

Critical Theology

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Introduction

By Rosemary P. Carbine

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This issue focuses on revitalizing public life via redefining democratic values and practices of freedom, equality, and solidarity. Opening this issue, Teresa Delgado elaborates a decolonial theology from a Latinx liberationist perspective. Applying Jon Sobrino's spirituality of liberation and Walter Mignolo's border thinking, Delgado wrestles with white supremacy, especially how racism and colonialism backed by theological arguments have built and bolstered "the architecture of white supremacy" in the US. These threats to imagining and living in and into a more just world are critically revealed and confronted from Delgado's incisive decolonial viewpoint about the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017 and its effective historical legacies with the Atlantic slave trade, the hurricanes in Puerto Rico in 2017 and their intimately intertwined legacies with Spanish and then US military and economic empire building, and the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol in 2021 and its inextricably entangled legacies with US slavery and its afterlife in systemic structures of racial oppression. Re-engaging the imagery of architecture, Delgado concludes with a decolonial theological view of hope in equal dignity and flourishing of all creation as future foundations of communities of love and justice, if we do the needed metanoia-based work to unearth and overturn deeply rooted structures of injustice.

Continuing with a decolonial theological starting point, Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo critically engages with the white and Christian supremacist, patriarchal, colonialist, and capitalist history of the enclosure, domination, and expropriation of the commons. At

the same time, Gandolfo constructively reclaims Indigenous and Latinx spiritualities and practices of commoning to cultivate an eco-conversion and restore the life-giving and sustaining goods or commons of creation as a site of human, more than human, and planetary well-being. Gandolfo offers a decolonial ecofeminist theological way to revitalize a Christian theology of creation as "localized in-placement" that centralizes the commons, by drawing on Indigenous cosmologies of eco-activists like Berta Cáceres, *mu-jerista* theological visions of the kin-dom of God, and Indigenous and interreligious dialogues about religious
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Puerto Rico and the Epiphany Insurrection: White Supremacy and the Task of Decolonial Theology

By Teresa Delgado

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As I begin this essay,¹ I acknowledge the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and honour the sovereignty of the Six Nations—Mohawk, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Seneca, and Tuscarora—and their land on which I am situated here in New York. I also acknowledge the traditional territory and sovereignty of the Indigenous peoples of southern California on this day—May 13—which marked the declaration of war by the United States on Mexico in 1846, a war that ended with the ceding of lands including California. I offer my profound respect for the first peoples of this nation and the treaties that were made on these territories, as well as my remorse for the harms done and promises broken in the distant and recent past. I am committed to working with my Indigenous sisters and brothers in solidarity and collaboration.

My recognition of the first peoples of this land is my small effort to assert the importance of our context: our bodies, our thoughts, our place. Yes, our context matters: to our theology, ethics, and ability to build communities of solidarity. Liberation theologies begin with where we have been and where we are.

So, to situate our current context as the starting point for exploring what I believe is the task of decolonial theology, I begin with three moments in time and place: the first in Charlottesville, Virginia—just 150 miles northwest of where ships of English settlers landed on May 13, 1607, and later with enslaved human cargo in 1619; the second in Puerto Rico—where Columbus landed in 1493; and the third at our nation's Capitol on January 6, 2021. All of these moments—1619 and Charlottesville, 1493 and Puerto Rico, 2021 and the Capitol—are markers along the history of white supremacist ideology and action in the Western hemisphere. None of these moments can be ignored if we are to dismantle white supremacy theologically—and decolonially—in the here and now.

