

# Touchstone

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**CHANGES ARE AFOOT**

Friends, as many of you will know, Rev. Dr. Peter Wyatt has been the outstanding editor of *Touchstone* since early 2010. With regret, the editorial Board has accepted his retirement from this position, and I know that Peter also steps down with some regret.

In these ten and a half years, Peter has offered wise, consistent, and caring leadership and service to *Touchstone*. He has had the thoughtful foresight to plan each number, inestimable patience to work with individual writers, and gentle good humour in managing a great deal of the "behind the scenes" business side of things—far more than most of us realize. His eagle eye for lexical coherence and scholarly attention to theological cogency has helped to keep up the high standards of this journal. My own work as board chair has benefitted much from Peter's good counsel, and I am grateful.

Please join me in toasting Peter Wyatt, wherever you are as you read this, and in offering him our hearty and sincere THANKS! Well done and thank you, Peter, fellow labourer in the vineyard.

With Peter's term coming to an end, the Board sought out and was glad to find a new editor in Paul Miller. Paul is a long-serving minister of The United Church of Canada, just recently retired, with a solid scholarly background and previous experience as an editor. We look forward to his contributions and leadership in the years ahead. Welcome, Paul!

*Rob Fennell  
Chair of the Editorial Board*

## EDITORIAL

### Racial Justice—a Challenging Theme

I grew up in Brantford, Ontario, and in my high school years attended Pauline Johnson Collegiate and Vocational School, where some of my fellow students were Black, some were Jewish, and some were Indigenous. I had a circle of three close friends, one of whom is a descendent of Joseph Brant, the great Mohawk chief. In my parents' home a fundamental teaching was that we would always show respect to others, period. In Sunday school, I learned to sing John Oxenham's hymn, "In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north, but one great fellowship of love/throughout the whole wide earth." The thought that Christians from all around the world belonged in a single family through Jesus Christ heartened me.

Of course, things are not as tidy as once imagined. The diversity of the single family is actually fraught with asymmetrical relationships generating unjust disadvantage and pain. Indeed, the concept of "whiteness" has come to encapsulate one way that this asymmetry works. At its heart is the recognition that White people in society—and White Christians in the church—carry controlling power and privilege to the detriment of others, even if in an unconscious and unintended way. White privilege is such that we who are White typically don't recognize our possession or exercise of it.

Peggy McIntosh has described White privilege as "like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks."<sup>1</sup> These tools allow Whites to negotiate life with relative ease, not having to endure the prejudice, alienation, and insults often experienced by those who are "racialized." McIntosh presents scores of the daily advantages of White privilege. Among them the chief may be: "the privilege to assume that whiteness is the norm against which everyone else should be compared and the privilege to live one's life without ever needing to be aware of one's whiteness and how it might be impacting their life."<sup>2</sup>

Put a postcolonial lens on my experience as a teen in Brantford—and for many years afterward, no doubt—and it looks like naiveté. Even

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<sup>1</sup> Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Independent School* (Winter 1990), accessed 10 May 2020 at [www.racialequitytools.org>resourcefiles>mcintosh](http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mcintosh).

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Lyubansky, "The Meaning of Whiteness," *Psychology Today*, accessed 10 May 2020 at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/between-the-lines/201112/the-meaning-whiteness>.

today, when we sing “Draw the circle wide,” it is we, who are already on the inside, who are drawing the circle wider. How difficult it is to escape the perspective of those who have much, even when we who have much are willing to try to give some of it away, and to open the door to a more equal sharing of gifts, insights, and talents.

Nevertheless, I am drawn back to the aspiration of “In Christ there is no east or west.” And that is how we must understand it—as aspiration for a time and a reality that is not yet. Perhaps other hymns, prophetic ones, must be enlisted to encourage us as we walk our way to Emmaus. Still, as the insistent drum-beat for the recognition of diversity sounds, and the more than justifiable cries for reformation of attitude and action among the privileged are expressed and heard, what holds the church together in unity?

Paul’s great assertion resonates down the centuries to reach us with compelling power: “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” The church is the community in which Jesus Christ offers us the levelling power of grace, and sets non-negotiable standards for loving the neighbour and loving God. In Christ we find our unity, and in Christ we may find the courage to listen and learn, and to walk the road of reformation.

Awareness of the privilege that I enjoy as a member of the White majority in North America leads me to listen to the voices in this number of *Touchstone* with especially attentive ears. Their voices can help to show us the way.

In our lead article Paul Walfall points out the difference between race prejudice and racism. He also tells some discomfiting truths about the racism that he and other Black ministers continue to experience in the United Church. Walfall has roots in the Caribbean, as does another of our authors, Catherine Williams, who compares the styles of Black and White worship, and paints a winsome picture of Black preaching that can dance word into song. In “The Cost of Justice: Atonement and Just Land Settlement,” Mitchell Anderson (dënesuġiné) and Morgan Bell argue that a basis for Christian responsibility in land settlement with Indigenous people can be found in the substitutionary concept of atonement.

In “Let (Racial) Justice Roll Down like Water,” Wenh-In Ng offers personal and theological reflection on her growing awareness, through the years, of a shadow side of Christian global mission, and also offers practical strategies for addressing the wrong of racism. Taking an historical overview in his article, Alan Davies brings to light the origins

of “White Nationalism,” whose growing and malign influence bedevils statecraft today.

In our “From the Heart” article, Ivan Gregan offers a Celtic confession, noting both personal and theological influences on his faith as a Gael. Perhaps readers will note the way that a traditional Celtic way of knowing and believing, once suppressed by the Latinate church, represents a cold case of “racial” injustice.

Our profile is of Howard Thurman, one of the key pioneers in what became the U.S. civil rights movement. As author Sarah Azaransky notes, Martin Luther King Jr. habitually carried two books with him everywhere he went—the Bible and Thurman’s *Jesus and the Disinherited*. An American, Thurman frequently lectured and led events in Canada. Azaransky’s recent book on Thurman and other civil rights pioneers is among our books reviewed.

### **A Farewell of Sorts**

Originally I agreed with John Hogman, founding board chair, that I would serve as editor of *Touchstone* for five years. Now, after ten years, I am stepping back from this role and handing over the pen to Paul Miller. In the future I may carry some minor administrative roles for the Board.

There are many relationships and details involved in producing a final text of the journal, and in seeing it then through printing and distribution. There are frustrations and also deep satisfactions in the work of an editor. It has been my privilege to serve in this capacity. I am especially grateful to Rachel McRae who has served as copy-editor and formatter almost from the beginning of my tenure. I am grateful also to Judi Elmer, our treasurer and a fellow member of the local Burk’s Falls-Katrine Community of Faith, and to John VanDuzer, who continues to design our expressive cover art. I thank Rob Fennell, who became board chair after John’s untimely death, for his support and friendship. The annual editorial board meetings and relationships with board members have been a highlight of my time as editor. And Mac Watts, the founding editor, has been a regular and supportive companion through visits by telephone.

The cover art of this number shows four former moderators of The United Church of Canada. Clockwise from the upper left, they are: Sang Chul Lee, Stan McKay, Wilbur Howard, and Lois Wilson, the first woman elected to the office. We thank the General Council of the United Church for permission to use them

*Peter Wyatt*

# RACISM IN THE UNITED CHURCH

by Paul A. Douglas Walfall

It was on a Saturday in September 2019. I was, as usual, minding my own business and doing the usual Saturday domestic activities. I got a message from a colleague, another Black minister, living in Ontario. The message inquired as to whether I had heard about the minister who was returning to his home country, leaving The United Church of Canada (UCC), because he had had enough of racism. Eventually I called this colleague who described his experiences of racism. These included constant criticisms about his accent, having his sermon interrupted one Sunday as a member publicly sought to correct the way he pronounced certain words, and being told by some members that they would return to church only after “the Black man” was removed as minister. I left the conversation heart-broken and outraged.

A few days after that experience, I received correspondence from another Black minister. This colleague I did not know, and, given the date of posting, it was impossible for him to have known about my conversation the preceding Saturday. His letter detailed the racist behaviour he had experienced, including an allegation of sexual harassment. In that case the accuser withdrew the allegation, confessing that this was done to hurt him.

I must confess that I really did not need these two experiences to prove the existence of racism in Canada or in the church. My own personal experiences had already confirmed this reality. Yet it was sobering and saddening, almost like a reality check, when you hear the experiences of others. It reminded me that in many ways I was not alone.

## Defining Racism

Karen Thompson, Associate General Minister of the United Church of Christ, USA, defines **racism** as “the intentional or unintentional use of power to isolate, separate, and exploit others. The use of power is based on a belief in superior racial origin, identity or supposed racial characteristics.”<sup>1</sup> This definition makes it clear that racism is not simply an issue of racial prejudice or discrimination. **Prejudice** is understood to be the attitudes, thoughts, feelings, stereotypes, and generalizations that are used to prejudge another person, or group of persons.<sup>2</sup> Usually, prejudice is based on second-hand experiences, or on little or no experience with the other person or group. Robin DiAngelo states that

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Georgia Thompson, *United against Racism—Churches for Change*, (New York: Friendship Press, 2018), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *White fragility: why it's so hard for White people to talk about racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 18.

**discrimination** is “action based on prejudice.”<sup>3</sup> While in many, if not all, instances the experiences of prejudice and discrimination cause hurt, they do not necessarily rise to the level of racism. Racism includes the additional step of using power to enable the prejudice that it promotes. This power appears in “legal, cultural, religious, educational, economic, political and military institutions of society.”<sup>4</sup>

Race is truly a social concept; there are no biological differences between persons with different skin colours. Any perceived differences have been debunked by science. The use of race as the determinant for the devaluation of a group of people is therefore to start from a false narrative. To say that racism is a social construct does not mean that it lacks sway over the thinking and actions of people. Race continues to be a significant factor in social discourse, and it cannot easily be dismissed. Joseph Mensah raises the profound point that “many people really believe in the reality of race and, indeed, act accordingly, regardless of what the physical science evidence suggests.”<sup>5</sup>

It is important that we make a clear differentiation between **race** and **racism**. The two words, while related, are not necessarily as directly linked as is commonly believed. In the lucid aphorism of Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Race is the child of racism, not the father.” While the word racism came into common use in the 1930s because of the theories of the Nazis in Germany, the ideology existed long before that time. Ibram Kendi shows that examples of the ideology of racism can be found as early as 1453, when the book *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* sought to defend African slave trade on the grounds that the taking of Africans into slavery was a missionary action.<sup>6</sup> From that time, the need to exploit the labour of Blacks led to the ideologies that upheld the inferiority of the Black person, and this supported continuation of the enslavement of Black people by Whites. The continued diet of these ideologies would ultimately lead to the widespread belief that there was something wrong with Black people.<sup>7</sup>

Racism originated as an ideology that has become institutionalized within society. It is supported by social norms and

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<sup>3</sup> DiAngelo, *White fragility*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, *United against Racism*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Mensah, *Black Canadians: History, Experience, Social Conditions* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2010), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racists Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

values, and it is part of the socialization process for all individuals. Racism takes different forms in society. It may be expressed by individuals in their day-to-day activities, or it may be systemic, as seen in ways that society operates and in the functioning of various societal institutions. It is also “reinforced through social penalties when someone questions the ideology and through the limited availability of alternative ideas.”<sup>8</sup> Racism may be overtly expressed in words and actions, or it may be subtle, and covert, as seen in micro-aggressions.<sup>9</sup>

Racism, by definition, is used by persons in one racial category to seek to subjugate and dominate persons in a different racial category. In the case of racism against Black people, it is Black people who are dominated, and it is White people who constitute the dominating race. This domination is upheld by social power, including legislation, norms, and values. It is a system that claims the inherent inequality and value of persons within society. For this reason, an apparent dissonance occurs when we reflect upon racism through the prism of the Judeo-Christian religion. George Fredrickson states:

If equality is the norm in the spiritual or temporal realms (or in both at the same time), and there are groups of people within the society who are despised or disparaged that the upholders of the norms feel compelled to make them exceptions to the promise or realization of equality, they can be denied the prospect of equal status only if they allegedly possess some extraordinary deficiency that makes them less than fully human.<sup>10</sup>

If there is indeed an “extraordinary deficiency” among a subset of humans, the presence of racism poses a question to the teachings of the Christian religion.

Kathy Hogarth and Wendy Fletcher observe that the racism experienced by Black people in Canada is oftentimes covert and manifested in insidious ways.<sup>11</sup> Robyn Maynard states that “Anti-

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<sup>8</sup> DiAngelo, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Micro-aggression may be described as the subtle actions or words directed towards a group of people that seek to uphold prejudice and discrimination. See Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2010), 3.

<sup>10</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 12.

<sup>11</sup> Kathy Hogarth and Wendy L Fletcher, *A Space for Race: Decoding Racism, Multiculturalism, and Post Colonialism in the Quest for Belonging in Canada and Beyond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 21.



Blackness in Canada often goes unspoken. When acknowledged, it is assumed to exist, perhaps, but in another time (centuries ago), or in another place.”<sup>12</sup> The church exists in society, and the ethos and ways of being in society are to be found in the church. The church is not insulated from the thinking of the society around it. If this is true then there may well be in the church, using the words of Maynard, “a wall of silence”<sup>13</sup> about the presence of anti-Black racism existing within the UCC. It is not that anti-Black racism is not seen to be present, but there may well be something that leads to an impotence of the church to confront it, and the church may well “sweep it under the carpet.” This feeling is captured in a statement made by a commissioner to the 43<sup>rd</sup> General Council in July 2018: “The institutionalized racism that exists in Canada is so deep and saturated and, in the system, that the level of oppressiveness is intense beyond having it in your face . . . It is like having a wall that you cannot see . . . because you don’t know where exactly the issue is.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Racism in the United Church (from my perspective)**

The reality of racism in the church is well established, and dealing with it has been part of the ongoing work of the United Church for at least the past forty years. Reading through the documents produced by the General Council Office offers an insight into the work towards becoming an anti-racist, faith-based organization. They provide an impressive chronicle of programmes planned, and documents produced, and those who have done the work to get these done must be thanked.

At the same time, after reading the document, I found myself asking the question, “Why bother?” Given all that has been done, why have we had experiences like those described at the beginning of this article or those expressed at the closing moments of GC43? The reality is that, among many of the Black leadership in the UCC, there continues to be feelings of hurt, alienation, and suspicion towards the Church, and this seems to be experienced chiefly in regard to pastoral relations.

What has come out of the documents for me is the presence of a clear disconnect between what is happening in the local church and at the General Council. It is at the Community of Faith (congregational) level that the majority of ministers function, and if the environment at that

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<sup>12</sup> Robyn Maynard, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2017), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Mugoli Samba, “Wilbur Howard and the White Church,” *The United Church Observer*, November, 2018: 32.

level is prone to the expression of racism and White entitlement, then the minister from a racial minority group is implicitly placed in a vulnerable situation. The question that confronts us is how to change the culture of church in the UCC that will focus on what is happening on the ground. Often the response to this question is that nothing can be done, or any suggestions for possible change are met with a tidal wave of reasons why it cannot be done. It is out of such experiences that the feeling of “why bother” continues, and it can feel that we are hopelessly involved in a church that does not want to change. The need is to ensure that awareness about racism is a focal point of congregational life. While we may never reach a place of perfection, we can arrive at a place of awareness, where incidents of racism can be reduced.

It must also be remembered that the UCC has set out on a movement to become an intercultural church. What progress, then, has been made with regard to anti-Black racism, White privilege, and White entitlement in the United Church? The decision to become an intercultural church sets forth a vision for the future of the church. It does not describe the present state of the church but a hoped-for future. This future will not happen by wishful decisions but deliberate hard work. The desired outcome is for a community of faith that is more just, and more aligned with the gospel that is preached.

To be clear: the vision to become an intercultural church is not being called into question. The issue is whether the movement towards realizing this vision also includes intentional movements against racism within the church. There is a certain weakness in the process towards the realization of this vision. Interculturalism, by definition, is that which occurs at the micro level, at the places where people meet and live. The main context for interculturalism in the church should be at the congregational level. It is in the congregation that people will meet and live out, in large measure, the meaning of their Christian witness and ministry in the church. It is at this grass roots level that people gather weekly for nurture, motivation, and empowerment to live out the meaning of their faith. It is at this level that cultures must learn from each other, and, that, more importantly, a new culture of diversity is conceived and given birth. The weakness is that the vision either has not been fully understood or “trickled down” to them. More attention must be given to enable congregations to grasp the full understanding of interculturalism if the vision is to be realized in the UCC.

Loraine MacKenzie Shepherd notes that the issue of “congregational reticence” was also present in the 1980s surrounding the movements towards reconciliation with the Indigenous peoples of

Canada.<sup>15</sup> “While the leadership at General Council, Conferences, and Presbyteries was moving into lament and confession for the harm that the church caused to First Nations, most congregations were more hesitant.”<sup>16</sup> The reality is that the hesitant ethos of the congregations may also be present in the issues of interculturalism generally, and racism specifically. Shepherd, looking towards the future, notes, “Instead of congregations asking how they can “help” others, they need to explore how they might enter into relationship with others and be open to being transformed themselves in the very act of partnership.”<sup>17</sup> Without using the word “intercultural,” Shepherd has made a strong recommendation for interculturalism to be found at the local church/congregation levels of the church.

