

# Christian Ethics Today

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# Not Waiting for the “Bye and Bye”

By Patrick Anderson, editor

*Tempted and tried, we're oft made to wonder, how  
it could be thus all the day long,  
While there are others living around us, never  
molested, tho' in the wrong.  
Farther along we'll know all about it; farther  
along we'll understand why.  
Cheer up my brother; live in the sunshine.  
We'll understand it all bye and bye.*

When Foy Valentine created this journal in 1995, he stated the mission of *Christian Ethics Today* as an effort to provide laypersons, educators, and ministers (That's all of us, I think!) with a resource that would help us ***understand and respond in a faithful Christian manner to moral and ethical issues that are of concern to contemporary Christians, to the church, and to society.*** Foy did not deem it necessary to enumerate the moral and ethical issues he thought to be important, wisely placing no limitation to the editorial imagination of subsequent editors, first Joe Trull and now me.

The moral and ethical issues have remained painfully persistent: hunger, race, poverty, injustice and economic disparity, to name just a few. The addition of issues related to global climate change and human sexuality have given added relevance and mutability of the old issues. Both Foy and Joe had to first describe the evidence of injustice, overcome denials and justifications for it, and then explain it to often unbelieving readers.

The lie has been put to official reports of heretofore deniable injustices thanks to cellphone-camera-holding witnesses, scientific evidence, and skilled journalists. We have actually *seen* the killing of Ahmoud Arbery by a white father and son who felt so entitled in their whiteness to take their shotgun and pickup truck and chase down a black man jogging through their neighborhood, a scene that echos slave patrols and lynch mob violence often denied in official history. We have seen the insufferable pleading (“Please, I can’t breathe!”) while a Minneapolis policeman pressed his full weight on the neck of George Floyd, killing him while fellow officers stood idly by and civilian bystanders begged for release of the captive. We cannot escape the scope of COVID-19’s carnage and the

ignored suffering of nursing home residents, dark-skinned people chronically bereft of medical care, and the happy talk of feckless political nincompoops.

Like Sisyphus, we keep pushing those stones up the hill. And while never quite getting over the top of the steep hill, we do not flinch away from those intractable matters. Foy added the word “today” to the title and the word “contemporary” to the concerns he sought to address. Those two words imply our attention to immediate issues then and now; but the issues in 1995 have proven to be unrelenting while the specifics of the particular issues unfold day-by-day.

So it is that in this journal in 2020, we address a new

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issue—the COVID-19 pandemic—and an old issue—racial bigotry—now correctly understood as white supremacy. The essays herein are strong statements penned by black and white writers regarding the moral and ethical issues of race and deadly human-transmitted disease.

May we all understand better and respond appropriately, not waiting for the clarity promised to us in the bye and bye. ■

# W.E.B. Du Bois' "General Strike" is Elevated, Changing Our Narrative

By Joseph Evans

“The plan to induce the blacks [slaves] to make a simultaneous movement of rising, on the night of the 1st of August next, over the entire States in rebellion to arm themselves with any and every kind of weapon that may come to hand, and commence operations by burning all the railroad and country bridges, and tear up railroad tracks, and to destroy telegraph lines, etc., then take to the woods, swamps, or the mountains, where they may emerge as occasion may offer for provisions and for further depredations. No blood is to be shed except in self-defense. The corn will be ripe about the 1st of August and with this and hogs running in the woods, and a foraging upon the plantations by night, they can subsist. This is the plan of substance, and if we can obtain a concerted movement at the time named it will doubtless be successful.”

These words that appear above describe what is known as a “general strike.” In short, this is the propositional argument of a seminal chapter entitled, the “General Strike” which is a part of W.E. B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction in America* (Harcourt and Brace, 1935). In *The Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois masterfully offers a corrective and an alternative narrative to that of the establishment. The Du Boisian narrative underscores the heroic and she-roic roles performed by the antebellum bondsmen and women. His narrative places them at the center of their own emancipation from slavery. This lies at the taproot of the Du Boisian prophetic tradition—a tradition that demands a courageous revision of history; a revisionist history that Du Bois’s distractors had characterized as subversive and controversial to the establishment’s narrative. In actual fact, *Black Reconstruction* is Du Bois’s magisterial work.

One reviewer makes clear what Du Bois accomplishes in his narrative. The reviewer writes, “By far, *Black Reconstruction*’s greatest achievement was to weave a credible historical narrative in which black people, suddenly admitted to citizenship in an environment of feral hostility, displayed admirable volition and intel-

ligence, as well as the indolence and ignorance inherent in three centuries of bondage.” It is the latter part of the reviewer’s comments that Du Bois seemingly anticipates. “The General Strike” then begins with the following words:

“How the Civil War meant emancipation and how the black worker won the war by a general strike which transferred his labor from the Confederate planter to the Northern invader, in whose army lines workers began to be organized as a new labor force.”

We notice immediately that Du Bois avoids the descriptor “slave.” Instead, Du Bois employs a different descriptor, namely “the worker.” This description

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of the humanity of the worker is an ingenious attempt to resist the white supremacist’s claim that the worker was a passive bystander to her and his circumstances. Secondly, Du Bois makes clear that the worker was aware – keenly aware of class distinctions among white class-strata. Whites however were able to hide their class-strata in America due in large part to the presence of the black and blue workers. The workers became a convenient trope – a metaphor that pointed toward a sub-species of humanity.

This was used to perpetuate the invention of the white skin privilege mythology. The myth of white supremacy then provided the immoral space to impose slavery upon blacks, slavery demonstrated by quarantining, justifying and recasting people of African

descent as chattel. We notice that Du Bois launches a frontal attack upon the limitations of Marxist theory's disregard of racism. This absence of the role of racism in the economic inequities in society was a blind spot for Karl Marx. He neglected to acknowledge the pain experienced and endured by people of color. Black people especially were the baneful trope, a metaphor, and an object of derision and misguided hatred which finds personified results in the shameful practice of American slavery.

Instead, Karl Marx's theories point toward inequality and inequity among the European workers and the European industrialists. This clash defines the ongoing economic and class wars between capitalists and laborites. In this rendering, people of African descent could not be placed in a Eurocentric ideological box. Yet such an imagined box was created to suggest that Du Bois and other advocates of black liberation were informed by Marxist theory and practice. Of course, this is hegemonic to suggest that there are no other identifiable methods available to approach such subjects.

We claim that there are new obstacles and opportunities that anachronistic Eurocentric claims, categories, and classifications can no longer be seen as accurate perspectives upon which to produce equitable solutions for black inequality. We need different philosophical points of departure for current obstacles and opportunities. Du Bois's Black Reconstruction narrative seems to be a current philosophical point of departure because it underlines innovative solutions. His model follows a black liberation motif. What follows are only a few examples that parallel the Du Boisian model.

First, on Saturday, November 2, 2015, the Missouri University football team announced that it would no longer participate in football activities until Tim Wolfe resigned or was removed from his office of the university president. On the campus in 2015, there was an obvious rise in "Trumpian" white nationalism. It was apparent that the University of Missouri's administration officials would not respond to this anachronism – this nostalgic, romanticism of the failed cause. The administration's silence gave a silent signal of approval. Shortly after a new university dormitory was erected and dedicated, feces was put atop it and a swastika was carved into the new dormitory wall. Like a steaming cauldron, this unaddressed white nationalistic action tipped over into an anti-white nationalist protest.

Indeed, there was socio-psychological tenseness on the university campus that led to the football team's decision to organize a "General Strike." The athletes, informed by their awareness of the teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr., presented their reasons for not

participating in a university function with a familiar quote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" . . . and they continued, "until President Wolfe resigns or is removed due to his negligence toward marginalized students' experiences, we are united."

The university did respond! President Tim Wolfe was forced to resign. The "General Strike," succeeded and the prospect of the potential economic shortfall played a significant role.

Indeed, the potential economic shortfall was the sole reason that the president resigned. The threat of the university's football team to strike was successful because the boycott (The General Strike) demonstrated that major university athletes are in position to generate economic windfalls for the university. If the team forfeits games due to boycotts, the university would remain obligated to pay the athletic department of the scheduled visiting team. In this instance, Brigham Young University would have received \$1 million, a boon gained without its players risking injuries. What is more, the University of Missouri competes in the ro-

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bust Southeastern Conference. What if the University of Missouri's "General Strike" were duplicated across the entire Southeastern Conference in all athletic competitions? What would be the economic impact and resulting social change?

This model however was not followed by the National Basketball Association's Los Angeles Clippers as its players faced similar issues involving racism. In April 2014, Donald Sterling, the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, was banned from the NBA for life and fined \$2.5 million by the league after private recordings of him making racist comments were made public. On April 27, 2014, Sterling made racist comments that affirmed what many knew concerning his racist values. But it was the league and its administrators who took the corrective action to ban and fine the owner, not the players.

Many people see the NBA players simply as caricatures. Many see the predominantly black players as minstrels with basketballs. The Clippers, however,

should have gone on to direct the “General Strike.” Of course, they did not, instead conducting a kind of “work slowdown.” As one former player employed by a sports network said, when describing the apparent lack of effort by the Clippers during an important playoff game against the Golden State Warriors:

“Guys [the Clippers] were slow on the defensive rotations. To the trained eye, there was a lot of stuff out there you could see. Trust me, they played, but they really didn’t.”

Although this was an indirect action, we claim that it was a hybrid of the Du Boisian “General Strike” but it was not as bold or courageous, and certainly not like that of the University of Missouri football team and not like that of Colin Kaepernick.

Kaepernick, the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback, who last started a game in 2016, had been kneeling during the pre-game singing of the United States national anthem. At the time, several well-known incidences of apparent wrongful deadly police shootings of young black men were a major issue in urban America. In those cases, the police officers were placed on paid leave while the families of the victims suffered unspeakable loss. Kaepernick, the quarterback, said that he knelt because,

“I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color... To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid to leave and getting away with murder.”

Kaepernick did not kneel because he opposed the actions of American armed forces abroad, as was claimed by predominantly white critics. This interpretation of Kaepernick’s act of kneeling during the national anthem was a ruse to draw attention from the potential “General Strike” power that could be employed to awaken people to the prevalence of racial inequality and inequity. Imagine what would have happened if many or all NFL players made similar gestures to call attention to the use of deadly force by police. Such action would pose a very serious threat to the NFL’s corporate empire. The fact that the league threatened players and discouraged any continued social resistance, while also essentially ending Kaepernick’s promising career, demonstrated the racism which continues to exist at the highest corporate levels of commerce in the country.

