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Guns to Garden Tools

Patrick Anderson, editor

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. – Isaiah 2:4

In the summer of 1994, Carolyn and I traveled to Lillehammer, Norway, to attend the meeting of the European Baptist Union, an organization which met every four years. This was the first time the attendance of Baptist leaders from the former USSR was permitted. Throughout the Cold War, although they had been invited, Baptists and other Christian folks in the Soviet bloc were reluctant or unable to attend such meetings, either for lack of resources or fear of reprisal.

Being in this meeting was one of the most exciting experiences of our lives. The Berlin Wall had been breached in December of 1989; the Soviet Union was disintegrating; “religious freedom” was in the air. Carolyn and I met church leaders from Belarus, Ukraine, Estonia, Russia, Georgia, Bulgaria, Moldova—from all over the place.

One fellow from Bulgaria made a particularly strong impression on us. As a metal worker, artisan and sculptor, he had created haunting metal figures of Jesus carrying the cross on the way to Calvary. The face of Jesus was etched with pain, sorrow, and exhaustion as though the sculptor had poured his own suffering into the image.

He had made the statues from discarded artillery shell casings which he had readily found in his country by the Black Sea and then melted down in his forge. From his modest exhibit, he sold the few pieces he had brought with him. I arrived at his booth after the last one was sold, but he promised to make one for me when he returned home, and I was able to retrieve it a few years later. Today, it sits in a place of honor in our son Chris’ home.

The practice of turning ammo to art is inspiring. The *Isaiah* writer told of a day to come wherein the swords of war would be beaten into useful items for agricultural purposes. Art and utility made from tools of destruction, transforming militancy to peacefulness—it seems to be a trend.

I read of a man in South Sudan making hand-digging tools called “maloda” from the junk of war. He had fled murderous militia, carrying his five children for

days across the country from his home village. They became part of the 2.3 million people in Sudan, refugees of war. “I thank God that my hands were not cut off,” he said.

He was faced with the need for food, shelter, medicine, and a secure future for himself and his children. (I can only imagine the effort necessary to provide for children in a country plagued by war, with no available jobs or financial assistance. Where does one begin?) He was a farmer in the village he had abandoned, so he sought to follow that trade, regretting the loss of the planting implements he had left behind. Displaced persons cannot afford oxen or tractors for plowing; so they use their hands to dig in the rough soil to plant

There has got to be better ways of dealing with the passions that lead to destructive violence. If ever we have needed to turn swords into plowshares, it is now.

rows of sweet potatoes, millet, lentils and okra.

He joined a small group of Christian men as they met regularly to pray and encourage each other. They also learned business skills and blacksmithing and began to pool their resources together. With a loan of \$50 from the support a micro-lending ministry called “Five Talents” he started a business with his newly learned trade as a blacksmith.

Today, he pounds scrap metal into farm tools and earns enough money to employ two young men and is able to put all of his children in school and provide for his family’s basic needs.

Closer to home, in Colorado Springs, I learned about some Mennonite blacksmiths, Fred Martin and his son Mike. They combine their Mennonite faith and blacksmith skills to teach others how to forge guns into garden tools. They founded a program they call “RAWtools.” Their strong anti-violence belief system led to the name---WAR spelled backwards to make RAW, whose mission is to “disarm hearts and forge peace” by turning guns into garden tools.

They partner with willing communities to find new ways of resolving conflict through relationship, dialogue and alternative means of justice. Their non-violence workshops address theory and practice and employ role-playing techniques. They offer a free garden tool in exchange for a gun. They take the biblical passage Micah 4:4 ...*everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid*, to encourage people to look inward and address the triggers such as fear and hate that lead to violence.

“RAWtools” has been replicated in numerous places. “Guns to Garden,” for instance, is a gun buyback program created by “New Mexicans to Prevent Gun Violence,” partnering with local law enforcement to buy back guns and transform them into usable art and gardening tools.

Another offspring is based in Oakland, California. That group held “gun melting and transformation” events at the 50th anniversary commemoration of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Atlanta. Guns that had been used by loved ones to commit suicide, guns used in senseless shooting deaths, and guns designed for no purpose other than to take human life were cut up, smashed, melted, and repurposed as garden tools. Those rituals help to fulfill

the *Isaiah* mandate as well as forge a new kind of public ritual for processing grief.

Symbols can be powerful, and public rituals can heal. For those who have survived violence or lost loved ones, turning a weapon into a productive tool or object of art can mark a time in one’s life when violence is put behind them and new life arises in front of them.

As I think on the dramatic end of the Cold War, the excitement and promise felt in the Baptist gathering in Lillehammer in 1994, I cannot help but feel a deep sense of grief and foreboding today. The gun violence in America is epidemic. The number of and deadly capabilities of guns available to Americans boggles my mind. Russian soldiers are poised on the border of Ukraine threatening a new Hot War less than three decades after what many of us had celebrated as the end of Soviet militarism and the beginnings of a new era of peace.

When Jesus was arrested in the Garden, and Peter tried to whack Malcus’ head off with a sword, Jesus said, “Put your sword away.”

There has got to be better ways of dealing with the passions that lead to destructive violence. If ever we have needed to turn swords into plowshares, it is now.

■



The January 6th Insurrection Involved Hundreds of Misguided Christians

By Marvin A. McMickle

An African American hymnwriter named Lucy Campbell reports that she was walking along a street in Memphis, TN, when she came upon a blind man named Connie Rosemond who was sitting on the street playing spirituals and church songs on his guitar. As he played, people would drop some money in his cup to express their support for his efforts. At one point, a group of men approached Connie Rosemond and told him they would give him five dollars if he would play one blues song.

Understand that for Connie Rosemond who was blind and poor with his feet wrapped in burlap bags because he could not afford to buy a pair of shoes, five dollars in 1919 was an enormous amount of money. However, this blind and broke guitar player turned down money that could have taken him off that street corner for at least a few days.

The men kept asking him why he was not willing to stop playing gospel songs for a while and play some blues tunes instead. Connie Rosemond answered by saying, “I can’t do that. All I know is, there is something within.”

Those words inspired Lucy Campbell to write the words to this song:

Something within me that holdeth the reins,
Something within me that banishes pain,
Something within me I cannot explain,
All that I know, there is something within.

This is the mark of authentic Christian faith, something within us that is unashamed to share our faith in public and unwilling to compromise that faith for any short-term financial or political gain. We are not governed by the headlines in the newspapers, or the breaking news flashes on CNN or MSNBC or Fox News.

I do not doubt that many Republican politicians in the Ohio legislature or in the U.S. Congress have the outward signs of religious faith. They are likely familiar with passages in the Bible. They might even keep a Bible in their office or in their home. However, based upon their recent actions I very much doubt that the teachings of the Bible have penetrated their hearts.

You cannot read the Bible and then plot to overthrow a free and fair election. You cannot say you are

a Christian, but then work to undercut democracy, take away people’s right to vote, and rig the process so you can challenge or overturn any election result you do not like.

These Republican politicians have essentially substituted Donald Trump for Jesus Christ and claim that not to support Trump was equivalent to not supporting God! Many of these people are so-called “evangelical Christians” who say they believe in the authority of scripture. But you would not know that by listening to their words or observing their deeds.

I wonder how many people who rampaged through the U.S. Capitol on January 6th were self-declared

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Christians who attend church somewhere and read the Bible and claim they believe in God.

I saw them standing on the podium where the speaker of the house sits when Congress is in session and when the president gives the State of the Union Address. I saw them claiming to pray to God in the name of Jesus. Of course, that was after they stormed past the Capitol Police, smashed in the doors and windows of our national capitol, chanted “hang Mike Pence,” left urine and feces in offices and hallways, and went through the desks of U.S. Senators taking pictures and putting their feet up on those desks. It was after all that when they decided it was time to pray.

Pray to whom? Pray about what? Pray in the middle of an insurrection? Pray in the middle of an attempted coup of the U.S. government while a presidential election was being certified? Pray after a Capitol police officer died after being hit in the head with a fire extinguisher? Pray after a Confederate flag was paraded

through the lobby of the U.S. Capitol, something that never happened even during the Civil War? Pray after the Capitol had been forcefully invaded, something that had not happened since the British did it in 1814 attempting to reconquer the colonies they had lost in the Revolutionary War? Pray to whom and about what?

None of this would have occurred if any of those so-called “evangelical Christians” had actually been real Christians who understand the word of God must work from within them, guiding their thoughts and words and deeds. They should learn a lesson from Connie Rosemond and have something within them that is

greater than their petty, partisan agenda. ■

The Rev. Marvin A. McMickle, Ph.D. is pastor emeritus of Antioch Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, retired in 2019 as president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in Rochester, New York, where he had served since 2011. This article first appeared on January 7, 2022 in The Real Deal Press, the premier fully digital news organization in Northeast Ohio targeting the news and information needs of the more than 400,000 African American residents of the area. See their webpage at info@therealdealpress.com

Ain't Gonna Study War No More

As sung by Nat King Cole

Won't that be one mighty day
When we hear world leaders say
"We don't have to cry no more"
"We're givin' it up, we gonna let it all go"

[Chorus]

"We're givin' it up, we gonna let it all go"
Ain't gonna study, study war no more
Ain't gonna think, think war no more
Ain't gonna fight, fight war no more
We're givin' it up, we gonna let it go
We're givin' it up, we gonna let it go

We will take gun powder to have fun
Then get rid of the atom bomb
Something else that we can do
Get rid of all those rockets too

[Chorus]

The money spent on bombs alone
Can build poor people a happy home
Something good we can do
You treat me like I treat you

[Chorus]

No more starving in the nation
Everybody gets an education
Every time a baby is born
We know he'll have him a happy home

[Chorus]

No more sleeping in the street
We all happy whoever we meet
Then we all will shake their hand
And make this world a promised land.

