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Seeking A New Birth of Freedom

Patrick R. Anderson, editor

Like many of you, I can recite Abraham Lincoln’s Immortal Gettysburg Address; and like many of you I first memorized that speech while living in a stronghold of the old Confederacy. I was encouraged (required) to memorize the speech by my teacher in an elementary school named for a southern Civil War hero. No irony at all. Jacksonville, Florida, was a city with numerous monuments to and public schools named for Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, J.E.B. Stuart or Jefferson Davis and not a single monument or other memorial to Abraham Lincoln or anyone else identified with the Union. I lived in a very segregated environment with very sparse interaction with anyone my age who was not white. Confederate flags, signs saying “The South will Rise Again,” monuments to Confederate soldiers, and strict separation of black and white Americans were ubiquitous symbols of disconnect between the words in Lincoln’s address and real life in Jacksonville, Florida. Yet I learned to quote the address while never hearing about or understanding Jim Crow.

The power of Lincoln’s words have deepened and become more meaningful throughout my life. In the speech, Lincoln deftly directed his listeners to connect the war with the rich content of the Declaration of Independence. It was not only relevant to mid-19th century America, but to whatever social context America has experienced in the troubled times we have faced in just my lifetime.

I cannot help but believe that the United States of America is imperiled like never before since the Civil War. Lincoln’s words are as relevant today as they were in 1863. Today, he would have to begin the address with “Twelve score and 10 years ago our fathers...” But, otherwise, the words are directly applicable to the state of the nation today.

Consider the following:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

No nation had begun with such a blank slate, driven by ideas of liberty and absent any preconceived notions of nationhood. The countries of the world were all based on the premise that human *inequality* was basic. Human beings were born as rulers or subjects,

powerful or powerless, royalty or the great unwashed. Southern slavery was established on the idea that white people were created superior to Black people. English colonialism was based on the idea that England ruled the world and colonies were subjects to the Crown. “All people (men) are created equal” was an idea so unknown, so novel, and so incredibly revolutionary that throughout our history America has been considered to be “an experiment.” The founding ideas of equality and freedom, in Lincoln’s view, were what the war was about. He said:

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met

Lincoln described the war as a test of “whether...any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” and that day on the Gettysburg battlefield most people would not bet on it.

on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

The writers of our Declaration of Independence were far from certain that this experiment would work. Lincoln acknowledged this, having read the letters and personal papers in which the men charged with writing the founding documents of this new nation described their uncertainties and fears, along with their hopes and dreams. Lincoln described the war as a test of “whether...any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” and that day on the Gettysburg battlefield most people would not bet on it. Lincoln called his venue “a great battle-field,” which it surely was.

Now 160 years after that war was settled, I cannot help but characterize America’s great divisions today as a war of ideas. States like the one in which I live, North Carolina, are even described as “battleground

states” in electioneering jargon. Our founders sought to set up a structure for equality and power of the people through the freedom to vote and accountability of government—not to a king—but by three equal branches, executive, legislative and judicial. Checks and balances among those branches, coupled with the basic idea of human equality, are central. Every citizen has a right to vote and nobody is above the law. Congressional oversight of the administration and the interpretation and application of the Constitution by impartial judges has protected us from dictators. After our founders ended the rule of King George over America’s colonies, the idea of an unaccountable person having total control of congress and the courts was anathema in America.

The Civil War proved to be the biggest test of the idea of America in the first 100 years of America’s existence. From its founding, a small number of rich, powerful white men, primarily in the South, sought to dominate America’s structure and jurisprudence. They firmly believed that white men were superior to all others. They tried to spread slavery to every state, to institutionalize inequality and to enshrine white male dominance in every aspect of life. Here we are again. History repeats itself. Lincoln said it then, and his words resound today:

*...It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here **highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.***

In 1831, Southern lawmakers tried to make America a white nation by making it a crime to educate Black Americans while women of any color continued to be denied the right to vote. After the war ended in 1865, victorious lawmakers passed the Land Grant College Act which gave access to higher education to all Americans, not just the sons of wealthy white fathers. They sought to provide government funds for public schools for poor Americans, both Black and white. After Abraham Lincoln was murdered and his vice president, Southerner Andrew Johnson, became president, he promptly vetoed those provisions, in effect, reversing the effects of the Civil War by appeasing the

losing Southern lawmakers. By the 1870s, all efforts to legislatively improve the lives of poor people, especially emancipated Black citizens, with land, schools and voting rights equally as they were to white men had ceased. Several decades of Jim Crow policies destroyed the Founders’ idea of America, especially for Black folks.

It was not until 1920, after decades of struggle and heroic action, that women gained the right to vote. It was not until 1954 that public schools were no longer racially separate and unequal, and education was made available to all children regardless of race in integrated schools. It was 1965 that the right to vote was mandated for all Americans and voters’ rights were protected in places seeking to deny Black and brown citizens the right to vote.

So, here we are in 2026, faced with the unhappy efforts of some of America’s government leadership to exclude certain Americans, particularly persons of color and women, from participation in the practices that undergird the nation, especially the right to vote.

*We need a “**new birth of freedom**” in America today—not the freedom for a few to dominate citizens they consider beneath them, but equality and freedom which would characterize this government as “**of, by and for**” everyone.*

With the assistance of six Supreme Court justices, our government leaders and Republican congressional representatives have eviscerated the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and strenuous efforts are underway to limit or deny the right of all citizens to vote in November, 2026. Christian nationalists are working within our government to repeal women’s right to vote, saying that voting should become one vote per household, and that vote should be given by the husband/father.

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Christians Without Borders: Toward a Trespassing Church

George A. Mason

Editor’s Note: This address was first presented as the Campolo Lecture at Eastern College/ Palmer Seminary on 26 April 2019 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The great Puerto Rican golfer, Chi Chi Rodriguez, was asked about how he learned the game. He said his first round of golf was an act of trespassing.

Now, I am a golfer myself. I have always loved the game and can relate to what Chi Chi says. I grew up across the street from a country club golf course in Staten Island, New York, and I would often sneak on there even though I was not a member. There were free public courses within driving distance, but I had no way to get there, so I trespassed. That’s what Chi Chi did too. And while I have no defense for my sin of trespassing, I want to say that I’m glad Chi Chi did and I think we should be thinking less about the trespassing and more about whether young people like him have access and opportunity to learn the game.

There are all sorts of borders we erect in this country and across the world to keep people apart, and it’s time Christians took a hard look at what we support. Here’s my thesis today: Christians in America—and particularly white Christians in America—have become more concerned with defending the law-and-order crowd that builds walls and fences against trespassers than they are for the people who live on the other side who share the same hopes and dreams for opportunity. If we are going to bear witness to the world in a way that makes a compelling case for our faith, we may have to switch sides and become a trespassing church.

Let’s take a look at where we are, to begin with. If I preach in my church about the southern border crisis, about the policy of separating children from their mothers at the border, about the idea of building “a big, beautiful wall,” as our president puts it, about the Muslim immigration ban, about the dehumanizing camps of people in Mexico awaiting a hearing just to be able to declare for asylum, about the fact that we will not appoint adequate immigration judges to hear cases because that will only lessen a crisis we would rather call an emergency so that we close the border altogether, about the explicit racism of claiming that the people who are seeking to come to this country to flee violence and seek safety, if not opportunity for their families are really rapists, murderers, drug dealers or terrorists in disguise, about the idea that we

should have more Norwegians who look like me than people of Latinx descent coming in, and that we ought to act as a nation according to the highest principles of humanitarianism—if I say those things, some people will think I’ve gotten too political. They just want me to preach the gospel. They want to leave public policy to the politicians.

But since Jesus, and the Hebrew prophets before him, and the apostles after him, were all political, I can’t do that and honor my ordination papers. Since

Since it’s probably obvious to everyone in this room, I won’t belabor the point for long—especially since Tony Campolo has been making the case for Evangelicals to speak and act for social justice for so long, Christianity is political by its nature. It isn’t partisan, but it is political.

it’s probably obvious to everyone in this room, I won’t belabor the point for long—especially since Tony Campolo has been making the case for Evangelicals to speak and act for social justice for so long, Christianity is political by its nature. It isn’t partisan, but it is political.

Jesus came proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God. Kingdom. That was the language of his day for a political entity. And no fair rushing to the argument about him telling Pilate that his kingdom is not of the world: the *of* is genitive, meaning something more like “authorized from” another world rather than “pertaining to” another world (John 18:36). Likewise, when Jesus says the kingdom of God is within you, the “you” is plural, not singular (Luke 17:21). So it means the kingdom is among you, here. And Jesus didn’t teach us to pray that God’s kingdom *go*, but rather that

“God’s kingdom *come*, God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Politics is how we live together in the world. It’s not a dirty word, no matter the grime and crime it often attracts. God wants us to bear witness *to* this world of God’s desire *for* this world by the way we live together now *in* this world. We are not biding our time until we escape it for Beulah Land.

Interestingly, many fundamentalists, who used to eschew the politics of this world and thought the kingdom of God was only for our hearts now and for heaven when we die, have entered the fray with a fervor we haven’t seen in ages. And they have taken center stage in this engagement. They have gained the ear of the White House and Congress and the Supreme Court, and their version of engagement has changed the face of our faith in ways we have to confront with our faith.

Christians—again, primarily white evangelical Christians—have courted the corridors of power and have curried favor to gain power over their enemies. They have been changing the principle of religious liberty into a license to discriminate against people who offend them, on the basis of their sincere religious convictions. This is not something a Jew or a Muslim could successfully claim in this America.

We have forgotten that once we were no people, but now we have become the people of God (1 Peter 2:10). “Once we were slaves in Egypt,” Jews say during Passover. “My father was a wandering Aramean,” the Hebrew confession begins (Deuteronomy 26:5). Once, we were rejected by popes and bishops and left to worship in hovels and homes and clearings in the woods. Once, we had to pay taxes to the state so that somebody else’s minister could be paid, while we couldn’t even hold the office of dogcatcher in our town because we were Baptists or Quakers or some other unauthorized sect. Once, we boarded ships to flee persecution and find a place to worship and work where nobody told us that some human beings had more purchase on the right to call themselves children of God than we.

How did we get from there to where we are today, siding with the rich and powerful against the poor, defending walls and caging children. We say we belong to the tribe of Jesus, but we’ve been revising his words to fit our politics instead of revising our politics to fit his words.

Jesus declared his own mission in that Nazareth synagogue long ago, reading from the Isaiah scroll: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor* (Luke 4:16-21).

He didn’t edit the prophet to our own liking. He didn’t say,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and has anointed me to preach good news to the rich, mass incarceration to targeted minorities, recovery of insurance payments to the optometrist, to let the oppressor get off Scot-free, and to declare the year of the Lord’s vengeance.

