness of an ecological web of life. *Algia* is a Greek word for "pain," and can also denote something more like "longing" or "yearning" in the way it is used in the term "nostalgia.")

To make constructive theological contributions toward addressing our collective ecological crisis, Christian faith praxis must attempt to restore this inspirited connection to earth others, moving beyond simple care for the earth to a shared love – *biophilia* – of life that unites God, humans and the ecological world. Nothing short of a theological reorientation of our relationships with the ecological web of life will begin to approach the tasks ahead of us in facing the planetary polycrisis alongside the larger earth community.

Reorienting Our Path toward Feral Hope-in-Practice

Seeing our future with an everything's-going-to-all-work-out-in-the-end optimism is a recipe for disappointment and dejection. Believing in the unfettered linear path of progress that will ensure that we will avert disaster in the end requires us to treat the very real setbacks and dangerous sideroads on the path of supposed progress with denial.

Our ways of practicing hope together must become undomesticated from hope's captivity to ideologies of progress (e.g., things are always getting better, scientific advancements will save us, etc.), emotional dominance of optimism and toxic positivity (e.g., look on the bright side, don't get so bogged down in the details of our situation, etc.), and spiritual bypassing (e.g., God's got this so there's nothing to worry about or do). None of these are robust enough to carry the weight of something approaching "hope."

Hope – in a genuine biblical and Christian theological sense – is germinated in the soil of despair. Despair is not the enemy of hope, it is most often hope's starting place. But hope, to be meaningful in contexts of despair, needs to be put into practice in our lives, and not be relegated to a feeling or belief. Here are a few of the interlocking practices that I believe are necessary to practice a feral hope that emerges from the context of planetary polycrisis.

We need to **cultivate communities of collective efficacy**. Hope is rarely practiced alone. Throughout the biblical text, narratives of hope take shape when communities are called together, often into wilderness places of danger and death. The congregations we belong to have all been called to do hard things in our pasts. These stories, retold with appreciation and awe and an eye toward what we can learn from our faith ancestors, help us build a sense of collective efficacy – the belief/feeling that we can do hard things and be successful at reaching meaningful milestones together. There are no solo disciples. Jesus always called disciples into community. We need strong relational tapestries to practice hope together.

We need **a realistic appraisal of what's actually happening** in our life in the world. That's why "polycrisis" is a helpful reorientation of our sense of what's going on around us. If we start with denial or a bright-sided perspective, we cannot approach the tasks that are needed for communities moving toward hopeful futures amid polycrisis. Take it all in. Refuse to look away from the heartache. Move toward the painful places in the world with eyes wide open. Hope begins with realistic perspective.

We must **develop an anticipatory vision** for what might be possible beyond the present status quo. If all we have is a realistic appraisal, we may know the diagnosis very well but have little sense of what can be done, or what preferred futures might look like. Part of this anticipatory vision of possible futures should include a more robust relational eco-theology. But beyond that, we must also ask together what kind of futures we feel called to cultivate together. How do our values and theological tradition inform this sense of call and these futurist visions? The eschatological imagination and prophetic tradition of the Bible developed this type of anticipatory vision for our faith ancestors. We continue to be called into futures that are yet unknown and must envision them with the eyes of faith.

We must **cultivate our collective courage to risk** together. Hope and risk are siblings. In the coming days, we will be called to risk more and more for the wellbeing of our neighbors, human and other-than-human. We will risk comfort, safety, money, relationships and much more if we are following a sense of call toward relational reorientation and justice on a planetary scale. The call of Jesus is the call to risk. There's no way around it. But we do not practice courage alone. We learn courage together, and from the examples of our faith ancestors throughout history. We practice risk alongside others who are called into the way of Jesus, too.

We need **robust practices of care for the human and other-than-human beings suffering the realities of the present status quo**. While we move toward possible futures, many are suffering and falling through the cracks of our systems of support. Our communities must continue to look at those around us – our neighbors human, animal, vegetal and geological – and ask what our mutuality in the web of life demands of us. Solidarity, not solutions, is the clearest orientation toward care. Plant the trees. Tend the community gardens. Feed the hungry. Protect the immigrant. All these care practices are vital, even as we look toward larger reorientations toward the planetary polycrisis.

The reality that many will not make it with us requires that we **hold sufficient space for grief and lament for all that we are losing along the way**. Grief keeps our hearts nimble so that they don't break under the weight of the losses we face. Grief is a communal task that we too often shirk by not creating sufficient space for people to bring their heartbreak into community. Lament helps us hold together the experience of both grief and anger, expressing these in full-throated cries to God for our pain and the pain of the earth. To love the world right now means that we also grieve it. It bears the weight and the scars of our human supremacist theologies and the ways we have feigned separation from the ecological web up to the breaking point of the earth systems that sustain us. We must grieve deeply to practice hope. ■

Cody J. Sanders is associate professor of congregational and community care leadership at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, an ordained Baptist minister, and a member of the CET board. He has written a number of books, including, *Spiritual Care First Aid: An All-Hands Approach for Church and Community* (Fortress, 2025).

The Earth's Han and the God Who Is Becoming

Grace Ji-Sun Kim

Climate change is no longer a distant threat or something we can brush off as nothing to worry about. It is evident, and we are feeling the deep consequences of what is happening to the Earth due to climate change. We are witnessing that storms are intensifying, and the droughts are becoming disastrous and even deadly. Hurricanes are growing more destructive as people's livelihood is being destroyed and erased. Floods are displacing entire communities, and people are losing their lives. Wildfires consume what once seemed permanent and are moving faster than they can be contained, destroying everything in their path. The climate crisis is not abstract or just a theory; it is embodied, lived, global and destructive.

When poison enters the human body, the body reacts almost immediately. It produces fever, pain, convulsions, exhaustion and even death. These are not signs of weakness; they are signs of resistance to foreign objects or materials entering someone's body. The body is fighting back against what threatens its life. It tries its best to fight and, if it is unable to fight back, death looms and takes over. The planet is doing the same thing as it convulses, as human beings pour toxins and harmful wastes into the air, soil and waterways. The Earth is reacting to our way of life our own bodies do to poison.