Architectures of White Supremacy

The “Unite the Right” rally held on August 11, 2017, in Charlottesville, Virginia, included a tiki-torch march onto the campus of the University of Virginia, culminat-

ing at a statue of its founder, Thomas Jefferson. The night-time rally was followed the next day by another gathering, this time with even more protestors, including civil rights and religious leaders who countered the white supremacist message and presence in their community. According to a 2018 report by the Anti-Defamation League, “almost every segment of the white supremacist movement was represented in Charlottesville that day.”² In addition to many people injured in violent clashes between white supremacists and counter-protestors, Heather Heyer was killed when a white supremacist weaponized his car to barrel into a crowd of protestors on Fourth Street (now named Heather Heyer Way); at least 20 others were injured in that same attack. White supremacist violence has risen since 2015; FBI director Christopher Wray has stated that “racially motivated violent extremism,” mostly from white supremacists, has made up a majority of domestic terrorism threats in recent years.³

Just shy of a month later that same year, Hurricane Irma barreled through the Caribbean as a category 5 hurricane, with its initial landfall on September 6 until it dissipated about a week later. Even though reports spoke of Irma as “skirting” past Puerto Rico's northern shore, it still wiped out electrical power for over 1 million residents and wreaked havoc, destruction, and death on many Caribbean nations, including Barbuda, which was left virtually uninhabitable. For Puerto Rico, this was merely the warm-up act to the headliner: Hurricane María ripped through the island as a near category 5 hurricane with sustained winds of 155 miles per hour. Its eye passed directly over the 100-mile-long island territory, damaging virtually everything in its wake and further exacerbating the damage done by Irma. Since the hurricane made landfall in the early morning hours of September 20, many Puertorriqueños (including myself) did not sleep at all that night, and if we did, we awoke to the devastating reality that this storm inflicted as its eye cut the island in half. There was no landline service; most cell phone towers had been downed by the storm. There was no power to charge the cell phones and, if people were lucky enough to have a charged phone and gasoline

in the car, they had to drive to a spot—sometimes just along a roadway—with some wireless service, and only if the roads were intact and passable. A Harvard study published by the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2018 estimated the death toll at 4,645—70 times higher than the official death count of 64.⁴

These two moments are inextricably linked by the logic of white supremacy—its past, its perpetuation, its persistence—and help us to see with greater clarity how these same logics mobilized an insurrection at our nation’s Capitol on January 6. Indeed, white supremacy is woven into every fabric of this country. If we are honest about our intention to dismantle white supremacy as our country’s foundational architecture—along with all the institutions it houses, including our educational institutions—then we must face the truth about that history. If we weren’t ready to face that history previously, the violence in Charlottesville, the violence of Hurricane María, and the violence of January 6 have made it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to unsee what we have seen.

What did these moments reveal to us? Both Charlottesville and Hurricane María laid bare the realities of racism and colonialism, twin siblings of white supremacist parentage. Both events stripped away the protective barrier that had functioned to obscure to some—surely not to all—the deep, infected wound lying beneath the surface, growing and spreading in varying degrees for five centuries. That infected wound—in all its raw and flaming heat—swelled in full display at the Capitol in January 2021.

Jefferson’s UVA

The home of the University of Virginia (UVA), Charlottesville, is located in Albemarle County, where “slavery was a powerful force shaping politics, economics and everyday life.”⁵ The organizers of the “Unite the Right” rally marched to the UVA statue of Thomas Jefferson; as UVA alumni, they claimed him as their own. The role of the university, in Jefferson’s own words, was to preserve the southern way of life for the southern man:

Jefferson wrote his friend James Breckenridge in 1821, expressing his concern with sending the youth of Virginia to be educated in the North, a place “against us in position and principle.” He worried that in northern institutions, young Virginians might imbibe “opinions and principles in discord with those of their own country. This canker is eating on the vitals of our existence, and if not arrested at once will be beyond remedy.”⁶

The veil of civility and intellectualism that has come to characterize the college campus, and the education it promotes, was torn away by the march and its after-

math to expose the monstrous nature of racism ever present, built into its very walls, seeped into the very soil of its foundation, inscribed on its monuments, and constructed by those enslaved by its founding benefactors: Thomas Jefferson, Joseph Carrington Cabell, James Madison, and James Monroe. The “Unite the Right” march was yet another marker that made explicit the connection between the Virginia landing of the ships bearing human cargo to be sold in 1619, the enslaved labour on whose backs the University of Virginia was financed and built two centuries later in 1817, and Charlottesville in 2017: racism is the connective tissue, the thick, adhesive mortar binding together the architecture of white supremacy.