The presence of black athletes in the NFL is far more prevalent than the percentage of blacks in American society would predict. But the major source of revenue to the corporate NFL comes from rich corporate box holders and advertisers, mostly television ads

from major corporations. Those sources represent the mostly white corporate entities of American capitalism. By labeling Kaepernick’s kneeling as “unpatriotic” rather than a “social demonstration in defense of black victims and their families” allowed the narrative of white nationalism to dampen any enthusiasm of players to express their outrage. Again, just imagine what the financial cost would be to the NFL if games were disrupted or cancelled through the “General Strike.”

The University of Missouri football team, the NBA and the NFL’s handling of Colin Kaepernick’s nonviolent demonstration are examples of strong, moderate and weak forms of how to execute a “General Strike.”

There are some things larger than winning presidential elections too – especially if informed citizens are leveraging their voices and votes in order to eradicate moral cancer in the body headed toward 21st century serfdom at best and 21st century slavery at worst. We all know that when private interest exceeds that of public interest, we cease to remain a democracy. Strangely, those who are not five percenters (those who

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control 70% of income and wealth) are the 95 percenters. We are the people who are left behind to wrestle with wars of classism, racism and genderism over the remaining 30% of income and wealth in the United States. In short, we are becoming serfs or slaves – and we know that economically, it’s the latter.

Thus, leveraging your votes may be the best and immediate remedy. If the establishment or the so-called two-party systems does not address universal healthcare, incarceration and immigration reform, fair housing and fair wages and tuition waivers, you may need to participate in the “General Strike” and leverage your votes against establishment power and influence. Otherwise, we will experience further economic and political disenfranchisement as American citizens. To highlight this grave assertion, we turn once more to Du Bois’s “General Strike” to reinforce our ashen concerns:

[For slaves]... There was no use in seeking refuge in an army which was not an army of

freedom; and there was no sense in revolting against armed masters who were conquering the world. As soon however as it became clear that the Union armies would not or could not return fugitive slaves...the slaves entered upon a general strike against slavery by the same method he [and she] had used during the period of the fugitive slave. He ran away to the first place of safety and offered his services to the Federal Army. So that in this way it was really true that he served his former master and served the emancipating army; and it was also true that this withdrawal and bestowal of his labor decided the war.

You can make a salient argument that Du Bois's workers did not immediately find confidence and cast their votes. Therefore, there is limited intellectual space to provide a plausible counter argument that may be employed successfully to refute our characterization of our current times. Thus, we confidently affirm that, like bondmen and women who understood how to leverage their vote, we should do the same. They voted with their feet on the policies and platforms of the northern armies – armies that represented a government that would lead to their eventual emancipation. What is more, their oppressed existential conditions shaped their political liberation strategies.

We pointed out that if similar strategies employed more recently by the University of Missouri football team and the Los Angeles Clippers (playing to lose cost the city and the NBA millions of dollars) and had others followed Colin Kaepernick's lead, it would have brought the nation moral clarity and economic implications to the National Football League. In short, the remaining presidential candidates must present policy proposals in the 2020 election cycle that address the aforementioned issues. If the establishment will not do so, this should become an organized liberation march; a march to the polls to vote down-ballot. This is our

21st century form of Du Bois's the "General Strike." Let's see if the establishment is willing to share our pain.

A final note, Jobs for Justice, do you have the political imagination and organization like the workers to plan, implement and execute a global "General Strike?" A strike where workers will not work on a specific single day? How would that change human working conditions before it's too late? Otherwise, this time, all will experience the pain of slavery. ■

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This virus is teaching us that from now on, living wages, guaranteed health care for all, unemployment & labor rights are not far left issues, but issues of right vs. wrong, life vs. death.

— Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II

# The Moral Cost of Coronavirus

By Joshua Parker and Mikaeil Mirzaali

COVID-19 is now a global pandemic. As cases rise rapidly, one effect will be to raise deep and troubling ethical issues. If the UK follows Italy, as it is predicted to, one such ethical issue will be an extreme demand placed on healthcare resources, specifically intensive care. Indeed, given differences in ICU beds it may well be that the challenges facing the NHS exceed those seen in Italy. Effective triage is the appropriate response to ensure that in spite of a severe mismatch between supply and demand allocation of resources is fair. In an overwhelmed system with critically unwell patients, doctors must decide which patients get oxygen, intensive care, both, or neither.

Fundamentally, this is a question of ethics and distributive justice. In answering this question, Italy has opted for a utilitarian approach: “the principle of maximizing benefits for the largest number.” That allocation must be towards “those patients with the highest chance of therapeutic success.” Indeed, American ethicists have also suggested that utilitarianism in some form is the best response to rationing in the face of coronavirus. Under the circumstances, utilitarianism seems to be the necessary and proportionate response. Whilst this might be the only ethical option, for doctors on the frontlines this represents a paradigm shift in how they practice and carries costs that must be considered over the longer term.

Deciding which patient should take the last remaining ICU bed is a decision for doctors. Rationing and making tough decisions are not unfamiliar; however, doctors’ approach to moral decision-making tends to be deontological in nature. Medicine takes place within discrete interactions between individuals. By this very fact of the doctor-patient relationship, doctors often set aside questions of the greater good emphasizing patient-centeredness, the needs of the person in front of them and putting that patient’s interests first. The predominate way that doctors interact with their patients, not to mention the way that the GMC admonishes doctors to act, places these values at the core of what it means to be a good doctor. Indeed, these moral values are at the heart of practicing medicine and a significant part of a doctor’s moral identity. This is a principally different way of thinking about ethics and the doctor-patient relationship than utilitarian ways of thinking

The decision to shift policy towards the rationing of intensive care based on utilitarianism does not belong to doctors. However, under the circumstances and given their expertise, society will entrust doctors to enact this policy, making the hard decisions on the ground. In a certain sense, this is simply “part of the job” and, no doubt, doctors will rise to the challenge and do their best. Nevertheless, these decisions carry immense moral burdens—burdens which doctors cannot refuse.

The two most important burdens are moral responsibility and moral risk. Taking responsibility for deciding how to best ration resources at a population level, knowing this will inevitably lead some people to die, is

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immense. The weight of responsibility and the inherent stresses must not be underestimated. Given what is at stake, it is vital that doctors make the right decision. Nevertheless, the pace of change, working in a busy and overwhelmed system and the vagaries of applying the principle of “maximizing benefits for the largest numbers” in the real-world leaves plenty of room for moral mistakes. The costs of these will weigh heavily on doctors. Moreover, these uncertainties might make ambiguous whether doctors did the right thing for the individuals for whom they are caring. Again, this may be a source of profound distress for doctors reflecting back on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moral injury is often understood as a psychological harm caused by transgressing ones deeply-held values. We have noted that many of the most deeply-held values of doctors, both as people and as professionals, are at odds with the demands of a public health emergency. One risk to doctors in tackling the myriad of difficult moral choices that COVID-19 hands them is that of moral injury. Where doctors must make utilitarian decisions at the expense of their more deon-

tological values, the sacrifice of these values has a psychological cost. What this recognizes is that by working at the focal point of the pandemic, doctors not only risk their physical welfare but their moral character.

Choosing between patients knowing that this may lead to death presents an impossible situation and leaves doctors facing “unavoidable moral failure.” Either the doctor performs as a deontologist prioritizing the needs of the individual patient in front of them, or as a utilitarian maximizing the greater good. Either way, important moral principles are violated. Whatever the doctor does, something of moral value is lost. Whilst following utilitarian principles might be all things considered best, and the doctor has little other option, many will still retain feelings of guilt and remorse.

COVID-19 is likely to be a global tragedy. In amongst its wide-ranging effects for patients, health-care systems and society, there will be a cost for doctors. As coronavirus forces doctors to make deep and challenging ethical decisions, it may also ask health-care professionals at the coalface to sacrifice their

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fundamental values for the greater good. There will be a great human cost to COVID-19. However, we must not overlook the moral cost in our response to this public health emergency. ■

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*Posted on March 16, 2020*

“African Americans live sicker and shorter lives than the average American.”

Dr. David Williams, at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

# Ahmaud Arbery and a Pandemic of Injustice

By Paul Robeson Ford

Speaking from the pulpit of his church in early April, Bishop William J. Barber II declared that “pandemics spread through the fissures of inequality.” The co-chair of the Poor People’s Campaign was pointing to a reality that should be a central theme in the story of the COVID-19 crisis: the most vulnerable among us have been the most deeply impacted by a sickness that does not discriminate. The way in which coronavirus appears around the world, as a virus that can infect any human being – black, brown or white, rich or poor, religious or atheist, educated or illiterate – means that we must look to our own country’s “fissures” to understand why this pandemic has been so brutal to certain communities.

Across the nation, it has been the black and brown, the working class and the poor, along with the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions, who have been affected disproportionately. Persons of color and the poor have represented a disproportionate percentage of the “essential worker” class. That reality has exposed long-standing inequities in health care, access to healthy food and to parks and other green spaces and to other factors that have nurtured these imbalanced statistics. A straight line can be drawn from the existing inequities in American society and the inequitable way many people have experienced the crisis caused by COVID-19.

The response from government officials and elected leaders has been more lip service than meaningful action. There has been talk of “concern” with these coronavirus inequities, but aggressive and more radical maneuvers that could have actually made an impact in neutralizing these differences, such as a national rent freeze, closing meat-packing plants until major changes could be made to protect workers and providing stimulus checks to tax-paying immigrants regardless of their citizenship status, have been deferred or denied.

Instead, what we have seen in many cases is a doubling-down by those pulling the levers of power in order to exploit these pre-existing inequities, proving the argument I made in a previous commentary that sin has entered this crisis not through the virus itself but in our response to it.

Few scenes have been more exemplary of this than what happened in Wisconsin on April 7 as an in-person

primary was held despite the objections of the governor and health officials. In cities like Milwaukee that have a disproportionate share of the state’s minorities, 90 percent of the polling places were shut down, which relegated voters to standing for hours in lines that stretched for blocks. We know now that at least 40 people were infected with COVID-19 based on their participation in that election. Every one of those individuals should sue the Republican legislators – corporately and individually – for their belligerent and callous negligence in forcing them to vote in-person.

Thankfully, justice prevailed, and the state Supreme Court judge who Republicans were trying desperately to protect (even if it required potentially sacrificing the

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*A straight line can be drawn from the existing inequities in American society and the inequitable way many people have experienced the crisis caused by COVID-19.*

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lives of black and brown voters) was unseated anyway. But the battle lines were drawn, and if there was any lack of clarity around what will be at stake this November, that veil was lifted.

What will likely determine this year’s presidential election is whether or not eligible voters have access to mail-in ballots. These ballots must be accessible to all without the requirement of “excuse notes,” notary signatures or other barriers. Every eligible voter should be sent a ballot, as is already the practice in five states. Opponents of this reasonable, democratic process will rail about the potential for voter fraud and “ballot harvesting,” but that is just a ruse on the part of politicians who have so far demonstrated a demonic determination to maintain power at all costs, from voter suppression tactics to lonely deaths on ventilators.