And yet, here we are. Eighty-two percent of evangelicals in America voted for a man for president whose policies are contrary to the way of Jesus. We have a Fox News religion analyst who pastors a tall steeple church in downtown Dallas and who declares that heaven has a wall in it to keep out lawbreakers, so there’s no reason not to support a wall on our southern border to keep out trespassers.¹ This is the same man who speaks for millions of American Christians when he says he wouldn’t vote for Jesus for president, because Jesus isn’t mean enough and wouldn’t punish evildoers. This same man prays at the ceremony in Israel when the Trump Administration announced

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the moving of the U. S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, because of his Christian Zionism that is based on a premillennial dispensationalism that needs Israel to crush its enemies so that Christ can return to rapture true believers and establish a timeline for judgment that will reward people with his theology and leave the vast mass of humanity to get its just desserts in the eternal fires of hell.

For heaven’s sake! Literally.

Before offering a different biblical approach to addressing these matters, I think we need to think a little more about borders and nations and the concept of national sovereignty.

When people make the claim that nations are sovereign and have the right to secure borders, we tend to think this is unassailable logic. But part of the unwinding of all this is to challenge that idea at its

core. Where is it written? The modern nation-state is a social construction, not a God-ordained natural political right.

No one knows for sure where the idea of the modern nation-state comes from. There are several theories, but they are just that. The most common is to trace it back to Europe and the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 that that ended the Eighty Years’ War between Spain and the Dutch, and the Thirty Years’ War that included the Germans. Prior to this, empires came and went, marching across the landscape to gain ground for their glory until they were defeated by a stronger empire.

Westphalia laid the groundwork for a modern sense of internationalism that recognizes territorial sovereignty of a people. But still, there are questions of whether these nations can simply declare themselves or must be recognized by others in order to be legitimate. And then there’s the question of whether ethnicity and culture should be the determining factor in the constitution of a nation-state.

In its more benign form, the idea that the people who naturally inhabit a region and share a common language and culture should determine their identity as a nation-state seems appealing. There’s a certain coherence to that theory, giving a clearer sense of identity to a people. But we have seen the malignant version of this in the “blood and soil” mantra of Nazi Germany that viewed the Jews as a scourge upon their land. So maybe that isn’t a solid moral basis for establishing a nation.

We translate the New Testament Greek word *ethnos* as nation, and we’re supposed to go into all nations to preach the gospel. Is every ethnic group on the planet supposed to have its own nation-state? What about the Kurds in Northern Iraq, then? What about the Rohingya people in Myanmar? The Jews lived in diaspora for centuries before returning to Palestine—some claiming it as a divine right. They declared themselves a nation-state in 1948, but 30 states, primarily Arab ones, still do not recognize Israel. Yet neither does the State of Israel recognize the right of the Palestinian people to their own national sovereignty in the land of their birth.

And what about many nations that have many ethnic groups within their borders? The word nation comes from the Latin root *natio* meaning birth or tribe, and thus means something like where or to whom you were born. So, most nations have this idea that if you are born within its borders, you have a claim to citizenship. But now our current administration in Washington is controversially trying to change that in order to discourage unauthorized border crossings and, in a more covert way, to protect a certain culture.

If you consider the American case, the natural inhabitant part quickly falls apart, since Native Americans are the only ones with original claim on the land. We decided that we would become a nation by declaration and that certain ideals about humanity would inform us—all men being created equal, for instance; each having the natural right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

But when your nation has to construct a narrative to justify its claim to land, it tends to neglect certain factors in favor of other factors. So, we tell a story of people seeking freedom from persecution, the right to worship as we please, the opportunity to pursue prosperity, etc. But no sooner do we do so than we privilege certain aspects of that story. For instance, we initially privileged white, northern European Protestant immigrants. We didn’t consider African slaves fully human, so they weren’t a problem; they were just property. When the Irish and Italian Catholics started coming over, we weren’t sure they could be integrated fully into this WASP-dominated nation, because of

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their higher loyalty to the Pope. In 1939, America turned away 900 Jews on the MS St. Louis who were fleeing Hitler’s genocide. No room at the inn. So much for Emma Lazarus’s poem at the Statue of Liberty that ends with these flourishing lines:

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

I tell you all this to remind you that when we hear people talking about borders and the rights of a nation-state to defend its borders, there’s a more fundamental question about the definition of a nation-state that we aren’t addressing. The nation-state is a social and political construct in search of a natural and universal grounding that falls apart with every attempt. It may

be the best construct we have to work with today, but it isn’t absolute or divinely ordained.

The more anxious we become about it all, the more likely we double-down on defending the indefensible. Nationalism is one such attempt. In the case of the United States, nationalism is always mixed up with white supremacy, no matter how much nationalists try to deflect that.

Representative Steve King of Iowa has been sanctioned by the House of Representatives by a vote of 421-1 for his comments to *The New York Times*, where he said, *White nationalism, white supremacist, Western civilization—how did that language become offensive?*² He has likened his censure to Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. He has also said that we have to limit immigration because we are losing our culture, since the birthrate among immigrants (read Hispanic immigrants) is higher than whites. And from the highest office in the land, we get much the same sentiment, even as white nationalists are far more guilty of racially and religiously-motivated mass murder and terror than immigrants or Muslims. *Good people on both sides.* Right.

This all spills over into white Christian nationalism, too. Muslim bans, the right of Christians to discriminate against those who offend their beliefs, the denial by the Supreme Court to allow for a chaplain of one’s own religion to serve a death row man: these are all trends that reveal the ungodly nexus of nationalism, white nationalism and Christian nationalism.

Now, what is the church to do in order to be faithful in our time and place? We should focus first on Jesus and look backward and forward from him—to the Hebrew Bible and to the early church.

When we look to Jesus, we find a consistent disregard for borders in his mission. With the possible exception of his enigmatic claim to the Syrophenician woman that he came for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, Jesus consistently modeled religious and ethnic trespassing (Mark 7:24-30). And even with this woman, we should probably see his encounter with her as a kind of hip fake intended to get him on to his more universal mission or a moment in which he stated the expected and accepted in order to move beyond it. The Gospels portray Jesus crossing over into Gentile territory time and time again, healing and teaching in ways that frustrated if not infuriated those with more nationalistic ambitions for the messiah. Furthermore, he challenged the purity codes of his tradition that were another way of marking exclusion. The confession of the Roman centurion of his being the Son of God at the point of Jesus’ death is another indicator of how the significance of his life transcend-

ed acknowledged borders.

This was also true of the Hebrew prophets. While post-exodus and post-exilic Israel continually focused on identity over against foreign influences, even in the Pentateuch there are clear commands to welcome the stranger, to treat the foreigner among them as if he were one of them (Leviticus 19:34). Likewise, it was in this same Holiness Code in Leviticus that Israel was instructed to love thy neighbor as thyself (Leviticus 19:18). And Jesus made clear in his Good Samaritan parable that “neighbor” didn’t mean only those who live in your neighborhood. For all the rules against intermarriage, there are moments like that in the Book of Ruth where an alternate vision is put forward.

The Bible does not speak with one voice. It shows us how God is working out God’s will and way against previous assumptions of how the world should be organized. There is a trajectory to Israel’s understanding of how to account for insiders and outsiders that reaches a more universal moral grounding in Second Isaiah with the vision of Israel becoming a light to all

The Spirit continually moves the apostles to accept God-fearing Gentiles, eunuchs and women without regard to traditional religious identity markers such as circumcision and purity laws. The early church had to reckon with this as it continued to move beyond Palestine into Roman territory—whether in Asia Minor, Greece or North Africa. The gospel simply would not be defined by nationalism.

nations, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. So, Jesus doesn’t just appear out of nowhere with these boundary-blurring ideas that burst the bubble of Jewish nationalism. He escaped Nazareth by a whisker when he interpreted Isaiah’s words to mean that He would rely on the examples of the prophets Elijah and Elisha who in their day served and healed Gentiles as well as Jews (Luke 4:24-27).

And then the early church in the Book of Acts takes up this border-crossing, boundary-crashing work. The Spirit continually moves the apostles to accept

God-fearing Gentiles, eunuchs and women without regard to traditional religious identity markers such as circumcision and purity laws. The early church had to reckon with this as it continued to move beyond Palestine into Roman territory—whether in Asia Minor, Greece or North Africa. The gospel simply would not be defined by nationalism.

And so today, we find ourselves in need of reimagining our role in the world as the church of Jesus Christ. We have a history of Christian missions to draw upon that, while respecting national borders to some extent, saw the imperative of trespassing those borders at times in order to bring the gospel to unreached people groups. Likewise, we have transnational corporations that argue for a global economy that requires nations to compromise some of their sovereignty for the sake of the greater good.

And we have groups like Doctors Without Borders, which see human need as a higher value than national sovereignty. Their web site borrows the Christian language of “bearing witness.” They declare that part of their mission is “to alleviate suffering, protect life and health, and to restore respect for human beings and their fundamental human rights.”³ And they believe this involves at times risky disregard for borders that protect governments and dehumanizing actors from being held accountable for their crimes.

One of your alumni the other day saw my title for this lecture, *Christians without Borders*, and suggested that it might be better if we had *Borders without Christians*. I think we know what he means, since the people who most egregiously defend the cruel and inhumane policies of policing our borders against desperate people yearning to be free almost always claim Christian warrant for their behavior. But it would be better if we would instead take ourselves to task and renew our commitment to being the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

We can start by remembering the distinction Martin Luther King, Jr., made in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail between a just and unjust law. *A just law is a man-made code*, he said, *that squares with the moral law or the law of God*. This is to be respected and honored. An unjust law, however, must be resisted and opposed.

*One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.*⁴

He was specifically dealing with segregation laws in his own day, but it didn’t take him long before he trespassed into other areas of militarism and materialism. Today I believe he would also speak against an ungodly nationalism that divides us against one another within our borders and against one another across our borders.

Recently, my work with clergy colleagues in Dallas has taken us to the city council in defense of the church’s right to house the homeless on nights when inclement weather forces them off the streets and when shelters are full. The old neighborhood canard, NIMBYism—Not in My Back Yard—rears its head time-and-time again when addressing the plight of the poor in our communities. And the council was receiving pressure to pass a code that would prohibit churches from taking in the homeless on such occasions. My Methodist colleague, Rev. Rachel Bachmann, rose to speak for many of us:

I worry that many of the proposals come from a Not in My Backyard mentality. I, too, rise to offer

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my own Not in My Backyard speech, but the proposals I would offer are rooted in morality and the faith that comes from Christian scriptures.