Given the apparent lack of effective resolve, a real threat of racism to Black ministers in the United Church continues to exist. If measures are not put in place to address the issues of racism in congregations, it follows that Black ministers and other racialized ministers, are placed in a vulnerable position. In the current system, it is the Community of Faith that 1) determines who will receive a call or appointment to the local church, 2) directly oversees the work of the minister and 3) selects members of the Ministry and Personnel Committee to which complaints about the minister may be addressed. If there is no appreciation of the issues of racism in the congregational context, or if there are no appropriate checks and balances put in place, then Black and racialized ministers are indeed vulnerable.

Anthony Reddie speaks of a “theology of good intention,” which he describes as “a way of responding to situations of injustice, in which the perpetrator fails to take full responsibility for the actions. It is a way of responding to the oppressed and powerless, by refusing to take the experiences or perspectives of these people seriously.”<sup>18</sup> The manifestation of this theology of good intention is that an apology is given when a person is called out for racism, and it is expected that the

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<sup>15</sup> Loraine MacKenzie Shepherd, “The United Church's Mission Work within Canada and its Impact on Indigenous and Ethnic Minority Communities,” in *The Theology of The United Church of Canada*, ed. Don Schweitzer, Robert C Fennell, and Michael Bourgeois (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2019), 302.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 304.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony G. Reddie, *Nobodies to Somebodies: Practical Theology for Education and Liberation* (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2003), 154.

apology is sufficient to resolve the issue. The unfortunate reality is that such situations continue, and further apologies will be given. The problem with this theology of good intentions is that it places the responsibility upon the person who has been the object of racism to accept the apology and go away. To continue to speak up about racism will make the speaker the problem.

It must be understood that those who face racism are under considerable stress. The understanding must be that Black clergy face not only the usual pressures of ministry, but also the pressure of racism. Derald Wing Sue notes that “the cumulative impact of stressors diminishes the quality of life; lowers life satisfaction, happiness and self-esteem.”<sup>19</sup> Concern must therefore be given about the mental wellbeing and health of Black and other racialized ministers in the United Church. In the current structures this intentional concern would fall under the responsibility of the Regional Councils for “encouraging and supporting ministry personnel towards health, joy and excellence in ministry practice.”<sup>20</sup>

To state therefore that The United Church of Canada is a racist organization is neither to condemn, nor to judge it negatively. It is simply to acknowledge that the church is part of a society that is racist. To overcome its racist heritage the church must work intentionally at the issues of racism that are evident in it. Part of this intentional work must include effort to realize the vision to become an intercultural church. The work to realize the intercultural vision must be intentional and done in tandem with work to address the presence of racism in the Church. In this study we have looked at the reality of racism in Canada and within the UCC. It must be affirmed that more work needs to be done at all levels to end the scourge of racism.

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<sup>19</sup> Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, 100.

<sup>20</sup> *The Manual* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2019). 38.

# THE COST OF JUSTICE: ATONEMENT AND JUST LAND SETTLEMENT

by Mitchell Anderson and Morgan Bell

We both attended the 2018 gathering of the 43<sup>rd</sup> General Council of The United Church of Canada (UCC) on the territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka and the Anishnaabe (Oshawa, Ontario). There, the General Council adopted "Calls to the Church" that outline a new relationship between Indigenous and settler communities within the denomination. When a *nehiyaw* Elder moved to the microphone to speak to the Calls, one of us overheard a commissioner ask, in reference to the 1986 Apology to First Nations Peoples, "Do you think she will accept the apology?" Later in that gathering, a commissioner approached Mitchell (*dēnesuliné*) to ask what one thing United Church communities of faith might do for greater reconciliation. He responded simply: "land." The commissioner replied that their community already acknowledges, when it meets, that it does so on traditional Indigenous territory. Yet Mitchell pushed further: "Don't just acknowledge it, give it back. Restore Indigenous governance with the land." The commissioner thanked Mitchell for his thoughts, and committed to thinking of how their community could put it into action in their context.

The United Church is aware that justice requires more than words. Words and gestures cannot create just relationships between Canada and Indigenous nations. Yet we further contend that an *acknowledgement of the inadequacy of words* similarly does not go far enough. Careful recitation of talking points about reconciliation is insufficient. Blanket exercises<sup>1</sup> or land acknowledgements<sup>2</sup> in worship services—while critically important—do not on their own secure a common life in which gifts are shared for the good of all and the forces that exploit and marginalize are resisted.<sup>3</sup> More is required; indeed, perhaps more than we feel able to provide. Land justice will carry a heavy cost.

The land and our relationships with land require restitution so

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<sup>1</sup> The blanket exercise is an interactive group activity wherein participants learn about pre-contact history, treaty-making, settler colonialism, and resistance. See: KAIROS Canada, "History of the Blanket Exercise," accessed 30 April 2020 at <https://www.kairosblanketexercise.org/about/>.

<sup>2</sup> Many UCC congregations regularly "acknowledge" the land on which they work and worship: bringing to mind whose land it traditionally was, what treaties the land is currently subject to, and the legacy of broken covenants.

<sup>3</sup> The United Church of Canada, "Song of Faith," in *The Manual 2019* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2019), 26-33.

that our relationships with one another can be restored and reconciled. The redemption won on the cross of Jesus Christ reveals that, in God's saving economy, justice *costs*. As settler and Indigenous Christians, our reconciling work *will cost*. The cross shows that the cost and sacrifice that justice requires has been paid on our behalf, making the just relationships God intends possible. In what follows, we will engage Indigenous scholars and leaders who have worked and called for land restitution for Indigenous nations, and argue that the Cross reveals that the cost of justice is one that has already been paid. That is, we posit that Christ's payment for sin and the new life he offers transforms land restitution into work in which Christians can willingly participate rather than a burdensome debt we must repay of our own resources.

### **“Give It Back”: Indigenous Demands for Land Restitution in Canada**

Indigenous nations have long sought the restoration of self-determination within the lands entrusted to them. In 1975, the General Assembly of the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories adopted the Dene Declaration. In the Declaration, the General Assembly insisted “on the right to be regarded by ourselves and the world as a nation.” Further, they declared: “What we seek then is independence and self-determination within the country of Canada. This is what we mean when we call for a just land settlement for the Dene nation.”<sup>4</sup> In the Declaration, the Dene of the Northwest Territories demanded land restitution: the restoration of self-determination and Indigenous governance in Denendeh. In this vision, reordered relationship to land can only be achieved with a just land settlement that is at the root of freedom and self-determination.

Glen Sean Coulthard (Dene) observes that contemporary reconciliation discourses have too often neglected the richness of the vision of the Dene Declaration and similar demands for land restitution. He writes:

Genuine reconciliation is impossible without recognizing Indigenous peoples' right to freedom and self-determination, instituting restitution by returning enough of our lands that we can regain economic self-sufficiency, and honouring our treaty

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<sup>4</sup> Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories, *Dene Declaration*, in *IBNWT Land Claim: Handbook for the Northern Claims Group*, November 1977, [http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2017/aanc-inac/R32-296-1977-eng.pdf](http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2017/aanc-inac/R32-296-1977-eng.pdf), accessed 18 April 2020.

relationships. Without these commitments reconciliation will remain a “pacifying discourse” that functions to assuage settler guilt, on the one hand, and absolve the federal government’s responsibility to transform the colonial relationship between Canada and Indigenous nations, on the other.<sup>5</sup>

Coulthard identifies the dangers of current settler models of reconciliation. Settler discourses ignore the fullness of what land restitution means to Indigenous peoples: self-determination and self-sufficiency, honouring treaty relationships, the reordering of how we relate with one another as peoples with land and water. Full reconciliation is neglected for fear of its cost.

Land and water restitution continue to be at the heart of Indigenous conceptions of justice. Shiri Pasternak and Hayden King (Anishnaabe) note that “one of the loudest and most frequent demands of Indigenous people in the relationship with settlers is for the return of the land.”<sup>6</sup> Calling for “land back,” Pasternak and King identify “conceptualizations that flow from the ongoing reconstitution of Indigenous law and governance” to articulate a “generalized version of Indigenous consent” over activities undertaken within Indigenous lands.<sup>7</sup> There is a vision of land coming under the governance of its Indigenous caretakers.

Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum (*nehiyaw*) states that land restitution is a *precondition* rather than an outcome of reconciled relationships between Canada and Indigenous nations. Saysewahum clarifies that to “give it back” does not require the eviction of settler Canadians from the lands on which they reside. Rather, to “give it back” means to “restore the livelihood, demonstrate respect for what is shared—the land—by making things right through compensation, restoration of freedom, dignity, and livelihood.”<sup>8</sup> It is this vision of common life to which Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Nishnaabeg) refers when she writes:

This is what my Ancestors wanted for me, for us. They wanted

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<sup>5</sup> Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 125.

<sup>6</sup> Shiri Pasternak and Hayden King, *Land Back: A Yellowhead Institute Red Paper* (Toronto: Yellowhead Institute, 2019), 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum, *Nationhood Interrupted: Revitalizing Nēhiyaw Legal Systems* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing Limited, 2015), 79.

for our generation to practise Nishnaabeg governance over our homeland, to partner with other governments over shared lands, to have the ability to make decisions about how the gifts of our parent [the Earth] would be used for the benefit of our people and in a manner to promote her sanctity for coming generations.<sup>9</sup>

These thinkers, activists, and communities all share a full-bodied vision of restitutive justice. A reconciliation that is just and lasting cannot be achieved with words: it would require a fundamental reordering of how peoples, land, water, and the Creator interrelate. Justice will cost. Much will have to be sacrificed such that greater justice might be lived. The current sinful patterns of relations between Indigenous nations and settler communities do not require modification: our holy God requires their dismantlement. Indigenous governance of land and water must be restored so that Indigenous nations and Canada can truly share in life together. Canada, and the churches therein, must give land back.

### **“Bought with a Price”: Substitutionary Atonement and Land Restitution**

To many, the call for “land back” sounds like blithe idealism. Land restitution would require millions of acres, together with the assets on those lands, to be transferred to Indigenous governance. A just land settlement, then, is often dismissed as functionally impossible, or it is obfuscated by emphasis on cultural or social reconciliation. Yet we believe that current Canadian discourses on social and cultural reconciliation are insufficient to achieve the kind of justice that Indigenous communities are seeking.<sup>10</sup> Too often, Canadian civil society, including Christian churches, opt for a “politics of grief,” that is, a set of tools the state uses to avoid structural changes and accountability by focusing on individual trauma rather than

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<sup>9</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the “politics of reconciliation,” Coulthard critically identifies “their normative assumptions about the presumed ‘good’ of forgiveness and reconciliation on a number of uncritical assumptions about the supposed ‘bad’ of harboring negative emotions like anger and resentment: that these feelings are physically and mentally unhealthy, irrational, retrograde, and, when collectively expressed, prone to producing increased social instability and political violence.” Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks*, 108.



collective, community, or nation-based losses, by truncating historical injustices from the current structure and the ongoing functioning of settler colonialism, by avoiding discussions about substantive changes involving land and dispossession in favor of superficial status quo ones, and by turning ‘lifestyle choices’ and victim blaming to further position the state as benevolent and caring.<sup>11</sup>

The preferred notion of justice for many, then, is one that does not ultimately cost. The nationalism at the heart of the United Church’s ecclesial self-understanding has enabled easy adoption of this grief-driven reconciling project. The United Church has forfeited many cogent and incisive theological tools that would enable us as contemporary Christians to imagine new and faithful alternatives to the sinful arrangements that settler colonialism has constructed. Canadian culture tells us how we must reconcile with Indigenous nations. The Gospel declares that this reconciliation has been accomplished. What is now required of Christians is repentance: to live in conformity to the reconciliation won by the cross of Jesus Christ. This is not a burden to be avoided, but recognition of what Christ has done on our behalf and for our benefit.

Wrapped up in current Canadian programs of “reconciliation,” the settler church fails to recognize the depth of the reconciliation God has effected among all creatures. Christian engagement in Indigenous/settler restitutive justice is most properly grounded in the Cross, “where we see most clearly the relationship between judgment (condemnation, destruction) and the righteousness of God (experienced *both* as judgment *and* as redemption).”<sup>12</sup> Since God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself (2 Cor 5:19), Christians will understand the work of Indigenous/settler reconciliation and its concrete demands for land restitution as an outward expression of what God has already done in Jesus Christ. The old ways of sin and death are themselves put to death such that we can participate in the abundance of Christ’s risen life. It is therefore the Cross that is the foundational act of our redemption from which God’s justice rolls down like waters and in which the ever-flowing stream of righteousness finds its source (Amos 5:24). Recognizing that reconciliation has already been established, the Church’s task is to live as

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<sup>11</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, 239.

<sup>12</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 106.

though this is true.

Many soteriologies identify creaturely forces (i.e. the Roman Empire, religious authorities, sin itself) as those which crucified the Christ, rather than framing the Cross as, say, an event ordained by the First Person of the Trinity.<sup>13</sup> These alternative theologies underscore the deep solidarity of the Crucified with those who are crucified in history. James Cone, for example, saw a close identification between the horrors of the Roman cross and the lynching tree in the postbellum American South: “God must therefore know in a special way what poor blacks are suffering in America because God’s son was lynched in Jerusalem.”<sup>14</sup> Crucifixion, then, exposes the death-dealing powers of this world doing what they do best, as the crucified Christ represents God’s experience of oppression, and the resurrection signals God’s promise of deliverance for creation. For these soteriologies, the power of the Cross is thus found in the solidarity of the Son of God with the oppressed and dispossessed. It is not necessarily, in the first instance, the means of salvation.

Alongside Cone and others like him, we acknowledge that on the cross “God bears the sin, grief, and suffering of the world” in solidarity with those under oppressive regimes and systems.<sup>15</sup> However, we furthermore acknowledge that this approach is one among many; the biblical witness proffers numerous motifs and images which together communicate the atoning work of Jesus Christ on his cross.<sup>16</sup> As we consider the Church’s response to land restitution, we believe that other motifs, showcasing God’s decisive response to sin and the reconciling word uttered in the Crucified, also have much to offer the church in its reflection and practice.

Holy Scripture describes God’s reconciling work in Christ in pluriform ways: as a Passover and exodus; a blood sacrifice; ransom and redemption; a great exchange; an apocalyptic war; a descent into hell; a recapitulation; and a substitution.<sup>17</sup> This final motif of substitution is one that, in many quarters of the UCC, has become *démodé*. Indeed, much has been made of the charge that the relationship between the first and

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<sup>13</sup> For a representative text, see: J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 158.

<sup>15</sup> The United Church of Canada, *A Song of Faith*, 184.

<sup>16</sup> We glean the language of “motifs” from Fleming Rutledge in her magisterial *The Crucifixion*. See especially pp. 207-213.

<sup>17</sup> We distill these categories from Rutledge’s *The Crucifixion*.

second Persons in substitutionary models constitutes “cosmic child abuse.”<sup>18</sup> It is undeniable that this motif has been misused to disastrous effect in the lives of those locked within disproportionate power relationships, including Indigenous persons within Canada.<sup>19</sup> Yet it remains that Christ’s dying *for us* and *in our place* is both an inescapable element of Scripture’s witness to atonement and has illuminative purchase for reflection upon land justice.

Our Reformed ancestor, John Calvin, noted that it was imperative that *Jesus Christ* be our Redeemer: the one who was true God and true human. “It was his task to swallow up death. Who but the Life could do this? It was his task to conquer sin. Who but very Righteousness could do this? It was his task to rout the powers of world and air. Who but a power higher than world and air could do this?”<sup>20</sup> Creatures simply do not have the capacity to escape the hold sin has upon us. We do not have the resources to pay the debt we owe to God and each other. Apart from Christ, the United Church confesses, the human “lives in a world of confusion and distress, and is unable of himself to fulfill God’s high purpose for him.”<sup>21</sup> Humans are unable to offer the obedience due to God; the love due to neighbour; the care due to Creation. Our capacity to do so has been wholly vitiated by sin. We persist in our indebtedness.

Convinced of the cost of sin and humanity’s helplessness in paying it, Anselm of Canterbury turned his gaze toward the Tree of Life. By the power of God’s response—God’s own willingness to die in godforsakeness—Anselm saw that humanity “had been completely ruined; it was not fitting that what God had planned for [humankind] should be utterly nullified, and the plan in question could not be brought into effect unless the human race were set free by its Creator in person.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For a White feminist response to this charge, see: Leanne Van Dyck, “Do Theories of Atonement Foster Abuse?” *Dialog* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 22-25.

<sup>19</sup> One of the most common abuses of this motif trades on the conviction that one must become like Christ—submissive and suffering—such that the redemption won on the Cross might be “actualized” or effective in the individual’s life. This, however, ignores the biblical insistence that Christ’s atoning work is *once for all*. In short: the cross of Christ is a unique, *unrepeatable* event.