We must defeat these efforts by any legal, legislative and nonviolent means at our disposal.

The consequences of national elections have been in sharp relief for nearly four years, and the events of recent days – specifically, the release last week of

video showing the lynching-by-shotgun of Ahmaud Arbery for #runningwhileblack – have only served to emphasize that point (as if we needed any more reminders). One of the forgotten stories of the 2016 debacle is how the transition to the Trump administration signaled the violent interruption of the progress that was being made – ever so slightly and slowly – in combatting racist police violence. Not only did Trump and his political enablers halt the Obama administration’s progress in this and other areas of racial injustice, they did everything in their power to reverse those hard-won gains. Only the persistence of some state and local governments has salvaged remnants of these initiatives.

Arbery’s lynching in a neighborhood outside Brunswick, Georgia, was straight out of Money, Mississippi, where Emmett Till was murdered in 1955. The white father and son, arrested more than 10 weeks later and only after the Georgia Bureau of Investigation took over the investigation from local authorities, literally treated Arbery like a runaway slave who they had been dispatched to capture or kill. At this point, it’s not even possible to say that the jury is out on whether or not Arbery will receive justice; the jury has yet to be empaneled even though this man was lynched two-and-a-half months ago thanks to the corruption of the local district attorney’s office that exploited restrictions in place because of the coronavirus.

Theodore Parker first said – and Martin Luther King Jr. made famous – that the “arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” The further insight in the decades since is that it is only through the courageous and relentless efforts of activists and organizers that the arc can actually bend. It is anything but automatic, and we must never assume it will simply happen. It requires vigilance and persistent prophetic witness in the public square. Ahmaud Arbery will receive justice only if we fight to make sure that

justice is served.

The story of the coronavirus is that it ushered in a pandemic of injustice. From addressing the inequitable suffering of working-class people who are disproportionately black and brown, to holding officials accountable for racist election policies, to responding to outright modern-day lynching, we have a multi-front fight on our hands as we move towards the second half of this year and the most important election of our lifetime.

We’d better do like scripture says and “gird up our loins.” It’s going to get messy. ■

*Paul Robeson is senior pastor of First Baptist Church (Highland Avenue) in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He was born and raised in New York City and grew up at The Riverside Church under the leadership of James A. Forbes Jr. He received a Master of Divinity from the Divinity School at the University of Chicago where he is now a candidate for the Ph.D. in theology. This article was first posted at Baptist News Global on May 12, 2020 and is reprinted here with permission.*

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*The white father and son, arrested more than 10 weeks later and only after the Georgia Bureau of Investigation took over the investigation from local authorities, literally treated Arbery like a runaway slave who they had been dispatched to capture or kill.*

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“You’re compounding the fact that these folks have all these chronic diseases — diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease – which is putting them in the high-risk category. And then you’re saying ‘You still have to go to work because you’re not able to stay [home]. You don’t have that luxury because you’re living paycheck to paycheck.’”

Dr. Cheryl Brewster, professor and associate dean at Florida International University’s Wertheim College of Medicine.

# A Lowdown, Dirty Shame: Ahmaud Arbery's Murder and the Unrenounced Racism of White Christians

By James Ellis III

In the wake of what many have rightly called the lynching of Ahmaud Arbery on Feb. 23 in Brunswick, Georgia, I have turned again to the Apostle Paul's assurance that sometimes the Holy Spirit "intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26-27). With a disoriented and weary soul, I am compelled in light of this latest example of racism and the danger of #runningwhileblack to confront my white brothers and sisters.

Although I understand and continue to experience the Lord's wondrous capacity to swap ashes for beauty (Isaiah 61:1-3), I am livid with how black people are treated in this country. Once more, it is disconcerting to know that people would dare sully Jesus' name by trying to align their misdeeds or the misdeeds of others with the Gospel. God never co-signs hate. Never has and never will.

Billie Holiday's famous 1939 intonation that "Southern trees bear a strange fruit" still resonates among those with ears to hear and eyes to see. Ahmaud Arbery was gunned down in broad daylight by a white father and son who according to news reports have insisted they were trying to make a citizen's arrest. It pains me to acknowledge yet again that this brand of racial violence in America is as old as the day is long.

White Christians, perhaps due in part to an obsessive and fast-paced culture of the privileged, have favored convenient, woeful forgetfulness. Many choose to stick their heads in the sand altogether, opting to remain ill-informed about the past and present, in hopes of achieving an artificial peace.

But there is a better way. White brothers and sisters, it is past time to learn about the Red Summer of 1919, Black Wall Street and the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, and what happened in 1923 in the small town of Rosewood, Florida. It is past time to take sobering stock of 14-year-old Emmett Till's killing in 1955 and that of 49-year-old James Byrd Jr. more than four decades later, if only to realize that these abuses were not – and are not – moral anomalies. Digesting the raw, visual revulsion of an uncivilized, unrepentant society in James Allen's book, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, would be another step toward

remembering the desolation sin causes. Ignorance is far from being blissful, and it is nothing like the God we worship.

Contrary to what a warped, do-gooder mentality asserts, racism is not an abstract superiority complex that exists way out there in some yonder, distant domain. No, racism has legs and it travels well, from home to home. It is as personal as it is political, birthed and institutionalized within individuals and then dispersed through webs of deceit, exploitation and lawlessness.

Tragically, Ahmaud Arbery's murder is merely the latest testimony to racial hatred and violence to capture

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*I know this is hard for many enlightened and well-meaning Christians to hear, but here's the truth: If you are white, you have no clue as to the PTSD-like realities black people in this country face every single day.*

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the attention of national news media and, with few exceptions, only after a video of the killing surfaced. There are others, often too many to stay abreast of.

It does not flummox me as it once did that so many white people struggle to comprehend, let alone address, racism's rank vicissitudes because that is what racism and its corresponding socioeconomic privileges do. You benefit while others suffer based on a power structure meant, functionally, to enslave others and provide ironclad dominance and autonomy to yourself and people like you. And these dynamics are so entrenched in your psyche and lifestyle that empathy becomes fleeting, if not impossible.

Say what you will, but in our highly color-coded society, racism is infinitely more destructive than any virus, hurricane or war.

I know this is hard for many enlightened and well-meaning Christians to hear, but here's the truth: If you are white, you have no clue as to the PTSD-like reali-

ties black people in this country face every single day. Legitimate fears about whether today you will face a police officer whose bad day or bad values, or both, will cost you severely. Constant calculations about whether you are being profiled while shopping in a store, held to an inequitable standard in the workplace unlike your white colleagues and friends, or being mistreated in countless other ways, whether overt or subtle, because of your race. And there are, of course, those incidents that leave no doubt that you have been victimized by racial prejudice.

All of this, and so much more, is beyond demeaning and draining. It is debilitating. Comparatively, white people do not have to worry about their loved ones being maligned, even unto death, due to some clash with homegrown bigotry that has reared its ugly face. You get the benefit of the doubt for that which you have not earned while for us, no matter what we have earned, we are likely to be viewed with suspicion and malice simply because we are not white.

In moments like this it becomes grotesquely obvious that many of my white sisters and brothers don't understand whiteness. In his essay in *Can "White" People Be Saved? Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission*, scholar and pastor Andrew T. Draper explains, rightly referencing the pioneering work of W.E.B. Du Bois, that white people are not the issue; rather whiteness is, which is to be understood as an idolatrous system of embedded norms intricately arranged to prefer, esteem and profit white people by any means necessary.

If, in Christ, we are to operate down here according to heavenly marching orders from God, who is no respecter of color, coinage or class, then this is what I, and I think many black Christians, are looking for from white Christians: renunciation. And only the genuine kind that includes a pledge to consistent advocacy and action for racial justice.

To be clear, I do not desire your tears, pity, lip service or guilt. Renunciation, however, is something else. It is only possible inasmuch as we humble ourselves under the Holy Spirit, who resides in all who believe in and confess Jesus as Lord. Right theology and right living, as defined in the Bible, is the fruit we all are called – and held accountable – to cultivate.

Yes, you are incapable of singlehandedly extinguishing racism and all her minions. We know that. You can, however, take a good, long, hard look in the mirror and take steps toward greater maturity in Christ, which for the long haul will impact those within your sphere of influence. I encourage you to take a cue from James 1:19-21 to uphold a listening posture while resolutely shunning wickedness wherever you encounter it, in

what you have done or left undone, or in what has been done to you or others. Make a conscious decision to acknowledge, faithfully steward and where appropriate dismantle your racial privilege.

Also, accept responsibility for educating yourself. What are you reading about race in America? To name but four, *Letters to a Birmingham Jail: A Response to the Words and Dreams of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* edited by Bryan Loritts, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* by Stephen R. Haynes, *Oneness Embraced: Reconciliation, the Kingdom, and How We are Stronger Together* by Tony Evans and *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* by Allan Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung are as good a place as any to begin prayerful self-examination.

In a fifth book I would add to this beginning list, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*, Jemar Tisby writes that "the longer arc of American history reveals that Christian complicity with racism does not always

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*If, in Christ, we are to operate down here according to heavenly marching orders from God, who is no respecter of color, coinage or class, then this is what I, and I think many black Christians, are looking for from white Christians: renunciation.*

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require specific acts of bigotry. Being complicit only requires a muted response in the face of injustice or uncritical support of the status quo." Be willing to say and do hard things, big and small.

My Bible tells me that I hold intrinsic, essential value, as do you, having been created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27, Psalm 139:14, Ephesians 2:10) and bought at a price (1 Corinthians 6:20). We are equals. Black people are not lesser, disposable "things" meant to serve you. We do not exist to put you at ease or to massage your unaddressed naiveté, hurts or biases.

Ahmaud Arbery should be alive today, free to go for a run through the neighborhood without hesitation or fear. The ugly truth is that he is not because of this country's original sin of racism. It is a shameful stain in the case file of humanity that should be addressed with all deliberate speed and in the power of God who "is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that

he should change his mind” (Numbers 23:19).

Josh Kelley’s “Busy Making Memories” is a delightful song, the kind prone to activate the tear ducts. Black people in America, however, are not able to make such sweet family memories as freely as our white counterparts on account of racist actions that continue to rob us of full lives. But Scripture is clear: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). ■

*James Ellis III is university chaplain and director of student ministries at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia, Canada. He holds master’s degrees from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and Baylor University’s George W. Truett Theological Seminary and is completing a doctorate at Western*

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*Theological Seminary. He is the editor of Tell the Truth, Shame the Devil: Stories about the Challenges of Young Pastors (Smyth & Helwys, 2015). This article first appeared at Baptist News Global on May 15, 2020 and is reprinted here with permission.*

The Bible is a Big Book. It says a lot of things. If you study the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and take a course in systematic theology, and another in ethics, you will discover quite a long and complicated history about how people of faith should live in the secular world. Here are a few of my summary thoughts about matters of faith, as they relate to the law:

- 1) Jesus was clear when he said to let Caesar have what belongs to Caesar, and let God be in charge of the God-stuff.
- 2) Paul was a follower of Jesus, willing to go to jail for disobeying laws. In fact, when he named his top three motivators, the law did not make the list. He said the Big Three are Faith, Hope, and Love, and the greatest of those is love.
- 3) The Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and Paul all point us to higher ground: “What does the Lord require of you but to act justly, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

The law is not to be our moral compass. Legalism is a methodology for defending, instead of fixing, a broken compass.