Colonial Project of Spain and the United States

Similarly, Hurricane María has torn back the veil on the crumbling effects of the colonial project: first by Spain and, since 1898, by the United States. For Puerto Rico, the veil of progress and democracy as a “free associated state” was torn away by two consecutive hurricanes, one worse than the next, to expose the truth about the last colony of the Western hemisphere.⁷ Taken by Spanish conquistadors in the late fifteenth century, and bolstered by the Doctrine of Discovery⁸ articulated in papal bulls of 1452 and 1493, Puerto Rico became a valuable asset. Spain quickly created a weak and dependent ward; as a colonial outpost, Puerto Rico’s economy was in an unhealthy state by the early 1800s, given the many trade restrictions imposed upon it by Spain to limit any production that would compete with products from Spain. The island was seen primarily as a strategic geographic location and a provider of certain export commodities, like sugar and coffee. Very little, if any, profit was reinvested in the island, except in areas where it bolstered the domestic supply of goods necessary to produce these exports. After over 250 years of Spanish rule, the island lacked any real infrastructure or industry. However, Spain did not relinquish its hold on Puerto Rico so easily.⁹ Puerto Rico was for Spain “a strategic outpost of empire—the cockpit ... of the Hispanic Caribbean defense system—so that its civilian aspect was altogether subordinated to its military significance.”¹⁰

Enter the United States in 1898. Under the banner of democracy and Enlightenment ideals, the United States took Puerto Rico (along with Cuba and the Philippines) as spoils of the Spanish-American war. The next century plus of US colonial rule saw the complete destruction of subsistence agriculture, the influx of development and industry, while maintaining complete dependence on US legislation without Puerto Rican representation. Most recently, the Great Recession of 2008 spiralled Puerto Rico into an eco-

conomic nosedive that had begun a decade earlier, to the tune of a \$72 billion debt crisis, which some legal scholars have called “odious”¹¹ and for which austerity measures were enacted by Congressional legislation in 2016. Named PROMESA, for “Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act,” this legislation includes the reduction in social services, reduced minimum wages, and an oversight committee with minimal representation by Puerto Ricans. Passed in bi-partisan fashion in both the House and the Senate, and signed into law by President Obama, PROMESA ensures that the hedge funds that financed the debt will undoubtedly be paid. As New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez stated,

It is a vote to authorize an unelected, unchecked and all-powerful control board to determine Puerto Rico’s destiny for a generation or more ... that could close schools, shutter hospitals, and cut senior citizens’ pensions to the bone ... to force Puerto Rico, without their say, to go \$370 million further in debt to pay for this omnipotent control board ... to cut the minimum wage down to \$4.25 per hour for younger workers in Puerto Rico ... to make Puerto Ricans work long overtime hours without fair compensation or protection ... to jeopardize collective bargaining agreements ... to cut worker benefits and privatize inherent government functions ... to place well-heeled hedge funds and creditors ahead of the people, [and] ... to give the board the power to sell off and commercialize national treasures that belong to the people of Puerto Rico.¹²

This history—of the denial of humanity, of ascribing second-class citizenship, of not being able to access humanitarian aid and supplies—was brought into sharp relief after Hurricane María. Like Charlottesville, the aftermath of Hurricane María served as yet another marker that made explicit the connection between Columbus’ landing of conquistador ships in 1493; the genocide, human subjugation, and economic crippling initiated by Spain and then perfected by the United States four centuries later in 1898; and Hurricane María in 2017: colonialism is the connective tissue, the thick, adhesive mortar binding together the architecture of white supremacy.

Both Charlottesville and Puerto Rico have exposed the insidiousness of white supremacist ideology: it may take different forms, like a three-fifths compromise, or the granting of citizenship in time to fight in a war; it may be disguised in a clean-cut suit and tie instead of a white sheet and hood, or be educated in a fine university; it may even look like the benevolent paternalism of a *promesa*. As Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré’s stories reveal, “the repressed always returns with a vengeance.”¹³ And it did so on January 6, 2021.