Humanity has built systems of overconsumption rooted in greed, individualism and extraction. We have treated the Earth not as kin, but as a commodity. We have taken as much as we possibly can to commodify it and make a huge profit off it. Take, for example, water bottles. We are taking water, which is free, flowing, accessible and part of nature, and commodifying it for huge profit. Water is necessary for everyone and everything to exist on the planet. It is the lifeblood of the Earth; but we have taken what is freely given to us, bottled it, shipped it all over the world, and sold it at a high profit. We are commodifying but also causing so much pollution by taking it everywhere around the globe, as the waste from plastic bottles is causing great harm to the soil, water and the air.

Humanity's greedy and harmful ways of life are destroying the planet, and now the Earth is responding. In Korean society and history, we have a word for this kind of suffering: *han*. *Han* is a Korean concept that is difficult to translate into the English language, as it is deeply embedded in our history and cultural experience. Korea is a small country that has been constantly invaded by China, Japan or other neighboring countries. It has gone through colonialism, war and lots of devastation. As a country, Koreans have collectively experienced *han*.

Han is a deep, collective anguish that is like a piercing of the heart caused by injustice. It has described the sorrow of colonization, war and oppression. It names wounds that linger across generations and are passed on through one generation to the next. It can be experienced by a community or by an individual. It is unjust systems such as racism, colonialism, patriarchy and other systems that cause deep pain, anguish and devastation.

As an eco-theologian, I believe the Earth is also experiencing *han*. The forests, the oceans, the atmosphere, the animals, the fish, the birds are experiencing *han* as they live under an unjust system of human greed, overconsumption and unfairness. The Earth is crying out from a deep piercing of the heart caused by pollution, poison and waste. *Han* is a deep suffering from pain, harm, violence and injustice. And as people of faith, we cannot turn away from the Earth's cry of suffering and pain but must turn to it and do our best to stop it.

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Trees, water, air and soil are being destroyed against their will due to our actions, which contradict the will of nature, and animals are producing *han.* The Bible describes this idea of creation's *han* (Roman 8:19-23), yet we have not taken it seriously. We have ignored the *han*-ridden cry of nature and animals and are causing ecological disasters. We must repent of anthropocentrism against nature and animals and work to dissolve the *han* of creation.[1] Nature is groaning under the weight of this oppression.

How We See God Shapes How We Treat the Earth

Much of Christian history has relied on metaphors to talk about God. Many of them have been dominant, masculine metaphors for God, such as Father, Lord, King, Master. These metaphors are not neutral and benign, as they shape and influence our imagination and understanding of who God is. When God is imagined as a dominating ruler, it becomes easier for humans, especially those in power, to justify their own domination and power over others, to rule over others, colonize others, and exploit them through enslavement and indentured labor. Those in power feel that they are closer to God and can do likewise to others around them who are darker-skinned or women. White and patriarchal images of God have supported sexism, racism, colonialism, and war. Now we can see that it is also supporting ecological destruction. If God is imagined as a conqueror, then conquest seems holy, whether you are doing it to others or to the Earth.

This dominant patriarchal theology has grave consequences for human beings and the Earth. It has justified crusades and colonial expansion. It has sanctioned violence against others, and it has shaped how we treat and damage the Earth. If we believe in a domineering patriarchal God, we feel entitled to dominate creation. We assume the Earth will endlessly replenish itself and therefore our actions will have no consequences against the Earth. But the Earth cannot sustain limitless extraction, commodification and exploitation. It replenishes only when human beings stop being greedy, destructive, wasteful and overconsumption ceases.

Reimagining God in the Age of Climate Crisis

Our image of God shapes our thoughts, ethics and behavior. If our theology blesses domination and exploitation, our world will reflect it. Therefore, in this time of climate crisis, this Anthropocene moment, we must reimagine God, which will stop reinforcing such harmful actions to others and to the Earth.

In my book, *Earthbound*[2], I argue that we need to move beyond speaking of God merely as a noun, a fixed object of doctrine. Scripture itself invites us to see God as dynamic, active and becoming. It has always been there; we have often ignored it or focused on the images and metaphors that legitimized the powerful white men.

When Moses stands before the burning bush and asks God's name, God replies, "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14). In Hebrew, this is an imperfect tense, which means that it is a verb of ongoing action. It can also be translated, "I will be who I will be."

Here, God is telling us that God is not static. God is movement, and God is becoming.

This matters as it shifts the theological paradigm and allows us to see God in a different light and perspective. It changes us from seeing God as static to a God who is a verb. This ignites our imagination to see God as living, acting, creating and liberating. God, who is a verb, does not allow our faith to be passive or static, but also active. To imagine God as a verb is not to freeze God into our likeness, but challenges the long historical and theological understanding of who God is. This way of imagining God also pushes us to participate in God's ongoing action of love, justice and renewal.

When we turn to the New Testament, Jesus continues this pattern of using the verb "to be" to talk about himself. In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes himself as "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). *"I am the bread of life,"* (John 6:35), and *"I am the light of the world"* (John 8:12). These are not static titles that Jesus is using to talk about himself, but rather, they are relational and active realities of who Jesus is. It is like what we find with God and Moses. If we are created in the image of God, then we too must become verbs. We must be people who act in love, hope, justice and liberation.

We are not conquerors of the Earth who can take everything that we wish from it. We are caretakers and stewards and not destroyers. We are participants in God's ongoing creative work.

The Church as God's Body in the World

Ecofeminist theologian Sallie McFague proposed that we imagine the Earth as God's body.[3] This is not pantheism, which believes that everything is God. Rather, this is panentheism, which states that God is in all things and all things exist in God. If the Earth is God's body, then harming the Earth is wounding God and what God has created and loves. If the trees, rivers and creatures are infused with divine presence and the Spirit of God is in all, then ecological destruction is spiritual violence against God. Thus, climate justice is not just a social and scientific problem, but a moral and theological issue. Therefore, we must act quickly to change what has been wronged.

This reimagining changes everything about God

and about the world and each other. We are not conquerors of the Earth who can take everything that we wish from it. We are caretakers and stewards and not destroyers. We are participants in God's ongoing creative work.

To be a church in this century means seeking and seeing God in all of creation. It means listening to the Earth's *han* and doing our best to stop and prevent *han* towards the Earth. It means recognizing that salvation is not only about souls, but it is also about soil.

There is urgency here, and we cannot remain silent any longer. We cannot sit comfortably in our homes while creation groans under unjust systems which cause *han*. Faith is not spectatorship, but it is participation and action.