These are principles even a politician can use as an ethical guide.

— Marion D. Aldridge

# “I Don’t Care if You Die.”

By Elket Rodriguez

“I don’t care if you die.” The U.S. government repeats this message to immigrants every day, reinforcing it over and over. Policies flip and explanations flop. But one message remains consistent: “I don’t care if you die.”

For our God of truth, facts matter. And the government’s callous disregard for immigrant life is a matter of factual record. Last week, an immigrant named Carlos Ernesto Escobar Mejía died of COVID-19 in an Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center. That is a fact.

This death and with many more that will follow were preventable. That is another fact.

For two months, as the pandemic escalated, advocates and attorneys all over the United States asked ICE to release immigrants from detention centers. The government agency responsible for processing immigrants received a flood of lawsuits, advocacy statements and letters pleading for detainees to be let go before the coronavirus could work its worst.

The government could release the immigrants without legal repercussions. Letting them go would be a simple, cost-effective and pragmatic approach to protecting immigrants who, like U.S. citizens, were made in God’s image and who, according to international law, have rights, too. And the government would not lose jurisdiction over their cases. No matter what, immigrants must attend their hearings or face deportation.

ICE’s cruelty is so extreme, federal judges have ordered detainees to be released in order to protect their lives. A federal judge in Miami cited “cruel and unusual punishment” to order ICE to release hundreds of immigrants. Another called ICE’s retention of immigrants during the coronavirus pandemic “unconscionable and possibly barbaric.”

The immigration advocacy community is not seeking to further its own agenda during the COVID-19 pandemic. Quite the contrary. Advocates hope to protect the lives of both immigrants and enforcement officers who work in ICE detention facilities. This is not coincidental. More than 40 employees in the Stewart Detention Center in Georgia contracted COVID-19.

Only one COVID-19 death among immigrant detainees after so many weeks of pandemic might seem like a great success. But “success” would not account for the cruel context of the exposure of immigrants to the coronavirus. The mortality number is so low because

of deportation. Instead of providing sick immigrants with medical attention they desperately need, ICE has shipped them back to their countries with the COVID-19 symptoms—not only denying them care, but also exporting their disease.

Sadly, the “I don’t care if you die” policy approach is not confined to ICE. In the past two months, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection has expelled to Mexico and other countries thousands of unaccompanied children. Fellowship Southwest partner Pastor Rosalio Sosa, who operates 14 refugee shelters in Mexico, has seen an increase in unaccompanied children arriving at the shelter in the middle of the desert in Palomas, about 100 miles west of Juarez and El Paso.

What bothers Sosa is the border patrol’s practice

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of returning children to Mexico through a different port of entry than where they arrived. This intentionally exposes them to Mexican cartels. Christians have disavowed this practice, creating an outrage that led to approval of the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act in 2019.

The government also inflicts cruelty and inhumanity on immigrants through its Migrant Protection Protocols, better known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy or the “Unwelcoming Our Neighbor” policy. This policy requires thousands of refugees to live in huge tent camps and crowded shelters for months on end as they progress through the U.S. asylum process.

The policy is so heinous, immigration judges have resigned, and asylum officers have protested their discomfort and have resigned for the sake of their consciences.

Don’t be shocked if immigrants question U.S. Christians’ professed love, not to mention their belief

in God and profession of faith. Don't be surprised if an immigrant asks: "How can you be an evangelical and love immigrants? I thought you guys hated us." Don't be surprised at global hostility toward U.S. Christians who remain silent while their government allows immigrants to die.

God commands people to love the stranger and wel-

come the neighbor. For God's sake—or at least God's reputation—it's past time to stop the U.S. government's "I don't care if you die" policy. ■

*Elket Rodriguez is the immigrant and refugee advocacy and missions specialist for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Fellowship Southwest.*

## Lockdown

By Brother Richard of Ireland

Yes there is fear.  
Yes there is isolation.  
Yes there is panic buying.  
Yes there is sickness.  
Yes there is even death.

But,  
They say that in Wuhan after so many years of  
noise  
You can hear the birds again.  
They say that after just a few weeks of quiet  
The sky is no longer thick with fumes  
But blue and grey and clear.

They say that in the streets of Assisi  
People are singing to each other  
across the empty squares,  
keeping their windows open  
so that those who are alone  
may hear the sounds of family around them.

They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland  
Is offering free meals and delivery to the  
housebound.  
Today a young woman I know  
is busy spreading fliers with her number  
through the neighborhood  
So that the elders may have someone to call on.

Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and  
Temples  
are preparing to welcome  
and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary  
All over the world people are slowing down and  
reflecting  
All over the world people are looking at their  
neighbors in a new way

All over the world people are waking up to a new  
reality  
To how big we really are.  
To how little control we really have.  
To what really matters.  
To Love.

So we pray and we remember that  
Yes there is fear.  
But there does not have to be hate.  
Yes there is isolation.  
But there does not have to be loneliness.  
Yes there is panic buying.  
But there does not have to be meanness.  
Yes there is sickness.  
But there does not have to be disease of the soul  
Yes there is even death.  
But there can always be a rebirth of love.

Wake to the choices you make as to how to live  
now.  
Today, breathe.  
Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic  
The birds are singing again  
The sky is clearing,  
Spring is coming,  
And we are always encompassed by Love.  
Open the windows of your soul  
And though you may not be able  
to touch across the empty square,  
Sing.

*A Poem by a Capuchin Franciscan. Brother Richard Hendrick lives in Ireland He wrote this poem about the Coronavirus for Waldensians and their friends everywhere. This poem resonates with the Holy Week and Easter themes of faithful service, death and resurrection.*

# Religion in the Age of a Pandemic

By Randall Balmer

About a decade ago, in a fit of madness or delusion or something, I decided I might want to write a book about Sarah Palin, then governor of Alaska and John McCain's running mate in the 2008 election. To explore this possibility, I headed to Wasilla with the intention of visiting her church, Wasilla Bible Church (Palin was associated with two congregations in Wasilla, the other a Pentecostal church).

In preparation, I read Palin's first book, *Going Rogue*, on the airplane while jetting across the continent to visit the author's church. I recall pulling the book surreptitiously out of my satchel and opening the cover with some mixture of dread and resignation, figuring that I might someday be able to make a case that the hours spent reading the book should count as a credit toward Purgatory.

The autobiography was, as I suspected, pretty insubstantial, filled with morality-play vignettes from childhood and recitations of the author's meteoric rise to national prominence. But it was not nearly as bad as I feared – kind of endearing, actually, like a cute little puppy tap-dancing frenetically on the kitchen floor, eager for attention. The puppy piddled in the corner more than once, taking cheap shots at political adversaries (including McCain campaign apparatchiks) and using the annoying, sophomoric reference to the Democratic Party as the “Democrat” Party. But *Going Rogue* was not unpleasant.

The second book in the Palin oeuvre, however, *America by Heart: Reflections on Family, Faith, and Flag*, crossed the line from cute puppy bouncing on his back legs to mangy cur relentlessly humping a visitor's leg. I was beginning to have second thoughts about this misbegotten venture.

Palin was not in attendance the Sunday morning of my visit to her church. But the enduring image I took away from that morning is relevant once again during the coronavirus pandemic. The congregation, as with many megachurches, met in an all-purpose room that resembled a gymnasium, with cantilevered basketball hoops folded toward the ceiling, more than a sanctuary. It was Communion Sunday at Wasilla Bible Church, and following his sermon the pastor invited congregants to approach circular tables positioned on the gymnasium floor for Holy Communion. Church deacons (all of them men) were stationed at each table,

dispensing thimble-sized containers of grape juice. Their wives broke off pieces of bread and handed them to congregants.

The wives were wearing clear, disposable plastic gloves, the kind used by workers in fast-food restaurants. I'm not aware that Wasilla was experiencing any sort of pandemic during that balmy, long-ago September, so the practice struck me as jarring, even sacrilegious. But this may be the new normal as religious groups make their own adaptations to life in the age of coronavirus.

Donald Trump's vision of burgeoning churches on Easter Sunday, a week from today – though he has

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*It strikes me as fairly difficult to sustain community while under quarantine or sheltering in place. Social distancing at a remove of six feet is not conducive to a community of faith. As Saul Bellow says, “Blessed are the present.”*

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since backed away from the statement, he said he wants the nation “opened up and just raring to go by Easter” – has been denounced as reckless and delusional, a circumstance that would likely exacerbate the spread of the virus. But if we ever do approach some semblance of normalcy, religious institutions will very likely need to make adjustments. Some groups might find the transition easier than others.

As a historian, I don't labor much in the scholarly vineyards of religious studies, but my colleagues who do so inform me that one of the characteristics of most – if not all – religions is community. It strikes me as fairly difficult to sustain community while under quarantine or sheltering in place. Social distancing at a remove of six feet is not conducive to a community of faith. As Saul Bellow says, “Blessed are the present.”

Some groups have turned to social media. When I called my youngest brother, Mark, who is lead pastor of a megachurch in Illinois, he told me that he and his family had just finished watching his church service

on YouTube. Two weeks into their ecclesiastical quarantine, the church staff records each Sunday's worship service, complete with the "praise team" and the sermon, during the week for streaming on Sunday morning. "Our sanctuary has been turned into a studio," he said.

I asked how he managed to foster a sense of community in these times. "That's the difficult part," he acknowledged, adding that he was encouraging congregants to interact with one another on FaceTime. "We always talk about how church is people, not a building," he said, "but you take the building out of the equation, and it's difficult." He joked that one of his big concerns was, "Are we gonna get an offering?" Park Hills Church has an app for that purpose, an online portal and also a mail slot in the church building itself for those who want to drop off a check.

The church's website has a feature called "Put me in Coach!" (I gently suggested that a comma might be a good idea), which coordinates volunteer efforts among the congregation and in the community. The church's children's ministry is sending emails to parents about what to do to keep kids occupied during this time.

Mark's church observes Holy Communion only once every two months (not uncommon among evangelical congregations), and he isn't sure how to pull that off in this age of social distancing. Mark acknowledged that Christians who believe in the "real presence" of Christ in the Holy Eucharist – that the bread and wine of Holy Communion actually becomes the body and blood of Jesus – face a greater challenge.