<sup>20</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster, 1960), II/xii/2.

<sup>21</sup> The United Church of Canada, “Statement of Faith,” in *The Manual 2019* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2019), 21-25: paragraph V.

<sup>22</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major*

As Katherine Sonderegger astutely notes, “the ‘negative’ assessment of sin is designed to show us that ‘everything that is not God,’ even infinite worlds of the not-God, worlds that are created good and very good, cannot outweigh or justify sin against the Holy Creator.”<sup>23</sup> The human simply cannot atone for the enormity of sin done against God and other creatures. Help must come from Another.

Yet this “Other” is not content to leave creatures to their own devices. In Jesus Christ, God assumes the whole of creaturely nature—in all its frailty, brokenness, and sin—so to die our death upon the cross.<sup>24</sup> The United Church believes “that in Jesus Christ God acted to save [humanity], taking, at measureless cost, [humanity’s] sin upon Himself; that the Cross reveals at once God’s abhorrence of sin and His saving love in its height and depth and power; and that the Cross is for all time the effectual means of reconciling the world unto God.”<sup>25</sup> To pay what we owe, Christ assumes our debt as his own. All that is Christ’s (grace, life, and salvation) become ours, and all that is ours (sins, death, and judgment) become Christ’s;<sup>26</sup> on the Cross, that which is ours is put to death. Our sin and its oppression are assumed by Jesus and put to death with him in our place and for our benefit. Creatures stand indebted to their Creator and one another. Yet, in mercy, God does for us what we cannot. In accordance with the eternal decision God has made that creatures be united to each other and their Creator, in history God personally *pays the price for sin*.<sup>27</sup>

As noted above, this facet of our salvation is often rebuffed as a vestige of another time when retributive justice outweighed *restorative*

*Works*, ed. and trans. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.14.

<sup>23</sup> Katherine Sonderegger, “Anselmian Atonement,” in *The T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam J. Johnson (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 181.

<sup>24</sup> “All this He saw and, pitying our race, moved with compassion for our limitation, unable to endure that death should have the mastery, rather than that His creatures should perish and the work of His Father for us men come to nought, He took to Himself a body, a human body even as our own.” Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Louisville: GLH Publishing, 2018), II/8.

<sup>25</sup> *Statement of Faith*, II.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), Kindle. Location 643.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2009), IV/1.

justice. Certainly, theologies will always bear some imprint of their time. Still, the motif of Christ's substitution—the payment of his life on our behalf—unabashedly punctuates the Scriptures. For this reason, we advance no apologetic for the validity of Christ's paying the price for our sin. Sin, the Scriptures suggest, *does* require restitutive recompense. Yet the price the Lord pays upon the Cross is not an abstract calculus that God has “solved” with no earthly import. What Christ has paid on our behalf has direct consequence for the settler church as it considers its sinful debt to the Indigenous nations in what is now Canada: for it is in the new economy that he has created that we can undertake the radical process of giving land back.

We recognize that Indigenous/settler relations have been marred by sin throughout our relationship. Land restitution, then, is not work that we accomplish with our own resources. Rather, it is work the Church is invited into because Christ has made it possible. Settler colonialism has been put to death on the cross such that new, reconciled life might take root in this world as it awaits the fullness of God's reign. Christ thus elicits our faithful discipleship to repent of our current political arrangements and to embrace the fullness of the new life he has made possible where Indigenous self-governance is restored and land is returned. In reconciling work, Christians at once attest, and participate in, the coming of God's new realm where justice is served and relations are restored.

### **Made Just By His Blood: Restoring Land through the Forgiveness of Debts**

As Christ has truly paid our debts, it is incumbent upon Christians to embody this truth in faith. Because we were bought with a price, Christians glorify God in our life together as the Body of Christ (1Cor 6:20), glorifying the Creator through our obedience and discipleship. The United Church believes that “on the Cross [Christ] bore the burden of sin, and He broke its power; and what He did there moves [humanity] to repentance, conveys forgiveness, undoes the estrangement, and binds them to Himself in a new loyalty.”<sup>28</sup> Salvation logically demands our loyalty to the Saviour. That loyalty to him issues in our participation in the new, just relations that Christ has already established in his death. Christians, then, live a life together that Christ has made possible, one that continually discovers and pursues a world in its proper relation to God.

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<sup>28</sup> *Statement of Faith*, VI.

When the All Native Circle Conference received the 1986 Apology, it expressed its hope “that the Apology is not symbolic but that these are the words of action.” Since then, the United Church has taken concrete steps to repent of its colonial sins. Restitution has involved a range of approaches “from financial compensation, resource-sharing, and return of property, to non-financial measures such as the Apologies, truth-telling, and gestures of reconciliation, to those that shifted power structures.”<sup>29</sup> Yet the Very Rev. Stan McKay critiques current discourses of reconciliation, expressing that “right now to me, it often feels . . . that reparation . . . is looked on as charity. There’s no dignity, there’s no recognition that it’s about treaty, and reconciliation, and justice.” Land restitution is not charity. It is the outworking of what Jesus has already done on our behalf on the Cross. As Christ has freed us from our debt, the settler church's participation in land restitution is not a burden to be undertaken grudgingly, but joyful participation in the forgiveness of debts and reordering of life that Christ has accomplished in his death.

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<sup>29</sup> Sarah Stratton, *Reparations with Indigenous Peoples in The United Church of Canada*, prepared for the General Council Executive, February 2020.

# LET (RACIAL) JUSTICE ROLL DOWN LIKE WATERS

by Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng

## Identifying the moments

*Moment 1.* The time was post-World War II in Macao, not too far from my birthplace, the British colony of Hong Kong. The place was an elementary classroom in a mission convent school run by Italian Canossian sisters. Still fairly new to the tongue of Shakespeare, I sat in my history class with our text and read: “Romulus and Remus and the founding of Rome . . .” Thus was this girl, known to teachers and classmates then as “Annie,” initiated into a world that began, and was centred, in Europe, spreading its power over many territories far away, whose civilizations yet came to exercise a hegemonic hold over her developing life.

*Moment 2.* Over four decades later, at St. Andrew’s-Wesley United Church in Vancouver, on the last day of the Annual Meeting of B.C. Conference of the United Church of Canada, excitement filled the air. The conference had begun to face up to the United Church’s past involvement in Indian residential schools, and had entrusted leadership to Jim Angus, a Gitksan, as in-coming president. As theme speaker that year, winding up my presentation with a “call to action” to the assembled delegates, I was acutely aware that I should not exempt myself from the challenge of taking at least one concrete action. What credible action could I take, given my complicated social location of being both a latecomer settler *and* the inheritor of histories of oppression and exclusion imposed on Chinese railroad and other nation-building labourers from the mid-1800s on? Finally, in solidarity with other colonized subjects and as an act of resistance, I decided to “come out” with the Chinese part of my name, “Wenh-In,” hitherto silenced and hidden on my birth certificate, without public acknowledgement and hence denied existence.

*Moment 3.* Two decades into the twenty-first century, the 2019 annual conference of the Religious Education Association (REA, established 1903), an association of professors, practitioners, and researchers in Religious Education, was held in “meeting place” Toronto. Its first plenary session, an experience of the latest version of the Kairos “blanket exercise,” led by Indigenous and ecumenical activist-educators, exposed conference participants to the gradual takeover of much of Canada’s land and its resources, with or without benefit of treaty. What better introduction to Canada’s history and context as, viscerally moved, participants sat in the final circle, soul-searching for parallels in “land-stealing” in their own countries? And what better follow-up to have a

later plenary session address ways of “disrupting the consequences of difficult histories through education”?<sup>1</sup>

### Naming the issues

Delving into Canada’s “difficult [and often silenced and hidden] history” with its Indigenous peoples from the perspective of an Asian immigrant, who has since made her home “on native land,” proved to be a sobering experience for this particular participant. Accounts of being prohibited from speaking in one’s own language in residential schools wakened uncomfortable echoes of injunctions to “speak English only” in mission school, even during recess. Then there were occasions of being censored for using expressions such as “losing face” or “paper tigers” as being “too Chinese” and therefore not legitimate, even when there was no equivalent term in English that could adequately express the nuances of meaning in incidents I was describing in composition assignments.

In an attempt to be freed from such cultural domination in subsequent years as church and theological educator, I sought to assess emerging theories of the field (personality type, faith development, multiple intelligences) by the extent to which they could be applicable to cultures other than the mainstream Western context in which they originated. I relished discovering alternative readings of biblical narratives that support a God who prizes diversity over uniformity, such as those that see the tower of Babel story (Genesis 11: 1-9) as pointing to fulfilment at Pentecost (Acts 2: 5-12), rather than as the usual negative contrast to the latter.<sup>2</sup>

It was not, however, until I encountered Edward Said’s *Orientalism* that I found a conceptual framework, *postcolonialism*, to better understand the pervading phenomenon of a Eurocentric worldview taken to be universal. I came to see how a collusion of colonialist knowledge and power with values derived from the glories of a Greco-

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<sup>1</sup> My panel presentation, focusing on the complexities in religious education with Asians/Asian Canadians in the context of Indigenous realities in light of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools and its 94 Calls to Action, will appear in the fall 2020 issue of *Religious Education*, 115/4.

<sup>2</sup> Bernhard Anderson, for instance, argues for the Babel story’s “profound significance for a biblical theology of pluralism,” that “diversity is not a condemnation,” and that it is humans rather “who strive for unity and fear diversity.” See his “The Babel Story: Paradigm of Human Unity and Diversity,” in *Ethnicity*, ed. Andrew M. Greeley and Gregory Baum (New York: Seabury, 1977), 63-69.



Roman past enabled the West to come to dominate and define reality for all “the Rest.” I came to value the methodology that postcolonialism provides to analyze and critique such a “norm” rooted in a “cultural racism” that is now embedded in political systems and institutional structures the world over.<sup>3</sup>

### **Engaging the Bible in Dialogue with Voices from the Periphery**

Spearheaded by Sri Lankan biblical scholar R.S. Sugirtharajah, postcolonial biblical interpretation seeks to explore the colonial presence concealed in the text. A postcolonial lens allows missing, silenced, and colonized voices to be heard, based on their lived experience and from their own perspective. From the margins they offer alternative readings to traditional interpretations hitherto held as authoritative everywhere.

One such voice is that of Robert Allen Warrior, a Native American of the Osage Nation whose experience and reality led him to read the Exodus story not only as a liberation event from the point of view of former slaves in ancient Egypt or contemporary fellow African Americans. In what most of us learned as Israel’s “entry into Canaan,” a story of triumphant conquerors, Warrior reads as a story of the invaded and the conquered. I remember how much I had to “unlearn,” as students of a Native Ministries summer school course I once taught, whether Nish’ga, Haida, or Maori, all arrived at a similar interpretation without ever having heard of Warrior, or read his chapter in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible from the Third World*.<sup>4</sup>

Another voice that speaks powerfully to reveal hidden meanings in the Bible is that of African American Hebrew Bible scholar Randall Bailey. Without going into detail about the fascinating ways by which he uncovers hidden and unexamined African presence in the Bible, I will lift up one issue that matters most to those who desire to undo/dismantle Black racism, namely, the valuing of all things White and the denigration of all things Black. Bailey shows how, by reversing ancient Israel’s conception of whiteness as a curse into whiteness as blessing (recall Miriam being punished with leprosy “white as snow” in Numbers 12), mainstream biblical exegetes have in fact been implicated, knowingly or

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<sup>3</sup> See the entry for “Postcolonialism” by Wong Wai Ching in *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, ed. Virginia Fabella and R.S. Sugirtharajah, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> A ground-breaking volume edited by R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices* (Maryknoll: Orbis), first appeared in 1991. Its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition in 2016 has been hailed as an important resource for world Christianity.

not, in a sanctioning of white supremacy.<sup>5</sup>

Dialoguing with these, and similar voices from Asian/Asian North American, and Hispanic-Latina/Latino communities, can therefore stimulate students of the Bible to consider the possibility of readings from more than one single perspective. I have also found that critically employing some of the insights of these scholars in my own reading, teaching, and sharing is necessary and helpful in advancing anti-racism work.<sup>6</sup> It is most encouraging to witness recently a “sounding” of such voices on the part of a younger generation of racialized and minoritized Canadian scholars in their 2019 publication, *Reading In-between: How Minoritized Cultural Communities Interpret the Bible in Canada*.<sup>7</sup>

### **The sinning and the sinned against: theological wrestlings**

“Racism is evil. Racism is idolatry. Racism is sin.” So begins Anthony Bailey (no relation to Randall) in his theological and ethical reflection in The United Church of Canada’s 2004 resource for educating toward racial justice, *That All May be One*. Bailey pleads passionately for grounding the church’s vision for racial justice in a theological understanding of God and God’s work as expressed through Jesus. He explains that racism is idolatrous because “it attempts to usurp the central and rightful place of the true and living God . . . [and] poses as the ultimate arbiter of how humanity is to be divided, regarded and treated.”<sup>8</sup> Four years earlier, the United Church’s Anti-Racism Policy Statement had been adopted at the 37<sup>th</sup> General Council. Its statement of beliefs asserts that “we are all equal before God,” that “racism is a sin and violates God’s desire for humanity,” and that “we believe in forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation . . .”<sup>9</sup> This last needs some explanation.

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<sup>5</sup> Randall C. Bailey, “The Danger of Ignoring One’s Own Cultural Bias in Interpreting the Text,” in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 66-90.

<sup>6</sup> Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, “Reading through new eyes: A basic introduction to reading Scripture from a feminist, postcolonial perspective for anti-racism work,” in *Making Waves*, Summer 2004, 27-29.

<sup>7</sup> This all-Canadian volume, edited by Nestor Medina, Alison Hari-Singh, and HyeRan Kim-Cragg, presents voices from Indigenous, Chinese, Indian, Korean, Latino, and AfriCanadian heritages (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Bailey, “Racism is Sin: Theological and Ethical Reflection,” in *That All May Be One: A Resource for Educating toward Racial Justice*, ed. Wenh-In Ng (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2004), 60-61.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

Korean American theologian Andrew Sung Park is our guide here. By introducing the concept of *Han* 恨 as a consequence of sin perpetuated on victims, Park makes it clear that the kind of forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation that bring life will differ depending on whether one is the offender/sinning or the sufferer/sinned against. Traditional Christian doctrine has addressed the needs of the “sinning” and neglected the “sinned against.” These latter experience *han* as the “knotted, twisted oppression” accumulated over lifetimes, even generations. Thus, the transformation needed by the dominant/sinning is to confess, repent, and render reparations, whereas transformation for the sinned against, such as survivors of Indian residential schools or women and children suffering domestic violence, is to claim or reclaim subjectivity, selfhood, and power. Where the quest for racial justice is concerned, among these sinned against are those who have internalized society’s racism for themselves and who will need to forgive themselves as they seek transformation through empowerment.<sup>10</sup> Because of the intersection of oppressions, racial injustice may be only one of a number of other injustices suffered, such as related to economic, gender, sexual orientation, or ableist prejudice. On the other hand, due to the multiple strands making up each person’s social identity, most of us are rarely totally sinning or totally sinned against all the time.<sup>11</sup>

### **So what? Moving toward racially just practices**

Two important reminders are important as we move toward racial justice practices. First, the actions we take in this direction can more accurately be described as “anti-racist” efforts, where racial justice is the end-goal

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<sup>10</sup> Park lays out his basic theological exploration of *han* in *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), and pursues its ministry implications in *The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned Against*, ed. Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson (Albany: State University of New York, 2001). *That All May be One* contains separate sections to raise awareness and deepen analysis for dominant White groups (38-47) and Indigenous and racialized groups (48-52).

<sup>11</sup> A useful tool developed by the Doris Marshall Institute for Education and Action is the power flower exercise accompanying Zenovia Skibinski, “What the Power Flower taught one White person about her complex identity,” in Canadian Ecumenical Anti-Racism Network, *Cracking Open White Identity towards Transformation: Canadian Ecumenical Anti-Racism Network Examines White Identity, Power and Privilege* (Toronto: Canadian Council of Churches, 2012), 59-63.

or *telos*, and anti-racism work the road we travel towards the goal. Second, all anti-racism action is based on the understanding that it is not the intent, but the impact or consequences upon people and groups, that makes any act racist in whatever form it takes, whether overt or covert, personal or institutional.

*Sharing learnings with individuals.* Over the years, the central challenge to me as an individual has been how to persevere in a commitment to naming and combating racism, no matter whether it is directed against me or against others. My experience has been that such efforts are best undertaken not alone, but collectively, with like-minded allies. It is vital to discern who those allies might be, as well as how to work with them most effectively. For racialized individuals, standing in solidarity with Indigenous and racialized, minoritized others is probably obvious. For mainstream White folk to become allies with racialized persons—without falling into the trap of “superiorist” behaviours or claiming “colour blindness”—can be more complicated and challenging. That is why serving on the steering committee of the Canadian Ecumenical Anti-Racism Network (CEARN) of the Canadian Council of Churches has been such a “growing” experience for all its members.