This past winter, among the individuals we provided warmth included infants whose mothers were without shelter. Exposed to the elements these children may not have made it through the night. When we open the doors of our church, we proclaim, ‘infants won’t die on the street tonight—not in my back yard.’”

When we open the doors of our church we proclaim, ‘people without shelter will not be deprived their right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ Not in my back yard.

When we open the doors of our church we proclaim, ‘human beings will not be stripped of their dignity just because they’ve been stripped of their financial well-being’ Not in my back yard.

Close the doors of our church to those in need, try to stop my church from following through on the mission appointed to us by God and you’ll have

*one hell of a fight in your front yard because this city will not deny us the right to religious expression and freedom so that some citizens can shuffle unsheltered persons into faraway places and feel a little better about the comforts they enjoy.*⁵

This same feisty spirit should characterize our advocacy for human life and dignity at our southern border. Defending the right of our nation to make our border all but impenetrable to outsiders on the basis of Romans 13, as some do, is both horrible hermeneutics and terrible ethics. Paul claims there that we are to be subject to governing authorities, because authority comes from God and governing authorities are instituted by God. Some Christians today, especially those who are controlling the public understanding of our faith, see our current administration as wielding just such godly authority—although they didn’t claim that for the previous administration. But this view conveniently passes over the historic struggle of the church to reckon with what to do with leaders who violate our sense of the universal moral law.

Martin Luther was challenged on just such a point in the early 16th century, the civil and ecclesiastical authorities calling upon him to be subject to their rule. The Swiss Reformed theologian, Philip Schaff, comments on this moment for Luther:

*When tradition becomes a wall against freedom, when authority degenerates into tyranny, the very blessing is turned into a curse, and history is threatened with stagnation and death. At such rare junctures, Providence raises those pioneers of progress, who have the intellectual and moral courage to break through the restraints at the risk of their lives, and to open new paths for the onward march of history.... Conscience is the voice of God in man. It is his most sacred possession. No power can be allowed to stand between the gift and the giver. Even an erring conscience must be respected, and cannot be forced.*⁶

Civil disobedience is sometimes the mark of faithfulness to God. And the church that loses its conscience, loses its soul. At certain times, we have to declare to the world that there will be hell to pay for the foul

treatment of human beings created in the image and likeness of God. The faithful church in these cases will be a trespassing church that respects God before human authority.

We will never know for certain if we are right in doing so; but certainty is not a Christian virtue—faith is. And if we are wrong, we can always pray as our Lord taught us to pray: ...*forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.* ■

George A. Mason is formerly the Senior Pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. Dr. Mason is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Christian Ethics Today.

- 1 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/preacher-robert-jeffress-border-wall-trump_n_5c3640d2e4b00c33ab5f394b
- 2 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/steve-king-white-supremacy.html>
- 3 <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/who-we-are/>

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- principles/bearing-witness
- 4 https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html
 - 5 https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=rachel%20griffin%20baughman&epa=SEARCH_BOX
 - 6 <https://famguardian.org/Subjects/Taxes/Articles/Christian/Romans13.htm>

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Practicing Gospel Dissent: LIKE NOW?

Bill Leonard

One of the greatest Christian dissenters I’ve ever known was James M. Dunn, late chief executive of Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and founding faculty member of Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

Like his dissenting Baptist forebears, James simply gave a gospel witness and let the Holy Ghost fall where it might. I shall never forget the day not long after the School of Divinity began when I was sitting in my office watching Professor Dunn testify at the cabinet appointment hearings for John Ashcroft to be attorney general of the United States. Dunn’s name appeared at the bottom of the TV screen, as did the words “Wake Forest University.”

“O God,” I said out loud, as a prayer, not an oath. Minutes later, my phone rang and a voice on the other end said,

“Does this man who’s testifying against Mr. Ashcroft work at Wake Forest?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Well,” she continued, “he’s criticizing a fine Christian. Can you stop him?”

“No, ma’am,” I responded, “I’m just the dean; you’d have to talk with Jesus if you want to stop him.”

“You’re no better than he is,” she declared, and hung up.

I still take that as a gospel compliment.

Our times compel us to acknowledge that dissent, often with religious implications, is not only present, but also essential in a democracy, or even a former democracy. LIKE NOW! That reality prompted this essay, “The Legacy of Dissent,” and the conference with the same title recently sponsored by Wake Forest School of Divinity.

History of dissent

Dissent as a descriptive term came into usage for labeling Protestant sectarians in 17th century England. It was applied to those minority groups — Separatists, Baptists, Quakers, Seekers, Ranters, Levellers and other religious nonconformists who challenged what Daniel White calls the union of “secular morality” and the state-privileged Anglican Church. It was a classification for Christians who were “dissenting from something” doctrinally, politically and morally, as

represented in a state-supported religious establishment. Dissenter-oriented groups were described by the novelist Daniel Defoe as those Christians who were “straightened in their Consciences,” and “spoke from the Heart to the Heart.”

In *Dissent in American Religion*, Baptist history professor Edwin Scott Gaustad explores the imperative of dissent, writing, “Should a society (whether church or state) actually succeed ... in suffocating all contrary opinion, then its own vital juices no longer flow, and the shadow of death begins to fall across it. LIKE NOW! No society — ecclesiastical or political, military or literary — can afford to be snared by its own slogans.”

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Dissenters compound faith’s eccentricities and call attention to the ways in which governments and religious communities cut deals with their consciences for the sake of order and control. Gaustad notes: “This reform of religion in the name of religion, this growing edge, this refusal to let well enough alone, is the role of dissent...The dissenter is a powerful if unpredictable engine in the service of a cause.”

It “may also be a manifestation of the unfettered human spirit,” he adds. “The dissenter is a powerful if unpredictable engine in the service of a cause.”

Shine some gospel light

The rhetoric of dissent calls us to shine some gospel light, not only on the major ethical and spiritual challenges of our time, but on the often-unnoticed deals

by which church, individuals or societies normalize the little injustices, the casual callousness, the “locker room banter” that dehumanizes. LIKE NOW!

In *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, Oxford University professor Paul Fiddes reminds readers that “flowing from the personal nature of faith and salvation is the defense of freedom of conscience and freedom from persecution.” He declares, “The very first appeal in English for religious liberty for all — not just Christians — was made by the minister of the first Baptist Church on English soil.”

That person was none other than Thomas Helwys, writing in *The Mystery of Iniquity* (1612), that “for men’s religion to God, is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man, Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.”

Also in 1612, a confession of faith titled “Propositions and Conclusions Concerning True Christian Religion” demonstrates how early in their history Baptists linked conversion with religious liberty. It reads: “That the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine: but to leave Christian religion free to every man’s conscience and to handle only civil transgressions, injuries and wrongs of man . . . For Christ only is the king and lawgiver of church and conscience.”

In 17th century England, the state required all infants receive Christian baptism at birth; each baptismal certificate being a birth certificate. Baptists insisted Christian conversion was an encounter between God and sinners seeking redemption and could not be compelled by the state.

Nineteenth century British historian Edward Underhill, insisted that “a distinguishing ... trait” of the early Baptists was their claim, “for the church and for the conscience, of freedom from all human control.”

Sometimes dissent is demanded because injustice is simply unbearable and to end that injustice requires dissent as civil disobedience, times when an oppressed minority is at odds with the cultural, religious, political, economic status quo. And all too often the times get out of hand, and dissent is thrust upon us. LIKE NOW!

Sometimes history and dissent collide. The times explode, and if we don’t claim the dissenter’s calling, it claims us. Conscience compels us to break the silence.

Such was the gospel imperative required to end Jim

Crow segregation and cruelty in the American South.

Martin Luther King and dissent

In *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: “When I went to Montgomery as a pastor, I had not the slightest idea that I would later become involved in a crisis in which nonviolent resistance would be applicable. I neither started the protest nor suggested it. I simply responded to the call of the people for a spokesman.”

For King, dissent against Jim Crow laws and culture was inseparable from Jesus’ own sermonic dissent. King recalled, “When the protest began, my mind, consciously or unconsciously, was driven back to the Sermon on the Mount, with its sublime teachings on love, and the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance.”

For King and other Black preachers, such dissent was anchored in the witness of the gospel — a sign that the gospel itself was alive, demanding action against legalized racism, oppression and injustice.

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King insisted, “The Christian gospel is a two-way road” of response to human need. And he concluded: “Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion.”

Even after the mantle of leadership fell upon him, King was well aware of the difference between gospel dissent and bellicose chaos. Reflecting on his role as preacher and civil rights activist, King asked: “How could I make a speech that would be militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action and yet moderate enough to keep this fervor within controllable and Christian bounds?”

Thus to claim the voice of dissent is metaphorically to handle serpents, to take a chance that your own

sense of justice, righteousness and gospel is a true one and deliberately step into the danger zone. LIKE NOW!

King captured the purpose of gospel dissent, declaring that, “in substance,” Jesus told us: “Whenever I come, a division sets in between justice and injustice. I have come to bring a positive peace which is the presence of justice, love, yea, even the kingdom of God.”

Today, we have a historic opportunity, indeed, obligation, to exercise “the responsibility of a minority,” in our own culture, and for many of us perhaps, in our own churches and denominations, speaking out from the depth of Christ-arrested consciences against the hatred, discrimination and violence of our own times.

I said this years ago. It’s still true: Practicing dissent is never easy. One person’s dissenter is another’s anti-Christ. One person’s conscience is another’s heresy. One person’s community organizing is another’s mob.

Sometimes dissent can get you damned.
Sometimes silence can too.
LIKE NOW! ■

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WISE WORDS FROM WISE PEOPLE

Maya Angelou: *I’ve learned that you shouldn’t go through life with a catcher’s mitt on both hands; you need to be able to throw something back.*

Wendell Berry: *Whether we and our politicians know it or not, Nature is party to all our deals and decisions, and she has more votes, a longer memory, and a sterner sense of justice than we do.*

Abraham Lincoln: *I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts.*

Maya Angelou: *One isn’t necessarily born with courage, but one is born with potential. Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can’t be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest.*

The Conjunction We Keep Forgetting: Catholic Social Teaching and the Immigrant in Northwest Iowa

John M. Sandy

*“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”*
—Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” 1883

I saw her for the first time this past July. I was in New York for a conference at NYU, and on a free evening, I went down to the pier and took a boat out to the statue, the way millions before me have done. I had known the poem since grade school—the tired and the poor and the huddled masses. I expected to feel something dutiful. What I did not expect was to stand at the base of that figure, read Emma Lazarus’ lines cut into the pedestal, and think immediately of my beloved northwest Iowa. Of the towns only an hour from my own, where the tired and the poor she describes are not a memory of Ellis Island, but the family sitting two pews ahead at Mass.