If the centerpiece of your worship is singing or a ser-

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*If the centerpiece of your worship is singing or a sermon, that's one thing – and relatively easily translated into digital form. If, on the other hand, the climax of worship is Holy Communion, the presence of Christ communicated to the faithful in tactile form, that's quite another.*

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mon, that's one thing – and relatively easily translated into digital form. If, on the other hand, the climax of worship is Holy Communion, the presence of Christ communicated to the faithful in tactile form, that's quite another.

Which brings us back, I suppose, to plastic gloves.

No one knows exactly how life will change in the wake of the current pandemic. But it surely will change, affecting everything from government and the economy to social conventions and expressions of faith. At the very least, we will need to learn once again how to foster a sense of community. ■

*Randall Balmer, the John Phillips Professor in Religion at Dartmouth College, is completing a book on church and state. This article is published here with his permission.*

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# Our World Has Turned Upside Down

By Welton Gaddy

April 21 at 5:57 PM

*“Our world has turned upside down.”* Over the past few weeks, I have thought that silently, and sometimes spoke the words out loud. Honestly, that exclamatory statement is relevant to virtually every dimension of our lives right now. And that reality evokes a terribly unsettling mixture of raw emotions.

I have spent most of my life at the intersection of religion and politics, dealing with the relationship between religious institutions and governmental offices. Since the murderous onslaught of the pandemic began, I have been amazed at the raging battle between the medical community’s insistence on the protection of social separation, and numerous clergy’s opposition to the government’s decision that religious institutions, like all other institutions, must refrain from convening large groups of people attending worship services. Especially among rabid evangelical leaders, pastors have encouraged their congregations to defy both the government and the medical community - and gather for worship faithfully. Earlier this week, a news story broke that muddled both my empathy and reasoning. I am now speaking as a minister of well over 50 years and as a theologian who studiously has read the literature of many religions, examined spirituality, and sought to understand the nature of God, holiness, YAWEH, ALLAH, and other recipients of worship, never thinking I could feel competent speaking about the mystery I find and respect in religion.

Like numerous other religious leaders, Bishop Gerald O. Glenn, pastor of New Deliverance Evangelistic Church in Richmond, Virginia, insisted his parishioners come to the church house as usual, despite warnings by both the governmental and medical authorities. Glenn said to his congregation, “I firmly believe that God is larger than this dreaded virus.” He said that people are “healed” in his church, and their fellowship would be open in violation of safety protocols because he was an essential leader who talks to God.

In that church’s gathering this past Sunday, the congregation was told that their pastor had died a week after being diagnosed with Covid-19. The pastor’s daughter now begged people to take seriously the pandemic assaulting our nation.

Immediately, conflicting emotions clashed in my

head and heart. I remembered a woman leaving a church house last week saying, “The blood of Jesus will cover us and protect us from the virus.” I wanted to ask, “What happened?” I know some are feeling, “He got what he deserved.” But I could say neither. I did not and do not want anyone to die. In my most rational moments I know the God I worship favors life; but God also favors wisdom, humility an awareness of humanity, and gives no favor to people trying to play God or to test God or to use God’s name as a way of saying “I am right and others are wrong; look at me.”

Through the years, embedded in the teachings of all great religious leaders, are the trait of care and the

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*God is getting a bad name. Can God no longer stop a pandemic? Now politicians show us that God wins and loses elections. Congressional votes claim divine direction whether they lose or win their would-be laws. Scores of people serve God to get rich, but it does not always happen that way. Must we tease God to show our power?*

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practice of healing.

Divinity is not about competition. God does not use stunts to show off power. I still remember Lt. Gen. William G. “Jerry” Boykin condemning Islam and bragging that because we are a Christian nation, our God, his god, is bigger than the Muslim’s God.” But no religion has been spared the touch of this pandemic. The God in whom I believe does not show off to prove divinity. Where there is holiness, safety and health are religious values.

I am sincerely sorry about the death of the pastor. I grieve with his daughter. Three of the pastor’s children, as well as his widow, have now tested positive. At the same time, I have nothing “positive” to say

about people who play God, people who use God to prove their supremacy, and people who boast that their God is greater than the God of anyone else.

God is getting a bad name. Can God no longer stop a pandemic? Now politicians show us that God wins and loses elections. Congressional votes claim divine direction whether they lose or win their would-be laws. Scores of people serve God to get rich, but it does not always happen that way. Must we tease God to show our power?

Sympathetic sadness and empathy are what's badly needed right now, along with sincere humility and active love. None of those essentials require being physically together, And, truth be told, mere physical proximity alone does not guarantee any of them.

Life is difficult enough when we seek to be good human beings. Why in God's name would we ever think of ourselves as bossing God around, or employ-

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A lot of people, in the name of God,  
are giving God a Bad name. And by the  
way, another name for God... is Love.

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ing God to give us success? A lot of people, in the name of God, are giving God a Bad name.

And by the way, another name for God... is Love.■

*C. Welton Gaddy, is President Emeritus of Interfaith Alliance and Interfaith Alliance Foundation from 1998-2014 He is the host of the on-line radio program, State of Belief. He has been pastor, author, mentor, and example for progressive Christians, in addition to leaders of many religious traditions, throughout his life and ministry.*

“At a certain time in your life, you accept the fact that lunacy comes in many forms. Is there a more disturbing sound than hobnailed boots striking a cobblestoned street in unison? Or our penchant for using ritual and procedure to give plausibility to the unthinkable? Baptised Christians ran the ovens in the camps. If we get scared enough we can convince ourselves that snake and nape are selective, and that a scarlet cross painted on a shield can make acceptable the beheadings of Saracens on a scaffold in Jerusalem.”

— from *The New Iberia Blues* by James Lee Burke

# Finding God in the Pandemic

By Chuck Bugg

John 14:15-21

When I was a teenager in my home church, I had a pastor whom I greatly admired. Our pastor baptized my parents and me on the same Sunday night. Later, he baptized my younger brother.

Once in awhile I would hear the whispers of people in the church, “He’s a good pastor, but he can’t preach.” Those whispers turned into shouts during our twice-a-year revival meetings. What I recall were ruggedly handsome evangelists with brightly colored sportscoats, one for each night of the week. They were far different from the gray and navy suits with bland ties that our pastor always wore. The wives of the evangelists looked like “Barbie dolls.”

Could these evangelists preach! They had all been to some far country that sounded so exotic and exciting that we young people couldn’t understand why they had left the appeal of the far country. These evangelists told gripping stories that had us sitting on the edges of our pews. On the other hand, our pastor, to be polite, was more pedestrian in his preaching. No hair-raising illustrations; no electrifying stories; no forays into the far country. But what our minister did Sunday after Sunday was to teach us the basic truths about our faith. I didn’t listen as carefully as I should, but I did hear this: God loves me; God wants me to love his caring creation, Jesus came to Earth to give the Holy One a face; and the Holy Spirit wanted to be my friend and spiritual guide.

Our minister was hardly a mystic. However, each Sunday he took a passage of Scripture, poured it into the same deductive form, and gave us three points about this gracious God. Occasionally, our minister would assault the sinfulness of life. He would name the things that we shouldn’t do. We weren’t old enough to buy alcohol and cigarettes, so those were out. Dancing was off-limits to real Christian girls and boys. “Just think of what it may lead to,” and, if he hadn’t titillated our young imaginations, I would have thought one dance just led to the next dance. Our pastor did better in getting us not to smoke and drink than getting us off the dance floor.

What our pastor also did was to get us to think about theology for life, although I never recall his using the word “theology.” Maybe, that’s why the evangelists

that held us spellbound have largely disappeared. We can’t live on a steady diet of “You wouldn’t believe what I was before I met Jesus.”

The older we become, the more we need more substance, especially as we face our personal crises. Probably without his knowing it, my pastor’s preaching about love of God and love for neighbor gave me a frame in which to deal later with issues like racism, sexism, injustice, and how we view people with different sexual orientations and identities.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, the disciples and Jesus are headed to Jerusalem. Jesus knew what awaited

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*Listen to what Jesus says in a section of John that scholars call the “farewell discourse.” No propositions. No bromides like, “When life hands you lemons, make lemonade.” Jesus speaks of God in a relational, almost mystical way, because what we most need is to know the intimate involvement of God in who we are.*

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him. Perhaps, at some deep level, the disciples realized that they were about to experience the greatest test of their faith. Jesus suffered and died. Jesus went through the valley. As much as you and I would like to avoid suffering, it sometimes comes and if the pain is intense, it changes the whole way we see God and the ways in which that we think and do life.

Where is God in this pandemic? Where is God in our personal and social crises? Listen to what Jesus says in a section of John that scholars call the “farewell discourse.” No propositions. No bromides like, “When life hands you lemons, make lemonade.” Jesus speaks of God in a relational, almost mystical way, because what we most need is to know the intimate involvement of God in who we are.

“I will talk to my Father,” Jesus says, “and my Father will send the empowering presence of Spirit of Truth.” Then, Jesus promises on that day (on this day and every day) that I am in my Father and the Creator God is living at the same time in us.

To believe is to be “alive in God.” The root word of believe is “to live,” and this is the central thrust of Jesus’ words. We don’t stand at a distance from this triune God trying to muster the words, “I believe,” hoping this will get us through the valleys. Rather, we look within to trust the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the God in whom we believe but more importantly, the God who believes in us. This is the God who gives us strength for all that we face.

It’s the sixth Sunday of Easter. I know Jesus died.

Let’s give it a little more time, and we will find that Jesus is alive.

Live simply,  
Love generously,  
Care deeply,  
Speak kindly,  
Listen reverently,  
Pray daily,  
And then... leave the rest to God. ■

May 07, 2020 Sixth Sunday of Easter (May 17)

*Chuck Bugg is an author, professor, dean, pastor, mentor, and role model for many aspiring preachers.*

### **Facebook post by George Mason on May 10, 2020 Regarding the murder of Ahmaud Arbery**

For the 1,001th time, it’s not enough for white people not to be racists; we have to become anti-racists. We have to stop dead the history of white people stopping black people dead for the crime of being suspect of crime just for being black. If you are white and you find yourself instinctively saying we have to wait to get all the facts because we will probably find that he was doing something there other than jogging that would justify his being suspicious, you are no help at all. Your experience with law enforcement and gun-toting neighbors might lead you to trust them. But genuine empathy requires that you listen to the very different experience of black Americans and lament every such death as if it were your own child. Because in the end, there is no such thing in the eyes of God as other people’s children.

Read this black evangelical college professor, Esau McCaulley, an assistant professor at Wheaton College, and a priest in the Anglican Church in North America, where he serves as the director of the Next Generation Leadership Initiative, stated in the New York Times.