*Sharing learning with local faith communities.* In addition to attending formal educational and training programs that name “racial justice” as their explicit curriculum, local faith communities also need to engage in “trans-educational” practices in their total life. In the congregation’s liturgical life, for instance, these can take the form of (a) singing “global” hymns not just on World Communion Sunday, but throughout the year; (b) attending to the spiritual and pastoral needs of both the “sinned against” and the “sinning” in the prayers of the people; and (c) in preaching, focusing on concerns raised in Black History month, Asian Heritage month, and Indigenous month throughout the rest of the year when relevant issues arise. Furthermore, (d) in sponsoring refugees and arranging for multi-faith dialogues, congregations could employ an anti-racist lens in the planning and evaluation of each program or event. In this way, members of all ages and maturity can be socialized into becoming racially-just Christians “organically,” as part of their faith formation—what Tillich calls “inducting education”—by simply belonging to such a community.

### **The United Church as a Justice-seeking Church: transforming a goodly legacy**

In light of the United Church’s rootedness in social gospel values since church union, its commitment to a “dual mandate” of evangelism and

social service, and its subsequent efforts to engage social justice contextually, it is relevant to ask what difference it would make when the qualifier “racial” is prefixed to a vital aspect of its ecclesiological identity, “To seek justice and resist evil.”<sup>12</sup> How would it help to surface a historical paradox, that is, the contrast between enlightened inculturation and partnership practices in overseas mission and the persistent paternalism, plus blindness to ethno-cultural-racial discrimination on the “home missions” front?<sup>13</sup> Would recognizing a “*han* of racism” help to explain the need for establishing an Ethnic Ministries Council at the General Council level in 1996?<sup>14</sup> Just as it would elucidate why minoritized focus groups concluded that “the United Church needed something like multiculturalism, but would go *deeper* than superficial interactions and a desire to be more transformative”?<sup>15</sup>

It was indeed in part to facilitate the Church to “seek [racial] justice and resist [the] evil [of racism]” that the proposal “A Transformative Vision for The United Church of Canada” was brought before the Church’s 39<sup>th</sup> General Council in 2006. In adopting its main proposed action that the United Church commit itself to becoming an intercultural church, Council accepted the challenge of making “intercultural dimensions of ministries . . . a denominational priority *in living out its commitment to racial justice . . .*” [italics mine]. And, significantly, no longer are *ethnic majority* mainstream constituencies exempt, but are to work with Aboriginal, Francophone, and ethnic entities in a church “where there is mutually respectful diversity and full and equitable participation . . . in the total life, mission, and practices of

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<sup>12</sup> See *Touchstone* 33/2 (June 2015), with the theme “Theology and Social Witness,” for a rich exploration of the varied strands undergirding this church’s identity since 1925.

<sup>13</sup> Hyuk Cho, “Practising God’s Mission beyond Canada,” in *The Theology of The United Church of Canada*, ed. Don Schweitzer, Robert Fennell and Michael Bourgeois (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2019), 251-277, and Loraine MacKenzie Shepherd, “The United Church’s Mission Work within Canada and its Impact on Indigenous and Ethnic Minority Communities,” *ibid.*, 279-311, trace the histories that provoke this observation/question.

<sup>14</sup> See the study by Kawuki Mukasa in his *Belonging: Constructing a Canadian Theology of Inclusion* (Toronto: Kamu Kamu Publishing, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Adele Halliday, “Introduction: A Transformative Vision,” in *Intercultural Visions: Called to Be the Church*, ed. Rob Fennell (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2012), xii.

the whole church.”<sup>16</sup> Among the various programs and resources produced since then to implement this commitment, the 2012 volume, *Intercultural Visions: Called to Be the Church*, is strong evidence of the more rounded picture of United Church *ekklesia* that an intercultural team of writers can contribute from the variety of their lived experience and understanding.

What we are witnessing, I am suggesting, is how a national church is attempting to move intentionally from being an open, awakening institution tolerant of racial-cultural differences to becoming a transformed one that values such differences as assets. This process involves moving from claiming an anti-racist identity and recruiting people of colour (as long as they conform to “majority” norms) to actually owning such an identity, along with the training and policies, programs that manifest it, with decision-making that weans itself away from a structure based on White privilege/supremacy.<sup>17</sup> The fact that Canadian society in general is still so biased requires a religious institution aspiring toward racial justice to act occasionally counter to that society’s values.

One example arising out of the pandemic-stricken context at the beginning of this third decade of the twenty-first century, is that some in Canada are blaming racialized and minoritized individuals and groups, especially Asians/Asian Canadians, for the new coronavirus, as has been pointed out by Kim Uyede-Kai, Shining Waters Region staff and the last incumbent of The United Church’s General Council Minister for Racial Justice and Gender Justice.<sup>18</sup> Her powerful image of the racism that prompts such acts and sentiments as itself a pandemic provoked me into wondering if a vaccine for it would ever be developed.

Remembering how anti-racism work has also been imaged as trying to walk up a down escalator, I have reluctantly come to the conclusion, “Quite unlikely.” And yet . . . does not the very term “crisis,”

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<sup>16</sup> From the summary of GC 39 Council Actions. For more information and materials on this action, see [www.united-cchurch.ca/intercultural](http://www.united-cchurch.ca/intercultural) and related links.

<sup>17</sup> These insights are gathered from Ronice Branding, Baily Jackson, and Andrea Ayazian, “A continuum for churches becoming an anti-racist institution,” *Making Waves*, Summer 2004, 48.

<sup>18</sup> Uyede-Kai’s reflection can be found at <https://shiningwatersregionalcouncil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-and-Racism-Pandemic-SWRC-revised.pdf>.

*wei ji* 危機, bring some hope? In every crisis there definitely is danger, *wei xian* 危險; at the same time, there is also opportunity, *ji hui* 機會. At this particular juncture in history, there are allies in and outside Canada encouraging and accompanying all entities committed to racial justice in their arduous vocation. A few that come to mind are the “Calls to Action” in the final report of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission that are addressed specifically to Christian institutions (2015),<sup>19</sup> the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), its Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024), and the upcoming Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2031).

Trusting in the crucified and resurrected One who has come “to reconcile and make new,” and who is both “our judge and our hope,” I rest in our communal hope, hope not as *xi wang* 希望, a bland, neutral kind of wish, but rather in hope as *pan wang* 盼望, the earnest, passionate longing that we invoke every first Sunday in Advent. Thanks, indeed, be to God.

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<sup>19</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Winnipeg: National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, University of Winnipeg, 2015). For example, Call to Action #49 asks church bodies to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples such as the Doctrine of Discovery and *terra nullius*; Call #65 asks them to develop educational strategies to ensure that their respective congregations learn about their church’s role in colonization and in the history and legacy of residential schools.

# PREACHING AND SINGING: PARTNERS IN THE DANCE OF WORSHIP

by Catherine E. Williams

I recently gave a presentation to a global group of diverse researchers and scholars on Christian congregational music. The presentation was entitled “Preaching Songs and Singing Preachers: A Decolonial Approach to Worship.” My thesis was essentially that preaching and singing flow into and out of each other naturally in the worship practices of African-oriented worshipping communities, in contrast to White mainline worship practices, where preaching and singing tend to be discrete liturgical elements.<sup>1</sup> One White colleague confessed to me later that the presentation held up a mirror to her Whiteness, revealing in a new way her Eurocentric perspective. All her life she had experienced preaching and singing as mutually exclusive elements of worship, believing this was the way it was everywhere, all the time. Hers is not an uncommon assumption. In many White mainline churches across North America, on any typical Sunday morning, worshipers experience preaching and singing as discrete elements, each with its own beginning and ending time. This norm, with its bent towards order and precision, is seen as part of the universal standard of excellence in worship, to which many colonized communities often subscribe.

This article challenges the dominance of that norm, declaring it to be adequate and appropriate for a particular culture, but inadequate and inappropriate for others. I am comparing particularly European-oriented and African-oriented worship practices in their respective diasporic groups. Preaching and singing, when functioning organically in non-White communities, often merge into each other in a dance more free-styled than choreographed. Such difference merits room around the table of homiletical discourse, widening the discussion with reference to different languages and terms.

## White Preaching

Preaching, as defined by Eurocentric norms, is a proclamation of the gospel by the one to the many. The doctrines of sixteenth century Protestant reformers gave preaching a prominent, even dominant, place within the worship service, with all other elements of the service seen as leading up to and away from that high point. White mainline preaching is generally monologic in nature, and uni-directional in delivery, moving

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<sup>1</sup> “Mainline” in this presentation refers to congregations across denominations whose worship liturgies are scripted, based on the church calendar year, and highly given to predictability and the classical *ordo* of worship.



from pulpit to pew with little if any audible feedback from the listeners. It is delivered by seminary-trained, or at least well-educated, persons. According to the Aristotelian categories that govern rhetoric, White preaching values *logos*, or a coherent flow of reasoned content, over *ethos*, the credibility of the preacher, or *pathos*, any appeal to the range of affect among the hearers. Frank Thomas describes traditional Western, Euro-American preaching as heavily influenced by Greek logic with a primary focus on words, seeking from the text a proposition or idea, from which elaborate deductions are made in order to persuade the listener.<sup>2</sup> In theological seminaries where preaching is taught, students receive the standard fare of expository, exegetical, topical, or narrative approaches, reading books mainly by White authors on methods developed by White homiletics. Black preaching is often introduced tangentially, represented by far fewer texts than have been written by Black preachers and homiletics.

### Black Preaching

In Black communities, life tends to be more fluid than neatly ordered, and worship practices tend to follow more spirit than script. The rational and irrational (and these are relative, value-laden words) tend to live in tandem and with little if any immediate critical questioning. Body, mind, soul, and spirit—named and unnamed categories of personhood—are all brought into worship practices, often with great freedom and abandon. Neat liturgical or homiletical categories don't hold up very well. Preaching can be any form of public proclamation of good news, supported by or situated within the Bible—its stories, its wisdom, its characters, its songs, and its prayers. Thus, preaching is often testimony and exhortation, spoken and sung. What is going on when preaching and singing break free from their silos and invite each other to dance? It could be expressed in what Evans E. Crawford calls *The Hum*. Reflecting on what William C. Turner Jr. calls homiletical musicality, Crawford considers how it comes together in “the way in which the preacher uses timing, pauses, inflection, pace, and other musical qualities of speech to engage all that the listener is in the act of proclamation.”<sup>3</sup> This engagement of “all that the listener is” takes into account every aspect of Black life. Cleo LaRue reminds us that the life situations of the

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<sup>2</sup> Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Evans Crawford with Thomas H. Troeger, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 16.

congregation may fall into any of several domains of experience, any of which may be the vantage point or focal point of the Black sermon. The preacher may focus on *personal piety, care of the soul, social justice, corporate concerns*, or issues concerning *the institutional church*.<sup>4</sup> In each of these domains the preacher is careful to accentuate the sovereign and overriding activity of God at work in people, in the church, and in the world outside of the church. As every Black homileician will attest, this dance of preaching and singing then takes place squarely within the context of Black lived experience.

### **White Singing**

Congregational song, in the context of Euro-American worship practices, is often drawn from a repertoire of historically preserved hymnody. This legacy is handed down through a series of printed books, thus expressing the White orientation towards literacy in communication. These hymnals, updated every twenty years or so, are organized into sections based on major themes of worship, including, but not limited to, the persons of the Trinity, the Bible, the Christian year, the Christian life, sacraments, mission, and so on. Hymns in White services are often functionally sprinkled throughout the liturgy and may appear as an opening hymn, a hymn of preparation, a hymn of response, and a closing hymn. Hymn lyrics tend to be strophic, metrical, and linear in thought. Congregations tend to value them for their literary and artistic contributions, and maybe even for their sentimental associations with some meaningful time in the life of the singer or the congregation. Subsequent to the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, which had quite a ripple effect among Protestant liturgical practices, different streams of congregational music have been flowing into denominational hymnals.<sup>5</sup> Yet the singing of these different genres of sacred music remains scripted, methodical, and functional. They are embraced in White worship primarily for their artistic value and their refreshing connection to the global church, but in their relocation from their original musical home, something of the spirit of these global songs gets lost in translation. Apart from congregational song, singing in the White mainline tradition is frequently offered by a choir of select voices, and/or paid and volunteer

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<sup>4</sup> Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 28.

<sup>5</sup> The metaphor of streams of congregational song is used by C. Michael Hawn in his edited volume, *New Songs of Celebration Render: Congregational Song in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (GIA Publications, 2013).

soloists. This speaks to the artistic value placed on music in this social location.

### **Black Singing**

In African diasporic communities, congregational song is often more spontaneous, and more experiential than functional in the role it plays within the service. Rarely is the music planned weeks or months in advance; it is not often selected based on the Scripture or theme of the day; and if selected from a hymnal, chances are that many in the congregation know it by heart. Black congregations tend to value their canon of songs not so much for their literary and artistic merit as for their affective and spiritual impact. The song has to mean something to the singers' experience—so they can render it with heart. This value placed on meaning is one reason the songs are often sung on repeat for extended periods of time. Black choirs and soloists are often part of Black worship services, most frequently on a volunteer basis. Renditions by such choirs and vocalists are expected to draw the listeners into a shared experience of Spirit encounter.

Hymns have their place in Black worship spaces to be sure, but more beloved and well-worn are the cyclical songs or those with refrains that may be repeated and improvised upon. What is going on when the song or refrain is repeated at will and extensively? Many would claim that the music is massaging the weary soul, refreshing the tired spirit, calming nerves stretched taught by oppression and resistance, replenishing hope-filled hearts, fortifying flagging resolve, reminding God's people of God's promise to be present through the fire, flame, and flood. This takes time, and time is counted differently in White mainline worship spaces than it is in Black traditional or folk congregations.

### **White Concepts of Time**

The White value placed on timeliness is reflected in the impact of the clock on worship services. Not only do services begin promptly at the appointed time, they are likely to last one hour—seventy-five minutes at the most. Included in their list of characteristics of White practical theology, Tom Beaudoin and Katherine Turpin list orderliness and procedural clarity, valued historically by Whites, as a way “to increase efficiency and convenience.”<sup>6</sup> Pastors of White congregations know that

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<sup>6</sup> Tom Beaudoin and Katherine Turpin, “White Practical Theology,” in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, ed. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 258.

one way to incur the annoyance of their congregants is to extend the service past the agreed-upon schedule. Time is often tied to economics, which makes it a highly valued commodity, not to be wasted. Making every minute count, eliminating “dead” space in worship, and keeping an eye on the clock are phrases that express the White attachment to *chronos* time.

### **Black Concepts of Time**

In contrast, African-oriented worshipping communities embrace the concept of *kairos* time, where an activity is measured according to what is a fitting or appropriate duration for the outcome desired. A singing community in the midst of an inspired, inspiring song will not count minutes, but rather intuitively gauge effect and affect. The song is over when the weary soul feels revived, when the tired spirit feels energized once more, and when nerves stretched taught by the tension of daily resistance are once again relaxed within a safe and nurturing space. Then the song will expire on its own accord. When I explain this process to my White colleagues and students their anxiety often becomes palpable. They want to know who is in control, who is keeping time. Brenda Aghahowa articulates the thinking around this fluid concept of time in African American churches: “Whether it is the prayer time . . . the praise time . . . testifying, congregational singing, the sermon, the call to Christian discipleship, or even the offertory period—no element or moment in the service is considered dull, a waste of time, unimportant, or uninspiring.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Affect in Black and White Worship**

In one of my worship classes where the students were reflecting on diverse worship practices, we were using Ruth Duck’s text on worship as a discussion guide.<sup>8</sup> In her chapter on diverse worship Duck lists characteristics and practices commonly found in the worship services of African American, Korean-American, Latino/a, and White worship. I asked my students at the end of the chapter, and after having watched a few video-clips sampling some of these cultural differences, to name the characteristics of the different modes of worship. I encouraged them to use judgment-free words, meaningful to the worshipers in the contexts

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<sup>7</sup> Brenda Aghahowa, *Praising in Black and White: Unity and Diversity in Christian Worship* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1996), 42.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 35.

under examination. This made them thoughtful. I was asking them to steer clear of stereotypical language, to avoid being dismissive or patronizing, and to put themselves in the shoes of the other. When it came to characterizing the affect of white worshipers, they were surprised at how difficult it was to speak fittingly of white emotional restraint and bodily containment in worship. One person suggested limited affect, to which one White student objected that the word “limited” suggested negativity. She offered “reserved” affect instead, to which her White colleagues nodded in agreement. When it came to describing the affect of Black worship, one Black student reacted negatively to the phrase “acting out,” used in one of our textbooks to name moments of high ecstasy and celebration in worship. Even though the phrase “acting out” was in quotes, indicating it was not necessarily the author’s point of view, the Black students still considered it derogatory. Discussion around that was difficult too. How does one describe what happens in those moments when “the anointing falls” upon a person, or when “the spirit moves” a person, or when a person senses “a quickening?” All of those phrases were used by the Black students but did not translate into the existential understanding of their White colleagues. After much debate, we settled on a substitute for “acting out.” It was “an ecstatic response to the felt presence of the Holy Spirit.” It is in those moments of ecstasy that preaching can become singing and singing can become preaching.