If God is verb and God is active love, then we must also be active. We need to be active in climate justice and work together with others in our community and churches. We must be active in resisting extractive economies and be part of the active reimagining of the church as a community committed to the flourishing of all creation. We must become a church for tomorrow that embodies liberation, restoration and care for the Earth. We need to *image* God not by domination, but by love. We join the God who is becoming and work together to heal the Earth's *han*. ■

Grace Ji-Sun Kim is Professor of Theology at Earlham School of Religion. She is the author of 26 books, most recently, Feminist Theologies, Earthbound, and When God Became White. Kim is the host of Madang podcast, a contributing correspondent at Good Faith Media, and blogs on her Substack: Loving Life. She has appeared on MSNBC, PBS, BBC Radio and C-Span.

America's Secret Prison Camps

In this secret prison environment, we really do not know the number of people who are locked up in private prisons all over the country. Nor do we fully know where all of those individuals are confined, who has been secretly flown out of the country, what they are accused of, what health problems they experience and whether care is provided. Some have died in custody but we are not told how many. They are "disappeared" and neither their families, lawyers, or even the agencies holding the prisoners know the whereabouts of hundreds of people.

The system of camps already in use and the many that are planned for communities throughout America appears sadly reminiscent of the system that Alexander Solzhenitsyn termed *The Gulag Archipelago* the vast and secret prison system scattered around the Soviet Union.

—Patrick Anderson

Called to Be Creatures

Timothy Eberhart

Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-17*: In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no vegetation of the field had yet sprung up - for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground, but a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground - then the Lord God formed the human from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there God put the human whom God had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Lord God took the human and put them in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded them, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.*
(Author's Translation)

It was the winter of 1933. A young lecturer at the University of Berlin named Dietrich Bonhoeffer, an emerging theological voice at just 27 years of age, delivered a series of lectures that would later be published under the title *Creation and Fall*. It was a time of profound social and political upheaval, with a global order still reeling from war and now stressed by hyperinflation and economic depression. The voice and the vision of the Führer, the strong man, had taken hold with promises of a return to national greatness by restoring white Aryan purity through the scapegoating of Jews, gypsies, gays and lesbians, socialists, the disabled and more. Within five years, Bonhoeffer would make first contact with leaders of a resistance movement, and in 10l years' time, he would be imprisoned and ultimately executed on April 9th, 1945. Bonhoeffer is celebrated as a political theologian, a neo-orthodox theologian, a confessing theologian, and a theologian of crisis. What he's rarely known for are his contributions as an ecological theologian. Let's follow along his reading of this ancient story to see what wisdom it might yet hold for us today.

"Then the Lord God formed the human from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being. (Gen. 2:7). "Even Darwin," Bonhoeffer says, "could not use stronger language…Humankind is derived from…earth…[Our] bond with the earth belongs to [our] essential being."[1] The Hebrew here is instructive: *Adam*, the human, is formed from *adamah*, which means earth, dust, soil, clay, land, ground. Like the animals, whom Bonhoeffer calls our "brothers and sisters… siblings,"[2] we are earth creatures. Similarly, notice that the Latin *humanum*, human, shares the same root with *humus* (earth, ground) – and *humility*.

At the molecular level, scientists tell us we're made up of the same stuff as all other life forms. So too at the genetic level, we share roughly 90 percent of our DNA with mice, dogs, cattle, and elephants, and 98 to 99 percent with chimpanzees.[3] As zoologist David Suzuki writes: "On the most basic level…we are directly…tied to the billions of organisms, past and present, that recycle energy and give us food and air…We are quite literally air, water, soil, energy and other living creatures."[4] Who are we humans? Who are you? Who am I? From a biblical and a scientific perspective, the answer is the same: we are earthlings. Creaturely kin. "What is to be taken seriously about human existence," Bonhoeffer says, "is [our shared] bond with mother earth."[5]

Pay attention to this. The tree of life, Bonhoeffer stresses, is at the center. We are created not to reside in the middle of it all, but in right relationship to the source of life. This, for Bonhoeffer, is a gracious gift

"And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden… [with] the tree of life…in the middle of the garden" (Gen. 2:9). Pay attention to this. The tree of life, Bonhoeffer stresses, is at the center. We are created not to reside in the middle of it all, but in right relationship to the source of life. This, for Bonhoeffer, is a gracious gift.[6] We are most freely, and happily, ourselves, not when we're self-consumed, turned in upon ourselves,

but only when we're rightly aligned with something much larger, grander and more mysterious: Life. Let's call it a biocentric – as opposed to an anthropocentric – perspective. *Bios*-centric. And notice the social implications. In response to those who would divide and rank humans based on race, skin color, ethnicity, geography, nationality, gender identity or sexual orientation, *we must insist* that white Aryan humanity is not at the center, neither is able-bodied humanity normative humanity, nor cisgendered heterosexual male humanity, nor U.S. western "civilized" humanity, nor even Christian humanity. And by all means, the pursuit of abstract financial profit is no proper center at all. Life, coursing through everything and everyone, is the only center worth orienting our lives around. This is for our good. We are created to flourish when our focus is rightly turned toward the middle of the garden where God has planted the Tree of Life.

In the third chapter of Genesis, as our story unfolds, the humans are told the truth: if you grasp after the fruit of the Tree and transgress the limit, you will be like gods. You will be like gods. From Bonhoeffer's reading, this is precisely what happens.[7] We grasp after the middle, making ourselves the center of the universe and, in so doing, we wield unfathomable damage and find ourselves far from Eden. In 2009, a team of 28 of the world's leading earth-systems scientists identified a list of nine planetary boundaries, any of which if crossed threaten human survival. Climate change, ocean acidification, novel entities such as chemical pollution, nitrogen and phosphorus nutrient cycles, freshwater use, land use changes, biodiversity loss, air pollution, and ozone depletion. They concluded that "the exponential growth of human activities is raising concern that [any] further pressure on the Earth System [in any one of these areas] could destabilize critical biophysical systems and trigger abrupt or irreversible environmental changes that would be deleterious or even catastrophic for human well-being."[8] At the time, four of those boundaries had been transgressed. Researchers now report we've crossed six of those boundaries and are close to breaching a seventh.[9]

Now, it's important to note that, for Bonhoeffer, the damage caused by self-centered grasping impacts both the natural world and our human neighbors. And so, we need to name that those living like gods are not *all* human beings in general but predominantly wealthy, resource-intensive northern, western, European-American producers and consumers, those who have been least likely to suffer the negative effects of planetary transgression – yet. Inversely, or perversely, those least responsible for environmental degradation – the world's poor, from so-called under-developed nations, whose skin colors are darker hued, including indigenous peoples, women, children, the elderly – have been and continue to be those suffering the worst effects. The truth is that some are living as if they're at the center of the universe, pretending to be gods; and the terrible truth is that the wages of social and ecological sin is the untimely death of so many others.