*“There is no bigger rebellion or miracle in the history of these United States than that of the black Christians who saw in the very book used to justify their oppression a testimony to a God who disagreed. There is no greater audacity than their use of that Bible to construct, almost from scratch, a Christian anthropology that demanded a recognition of black worth. That struggle continues...*

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*“In the end, the question is not whether this country will finally fully value black lives. America doesn’t get a vote in the matter. It lacks the competence. The question is whether this country will continue to find itself in the dangerous place of having policies, customs and laws that oppose the will of God.”*

# Christian and Muslim Gatherings Are Africa's Greatest Risk of Spreading COVID-19

By Jenny Taylor

Health experts, missionaries and others are warning that with up to 80 percent of Africa's populations, particularly Christian and Muslim, attending some form of mass worship, social distancing is being ignored.

Many religious believers are refusing to heed their leaders, believing "God is sovereign."

Video footage from March 20 made by former Al-Jazeera journalist Nicholas Haque shows a vast and volatile demonstration in Dakar, capital of Senegal, protesting a ruling by the imam of the Central Mosque not to attend.

Returned Youth with a Mission (YWAM) staffer, Garry Tissingh, speaking by phone from London, told Religion Unplugged that coronavirus will "have a huge impact because of the churches and mosques" still hosting gatherings.

Tissingh, a Dakar-based missionary for 15 years, had planned to leave the country anyway, but got away just five hours before the airport closed. "They were still all going to the mosque for Friday prayers, even though everybody including the imam, said, 'Don't go.'"

"'God is in control and what's this virus?' they were saying."

He said Christians felt the same way. "Religious populations are not listening."

That is ominous, according to Revd Hassn John in Jos, Northern Nigeria, a CNN stringer who broke the story of the mass abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls by Boko Haram.

Northern Nigeria is already struggling from Fulani and Boko Haram massacres which target Christians and any Muslim seen to be sympathetic to the West.

"If coronavirus gets a hold here on top of everything else, it will be catastrophic," he said.

Nigeria and much of Africa suffer from a flight of academics and professionals who could address what one Christian, Kampala-based former New Vision editor David Sseppuuya calls "the 10 plagues" - including disease - that prevent progress. Sseppuuya believes the pandemic is God's call for a "sabbath rest for man and all creation" and is pumping out by email powerful daily devotionals to his prayer teams.

"[God] has responded to rebellion and idolatry by

executing judgment via plagues ... God has shown our technological innovation, advances in medicine, philosophies of governance to be towers of Babel, crashing down, leaving man in utter confusion and complete powerlessness."

## The spread of COVID-19 in Africa

The World Economic Forum says that in the last two weeks, the number of affected African countries increased from 9 to 41.

"As people continue to travel, it is only a matter of time before COVID-19 spreads to the rest of the 54 countries on the continent," says WEF writer Neema

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*Northern Nigeria is already struggling from Fulani and Boko Haram massacres which target Christians and any Muslim seen to be sympathetic to the West. If coronavirus gets a hold here on top of everything else, it will be catastrophic," he said.*

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"Social cohesion and social gatherings are of great importance in Africa," she said. "For example, weekly attendance of a religious service is highest in Africa with rates as high as 82 percent in Uganda and Ethiopia. As a result, measures to impose social and physical distancing may prove to be more challenging."

This is against a background where health and health services are already hugely compromised. Liberia has no ventilators, for instance. A recent analysis of countries with the highest numbers of intensive care beds per capita does not include any country from Africa.

Tanzania came under fire when the country's president refused to close places of worship in a speech in church on March 22, likening the virus to "Satan" needing divine intervention to quell it, according to a Bloomberg report.

Kenya on the other hand has included religious meeting bans along with other measures limiting the spread of the virus.

Evon Benson-Idahosa, son of the Pentecostal archbishop of Benin, Benson Idahosa, reports from Nigeria's Edo State where religious, social and public gatherings of more than 20 people have been banned, that "many who have strayed from God are now repenting of their sins and brandishing the sign of the cross as they leave their homes."

He also notes a transactional attitude: "They come bearing tithes and/or offerings in the hopes that God will hear their prayers."

### **Online worship slowly growing**

Paul Bakibinga, senior producer at BBC Africa says the churches have been "behind the curve" in taking their service online, but notes that it is beginning to happen.

"I think in terms of electronic use, they could have been ahead of the curve, but this has forced them to move faster. The church is playing catch-up," he said.

Urging Nigerian believers to "fill the glaring gaps and practically serve the last and the least," Benson-Idahosa suggests that Nigerian believers may be suffering an identity crisis. "Who, precisely, are Nigerian believers without our religions and religious houses of worship?"

For the first time, Nigerian believers are being presented with a "church-less opportunity" to draw close to God.

Kampala-based Bishop Zac Niringiye, former Africa

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*"The imperative is to seek to serve others, particularly the vulnerable and disinherited." He is backing calls to convert churches to temporary hospitals or food pantries and use donated funds to buy ventilators and hygiene products.*

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Director for the Anglican Church Mission Society who has himself been in quarantine against coronavirus following a trip to UK, said in a Facebook message to his followers that "prayer vigils and assemblies" were a "cop out."

"The imperative is to seek to serve others, particularly the vulnerable and disinherited."

He is backing calls to convert churches to temporary hospitals or food pantries and use donated funds to buy ventilators and hygiene products. ■

*Dr. Jenny Taylor is a journalist, author and part-time Fellow in Media, Communication and Journalism at Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics in Cambridge, UK. She founded and for 12 years directed the charity, Lapid Media, to improve religious literacy in journalism and world affairs. Written for ReligionUnplugged.com this essay is reprinted with permission.*

My favorite quote that is not directly in the Bible came from Woodrow Wilson by way of Billy Graham. We should all write it on our voter registration card.

"If you lose your wealth, you have lost nothing; if you lose your health, you have lost something; but if you lose your character, you have lost everything."

This applies to a nation and its public/private organizations as well as individuals.

— Frank Broome

# It's Not Just the Coronavirus – Bad Theology is Killing Us

By William H. Lamar IV

COVID-19 – and its impact on black and brown communities – is the American empire in viral form, writes the pastor of Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C.

There comes a time when being nice is the worst kind of violence. This is especially true for the many Christians who erroneously conflate being nice with following Jesus. No more euphemisms. No more pretending. No more craving the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day “Kumbaya.”

I believe it is time for those who claim to follow Jesus to declare, without equivocation, that white evangelicalism is a morally bankrupt, bone-crushing theological system devoid of any semblance of the deity incarnate in Christ.

Multiple factors are responsible for the alarming death rates that black, brown, Native American and poor white communities are experiencing from the novel coronavirus.

Mendacious, misanthropic political leadership. A so-called health care system driven by profit and not human flourishing. An economic reality where even the below-a-living-wage money earned by poor and working-class people is siphoned off to the wealthy via tax cuts and tax policies that force wage earners to pay a larger share than dividend earners.

I am a preacher. So as I dust the COVID-19 crime scene, I am ultimately in search of theological fingerprints.

What kind of God-talk makes possible a refusal to provide the universal health care that may have mitigated this crisis? What kind of God-talk makes possible a refusal to invest the money necessary to end homelessness? What kind of God-talk makes possible the racializing of criminality and poverty? What kind of God-talk gives political power to science-denying policymakers?

The answer? White evangelical God-talk. The injustices that many communities are experiencing as a result of the novel coronavirus are inextricably linked to this theology. The evidence is irrefutable.

Political systems require a theological system. Constantine glommed onto Christianity to strengthen Rome. The French, British and Dutch empires all used

the signs and symbols of Christianity to plunder and to pillage. Norman Vincent Peale and Billy Graham were largely quiescent in the face of American war-mongering abroad and racialized violence at home. (Integrating revivals is hardly enough.)

From what I can see, their purpose was access to power, not its conversion to the ways of Jesus. Even Vladimir Putin deploys the deep, symbolic well of Russian Orthodoxy to strengthen his dictatorial machinations.

The political order that presides over the United States would fall overnight if white evangelicals with-

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*Political systems require a theological system. Constantine glommed onto Christianity to strengthen Rome. The French, British and Dutch empires all used the signs and symbols of Christianity to plunder and to pillage.*

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drew their support. But they will not.

Why won't they break ranks with race-baiting, xenophobic politics? Why won't they break ranks with economic policies that have destroyed wages and benefits and safety? Why won't they break ranks with a politics that is clearly nourished by white supremacy? I believe there is no Christianity to be found here.

American white evangelicalism is the offspring of the religion of settler colonialists, and the *raison d'être* of settler colonialism is to remove an existing population and replace it with another.

Settler colonialism is always violent, and it always has a theological system to support it.

The settlers who came to these shores were convinced that God was with them and that God commanded them to take what belonged to others. The idea that “what I survey I own” is deeply ingrained in white evangelicalism. Those who think, look or act differently are summarily marginalized, silenced and removed.

The fatal shooting of 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery -- chased down by two armed white men while jogging through their neighborhood -- is just one recent example of this in action. And it's why I argue that white evangelical theology's settler colonial impulse fosters the conditions for the novel coronavirus to thrive.

Push black people onto islands of poverty and deny them health care, adequate housing and equal education. Keep them away. Send brown people, whether they were born in the United States or not, back home.

In the white evangelical imagination, certain bodies will never belong. This is why Mr. Trump knew that birtherism and calling Mr. Obama a Muslim would catapult him to white evangelical prominence even though he does not hold to its purported moral code.

Owning space and controlling bodies has always been more important than personal morality in that imagination.

Even a "liberal" city like Washington, D.C., is marked by policies born of white evangelical assumptions about who belongs and who should flourish.

Would majority-white, middle-class neighborhoods not have hospitals? Would white people be forced from public housing without an offer of viable alternatives so that fat-cat developers could feast on public land and make exorbitant profits?

COVID-19 -- and its impact on black and brown communities -- is the American empire in viral form. It lodges itself among the poor and feasts upon them.

They cannot socially distance in tight, squalid quarters. They cannot wash their hands in lead-ridden water in Flint. We are having digital funerals for people who live in a city where Congress refuses to extend the health benefits that they themselves enjoy.

This bad theology of who belongs and who does not, of who is worthy and who is not, has the blood of my parishioners on its hands.

Jesus is a strange figure. In Luke 4, he went to his home "church" and told the people gathered there that God did not love just them. And he used the Scriptures

to buttress his claim.

The folks at that church tried to kill Jesus by hurling him off a cliff. But he made his way through the crowd and kept showing, in word and deed, that God was for everybody.

