

“WHY WE CAN’T WAIT”

Racism and the Church

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Introduction

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“Why We Can’t Wait”:¹ Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

On January 16, 1963, eight White Christian and Jewish clergy penned “An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense.” The open letter, printed in the *Birmingham News*, challenged White segregationists and affirmed seven principles, including “every human being is created in the image of God and thus due just respect.”² Four months later, they changed their minds.³

In April 1963, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. joined Birmingham’s local campaign, organized by Fred Shuttlesworth, to address segregation in the city. The SCLC chose Birmingham as opposed to

¹This phrase directly refers to Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Why We Can’t Wait* (Boston: Beacon, 1964).

²This was an open letter penned by a group of Christian and Jewish White clergy after the election of Governor George Wallace. The group articulated seven principles, which are outlined along with the process of discussion in S. Jonathan Bass, “Not Time Yet: Alabama’s Episcopal Bishop and the End of Segregation in the Deep South,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 63, no. 2 (June 1994): 235–259. The open letter was originally published in the *Birmingham News* on January 17, 1963.

³The White clergy’s support of desegregation in the South wavered over time. But in this particular case, the gubernatorial election of George Wallace prompted a response.

larger cities in the South like Atlanta, partly due to the reactionary nature of its leadership: Bull Connor. On April 3, 1963, civil rights leaders launched a campaign to shut down the city during the Easter holiday with marches, sit-ins, and protests. The residents of Birmingham responded by participating in full measure.⁴ One week later, the local government was granted a state court injunction against the protests, making participation illegal. White clergy issued a second open letter, urging King and the SCLC to halt the demonstrations, calling them “unwise and untimely.”⁵

Despite the injunction, on April 12, 1963, King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy decided to participate in the demonstrations and were arrested. On May 2, 1963, more than one thousand Black students attempted to march down the street. Hundreds were arrested. The next day, the city commissioner Bull Connor directed the police and fire departments to use force to stop the demonstrations. Images of children being beaten by police, blasted by high-pressure fire hoses, and bitten by police dogs were broadcast across the nation.⁶ While in solitary confinement in the Birmingham jail, King addressed the nation:

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was “well timed” in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”⁷

⁴Glenn T. Eskew, “Birmingham Campaign of 1963,” *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, last updated October 9, 2017, <http://encyclopediaofalabama.org>; “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” *King Encyclopedia*, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/>.

⁵“White Clergymen Urge Local Negroes to Withdraw from Demonstrations,” *Birmingham News*, April 13, 1963.

⁶Eskew, “Birmingham Campaign of 1963.”

⁷Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, May 1963).

Justice is not an abstract reality to be debated in academic circles. Justice is freedom from oppression actualized in human history. In the six decades since, King's words remain pertinent: too many are living in a world where "justice is denied."

We continue to live in a fractured and racially segregated America. Black and Brown children bear the brunt of criminalization in the United States today. Black girls are body slammed in the school cafeteria (Jasmine Darwin, 2017) and arrested for having temper tantrums in kindergarten (Kaia Roelle, 2019). Black and Brown people of all genders are killed by the police: Eric Garner (2014), Michael Brown Jr. (2014), Ahmaud Arbery (2020), Breonna Taylor (2020), Dominique Fells (2020), and George Floyd (2020). Migrants are detained in overcrowded and unsafe conditions at the US-Mexico border and separated from their families. Anti-Asian violence has risen in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Anti-Jewish hate crimes continue to rise across the nation.

Racism persists in deeper, less obvious ways. Subtle acts of exclusion or avoidance, racial "jokes" and stereotyping, implicit racial bias, and racialized microaggressions are all acts of covert racism propping up racist structures and seeping into every facet of society, including religious life. As King stated, "The judgment of God is upon the church as never before."⁸ Moreover, he expressed greater frustration over the "shallow understanding of people of good will" than the "absolute misunderstanding of people of ill will."⁹

While some may have seen our theme as passé, we find it fitting for the College Theology Society (CTS) in the present moment. The year 2022 was the first time the CTS devoted an entire convention to the theme of racial justice. Given the CTS's emphasis on education and its inception in an era of segregation in the United States, such attention is long overdue. The CTS was founded in 1954 by religious and lay women and men. Central to its mission is the training and formation of those who teach theology in Catholic institutions in the United States. While the society has focused on many social and political issues in its seventy-year history, it

⁸Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*, Legacy ed. (Boston: Beacon, Kindle ed.), 105.