When Things Do Not Go that Way

By Chuck Poole

Every three years, the lectionary places in our path this morning's lesson from the gospel of Mark. And, every time it rolls back around, things work out wonderfully well; twice—first, for the unnamed woman with the debilitating, isolating, flow of blood; and then, for Jairus, who had lost his daughter, only 12-years-old. Two great sorrows, both relieved by the touch of Jesus.

Which is the way things go sometimes. Sometimes, our deepest sorrows become our highest joys, because our heaviest burdens are lifted away. That which we fear the most does not come to pass; the sadness we have lived with the longest is lifted; the disease is healed; the pain is relieved; the conflict is resolved; the worst is behind us; and the best is before us.

As it was for the suffering woman and the grieving man in today's gospel lesson, so it is for us. It's a miracle. Sometimes things work out that way.

And, sometimes, things do not work out that way. Sometimes, the burden is not lifted; the struggle is not resolved; the disease remains; the sorrow stays. Things do not always work out for us the way they worked out for the people portrayed in today's gospel lesson.

Such is the nature of life. To say as much is not to be negative or pessimistic, but rather to be truthful. People do not come to church to be told cheerful-sounding things which will not prove true in life's toughest arenas. Anything we say concerning suffering and loss must ring true on the saddest ears in the room.

The truth is, there is a long list of the ways things can go wrong in this life and, hile none of us will go through all of them, all of us will go through some of them; sometimes, one hard thing after another, sometimes more than one difficult thing at the same time—not because God wills it for us or sends it to us, but because that is the nature of life in the world.

To speak of the unresolved struggles and unrelieved sorrows of life often leads to questions about “unanswered prayers,” a way of thinking about prayer which measures the worth of our prayers by whether or not they “worked;” a way of thinking about prayer which sees prayer as a transaction in which we may be able to persuade God to give us what we need if we can show God enough faith, or persistence, or prayer partners. It is a way of thinking about prayer to which we are naturally and understandably drawn, partly because

it leaves us with some control: If we can just pray harder or have more faith, perhaps we can get God to do our will.

There are, of course, some things in this life over which we do have that much control. Are we kind? Are we thoughtful? Are we truthful? Do we live lives of integrity? Do we practice careful speech? Do we treat all others as we wish all others to treat us?

Beyond those things over which we do have some autonomy and control, there are all those things which lie beyond our power to manage. There are sorrows and struggles, burdens and losses, diseases and injuries, some of which turn out amazingly well, as happened twice in today's gospel lesson; but there are

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others which do not turn out that way.

But, still, we pray, as C.S. Lewis said, “Not because we are trying to change God, but because we can't not pray.” Once, we may have thought Paul's admonition in Philippians that we should “pray without ceasing” was impossible to obey. But the longer we live, the more we find it impossible not to pray without ceasing. It's breathing in whatever news life brings, of joy or sorrow, and breathing out either, “Thank you, Lord” or “Help us, Lord” with prayer becoming our life until, eventually, our life becomes a prayer. Sometimes, our prayers change our lives and, other times, our lives change our prayers, from the first best hope, to the next best hope, to the last best hope.

But there is never no hope. Because we love God as unconditionally as God loves us, we never stop believing that God is with us and for us, when life could not be better and when life could not be harder. Which is why, if we say, when we do get the miracle, “Isn't God

good!” we also say, when we don’t get the miracle, “Isn’t God good!” Because we know that the goodness of God is not tied to how well things go for us. Sometimes, things turn out as well for us as they did in today’s gospel lesson. Sometimes they don’t. Either way, God is good, and, either way, we love and trust God the same.

On a Sunday morning in 1927, at a church in Aberdeen, Scotland, a pastor named Arthur J. Gossip, suffering through an enormous crisis in his own life, preached the now famous sermon, “When Life Tumbles In, What Then?” We know the answer to that tender old question. When life tumbles in, we still get up every morning and take care of what we can take

care of, our own kindness, gentleness, truthfulness and integrity. And we still love and trust God, praying the same as ever, only harder, for God to help us go through the wonderful thing God might have done. but did not do.

Or, as one wise soul once said, “Faith is what you have left when you don’t get the miracle.”
Amen. ■

This sermon, preached. June 27, 2021 at Northminster Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost and is reprinted here with permission of the preacher, the pastor of Northminster, Chuck Poole.

Heather Cox Richardson January 22, 2022

Joe Biden’s presidency is just over a year old. Biden has embraced the old idea, established by the Democrats under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Republicans under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, that in a democracy, the federal government has a responsibility to keep the playing field level for all. It must regulate business to maintain competition and prevent corporations from abusing their employees, protect civil rights, provide a basic social safety net, and promote infrastructure.

Nuns against Nuclear Weapons – Plowshares Protesters Have Fought for Disarmament for Over 40 Years, Going to Prison for Peace

By Carole Sargent

In July 2012, Sister Megan Rice, an 82-year-old Catholic nun, and two men walked past multiple broken security cameras and into the heart of a high-security nuclear complex. Y-12 in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, was the birthplace of the atomic bomb and now stores enriched uranium for nuclear warheads. Although thanked by Congress for exposing astoundingly lax contractor security, the three were also convicted and served two years in prison.

Rice, who died in October 2021, was part of a protest tradition called Plowshares. Since 1980, there have been over 100 Plowshares actions in the U.S., the U.K. and Europe. The name comes from the books of Isaiah and Micah in the Bible: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” The books of Isaiah and Micah are accepted as Scripture by Christians, Jews and Muslims.

As a historian studying faith-based calls for nuclear disarmament, I focus on nuns at the forefront of this significant movement. My upcoming book, “Transform Now Plowshares,” shows how they use existing international law and their own creative courtroom strategies to guide U.S. courts and even Congress to include pacifist principles in court records and congressional documents.

Civil resistance, not disobedience

Rice’s journey with *Plowshares* began when she retired after four decades teaching science and math in schools founded in Nigeria by her religious order, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. At Baltimore’s Jonah House, a faith-based activist peace community, she met Sister Anne Montgomery, a Society of the Sacred Heart nun and the daughter of a prominent World War II naval commander. Montgomery became Rice’s Plowshares mentor.

Montgomery helped develop Plowshares’ legal strategies, such as attempting to put nuclear weapons on trial. This means explaining to juries that nukes have been internationally illegal since the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and even its 1968 pre-

decessor – and also how their use violates the Geneva Conventions and other binding treaties.

When testifying, these nuns do not describe their actions as “civil disobedience,” because that would mean they did something illegal. Instead, they prefer “civil resistance,” which Montgomery called “divine obedience” to higher principles of peace.

One of *Plowshares*’ most effective strategies is to represent themselves in court, known as *pro se*, which in Latin means “for oneself.” It allows protesters, including these nuns, to discuss humanitarian

Just like Rice’s group and many other Plowshares activists, the three nuns carried rosaries, Bibles and other objects in small black bags. Explosives experts, however, thought they might have bombs. Attack helicopters swooped in as they sang and prayed. Police pointed semiautomatic rifles at them and shut down a nearby highway.

law, the necessity defense – meaning you broke a small law to stop a large crime – and the U.S. 1996 War Crimes Act. Lawyers cannot discuss these issues because judges limit cases to mere trespassing or property damage. Using *pro se*, activists speak freely in ways that might get a real lawyer professionally reprimanded. Lawyers often do, however, stand by as advisers.

Sabotage charges

Rice wasn’t the first nun to be convicted of sabotage. Ten years earlier, Dominican Sister Ardeth Platte, who inspired the nun character on the popular Netflix prison series “Orange is the New Black,” went to prison in

Danbury, Connecticut, on the same charge. Platte (pronounced Platty) spent her retirement years engaging in Plowshares and other protests at weapons sites.

In 2002, along with fellow Dominican nuns, Sister Carol Gilbert and Sister Jackie Hudson, Platte breached an intercontinental ballistic missile facility in Colorado. The three poured blood in the shape of a cross to remember victims of war. Then they rapped on the blast lid with a household hammer. The small hammers do not damage such massive weapons in any significant way. The three were accused of preventing the United States from attacking its enemies or defending itself, which is the definition of sabotage.

Just like Rice's group and many other Plowshares activists, the three nuns carried rosaries, Bibles and other objects in small black bags. Explosives experts, however, thought they might have bombs. Attack helicopters swooped in as they sang and prayed. Police pointed semiautomatic rifles at them and shut down a nearby highway. This was an unusual reaction, since Plowshares protesters are usually stopped and arrested with far less fanfare, and it may be why the prosecutors won a sabotage conviction.

Rice's prosecutors brought up Platte's case during her trial, in which she and her companions were

also convicted of sabotage. However, two years later an appeals court overturned it, admonishing that "no rational jury could find" they actually injured the national defense.

Leadership for prisoner justice

Rice, Montgomery, Platte, Gilbert and Hudson all showed exceptional leadership in prison. Since their first sentences were handed down in the 1980s, they have used incarceration time to run prayer groups, teach prisoners to read and help them earn high school diplomas. They advocate for poor women, many of color, who often receive unjustly harsh sentences for prostitution and nonviolent drug offenses committed because of poverty.

Rice identified with poor people. She called her fellow prisoners friends and asked to remain with them. Her ultimate act of leadership ideally would have been to die serving them. As she said in 2015, "Good Lord, what would be better than to die in prison for the anti-nuclear cause?" ■

Carole Sargent is a literary historian, Georgetown University and is a Friend of The Conversation where this article first appeared on December 8, 2021 and is reprinted here with permission.

GRATITUDE

We are so very grateful for the affirmation and faithful support from our readers. Thank you.

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We are blessed.

Jesus and Gandhi: A Study in Commonalities

By Robert P. Sellers

In 2019, during the 150th anniversary year of the birth of Mohandas K. Gandhi, I was invited to give a webinar speech, made available throughout India, on the topic of “Gandhi in the New Era.” The sponsoring and inviting body was Harijan Sevak Sangh, the organization that Gandhi himself formed in 1932 to carry on his work of championing the human rights of the casteless, or “untouchables,” of his country.