These have been humbling years. So many of the aspirations many of us had imagined for the world seem to be coming undone. The headlines speak of decline, unravelling, even collapse; and it's not too difficult, if we step back in a reflective mode, to name what that has meant in our own lives. What is difficult, as members of a culture fixated on endless growth and taught to believe in continual progress, is knowing how to navigate descent. Like so many of our spiritual ancestors, Bonhoeffer points here to Jesus. God, he says, did not become human so that we might become like gods. Rather, God humbled Godself and became human so that we might become more truly human. For "it is only through the depths of earth that the window of eternity opens itself up to us," he writes.

These have been humbling years. So many of the aspirations many of us had imagined for the world seem to be coming undone.

And here I'll quote him at length: "Those who would abandon the earth, who would flee the crisis of the present, will lose all the power still sustaining them by means of eternal, mysterious powers."[10] He continues, "When life begins to be difficult and oppressive, one [seeks to leap] boldly into the air and [soar], relieved and worry-free, into the so-called eternal realm. One leapfrogs over the present, scorns the Earth." But "Christ does not lead [us] into the otherworldliness of escapism. Rather, Christ returns [us] to the Earth as its true [children]"[11] And so "Christians do not have an ultimate escape route out of their earthly tasks and difficulties…Like Christ [we are] to drink the cup of earthly life to the dregs."[12] We have known something of that cup in these years. Many of us can appreciate the desire to flee: to flee the body, flee the earth, flee this historical moment. At just such a time as this, Christ is fully present to us, humbly revealing the way: This is my body, this is my blood, do *this* in remembrance of me.

So, here's the invitation. We're being called back to our first vocation, our primary calling, every one of us: to till and keep the earth. The Hebrew word for till, *abad*, means to serve, to work for, to revere – the earth. And to keep, *samar*, means to watch, guard, protect, treasure – the earth. Let me put it this way: We need to get our hands dirty. Seriously, Church has got to be more earthy, the spiritual life more supernatural, as in superbly, supremely natural. Right? Imagine, within 10 years' time: wherever you come upon a Christian congregation, anywhere in the world, what you encounter looks and feels like a Garden of Eden bursting with apple trees and raspberry bushes, native flowers and grasses, just humming with pollinators, songbirds and butterflies. As you step onto the grounds, your spirit is replenished as you're welcomed by the vibrancy of life, a tangible witness to God's capacity to bring about a new creation, a healed creation, already in this life. Picture then all of the teeming home yards and gardens of church members, the many workplace regenerative land-use initiatives, and the environmental justice efforts taken up to ensure that all citizens, all neighborhoods, enjoy equal access to the goods of tree canopies and park spaces and healthy food sources.

Can you see it? Bonhoeffer's vision of a more "worldly" Christianity is coming to fruition and the call of discipleship has become an invitation "not to a new religion, but to life," because "righteousness and the Kingdom of God on earth" is now "the focus of everything"[13] it means to be to be Christian, to follow Jesus, to be fully human. This is the calling of our time, our first vocation: to serve and treasure the earth.

Not long after Hitler's appointment as Reich chancellor of Germany, Bonhoeffer wrote of the church's obligation, "not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel" of any social order that is antithetical to "the good of all" (Gal. 6:10) but, if necessary, "to seize the wheel itself."[14] It's possible that atmospheric physicist, Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, a German, was thinking of Bonhoeffer, when in reference to climate tipping points said: "I am telling you that we are putting our children into a global school bus that will with [all] probability end in a deadly crash."[15] Friends, we have no time to wait, for any more catastrophes to motivate us into bold action. There's still so much we can yet save, so much we must save—through resistance, through repentance, through regeneration and repair. And so inspired by our spiritual ancestors, keeping the way of Jesus at the center, our feet humbly rooted on the ground, for the sake of future generations, let us be found faithful to our high and mighty calling: to give our bodies, our very lifeblood – whatever it takes – in reverent service and protective care for the healing of the Earth.

Benediction

In his final writings, *The Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer looked back at the previous decade of his life, and wrote: "The ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation, but [how] a coming generation is to live?"[16] May this generation be found faithful to our calling, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, guided by the Good Shepherd, our brother in suffering, and enlivened by the Spirit, the resurrecting Lord of Life, to seek first God's universal kin-dom. That it may be on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen. ■

This is the calling of our time, our first vocation: to serve and treasure the earth.

Timothy Eberhart is the Robert and Marilyn Degler McClean Associate Professor of Ecological Theology and Practice at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, where he directs the Center for Ecological Regeneration. He teaches in the areas of theology and ethics, concentrating on the relation of Christian doctrine to ecological, economic, political and social change theories and practices.

Regarding Footnotes and References

To accommodate all articles, we have omitted footnotes and references from the printed journal. However, readers can find the article's document, including footnotes, on our website at **www.christianethicstoday.com**

Climate Hospitality: A Church Guide to Making Room in a Wounded World

Avery Davis Lamb

In 2023, I gave a talk to a group of churches in Black Mountain, North Carolina. It is a beautiful small town nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, just outside Asheville, where the peaks are often draped in a serene, ancient mist (the blue for which the Blue Ridge is named). Indeed, these mountains are ancient, some of the oldest in the world, some 1.1 billion years of bearing witness to natural floods and fires, slowly eroding the granite peaks down into the calm serenity they exhibit now.

During our time together, I shared that their region was generally considered a "climate refuge"—a geographic, geological or meteorological sanctuary, shielded from the most violent effects of our changing world. We spoke of environmental justice with the comfort of those who believe the storm to be a distant neighbor.

Hurricane Helene shattered that illusion. In 2024, the same forces that eroded and molded the serene valleys of the mountains, now supercharged from human-created climate change, created a 1000-year flood event in the region.[1] The storm claimed 115 lives in North Carolina and left thousands without water, power or a roof over their heads. The "refuge" was gone, replaced by a landscape of trauma that made one thing clear: As we stand in 2026, the climate crisis has forced us to reevaluate the boundaries of where we call home and whom we call our neighbors.