⁹*Ibid.*, 96.

has yet to give sustained, systematic attention to the problem of racism in the United States. In 1954, the very same year of the CTS's founding, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that "separate but equal" based on race in public schools was unconstitutional. The Court's 1954 decision ignited waves of White resistance across the country for decades that could not be ignored. Moreover, Catholic education benefited economically from *Brown v. Board*, with all-time high enrollments in the 1960s.¹⁰ The reality is that any historically White institution (HWI) born in the 1950s that did not center (and has not centered) racial justice is part of the problem.

White liberal Christians continue to change their minds about the rules of belonging and engagement. Scholars of color have developed significant work that sheds greater light on the sin of racism and draws theological richness from experiences of communities of color. Yet their contributions have remained peripheral in the academy, church, and world. Theologians and scholars of religion must take on the process of self-examination and articulation of complicity in the sin of racism, as well as work in all areas of thought and practice to develop a faith defined by racial justice.

We are grateful for the CTS's willingness to host this conference and annual volume. In particular, the CTS board allowed us to play a prominent role in shaping the liturgy and the convention during the COVID pandemic. Yet there is much more work to be done. As an HWI, the CTS must begin where it is. At the conference, the CTS started to take a few steps forward with an amendment to the constitution to include an emphasis on diversity and the creation of three Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) board positions. Yet there is still so much more that needs to be done. This work, if taken up by all in the community—not just a select few—will genuinely transform the way theology is done.

What Next? For Those Not Ready for Healing

The convention was held during Pentecost weekend. As a part of our preparation, we invited Antonio Eduardo Alonso and Kim

¹⁰See Shannen Dee Williams, *Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 137–140.

R. Harris to develop an online Pentecost Vigil Evening Prayer. In the planning, we spoke together about our hope that the convention theme and annual volume not be used to “check off a diversity box” or be an occasional topic for discussion without deep discernment and change.

The liturgy was a true highlight of the convention, bringing together the Spirit’s fire for truth and honoring the need for lamentation and repentance. We have included Kim Harris’s powerful homily in this volume, which calls us to do the work of racial justice. Yet we also believe it important to note Antonio Alonso’s use of Yolanda Pierce’s “Litany for Those Not Ready for Healing.” It reads in part:

Let us not rush to the language of healing, before understanding the fullness of the injury and the depth of the wound.

Let us not rush to offer a band-aid, when the gaping wound requires surgery and complete reconstruction.

Let us not offer false equivalencies, thereby diminishing the particular pain being felt in a particular circumstance in a particular historical moment.

Let us not speak of reconciliation without speaking of reparations and restoration, or how we can repair the breach and how we can restore the loss . . .

Let us not be afraid to sit with the ugliness, the messiness, and the pain that is life in community together . . .

Instead . . .

Let us lament the loss of a teenager, dead at the hands of a police officer who described him as a demon.

Let us weep at a criminal justice system, which is neither blind nor just . . .

Let us . . . sit in the ashes of this nation’s original sin.

Let us be silent when we don’t know what to say . . .

Let us listen to the shattering glass and let us smell the purifying fires, for it is the language of the unheard.

God, in your mercy . . .

Show [us our] own complicity in injustice.

Convict [us] for [our] indifference.

Forgive [us] when [we] have remained silent.

Equip [us] with a zeal for righteousness.

Never let [us] grow accustomed or acclimated to unrighteousness.¹¹

As we think of what is next, we call on the College Theology Society and all who read this volume to continue to lament and to repent—to sit with the “ugliness, the messiness, and the pain that is life in community together.” The wounds of the sin of racism are deep, and the healing cannot be forced as wounds are still being inflicted.