It was a distinct honor for me as an American Christian to present my thoughts on Gandhi. Throughout my many years of involvement in higher education and especially during the quarter century I lived and worked in Asia, I had grown to appreciate, value and learn from followers of other religions. I am a better Christian because of the people from other faith traditions whose lives of devotion have instructed and motivated me. Gandhi, in particular, had become an inspiration. His personal sacrifice and public example had often influenced what I said, wrote, and did to promote justice for the world’s most marginalized peoples.

Reaching out to Hindu friends across our cultural, racial and religious boundaries was an opportunity I perceived to be divinely orchestrated. It caused me to revisit various accounts of the life of the Mahatma, or “Great Soul,” and thus to be enriched and emboldened once more. It called me to understand that I must never underestimate the power of my one voice to help persons who are socially neglected or systemically abused because they are different from the norm.

As a Christian I follow Jesus, who has often been referenced in Christian theology as the “human face of God,” one whom millions of Hindus might call an “avatar” of the Divine. They celebrate the Mahatma as the “Father of the Nation,” one that millions of Christians credit with inspiring the modern, political application of Jesus’ moral posture of nonviolence and non-retaliation. In a sense these two men uniquely connect Christians and Hindus, for many Hindus honor Jesus while many Christians honor Gandhi.

As I thought about “Gandhi in the New Era,” I realized that Gandhi and Jesus had in common multiple historical circumstances, character traits, personal choices and life commitments.

First, formative incidents occurred in the lives of

both men when they were just 12 years of age.

Although these events were very significant in the individual families where these boys were growing to maturity, they also prefigured the passions that would guide the public lives of the famous men these boys would become.

Jesus, reared in a typical, pious Jewish family, made the journey to Jerusalem with his parents when he was 12, on the cusp of his bar mitzvah, or coming of age initiation. As the Gospel of Luke tells the story, Jesus already had a mind of his own. When his parents and fellow townspeople left the capital city to begin their multi-day trip walking back to their village of Nazareth, Jesus wasn’t in the crowd. He wasn’t

Although these events were very significant in the individual families where these boys were growing to maturity, they also prefigured the passions that would guide the public lives of the famous men these boys would become.

running on ahead of the adults, laughing with other children, throwing rocks and playing games. His parents, Mary and Joseph, assumed he was in the caravan somewhere but simply out of sight. But he wasn’t. Jesus had stayed behind in Jerusalem, perhaps sleeping in a dark corner of the Temple complex at night, then wandering the Court of Israel during the day and asking questions of priests and Torah scholars. Two days later, his frantic parents somehow found him in that gigantic place overrun with pilgrims. Immensely relieved, they took him home after securing his penitent promise to be submissive to their authority. Yet Jesus had seen the city – teeming with the masses of commoners, governed by privileged ecclesial and political power brokers. It is not unreasonable to conclude that the status and wealth he observed, compared to the hopelessness of the outcast poor who flooded the city, made a profound mark on the boy’s psyche

and would shape his striving for justice years later when he was an adult.

Gandhi was 12 when something in his household happened that he would never forget. A man named Uka, a *bhangi*, a scavenger – a member of the lowest *varna*, or class – was employed by the Gandhi family to clean the latrines. Since the Hindu scriptures only mention four classes in society, to be relegated to a supposed fifth *varna* meant that one was considered to be casteless. Indian purity regulations dictated that if anyone of a superior class touched a scavenger, even accidentally, then ritual ablutions had to be performed in order to become clean again. Young Mohandas told his mother, however, that he didn't consider Uka inferior to anyone, and furthermore that he believed the Hindu scriptures did not justify untouchability or the need to purify oneself after touching a scavenger. Indeed, he later realized that the Bhagavad Gita places the *Brahmin*, or first *varna*, and the *bhangi*, the so-called fifth *varna*, on the same level – textual proof for the adult Gandhi that he had properly defended his friend Uka and challenged his mother Putlibai so many years before [Vogesh Chadha, *Gandhi: A Life* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1997), 10].

Second, the oppressive life context and response to it by the one global Christians call “Savior” and “Lord” and the one Indian Hindus call “Bapu” and “Gandhiji” are also fascinatingly parallel.

While a child of his times, Jesus was not a prisoner of his culture. Rather, he was often criticized for defying social convention. Historically, he lived during Israel's occupation by a foreign power, the Roman Empire. Jesus grew up hearing the frustration and despair from his fellow Jews who felt humiliated because they lived in a conquered land. He could understand their longing for liberation, yet he believed – and said – that freedom could not be found by taking up swords.

Gandhi also lived counterculturally, refusing to base his life choices or conduct on the opinion of either friends or foes. He saw how his countrymen and -women languished with the heavy boot of the British Empire on their necks. Gandhi heard those who argued for armed resistance against the colonial overlords, but he conceived of another way – *Satyagraha*, the “Force born of Truth and Love,” the path of non-violence.

Third, it seems that both Jesus and Gandhi experienced personal traumas so intense that they were inspired to become advocates for justice, human dignity and liberation.

Jesus grew up in the Galilean village of Nazareth, where he trained alongside his father to become a carpenter, a trade he practiced into young adulthood. According to the Gospel of Matthew, however, when he found out that his cousin John was preaching to crowds of spiritually hungry people along the banks of the Jordan River, he left home and traveled south to find him. Intrigued by what John was saying, he asked to be baptized by him and thus became a novice in the movement. He must have heard people saying that his cousin had once bravely confronted Jewish religious leaders who were in the crowd at the river. Perhaps those Pharisees and Sadducees had enough clout to complain to powerful friends how they had been publicly shamed by John, because it wasn't long until John was arrested. When Jesus learned what had happened to his cousin, he returned to Galilee. There, he abandoned his carpentry shop and began gathering disciples to accompany him in his own new work as an itinerate teacher and reformer. The subsequent news of the beheading of John by King Herod Antipas

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would surely have hit Jesus hard, yet it also must have strengthened his resolve to stand firm against unjust power.

By all accounts, Gandhi's life direction was also forever altered by personal trauma – an ugly, racist experience he had in South Africa on June 7, 1893. Mohandas was a young lawyer riding a train to Pretoria. A white passenger disapproved of the Indian's having taken a seat in the first-class carriage of the train. The 23-year-old was holding a first-class ticket and refused to move; so white stewards and the conductor forcibly removed Gandhi, a person of color, from the compartment and threw him off the train at the very next stop. Shaken by this unfair treatment, Gandhi determined to continue acts of civil disobedience as a way to fight the “deep disease of color prejudice.” He soon decided to return to India, where his life was never again the same [Arvind Sharm, *Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 54-59].

Fourth, neither Jesus nor Gandhi sought notoriety or fortune, although each became wildly popular.

Jesus was a celebrated teacher who drew large crowds of the curious and the faithful, but he rejected the trappings of fame. When the devil tempted him with worldly power, Jesus sent him away, declaring that only God should be worshipped, not kingdoms or earthly splendor. Later, when an exuberant crowd attempted to force Jesus to become their king, he immediately withdrew to a lonely place to calm his spirit and tamp down the temptation to worldly power. He emphasized his commitment to austerity by reminding those who wanted to follow him that he owned no property, had nowhere to lay his head, and carried no baggage to distract him from his crucial mission. In one of his most famous teachings, he told a wealthy young man seeking eternal life that he must sell all that he owned and give the proceeds to the poor. Guided by that demanding principle, Jesus lived simply, and at the time of his death he possessed only one garment, gambled for by his persecutors.

Gandhi, too, was well-known both in the ashrams of India and the parliaments and presidential halls of Western governments as a man who embraced simplicity. People were startled that this major figure on the world's political stage preferred his shaved head, sandals and *dhoti*, spinning wheel and dried mud and bamboo hut. Gandhi had very few personal possessions at the time of his death, despite the fact that he had not been born into a poor family. Trained as a lawyer in London, later practicing his profession in South Africa, Mohandas nonetheless returned to India where he rejected the three-piece suits of traditional success and consciously adopted a modest demeanor he felt would bring him closer to the poor people whose causes he wanted to champion.

Fifth, advocating for the marginalized, the left out, the disadvantaged and the poorest of the poor was the special work of both of these prophetic teachers.

Jesus repeatedly defied convention and took the side of marginalized persons in first-century Palestine. Religious conservatives, like the Pharisees and Torah scribes, accused him of not adhering to their standards of piety and purity. They faulted him for not rebuking a hemorrhaging woman who hoped for a miracle by touching his robe. They were scandalized that he would allow another woman – one known publicly as a “sinner” – to wash his feet and dry them with her hair. They criticized him for putting his hand on the skin of a leper he was healing, and for approaching

the corpses of the dead that he raised to new life. They complained that he conversed with the demons of possessed victims, and spoke affirmingly of half-breed Samaritans. For these leaders of religious society, the problem with Jesus was that he was not clean enough; for Jesus, the problem with these self-righteous judges was that they were not compassionate enough.

Gandhi did not forget how he felt to be told that Uka was polluted and polluting, and he also remembered what he had said to defend him. When Gandhi's voice grew larger and louder, as an adult he made his opposition to untouchability a major part of his life's work. He campaigned to liberate the Indian people from the shackles of colonial occupation, but he also endeavored to free outcasts from the bonds of discrimination and dereliction. He accepted the wisdom that different occupations together contribute to the welfare of society, but rejected the notion that distinctions in labor should necessitate diminished wages or reduced respect. All people, he believed, were worthy of dignity [Dhirendra Mohan Datta, *The Philosophy*

Jesus lived simply, and at the time of his death he possessed only one garment, gambled for by his persecutors. Gandhi, too, was well-known both in the ashrams of India and the parliaments and presidential halls of Western governments as a man who embraced simplicity. People were startled that this major figure on the world's political stage preferred his shaved head, sandals and dhoti, spinning wheel and dried mud and bamboo hut.

of Mahatma Gandhi (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), 105]. Thus, he went on a 10-month journey of 12,000 miles in 1932, visiting towns and villages everywhere to preach against the evil custom that put the poorest people in a subhuman status. Moreover, when an earthquake devastated large sections of the Bihar province in 1934, Gandhi publicly proclaimed that the disaster was a “chastisement for...the sin of untouchability” [Chadra, *Ibid.*, 232-233].