This experience in Black Mountain has become a familiar one for many of us. Climate disasters are now an expected feature of living in our Anthropocene time, an era defined by the mutual "in-breaking" of the human and the nonhuman. In this era, the modern perception of human life as separate from and superior to the nonhuman world is being washed away by rising seas and migrating creatures. This is an apocalyptic era in the literal sense: The "veil" of the human-nonhuman binary has been torn. As Amitav Ghosh writes in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, we are beginning to recognize the "presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors" from which we had previously turned away.[2] As human systems break into balanced ecological systems, those nonhuman forces—wind, rain, heat, fire—break back into our human systems. This disastrous unveiling reveals the porous nature of our world: We were never as independent as we thought.

Perhaps one way to read this moment is as an invitation into hospitality. Rather than walling ourselves off from nature, as has been the project of the Anthropocene, we could welcome human and nonhuman forces in, welcoming the ways in which their presence might shape us.

When humans act as "rude hosts" to the nonhuman world, hospitality offers a framework for reshaping our political, ecological and ecclesial relationships with other humans and nonhuman creatures, and ourselves. As a society (and, too often, as Christians),

As storms intensify and ecological challenges deepen, churches stand uniquely positioned to offer more than temporary shelter. They can provide a transformative vision of a world where all creation has the opportunity to truly flourish.

we risk slipping into what Patrick Chamoiseau calls "dishumanity"—a state where apathy and disdain for the displaced refugees signal a disconnection from what makes us human. Chamoiseau argues for a global politics of hospitality where no one is considered a foreigner.[3] Hospitality offers a vital alternative to this dishumanity. As storms intensify and ecological challenges deepen, churches stand uniquely positioned to offer more than temporary shelter. They can provide a transformative vision of a world where all creation has the opportunity to truly flourish. This is the work of "Climate Hospitality"—the creative work of creating space for thriving in a world increasingly disrupted by climate change.

Hospitality in Creation and the Church

To understand climate hospitality, we must first recognize that hospitality is not merely a human virtue, but the very mode of God's working in the world. As Norman Wirzba writes, "when we attend to the first Sabbath sunrise, we see a "hospitable love that 'makes room' for what is not God to be and to flourish."[4] Divine love is the action that brings creation into being. God, in the act of creation, makes room for the thriving of life. This "logic of creation" suggests that the world does not operate fundamentally through the forces of competition or "red in tooth and claw"[5] survival, but through the divine nurturing presence that welcomes others into existence.

In the ministry of Jesus, too, we see this divine hospitality in action. Jesus attended to the spiritual, social and material needs of bodies, creating the "practical, social, and structured environment in which sacred life can be affirmed."[65] This reflects a biblical witness where the sparrows "are not forgotten by God" (Luke 12:6) and the lilies are "clothed in splendor" (Matthew 6:28–29). Even his triumphal entry into Jerusalem—an act of "political street theater"—features Jesus riding a young colt rather than a war-horse, inviting a nonhuman creature to participate in the work of peacemaking rather than exploitation.[7] As the ultimate host, Christ makes space for the flourishing of life, reconciling the broken relationships that prevent all creatures from living into the fullness of their lives.

If hospitality is the fundamental logic of God's relationship to the world, then the mission of the church must be a creative redeployment of that logic in our specific time and place.[8] The church is called to be the embodiment of Christ's hospitable works on earth. This transition from theological foundation to institutional practice requires us to bridge the gap between our Sunday liturgies and our Monday landscapes.

As Christine Pohl reminds us in her work, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, "hospitality is a personal but institutionally rooted practice" that depends on the viability of the institutions in which it is embedded.[9] For the church to be a "sanctuary" in the Anthropocene, its structures and sensibilities must be responsive to the creaturely needs of our warming world. This is where the political and the parochial meet: The church becomes a hybrid "oikos-polis"—a household and a public assembly—where we negotiate a common life with friends, strangers and the nonhuman "friendless."

To follow Christ into this work, we must move from mere contemplation to *misericordia*—the capacity to understand the pain grief, or sorrow of another as one's own.[10] This capacity allows us to see the "world of wounds" and respond with the deliberate shaping of spaces where life can take root again. When we are linked to our guests by *misericordia*, hospitality becomes a formative practice that changes the host as surely as it aids the guest.

Four Modes of Climate Hospitality for the Church

This constructive engagement requires the intentional shaping of our physical, social, spiritual and political structures. True climate hospitality requires addressing the systems that create displacement and destruction. For the local church, this work can be understood through four reciprocating modes: Gardens, Encounters, Rituals and Movements.

Gardens: Physical Hospitality. The journey begins with the mode of physical hospitality, where we ask how to make room for the thriving of displaced and dispossessed creatures. A gardener creates the appropriate conditions—the soil, light and nutrients—under which the creatures in the garden can thrive. This requires an intimacy with the local ecosystem, recognizing that a "tree's beginning is at the meeting point of seed and soil." In Annapolis, Maryland, St. Luke's Episcopal Church embodied this by restoring a buried

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stream and creating a "living shoreline" to absorb rising tides.[11]

Encounters: Social Hospitality. Social hospitality is not just about friendliness; it is about building the encounters that form the backbone of a community's survival. Because climate-resilient communities are built on strong social bonds, we must practice getting to know our neighbors—both human and nonhuman.

Recent scholarship confirms that social cohesion is one of the best predictors of a climate-resilient community. Resilience is more than just "bouncing back" to a pre-disaster state; it is the capacity of a community to "bounce forward" by learning, adapting and taking collective responsibility for its future. This collective efficacy depends on what sociologists call "community capitals"—specifically the social capital found in the "bonding, bridging and linking" ties that hold a neighborhood together.[12]

Rituals: Spiritual Hospitality. The spiritual dimension is found in rituals that shape us to see the world as creation, not as resources to exploit and destroy. In the Anthropocene, we need rituals that can address the deep trauma and anxiety wrought by climate change. I write this the day after Ash Wednesday, a day filled with earthy significance. It is one of the many Christian practices, including the sacraments, that could use a good re-earthing. For me, this has meant reimagining Ash Wednesday by rubbing muddy humus between my fingers to remember that we are divine dirt, a ritual echoing those words we hear or say on this day: that "we are dirt, and to dirt we shall return." It has meant experiencing baptism as a creation-soaked sacrament, by being held in the 40-degree meltwater of a dying glacier—a ritual of rebirth into love for a world that is presently dying. These re-earthed rituals move us toward an active hope, grounded in the reality that everything is not all right, but that redemption is possible.