There is a stretch of Highway 71 south of Spirit Lake where, at the right hour of an August evening, the corn stands so tall and green on both sides that the road feels like the aisle of a church. I have driven it a thousand times. For most of those drives I never thought about who holds it all up. The fields and the plants that turn what they grow—hogs, turkey, cattle and chicken—rest on the labor of people my neighbors will mostly never see. The man scrubbing the blood-drying room at two in the morning. The woman on the line in Storm Lake, Denison or Sioux Center. The children filling desks in schools that would otherwise be closing. They keep the lights on in the towns I love.

I am an Iowan and a Catholic. For a long time, I assumed those two things sat together comfortably. I am less sure of that lately, and I have found help thinking it through in an unlikely place. John Carr spent 50 years working where Catholic social teaching meets public life, most of them running the justice and peace office of the U.S. bishops. When he retired this year, he wrote down what he had learned. One of his lessons has stayed with me. It is about a single word.

The Most Important Word

Carr says the most important word in Catholic social teaching is *and*. Our faith joins what our politics tends

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to split: life and dignity, rights and responsibilities, family and community, solidarity and subsidiarity, the planet and the poor. With an example about the unborn, he shows what a conjunction can do. If we say that the protection of human life begins with the unborn child *but* does not end there, it sounds like a rebuke. Say it begins there *and* does not end there, and it sounds like an invitation to a shared task.

Northwest Iowa is a place where the wrong conjunction has done real harm. The temptation runs two ways, and both swap the word *but* for the word *and*. One says we are a nation of laws, *but*, and then lets the sentence trail off while fear finishes it. The other says these are human beings made in the image of God, *but*, and trails off into irritation at anyone who worries

about a border at all. Each half is true. Neither half is the Gospel. The Catholic sentence keeps both clauses and refuses to drop either one. These are human beings made in the image of God, *and* we are a people who owe something to the rule of law. That sentence is harder to say. It will not fit on a yard sign. It is also the only version I can say as a Catholic without lying.

What the Numbers Cannot Hide

The facts are not really in dispute, whatever the noise around them. Storm Lake sits in the corn of Buena Vista County, a town of about 11,000; it is one of the only cities in Iowa without a white majority. Its schools, once nearly all white, now belong largely to the children of immigrants and refugees, Latino and Southeast Asian and African and Micronesian. Two-thirds of Iowa’s counties are shrinking. Storm Lake is growing, and it grows because people traveled a very long way to do work almost no one born here will take. In Sioux City, the seat of my diocese, now more than one in five residents is Hispanic. The Tyson plant in Storm Lake starts workers well above 20 dollars an hour and still cannot fill the roster. Nobody in that picture is taking anything. They are holding the place together.

The *and* has more work to do because it does not stop at economics. There is an easy argument that defends the immigrant because he/she is useful. Useful he/she certainly is. Without him/her, the plants close and the schools empty. But a human being is not owed his dignity because he/she is useful. They are owed it because he *is*. Catholic social teaching starts with the person, not his utility. I fear our willingness to see the person first is what has worn away. The worker in the blood-drying room matters because of the God whose image he carries, not because of the pork he cuts. That he also keeps the town alive is something I am glad to add, with an *and*, but never a *therefore*.

Political, but Not Partisan

Drawing on the bishops’ “Faithful Citizenship” tradition, Carr offers four postures for the Church in public life, and they read almost like an examination of conscience for Iowans. The Church is called to be political but not partisan, principled but not ideological, civil but not silent, engaged but not used.

Silence, Carr contends, is sometimes just agreement with what is wrong. In a small town, silence is comfortable. Everyone knows everyone, and the surest way to keep the peace at the coffee shop is to say nothing about the family that stopped coming to Mass because they are afraid of being seen in the parking lot. Yet a Church that will feed the hungry only as long

as no one asks who they are is not being prudent; it is being quiet in the face of fear and calling the quiet prudence.

The Church is not the chaplain of a political party. I have no wish to bless a platform, and I distrust anyone who wants the crucifix out on the campaign trail. But declining to be partisan is not the same as declining to speak. My own bishop, John Keehner of Sioux City, wrote a pastoral letter this February on exactly this. He wrote of immigrant brothers and sisters who worship beside us on Sunday, whose children sit in our schools, and who now live in real fear, and he said that as their shepherd, he could not stay silent while members of the human family suffer.

What the Conjunction Asks of Us

It asks first that we not hand the works of mercy over to an argument. The Diocese of Sioux City already does more than most people in the pews realize. Catholic Charities runs a Welcome program. The diocese points families toward a *Know Your Rights*

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toolkit and to immigration attorneys. Briar Cliff University has taken up the subject in its Franciscan values lectures. These are the ordinary ministries that Carr says give the Church its standing, since what we do usually persuades more than what we say. A parish that helps a frightened family find a lawyer has preached a better sermon on human dignity than most of us will manage from a lectern.

It asks second that we give up what Carr calls the “pick a pope” habit, and its local cousin, the habit of picking a clause. In his first apostolic exhortation, *Dilexi Te*, Pope Leo XIV calls us to put the poor at the center of our faith and our lives. Such summons belongs to no faction. The immigrant is poor in the sense Scripture means, the stranger and the sojourner,

the one with no standing, and the call to place her at the center is addressed to everyone, the people who worry about the border included.

It asks third that we speak even when speaking costs us something at the coffee shop. I am a judge. I believe in law, and I will not pretend the word *illegal* is vacuous. I am also a Catholic, and the same tradition that tells me to honor lawful authority tells me in the same breath that no statute ever written can undo the image of God in a person.

I think again of Highway 71 at dusk, the corn standing up like the walls of a church. For most of my life I took that country as simply mine, my state, my inheritance, the ground my people have farmed and prayed over for generations. I was not wrong about that. I was only using the smaller word. The fuller sentence is that this is my home *and* it has become more. Home of people who came from Michoacán and Chuuk and South Sudan to keep it alive, and who worship the same God I do, often with more fervor, in the same buildings, in a language I never learned.

Carr ends on hope, and I dare borrow his posture. My hope is that the Catholics in northwest Iowa learn to say *and* where the culture keeps insisting on *but*. That is the harder sentence. And it may be the only one that can still hold this place together. The lamp Lazarus set beside the golden door was never only

The lamp Lazarus set beside the golden door was never only New York’s to keep; some of its light was always meant to fall this far inland, on a gravel lot outside a country church, on the family two pews ahead of me at Mass.

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The Peace of Wild Things

By Wendell Berry, From *Openings: Poems* (1968)

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.*

*I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
or grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

The Dangerous Myth of Being a Good Person

Dr. Lewis Brogdon

There is something deeply unsettling about the moment in which we are living. Every day ordinary people participate in extraordinary forms of injustice while continuing to believe they are good people. Immigration officers separate families, believing they are simply doing their jobs. Government officials approve policies that inflict suffering while calling them fiscal responsibility. Corporate executives and managers make decisions that strip workers of dignity because “it is company policy.” Employers eliminate diversity initiatives and make hiring or promotion decisions that leave qualified women and racial minorities with fewer opportunities, explaining that they are simply complying with changing laws or adapting to a new political climate. Millions of vulnerable people remain in detention facilities operated for profit while contracts are renewed, budgets are approved and the machinery of government continues uninterrupted. Across the country, workers struggle to afford housing, healthcare, childcare, groceries and gas while others profit from systems that leave millions financially exhausted.

Most of the people involved in these decisions would never describe themselves as cruel. They would probably tell you they love their families, work hard, go to church, give to good causes and try to live decent lives. They believe they are “good people.” They don’t see themselves as moral monsters. They are good neighbors, coworkers, church members, public servants, business leaders and ordinary citizens. Yet together they participate in systems that diminish human dignity and exact monstrous violence on others every single day.

How is that possible? Or better stated, “why do we go along with these things?” It is tempting to answer that question by pointing to a president or political party. Political leaders certainly matter. They shape public priorities, influence culture, establish policies, and communicate what behaviors deserve approval or condemnation. Leaders can cultivate compassion, or they can normalize indifference. They can enlarge our moral imagination, or they can shrink it. Yet no president, governor, corporation or institution can produce a morally compromised society alone. Every moral crisis ultimately depends upon the participation, silence, accommodation or indifference of ordinary people.

The most disturbing possibility is not that America is becoming a nation of bad people. It is that otherwise decent people are becoming increasingly comfortable participating in injustice without recognizing their own participation. We have become remarkably skilled at identifying evil in other people while remaining strangely confident in our own goodness. We assume that because we are not intentionally malicious, we cannot possibly be contributing to the suffering around us. Perhaps that assumption is one of the greatest moral illusions of our time.

Why I Keep Coming Back to Zimbardo

Social psychologist Philip Zimbardo devoted much of his career to understanding how ordinary people

Zimbardo’s most unsettling contribution is not that evil exists. We already know that. It is his insistence that we consistently underestimate our own moral vulnerability. We like to imagine that if we had lived during slavery, we would have opposed it. If we had lived in Nazi Germany, we would have resisted. If we had witnessed segregation, we would have marched with Dr. King. Perhaps we would have. But perhaps we flatter ourselves.

become participants in evil. In *The Lucifer Effect*, he argues that human behavior cannot be explained simply by dividing people into good and bad. Our choices are shaped not only by personal character but also by powerful situational and systemic forces that influence what we think, what we value, and what we consider acceptable. In the right conditions, ordinary people are capable of participating in extraordinary injustice and cruelty without ever believing they are caught up in the machinations of evil.

Zimbardo’s most unsettling contribution is not that evil exists. We already know that. It is his insistence that we consistently underestimate our own moral vulnerability. We like to imagine that if we had lived during slavery, we would have opposed it. If we had lived in Nazi Germany, we would have resisted. If we had witnessed segregation, we would have marched with Dr. King. Perhaps we would have. But perhaps we flatter ourselves. Zimbardo invites a far more uncomfortable question: Who do we become when the world around us begins rewarding conformity, fear, tribal loyalty, self-interest and indifference? That question leads naturally to one of the central assumptions of the New Testament.

The New Testament assumes that human beings are morally vulnerable. Jesus describes us as sheep in need of a shepherd. Paul warns believers not to be conformed to the patterns of this world, not to think more highly of themselves than they ought to, reminds them that they are easily “tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine,” and insists that their struggle is against powers larger than themselves. Peter insists that we must be sober and vigilant with evil. Christian formation exists because the earliest Christians understood something we often forget: Left to ourselves, we are continually shaped by the people, institutions, and cultures around us.

Permission Structures

Permission structures deserve far more attention than they receive because they help explain how ordinary people become participants in injustice without ever thinking of themselves as unjust. Moral decline rarely begins with spectacular acts of cruelty. It begins with small accommodations that slowly reshape our consciences.

“It is the law.”

“It is our policy.”