Sixth, both Jesus and Gandhi based their assessment of the worthiness of all individuals on everyone's inherent connection to God.

In the Gospel of John, the resurrected Jesus appeared to his distraught disciples beside the Lake of Galilee. At a campfire where he was cooking breakfast, Jesus gave instructions to Simon Peter, one of his closest followers. He said to him, "Simon, if you love me, take care of my little ones." For Jesus, all people were his little ones. Christians should read this command to Peter not only as a first-century charge to one disciple, but also as a compassionate directive intended for every disciple throughout all of Christian history. I hear this ancient admonition as a pointed pronouncement that challenges me personally – to do everything possible to lift up the fallen and improve the status of the forgotten of society. I believe I must do this because such people – those who are physically, mentally, sexually, socially, economically, politically and religiously outside the parameters of what society considers to be normative – are God's special "little ones" whom God loves, members of the Family of God.

Gandhi, in his crusade to create a new and better reality for the outcasts, used a different term to define them. They were not "untouchables" or "scavengers," but "*harijan*" – the "children of God." He founded an eight-page weekly, called *Harijan*, and through this journal disseminated his convictions about untouchability. To join in the struggle, he founded Harijan Sevak Sangh, an organization that still bears the name and continues the work begun 90 years ago. In 1933, Gandhi turned over the Sabarmati Ashram, where he had lived for almost two decades, to those beloved partners. He undertook a 21-day fast in 1943 to protest for the rights of the children of God, an ordeal he might not have survived if his friends had not secretly added fruit juice to the water he allowed himself to drink. At the core of all these acts of solidarity with the Harijan was his belief that everyone is born into this world with innate nobility. To take up their cause was his proud decision, for as Gandhi said: he was "touchable by birth, and untouchable by choice" [Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banares* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 207].

Seventh, a trait that characterized both Jesus and Gandhi was their acceptance of persons who followed other religious paths.

Jesus was committed to the idea that religious exclusivism did not reflect the wide, wide love of God. So,

he unapologetically attended to the needs of Gentiles, as well as he cared for his own fellow Jews. He healed the daughter of a Syrophenician woman, cleansed a Samaritan leper, and saved the dying servant of a Roman soldier. All of these people needed a miracle – the Canaanite, the Samaritan and the Roman. They practiced spiritual traditions other than his own, yet the compassion of Jesus was expansive and his concern for others included them. In his final public statement, as Matthew recounts it, he sent his followers out to Jews and Gentiles alike – to people of all religions and no religion – to share the gospel ("Good News") of a Divine Presence who cares for all of God's children.

Gandhi, too – although a Hindu by birth and choice – had an openness to the best of other spiritual traditions. In his study of the scriptures of the great world religions, he discovered that each of them offered insights to help people attain a truly religious life [Datta, *Ibid.*, 44-45]. He explained: "Hinduism is not an exclusive religion. In it there is room for the worship of all the

Gandhi condemned the behavior of the Christians he observed who didn't practice the faith they professed. But Jesus lived what he taught. So did Mohandas Gandhi. Both men embodied principles that opposed community disharmony and fostered interpersonal unity.

prophets in the world." Asked if he were a Hindu, Gandhi replied, "Yes I am; I am also a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist, and a Jew" ["Mahatma Gandhi Quotes," *Goodreads*, accessed at <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/361107-yes-i-am-i-am-also-a-muslim-a-christian>].

Eighth, both Jesus and Gandhi have been identified with what is called the "Sermon on the Mount."

New Testament scholars explain that the Sermon on the Mount, comprising three chapters of ethical material in the Gospel of Matthew, contains Jesus' central teaching on what it means to be an authentic member of the new community that he was establishing. The "Sermon" – most certainly a compilation of moral instructions rather than one long, sustained discourse

– contains some of Jesus’ most memorable and challenging thoughts.

The Sermon on the Mount was very inspiring and challenging to Gandhi. He felt that if it were truly followed, it should “revolutionize the whole of life.” He observed, however, that Christians didn’t practice what the Sermon taught – expressed in the words of Methodist Harvard professor Diana Eck as “identifying with the poor, loving one’s enemies, absorbing insults and returning love.” Thus, Gandhi admitted: “If...I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount, and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, ‘Oh yes, I am a Christian’.... But I can tell you that, in my humble opinion, much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount.” In saying this, Gandhi condemned the behavior of the Christians he observed who didn’t practice the faith they professed [Eck, *Ibid.*, 206].

But Jesus lived what he taught. So did Mohandas Gandhi. Both men embodied principles that opposed community disharmony and fostered interpersonal unity.

Ninth, both men paid a terrible price for their integrity, morality and humility, because their courage and countercultural lives led to their deaths.

Jesus was martyred, the victim of jealous and corrupt religious leaders who lied to insecure and self-promoting politicians. They, in turn, conducted sham trials and sentenced this peaceful religious reformer to be crucified – the cruelest form of execution the Roman Empire had ever employed – a punishment reserved for those who dared to challenge the State.

Gandhi too was martyred, the victim of a disillusioned and angry fellow Hindu, Nathuram Godse. He, along with two other conspirators, believed the Bapu had shown favoritism to Muslims in the discussions and ultimate decisions concerning the partition of India. So, as the frail and elderly Mahatma made his way to an afternoon prayer, he paused to offer *namaskar* to some of the faithful who had gathered. That’s the moment, as Gandhi smiled with his hands folded in the traditional gesture of respect, that his assassin rushed forward and shot him three times at point-blank range [Assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, *Wikipedia*, accessed at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination_of_Mahatma_Gandhi].

Anantanand Rambachan is a Hindu emeritus professor of religion, philosophy and Asian studies at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. He contributes to a book on Hindu-Christian dialogue by writing: “As a Hindu, I have never found it difficult to identify with the per-

son of Jesus. The symbols and images, parables and examples used by Jesus in talking about the spiritual life do not appear, in my view, to be entirely different from those employed in the Hindu tradition. From my Hindu viewpoint he embodies the ideals and values of the authentic spiritual life” [Anantanand Rambachan, “Christian Influence on Hindu Spiritual Practices in Trinidad,” *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, ed. Harold Coward (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 212-213]. I am moved by this confession of appreciation for Jesus from a Hindu scholar. In fact, I feel that I can make a very similar admission: As a Christian, I have never found it difficult to identify with the person of Mohandas Gandhi. The symbols and images, stories and examples used by Gandhi in speaking about the spiritual life do not appear, in my view, to be entirely different from those employed in the Christian tradition. From my Christian viewpoint he embodies the ideals and values of the authentic spiritual life.

Jesus was martyred, the victim of jealous and corrupt religious leaders who lied to insecure and self-promoting politicians. They, in turn, conducted sham trials and sentenced this peaceful religious reformer to be crucified.

Tenth and finally, the memories of these heroes of Christian and Hindu tradition are sometimes presented quite differently today, and may be said even to be distorted.

This is because not every Christian nor every Hindu necessarily agrees with testimonials to the authenticity of the spiritual lives of Jesus and Gandhi.

Some Christians, maybe many who claim to follow Jesus, choose to overlook the difficult, countercultural and risky actions of the Galilean. They turn his non-conventional and challenging teachings on behalf of others into a call for a personal, interior life of spirituality that is touchy-feely nice and safe. Some of them condemn other Christians who claim that the Good News Jesus embodied and imparted was about social justice. They distort his memory by making the historical Jesus into a self-help guru and the eternal God into

a needy Deity who wants our praise more than our service to God's children and the earth.

Hindu critics, some who comment on Gandhi today – join others who are not themselves Hindu – to analyze this founding father of India with less than admiration. Christopher Hitchens, for example, notes that in India, a Hindu nationalist organization called the Hindu Maha Sabha, wants to erect statues of the man who murdered Gandhi. As Gopalkrishna Gandhi, an academic, former governor of West Bengal and another of Gandhi's grandsons, said in 2015 in the British capital at a ceremony honoring his grandfather: "The fact that London...raises a statue for him even as India has some people [who] contemplate a temple for his assassin, shows that Gandhi's work for freedom of belief and expression succeeds in the most unbelievable ways" [Christopher Hitchens, "The Real Mahatma Gandhi: Questioning the Moral Heroism of India's Most Revered Figure," *The Atlantic Magazine*, accessed at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/07/the-real-mahatma-gandhi/308550/>].

It seems clear that we live in a time that needs to consider both "Jesus in a New Era" and "Gandhi in a New Era." I am committed to do all that I can, through my writing and teaching, to contribute to that new (old) view of Jesus as religious and social reformer who wanted to be followed rather than worshipped. And, I am also supportive of the efforts of Harijan Sevak Sangh and others – who want to return to Gandhian means for the sake of humankind – by calling for a new (old) view of Gandhi as an imperfect man who did all that he could in his life and work in India to liberate the nation and raise the status of the untouchables of society.

I close with a personal anecdote.

One of my beloved mentors was John Jonsson, a world religions scholar who grew up as the son of Swedish missionaries in South Africa. John was a legendary minister who stood for election to the South African Parliament as an anti-apartheid candidate. He was one of the very few whites who signed the famous Kairos Document, which originated in the Soweto townships of Johannesburg, and was a liberation declaration of rights for Blacks in South Africa.

After John barely lost his bid for election, the Afrikaner regime of Prime Minister P. W. Botha

confiscated all of his properties and bank accounts, so he and his wife immigrated to the United States, where John became a theology professor. In one of his classes, a young seminarian asked him, "Dr. Johnson, do you think you will see Gandhi in heaven?" John paused but a moment, then replied, "No, I don't think I will see Gandhi in heaven." The exclusivist Christian student was pleased and smiled, thinking the professor had validated his opinion that only Christians would enjoy the afterlife with God. Then Johnson continued: "I won't see Gandhi...because he will be so far ahead of me in heaven that our paths will never cross!"