### **The Dance of Preaching and Singing**

How does preaching sing? One ready answer comes to us from traditional African American preaching. There comes a time in the delivery where the preacher’s speech becomes intoned. The words are lengthened and shortened to produce rhythmic patterns, they are sung to snatches of chant to produce melody, and often an organ or other instrument nearby will join in to produce some kind of counterpoint or harmonic support. This is better experienced than explained, to be sure. If this kind of intoned delivery is sustained for a period of time, chances are a song will actually burst forth from the preacher—either an improvised one that repeats an inspired phrase, or an actual song whose lyrics are well matched with the preacher’s thoughts. This is a moment of high affect in Black worship. In the elegant language of Albert Raboteau, “the relation of music and preaching has been symbiotic. There is a vocal continuum between speech and song in the sermon, as speech becomes rhythmic chant, and chant in turn becomes tonal and shades into song.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American*

How does singing preach? Once we can expand the classic definition of preaching as public proclamation of the gospel in reasoned, organized, rhetorically eloquent ways, we can begin to include such forms as testimony and exhortation. These are functions of many favoured hymns and songs in the Black worship tradition. “Amazing Grace” and “Blessed Assurance” are songs of testimony. “I Don’t Feel No Ways Tired” and “I Will Trust in the Lord” are songs of exhortation. Often testimony and exhortation precede and interweave one another in practice, particularly during the time of devotions—a prelude to the beginning of the worship service in many Black churches. One seasoned preacher calls the song “the sermon you take home with you and preach to yourself all throughout the week.”<sup>10</sup>

Within the context of Black worship, the engagement of these two liturgical practices—preaching and singing—is often unscripted, unplanned, communal, Spirit-inspired, and organic. Black worshipers often take this dance for granted, as it reflects the fluidity of interpersonal interaction within Black communities. It is one of the distinctives of the worship life and style of a people whose worldview does not dichotomize or compartmentalize, but rather integrates into holistic patterns. Pedrito Maynard-Reid observes:

Africa has bequeathed to [North] American society a way of worship that is rich in expression and content—its music . . . its expression of the Word in preaching and praying, its communal and ecstatic responses in “call and response” antiphony, the shout, the falling out. All these . . . are deep expressions of an African way of life and worldview. When African Americans capture this spirit in worship, one will hear the folksy expression as they depart from the place of worship, “We had church today!”<sup>11</sup>

## The Spirit

The presence and activity of the Holy Spirit is a core value that runs through much of Black practical theology, particularly the areas of preaching and worship. Spirit activity is integral to the practice of African-oriented religions. Maynard-Reid reports of worship in

*Religious History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 147.

<sup>10</sup> Author’s conversation with the Rev. Williams B. Roane Sr., Westhampton, NJ, 22 September 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Pedrito Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship: African American, Caribbean & Hispanic Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 54.

Afrocentric worship communities in the Caribbean that “the supreme religious experience of almost all is possession by a spirit of the Spirit (as is true in many African American churches).”<sup>12</sup> African cosmology does not allow for an impermeable barrier between the material and immaterial world, between the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit. The plane of spirit connection, spirit possession, and Spirit-filled worship is the continuum along which we find preaching and singing. The symbiosis between them is their ability to afford worshipers the kind of religious experience that transports them from one realm to the next and back. This is why the preacher will often not begin to preach until the singing has generated a certain level of intense energy in the room. It is also why the preacher may launch right into a song upon completing the sermon. It is also why musicians may be cued to begin playing as a preacher begins to wrap up her sermon. The energy flows from the one activity into the other, all with the intention of moving the worship and the worshipers from one realm of reality to another.

The element of Spirit is critical to any discussion or understanding of Black worship. The aim of the service is to invite and experience the presence of God the Spirit to infuse every aspect of worship. This is why the singing often continues for as long as it takes to sense that numinous presence. This is why the preaching is often lengthy. The preacher may begin calmly in a didactic mode until that time she senses the energy of the Spirit—at which point her entire affect may change, becoming more animated, as the preaching becomes more intoned, embodied, and vernacular. Prayers in folk worship are never scripted or read; they are uttered extemporaneously, and again the expectation is that they will continue until the Spirit begins to blow through the prayer. Soloists are never simply artists or performers; they are ministers who use their gift to bring more of the Spirit into the room.

Discussion about S/spirit in this light often stymies my White students. Colonial epistemologies are primarily cognitive, funded by empirical sensibilities. Influenced by Enlightenment thinking, these ways of knowing create an allegedly impermeable division between the scientific world and anything that cannot be scientifically accounted for—the latter generally labeled as superstitious or pre-critical. African cosmology defies and resists this dichotomous way of being in the world. It insists that while there is a material world where reason and cognition lead to knowledge and a certain kind of sensory reality, there are other ways of knowing influenced by the world of the spirit, which leads to its

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

own kind of reality and experience. Whereas Enlightenment thinking imagines an impermeable barrier between the world of science and the world of what some call superstition, across the African diaspora people traverse that barrier back and forth as a matter of course in everyday living. This world of the spirit is so intrinsic to wholeness and well-being for Africans, whether in the homeland or diaspora, that it cannot be extracted out of life, or worship for that matter.

The significance of any and all of this comparison and contrast stems from the historical hold White norms and values have had on the field of practical theology as a whole, and on preaching and worship specifically. In their deeply reflective chapter on White practical theology, Beaudoin and Turpin name several key features of this culturally embedded by-product of colonial Christianity. With indicting clarity they confess:

white theology presumes to speak for and about others without a sense that the others might also be speaking too, and speaking back. It innovates strategies for keeping others silent by hemming them in rhetorically through effective theological forms—logic, conceptual clarity, love-paternalism, abstraction—which are forms of aggression masked as neutral or even positive Christian ways of proceeding.<sup>13</sup>

This is a classic representation of the European colonialists who assumed the linguistic differences of the people they met on foreign shores meant these people could not speak for themselves. There was no mindset of accommodating difference; so the Westerners took over the dance, introduced new steps, changed the music, silenced the original performers, and rendered the original version of the dance immoral and illegal.

In her study of Black and White Christian worship, Branda Aghahowa responds to those who might wonder “Why talk about Black worship at all? Why raise barriers? We’re all Christians and we all worship. Worship is (or should be) generic.” Citing the thought of Cyprian Lamar Rowe, Aghahowa responds that for non-Blacks “to deny the uniqueness of Black worship (and to deny the validity of the existence of such uniqueness) constitutes a kind of *liturgical imperialism* that suggests, ‘They (African- Americans) should worship like us.’”<sup>14</sup> This implied inferiority of Black worship practice is insidious. It has

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<sup>13</sup> Beaudoin and Turpin, 254.

<sup>14</sup> Aghahowa, 27.



served to whitewash the uniqueness of non-White cultures, thus eclipsing whole swaths of non-Western history.

Some Blacks whose worship practices are reflected in this article have heard themselves stereotyped and criticized as unreflective and non-critical—code language for unintelligent. Such adverse naming has had the effect of depriving them of a genuine encounter with God in worship. Nonetheless, the God of all flesh continues to call their names and identify with them. Some Blacks whose worship practices align more closely with European values have sought to distance themselves from certain folk practices such as named in this article. Anyone may preach and worship in any way they choose, but to give practical or pedagogical privilege to any one practice of preaching or worship enables rather than disrupts Christian accommodation to Whiteness. Let the dance go on! Let preaching and singing move gracefully—or wildly—together as the wind of Spirit blows over them. Let the worship of our God reflect the fulsome nature of our God, in whom all things hold together.

# WHITE NATIONALISM

by Alan Davies

The term “white nationalism” is in the air, stirred by the antics of Donald Trump and brought into sharp relief by an escalating series of deadly events, including the savage massacre of worshipping Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand (15 March 2019). It is both an old and a new term, and one that requires dissection. It is old because it is a compound of racial and political elements derived from two converging ideologies of the modern age, and it is new because, while racism and nationalism are first cousins, they are usually distinguished from each other in the history of ideas. Let us examine them in turn.

White, of course, is a colour, but also a metaphor, standing for the European peoples and their descendants throughout the world. Its usage is old. In biblical and classical antiquity white was employed as a symbol of purity and virtue, whereas black acquired the opposite meaning, a juxtaposition suggested by nature itself, i.e., the perpetual interplay between light and darkness, day and night. According to Maurice Farbridge, white suggested the “light, ascension into the bright realm, the immaculateness of virgin snow . . . and the transparency of limpid air . . .” Black, on the other hand, because it “absorbs all colours and thus buries the light” symbolized “death, humiliation (and) mourning.”<sup>1</sup>

This metaphorical dualism was totally devoid of racial connotation, but it supplied a convenient framework for race doctrines when the latter started to coalesce in the modern mind. To the early Christians, the soul rather than the body was the object of redemption. Therefore, the flesh and its skin colour did not matter, at least did not literally matter, although some ambiguity nevertheless attached itself to the play of images. The biblical myth of Ham (Gen 9:25-27) could be read or misread in support of this suggestion. As a punishment for gazing on his father’s nakedness when Noah was in a drunken stupor, Ham, according to some rabbinic sources, was “smitten in his skin” or blackened.<sup>2</sup> One presumes that the proximity of the Near East to Africa prompted this curious exegesis, which is hardly supported by the text itself. As an anti-Black inscription on an Egyptian pillar at the second cataract of the Nile testifies, prejudice against Black Africans was not unknown among the ancients. According to one authority, “ominous” feelings toward the Ethiopians on the part of the Egyptians permeated

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice H. Farbridge, *Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1923), 278.

<sup>2</sup> *Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 2, ed. I.

“certain circles” in the Mediterranean world long before the advent of Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Later Christian ascetics, notably the Egyptian desert fathers, even on occasion personified the temptations of the flesh, including sexual lust, in Black form.<sup>4</sup> Colour dualism, therefore, and its racial implications, long preceded the rise of racism proper in the modern world. Its potency lingers today.<sup>5</sup>

Racism proper, however, only arose after a long transitional period of racial speculation or race-thinking, stimulated by the European encounter with large and unprecedented numbers of non-white peoples during the Great Age of Discovery (fifteenth to nineteenth centuries). New questions were raised. A growing scientific passion for the classification of data, all kinds of data, led inevitably to the classification of human beings, which in turn led to the conclusion that the different types of humanity were simply too different to be reduced to a single common denominator. The next step was the rise of racial theory, assisted by the already embedded colour dualism in the European psyche which, of course, meant that the classifiers, who were White, belonged at the top of the racial scale, and all the non-White races on a sliding scale downward to the black bottom. Other elements were added: skull shape, facial angles, eye colour, hair texture, body symmetry, for example; indeed, a host of aesthetic principles derived from classical Greek sculpture, especially representations of the Greek gods. The implication was that the white European with his superior intelligence (intelligence was correlated to head size and head formation) was god-like in comparison to the non-European races who were in the throes of colonization. This was no coincidence. The science of race, however, or race-thinking did not become a true ideology, that is to say, a real “ism” until the mid-nineteenth century when certain writers, notably Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882) identified it as the clue to history itself. In their eyes, everything or almost everything became a question of race.

To Count Gobineau (his title was fictitious), a man deeply estranged from his age, Europe in general, and France in particular, were faced with ruin because of the horde of social misfits (*les déracinés*)

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<sup>3</sup> Frank M. Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 179. Famously, Giuseppe Verdi’s great opera, *Aida*, plays on this theme.

<sup>4</sup> See Owen Chadwick, ed., *Western Asceticism*, Vol. 12 of *Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 61-62.

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller exposition, see my book, *Infected Christianity: A Study of Modern Racism* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988).

infesting the cities (notably Paris), whose only intent was to tear down everything beautiful and noble, in other words, the treasured white aristocratic world of his imagination. In Gobineau's mind they were the progeny of miscegenation, and thus incapable of civilization as he understood the term. The would-be aristocrat did not invent the Aryan myth, the great race myth of the white Europeans—it originated in British India<sup>6</sup>—but he subscribed to it without reserve. In his mid-century *Essai sur L'inégalité des Races Humaines* he indulged in an infamous comparison:

Human history is like an immense tapestry. The earth is the frame over which it is stretched. The successive centuries are the tireless weavers . . . The two most inferior varieties of the human species, the black and yellow races, are the crude foundation, the cotton and wool, which the secondary families of the white group make supple by adding their silk, while the Aryan group, circling its finer threads through the noble generations, designs on its surface a dazzling masterpiece of arabesques in silver and gold.<sup>7</sup>

Silver and gold indeed! The stage was set for the rise of pseudo-scientific racism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Aryan imagery began to cast its shadow over the intellectual and cultural landscape. Racial talk was fashionable. In Germany the half-English Houston Stewart Chamberlain, incidentally the son-in-law of the great, albeit racially tainted composer, Richard Wagner, published his hugely popular *Die Grundlagen des XIX Jahrhunderts (The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century)* in 1899, earning for himself in certain circles the

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<sup>6</sup> Its origins were philological. Sir William Jones, an English jurist in British India, discovered a grammatical affinity between Sanskrit and Latin and Greek, causing others to distinguish the Indo-European languages from the Semitic languages. The term “Aryan” was borrowed from the Greek historian Herodotus as a designation for the so-called Indo-European peoples. What began as a linguistic distinction soon became a racial distinction under the aegis of romanticism. Hence arose the Aryan myth, a tale of an original white race in India (the Himalayas) whose members marched down from the roof of the world in columns of “masterful men,” founding empires and civilizations. They became the ancestors of the modern Europeans, in particular the Teutonic nations, meaning the proper rulers of France and England as well as Germany.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in *Gobineau: Selected Political Writings*, ed. Michael D. Biddiss (London: Cape, 1970), 162-163.

appellation of a new Immanuel Kant. Its thesis was simple. The Aryan-Teuton-German was the bearer of the creative principle in history in contrast to the Semite, who was the bearer of everything vile. Jesus, of course, was not a Semite but an Aryan; his veins, according to Chamberlain, contained no drop of Jewish blood! It was not many years later when the implications of that claim became clear.

Nationalism, the ideology of the nation, is the first cousin of racism, similar but not necessarily identical. It also arose in the modern age, dating back to the French Revolution (1789) when, apparently for the first time, the concept of the nation (Latin, *natio*) as a collective and mystical unity came to the fore, producing national hymns (*la Marseillaise*) and national (as opposed to dynastic) flags (*le tricolore*). According to Sir Isaiah Berlin, however, the Germans rather than the French, were the first true nationalists, because it was in Germany that nationalism became cultural and linguistic and finally racial.<sup>8</sup>

In 1807 in French-occupied Berlin, the philosopher Johann-Gottlieb Fichte composed its most riveting text: *Reden an die Deutsche Nation (Addresses to the German Nation)*. It can only be described as a glorification of the German spirit and German identity. No other nation is or can be as close to God as the German nation because no other nation possesses its unique spirituality. Unlike more earthbound peoples, the German genius soars like an eagle into the heavens; unlike the hated French, the Germans constitute an *Urvolk*, an original or authentic people, and their language with its rich tonal sounds an *Ursprache*. Such sentiments were nationalistic in the extreme, although Fichte, a protégé of Kant, was formally a universalist. He was clearly over-reacting to Napoleon's invasion. Unfortunately, his speeches became the classic text of romantic nationalism in future time, especially his emphasis on linguistic purity, since in his eyes a German who learns a foreign tongue (especially French) somehow sullies his Germanic soul. Language was highly instrumental in the stirring of national feelings in any country since without a common tongue a common identity is difficult to forge. At least one other European nation, Poland, copied Fichtean nationalism by making similar claims for the Polish language.<sup>9</sup>

Fichte was not a racist, however; nationalism and racism had yet

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<sup>8</sup> Sir Isaiah Berlin, "Nationalism: past neglect and present power," *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 350.

<sup>9</sup> See my book *The Crucified Nation: A Motif in Modern Nationalism* (Eastbourne, U.K.: Sussex Academic Press, 1988), 6-24.

to wed. The fusion came with the adoption of Aryan speech in nationalist circles in the late nineteenth century when, not coincidentally, the term “antisemitism” (*Antisemitismus*) was coined.<sup>10</sup> An ancient prejudice thus cloaked itself in fashionable modern dress, for Aryan and Semite were respectable anthropological terms and pitting the one against the other was in keeping with the conventional truisms of the day. Not only Chamberlain in Germany, but Ernest Renan (and others) in France were busy utilizing the new thought as an interpretive key to current events.