“I am just doing my job.”

“I have no choice.”

“Everyone else is doing it this way.”

“That is what leadership wants.”

These are not merely excuses. They are ways of surrendering moral agency.

Political leaders, corporations, churches, universities and media organizations all create environments that influence what people consider acceptable. They communicate what is rewarded, what is punished, what is expected and what no longer requires moral reflection. In essence, they create environments in which people feel increasingly free to act in ways they might once have considered morally unacceptable. Under such

conditions, actions that once troubled our consciences gradually begin to feel normal. This is what I mean by a permission structure for evil.

A permission structure does not necessarily create prejudice or cruelty from nothing. More often, it lowers the moral barriers that once restrained them. It assures people that they no longer need to question what they are doing because respected authorities have already done the questioning for them. The result is not always dramatic acts of violence. More often it produces quiet participation in systems that steadily diminish human dignity while allowing participants to preserve the comforting belief that they are simply doing their jobs.

The Slow Work of Moral Erosion

Yet people rarely adjust to a changing moral climate all at once. Our consciences are seldom abandoned in a single dramatic decision. They are reshaped through countless small accommodations that gradually redefine what feels acceptable. We tell ourselves that a

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small deception is harmless. We take advantage of someone because we can. We overcharge a customer. We laugh at a degrading joke instead of challenging it. We remain silent when someone is treated unfairly because speaking up might cost us something. We become impatient with those who slow us down, dismissive of those with less power, indifferent to suffering that does not touch our own lives. Individually these actions may seem insignificant. Collectively they form us.

This is how moral erosion works. It rarely begins with spectacular acts of cruelty. It begins with ordinary compromises that dull the conscience one decision at a time. Every rationalization makes the next one easier. Every silence becomes practice for another silence. Every act of indifference trains us to look away again. By the time we are asked to participate in something much larger, we have already spent years becoming the kind of people for whom such participation no longer feels morally troubling.

By the time we encounter a significant moral test,

our response is rarely determined in that moment alone. It has been shaped by hundreds of smaller decisions that came before it. Character is formed gradually. So is compromise. We become the kind of people who either resist injustice or accommodate it long before history places us in front of its largest moral questions.

Three Everyday Ways We Explain Ourselves

Permission structures shape the environment around us. Moral erosion reshapes the person within us. Eventually both become visible in the stories we tell ourselves about why we cannot, should not or need not act differently.

1. “I don’t have time”

We express concern, perhaps even outrage, but rarely allow another person’s suffering to interrupt our schedules or rearrange our priorities. The suffering of immigrants, children trapped in poverty, victims of war, lonely neighbors, exploited workers and forgotten communities becomes background noise.

2. “I am just following policy.”

At other times we surrender our moral responsibility by replacing ethical judgment with institutional compliance. Throughout history countless injustices have been defended with the language of law, policy, procedure and order. People stop asking whether something is right and begin asking only whether it is permitted. They stop asking whether a policy reflects justice and begin asking only whether it satisfies legal requirements. The law can become an excuse for abandoning conscience.

3. “I am just one person. I can’t make a difference.”

Finally, many of us excuse ourselves through resignation. We convince ourselves that our efforts cannot possibly matter. One church cannot solve poverty. One citizen cannot transform immigration policy. One employee cannot challenge an unjust workplace. One community cannot reverse generations of inequality.

All of those statements contain some truth. But they also contain a dangerous temptation, a giving in to a hopelessness that is a permission for inaction.

Conclusion

Permission structures that erode the conscience and allow ordinary people to participate in cruelty while believing they possess the moral high ground may be every empire’s most dangerous gift. If that is true, then the challenge before us is not simply political. It is

moral and spiritual.

America’s crisis will not be solved simply by electing different leaders or defeating opposing political parties. Those battles matter, but they cannot be a substitute for the deep soul work needed in this nation. The fight for the soul of this nation continues. Every generation imagines it is immune to the moral failures of those that came before it. Every generation eventually discovers it is not. Every lasting renewal begins with people who refuse to surrender their consciences to the surrounding culture and with people with enough humility and wisdom to learn from history, not seek to erase it.

We never seem to learn from history, and this worries me because the greatest tragedies of human history have rarely depended upon a handful of evil people acting alone. They have depended upon millions of ordinary people who gradually accommodated themselves to injustice. Some remained silent. Others simply followed orders. Many convinced themselves that someone else is responsible. Still others accepted

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the suffering of their neighbors because challenging it seemed inconvenient, dangerous, or futile. **History reminds us that societies do not descend into moral darkness simply because evil people gain power. They descend because ordinary people gradually adjust to what they once would have rejected.** So, the question facing us is not whether we believe ourselves to be good people. It is whether we are becoming the kind of people who can recognize evil before it becomes ordinary, resist conformity before it becomes instinctive, and remain faithful when the culture invites us to surrender our moral imagination for the comfort of belonging.

The most dangerous words in a moral crisis may simply be: “But I’m a good person.” ■

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On Justice and Freedom

Wendell B. Griffin

Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., were right. The pretentious United States of America must structurally and fundamentally change or be forever damned as a curse on the world.

The January 1969 issue of *Playboy Magazine* contained an opinion article titled *A Testament of Hope*. It was written by Martin Luther King, Jr., and published posthumously in a compendium of Dr. King’s writings, speeches, and interviews under the same title that was edited by James Melvin Washington, a noted King scholar. Consider these excerpts from *A Testament of Hope*, Dr. King’s last published essay:

Why is the issue of equality still so far from solution in America, a nation that professes itself to be democratic, inventive, hospitable to new ideas, rich, productive, and awesomely powerful? The problem is so tenacious because, despite its virtues and attributes, America is deeply racist and its democracy is flawed both economically and socially. All too many Americans believe justice will unfold painlessly or that its absence for black people will be tolerated tranquilly.

Justice for black people will not flow into society merely from court decisions nor from fountains of political oratory. Nor will a few token changes quell all the tempestuous yearnings of disadvantaged black people. White America must recognize that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society. The comfortable, the entrenched, the privileged cannot continue to tremble at the prospect of change in the status quo.

...When millions of people have been cheated for centuries, restitution is a costly process. Inferior education, poor housing, unemployment, inadequate health care —each is a bitter component of the oppression that has been our heritage. Each will require billions of dollars to correct. Justice so long deferred has accumulated interest and its cost for this society will be substantial in financial as well as human terms...

The price of progress would have been high enough at the best of times, but we are in an agonizing national crisis because a complex of profound problems has intersected in an explosive mixture... Schools, transportation, water sup-

ply, traffic and crime would have been municipal agonies whether or not Negroes lived in our cities. The anarchy of unplanned city growth was destined to confound our confidence. What is unique to this period is our inability to arrange an order of priorities that promises solutions that are decent and just...

It is time that we stopped our blithe lip service to the guarantees of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. These fine sentiments are embodied in the Declaration of Independence, but that document was always a declaration of intent rather than of reality. There were slaves when it was written; there were still slaves when it was adopted; and to

There were slaves when it was written; there were still slaves when it was adopted; and to this day, black Americans have not life, liberty nor the privilege of pursuing happiness, and millions of poor white Americans are in economic bondage that is scarcely less oppressive...

this day, black Americans have not life, liberty nor the privilege of pursuing happiness, and millions of poor white Americans are in economic bondage that is scarcely less oppressive...

... The question that now faces us is whether we can turn the Negro’s disillusionment and bitterness into hope and faith in the essential goodness of the American system. If we don’t, our society will crumble.

...This is not a nation of venal people. It is a land of individuals who, in the majority, have not cared, who have been heartless about their black neighbors because their ears are blocked and their eyes blinded by the tragic myth that Negroes endure abuse without pain or complaint. Even when protest flared and denied the myth,

they were fed new doctrines of inhumanity that argued that Negroes were arrogant, lawless and ungrateful. Habitual white discrimination was transformed into white backlash. But for some, the lies had lost their grip and an internal disquiet grew. Poverty and discrimination were undeniably real; they scarred the nation; they dirtied our honor and diminished our pride. An insistent question defined evasion: Was security for some being purchased at the price of degradation for others? Everything in our traditions said this kind of injustice was the system of the past, or of other nations. And yet there it was, abroad in our own land. Thus, was born – particularly in the young generation – a spirit of dissent that ranged from superficial disavowal of the old values [militarism, racism, and materialism] to total commitment to wholesale, drastic and immediate social reform. Yet all of it was dissent. Their voice is still a minority; but united with millions of black protesting voices, it has become a sound of distant thunder increasing in volume with the gathering of storm clouds. This dissent is America’s hope... Today’s dissenters tell the complacent majority that the time has come when further evasion of social responsibility in a turbulent world will court disaster and death. America has not changed because so many think it need not change; but this is the illusion of the damned... America must change.

Dr. King’s perspective before he was murdered 58 years ago was that “America must change” or be damned by the illusion that it need not change. Today we see that America has not changed.

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 and the tenure of Kamala Harris as Vice President of the United States during the Biden presidency occurred in a society that remained in the deadly grip of racism, materialism and militarism. Maternal mortality among black women is not only high but is being ignored by health professionals and the nation. Public education is being defunded, privatized and cannibalized in service to a neoconservative ideology that smacks of the Confederate States of America.

We must acknowledge the witting cooperation of some privileged black people with racist, capitalist, and militarist dystopian actions is working to perpetuate systemic injustice and further inspire resentment, disillusionment and protest. Justice Clarence Thomas is not the only example. Kay Cole James, a black woman, led the Heritage Foundation from January 2018 until March 2022. She is now Secretary for the

Commonwealth of Virginia.

Their examples are repeated across the nation, and in Arkansas.

Fifty-eight years after King’s death and 250 years after the first 4th of July, King’s hope that the United States would change has not yet borne fruit. Instead, our nation is a crumbling empire suffering from the greed, cruelty and incompetence of a sociopathic idiot, his pseudo-religious fascist supporters, and what Rollo May called “pseudo-innocence” in his 1972 book *Power and Violence*. Allan Aubrey Boesak echoed Rollo May’s concern in his 1976 book *Farewell to Innocence*.

We are not more free, wise or kind now than the white men who founded this nation 250 years ago. This week’s Supreme Court decisions are not the only evidence why we should question whether the nation believes in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all people, let alone whether we are willing to work, fight and even die to ensure that our descendants will live in such a society. The presidential election of

Each of us must answer some pressing questions: Do we believe that the ideals of life, liberty and justice for all persons are worthwhile for our society? Do we have the courage, determination and commitment to communal well-being to work for them, fight for them, and even suffer and die to achieve them?

2016, January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, presidential election of 2024, and the tyrannical conduct by national, state and local political leaders since 2024 are compelling proof that tens of millions of people in the United States do not believe in the ideal of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness for all people.