How would the novel coronavirus be affecting my community if the God-talk of white evangelicals, whose theology controls our political landscape, sounded more like Jesus? ■

*The Rev. William H. Lamar IV is pastor of Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. He previously served Turner Memorial AME Church in Maryland and three churches in Florida: Monticello, Orlando and Jacksonville. He is a former managing director at Leadership Education at Duke Divinity. Lamar is a graduate of Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University and Duke Divinity School. He is the co-host of "Can These Bones," the Faith & Leadership podcast, and can be reached on Twitter @WilliamHLamarIV(link is external).*

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## AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

As Chair of the Parliament of the World's Religions, I collaborated with a professional staff, multifaith trustee board, and hundreds of volunteers from the USA, Canada, and other countries to produce the seventh international convening of the Parliament in Toronto from November 1-7, 2018. Our creative efforts spanned almost three years and gathered 8,500 persons from 70 countries and 50 religions and spiritualities – who attended 12 plenaries, 1,000 breakout and training sessions, musical concerts, a film institute, an exhibition hall of global educational and craft items, and art and photography displays. The article below was commissioned for a Canadian Hindu academic journal, designed to promote the Parliament and honor Swami Vivekananda, the luminary who famously participated in the 1893 initial Parliament in Chicago. Christian Ethics Today has agreed to publish it here, believing interfaith relations are crucial to the peaceful flourishing of our diverse world.

At a Parliament, despite all the amazing joint events, nothing can be more fulfilling than individual encounters people have. Here are two such experiences related by one grateful participant.

From her Kansas City home, Carrah Quigley came to Toronto. She is the daughter of Robert Bechtel, who in 1955, long before Carrah was born, walked into his dormitory at Swarthmore College with the intent of murdering fellow students. Having suffered severe bullying all of his young life, including in his college dorm, the 22-year old entered the room of a random student – not one of his bullies – shooting and killing 18-year old freshman Francis Holmes Strozier. Shocked at what he had done, Bechtel emptied his gun in the hallway as he fled, later surrendering to police. Found not guilty by reason of insanity, he was sentenced to life confinement in the Fairview State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. There, Robert began reading the story of Mahatma Gandhi and contemplating Gandhi's teaching on non-violence, which changed his life. Five years later, a judicial panel – following psychiatric recommendation – determined Bechtel was no longer insane nor a threat to society, and he was released. A graduate degree, strong marriage, birth of two daughters and a 34-year acclaimed career as a psychology professor at the University of Arizona followed.

Carrah was 19 before her father told her of his youthful crime of rage, but also how Gandhi's message of peace and non-violence transformed his life. So Carrah determined to go to Toronto to see Arun Gandhi, the Mahatma's grandson. When they met, she—the daughter of a man who had murdered another, and he--the grandson of a man who was murdered by another, shared an emotional conversation as she recounted how the life of Arun's grandfather had saved her father's life.

More significant, perhaps, was what occurred when Carrah led a breakout, where she shared the story of her father, the restored murderer. Sitting in the audience was a couple from Newtown, Connecticut, who had been traumatized by the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary. During the Q & A, the three met in the aisle, hugged and cried together – the daughter of a school shooter and parents who knew the horror of a school shooter.

Miraculous experiences often do result from full transparency and accompanying forgiveness. Not all Parliament experiences are this dramatic, but the convening work of this 127-year old organization provides remarkable opportunities for ethical reflection and commitment to change.

# The Parliament of the World's Religions: A Legacy of Swami Vivekananda

By Robert P. Sellers

The breakfast table was appropriately prepared as we sat down to a meal both kosher and halal. I was meeting the guests seated on either side of me for the first time. To the left was Rabbi David Saperstein, the United States ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom under President Obama, and to the right was Sheikh Saleh Abdullah bin Humaid, president of the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia and imam of the Grand Mosque of Mecca.

As a Christian minister and Baptist professor from Abilene, Texas, and chair elect of the convening organization hosting the meal—the Parliament of the World's Religions—I sat between them. There we were: a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim, unofficial representatives of the three great Abrahamic religions, siblings descended from the same Semitic ancestor and committed to a life of belief in and submission to One God.

Where did such a fascinating shared meal occur? It happened one morning during the sixth convening of the Parliament in Salt Lake City, Utah, in October 2015. While this encounter was remarkable for me, because of the character and accomplishments of my breakfast companions, it was emblematic of the kinds of chance or planned meetings that frequently take place at these international gatherings.

The Parliament of the World's Religions is arguably the oldest, most documented, and largest convener of religious followers on Earth. Sometimes credited with originating the term “interfaith dialogue,” opportunities to experience similarly significant conversations with the religious other are limited only by one's personal inclinations and the willingness to engage with those who are different than oneself.

## The First Parliament

The original assembly in 1893 has been termed “the dawn of religious pluralism.”<sup>1</sup> Concerning this claim, professor and director of Harvard University's Pluralism Project, Diana Eck writes:

For some, this was surely the dawn of what we might call pluralism: that this plurality is where we, with all our particularities, make our home, and its energetic exploration is our common task.

For others, however, this plurality was seen as but a step on the way to an emerging world religion that would draw the finest essence of each into one. . . . For still others, the high-flown talk of the “coming unity of mankind” concealed an implicit vision of the gradual universalization of Christianity. On the whole, one could argue that the predominant vision of the Parliament was not pluralism, but the dawning of a new era of unity and universalism.<sup>2</sup>

The “World's Parliament of Religions,” the precur-

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*There we were: a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim, unofficial representatives of the three great Abrahamic religions, siblings descended from the same Semitic ancestor and committed to a life of belief in and submission to One God.*

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sor and model for the contemporary Parliament of the World's Religions, was conceived to be a vital part of the World's Columbian Exposition, a world's fair crafted to celebrate the “discovery” of the New World by Christopher Columbus. According to religious studies scholar Richard Hughes Seager:

In September of 1889, when plans for the fair were just getting under way, Charles Carroll Bonney, a Chicago lawyer and a layman in the Swedenborgian church, proposed that the Exposition Corporation sponsor a series of international congresses to complement the material triumphs and technological marvels that formed the substance of the Exposition's displays. “Something higher and nobler,” he wrote, “is demanded by the enlightened and progressive spirit of the age.”<sup>3</sup>

Of the 200 such congresses convened during the

Exposition—focused upon themes as diverse as “women’s progress, the press, history, fine arts, public health, medicine and surgery, engineering, temperance, government, social reform, and religion,” which collectively drew “an estimated 700,000 people in the course of the Columbian summer of 1893”—the World’s Parliament of Religions garnered “the most attention, the most applause, and the best press.”<sup>4</sup>

### The Goal of the First Parliament

Charles Bonney’s desire was that the World’s Parliament of Religions would “unite all religion against irreligion,” and that the Golden Rule would be “the basis of this union.” His hope was that “when the religious faiths of the world recognize each other as brothers, children of one Father, whom all profess to love and serve, then and not till then, will the nations of the earth yield to the Spirit of concord and learn war no more.”<sup>5</sup>

His conviction that persons of multiple faith traditions who choose to live as neighbors could ultimately effect change and inspire good in the world was echoed, more than a century later, in the assertion of Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng, who famously said that “There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.”<sup>6</sup>

The opening day for the highly anticipated 17-day festival was September 11, 1893. The Columbian Liberty Bell tolled 10 times for the great religions of the world, as they were identified at the end of the 19th century: three Indic religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism); three Eastern religions (Taoism, Confucianism, and Shintoism); and four Mediterranean religions (Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). At that same moment, a joyous procession into the Hall of Columbus and onto the decorated stage began, creating a colorful display of distinguished spiritual figures from many diverse faiths. As Seager poetically recreates the scene, there were:

*the ocher robes of Buddhist ascetics; the vermilion cloaks and turbans of Hindu swamis; the silk vestments of the Confucians, Taoists, and Shinto priests; and the somber raiments of Protestant ministers, all gathered together on the platform around a Catholic cardinal dressed in scarlet and seated upon a high chair of state.*<sup>7</sup>

In the words of Jenkin Lloyd Jones, founder and minister of the All Souls Unitarian Church in Chicago who witnessed the spectacle, “Over and over again the

throng burst into tumultuous applause. The waving of handkerchiefs, the mingling of tears and smiles combined to make a scene never to be forgotten.”<sup>8</sup>

### The Legacy of the First Parliament

This initial excitement did not wane over the two-and-a-half weeks of meetings. Inspired by stirring public speeches and stimulating personal encounters, attendees went home flush with idealism and zeal. Bonney optimistically predicted, “Henceforth the religions of the world will make war, not on each other, but on the giant evils that afflict mankind.”<sup>9</sup> Some considered planning another convening in India but global conflicts and depressed economies, as well as the lack of an ongoing organization to coordinate efforts, soon overcame idealistic intentions, so that the impact of the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions took years to realize. As Braybrooke explains, “[I]t was a long time before America could be described as a multi-religious society. Only then did the importance of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions come to be recognized as marking the beginning of the international interfaith

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*There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.”*

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movement.”<sup>10</sup>

A major aspect of this inheritance was the newly-felt appreciation in the West for the religious traditions of the East. More than mere curiosity, the shared sentiment of admiration can be attributed to the presence in 1893 of Swami Vivekananda, an appealing Hindu monk [who] mesmerized the 5,000 assembled delegates, greeting them with the words, ‘Sisters and brothers of America!’ This speech, which introduced Hinduism to America, is memorized by school children in India to this day. Swami Vivekananda became one of the most forceful and popular speakers [at the first Parliament] in spite of the fact that he had never before addressed an audience in public.”<sup>11</sup> From this impressive spokesperson for Asian inclusivity has come a legacy of accepting religious diversity and recognizing that multiple spiritual paths offer valid avenues for improving the world. Vivekananda made this point 125 years ago:

*Much has been said of the common ground of religious unity. . . . But if anyone here hopes that*

*this unity would come by the triumph of any one of these religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say, "Brother, yours is an impossible hope."*

...

*The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the others and yet preserve its individuality and grow according to its own law of growth.*

*If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: it has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character.*<sup>12</sup>

Another legacy of the 1893 Parliament, despite the fact that North American Christians were numerically dominant in the gathering, was the growing awareness that there are 'wells of truth' beyond Christianity.<sup>13</sup> This enlightened perspective can be heard in the words of many contemporary Christian scholars and practitioners when they note the benefits of drinking from interfaith wells. Benedictine abbess and prolific writer Joan Chittister, for example, suggests that our common humanity justifies our drawing from other wells. She writes:

*Whatever the distinctions of . . . culture, whatever the time and place in which we have lived, we are all human beings. . . . We have at our fingertips . . . a reservoir of wisdom as broad as the sky, as deep as history. [For each great spiritual tradition, in its own way, suggests a model of what it means to be a holy person.]*<sup>14</sup>

Ecologist and process theologian, Jay McDaniel, maintains that we should drink from other wells because our own water may be less than pure. He says, "Many people in different religions are realizing that the water is polluted, and that in order to cease polluting it, they need not only to dig within their own heritages for help but also to learn from other religions."<sup>15</sup> Perhaps most pointedly Matthew Fox, Dominican priest and author "silenced" by the Vatican for his Creation Spirituality, argues that the source of water in all the wells is the very same Divine River. He insists:

*There is one underground river—but there are many wells into that river: an African well, a Taoist well, a Buddhist well, a Jewish well, a Muslim well, a goddess well, a Christian well, and aboriginal wells. . . . To go down a well is to practice a tradition, but we would make a grave mistake (an idolatrous one) if we confused the well*

*itself with the flowing waters of the underground river. Many wells, one river.*<sup>16</sup>

The fact that many progressive Christians, including myself, are outspoken about the beauty, richness, and wisdom of other faith traditions is a wonderful extension of interfaith awareness that began developing in the minds and hearts of our spiritual ancestors long ago.