In his “style ingénieux,” Renan, the author of a popular book about Jesus,<sup>11</sup> declared the Prussians had defeated the French at Sedan (1870) because of their racial superiority; unlike the latter, they had not stupidly liquidated their (Aryan) aristocracy in a bloodthirsty revolution.<sup>12</sup> One did not have to hold aristocratic views to think in this fashion. An entire school of French anthropologists, all radical republicans and believers in evolution, convinced themselves that their brave new egalitarian world could only be brought to pass by the more highly evolved, i.e., superior white race.<sup>13</sup> Similar views seeped into Britain and the United States where they took the form of a promethean Anglo-Saxon vainglory, both racial and national. Did not Anglo-Saxon man possess a more highly evolved nervous system and therefore a greater capacity for civilization?<sup>14</sup> Would not “two Englands” (meaning the two great Anglo-Saxon nations) soon claim the world for themselves, reducing the lesser nations to minor roles in the march of time?<sup>15</sup> What enlightened person could doubt it? These nineteenth century conceits acquired a more deadly aura in the twentieth century as a chain of terrible events, that need not be recounted, bears witness. They define our modern consciousness.

Today, however, many decades after the Second World War, a new and subtle compound of old and discredited beliefs has arisen in the

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<sup>10</sup> By Wilhelm Marr in order to single out the Jews as a separate alien race from the Germans.

<sup>11</sup> *Vie de Jésus*.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: Mentor Books, 1969), 69.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Michael Hammond, “Anthropology as a Weapon of Social Combat in late Nineteenth-Century France,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 16 (1980), 126.

<sup>14</sup> Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1885), 168.

<sup>15</sup> John Fiske, *American Political Ideas* (New York: Harper, 1844), 129.

form of white nationalism. It is not clear who first coined this term nor does it matter. Its intellectual face (if it has one) can be ascribed to the French man-of-letters Renaud Camus whose book *Le Grand Remplacement* (*The Great Replacement*)—a work very much in the spirit of Count Gobineau—seems to be its most erudite text.<sup>16</sup> The argument is simple. Europe in general and France in particular are in the throes of a radical transformation that Europeans in general and the French in particular do not properly understand. A veritable flood of aliens “*massive et souvent clandestine*” has poured, and continues to pour into France (and elsewhere), often without proper documentation—“*migrants qui ont violé la loi*”—so that they have no legitimate right to be on French soil but claim such a right nonetheless.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Camus suggests, if any misfortunes descend on their heads, these recent arrivals always manage in one way or another to blame the French because they know how to exploit public sympathy. The author’s indignation boils over at this effrontery:

A veiled woman who speaks our language badly, knows nothing about our culture and, what is more serious, is full of angry condemnation, not to say hatred for our history and civilization, can smoothly assert, especially on television, to a native Frenchman with a passion for Romanesque churches, the exquisite vocabulary and syntax of Montaigne, of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the wine of Bourgogne and for Proust, whose family has dwelt for several generations in the same vale of Vivarais or of Périgord, from which it has lived through all the vicissitudes of our history, will strongly assert, usually in a less than friendly tone: “I am just as French as you.”<sup>18</sup>

In Camus’ view, the veiled woman might be formally French, that is to say, might possess French citizenship, but that certainly does not make her *really* French, for to be *really* French one must grasp the genius of the French race (*génie de notre race*). But genius thus defined, he argues, has become in contemporary “anti-racist” discourse a taboo word that one no longer dare use. Camus laments this semantic and ideological change. The anti-racist guardians of modern speech forget the singular beauty and profundity of French culture in all its manifold forms and

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<sup>16</sup> At least as far as I know.

<sup>17</sup> Renaud Camus, *Le Grand Remplacement* (Paris: David Reinhare Éditions, 2011), 19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. My translation.

expressions throughout the long ages; they also forget that every people, every real people—in other words every nation—also constitutes a race, for heredity and heritage are twins. They forget that real peoples cannot truly mix or merge with other peoples. They can only conquer them, rule them, or replace them. Hence Camus arrives at “the great replacement” of the real French and the real France, the idealized, sacralized, and not incidentally white France, of the author’s devotion with another France—non-white, non-Christian, and non-French.

We are still above all a European people of the white race, Graeco-Latin culture and Christian religion. Let us not fool ourselves! You have seen Muslims. You have seen their turbans and their djellabas (long gowns). You have seen that they are not French. Those who talk of integration possess the brains of hummingbirds even if they have learning. Try to mix oil and vinegar. Shake the bottle. In a moment or two they will separate again. Arabs are Arabs, the French are French. You believe that French society can absorb ten million Muslims who tomorrow will be twenty million and the day after tomorrow forty million? If we were to integrate, if all the Arabs and Berbers of Algeria were regarded as French, how could we prevent them from coming to live in metropolitan France where the standard of living is so much higher? My village would no longer be called Colombey-of-the-two-Churches but Colombey-of-the-two-Mosques.<sup>19</sup>

The dark pessimism that pervades this vision of the French future has antecedents elsewhere. In 1923 the New York patrician Madison Grant, also in the spirit of Count Gobineau, published his bleak prognosis for a United States overrun with post-war immigrants from the Polish ghettos and other unsavoury places pouring into its cities.<sup>20</sup> They would utterly ruin white Anglo-Saxon (Aryan) civilization, meaning the racialized nation which he regarded as the true America. Similar sentiments were expressed in Great Britain fifty years later by Enoch Powell, a Tory parliamentarian once considered for prime minister. Once again in the spirit of Count Gobineau, Powell decried the mounting number of non-white ex-imperial subjects seeking entry to Britain: “In all

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25. My translation.

<sup>20</sup> Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1923).



of its history our nation has never known a greater danger.”<sup>21</sup> If the tide were not checked, if the invaders were not turned back, English cities would no longer be English, England would no longer be England, and its downfall would ensue.

White nationalists, therefore, can claim a few prophets and forerunners, even if their names are no longer common currency. Donald Trump is not the first politician to denounce the movement of non-white, non-Christian, non-familiar refugees in search of a better life, nor is he likely to be the last. He has even managed to cast his shadow over Canadian politics. Last summer two women campaigning on behalf of the white nationalist candidate for mayor of Toronto rang my doorbell. When I refused to accept their pamphlets, one of them looked at me accusingly and said, “You don’t know!” “Oh yes I know,” I replied, “I know exactly.”

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<sup>21</sup> John Enoch Powell, *Still to Decide*, ed. John Wood (London: Batford, 1972), 164.

## From the Heart

### CELTIC CONFESSION

Ivan Gregan

I grew up in a home filled with a Celtic understanding of the entire cosmos. We rose in the morning with out-stretched arms to greet the rising sun breaking the horizon and, as if willing to embrace it, we said the recitation. “I greet you, O rising sun, for you are the light of this world.” Then we would turn our back on the sun, still with arms outstretched, casting a cross-like shadow across the land. We would continue, “But a far greater light has arisen in my life, Jesus Christ, and in him I will walk until travelling days are done.” We would then step into the shadow of the cross and begin our day. We would end our day by saying, “I will lay me down with Christ and Christ shall lay down with me. Into your hands I commend my spirit, O Lord, Amen.”

From beginning to end, we concentrated our thoughts on God. Every chore was done to a rhyme or a hymn and there was not a moment when we were not focused on the omnipresence of God who is a friend at our side and the great Lover of humanity.

At university, I became involved with an evangelical student group—the only group I found who would talk openly about God. Unfortunately, their perspective on God was the exact opposite of that on which I had been raised. The God of love became a god of wrath. The God who was my friend became the god who would judge and condemn. The enticing mystery of Scripture became a twisted road map of wrong turns. The warm, flickering Light that shone in darkness to guide me home was snuffed out by the omnipresence of cold, hard evil. The inclusivity of God’s heaven was replaced by the swallowing mouth of hell. The forgiving pardon of an understanding Saviour was replaced by a divine Santa Claus “He’s making a list, checking it twice, going to find out who’s naughty or nice.” The concept of the “end time” being each night as I fell asleep was replaced by some future wrath-filled Day of Judgment. The concept they had of God giving birth to a Son, God’s own child, all the time knowing that the life of that child would be demanded by God as a blood sacrifice, was absolutely incredible to me. This god seemed a monster to me, and was certainly not the God of Love I knew.

They convinced people that they were horrible sinners and were all going to go to Hell as if it were some future destination for all human beings except the redeemed who had to believe exactly what this group believed. It was doubtful all would make it, due to some hidden stain.

I grew up with the concept that heaven was living *with* an Icon of God. Hell was living *without* an icon of God. The duty of the Christian

community was to help people discover icons of God's presence around them to illuminate their pathway home.

After several years in this group, it was as if I woke up suddenly and thirsted for the God I knew, the God I missed, and the God who was crying for me to come home. I stood up in a meeting and walked out of it, out of literalism, out of Hell and out of Western atonement theology. Since then, my life has been a pursuit of that kind, gentle, forgiving, guiding, illuminating friend presented to me by my father and mother and by generations who had preceded us, and who still walk with us in the presence of Christ.

The ancient Celtic prayers were all designed in rhythm and rhyme. It is said that John, the beloved disciple, laid his head on Jesus' chest and heard then the heartbeat of God in human existence. The purpose of worship is to bring us into common rhythm, into common heartbeat, into sync with heaven and the great cloud of witnesses gathered around Christ and who surround us.

When my grandmother died, we "waked" her in the parlour. The purpose of a "wake" is to assure the soul that although their body may be dead, they will not be forgotten. So, we sit around the corpse and tell stories with the grieving soul listening to us. We reminisce, we laugh, and we recount deeds of glory and shame. After three-days (one cycle complete so another can begin—in Celtic mythology) the soul is assured that even without a body, he/she will be remembered. We then accompany the soul on the last leg of their journey by taking them to church and commending them into God's care in a funeral service that is highly steeped in spirituality and prayer. There is a Gaelic saying that the last good thing we can do for a loved one is say a prayer for them at their funeral—for then they have no way to reward us. After commending them into God's care, we are left with the "remains" which are then returned to the earth as the soul was returned into heaven. We have an expression, *Cearcall a' Chuain*, which translates as "Circle of the sea." Like a wave out on the ocean, we rise up and gradually grow in height as we approach the shore. In our time we reach our grandeur, we crest, and then quickly fall only to rush back into the sea from whence we came. We return home, back to God.

This form of theology, based on a Celtic understanding of the cosmos, is for me enticing, life-giving, encouraging, and holy. It does not ignore sin (broken relationships), nor the Incarnation (presence of God in human flesh), nor what God has done for us in Christ from the crucifixion to the resurrection, nor the other rich words of Christian theology and doctrine; however, it challenges us to re-examine the

definitions that culture has placed upon these words, and to enter into dialogue with the Holy Spirit who leads us into greater truths.

Our culture influences our theology. Without even analyzing our preconceptions, we slip into a groove of presumptions that we have inherited from our culture. Until the fifteenth century, Europeans placed the earth at the centre of the universe, and around it everything revolved—and theology evolved. Copernicus (1473-1543) placed the sun rather than the earth at the centre of the universe and shattered the European conception of celestial order that was held as being sacrosanct for centuries. Around the world cultures perceive the structures of existence differently.

People's interactions with creation, and their observations of regular seasonal changes, birthed creation myths, with the catalytic agent being a "god." This allowed people to have a construct of the universe that offered explanation and assurance. Some cultures located the homes of the gods in the heavens above and beyond, and constructed their theology within this framework.

In the Celtic construct of the universe, gods existed around the people and not off in some distant celestial abode. Above, below, behind, before, within, without—the gods were everywhere. They were engaged in every part of life. The concept of a god in a distant heaven that had to be called down to earth through the magical agency of certain persons who were themselves apart from common life seemed idiotic and utterly preposterous.

Language also affects one's theology. In the Gaelic language there is no verb for "to have, to possess, or to own." There is the expression, "Close your eyes. What you see is all you possess in life. Everything is simply leant to you." If you cease to exist, all things exterior to you do not cease to exist. They are only leant to you. So we say, *Tha cota agam*, meaning "There is a coat at me"—for when I die, the coat will not cease to be. My death does not bring about its death, nor causes its existence to cease. It was simply with me for as long as I lived. A person does not even own their name. We say, *De an-t ainm ort?* meaning, "What is the name on you?" Your name comes from a great pool of names and you share it with many who have gone before you, who are with you now, and who will come after you. A thief in the Celtic mind is someone who thinks he or she exclusively possesses something and begrudgingly withholds it from common wealth or common usage.

Additionally, there are emotions or needs that are experienced or felt by all members of society. In the Celtic mind, they exist exterior to a person and settle upon a person or indwell a person. We say, "There is a

hunger on me” or “There is a thirst on me” or “There is a fear on me.” All of these are believed to settle on a person and possess them. John 14:1 in (modern) Gaelic reads, *Na biodh ur cridhe fo thrioblaid*, meaning “Let not your heart be under trouble,” implying that trouble exists apart from you and could settle on anyone.

The interpretation of biblical texts among Celts was quite different from understandings in the Mediterranean Basin. The Celts were not literalists. They were storytellers and in Jesus they saw a master storyteller. The gospels themselves were viewed as masterful constructions to convey truth and not as an historical account of the life of a Nazarene. Variations in the gospel accounts were simply seen as differences in how different storytellers would tell the same story emphasizing what was more important to him or her.

In a story telling or oral culture, a word-thread often led from one story to another. While recounting an event, the storyteller would use certain words and then someone else in the room would say, “Now that reminds me . . .” and continue on to the next story. This literary technique allows huge passages to be memorized and recited often with few errors or none. In ancient times there was an entire guild dedicated to memorizing and recounting the ancient stories—the bards—who were learned men and women, steeped in the sagas, and in philosophy, theology, and history. The gospels themselves were memorized and the laity were encouraged to memorize (and understand) large sections of the accounts. The gospels were interior, in the heart of the people, and not exterior in a book.

Let me note one instance of the non-literalist, oral style of biblical interpretation. Certain words were interpreted differently, and numbers were always understood to be allegorical.

In Luke 17, we have the account of Jesus healing the ten lepers—in Greek, δέκα λεπροί. In an alternative interpretation, *leproi* could mean stains or spots, not Hansen’s disease. In an oral tradition, “ten” was always a summary of the “whole” as the “Ten Commandments” are a summary of the 613 commandments. An alternative interpretation of the entire passage is that Jesus walked on the fringes (borders or edges) of the two worlds of Samaria and Galilee. There he met people who were pushed to the fringe of society because they had some “stain,” either visible for all to see—their reputation or on their body, or invisible to everyone except themselves—a humiliating, hidden stain on the soul. In either case, the *lepra* (stain or spot) separated them from their community and exiled them from social engagement with people and spiritual

engagement with God. Jesus wanders into this group, and thus God comes to the place where the world has pushed them out. God in Christ engages them in conversation and sends them with his acceptance back into community, and, along the way, with the courage they gained from Jesus, they were healed. There were “ten” of them—which could mean that they represent all of us who have a stain on our reputation and have felt exiled from community. The Gaels were flabbergasted at literal interpretations which they viewed as destroying the liberating power of the gospel story.

There are many radically different interpretations of the biblical texts that the Celtic people relentlessly analyzed and still dissect for pearls of great price. When the biblical texts are read with this interpretation of numbers, the passages suddenly come alive again with a wonderful infusion of spirit.

There are theological differences to note as well. For example, the concepts of atonement and ascension were almost completely absent among Celts. Jesus died because he was a bearer of the light of God, the light that would bring us home to God, and a light for every man and woman who enters the world. Evil wanted to imprison humanity and extinguish the light that allows us to form relationship with God, with one another, and ourselves as we were created to be. God refuses to allow the light to be extinguished and continually re-lights the light.

At the end of Luke’s Gospel (Luke 24:51), the Greek text does not in all cases mention the ascension: *καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ εὐλογεῖν αὐτὸν αὐτοὺς διέστη ἀπ’ αὐτῶν [καὶ ἀνεφέρετο εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν]*. The words, “And he withdrew from them,” end the passage. In the Celtic mind, Jesus simply withdrew to the shadows but stayed in the room, trusting us to continue God’s work. He would stay with us forever in whatever room we were to gather, wherever two or three are gathered together, and there he would breathe on us, give us direction, cause us to search, to open our minds, to analyze and to explore, but he has never left us. Every time we sit at Table, he sits with us, to commune with us and renew our strength. He comes out of the shadows and manifests himself. He has never left us, nor ascended into some distant ethereal realm beyond our reach.

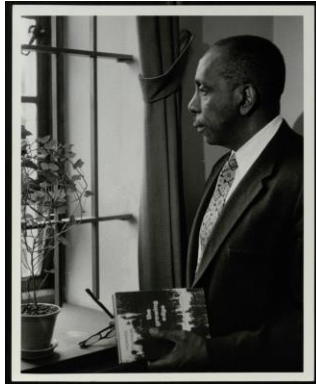
In this century, church life is rapidly evolving. The insights of ancient oral traditions, the different theological understandings of ancient cultures, and the presence of the Spirit who is constantly leading us into new truths, all bring the possibility of renewed life to our congregations if we are brave enough to explore.

*Beannachd leibh.* Blessings be with you all.