On the 250th anniversary of the 4th of July, we will be dismissed as fools or frauds if we claim that racism, militarism and materialism have subsided.

On the 250th anniversary of the 4th of July, we will be dismissed as fools or frauds if we claim that we confronted and corralled the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism. We have added sexism (including homophobia and transphobia), imperialism, classism, techno-centrism and xenophobia.

What King viewed as “giant triplets” – racism, materialism and militarism – have been bred and fed so much that democracy in the United States is on the brink of ending because the “giant triplets” are now octuplets being constantly fed by mass media, willful miseducation, hateful religious-inspired bigotry, naked and unparalleled greed, commercialized cruelty and lust for domination and white male supremacy.

Each of us must answer some pressing questions:

Do we believe that the ideals of life, liberty and justice for all persons are worthwhile for our society?

Do we have the courage, determination and commitment to communal well-being to work for them, fight for them, and even suffer and die to achieve them?

If we will not or cannot answer “yes” to those questions, we will continue having 4th of July observances. We will continue hearing renditions of what Frederick Douglas said 174 years ago. Meanwhile, our 4th of July gatherings will be dismissed as shams by people who recall how Americans profaned the sacrifices of millions of people across our history by political apathy, civic atrophy and moral lunacy.

Our young people and their descendants will curse our self-delusion, insincerity and their plight. They will be right to do so.

Now, as in 1852, these words from Frederick Douglass ring true:

At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could reach the nation’s ear, I would, today, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced.

On this 250th anniversary I borrow from Frederick Douglass and pose this question. What to the American indigenous, black, Latino, Asian Pacific, immigrant, women and girls, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and poor white population is our 4th of July? I answer: to them, more than all other days in the year, the 4th of July celebrations reveal the gross injus-

tice and cruelty to which they are constant victims.

To them, our celebration is a sham; our boasted liberty, an unholy license; our national greatness, swelling vanity; our denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; our shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; our prayers and hymns, our sermons and thanksgivings, with all our religious parade and solemnity, are, to them, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes that would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloodier, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.

Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the Old World, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me today, as Frederick Douglass said 174 years ago, that for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, the pretentiously titled

Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., were right. The pretentious United States of America must structurally and fundamentally change or be forever damned as a curse on the world.

United States of America still reigns without a rival.

Until we admit that this is who we are, we will never be free or just. Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., were right. The pretentious United States of America must structurally and fundamentally change or be forever damned as a curse on the world. ■

Wendell Griffen is a frequent contributor to Christian Ethics Today, on which he serves as a member of the board of directors. This address was given at the 250th 4th of July celebration in Little Rock, Arkansas, and has been edited for CET and published with his permission. His writings and opinions about faith and justice can be found at <https://substack.com/@wendellgriffen>.

Farmer-poet Wendell Berry’s Environmental Ethics Were Deeply Rooted in His Christian Faith and Belief in Caring for Creation

Kristy Nabhan-Warren

For most of his 92 years, Wendell Berry farmed his Lane’s Landing homestead in Henry County, Kentucky, using methods that embraced the land. He preferred draft horses to diesel-powered tractors and used crop rotation and manure fertilizer to naturally nurture his fields.

The widely revered poet-farmer, who wrote passionately about rural American life and humans’ responsibility to care for the land, believed in practicing what he preached.

Those beliefs were rooted firmly in his Christian Baptist faith.

Throughout his life, Berry, who died on Aug. 31, 2026, was a leading advocate of environmental stewardship. You might recognize his belief system in what’s known as creation care today.

It embraces a responsibility to care for the Earth and all its creatures. Berry increasingly saw that ethic violated by the industrialization of agriculture and ignored by a dominionist theology, preached by some prominent American Christians, which holds that humans have a God-given right to exploit the Earth’s resources.

Biblical base for Berry’s environmental ethics

Berry’s environmental ethics had their basis in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, which emphasizes that humans are not the owners of the Earth but rather are called to be caregivers and to tend the planet. He wrote, “We are allowed to make no exceptions – every person’s obligation toward creation is summed up in two words from Genesis 2:15: ‘Keep it.’”

In contrast, the dominionists’ view emphasizes Genesis 1:28, which has been interpreted by some to mean that humans are to subdue the Earth and to establish Christian dominance.

Berry opposed the idea that Christian scripture advocated for environmentally destructive practices such as mountaintop-removal coal mining, which led to the destruction of streams and forests in his native Kentucky. In 2011, he participated in a multiday sit-in protest of the mining practices, saying, “I intend to stay interested in it and involved as long as the Lord

spares me.”

I am a scholar of American Christianity and have spent my career researching and writing about how Christians practice their beliefs. I was in the audience when Berry was awarded the 2013 American Academy of Religion’s Martin Marty honor for the Public Understanding of Religion. For over an hour I listened raptly, as did the rest of the standing-room-only crowd, as he detailed his love for the land, community and his wife, Tanya.

I also taught students using his book “Jayber Crow,” about small-town living, religion and community, in

He wrote, “We are allowed to make no exceptions – every person’s obligation toward creation is summed up in two words from Genesis 2:15: ‘Keep it.’”

my honors course at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. I returned to his work when I was researching modern-day agriculture in Iowa for my book “Meatpacking America”.

I saw how Berry’s beliefs that humans have a responsibility to care for the Earth shaped his critiques about “agripower,” which he viewed as showing little regard for the fertility of the soil or the “health, wisdom, thrift, or stewardship of the farming community.” His poems, fiction and nonfiction often advocated for consuming less and living more communally.

Those beliefs rested on his commitment to caring for God’s creation.

The idea of ‘enough’

Berry’s Christianity-infused agrarianism began in earnest in the 1970s and helped popularize family-run farms, organic farming and farm-to-table eating establishments.

The modern creation care movement began as part of a wider network of American social justice movements. It took shape in the 1980s and ’90s, especially among those Christian evangelicals who read the

Book of Genesis as instructing humans to care about all of God’s creations. Today, creation care is a broad Christian movement that calls for environmental stewardship, repairing the harm that humans have done to the environment, and belief in a loving God who is responsible for the Earth’s creation.

As the religious studies scholar Laurel Kerns has written, the Christian environmental movement that began in the 1980s laid the theological groundwork for creation care. Today’s many chapters of creation care form part of a religious environmental movement that calls for Christians to embrace stewardship, creation spirituality and ecojustice.

As he detailed his 1977 text “The Unsettling of America,” Berry was a fierce critic of agribusiness and American’s throwaway, consumeristic culture. He admired the Amish lifestyle, which forgoes modern conveniences for simple farm living focused on God and family. He wrote, “It is possible, I think, to say that this is a Christian agriculture, formed upon the understanding that it is sinful for people to misuse or destroy what they did not make. The Creation is a unique, irreplaceable gift, therefore to be used with humility, respect, and skill.”

Berry encouraged people, whether or not they identified as Christian or as religious, to question technology as the Amish do, to consider its impact on the environment as well as on human lives, and to develop the concept of “enough.” He wanted people to be more intentional and reflective in their thoughts, words and actions.

Throughout his poems and other writing, Berry beseeched readers to focus on what they actually need and not what they want or think they need. “The idea of ‘enough’ is alien to capitalism, which respects no limit,” he wrote.

Wendell Berry’s legacy in an AI backlash

Berry and his wife and collaborator for 69 years, Tanya Amyx Berry, built a way of life and advocated for a way of living that went against the grain of mainstream American and global culture.

In over 50 books and many poems and talks, Berry helped lay the theological, ethical and how-to groundwork for a creation care movement that spread around the world. He consistently called out the extractive, destructive human behaviors that have posed dangers for the planet’s future.

How his legacy will be fulfilled remains to be seen, but if the growing cross-generational public aversion to AI data centers and other forms of resource extraction are an indicator, it is my belief that Wendell Berry’s legacy will have a long and fruitful afterlife. ■

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On Behalf of a Thin Theology

Robert Baird

Most, probably all, readers of this journal have a theology. It may not be systematic, but most readers of *Christian Ethics Today* have thoughts about the nature of God, how God relates to the world, and, specifically, how God relates to human beings. Your theology may be thick and detailed, with precise beliefs about God and God’s relation to creation. It may be thin. God may be the word you use for the mystery which seems to underlie all; that is, a mystery which lures you into the future in ways that seem right and good, a mystery which gives you hope that in the end all pain, suffering, and tears will be redeemed, hope that in God’s good time all will turn out well. Or perhaps your theology is very, very thin indeed. For you God may be a mystery that elicits silence in the face of it all, especially silence in the face of questions about how divine goodness and power are compatible with the pain and suffering in the world.

At any rate, anyone with a religious bone in his or her body (which surely includes the agnostic who puzzles about it all, and maybe even the atheist who, after good faith struggle, denies it all), has a theology ranging somewhere on a continuum from really, really thick to very, very thin.

Early on, the Christian story got complicated, giving birth to some very thick theology. The *Gospel of John* says that “in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God.” (So we seem to have two—God and the Word.) But then the gospel adds, “the Word was not just with God, the Word was God.” (So it turns out that they are not two, but one). Then Jesus, near the end of his life, says: “When I go I will send the Spirit, the Comforter to you.” So, now we have three. In the language of Christian tradition: God the father (or mother), God the son (we don’t seem to have the option of “or daughter”), and God the Holy Spirit. And we are on the road to a very thick theology. Indeed, some are so committed to a thick Trinitarian theology that they never refer to just God. (That’s too vague, too inclusive.) They always refer to the Triune God.

In the history of the early church, fights emerged over an increasingly thick Trinitarian theology. Hard questions were raised about how God could be three *and* one. Arguments ensued, battles fought and councils called to settle the questions, to quiet the arguments, to still the fighting.

In the fourth century, the Athanasian Creed tried to settle matters. Here is one translation of a passage from that Creed: “We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost . . . the Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible . . . They are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible . . .” The creed concludes: “He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.”¹ That is a thick theology.

Bright, inquiring, and sincere religious believers around the world disagree about the nature of God or ultimate reality; therefore, we have Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and the list goes on.

In 1553, John Calvin and others burned Servetus, a Spanish theologian, at the stake in Geneva because he denied the Trinity. That is thick theology gone mean.

To be sure, there are important and creative efforts to interpret the Trinity that are quite meaningful to some. I acknowledge that. Others, however, for many reasons have difficulty with theological thickness, not the least of which is the awareness that from earliest recorded history individuals have disagreed about the nature of God. Over time those disagreements have only been magnified.

Bright, inquiring, and sincere religious believers around the world disagree about the nature of God or ultimate reality; therefore, we have Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and the list goes on.