Map of the Volume

The volume represents numerous areas of research in varying stages of development. We have been mindful of including this variety to highlight the wholesale need to rethink our theologies, pedagogies, and practices in light of racism. Racial justice work requires continuous questioning, self-reflection, and discernment. Whereas some of our authors specialize in race, theology, and religious studies, others are taking up the challenge to examine and reexamine their fields.

One of the many challenges in discussing race today is what linguistic conventions to utilize. Language is power, and the terms that we use matter. It is now common practice to capitalize the “b” in “black” when used as a racial designation to signify “personhood, culture, and history.”¹² A trickier question is whether to capitalize the “w” in “white” when discussing race.

¹¹Yolanda Pierce, “A Litany for Those Not Ready for Healing,” Prayers for Racial Justice and Reconciliation, xavier.org.

¹²Kristen Mack and John Palfrey, “Capitalizing Black and White: Grammatical Justice and Equity,” MacArthur Foundation, August 26, 2020, macfound.org.

Whereas a number of scholars and organizations have chosen not to capitalize “white”—either because there isn’t seen to be a shared cultural history or because the organizations do not want to reinforce supremacists who capitalize “white” to assert their power—others capitalize “white” to highlight that there indeed is a shared construction of “whiteness” that needs to be made visible.¹³ Another common practice is to italicize non-English words. However, scholars, writers, and activists, such as Khairani Barokka, have questioned this convention. Barokka argues that italicization reinforces cultural (English) hegemony.¹⁴ We have asked authors, therefore, to be deliberate about their linguistic choices. Many authors offer explanations for their choices in the notes, especially those not following Orbis Books house style. We capitalize both Black and White, as Whiteness is neither neutral nor normative; it is culturally specific. We also have chosen not to italicize non-English words.

The volume is organized with an Introduction and Epilogue (authored by the editors), an Invocation and Call to Action (written by our 2022 annual convention homilist and award recipient representative), and four parts (authored by our volume contributors, including plenary speakers and some presenters from the 2022 annual convention). The Invocation, by Kim R. Harris, connects our current time with the Pentecost. Harris reminds us that the Spirit is already in our midst, and we cannot hide. We must “proclaim, lament, and rejoice in the Spirit.” In her Call to Action, Joan F. Neal offers an inspiring message to CTS members, theologians, and religious scholars. For Neal, scholarship and teaching provide a foundation, a language, for justice. Our work is an essential vocation and resource for building a just society.

Part I of the volume focuses on colonialism and the (de)construction of Whiteness. Three plenary panelists—SimonMary A. Aihio Khai, Karen B. Enriquez, and Karen Teel—underscore the ongoing imaginary of European colonialism as entangled religious, racial, and cultural projects. Aihio Khai deconstructs the production of Whiteness in the European colonial project and offers a

¹³See, for example, *ibid.* See also David Bauder, “AP Says It Will Capitalize Black but Not White,” Associated Press, July 20, 2020, [apnews.com](https://www.apnews.com).

¹⁴Khairani Barokka, “The Case against Italicizing ‘Foreign’ Words,” *Dialekt::Dialekt, Catapult*, February 11, 2020, catapult.cult.co.

decolonial vision of radical encounter and Eucharistic humanity. Enriquez examines how the academy is colonized, how this colonization shapes her imagination and the need for conversion to truly see and love. Teel develops a Whiteness inventory, drawing on her own self-examination in order to draw out how Whiteness thinks. Christina Astorga examines the ways Iberian Catholicism imposed Western patriarchal binaries in Philippine colonization; yet even with the diminishment of the status of women during and after colonization, Babaylans (shamans) resisted. Victoria Basug Slabinski also focuses on the Philippines, arguing for an archipelagic approach that resists colonial and nationalistic interpretations of the quincentennial celebration of the introduction of Christianity to the Philippines.