I agree with John's conclusion that Gandhi is acceptable to God because of the life of compassion and forgiveness he lived – a life that in so many ways became a reflection of Jesus' own life.

Of course, as a Christian, I respond differently to Jesus than to Gandhi. Jesus is the one whose ethical way of being in the world has challenged and transformed my life and enabled me to be reconciled to the Divine. Yet, as I reflect upon the example of this

The symbols and images, stories and examples used by Gandhi in speaking about the spiritual life do not appear, in my view, to be entirely different from those employed in the Christian tradition. From my Christian viewpoint he embodies the ideals and values of the authentic spiritual life.

simple Indian saint, I affirm that he truly was a "Great Soul." ■

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What Americans Hear about Social Justice at Church – and What They Do about It

By R. Khari Brown, Ronald Brown

On June 5, 2020, it had been just over a week since a white Minnesota police officer, Derek Chauvin, killed George Floyd, an unarmed African American man. Protests were underway outside Central United Methodist Church, an interracial church in downtown Detroit with a long history of activism on civil rights, peace, immigrant rights and poverty issues.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the church was no longer holding in-person worship services. But anyone walking into its sanctuary that day would have seen long red flags behind the pastor's lectern, displaying the words "peace" and "love." A banner reading "Michigan Says No! To War" hung alongside pictures of civil rights icons Fannie Lou Hamer and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as labor-rights activist Cesar Chavez. In line with her church's activist tradition, senior pastor Jill Hardt Zundell stood outside the building and preached about her church's commitment to eradicating anti-Black racism to her congregants and all that passed by.

In our sociology and political science research, we have both studied how race, religion and politics are intimately connected in the United States. Our recent book, "Race and the Power of Sermons on American Politics" – written with psychologist James S. Jackson – uses 44 national and regional surveys conducted between 1941 and 2019 to examine racial differences in who hears messages about social justice at church. We also examined how hearing those types of sermons correlates with support for policies aimed at reducing social inequality and with political activism.

For centuries, many Americans have envisioned that their country has a special relationship with God – that their nation is "a city on a hill" with special blessings and responsibilities. Beliefs that America is exceptional have inspired views across the political spectrum.

Many congregations that emphasize social justice embrace this idea of a "covenant" between the United States and the creator. They interpret it to mean Americans must create opportunity and inclusion for all – based in the belief that all people are equally valued by God.

Politics in the pews

In our book, we find that, depending upon the issue,

between one-half and two-thirds of Americans support religious leaders taking public positions on racism, poverty, war and immigration. Roughly a third report attending worship settings where their clergy or friends discuss these issues and the importance of acting politically on one's beliefs.

African Americans and Hispanic Americans tend to be more supportive of religious leaders speaking out against racism and attempting to influence poverty and immigration policy. On the whole, African Americans are the most likely to support religious leaders expressing political views on specific issues, from poverty and homelessness to peace, as we examine in our book.

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Black Americans are also more likely to attend worship settings where clergy and other members encourage them to connect their faith to social justice work. For example, according to a July 2020 Pew Research Center poll, 67 percent of African American worshippers reported hearing sermons in support of Black Lives Matter, relative to 47 percent of Hispanics and 36 percent of whites.

Race also affects the relationship between hearing such sermons and supporting related policies. When statistically accounting for religious affiliation, political party and demographic characteristics, attending these types of congregations more strongly associates with white Americans supporting progressive policy positions than it does for Black Americans and Hispanics.

White worshippers who hear sermons about race and

poverty, for example, are more likely to oppose spending cuts to welfare programs than those who hear no such messages at their place of worship.

This is not the case for African Americans and Hispanics, however, who are as likely to oppose social welfare spending cuts regardless of where they worship. In other words, while hearing sermons about social justice issues informs or at least aligns with white progressive policy attitudes, this alignment is not as strong for Blacks and Hispanics.

Clergy of predominantly white worship spaces are often more politically liberal than their congregants. Historically, this has translated into members pushing back when clergy take public positions that are more progressive than their congregation's.

This may explain why white parishioners who chose to attend congregations where they hear social justice-themed sermons tend to be more politically progressive, or more open to sermons challenging previous views, than are other white parishioners.

From words to action

However, when it comes to the connection between hearing sermons and taking political action, race doesn't matter as much. That is, when taking into account religious affiliation, party affiliation and social demographics, people who hear social justice-themed sermons in their places of worship are more likely than other Americans to engage in political activism, regardless of their race.

For example, during the months following Floyd's murder, Black, white and Hispanic congregants who heard sermons about race and policing were more likely than others to have protested for any purpose in the past 12 months, according to data from the 2020 National Politics Study. More specifically, white Americans who attended houses of worship where they heard those types of sermons were more than twice as likely to participate in a protest as other white

worshippers. Black and Hispanic attendees were almost twice as likely to protest, compared to those attending houses of worship where they did not hear sermons about race and policing.

The difference between people who attend houses of worship with a social-justice focus and people who did not attend religious services at all is even more striking. White Americans who heard such messages at religious services were almost four times more likely to protest than white Americans who did not attend services; Black and Hispanic Americans were almost three times as likely.

Today, many Americans are pessimistic about inequality, political divisions and ethnic conflict. Yet, as these surveys show, social justice-minded congregations inspire members to work for policies that support their vision of the public good. ■

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Today, many Americans are pessimistic about inequality, political divisions and ethnic conflict. Yet, as these surveys show, social justice-minded congregations inspire members to work for policies that support their vision of the public good.

State University. This article first appeared in The Conversation on November 18, 2021 and is published here with permission.

Evil and Suffering: An Interim Theodicy

By R. Page Fulgham

Laura's story is repeated all too often. Her mother died a slow death from Alzheimer's disease and then her brother developed colon cancer and died. Next, Laura's husband committed suicide; and within just a few months, her 14-year-old son was killed in a horrible car accident. A few years later, Laura's dad ended his own life. Laura contracted polio as a child and eventually developed Alzheimer's and died. My first question is, "Why is there so much suffering in the world?" Next, why would one person have to endure so much suffering? Then, I want to know, "Can I honestly believe in a God of love and power, when God cannot prevent or does not choose to prevent suffering?"

In every century, in every age, these questions have reverberated as humans have searched for answers. Questions tumble from cancer wards, hurricane relief centers, and the parents of innocent infants who have died or suffered trauma and pain. Are there any reasonable answers in the Bible? Why does "just trust God" sound so thin to those who experience great suffering and loss? Pious and simple answers stream from religious teachers. Meaningless shibboleths and trite sayings such as "it must be God's will" abound.

Many have tried to unravel the mysteries of evil and suffering only to complicate the problem. In the words that follow, I attempt to simplify a complex theological and human problem, discuss possible solutions, and give practical answers, all in an effort to bring some measure of understanding. This is not an easy road, the journey toward understanding, but a necessary road that must be traveled to demystify complex and sometimes unexplored avenues. Challenges to traditional faith and beliefs about evil and suffering and the introduction of a fresh approach to the issues involved can lead to a new and refreshing understanding.

The contrast between Augustinian and Irenaean theodicies gives us a starting place toward a new understanding of theodicy, or the attempt to rectify the existence of evil while maintaining faith in a loving God. Augustine attempts to relieve God from the responsibility of suffering and places it on the misuse of human freedom. Irenaeus accepts God's ultimate responsibility and seeks to show for what good reason God created a universe in which evil was inevitable. Based on our findings, I would suggest that the

Irenaean type of theodicy (which suggests that we are created as children and through suffering grow into maturity) gives more clarity and hope in finding answers to the persistent questions about evil and suffering. The Genesis story affirms both the goodness of creation and the origin of human disobedience; but there is no indication in the text that goodness means "perfection," which Augustine affirms and Irenaeus rejects. We find more evidence for original blessing than original sin.

What we find in the Genesis narrative is an attempt to name what the ancient Hebrews viewed in their world, with any literal interpretation of that account leading to wholesale despair in placing God in unten-

The fact that evil exists is one of the givens of life, as is the freedom to choose between good and evil, making humans responsible for those choices.

able positions. The biblical material does not support a systematic understanding of evil. Rather, it describes the results and implications for daily living, yes, even within the pain, suffering and anomalies of life. God does not need to be absolved from the responsibility of creating or allowing evil. We cannot know with certainty the origin of evil, but we have to contend with the figure of the serpent which may depict the choice of evil present in the created order. The fact that evil exists is one of the givens of life, as is the freedom to choose between good and evil, making humans responsible for those choices. It is in the context of insurmountable questions about the existence of natural and moral evil that we become fully human or, as Irenaeus said, we mature into our understanding of what it is to be human in the likeness of God.

For the unbelieving world, perhaps this is not a problem; but it is often used to taunt Christians who sometimes struggle to answer. It is a problem only for those who hold tight to the existence of an all-loving and all-powerful God who has chosen, it seems, to limit

interference in either the natural or moral order. The self-limitation of God's powers is more palatable than the view of a finite God unable to alleviate suffering. John Newport says,

"Limitation is inherent in God's own choice and character, rather than in some force outside God's power. The suffering of the innocent is part of the price that must be paid if we are to be really personal beings.... In spite of the horrible suffering choice can involve, most of us would prefer such a world to its alternative."¹

Despite the challenges and limitations of this world, it is the place where souls are made, to borrow a phrase from Irenaeus. Yet, we must forever listen to the plaintive voices decrying the price of such soul-making. Dostoyevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, wrestles with the problem of innocent human suffering. In the estimate of Kenneth Surin, "What he [Ivan Karamazov] cannot accept, therefore, is the price, in terms of innocent human suffering, that is exacted so that men and women may come to enjoy eternal harmony." Surin continues:

The 'soul-making' theodist's central affirmation, that human suffering is the means by which supreme happiness is ultimately attained, is unacceptable to the 'protest' atheist: like Ivan, she questions the moral propriety of a process which submits innocent children to unbearable pain so that human beings can get to heaven. For Ivan, there is no possible moral justification for the belief that the sufferings of the innocent can be expiated or redeemed in this life or in a post-mortem existence.²

Only in the crucified Jesus and the sufferings he did not deserve can we begin to glimpse the mystery of suffering that will be unveiled in the eschatological age. The heart of the gospel message is that through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, God has proclaimed more than mere judgment on human sin. God was in Christ, proclaiming and revealing both the image and likeness of God. In Christ we have a glimpse of what we can become in God's likeness.