## PROFILE

### HOWARD THURMAN: RACIAL JUSTICE PIONEER

by Sarah Azaransky



Howard Thurman (1899-1981) was a leading American intellectual of the twentieth century. He developed liberationist readings of the Christian gospels, organized one of the first interracial churches in the United States, and was in the vanguard of African American religious intellectuals who conceived the theological infrastructure of the period in the Black Freedom Movement that would become known as the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.<sup>1</sup>

Thurman was a teacher, pastor, and theologian, and he is often remembered as a mystic. An abiding commitment to racial justice permeates Thurman's work and writing such that it is possible to take a snapshot of any moment of his life to see how one of the century's great minds wrestled with it. This profile will give a brief overview of Thurman's life and analyze two examples of Thurman's analysis of justice, in his writing and in his preaching.

#### **Boyhood Promise**

Despite being a leading religious thinker of his century, Thurman had a knotty relationship with traditional religion, which he traced to his boyhood. Thurman grew up in Daytona Beach, Florida, where the majority of Black residents, like his grandmother and mother, were

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Dickerson has identified this group of religious intellectuals as devising the theological foundations of what would become the Civil Rights movement. See Dennis Dickerson, "African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement," *Church History* 74, no. 2 (June 2005): 217-235.

formerly enslaved or the children or grandchildren of slaves from nearby cotton plantations. His mother and grandmother were devout Baptists who brought him and his older sister to church each week. Among Thurman's earliest memories are reading the Bible to his grandmother, who refused to hear anything from the Apostle Paul. She explained to young Howard that when she was enslaved, the plantation owner would hire travelling preachers, who quoted Paul about enslaved people being loyal to masters. Thurman's grandmother asserted that she could not countenance Paul.<sup>2</sup> Thurman learned from a young age a critical biblical hermeneutics that prioritized liberation, and rejected readings that seemed to affirm slavery.

Thurman learned complex lessons about Christianity and the role of religion in community life. He grew up in the midst of the church; its rhythms and calendar became a primary thread of his childhood. But sometimes Thurman struggled to find God in the church, which, he felt, had abandoned him when he needed it most—after his father died suddenly. His father was, by Thurman's description, a quiet and thoughtful man, who stayed home on Sundays, preferring to read the newspaper and sit on the porch. His father died suddenly from pneumonia when Howard was still a boy. Since his father had not attended services, local churches refused to conduct the funeral; the family was compelled to employ a travelling minister for the service.

“With wonderment, then anger, then finally mounting rage,” Thurman listened as the evangelist preached his father “into hell,” exploiting the elder Thurman's funeral as his bully pulpit, taking the occasion of Thurman's father's death to preach about the risks of a person not giving his life over to Jesus.<sup>3</sup> Thurman despaired at the cruelty of a pastor who was more eager to make a theological point than to offer succour to his grieving family. He had loved and revered his father; so Thurman wanted nothing to do with a theological framework that denied his father a last rite and damned him to hell. Thurman's father would exemplify for the younger Thurman how moral men can, and often did, exist outside of denominational religion. From an early age, then, Thurman was unsure of the church's authority to do God's will. On the way back from the cemetery, Thurman whispered to himself, “One thing is sure. When I grow up and become a man, I will never have anything to

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), 6.



do with the church.”<sup>4</sup>

Even after he became one of the country’s best-known preachers, Thurman remained faithful to the spirit of his boyhood promise. For the rest of his life, he carried a suspicion of institutional religion and a conviction that dogmas could distance people from the true meaning of religion.<sup>5</sup> But Thurman did believe that God was available throughout the world, coursing through all life. From an early age Thurman perceived religion that arose in the natural world. He recalled nights spent along the dunes where “I found, alone, a special benediction. The ocean and the night surrounded my little life with a reassurance that could not be affronted by the behavior of human beings. The ocean at night gave me a sense of timelessness, of existing beyond the reach of the ebb and flow of circumstances.”<sup>6</sup> His reverence for nature inspired an ethic of “mutual interdependence . . . characteristic of all life” that is evident throughout his writing.<sup>7</sup>

Thurman’s radical religious sensibilities persisted despite conventional academic training as an undergraduate at Morehouse College (1919–23) and Rochester Theological Seminary (1924–26). At Morehouse, Thurman dedicated himself to campus chapters of the YMCA and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a pacifist organization. He continued to be aligned with these organizations for decades to come, and mentored young activists into and through the FOR and the Congress on Racial Equality, which began as a FOR project, including Black Gandhian activists like James Farmer, Bayard Rustin, and Pauli Murray.

Thurman became the Dean of Howard University Chapel and was part of a vanguard of Black religious thinkers in the 1930s and 1940s. He left Howard to co-pastor the Fellowship Church in San Francisco, an intentionally multiracial Christian community. The Fellowship Church became an embodiment of Thurman’s “vision of a beloved community that eschewed racism and abhorred segregation.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>7</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground: An Inquiry into the Basis of Man’s Experience of Community* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Zachery Williams, “Prophets of Black Progress: Benjamin E. Mays and Howard W. Thurman, Pioneering Black Religious Intellectuals,” *Journal of African American Men* 5 (Spring 2001): 29.

Historian of American religion Clarence Hardy observes how “almost two decades before the mass civil rights movement and the social protests against segregation in American life reached their height, Thurman’s desire for cross-cultural and racial worship was partially realized.”<sup>9</sup>

Thurman returned to the East coast to be the Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, and thus became the first Black minister to lead the chapel of a predominantly White university. Thurman was an incredibly popular figure in the University and the larger community; his weekly sermons brought a large congregation to the chapel and were broadcast to an eager radio audience. Thurman’s tenure at BU “confirmed his belief in the power of religious experience to overcome the religious, cultural, class, and racial barriers that militate against community.”<sup>10</sup>

Whether at Howard, at Fellowship Church, or at BU, Thurman’s ministry cultivated religious community in which a seeker could come to know oneself and grow adept at practices that could yield spiritual insight.<sup>11</sup> A person who knows herself, who is in the process of learning about herself and her relationship with God, is able to be in community with other people, what Thurman insisted was the destiny of human beings.<sup>12</sup> Thurman also brought this teaching far and wide. He had particular connections with Canada. Thurman’s primary advisor at

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<sup>9</sup> Clarence E. Hardy III, “‘Imagine a World’: Howard Thurman, Spiritual Perception, and American Calvinism,” *The Journal of Religion* 81, no. 1 (January 2001): 92.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Thurman, *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, eds. Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Thurman greatly admired Quaker theology and practice and began integrating Quaker silence into his ministerial practice at Howard University in the 1930s. Thurman had, in the mid-1920s, studied with Rufus Jones, who was a leading Quaker thinker and a founder of the American Friends Service Committee. Jones exemplified for Thurman the connection between spiritual practice and social action. For more on Thurman and Quakers, see *Black Fire: African American Quakers on Spirituality and Human Rights*, eds. Harold D. Weaver, Paul Kriese, and Stephen W. Angell (Philadelphia: Quaker Press, 2011), 63-95.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders since 1940* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 48-49. See also Gary Dorrien, “True Religion, Mystical Unity, and the Disinherited: Howard Thurman and the Black Social Gospel,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 39, no. 1 (January 2018): 98.

Rochester Seminary was George Cross, a Canadian and graduate of the University of Toronto and McMaster University, before receiving his PhD at the University of Chicago. Thurman visited Canada on a number of speaking engagements. The Student Christian Movement invited him to lecture in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in January and February in 1937; the SCM invited him that summer for a series of lectures at their retreat centre near Orillia, Ontario. When he led the Fellowship Church, he spoke for a number of times at the Naramata Centre, in British Columbia.<sup>13</sup> Through the rest of Thurman's career, he spoke a number of times in Montreal and Toronto, as well as at the Five Oaks Retreat Centre, near Paris, ON, in November 1956.<sup>14</sup>

### **To those whose backs are against the wall**

Howard Thurman had been marked as a theological prodigy early on. Beginning in the mid-20s, he kept a punishing schedule of talks about race relations all over the country. In part because of his renown, he was invited to lead a so-called Negro delegation on a "Pilgrimage of Friendship" to South Asia, which was sponsored by the YMCA.

Thurman was thrilled by the chance to go to India. He had been following Gandhi's efforts in the Indian independence movement; he and colleagues at Howard's School of Religion were convinced that how the Indian independence movement was using religion could be a model for an American racial justice movement. Thurman and the delegation went all over the subcontinent. For five months, from November 1935 through March 1936, they travelled the length and breadth of what is now Sri Lanka, Burma, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Throughout, Thurman lectured about American politics, history, and religion.<sup>15</sup>

Near the end of the trip, Thurman met Gandhi. Thurman was well-prepared for the meeting and was eager to ask Gandhi about tactics that African Americans could use in a racial justice movement at home. But Gandhi had his own pressing questions: How could Thurman be a

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<sup>13</sup> Email to author from Peter Eisenstadt, historian, editor of each volume of Thurman's papers, invaluable resource for details about Thurman's life, and author of a forthcoming biography of Howard Thurman.

<sup>14</sup> Howard Thurman Chronology, the Boston University Howard Thurman Papers Project, available at <https://www.bu.edu/http/howard-thurman-chronology/>.

<sup>15</sup> For a thorough account of the Delegation's trip and its religious significance, see Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman's Pilgrimage to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011).

Christian when Christianity was associated with segregation and colonialism the world over? Why wasn't Thurman a Muslim instead, for Islam insists there is no colour line?<sup>16</sup> The question of why he was Christian struck Thurman forcefully, in part because this was not the first time he had been asked. The exchange that had the greatest effect on him came early in the trip, when he was giving a lecture in Colombo, at the law school. He wrote about this particular exchange a number of times, including in the first chapter of *Jesus and the Disinherited*. In this account, Thurman explains how he gave a lecture on "civil disabilities under states' rights in the United States," after which the dean of the school, a law professor, engaged him in the discussion period. To preface his question, the Dean offered a detailed account of American racial history, from enslavement to emancipation to Jim Crow. Only after expounding on this history, did the dean ask: "I am a Hindu, I do not understand. Here you are in my country, standing deep within the Christian faith and tradition. I do not wish to seem to be rude to you. But, sir, I think you are a traitor to all the darker peoples of the earth. I am wondering what you, an intelligent man, can say in defense of your position."<sup>17</sup>

*Jesus and the Disinherited* set out to answer the law professor's probing question: how can Thurman call himself a Christian and not be a traitor? To answer, Thurman did what any good theologian should do—he started by re-reading the gospels, and, when he did, Thurman saw what he always knew, but saw it in a new way: that Jesus was a poor Jew who lived in Palestine under Roman occupation without citizenship status.

In the book's first pages, Thurman spells out clearly that the audience for *Jesus and the Disinherited* is those whose "backs are against the wall."<sup>18</sup> Christianity has not been useful for the disinherited; it has not necessarily affirmed their dignity, nor has it been a source of strength. Instead of treating the disinherited as the object of Christian charity, Thurman wanted to treat them as the subjects of the religion of Jesus. Herein lies an important distinction for Thurman between Christianity, a religious tradition with a history of discrimination and injustice, and the religion of Jesus, the core teaching of Jesus recorded in the gospels. More interested in the latter, Thurman investigated how Jesus' message could speak to the disinherited.

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<sup>16</sup> Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 132.

<sup>17</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Thurman used the Christian story to analyze contemporary American politics. In texts about the first century, Thurman perceived an existential and political crisis similar to that which Black Americans suffered under Jim Crow. Thurman wrote; “the striking similarity between the social position of Jesus in Palestine and that of the vast majority of American Negroes is obvious to anyone who tarries long over the facts.”<sup>19</sup> Thurman’s radical message was that Jesus had suffered indignities similar to those endured by Black Americans. Instead of justifying oppressive racial politics, the Bible offers strategies to resist imperialism, racism, and injustice. By lifting up Jesus’s resistance against Roman occupation, Thurman showed how the religion of Jesus could provide techniques for confronting Jim Crow. Thurman prioritized concrete, practical action—repeatedly he emphasized that the gospels depict people not merely having their hearts changed, but taking action. He wrote: “There cannot be too great insistence on the point that we are here dealing with a discipline, a method, a technique, as over against some form of wishful thinking or simple desiring.”<sup>20</sup>

*Jesus and the Disinherited* was a theological argument about the meaning of Jesus for the rejected and oppressed. But it was also a proposal for interracial cooperation. The book developed a moral framework for relationships between Black and White Americans and considered standards of just community. Thurman deployed a variety of sources and methods to make his argument: he used historical criticism, he appealed to his grandmother’s experiences of enslavement, and he called on accounts of anticolonial activism from around the world.

The book also contains lessons from Gandhi’s movement in India. It referred to Gandhi by name just once; Thurman quoted a letter between Gandhi and an activist whom Gandhi advises to speak the truth, no matter the consequences. But more than this singular reference, the book contains Gandhi’s teaching in an elemental, if perhaps less obvious, way. The book has Gandhian bones. Its table of contents reflected Gandhi’s program: the middle chapters are entitled “Fear,” “Deception,” and “Hate.” These are antitheses of what Gandhi described as cardinal principles of nonviolence—fearlessness, truth, and love. Thurman’s final chapter is love. Thurman employed Gandhi’s terms in his own theological construction, to demonstrate, in the first three instances, what Jesus overcame, and then what Jesus promises. In other words, Thurman’s signal contribution to Christian theology relied on a Gandhian

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 101.

outlook that drew on Hinduism, among other moral traditions.

This book grew in importance when it became a primary text of the later movement. People who travelled with King said that he took two books with him almost everywhere.<sup>21</sup> One was, of course, the Bible. The other was *Jesus and the Disinherited*. King carried with him this book that emerged, in part, out of Thurman's international travel and the very direct challenge to see his religious tradition in a new light. Thurman outlined fearlessness, reverence for personality, and the way to free White people from what he called our "White necessity." King's activism and his great intellectual contributions to democratic theory and Christian theology were based upon Thurman's work.<sup>22</sup>

### **To those who live under God's judgment**

Thurman addresses *Jesus and the Disinherited* to those whose "backs are against the wall," the marginalized and oppressed of every age. The book revealed how the religion of Jesus could sustain Black Americans in their work for racial justice. Throughout his career, Thurman also addressed those who were not marginalized or oppressed; he addressed those who we might identify as among the oppressor class. Thurman managed to navigate a fine line between believing in the capacity of individuals to act justly, while also recognizing how social structures—including racial identity—curtailed people's moral imagination about justice.

Though Thurman was deeply committed to racial integration, he was not naïve about how White racism worked against it at every turn. Sometimes, he noted, White people trick themselves into thinking they are committed to justice, when in fact they are doing very little to change social structures and practices that keep their lives comfortable and familiar. In a 1929 article about pacifism, Thurman noted, "It is a very simple matter for people who form the dominant group in a society to develop what they call a philosophy of pacifism that makes few, if any, demands upon their ethical obligations to minority groups with which they may be having contacts."<sup>23</sup>

As the first Black minister of the chapel of a predominately White university, Thurman was charged with preaching to a congregation whose backs were *not* against the wall. In many sermons given at Marsh

<sup>21</sup> Vincent Harding, "Foreword," *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 100.

<sup>23</sup> *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman, Volume I: My People Need Me, June 1918—March 1936*, ed. Walter Earl Fluker et al. (University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 145.

Chapel of Boston University, Thurman noted the capacity of people to orient their lives to God, while noting that, in the main, Americans tend to choose comfort and wealth over justice. One example is his sermon “The Message of Amos,” delivered in May 1952 as part of a series on the “religion of the prophets,” in which Thurman emphasized three interrelated lessons: the connection between self-consciousness and moral responsibility; how wealth and security affect a community’s moral formation; and the imperative of social responsibility.<sup>24</sup>

Thurman’s sermon focused on the identity of Amos as a shepherd. Unlike his neighbours who were farmers, Amos was not tied to a particular plot of land. As an individual, free of ties to family or clan, the prophet was able to develop self-consciousness. Thurman underscored his conviction that a person has to become self-conscious before she can be aware of injustice to herself. Without self-awareness, he said, I cannot be aware of what is happening to me as an individual. Thurman regarded a sense of a personhood and individuality as the bed rock of moral responsibility.

Here, as throughout his career, Thurman emphasized that a person’s capacity for individual spiritual practice and discernment prepares her to engage with her community.<sup>25</sup> Thurman stressed that “it’s not unreasonable that a shepherd, who has a primary and sustained exposure to the stars would begin to feel that he is directly related, that all of life, that all living things, that all the vastness of the universe is under one comprehensive judgment of a universal god.”<sup>26</sup> This is a

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<sup>24</sup> Hundreds of recordings of Thurman’s sermons are available to the public through a “virtual listening room” hosted by The Howard Thurman and Sue Bailey Thurman Collections at Boston University, <http://archives.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room>.

Included are sermons from 1951 through 1980, organized by date, series (e.g. “the creative encounter,” “parables of Jesus,” and “a faith to live by”), and searchable by keyword. In short, they are a homiletic treasure trove, thirty years of recordings of one of the century’s best preachers. Certainly, recordings can’t tap the energy among congregants in the Chapel, but they do capture Thurman’s tone, the cadence of his voice, at times playful, at times chilling and forbidding.

<sup>25</sup> Thurman often connected work for social change with a “spiritual maturity” and religious practices that could cultivate “a central stillness of the spirit that is so vital that it can tame the wildness out of almost any tempest,” as quoted in *Black Fire*, 65.