Movements: Political Hospitality. Finally, parochial actions must expand into Movements, the mode of political hospitality that seeks to change the systems that destroy life. This work moves beyond personal charity to engage in works of justice with creation. We see this struggle play out vividly at *Chi'chil Biłdagoteel*—Oak Flat—a site in Arizona sacred to the San Carlos Apache Tribe. To the Apache, *Chi'chil Biłdagoteel* is a sanctuary where *Ga'an* (messengers) dwell and prayers ascend straight to the Creator. This cathedral of creation is currently threatened by a massive copper mine that would cause the land to collapse into a gaping crater. The legal and spiritual struggle led by Apache Stronghold is an act of spiritual solidarity and a holy refusal of empire's script, and the support of many Christian institutions, who have advocated and filed amicus briefs, seeing the support of Oak Flat as an issue of human and more-than-human justice.[13]

Building the Ark

Timothy Gorringe argues that the time for the purely prophetic is over. He suggests that in the face of our current global emergency, "ark building might be the task to which theological ethics leads us."[14] While this imagery draws on the Noah story, the sentiment applies directly to our role today: In the midst of crisis, the material matters. For the church, "ark building" is the faithful work of hospitality. It is the labor of constructing and maintaining the physical, social, spiritual and political structures that can sustain life through the oncoming storms. ■

Avery Davis Lamb is executive director of Creation Justice Ministries and a writer exploring the intersection of Christianity, ecology and justice. He leads national ecumenical efforts to equip congregations and denominational partners for faithful climate action, weaving together theology, advocacy and spiritual formation. An avid runner, cyclist and outdoor pilgrim, he draws on experiences in wild places to imagine a church rooted in sacred kinship and committed to the flourishing of all creation.

The spiritual dimension is found in rituals that shape us to see the world as creation, not as resources to exploit and destroy. In the Anthropocene, we need rituals that can address the deep trauma and anxiety wrought by climate change.

Interesting Quote:

Any claim that Jesus is the center of one's faith and living—by people who condone bigotry against immigrants, racism, sexism, murdering political enemies, denial of access to healthcare services to people who are needy, and who condone mistreatment of vulnerable persons—is beyond unpersuasive. Such a claim of allegiance to Jesus amounts to moral and ethical nonsense.

—Wendell Griffen, Preacher, Judge, Writer, Prophet

Apocalyptic Protein and the Abstraction of Creation

Samuel Davidson

"Food is God's love made delicious."

I. If we take seriously this axiom of Norman Wirzba, the world of ordinary and everyday life begins to take on a different character.

Eating is so fundamental to our lives—not only nutritionally, but culturally, socially, economically and politically—that more often than not it recedes into the background of our conscious awareness. This is especially true in the industrialized food economy of the Global North, in which regional climates, seasons and weather conditions have little observable correlation with the constant availability of fresh produce, eggs, dairy or meat.

Particularly under such conditions, it becomes easy to "consume a wide variety of foods and not really savor any of it as God's love made nurture for us," as Wirzba describes.[1] The story of how all of these foods can end up on our plates with so little effort or awareness on our part has been told from numerous angles—theological and otherwise—by many different people, and is not in itself my focus here. But if we can hold Wirzba's admonition in our heads (and hearts), to "eat with theological appreciation," by developing and upholding a "reverence for creation as the work of God's hands," then the apparently mundane act of eating becomes not only spiritually meaningful, but potentially even apocalyptic.[2]

In biblical, literary and theological terms, "apocalypse" does not mean "disaster," but rather an unveiling of things. The Book of Revelation, for example (also known as the "Apocalypse of John"), does not primarily foretell future events of destruction, but "pulls back the curtain" of reality, revealing that the self-giving love of God has conquered the dominative power of Rome (and all other empires). To say that eating theologically is apocalyptic, then, is to suggest that sustained attention to food, perceived as a material expression of God's love, provides a fundamentally different lens through which to see the mundane rudiments of our lives—especially those aspects of life into which great amounts of money and influence have been poured in order to make the absurd appear normal.

Which brings me to a recent and otherwise routine trip to my beloved regional grocery chain where, upon entering I encountered a display of brightly colored pastel packages the size of a small SUV—an image now seared into my imagination—offering a new health food for the hungry masses: *Khloudä Brand Protein Popcorn.*

II. My own theological attention to food has been mutually reinforced by an ethical commitment to veganism; and so I have been highly averse (sometimes curmudgeonly so) to the food industry's ever-increasing emphasis on marketing protein consumption in recent years. For obvious reasons, protein intake is generally seen as the most significant nutritional concern in a plant-based diet; indeed, the advertisements of food corporations give one the impression that herculean efforts at meat, egg and dairy consumption are required in order to prevent one's body from simply disintegrating altogether.

But one discovers rather quickly when giving up animal products that protein is actually not at all difficult to come by:\It is abundantly available in whole grains, nuts, legumes and vegetables.

But one discovers rather quickly when giving up animal products that protein is actually not at all difficult to come by:\It is abundantly available in whole grains, nuts, legumes and vegetables. And in fact, the average American already consumes 50-75% more protein than is nutritionally necessary, the vast majority of which comes from animal products. Even setting aside (for a moment) an ethical commitment to the well-being of other animals, then:, as a vegan who regularly exercises, lifts weights and adds muscle mass through a completely plant-based diet, it is baffling to the point of madness to see protein marketed as though it were a mythically rare, alchemical substance.

And upon further investigation, the protein in protein popcorn (and protein soda, and protein chips, and protein waffles, and protein candy…) actually does appear

to be just that—an alchemical substance. All of these products are made protein-rich by adding *milk protein isolate*: "the substance obtained by the partial removal of sufficient non-protein constituents (lactose and minerals) from skim milk so that the finished dry product contains 90% or more protein by weight."[3]

This substance can then be easily blended into foods and drinks—or added to popcorn seasoning—to increase the protein content of practically any product we can dream of. In a society that has been drastically oversaturated by protein for the last half-century, then, industrial food advertisers have created the illusion of protein scarcity, and they are now very pleased to announce a cure to this imaginary deficiency in the form of magic protein dust sprinkled into every corner of our diet.