A further outgrowth of the World's Parliament of Religions was the seed of desire for a dialogue-with-difference which was carried back to distant places, planted in the soil of religious homogeneity, and allowed to germinate and produce what has become thousands of local interfaith projects and organizations around the globe. As one who has dedicated much of her adult life to this cause, Professor Kusumita Pedersen observes:

*This is the greatest contrast to the movement's early decades, and it seems to signal a new phase. The increase of local interfaith programs is important not only because it represents an ever wider*

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*If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: it has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character.*

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*horizontal reach of practical pluralism but also because it actualizes an ever deeper reach. It is in the local setting that members of different religious traditions can meet not just regularly and often but also over time, building enduring friendships and joining together for the long term in ongoing partnerships and mutual education about the realities of their day-to-day lives and their deepest, most abiding concerns.*<sup>17</sup>

The mission statement of the contemporary Parliament of the World's Religions concludes with the hope for "a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world." To attain these good and noble ends, people in grassroots organizations everywhere are voicing their prayers, joining their efforts, and dedicating their lives.

Regardless of their differences, they have realized that all of us are interconnected in the Human Family and that our collective future depends upon achieving these goals.

## THE MODERN PARLIAMENTS

In 1987, an idea began to be discussed around the kitchen table of the monastery at the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Hyde Park in Chicago. Swami Varadananda, a current trustee of the Parliament's board of directors, recalls that he and other devotees of the order founded by Swami Vivekananda were interested in celebrating the centenary of that first international convening.<sup>18</sup> To help to bring this dream into being, the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions was incorporated as a non-profit organization dedicated to extending the spirit and legacy of the 1893 event through subsequent global gatherings. The Chicago monk stresses that the first Parliament "has been described as a watershed event, meaning that the world changed—a new idea, an idea of interfaith harmony, of interfaith dialogue, of religions trying to understand rather than compete with each other—came out of that Parliament, and . . . out of the message of Swami Vivekananda. . . ."<sup>19</sup> Daniel Gómez-Ibáñez, the first executive director of the Council, reminisces about the beginnings of the modern Parliaments, saying: "The non-Western religions all understood that their origins and their visibility in the West could be traced back to 1893 to the original World's Parliament of Religions. . . . So the very first people who got involved were people from the communities representing non-Western religions."<sup>20</sup>

When the centenary celebration took place, however, participants from many different religions, both East and West, were enthusiastically engaged. But the two Chicago events were not the same, as Braybrooke emphasizes:

*In many ways the 1993 Parliament was very different to the one which it commemorated. The optimism and "frontier mentality" of 1893 had long gone. By 1993, the Cold War had ended and there was growing anxiety about the dangers of globalization and American imperialism. . . . [Moreover, t]he range of religions and spiritual movements in 1993 was far, far larger. Indeed, Spiritualist and New Age movements were conspicuous more so, perhaps than the Protestant churches.<sup>21</sup>*

Seager comments on the dissimilar nature of the two convenings, as well, writing:

*By late nineteenth-century standards, the first Parliament was a liberal assembly, infused with*

*a progressive post-millennial spirit, while partaking of the Euro-American triumphalism of the age. Its controlled structure buttressed its organizers' intention to present to the world both the essential unity of all religions and the supremacy of Christianity. The second Parliament was marked by a more egalitarian spirit. At the same time, it displayed a more critical concern for the impact of modernity on different peoples, traditions, and the planet. Its decentered structure seemed to mirror the intention of its organizers to affirm the complexity of the religious world of the late twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>*

It might be said that the first Parliament was an event consistent with the attributes of modernity—with its appreciation for the expert voices that represented the centers of influence in North America and beyond. The centennial Parliament, on the other hand, exhibited traits of postmodernity—non-totalizing (refusing "to impose one, overarching pattern upon the complex possibilities of life"), non-objective (recognizing that "all perceptions of reality contain an element of subjectivity and may therefore be suspect"), non-univocal (admitting that the "pursuit of knowledge is a participatory activity, a shared quest"), and non-elitist (insisting that "we listen not only to those from privileged positions . . . but also to those who are usually not given a chance to speak").<sup>23</sup>

Following the 1993 Parliament in Chicago, where Hans Küng brought the draft of a "Global Ethic" which was debated, modified, and endorsed by prominent figures from multiple religions, there have been four subsequent, international Parliaments which have fleshed out many of those shared ethical concerns. These convenings occurred in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1999; Barcelona, Spain, in 2004; Melbourne, Australia, in 2009, and Salt Lake City, Utah, in 2015. The average attendance at these multi-day conferences has been 8,000 persons from all around the globe. Massive plenary sessions have included presentations by spiritual leaders like the Dalai Lama of Tibetan Buddhism; Christian author and founder of Sojourners, Jim Wallis; Sri Sri Mata, or Amma, the Hugging Saint of Hinduism; Rabbi David Rosen, the British-born director of the American Jewish Committee's Department of Interreligious Affairs; New Age Spirituality guru and humanitarian Oprah Winfrey; Chief Arvol Looking Horse, the Lakota Keeper of the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe; and Shirin Ebadi, Muslim judge and human rights activist from Iran. These striking sessions have also featured Nobel Laureates such as Archbishop

Desmond Tutu of South Africa and Ireland's Mairead Maguire; political figures like Presidents Nelson Mandela and Jimmy Carter; academics including historian of religions Karen Armstrong and primatologist Jane Goodall; and international specialists like Jim Young Kim, head of the World Bank, climate change gadfly Al Gore, and Wei Ming Tu of China, the premier Confucian philosopher. Supplementing these plenaries have been between 600 and 1,000 breakout sessions at each Parliament—excellent opportunities for persons committed to the beliefs and actions of the interfaith movement to present their own ideas. Additionally, a Sacred Music Concert, art and photography exhibits, film premiers, and a massive exhibition hall filled with educational and craft materials add to the “world’s fair” atmosphere.

The overall impact can be life-altering. That was the testimony of Franciscan Sister Georgene Wilson, who wrote:

*The experience of the Parliament changed my vision. It was as if the soul of the cosmos met my glance with bold embrace. For a week of creation we coincided as if there were but one homeland where blessing was the law of the land. We exchanged the breath and fire of life in word and ritual, in poetry and dance, in confirmation and challenge, in tears and laughter, in fears and faith, in inspiration and invitation to global awareness as well as to a global ethic. Because of the experience of the Parliament my heart has grown more loving. My spirit breathes more fully. My desire for “unity coinciding in diversity” longs more passionately. I suspect I will forever be changing the filters through which I gaze and receive.<sup>24</sup>*

#### THE 2018 PARLIAMENT IN TORONTO

The seventh global convening of the Parliament will be in Toronto November 1-7, 2018. It is appropriate that the most inclusive interfaith organization in the world will meet in what the United Nations call the “most diverse city” on Earth. As one of our partners in Canada noted, “More than 140 languages are spoken in the city every day, and . . . over half [of Toronto’s six million inhabitants] were born outside of Canada, representing more than 200 ethnic origins.”<sup>25</sup> Toronto is a fitting host for such a pluralist gathering, indeed!

Three critical issues—promoting climate change, advancing justice, and countering hate, violence, and war—and three important constituencies—Indigenous

peoples, women, and the next generation of emerging leaders—will anchor this Parliament’s programming. Thousands of participants from 70 countries and 50 religions are anticipated. Trustees, staff, and volunteers have been working for many months in Canada, the United States, and other parts of the world to launch this remarkable conference.

Who should come to Toronto? Those who want to hear important speeches or enjoy music and movement as varied as the Japanese Shinto taiko drums, Balinese Hindu barong performance, African Christian children’s choirs, Jewish hava nagila dance, Indian Sikh rebab and dilruba, Turkish Sufi whirling dervishes, Australian aboriginal digeridoo, and Tibetan Buddhist monks chanting multiple harmonic tones from a single throat. And, those who plan to participate in ceremonies or rituals that come from religions other than their own. Or, those who desire meaningful conversations with persons from other spiritual traditions, when shared life stories and dreams are discovered to be so similar. Plus, those who hope for a place in today’s troubled world that reflects the inspiring words of Swami Vivekananda, who said about himself, his religion, and his nation:

*I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth.<sup>26</sup>*

Of all those who should come to Toronto, however, most of all it will be those who joyfully seize the moment to join with people of good faith—of many good faiths—so that, having been informed, engaged, and motivated—they may return home inspired to help create a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world. ■

*Rob Sellers is professor of theology and missions emeritus at Hardin-Simmons University’s Logsdon Seminary in Abilene, Texas. He is the immediate past chair of the board of the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago. He and his wife, Janie, served a quarter century as missionary teachers in Indonesia. They have two children and five grandchildren.*

All footnotes in this article are to be found on our webpage version at [www.christianethicstoday.com](http://www.christianethicstoday.com)

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# Christian Ethics Today

## A Journal of Christian Ethics

“We need now to recover the prophethood of all believers, matching our zeal for the priesthood of all believers with a passion for the prophethood of all believers.”  
—Foy Valentine, *Founding Editor*

### MISSION

The Christian Ethics Today Foundation publishes *Christian Ethics Today* in order to provide laypersons, educators, and ministers with a resource for understanding and responding in a faithful Christian manner to moral and ethical issues that are of concern to contemporary Christians, to the church, and to society.

### PURPOSES

- Maintain an independent prophetic voice for Christian social ethics
- Interpret and apply Christian experience, biblical truth, theological insights, historical understanding, and current research to contemporary moral issues
- Support Christian ecumenism by seeking contributors and readers from various denominations and churches
- Work from the deep, broad center of the Christian church
- Address readers at the personal and emotional as well as the intellectual level by including in the Journal narratives, poetry, and cartoons as well as essays
- Strengthen and support the cause of Christian ethics

Christian Ethics Today was born in the mind and heart of Foy Valentine in 1995. From the beginning the purpose of the Journal has been “to inform, inspire, and unify a lively company of individuals and organizations interested in working for personal morality and public righteousness.”

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