<sup>26</sup> This and subsequent references to “Religion of the Prophets: The Message of Amos,” preached on 25 May 1952, available at

glimpse of Thurman as nature mystic—reminding his congregation of the rich insight a person can gain through communing with nature.

In this case, Amos came to understand Israel's unique position in relationship to God's judgment. While all nations are under the judgment of God, only Israel had the capacity to know this and to understand its moral significance. "And that knowledge," concluded Thurman, "gives to Israel a sense of responsibility; it should give to Israel a sense of responsibility that may not be present in the other nations." Emerging in the prophecy of Amos, insisted Thurman, is the insight that a person's moral responsibility is somehow tied to the exposure she has to the truth.

Yet, wealth and security may inure people to perceiving God's judgment. Amos reported that in ancient Israel people became wealthy through cheating—they put extra weight on the scales—as they neglected worshipping God and even wondered "when will the Sabbath be over so we can sell our grain?" Thurman noted "that it is so easy for people who are religious, or for people who are secure in the pattern of their culture or their nation or their society, to feel that because of the favorable position in which they are located at a particular time interval in history that the things, the judgments that apply to people who are not as favorably located do not apply to them."

In 1952, Thurman preached that Americans should not feel that their growing security, that their growing wealth, is a sign of God's favour. On the contrary, "God holds you responsible and you can't escape that responsibility, either in fear or in nationalism, or any kind of arrogance or pride or might, majesty, strength or wisdom, you can't escape that responsibility." Thurman's lesson on Amos did not address racial justice directly; rather it laid a ground work for what each member of the congregation would have to discern and do for racial justice to be possible. You have to be conscious of yourself, Thurman asserted, before you can be aware of injustice. Thurman entreated his congregants to become aware of themselves and of their place in the work for any kind of justice to be possible.

Thurman's religious leadership prioritized racial justice, and his writings and sermons continue to "reward careful scrutiny."<sup>27</sup> For Christians in the early twenty-first century, Thurman challenges us to undertake liberative readings of the gospels and to find ways of being church that aspire to what Thurman called the religion of Jesus.

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<http://archives.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room/detail?id=343569> and transcribed by the author.

<sup>27</sup> Fluker and Tumber, *A Strange Freedom*, 2.



## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Speaking Church: A New Vision for the Sub/Urban Congregation*

I. Ross Bartlett. Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018. Pp. viii +125.

Bartlett claims that this text is, at its core, a “study of how we think and talk about—and subsequently live out—sub/urban ministry” (3). This is a useful endeavour because “the sub/urban ministry is often unsure about its calling” (4). To that end, this book makes much of language, metaphor, and imagery in order to bolster the arguments.

The most obvious assumption in this text is the idea that rural and sub/urban congregations have very real and tangible differences, such that a text devoted to sub/urban ministry would be distinct from a general or rural-oriented text. The other primary assumption is that language—in particular the images we use to talk about ministry and congregations—is important (3).

The opening chapters of this text are heavy on theory, ensuring that the reader is thoroughly grounded in the present-day realities in which many sub/urban churches find themselves living (9) and in the language and metaphors available to the sub/urban church (25), and highlighting the displacement that the mainline Protestant churches have experienced in North American society as a whole (50). Arguably, the meat of this book can be found in the fourth chapter which engages with the biblical text of Revelation, specifically the letters to the seven churches in chapters two and three. These case studies provide a fruitful analysis of some of the challenges faced by sub/urban churches, both historically and in the present day. In the fifth and final chapter, Bartlett lays out his vision for what a faithful sub/urban congregation might look like (112-115). An additional feature of this text is that at the end of each chapter there are helpful questions for reflection and discussion.

Bartlett begins his first chapter with a question that will be revised and revisited a number of times throughout the book: “When you read the word ‘church’ what comes to mind?” (8) For Bartlett, the role of the church in society, and particularly in the sub/urban setting, has changed. The church, at least the mainline Protestant North American church, he argues, is not in exile, nor is it sojourning. Instead, it has become displaced (16). As such, new/old ways of looking at and speaking about church are needed. Bartlett identifies a need to revisit hymns and metaphors.

Moving on from language, Bartlett next considers secularization (48) and contextual theology (51). Secularization, Bartlett argues, is one of the reasons the church has been displaced in our society (50). As a

result of this secularization, there is a need for contextual theology particularly among sub/urban churches. This is distinct from classical theology, which “understood its subject as an objective reality” (52).

We then come to the heart of this book, which is a detailed look at the letters to the seven churches of Revelation. In each of these short letters to the churches, one can find material ready for analysis, and Bartlett makes good work of each piece, considering the context and the details of the church in question before moving on to observations.

In summary, Bartlett lays out a vision for the sub/urban church and how it can reach the city in which it abides and to which it seeks to minister. A faithful sub/urban congregation would be contextual, communal, contextually aware, cooperative, open and outward, focused on metaphor and story rather than argument, and it would deal with displacement (112-118). Bartlett is clear that there is a role for the church in a sub/urban setting, playing a role in creating welcoming communities, speaking the truth, advocating the gospel response, engaging with “collaborative justice-seeking and truth-stating work with other groups” (120), and being committed to hearing the voice of God in the cries of the oppressed (129-130).

Overall, this text struggles to keep its centre. At one point it focuses extensively on language and metaphor, at another it considers theologies of exile and displacement, and at yet another it engages in Bible study. This makes for a somewhat uneven narrative. Nevertheless, the discussion is eventually brought back to the sub/urban church and sub/urban ministry and the concerns, challenges, and strengths thereof.

If you serve or are an active part of any congregation, but particularly one situated in close proximity to an urban area, there is something of value to be found here. Bartlett is thorough in his exploration of images and metaphors for church, and his scriptural analysis is accessible and concise. Furthermore, the vision that Bartlett lays out would be of value to many congregations, sub/urban or otherwise.

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***Church in Ordinary Time: A Wisdom Ecclesiology***  
**Amy Plantinga Pauw. Eerdmans, 2017. Pp. 188.**

In this book, Amy Pauw, a Presbyterian theological seminary professor, contributes fresh and insightful discussions to a theological understanding of the church (ecclesiology) for today. She draws on sources and guidance from the Wisdom literature of the Bible, the doctrine of creation, the Reformed tradition, and theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

“Ordinary-time Wisdom ecclesiology,” as the author calls it, begins with acknowledging that God is the Creator and the church is a creature, and that there is stark radical “asymmetry of the Creator-creature relationship” (25). The church does not take its place above the world or somewhere between God and the world to mediate God’s grace to the rest of creation. Pauw is critical of any tendency to blur or soften this essential distinction between God and creation, such as the traditional ecclesiology that puts emphasis on the concept of “the invisible church” as holy and separate from the world, or the contemporary Process theology that suggests an ontological reciprocity and interdependence of God and church. Wisdom ecclesiology embraces the church’s creaturely identity, not as a passive or negative aspect, but as foundational to a theological understanding of church. “As creature, church is graced with its own integrity and capacity for action. Its receptivity to and dependence on God is not passive. Its agency is not displaced by God’s . . . What God creates and delights in is finite creation—mortal, vulnerable to injury and harm—in short, radically contingent. It is this creation that God values and calls good” (26-27).

The concept of the church’s creaturehood also has implications for our understanding of the church’s relationship with, and ministry to, the world. Sharing with other creatures the vulnerability and limitations of creaturehood, the church exists in solidarity and interdependence with the world and is not “above” or “for” it. The church is not called to its ministry for the world because its own redemption is complete and can now be extended to others (135). It shares with a sinful and suffering world a need of redemption. As Christians serve others in the world they are to bestow the same blessing on the world that they yearn for themselves, that is, “to be called back to God and renewed” (136).

What is the church, then? The author invokes the biblical metaphor of “this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7) to answer. This metaphor has a two-fold meaning and tension: “The Church is *earthen*—of the stuff of natural and historical life. The church is a *vessel*; it is

useful” (82). The church is a “trustee” of God’s universal vision and good news for all creatures, and thus conserves and embodies the treasure through its earthen character (not in spite of it) and the ordinary tasks of worship, sacrament, education, mission, and social service (83). Within a wisdom ecclesiology, church life is a school of training in wisdom (15). Here, learning is a lifelong process involving the ongoing rhythms of creaturely experience and the cyclical dimensions of the Spirit’s work (106). Those rhythms and dimensions are addressed in the later chapters which correspond to the liturgical seasons of the church year beginning with ordinary time. Each chapter provides fresh insight for church life: “Making New and Making Do” (ordinary time), “Longing” (Advent), “Giving” (Christmas), “Suffering” (Lent), “Rejoicing” (Easter), and “Joining Hands” (Pentecost).

For example, wisdom ecclesiology helps Christians understand “suffering” (Lent) as a tragic dimension of creaturely life. Suffering is not only the consequence of our sins but also a result of our creaturely limitations and vulnerability. “Some of the most damaging Christian theology has come from attempts to confine all suffering within the orbit of sin and redemption . . . Suffering often simply happens to us, a mark of our vulnerability and incompleteness as creatures” (136). In the face of the suffering and injustice of creaturely life, our faithful response can take the forms of repentance, of lament, and of work for justice and healing. Our response is grounded by trust in Christ’s merciful presence in our continuing reality of failure and suffering.

In conclusion, the author highlights, with Bonhoeffer, the concept of “polyphony”: “the harmonies arise from the complex interplay of different voices” (161) in the Christian life. The church is called to live in many different dimensions at the same time—creation and redemption, giving and rejoicing, and making do and joining hands—as its multidimensional life becomes part of a larger creaturely polyphony singing God’s love for the whole world.

This book is highly commendable—for ministers, lay leaders, theologians, and seminary students who seek a fresh and rich understanding of the church and its ministry relevant to our ordinary life on earth. The readers will be inspired by intriguing perspectives on the church’s life drawn from Christian traditions.

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*Christ the Heart of Creation*

Rowan Williams. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. Pp. xvi + 279.

Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury and one of the most significant theologians in the English-speaking world, has written a formidable book. Its chief aim is to offer greater clarity about how the church's language about Christ functions and "why it is credible" (xi). This deeper examination of confessional language, Williams claims, also illumines the relation between God and creation. He thus offers a brilliant synthesis of historical and constructive theology, steering between extremes of accepting traditions for tradition's sake and rejecting them as relics of antiquated thinking.

The church's traditions teach us that the central claim about Christ—that he is fully human and fully divine—portrays a non-competitive relation between God and creation. Many attempts to decipher the Nicene-Chalcedonian consensus invariably resort to competitive relations (such as "how" the divine can indwell a human person). Williams counters such attempts by beginning his study with an exploration of the fluid New Testament imagery for Christ. Within a few sentences Paul can move from talking about Jesus' actions at the Last Supper to cosmic imagery of Christ as the head of a body and believers being "in" Christ. The church's earliest language about Jesus thus expands our understanding of personal agency so that believers might also claim correspondence between Christ's activity and their own (53).

According to Williams, the church's first debates about Christ's nature represented attempts to describe Christ's present activity in the church and "develop a language for identity, individual and generic" (68). These debates were not, in short, the result of alien philosophical categories being added to the gospel. Incarnational language offered not a puzzle to be solved, but a statement about God's relationship to the world. Central to Williams' argument is the *way* in which God is revealed in Jesus:

The suffering that the Word takes to itself in the Incarnation is the absolutely specific pain of Jesus and, consequently, the specific human pain of all those for whom the Word in Jesus speaks. It is not an unimaginable "divine" suffering but yours and mine in their historic particularity (92).

What is scandalous about the incarnation, in other words, is not that God is revealed in a human life, but in *this kind* of human life: a servant who experiences rejection, humiliation, and death. Maximus the Confessor emerges as an important interlocutor in this discussion: as Jesus lives a

finite human life, he shows us that the human vocation is not to become like God, but to live *as* human and finite (108).

Williams claims that some of the riches of the church's confession about Jesus began to disappear with the rise of nominalism and the onset of Reformation. But he observes that Calvin offered a different voice, upholding some of the Catholic tradition in fresh idiom: "Through the Incarnation, humanity becomes *human* in the way God always intended—which is indeed to become united with the divine nature by adoptive filiation" (154). Christ comes so that we might, *as humans*, live out of the fullness of God's gift to the world. Bonhoeffer expresses the heart of this wisdom for a world come of age by focusing not on the "how" of the incarnation, but on the "who" of Jesus. In his work we see a reclamation of the image of *kenosis*, how Christ enfleshes "a humanity that entails solidarity not simply with humanity in general but with the most powerless" (189). To live in Christ is to embrace our finitude and stand in solidarity with the most vulnerable, "to risk what the other risks" (207).

The church's confession of Christ thus shows us the shape of creation's flourishing, where "finite love and intelligence are in accord with the uncreated love and intelligence that the Word externally exercises" (223). Jesus shows us the true relationship of creature to the Creator. For Williams, the paradox of the incarnation is not that the divine and the human exist simultaneously in Jesus, but that "only the Creator can exhibit fully what it is to be a creature" (239).

Williams' writing is dense: many paragraphs require repeated readings and he assumes that readers have more than a cursory familiarity with major figures in the history of theology. It is open for debate whether the coherence of the church's speech about Christ is a significant pastoral or theological issue. But for readers who have the patience to wade through this book, the result will be a rewarding discovery of how the church's language about Jesus came to exist and how it can continue to foster human and ecological flourishing in a broken world.

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***This Worldwide Struggle; Religion and the International Roots of the Civil Rights Movement***

**Sarah Azaransky. Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. 281.**

Many Christians struggle with the relationship of their religion to the state, especially the state's colonizing or imperial tendencies. Canadian Christians were once again brought face to face with the shameful history of this relationship through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Many nations share the same, tragic conundrum of a majority of their citizens claiming Christ as their Saviour while practising, or tolerating, unChrist-like behaviour toward minorities.

Sarah Azaransky paints a vivid picture of how a group of Black theologians responded to the legacy of the slave trade in one of those countries, the United States, beginning in the 1920s. She provides the family background, educational path, and theological insights of women and men who set the stage for the American Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Slavery persisted in the American Colonies and the new republic for two and a half centuries until the 1863 Emancipation Declaration during the American Civil War. After the war there was a brief period of full rights for former slaves, and the development of organizations and institutions devoted to their wellbeing.

Two such institutions, founded in 1867, were Howard University, set up in Georgetown, a neighbourhood in Washington, DC, and Morehouse College in Atlanta. Although the window of equality for African-Americans slammed shut less than a generation after the Civil War with the adoption of so-called Jim Crow laws across the South, both schools endured and grew, graduating academics, ministers, and civic leaders. Because gifted Black scholars could not get academic positions at White universities, these schools gradually became the intellectual homes of an astonishing collection of innovative scholars. They set about challenging both the governmental support for segregation, and the dominant religious thought that justified white privilege and racist policy.

Azaransky brings us Howard Thurman and Sue Bailey Thurman, Benjamin Mays, Juliette Derricotte, Celestine Smith, William Stuart Nelson, Pauli Murray and James Farmer. She follows some of them to India and Europe, where they meet Gandhi, Nehru, and many others, both formally and informally, and find their assumptions tested, and their insights sharpened. She also brings us the myriad organizations that enabled Black theologians to travel the globe, and then helped them disseminate their thinking upon returning to the United States: the YM and YWCA, the Congress of Racial Equality, the National Council of

Negro Women, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Black theologians used their in-depth investigation of anti-colonial movements in India, South Africa, and elsewhere to hone their critique of the hypocrisy of American churches and society. The churches espoused ideals of love, respect, and dignity; the nation was founded on values of freedom and equality; yet both church and state fell far short of those aspirations in practice—with strict segregation in almost all churches; lynching; voter suppression all over the South, depriving Black citizens of their franchise; and other kinds of oppression. Their glaring failure led to discrimination, suffering, violence and death for Black Americans—societal ills that continue to the present day.

Black activists also raised issues of discrimination within and by the Black community. Pauli Murray pointed out that the Black liberationist movement was sexist, failing to take seriously the oppression, ideas, and leadership of women like herself. In 1955, for instance, Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King, Jr. were reluctant to acknowledge the leadership of women activists in the Montgomery bus strike, the action that launched the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s. Benjamin Mays challenged the anti-semitism of many Black churches of his day. He and Murray believed that the claims of African Americans to equality were undermined by such injustices.

Azaransky's book is both an inspiration and a caution to those interested in the ongoing struggle for justice anywhere—economic, racial, gender, or environmental. Her exploration of her subjects' early lives gives the reader a way to connect with their own sources of spiritual, religious and moral energy, stamina, and courage. Her depiction of the huge network of connections and relationships across cities, countries, and continents reminds activists of the important need for solidarity, humility, and communication with allies. In Canada in the twenty-first century, many people of faith seek ways to be Treaty people in the fullest sense, seekers of a more just sharing of the world's resources, activists for equality between men, women and the LGBTQ+ community, and champions of a sustainable economy. *This Worldwide Struggle* would be an excellent resource for a congregational book club wanting a deep dive into ways and means to answer the call to all Christians to seek justice and resist evil.

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