Maybe this answer does not bring comfort to the many who suffer from the anguish of life and the pain of existence in today's realities; but perhaps it solves for many the mystery of the origin of evil, the necessity of suffering and the ability to make choices which either drive us into the arms of a loving God or usher us into the oblivion of hopelessness.

As a believer, I cannot fathom a God who arbitrarily inflicts pain and suffering on the innocent or is unaffected when children are suffocated in the gas cham-

ber. In my mind, that kind of God becomes some kind of evil monster. Instead, what happens in the world is given as an opportunity for us to interact with pain and suffering, to learn, to grow, to become what is pictured in Scripture as genuine followers of Jesus. That involves a faith choice. I choose to believe in a loving and powerful God, not just *in spite* of what happens, but mostly *because* of what has happened. Yet, every time I read or hear of some tragedy, large or small, I wince and wonder why, or if it could have been prevented or lessened. The Irenaean type of theodicy does indeed involve the paradox, as John Hick points out, "that moral and spiritual growth occur through overcoming evil and that evil therefore contributes to good by being overcome by it." But does that mean that we should not strive to overcome evil in the world? On the contrary, Hick concludes, that is why we are here!³

To illustrate, the overwhelming evidence of systemic racism in the world is a looming problem facing all nations. The false ideology of white supremacy is self-perpetuating in the structures and institutions of

God is not lying-in wait to catch sinners in the act and smite them, as the existentialist atheist, Jean Paul Sartre, implied. God is waiting patiently for opportunities to show love and mercy.

society. I think that surely, we can do better, be better people. We must, we will dig our way out of the well of hatred and injustice. It is the unimaginably senseless events of history that cause me to continue to dive into the reasons as to why and how human actions can be so evil. It is the faith of my forebearers that lets me sleep at night.

The question of predestination by God is debated in reformed theological circles and in the wider Christian community. Calvinism, or hyper-Calvinism, is credited with the belief that God predestines some for salvation and some to damnation as shown in the Augustinian type of theodicy. If in fact God does predetermine all human and natural events in history, then humans have no real choices, no freedom of will, except in the pre-fallen world as described by Augustine where humans were free only to fall or fail. Thus, our lives are spent in faux freedom as mere pawns on God's chess board, appearing to be independent, but actually groveling in

servitude to the divine plan and Planner.

In my attempt to understand predetermination, I conclude that we do have choices as free-will creatures. Otherwise, why would God create humans who were not free to choose to worship God? In the beginning of the human race, God endowed us with the power to make choices, even bad ones, and to serve God out of that freedom. Would not God prefer to have one person choose to serve the kingdom rather than an army of sycophants pre-programmed to obey? Otherwise, what's the point? We are free to choose evil, and that partially accounts for the evil in the world, but human freedom does not account for all evil, particularly natural events which are judged by some to be evil, by others, to be just nature performing as nature was created and intended by God.

We can conclude that the Irenaean approach to the problem of the origin and existence of evil gives more pathways to understanding than does the Augustinian approach. The Irenaean type of theodicy demythologizes evil and suffering and the superstitions surrounding the centuries of erroneous doctrine, teachings, and preaching about the origin and nature of evil, and especially original sin. The Middle Ages (but not limited to) produced the most outrageous non-biblical ideas about the nature of Satan, his powers, and the afterlife. Witchcraft, demonology, exorcisms and bargains with Satan contribute to Carus' conclusion that "The Devil becomes greater and more respected than ever; indeed, this is the classical period of his history and the prime of his life."⁴ The reaction of the Enlightenment was total skepticism. What moderns are left to dissect and digest is a mixture of truth and fiction, fantasy and facts. Richard Rohr said, "In one way, the doctrine of 'original sin' was good and helpful in that it taught us not to be surprised at the frailty and woundedness that we all carry." He continues:

I truly believe that Augustine meant the idea of original sin to be a compassionate one. Yet historically, the teaching of original sin started us off on the wrong foot—with a no instead of a yes, with mistrust instead of trust. We have spent centuries trying to solve the "problem" that we're told is at the heart of our humanity."⁵

My argument is that "the devil didn't make you do it, you made yourself do it." In other words, we cannot blame outside interference when our choice is our choice. Nor can we say with any biblical authority that God is punishing the world or individuals for their sinfulness or sinful choices by inflicting pain and suffering. God is not lying-in wait to catch sinners in the act and smite them, as the existentialist atheist,

Jean Paul Sartre, implied. God is waiting patiently for opportunities to show love and mercy. Even the preaching of hellfire and damnation is in and of itself a misrepresentation of the Bible message about God's love for the sinner. With the scarcity of biblical teaching on hell and damnation, and the over-abundance of material on the subject generated by the Church, I suspect we have preached more than we know about the subject. I have a theory that the Church, especially in the Middle Ages, developed an overly harsh doctrine of hell and punishment in order to manipulate and control the population.

I would be so bold as to say that what we humans call evil is a social construct, made-up imagery convenient for categorizing and classifying, but otherwise, a reality that is not really real. Evil was not created, nor does it exist as a separate substance, over against the substance of the universe. In other words, evil is only evil because we agree that it is evil or non-good. In a perfect world, there would be no bad or evil, only good. The slightest amount of non-good spoils

The new question and indeed the only question left to answer is, "How will I respond to evil in light of my faith in God?"

the whole scene and thus evil enters our vocabulary. While evil, as a socially agreed upon construct, is nebulous and squirmy, hard to hold or describe, there is a tipping point, that a family, community or society can agree is crossing the border between good and bad. To restate, there is only one reality, mostly referred to in studies like this as the natural or physical order, but the natural order is divided into agreed upon realities like evil, morality and non-good, as well as good and acceptable. Civility leads us to agree that murder and rape are evil, that the senseless death of children through negligence or intentionality is evil—and the list goes on *ad infinitum*. Could there be a society where there was no evil, where everything, including what we call evil, is acceptable and tolerated? Maybe so, but I do not think I would want to live there or even visit.

According to Pew Research Center, most Americans say suffering in the world comes from people—not God. In September 2021 a survey of 6485 Americans polled online shows that Americans overall have a strong belief in God and that belief appears to be

unshaken in the midst of hardship and suffering. Instead, according to Pew, seventy-one percent of Americans lay some blame for the suffering that occurs in the world at the feet of individuals and societal institutions. Thirty-five percent say that life happens and very few respondents (eight percent) suggest that sinful nature or free will is the root of evil or bad things. Even less (four percent) conclude that evil or suffering provides an opportunity for growth.⁶ While on the one hand this research shows positive movement away from traditional religious approaches to evil and suffering, it also shows that only a very small percent of American respondents has any appreciation for hardship as a tool for growth, self-understanding, or pathway of faith.

We must conclude that reframing the conversation about evil and suffering leads to a broader understanding and a different set of questions. The old questions of “why evil?” and “why does God permit/cause evil?” seem inadequate to examine or explain reality, the real “reality,” not the one imagined. The new question and indeed the only question left to answer is, “How will I respond to evil in light of my faith in God?”

Indeed, the fight or flight phenomenon sets in, and we gird our loins and fight for meaning and purpose in order to hold the darkness at bay, or we bury our heads in the sand. As a society, we face a major problem—how to manage what we deem evil and maintain civil order, equality, justice and peace.

While we cannot take away all evil, and we would not want to, we can attempt to hold a balance. We need evil to prod us to reach our full potential. John Haught, scientist, theologian, and advocate of biological evolution, states, “If God had not opened up the universe to novelty and drama from the start, there would have been no suffering. But there would have been no increase in value (beauty), life, sentience, and consciousness either.” Haught notes that a perfectly designed world would preclude any struggle with how to make sense of evil and suffering in a world said to have been created by a good and all-powerful God, and concludes that a perfect world would have been “trivial in comparison with the dramatically intense universe that is still coming into being and whose meaning remains obscure until the story is fully told.”⁷

The greatest contribution of Irenaeus to the conversation on evil and suffering is that we accept reality, even with our artificial social constructs, as the best place to grow, or complete the story, and prosper with and because of the existence of evil (even horrible evil). The attempts to explain, justify and absolve

God from the responsibility of evil lead only to dead ends and theological entanglements that great minds of present and previous centuries have been unable to resolve.

In the end, we cannot answer the ultimate question of evil and suffering in the natural order or the moral universe either philosophically or theologically. We can only live in the mystery and suffer with the courage of hope as we await the eschaton. In the meantime, we struggle with the pain, with the mysteries, with the horrible and unexplainable evil found both in the universe and in humans, and with the existential angst of life—all of which compel us to the quest for the likeness of God. Becoming fully human (in the likeness of God) is not completed until we reach our eternal destiny, or, in Haught’s words, “when the story is fully told.” There is much to be said about the God of the future who leads us gently into the unknown, which requires patience suffused with hope.

How does undeserved suffering make theological sense? One answer is that it does not make sense at

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all. Another might be we will not know until someday. I would suggest that according to biological evolutionary science, all that happens to us influences, affects, or alters our DNA which is passed on to future generations. In other words, what seems meaningless or senseless now may hold future value. What Haught and other biological evolutionists are saying is that Darwinian science may be able to help us understand that suffering has adaptive significance but cannot tell us what subjectivity is or why subjectivity came into existence.⁸

“Someday” seems like a thin answer to the many who suffer the ravages of war, the devastation of poverty, the consequences of disease, and to those who are the victims of crime, hate, and racism; to those children who are born into the city of hopelessness and despair, who cling to life with the boney fingers and the swollen bellies of starvation.