Bright, inquiring and sincere Christians disagree about the nature of God; therefore, we have Catholics (Roman and Greek Orthodox) and Protestants. And within Protestantism, we have Baptists, Episcopalians,

Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans and the list goes on.

Bright, inquiring, and sincere Baptists disagree about the nature of God; therefore, we have Southern Baptists, American Baptists, the Alliance of Baptists, The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Landmark Baptists, Freewill Baptists, Primitive Baptists and the list goes on.

Compounding the epistemological problem is another matter mentioned so often that it may seem tiresome, but its relevance never ceases. One’s religious group is almost certainly determined by family of origin. Born into a Catholic family, one becomes Catholic. Baptists give birth to Baptists, Episcopalians to Episcopalians, and Muslims to Muslims. Not always of course, but almost always. To be raised a Christian or a Jew, a Muslim, a Daoist or a Hindu is to be raised in a community that has already interpreted ultimate reality. This is as basic as the fact that we learn words from our community, words like God, Allah, Dao and Brahman.

Many college students first encounter this challenging thought reading John Stuart Mill’s 19th century essay, *On Liberty*, in which he famously or infamously (depending on your point of view) argues that “it never troubles him [the religious dogmatist] that mere accident has decided which of these numerous . . . [faith positions] is the object of his reliance, and that the same causes which make him a churchman in London would have made him a Buddhist or Confucian in Peking.”²

In his book, *God is Not a Christian*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu refers to this truth as an overwhelmingly simple one: The contingency of where we were born largely determines the faith to which we belong. “The chances are very great that if you were born in Pakistan you are a Muslim or a Hindu, if you happened to be born in India, or a Shintoist if . . . Japan, and a Christian if . . . born in Italy.”³

Years ago, when my wife and I were in California, we attended Christmas Eve services with our daughter’s family. There was a traditional pageant with young children playing the roles of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the angels and the wise men. Even Jesus was played by a new-born, who finally got overwhelmed by it all and had to be rescued by his mother sitting poised on the front row. Witnessing it, the thought struck me that it was virtually assured that those children would grow up with the Christian story a part of the very fiber of their beings. Then it also occurred to me that on that very day, thousands of little children in India were becoming immersed in the Hindu tradition, learning to interpret reality through

such words and concepts as Brahman and Krishna and karma, growing up with the world of the *Bhagavad-Gita* a part of the very fiber of their beings, as we would have too had we been raised in that culture. That all of this this is true is simply to acknowledge, as philosopher Simon Blackburn notes, that we are embodied creatures.⁴

But what follows from all of this? What conclusions should be drawn from this sociological or cultural fact? Let me mention two in passing and then, third, make a proposal which takes us back to the piece by Sellers on “The Parliament of the World’s Religions”

First: One conclusion that does *not* follow, a point importantly and forcefully made by philosophers Peter van Inwagen⁵ and Alvin Plantinga,⁶ is that because one’s beliefs are influenced or even determined by the environment in which one is born, one should *for that reason* reject the truth of the belief. Under such epistemological guidance, most of our beliefs would go by the boards since we inherit most of them. If such beliefs guide us well, if they seem to get us in touch

In his book, God is Not a Christian, Archbishop Desmond Tutu refers to this truth as an overwhelmingly simple one: The contingency of where we were born largely determines the faith to which we belong. “The chances are very great that if you were born in Pakistan you are a Muslim or a Hindu, if you happened to be born in India, or a Shintoist if . . . Japan, and a Christian if . . . born in Italy.”

with and keep us in touch with reality, to reject them on the grounds that they were learned from our environment would be epistemological folly.

But second, awareness of religious differences that also give birth to loving lives should elicit some level of epistemological humility, some level of awareness of and appreciation for the possibility that religious traditions other than one’s own may have insight into the nature of ultimate reality. Barbara Brown Taylor’s marvelously titled and insightful book, *Holy Envy*, published last year is a testimony, as the subtitle of her book puts it, to *Finding God in the Faith of Others*. Having illustrated this repeatedly throughout the work,

she concludes: “The more I learned about the religions of the world, the more I became convinced that they were all pointing to the same sacred mystery beyond all human understanding.”⁷ John Hick (1922-2012), the philosopher perhaps most associated with a pluralistic understanding of religion, argued that “if it is rational for the Christian to believe in God on the basis of his or her distinctively Christian experience, it must by the same argument be rational for the Muslim . . . for the Hindu and the Buddhist [to hold their beliefs] . . . on the basis of their own distinctive forms of [religious] experience.”⁸

So, then, third, here is a proposal. It involves affirming and cherishing a thick theology in one’s private devotions, in worship and in fellowship with one’s own religious community. At the same time, “moving in the direction of a thinner theology”⁹ can be a rationally and emotionally satisfying way of appreciating the varieties of religious experience and of relating to the broader world of religious communities. Compare, by the way, the insights of perhaps the greatest work ever published in the philosophy and psychology of religion, William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.¹⁰

What would such an approach look like? Here are some intimations.

Fred Craddock (1928-2015), Distinguished Professor of Preaching at Emory University’s Candler Divinity School, told the following story on himself. Craddock read Albert Schweitzer’s *Quest for the Historical Jesus*; his response was negative. The theology, the Christology, in the book was so weak, so thin, says Craddock, that he was convinced that it could not keep the church alive. As Craddock put it: “There are not enough [theological] calories in this to last two weeks.”¹¹ He then heard that Schweitzer was going to play the organ in a dedicatory service in a large church in Atlanta, and that he was going to be available for questions after the service. Craddock says he prepared. His copy of Schweitzer’s book was thoroughly marked-up. His questions well formulated. He sat on the front row, eager to critique Schweitzer’s weak, thin theology.

Then, Schweitzer appeared. In Craddock’s words: “Schweitzer got up and said, ‘I thank you for your hospitality, for your gracious reception of me, but I have to go back to Lambarene in Africa. My people there are dying. They are sick and they are hungry. If any of you have in you the love of Jesus come help me.’”¹² I looked at my questions, says Craddock, and in that context, they were “stupid silly stuff.”¹³

In that moment it seems to me, Craddock experienced a thinning of his theology, by which I mean he

put aside theological details for the affirmation that the creative source of all that is, is love, desiring that we love too. Thin, as theologies go, many would argue, but powerfully thick in another way: “my people there are dying. They are sick and hungry. If any of you have in you the love of Jesus come help me.”

Harvard philosopher, Hilary Putnam (1926-2016), committed to “his belief in a single personal God,” rejected the notion of giving up his own religious tradition for some universalistic religion. But he was also committed to religious pluralism because, as Putnam expressed it: “I am . . . convinced that whether one has the right or wrong view on theological questions is far less important to God (or to the Compassionate Buddha, or to what some Buddhists call ‘the other shore,’ or to what Chinese refer to as Heaven) than whether one shows compassion, cheerfulness, and makes a contribution to enriching human spiritual and material life.”¹⁴

Sounds right out of the Old Testament book of Micah: “He has showed you, O man, what is good;

Sounds right out of the Old Testament book of Micah: “He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk in quiet fellowship with your God.” Micah emphasizes not what one believes, but who one is and what one does.

and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk in quiet fellowship with your God.” Micah emphasizes not what one believes, but who one is and what one does.

The same point is repeatedly made by referencing the New Testament passage from Matthew in which the sheep are separated from the goats, not on the basis of beliefs but on the basis of who feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and visits the imprisoned. The distinction made between the sheep and the goats has nothing, nothing, to do with the religious language of either the sheep or the goats. And, by the way, Barbara Taylor, reminds us that we miss the point of that passage if we fail to recognize that there is some of the sheep and some of the goat in all of us.¹⁵

Putnam concludes: not only are there forms of spirituality other than his own of great value but that “the

world is a better place –and God is better served-- . . . because there are a variety of perspectives on the divine.”¹⁶

A Christian, a Jew and a Muslim on the road together fell into debate. The Christian tried to persuade the Jew that he had rejected the final revelation of God in Christ. The Jew tried to convince the Muslim that his community was blocking the establishment of the one true faith in Jerusalem. The Muslim tried to convince the Christian that since the seventh century, Christians had mistakenly opposed the fact that there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet.

On that same day, another Christian, another Jew and another Muslim fell into conversation. The Jew spoke of his religious life, of the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. The Christian testified to his faith in Jesus and of the remarkable lives of Peter and Paul. The Muslim recounted his commitment to Allah and of Mohammed’s fateful journey from Mecca to Medina. They were joined on the way by a Buddhist who spoke of Siddhartha Gautama and of a revelation under a Bo tree. And, in the spirit of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, they appreciated the valuable lives growing out of one another’s poignant stories.■

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Why Christian Clergy See Risk as Part of Their Moral Calling

Laura E. Alexander

As Christian clergy across the United States participate in ongoing protests against harsh immigration enforcement actions and further funding for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, many are still pondering the words of Rob Hirschfeld. On Jan. 18, 2026, Hirschfeld, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire, encouraged clergy in his diocese to “prepare for a new era of martyrdom” and put their wills and affairs in order.

He asserted that “it may be that now is no longer the time for statements, but for us with our bodies to stand between the powers of this world and the most vulnerable.”

Hirschfeld’s words attracted a lot of attention, with clergy generally responding positively, though at least one priest argued that he “did not sign up to be a martyr” and had a family and church relying on him.

Other clergy have willingly faced arrest for their advocacy on behalf of immigrants, seeing it as a moral calling. Rev. Karen Larson was arrested while protesting at the Minneapolis airport. She stated that when people are being separated from their families and taken to unknown detention centers, “this is our call” to protest on their behalf.

As a scholar of religious ethics, I am interested in how Christian clergy and thinkers consider personal risk when they feel called to engage in social action.

Ethics of risk

There are many examples of Christian leaders who have taken on risks out of a religious and moral obligation to provide spiritual care for people in need or advocate for oppressed communities.

Most data on the risks that clergy face in their roles as religious leaders comes from studies of religious leaders in institutional settings, such as hospitals or prisons.

Scholarship on clergy and chaplains in medical settings points to a professional obligation to take on risks. Similar to medical providers who often see risking exposure to infection as part of their professional responsibility, many clergy and chaplains in medical settings understand their vocation to include such a risk.

Questions about professional risks became particularly acute during the early years of the HIV/AIDS cri-

sis, when researchers were uncertain exactly how the disease was spread and caregivers feared they might acquire HIV through their bedside work.

In her memoir about chaplaincy with HIV patients, Audrey Elisa Kerr notes that Riverside Church in New York continued to organize funerals, ministries and support groups for HIV/AIDS patients despite “terror” in the wider community about contagion.

As a chaplain herself, Kerr says this story of “radical hospitality” inspired her to set aside her own fears and embrace her professional role caring for people who were ill and dying.