III. Lest I be misunderstood, let me clarify in no uncertain terms that my intention is not to moralize individual food choices, which are made for reasons as diverse and complex as the lives of those who make them. Rather, I want to draw attention to the manner in which protein is ubiquitously, relentlessly marketed as an inert alchemical substance of which we are apparently in constant and dire need, and the consumption of which, it is promised, will make us strong, sexy and healthy.

But protein is *not* an inert alchemical substance, despite the technological and industrialized processes by which it ends up in bags of popcorn and cans of soda. Protein is a basic building block of organic life, which means that it comes from *living creatures*. And in the case of most protein-enriched products, those creatures are other sentient animals—specifically, dairy cows. Thus even if our diets *did* require constant protein supplementation (which they very much do not), the ways in which we obtain that protein would be of theological and moral concern for Christians.

Again, my aim is not to apply that moral concern primarily to the dietary choices of individuals. Instead, I want to suggest that the very existence of protein popcorn reveals a profound distortion in our cultural imagination, and a fragmentation of our interrelatedness with creation and other creatures. It reflects a fundamental loss of what Wirzba calls "material intelligence": an abiding awareness of how the world in all of its material and ecological complexity actually functions. "When people lose material intelligence," he writes, "they move through the world oblivious to where they are and who they are with. Places, creatures and objects are clearly present, but they remain mute and indecipherable, carrying only surface significance because people have not engaged with them so as to discover their potential and limits."[4] It is difficult to imagine a more vivid illustration of the alienation that characterizes our lack of material intelligence than the obliviousness with which food companies encourage us to eat protein popcorn. Allow me to explain what I mean by this:

For protein popcorn to exist, it is necessary to manufacture something called milk protein isolate. For milk protein isolate to exist, it is necessary to have milk at a scale that exceeds what can be easily fathomed by those of us who are not industrial dairy farmers. (After all, this is in addition to the milk that is still being produced and consumed *as* milk.). In order for milk to be available at this scale, dairy cows must be fed specifically formulated food that does not resemble their natural diet of grass; they must be raised in intensive production environments that limit their movement, increase the likelihood of disease and infection by constant exposure to their own excrement, and create ecological wastelands; and they must be milked as often as three times every day. In order for dairy cows to produce enough to be milked three times daily, they must be selectively bred for milk production (a process which has led to drastic increases in rates of lameness, infertility and painful mastitis), and be kept in a stage of lactation for their entire adult lives. In order to be kept in a stage of lactation, they must be forcibly and artificially inseminated (typically by machines), carry a pregnancy to birth, and subsequently be separated from the nursing calf that they have mothered at the earliest possible moment so that their milk can be reserved for human consumption. This process must be repeated as many times as possible until their milk production decreases and their lives are ended.

I want to draw attention to the manner in which protein is ubiquitously, relentlessly marketed as an inert alchemical substance of which we are apparently in constant and dire need, and the consumption of which, it is promised, will make us strong, sexy and healthy.

Whether or not one is moved by this description to consider veganism, the layers of abstraction and obfuscation that exist between the human creature eating protein popcorn in an urban apartment building, and the lives of the innumerable dairy cows across American farmland that are reduced to misery with no chance of flourishing in order to produce that (unnecessary) protein snack, should give Christians profound pause.

We know cows and farmland exist; we know milk comes from cows. But for most of us, the extent of our material intelligence regarding cows, milk and dairy production ends there. We do not know the limits or potential of these fellow animal creatures because we simply do not engage with them, and so they—and their "byproducts," which we passively consume—remain "mute" and "indecipherable" to us, as Wirzba puts it. Can we conceive of a source of nutrition more mute and indecipherable than "milk protein isolate?"

Can such production and consumption possibly bear witness to what we claim to be true about God's creation and all of God's creatures—that they are *good*, and worthy of honor and care—or possibly evince a "reverence for creation as the work of God's hands?" If food really is God's love made delicious, what does the abstract absurdity of protein popcorn say about what we believe divine love to be?

IV. At the risk of stating the obvious, protein popcorn is not itself the problem to which I am attempting to point, but only one pointed illustration of it. The problem is the abstraction and alienation which it reflects, and the manifold ways in which we are disconnected from the material realities that make our lives possible. We are alienated from ourselves and one another as embodied creatures, and so we do not understand our own physical needs and find ourselves at the mercy of corporations who profit from our nutritional disorientation. We are alienated from other creatures and the sources of our food, and so we are unable to even register what is required in order for something like protein popcorn to exist. In this state of alienation, we can relate to ourselves, to the world and to our fellow creatures only as abstractions.

"The products of nature and agriculture have been made, to all appearances, the products of industry," Wendell Berry observed, well before the advent of protein popcorn. "Both eater and eaten are thus in exile from biological reality. And the result is a kind of solitude, unprecedented in human experience, in which the eater may think of eating as, first, a purely commercial transaction between him and a supplier and then as a purely appetitive transaction between him and his food."[5] And, of course, such solitude and exile is true not only of our relationship to the fellow creatures that we eat, but of our relationships to lakes and rivers, forests and plains, watersheds and wild animals.

V. If we as Christians exist in such a state of abstracted isolation and alienation, how can we hope to positively contribute to the care of a world—which we name not merely as nature, but as God's creation—that is approaching an ecological breaking point? Berry offers a list of suggestions by which we might hope to counter this fragmentation:

(1) Participate in food production to the extent that you can.
(2) Prepare your own food.
(3) Learn the origins of the food you buy, and buy the food that is produced closest to your home.
(4) Whenever possible, deal directly with a local farmer, gardener, or orchardist.
(5) Learn, in self-defense, as much as you can of the economy and technology of industrial food production.
(6) Learn what is involved in the *best* farming and gardening practices.
(7) Learn as much as you can, by direct observation and experience if possible, of the life histories of the food species.[6]

If food really is God's love made delicious, what does the abstract absurdity of protein popcorn say about what we believe divine love to be?