“Someday?” It is incumbent on all decent human beings on the face of the earth to pull out all the stops, leave not one stone unturned until we alleviate the great afflictions of poverty, war, disease and the moral plagues of hate, racism, greed and indifference. Although we cannot possibly eliminate all pain and suffering, we can try! In the meantime, what hope can we offer?

Whatever solace, comfort, and future lies in the promise of eternity, surely it is found in the transformation into the likeness of God, as Irenaeus has presented. We are being remade by the Holy Spirit into beings who bear the scars of pain and suffering but who will find ultimate completion in the likeness of God. ■

The author has edited this excerpt from his forthcoming book published by Smyth & Helwys, *Evil and the Garden of Good: Exploring the Mystery of Suffering*.

1 John P. Newport, *Life's Ultimate Questions: A Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Dallas: Word

Publishing, 1989), 240.

2 Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1986), 98.

3 John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* [Revised Edition] (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 376.

4 Paul Carus, *The History of the Devil and the Idea of Evil* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1974), 283.

5 Richard Rohr, “Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation,” The Center for Action and Contemplation. October 25, 2021.

6 Pew Research Center, November 21, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/in-their-own-words-how-americans-explain-why-bad-things-happen/>

7 John Haught, *Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 84-85.

8 John Haught, *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 179.



On Book Reviews

By Walter B. Shurden

I subscribe to *The New York Review of Books*. I adore it. But I do good to read one article, at most two, of each of the 20 issues each year. The articles are long. The small font is for millennials. The content is often esoteric and out of my league. And the NYRB is a clumsy little newspaper hard to hold. On top of all that, I have no earthly idea how to “file” the old issues. Throwing them in the recycle seems a mortal sin, like throwing a new book away. Ugh!

However, it is quite impressive to have copies lying around the house in conspicuous places when people visit. Apart from that transparent pretense, an authentic footnote to my education lives here.

When I entered theological seminary in 1958, (that’s 63 years ago), I ran headlong into the requirement of writing a “critical book review.” The most fruitful assignment ever required of me, it was far more helpful than writing a term paper. Term papers are often little more than exercises in academic bricklaying, piling one footnote on top of another with no critical acumen required. Learning to write insightful critical book reviews enables one to write good term papers, theses and dissertations.

At my seminary in 1958, they craved “critical.” I discovered by means of an ugly grade that a simple summary of the book was not what they had in mind. Nor did “critical” mean nastiness or negativity. Although “what” the author said, was very, very important, my charge was to fillet the book judiciously: “how” was it said; “why” was it said; “who ought to read” what was said; “when” was it said; “what was right and wrong” about what was said; “what was left unsaid;” and “who had said something like this or the opposite of this.”

I searched, but no inerrant template existed of correct critical questions to ask of the book. The critical aspect of the review depended altogether on the nature of the book. I believe that when seminary is done correctly, a lawyer’s schooling has absolutely nothing over a good theological education. Both have prosecutorial dimen-

sions. Each must learn to speak clearly and read critically, to ask creative, critical and analytical questions of a text or a person.

I became so attracted to the idea of a “critical book review” that I rode it like a hobby horse. I began to spend time, maybe hours, on the second level of the seminary library, reading book reviews from major theological, ethical and historical journals. It was for me, and still is, great fun and exceedingly educational.

And then one day, bam! I realized that I had to critique the reviewer of the book as well as the journal in which he reviewed the book. Then the entire exercise really became critical. Perspectives and points of view came into focus: that of the journals, that of the reviewers of the books, and that of the authors of the books.

Why these words about a “critical book review”? Because I recently read in the NYRB a fascinating review of what appears to be an interesting book I have not read. The reviewer tantalized. She caused me to want to read the book, maybe the best sign of a good review. But she also challenged. Did she do right by the author? Did she write a review of a book that the author did not write, pitching her interests instead? I came away as interested in her comments as in the contents of the book itself.

I probably will neither read the book nor critique the critic of the book. But now I know a bit about the book and one person’s take on the book. If you come to my place and have read the book, I’m armed with questions for you— questions about the author and the book and questions about the reviewer and the review. And my education, like that Energizer Bunny, keeps going on and on and on. ■

Walter B. Shurden is Minister at Large at Mercer University and lives with his wife, Kay, in Macon, Georgia.

Hold On

By Nathan Brown--For Jody Karr
Friday, December 4

Due to an unprecedented number
of calls, we are all still waiting
for a representative, sitting
in a cubicle, somewhere
in the poorly-lit offices
of the Year of 2020
to answer the phone.

And it's December, folks.

For concerns about COVID-19,
please press 1

For worries about when the movers
are going to arrive at the White House
please press 2

For problems with political partisanship,
you can press 3,
but don't expect change.

For wishes that the doubters will wise up,
mask up, and do what's best for others,
go ahead and press 4,
if you think it will help.

For questions about the American
medical system, health insurance,
or lack of resources and support
for its workers, or how to fix it,
5 connects the caller to
a recorded message
from Congress.

For fears about the planet,
plants, animals, endangered
species, climate, food, water,
please press 6...
and keep pressing it.
do not give up.

For when it will be
safe to go outside again
and try to rebuild our lives,
press 7...or 8...or 9...
nobody really knows.

And please do not bother
With zero. It goes nowhere.

To speak to a representative,
please hold on.
really...

Hang in there...
with everything you've got...

And the force will be with you, soon.

*Nathan Brown is Poet Laurette of
Oklahoma. This poem can be found in
his book, In the Day of Our Resilience,
Mezcalita Press, 2021 and is printed here
with his permission.*

Persistence

By Gerald Wright

She sits on the sidewalk with her back against the building,
her ginger bangs hanging loosely on her forehead,
and busies herself scanning reams of ledgers...pulled from a dumpster.

The need for work - for dignity - runs deep in her.

A T-shirt rug shrouds her store of worldly belongings stacked in piles

In the shopping cart she has commandeered.

Clothes.

Books.

Random objects - each with a story.

"This metal cover? I think it came from the yacht of Aristotle Onassis..."

She likes the shaded area near a certain sidewalk cafe
where the smell of coffee and baking pastries loiters in the air.

It is her space...

her office; her veranda; her living room; her chapel - all rolled into one

From her station she seems not to notice the passersby
as their pace quickens and as they, in return,
are careful not to notice her.

She scans the rows of numbers;
lots of pages to work through before night falls.

Gerald Wright is a professor emeritus of Intercultural Studies at Palm Beach Atlantic University and also a member of The Trinity Group and former missionary. This poem reflects his friendship with the homeless woman described in the piece.

The Re-assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Wendell Griffen

This year, the Arkansas Martin Luther King Jr. Commission, an agency of the Arkansas Department of Education, has invited an un-reconstructed Southern Baptist preacher, right-wing politician, and Fox News pundit named Mike Huckabee to deliver a “keynote address” during what it terms an “inter-faith prayer breakfast” on the King holiday (January 17). Attendance will be by invitation only. The event will be held at the Arkansas governor’s mansion (<https://arkingdream.org/events>).

A year-to-the-day before he was assassinated, on April 4, 1967, Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist pastor, publicly defined the war in Vietnam as a civil rights issue, in an address titled *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence to a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam* at Riverside Church in New York City. In doing so, King uttered the following prescient statement:

The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality we will find ourselves organizing clergy-and laymen-concerned committees for the next generation. ... In 1957 a sensitive American official overseas said that it seemed to him that our nation was on the wrong side of a world revolution. ... I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented” society to a “person-oriented” society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not

haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: “This is not just.” It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of Latin America and say: “This is not just.” ... A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: “This way of settling differences is not just.” This business of burning

The New York Times issued an editorial claiming that King had damaged the peace movement as well as the civil rights movement. Life magazine assailed the speech as “demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi.” The Pittsburgh Courier, an African-American publication, charged King with “tragically misleading” black people.

human beings with napalm, of filling our nation’s homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities

so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war. There is nothing to keep us from molding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood.[1]

Public reaction to King's message was swift and hostile. A number of editorial writers attacked him for connecting Vietnam to the civil rights movement. *The New York Times* issued an editorial claiming that King had damaged the peace movement as well as the civil rights movement. Life magazine assailed the speech as "demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi." The Pittsburgh Courier, an African-American publication, charged King with "tragically misleading" black people. And at the White House, President Lyndon Johnson was quoted as saying, "What is that goddamned nigger preacher doing to me? We gave him the Civil Rights Act of 1964, we gave him the Voting Rights Act of 1965, we gave him the War on Poverty. What more does he want?"[2]

King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, exactly one year after he delivered the speech written by Vincent Harding, a black historian and trusted friend. Despite the hostile reaction to the speech, Martin King and Vincent Harding never disavowed it. But Harding always believed the speech was the reason King was murdered. "It was precisely one year to the day after this speech that that bullet which had been chasing him for a long time finally caught up with him," Harding said in a 2010 interview. "And I am convinced that that bullet had something to do with that speech. And over the years, that's been quite a struggle for me."[3]

Nine years after his death, King was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by another Baptist from Georgia, President Jimmy Carter. A federal holiday has been established to honor his birthday. His statue has been placed in Washington, DC. Numerous cities and towns in the United States have re-named major traffic arteries for him, and he is revered throughout the world as one of the most prophetic souls of the 20th century, if not the modern era. When President Barack Obama took the oath of office to begin his second term, he placed his hand on a Bible that belonged to King and alluded to him during his inaugural address.

Yet the veneration of King has not included any significant or serious effort by U.S. policymakers, social commentators and moral leaders—including Baptist clergy, laity, associations, denominations, and educational institutions—to embrace the "radical revolution of values" King called for in *A Time to Break Silence*.

The "giant triplets" of racism, militarism, and materialism have not been confronted. The U.S. currently devotes more of its budget on national defense and homeland security than on educating children, fighting disease, feeding the hungry and alleviating poverty.