Priests and nuns of the Catholic Church who cared for HIV/AIDS patients in the 1980s risked both the

As a scholar of religious ethics, I am interested in how Christian clergy and thinkers consider personal risk when they feel called to engage in social action.

fear of contagion and the disapproval of their bishops and communities, since many of the people they cared for were men who had sex with men.

Some felt, however, that they must care for those at the margins as part of their role in the church or their monastic order. Sister Carol of the Hospital Sisters of Saint Francis felt that it was simply her moral duty as a sister to “go where she was needed,” despite potential risk.

Examination of the ethical obligations of chaplains and clergy ramped up during the COVID-19 pandemic when at least some priest, pastors and hospital chaplains felt an obligation to continue visiting patients for spiritual care.

In a reflection from 2020, Rev. David Hottinger, then working at Hennepin Healthcare in Minneapolis, noted that chaplains “felt privileged” to use their professional skills, even though they took on extra risk because they did not always have access to adequate protective equipment.

Risks in other institutional settings are not such a

matter of life and death. Because of their professional preaching function, however, clergy in church settings do accept the risk of alienating church members when they feel religiously called to speak about social issues. Rev. Teri McDowell Ott has written about taking risks when discussing LGBTQ+ inclusion and starting a prison ministry.

Risk-taking during social protest

For many clergy, religious and ethical obligations extend beyond their work in institutions like churches and hospitals and include their witness in public life.

Many feel an obligation to preach on issues of moral importance, even topics that are considered controversial and might elicit strong disagreement. It is common for priests and pastors in conservative churches to include messages against legalized abortion in their sermons. Tom Ascol of the Center for Baptist Leadership urged Baptist pastors to preach about abortion in the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election.

Rev. Leah Schade, a Lutheran minister and scholar, has argued that since 2017, mainline pastors have preached more often on issues like racism, environmental justice or gun violence. Schade says pastors are inspired to speak more bluntly about social issues because of their religious concern for people who are at risk of harm from injustice or government policies.

Some clergy view their moral obligations as going beyond preaching and leading them to on-the-ground advocacy and protest. Rev. Brandy Daniels of the Disciples of Christ denomination examines these obligations in an article on her participation in a group of interfaith clergy in Portland, Oregon. The group was convened by a local rabbi and supported protesters for racial justice in Portland in 2017. In Daniels’ analysis, clergy took on the risk of staying in the middle of protests and facing a violent police response in order to “bear moral witness,” something they were both empowered and obligated to do as religious leaders.

Risking their lives

There are more extreme cases in which clergy who challenged government leaders or policies were killed for their words and actions of protest.

In a well-known historical example, Bishop Oscar Romero, canonized as a martyred saint by the Roman Catholic Church in 2018, was assassinated in 1980 after speaking out against human rights violations against poor and Indigenous communities committed by the government of El Salvador. Romero viewed himself, in his priestly role, as a representative of God who was obliged to “give voice to the voiceless.”

During recent protests against ICE in Minneapolis and elsewhere, many clergy risked arrest and bodily harm. Rev. Kenny Callaghan, a Metropolitan Community Church pastor, who says that ICE agents in Minneapolis pointed a gun in his face and handcuffed him as he tried to help a woman they were questioning, said, “It’s in my DNA; I have to speak up for marginalized people.”

On Jan. 23, 2026, over 100 clergy were arrested at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport as they protested and prayed against ICE actions. Rev. Mariah Furness Tollgaard said that she and others accepted being arrested as a way of demonstrating public support for migrants who are afraid to leave their homes.

In Chicago, ministers have been hit with projectiles and violently arrested. Presbyterian pastor David Black was shot in the head with a pepper spray projectile while protesting outside an immigration detention center in October 2025.

The clergy have told reporters that they feel a particular call to be out in public and to protect and support their vulnerable neighbors against ICE raids, at a

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time when families are afraid to go to school or work and U.S. citizens have been swept up in enforcement tactics as well.

As I see it, for these and many Christian clergy and ethicists, the call to ministry includes an obligation to express their values of care for vulnerable neighbors precisely through a public willingness to accept personal risk. ■

Laura E. Alexander is Associate Professor of Religious Studies, University of Nebraska Omaha. This article was first published in The Conversation on February 10, 2026 and is reprinted with permission. With funding from the Mellon Foundation she researches immigration and religion, and was previously a fellow with the Public Religion Research Institute.

Book Reviews

Reviewed by Walter B. Shurden

Pope Francis, LIFE, My Story Through History,

by Pope Francis with Fabio Marchese Ragona, translated from the Italian by Aubrey Botsford (Harper One, 2024). 232 pages.

Pope Francis, HOPE, The Autobiography

by Pope Francis with Carlo Musso (Random House, 2025). 302 pages.

Kirby Godsey, former president of Mercer University and a cradle Baptist, said to me once of Pope Francis, “He is certainly their pope, but he is also our pope.” I have felt that sentiment in my bones ever since I read “The Joy of the Gospel,” Pope Francis’ first Apostolic Exhortation. Regardless of what saintly leader yet emerges in the 21st century, I would bet good Baptist money that Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Pope Francis, the 266th supreme pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church, will be assessed in 2100 as among the greatest spiritual leaders of the 21st century. If not, I and millions of others will break our deadly silence from another world shouting, “Shame, Shame, Shame!”

For both devotees and decriers (and both abound), here are two books by and about Pope Francis. They are lush lodes of memories of the Argentinian priest become pope. While both books recount his life, each has distinctives.

LIFE is the earlier book by one year. Francis and his collaborator, Ragona, retell the Francis story through the momentous events of the last 80 years. These events include World War II, the genocide of the Jews, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cold War and McCarthyism, the historic moon landing, Argentina’s Dirty War, the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, the birth of the European Union, 11 September 2001, the great economic crisis, Pope Benedict XVI’s resignation, and Covid 19. That’s a lot of history to live through and reflect upon. Depending upon your age, you, too, will recall some of these events and your reactions to them. Here you can compare your responses to those of one of the sensitive souls of our time.

LIFE came into existence after a series of conver-

sations between Fabio Marchese Ragona and Pope Francis. These conversations caused Francis to open “the door to his heart and memories ...on fundamental topics like faith, family, poverty, interfaith dialogue, sports, scientific progress, peace and many others” (LIFE 2).

Each chapter of the book has two voices. Ragona first reconstructs moments in the life of the future pope, placing them in global historical context. Pope Francis follows by giving rare glimpses “into the treasure chest of his memories,” speaking candidly about events that changed both the world and him.

The second book, HOPE, belongs to the genre of classic autobiography. This is the unmistakable voice of Pope Francis, though Carlo Musso assisted with

From his phenomenal “Call” experience on September 21, 1953, to his death on April 21, 2025, he consistently befriended everybody--- prisoners, prostitutes, the poor, communists, common people (especially their spirituality), LGBTQ people, migrants and all who suffered.

producing the book. In 29 chapters, we are led from Francis’ common Italian ancestry to his humble ascendancy and ministry in Peter’s chair.

In the initial 10 chapters, he details his growing-up years in Argentina. Here we learn of his young loves: family (especially Grandmother Rosa who “sealed” his religiosity), the city streets of Buenos Aires, classical music, soccer, childhood friends, tango, basketball, girlfriends, stamp collecting and reading, among others. One senses a man who dearly reveled in a happy childhood and exciting teen years.

In the last 15 chapters, Francis described his priestly life. From his phenomenal “Call” experience on September 21, 1953, to his death on April 21, 2025, he consistently befriended *everybody*--- prisoners, prostitutes, the poor, communists, common people (especially their spirituality), LGBTQ people, migrants

and all who suffered. He did not fear the labels people wore or were made to wear. He moved toward people, not away from them. He was a Christian pastor, not a religious bureaucrat. He was a street Christian, hunting down hurt, not a religious officer in prissy clothing. “When someone is left behind, the whole human family comes to a halt, (HOPE 39)” he warned.

He had his laments. He bemoaned authoritarianism and clericalism. Of clericalism, he complained often and loudly. Clericalism, he grouched, is “the view of clerics as an elite with an attitude of moral superiority over and distance from the faithful.” Then he added, “It has become a disease, a plague” (LIFE 217)!

An uncompromising advocate of the reforms of Vatican II, Pope Francis disdained what he called traditionalism or “backwardism.” In the bright lights of Vatican II, he pushed *synodality*, a theological way of listening to all the people of God, not just the priestly hierarchy. And he faced stubborn opposition in trying to bend a hardened vertical line within the church into a more supple horizontal one. Because he believed that “the people” had a nose for finding new paths, he wanted to give them a place at the table, a round one.

Ethically. Francis loathed war, poverty, nationalism and a church that pulls inward on itself. Regarding the mission of the church, he told both priests and laity, “Go out, go out, I prefer a Church that is broken, wounded, and dirty for having gone out on the streets, rather than a Church that is feeble and sick for having closed itself up and clung on comfortably to its safety.” He added, “I am well aware that programs are necessary, but I find it difficult to place much hope in an organizational chart” (HOPE 178-79).

He nudged the church a bit forward on the role of women, but certainly not far enough. And my guess is that he would have done much more had he not suspected a Reformation-like schism. But I am guessing here.

I read HOPE with my coffee in the mornings, two or three chapters at a time. About a third of the way into the book, I realized that this autobiography was serving itself up to me as devotional literature. Courage in the face of fierce opposition, compassion for those on the bottom, identification with those on the outside, savvy for dealing with ethical complexities, passion for our common earth home, sensitivity to the revolting violence of war and poverty---some of this and much more appeared on most every page of this memoir.

One comes away from HOPE newly sensitized and awakened to the ethical issues facing all of us.

But I also came away from HOPE with a long-held conviction that was both enlarged and inflamed: *It is impossible to overstate the importance of leadership!* Regardless of the religious, cultural, political and economic climate, the right person at the right time can change things, shake things up, or cause “good trouble.”

Francis literature is already abundant, and it will only multiply in the future. These two books, LIFE and HOPE, are essential primary sources, coming directly from the words of Pope Francis. Additionally, Austen Ivereigh has proven to be one of the best interpreters of Pope Francis. His two books, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* and *Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church*, will help you further understand Pope Francis and the current turbulence within the Catholic Church, some of which the smiling, baby-faced Pope ignited. If you are serious, begin your reading with HOPE, then turn to LIFE, *The Great Reformer*, and *Wounded Shepherd* in that order.

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My wife told some of her friends that I, 70 years a Baptist, was “trending Catholic.” Not really. I’m not “moving my membership.” But I have trended “Francis,” even with some serious disagreements with him on abortion, the sacraments, and Marian devotion. Based upon reading these two books and others, however, I give thanks to God that while “he was their pope, he was also my pope.” ■

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