Written nearly 40 years ago, it may be tempting to dismiss such a list as no longer relevant, or as an artefact of a romantically parochial imagination that cannot address the scale or magnitude of our planetary emergency. Yet I would contend that there is simply no other place that we *can* begin, if we wish to develop the practical knowledge necessary to do any good whatsoever in encouraging the care and protection of our world. Christians and churches of all sorts "care about creation" in the abstract; very few of us have any idea how to stop actively destroying the real creatures with whom we are actually and immediately in relation.

"Do not conform to this age," Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, the center of the global empire at the time, "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern the will of God" (Romans 12:2 NRSVue). In our age of ecological catastrophe, positioned as we are at the center of today's global empire, such renewal and discernment

demand that we confront our own ignorance, tearing down the layers of apathy and obfuscation placed intentionally between us and our fellow creatures.

Planting a community garden will not save the planet, and neither will shopping at your local farmer's market. But if eating is our most fundamental relationship with creation, then we cannot hope to transform the powers and principalities that are destroying it without first transforming the way we relate to our food. And if we are to overcome the alienation from other creatures that defines our lives in a technological, industrial and capitalist global economy, we cannot do so abstractly. We must do so through local engagement with real people, real places, real neighbors, real animals, real landscapes, real possibilities and real solutions. We must learn to see real creatures as God sees them: not as nutrient-making machines to be used at will for our snacking convenience, but as those loved into existence as part of the interconnected and interdependent creation to which we also belong.

"The future of a healthy and vibrant world," Wirzba reminds us, "depends on people seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting fields, forests, waterways, and fellow creatures *as gracious gifts* and not merely as units of production or consumption."[7] ■

*Samuel Davidson (PhD, Princeton Theological Seminary) is a senior research associate at the Baylor University Center for Disability and Flourishing. He is also the minister to college students at DaySpring Baptist Church in Waco, TX. His forthcoming book (*Deep Ecclesiology: An Ecological Theology of the Church*, Baylor University Press 2027) develops a constructive theology of the church as a more-than-human community.*

From our incoming mail…

Patrick: I cannot exaggerate the appreciation and respect I have for CET.

Bob Baird

Dear Colleagues, Thank you for your vital and important work with the journal. Praying that you have the strength and guidance needed in this crucial time. With gratitude,

Barry Christensen

Pat, We continue to be grateful for the challenge, encouragement, and hope CET consistently provides. Thanks for all you do!

Huey and Charlotte Bridgeman

Dear Dr. Anderson: I've been a CET reader since its founding. This current issue is just so on target. I especially enjoyed "Beneath the Shouting" since my early spiritual formation introduced me to the contemplative life. Such a treasure: Julie Pennington-Russell, and a joy to know of her ministry.

Thank you for your leadership of CET and its far-reaching message "for such a time as this."

Now, 90 years old, I'm blessed to live out my calling for this leg of my journey—a deeper, more intentional life of prayer.

In Jesus name and for his sake,

Sarah Logan

The Myth of Redemptive Violence

Cameron Trimble

"Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars." — Martin Luther King, Jr.

Every generation hears the same promise: *War will bring peace.*

Leaders rarely say it quite so plainly, but the logic is always the same. If we strike hard enough, remove the right enemies, destroy the right targets, then stability will follow. Violence becomes the doorway through which peace will supposedly enter.

We are hearing that promise again now.

War with Iran is being explained as necessary. Strategic. Preventive. The language is familiar because it has been repeated for generations. Each war is described as the one that will finally secure safety.

Beneath all the policy language is the belief that violence can redeem the world. If we destroy enough targets, something better will emerge.

Theologians have a name for this. They call it **the myth of redemptive violence**.

It is not really a strategy. It is a story we tell ourselves about how the world works.

The story says evil can be located in certain people or nations. Remove them and the world becomes safer. It says violence is neutral, just a tool that can be used wisely by the right hands. It says history can be reset by decisive force. There will be a clear "before" and "after."

But this story requires something from us. It requires distance from the human reality of violence. We invent phrases like "collateral damage." We speak of "targets" and "assets." We say "strategic strike."

These words are not descriptions. They are anesthetics. They protect us from seeing what violence does. Bodies are torn apart. Families lose children. Grief spreads across generations. The earth absorbs the toxins of war. Fear becomes the air people breathe.

Violence does not stay contained. It ripples outward through the entire field of life.

Right now, we are watching that ripple spread across the Middle East. Hundreds dead in Iran. Funerals interrupted by air raid sirens in Israel. Civilian casualties rising in Lebanon and Gaza. US service members killed. Fear tightens across an entire region.

Peace through war requires believing those ripples can be controlled. It requires believing we can decide where the suffering will stop.

History tells a different story.

Violence rarely produces the world its architects promise. The myth persists because it offers something seductive: the promise that destruction can purify the world. That devastation can open the door to a better future.

This is not only political thinking. It is theological thinking, even when people do not realize it. It echoes an ancient temptation: that the world can be saved by force.

Jesus rejected that temptation.

When his disciples reached for swords, he told them to put them away. He understood that violence does not heal the world. It multiplies the wounds the world already carries.

Peace is not something that emerges from domination. Peace is a quality of relationship. It grows where justice grows. It grows where dignity is honored. It grows where people learn how to live together without turning one another into enemies.

You cannot bomb relationship into existence.

You cannot kill your way to connection.

You cannot destroy your way to safety.

War always promises resolution. But it spreads grief. That grief matters. Feeling it matters. Refusing to numb ourselves to it matters. When we lose the capacity to feel the suffering of others, the myth of redemptive violence becomes easier to believe.

The spiritual task in times like this is not to pretend the world is simple. Nations face real dangers. Conflict is real. Evil is real.

But we must refuse the lie that violence will redeem us.

Our calling is harder than that. We are called to protect life. We are called to tell the truth about suffering. We are called to resist the stories that make war sound clean.

Peace will not come through destruction. It will come through the slow and difficult work of rebuilding relationships that violence has shattered. ■

A Meditation by Rev. Cameron Trimble
March 05, 2026

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—Foy Valentine, Founding Editor

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Dr. Patrick R. Anderson is the current editor. He earned a BA from Furman University, MDiv from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and PhD from Florida State University. He is a professor, criminologist, pastor and writer. He and his wife, Carolyn, have been intimately involved in the development and operation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as well as several non-profit ministries among poor and disadvantaged people.

OUR CONTACT INFORMATION
Pat Anderson
P.O. Box 1238
Banner Elk, NC 28604
Cell (863) 207-2050
E-mail Drpatanderson@gmail.com

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