We may never learn the true financial cost of the tragic military misadventure known as the war in Iraq. As the 10th anniversary of the war in Iraq approached, Reuters reported on a study by a team of academicians which tallied the cost of the war at \$1.7 trillion, a figure that did not include \$490 billion owed to Iraqi war veterans for disability benefits. The study projected that expenses related to the war in Iraq could grow to more than \$6 trillion over the next four decades.[4]

After U.S. forces finally withdrew from Afghanistan last year, I wrote: In total, 2,448 U.S. service members have died. Tens of thousands more were injured. The U.S. spent more than \$2.26 trillion — including more than \$500 billion for interest — for the military effort in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan since 2001.

The result of those sacrifices is more than disappointing to U.S. families who lost loved ones, to veterans who lost comrades, to veterans who are permanently maimed and scarred in ways that only war can cause, and to people who care for them. The sorrow and anguish felt by men, women and children in Afghanistan who hoped the U.S.-led war would defeat the Taliban goes beyond disappointment. For those persons, the outcome of the war in Afghanistan is so heartbreaking that we will never have enough money and words to tally and talk about it.[5]

At the same time that U.S. leaders—including Baptist and other religious leaders—are venerating King's memory, they have ignored or rejected his call for the United States to use its wealth and prestige to lead the world in a radical revolution of values that rejects war as the preferred means of resolving differences. Former President Barack Obama could not have been guided by the vision of the Baptist preacher whose Bible he used for his second inauguration. Although Obama could not persuade U.S. officials and global allies to embrace a military response to Syria the way George W. Bush did concerning Iraq, U.S. militarism continues to cast an ominous cloud over the world and hinder efforts to address glaring problems at home.

Jonathan Tran's 2012 essay about the war policies of the Obama administration reminds us that Obama articulated what Tran termed "a theology of war." [6] It is more than sadly ironic that the first African American to hold the office of President of the United States oversaw a policy of killing American citizens by using armed drones. The militarism King criti-

cized was also clear in the virulent response by Obama and other U.S. leaders to the disclosures by Edward Snowden that the U.S. engaged in wholesale spying on American citizens and others throughout the world—including the leaders of nations considered its allies.

Decades after King was murdered by a gunman, the nation suffered the massacre of 20 children and six adult staff members of Sandy Hook Elementary School in New Town, Connecticut, by a shooter who had already killed his mother and who later killed himself. The militarism that drives U.S. global policy seems to have turned on our own children. The response to the Sandy Hook massacre was not, however, to confront the giant of militarism. Firearm manufacturers and their lobbyists, like defense contractors and their lobbyists, now hold more influence than ever before.

Sadly, devotion to corporate profit-making continues to hamstring efforts to make our society and the world safe. Thus, militarism has joined forces with materialism so much so that American schools look and feel more like fortresses than places where children are nurtured to learn, work and play together. We somehow are blind to the stark moral and ethical contradiction of singing *Let There Be Peace on Earth* while arming schoolteachers and cheering people who openly brandish handguns.

The moral and ethical disconnect between the rhetoric used to venerate King and the persistence of entrenched racism in American life continues to afflict us. Policymakers refuse to acknowledge the plain truth that the “law and order,” and “war on drugs” mantra used by every U.S. president since Lyndon Johnson produced the mass incarceration of millions of people who are disproportionately persons of color. Thanks to the not always covert racism of “law and order” and “war on drugs” enthusiasts, more black people are politically and socially disenfranchised in the United States now than were enslaved in 1850, 10 years before the Civil War began, a fact Professor Michelle Alexander forcefully presented in her 2010 book titled *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-Blindness*.^[7]

Oppressive law enforcement policies that gave rise to civil unrest during Dr. King’s lifetime still operate against people who are black and brown. Years after President Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder became the first black persons to hold their respective offices, the terrorism of racial profiling remains as prevalent as when Dr. King was assassinated, if not more so.

Insensitivity to the insidious racism that poisoned the United States when King was killed has not changed. Trayvon Martin,^[8] Oscar Grant,^[9] and Amadou

Diallo,^[10] like Martin Luther King, Jr., were black men shot to death by people who claimed the moral and legal right to take their lives. The racism and militarism King deplored in 1967 were major factors in causing the August 9, 2014, death of Michael Brown, Jr., an 18-year-old un-armed black teenager shot to death by Darren Wilson, formerly of the Ferguson, Missouri Police Department. That racism and militarism also accounted for the killing of Eric Garner, who was choked to death on July 23, 2014, by Daniel Pantaleo while other New York Police Department officers pressed their knees on Garner’s torso despite his repeated statement, “I can’t breathe!”

The world has since then suffered the trauma of George Floyd’s murder by a Minneapolis police officer who pressed his full kneeling weight against Floyd’s head and neck as the helpless man died pleading for his mother. Do not forget how Elijah McClain died at the hands of Aurora, Colorado police.

Plainly, the United States has not become more informed about or responsive to racial injustice since King died. We have simply militarized the injustice in

We have not confronted or corralled the giant triplets of militarism, materialism and racism. Rather, we have added sexism (including homophobia and transphobia), classism and techno-centrism to the mix. The triplets are sextuplets now!

brazen ways.

We have not confronted or corralled the giant triplets of militarism, materialism and racism. Rather, we have added sexism (including homophobia and transphobia), classism and techno-centrism to the mix. The triplets are sextuplets now!

The painful truth is that political, commercial and even religious leaders are comfortable bestowing platitudes on King’s life and ministry while actively and deliberately disregarding his warnings and call for repentance. Our leaders play on (some would say “pimp”) King’s moral authority for their own benefit at every opportunity. However, they question the relevancy of his teachings and warnings for our time.

It is bad enough that politicians and pundits do so. Now the Arkansas Martin Luther King, Jr. Commission has invited Mike Huckabee to deliver the keynote speech during a January 17, 2022, event intended to commemorate the King holiday. Huckabee is a Fox

News right-wing commentator, former Arkansas governor, and white Southern (slaveholder) Baptist preacher. His daughter, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, was spokesperson for former President Donald Trump's vicious policies and is a Republican candidate for governor of Arkansas this year.

Such contradictory behavior amounts to what I have called the "re-assassination" of Martin Luther King, Jr. King's ministry and message are being re-murdered by drone warfare, NSA surveillance, a militarized law enforcement culture, and our support for regimes that use military force to oppress minority populations in this society and elsewhere in the world (militarism), and by the half-truths and outright lies uttered to defend those actions.

King is re-murdered by fiscal policies that promote the corporate interests of investment bankers over the lives and fortunes of workers, homeowners, retirees and needy people (materialism).

King's dedication to attack and eliminate the causes of systemic poverty is currently being re-assassinated by policies that widen the glaring income inequality between the super-wealthy and the poor (classism).

King's righteous indignation against injustice is murdered by proponents of the so-called "prosperity gospel" and those who use religion as a weapon to deny civil rights to people who are LGBTQI, poor, immigrants, women or otherwise vulnerable (racism and sexism).

King's call for a radical revolution of values is murdered when we profess to honor his memory while bowing to the techno-centrism responsible for poisoning community aquifers through fracking for natural gas. Thanks to capitalist greed and political incompetence, devotion to techno-centrism has produced melting polar ice, rising oceans, climate change, global warming, growing deserts, dying coral reefs, raging wildfires and ever-worsening weather patterns.

When we honestly assess the mood and conduct of U.S. leaders and the public at large—including religious leaders—since King was assassinated in Memphis, it becomes clear that we have not chosen to embrace the "radical revolution of values" King articulated. We have not weakened the giant triplets of racism, militarism and materialism. We have nourished, bred and multiplied them. Religious leaders such as Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Jr. who followed King's model of prophetic criticism and congregational leadership have been rejected and condemned in much the same way that President Johnson responded to King.

King was correct when he observed, "America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is

nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities..." Sadly, we seem unable to realize that by rejecting his call to reorder our values and priorities—in other words to engage in the Biblical imperative of repentance—we not only "re-assassinate" King. By rejecting his values while pretending to venerate King as our greatest prophet, we are destroying ourselves and risk losing any moral authority we claim as agents for peace, justice and truth in the world.

Sooner or later, those who feed a death wish find a way to destroy themselves. Over the course of the past three generations, we have watched and heard the death rattle of the society that rejected Martin Luther King, Jr., during his lifetime, killed him and has re-assassinated him since the day he died.

Now that the State of Arkansas has proudly announced its intention to "re-assassinate King" by having an un-reconstructed Southern Baptist preacher and right-wing politician named Mike Huckabee deliver a "keynote address" on the King holiday at the Arkansas governor's mansion at the invitation of the state agency that bears King's name, we should be clear

When we honestly assess the mood and conduct of U.S. leaders and the public at large—including religious leaders—since King was assassinated in Memphis, it becomes clear that we have not chosen to embrace the "radical revolution of values" King articulated.

what its conduct means.

A society that behaves this way has gone beyond a death rattle. It is already morally and ethically dead.

We are attending the visitation. ■

*Judge Wendell Griffen is a regular contributor to Christian Ethics Today. This analysis was first made public and presented on March 24, 2015, at the T.B. Matson Lecture at Logsdon Seminary. Another version of this commentary appears as chapter 5 of Judge Griffen's book, *The Fierce Urgency of Prophetic Hope* (Judson Press, 2017). Most recently, a revised version appeared on his blog <https://fierceprophetichope.blogspot.com> and is now published here.*

Note: All references may be found on our website: www.christianethicstoday.com

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I am humbled and affirmed when I receive notes and messages expressing gratitude for Christian Ethics Today. Two of our most enthusiastic fans, Buddy Shurden and Fisher Humphreys, in addition to writing to me decided to send an email to their friends bragging on the journal. The result was several new readers. Perhaps you will consider doing the same. See Fisher Humphrey's email here, and consider it a template for your use.

Dear Friends,

Please pardon this group mailing. I couldn't figure out any other doable way to communicate with you all.

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Best wishes,
Fisher

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A Journal of Christian Ethics

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—Foy Valentine, *Founding Editor*

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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.

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

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