Part II examines embodied pedagogy and spirituality, positioning ourselves as intellects and embodied persons with emotions, spirits, psyches, and more. Emilie M. Townes offers an excerpt from her plenary presentation, calling for a new model of theological education that resituates educators as learners grounded in fully embodied joy. Charles A. Gillespie, Emily Bryan, and Rachel E. Bauer develop an embodied pedagogy and antiracist spirituality based on the theater practice of table work, a practice of conversation, bodily encounter, and unfinished process. La Ronda D. Barnes proposes the affirmative mysticism of Howard Thurman as a practice for cultivating empathy and bridging racial divides. Finally, George Faithful wrestles with problematic passages in Juan de la Cruz, pushing notions of spiritual perfection and sainthood.

Part III considers racial justice and the church, offering assessments of Christian efforts for racial justice and suggestions for more effective ecclesial work. Cecilia A. Moore's plenary focuses on Black Catholic efforts in the last hundred years. Even as they experienced racism in the Church, Black Catholics fought for liberation, made space for themselves, and found creative and spiritual nourishment. Daniel Cosacchi challenges the current resistance to antiracist (and other) movements like Black Lives Matter among many US bishops by offering the example of Bishop Gumbleton. John N. Sheveland looks at how Whiteness prevents many Catholics from embracing Islam and the Muslim-Christian dialogue integrated into Pope Francis's magisterial teaching. Vin-

cent Lui reads Acts through the lens of the racial geography of Baltimore, the racist legacy of Christian colonialism, and integral liberation.

“I can’t breathe.” The last words of Eric Garner (a Black man killed by police in 2014) and so many others.¹⁵ Part IV reimagines theology and practice, lamenting the cries of “I can’t breathe” and seeking pathways for the Breath of Life to flow. In her plenary, Shawnee Daniels-Sykes examines the ways adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are behind the fear driving implicit racial bias in law enforcement and domestic terrorists. She proposes fear of the Lord to inspire the Church to protest in the streets, stop partisan politics, and address the greater public health crises within racism. Melissa Pagán’s plenary applies a decolonial feminist analysis of *el grito* and *vincularidad* to construct a new way of relating, a decolonial intimacy beyond solidarity. Héctor M. Varela Rios argues for Latinx as theological microintervention, a linguistic *mestizaje/mulatez*. John Sniegocki explores Black veganism as a resource for deepening notions of integral liberation and integral ecology in Catholic social teaching. Maureen H. O’Connell draws on the urban alchemy of Mindy Thompson Fullilove to reimagine and transform Catholic campuses and their communities, spaces that have been fractured by racism.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the many people who helped make the 2022 College Theology Society annual convention and volume successful. First, we thank the authors of this volume, particularly the plenary convention speakers whose chapters anchor each section (SimonMary A. Aihio Khai, Karen B. Enriquez, Karen Teel, Emilie M. Townes, Cecilia A. Moore, Shawnee Daniels-Sykes, and Melissa Pagán). We also thank everyone who submitted essays for the annual volume. We could not include many due to our space

¹⁵Mike Baker, Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, Manny Fernandez, and Michael LaForgia, “Three Words. 70 Cases. The Tragic History of ‘I Can’t Breathe,’” *New York Times*, June 29, 2020, [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com). More than half of the persons identified by the *New York Times* who died in custody after saying “I can’t breathe” were Black.

limitations, and we hope they will find their way to publication to continue the many rich conversations begun at the annual convention. We are grateful to the many peer reviewers of the essay submissions. This volume could not have been completed without their close reading, careful review, and constructive feedback. We also would like to thank every participant at the meeting, especially the conveners and presenters, for planning such engaging sessions. We owe a special note of gratitude to Brian Flanagan (CTS president), Daniel Rober (executive director of national conventions), Dana Dillon (executive coordinator of digital media), and Katherine Schmidt. Their work to ensure a successful online convention was extraordinary. Reid Locklin has been a supportive advocate as CTS director of research and publications. Thomas Hermans-Webster has been a patient and helpful guide at Orbis Books.

We want to extend a special note of appreciation to our Action Collaborative co-conspirators (you know who you are). These dear colleagues were the support that helped us propose and develop the theme for our convention and volume. What started as a conversation over drinks led to a year (and then some) of processing and planning, venting and strategizing, deconstructing and reconstructing. We are especially thankful for the gift of your friendship.

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