Insurrection 2021

It’s hard to describe how I felt as I watched the horror that unfolded on what has been in every other instance a benign, pro forma, uneventful C-SPAN occasion of certifying election results. The best way to describe one aspect would be cognitive dissonance: seeing what is happening before me and not believing my own eyes—a threat to the seat of democracy in our country, seemingly without any police or military resistance for hours. At the same time, what I witnessed did not surprise me at all:

- gallows erected on the Capitol grounds
- a Confederate flag in the Capitol Rotunda
- T-shirts emblazoned with “Camp Auschwitz”
- “white power” hand gestures of the Proud Boys
- “Civil War January 6” shirts to commemorate the date long awaited by far-right anti-government groups
- co-opted Norse mythology as symbols of deified whiteness
- thousands of people, mostly white, permitted to go home after desecrating the People’s House.

While there is still much to be learned about that day—all the elements that led to it, why it was allowed to go as far as it did, and the ongoing threat still posed across the country—we can say for certain: January 6 is another marker on the continuum of white supremacy in this country, a deep foundational architecture forged on the soil of the Capitol grounds, and stronger than its sandstone walls constructed by enslaved labour.

The Task of Decolonial Theology

In the face of this reality, what is the task of theology more broadly and decolonial theology more precisely? Liberation theology has already demonstrated the necessity of being faithful to the “real” as the starting point for theology and praxis. Jon Sobrino, a Salvadoran Jesuit priest, activist, and theologian, proposes three prerequisites for a genuine and concrete spirituality of liberation, which in my view can be upheld as prerequisites for doing decolonial theology: (1) honesty about the real: a willingness to look the contradictions squarely in the eye and confront the ugliness of our situation with hope; (2) fidelity to the real: a recognition that faithfulness to eradicating the contradictions will lead to carrying a burden of love that those who choose to “escape” from reality do not shoulder; and (3) participating in the “more” of reality: a willingness to be an active player in the building of a more just society, which is our ethical mandate to strive towards the “ought.”¹⁴ For Sobrino, a more just society tries to live out a profound notion of freedom.

A decolonial future—and the theology that imagines it as an act of resistance to white supremacy—must also embody liberating action while maintaining the prerequisites Sobrino describes.

This space of resistance, or living in the boundary of a “fidelity to the real,” the IS, and the participation in the “more of reality,” or the OUGHT, is likened to what Walter Mignolo describes when he upends the Cartesian formula and instead affirms, “I am where I think.”¹⁵ He asserts the necessity of thinking from that space of contradiction, “to dwell in and think from the borders.... Border thinking becomes, then, the necessary epistemology to delink and decolonize knowledge and in the process to build decolonial local histories, restoring the dignity that the Western idea of universal history took away from millions of people.”¹⁶

How do we envision a future where white supremacy is dismantled, and employ theological values toward that goal in a way that does not reinscribe racist and colonial ideologies, at this particular moment in our country and our world? Especially after January 6, 2021, the state of the US and world saddens me to the point of paralysis. In the midst of the images of torches and swastikas, of Confederate statues and flags, of shuttered hospitals and schools, I have often thought about songs that capture a mood. For example, Bob Marley and the Wailers’ “Corner Stone” paraphrases the biblical passage “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Ps. 118:22; Matt. 21:42; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:7). While Marley applies multiple meanings to the “builder” and the “stone,” the central message is consistent with the biblical interpretation: what society refuses to accept as valuable can be, in fact, the foundation upon which our most essential values are constructed.

If we accept this interpretation, can decoloniality be understood as the theological value that becomes the cornerstone for the future we wish to build together, where the dignity and integrity of all creation—including our planet—is valued and given the opportunity to flourish? I affirm that possibility. Charlottesville, Puerto Rico, and the Epiphany insurrection—as well as the killings of so many Black women and men at the hands of the state, the rounding up of undocumented persons, of children in cages, among so many other atrocities of late—challenge my belief at its core.

However, I have used the imagery of architecture to describe the reality of white supremacy for a reason. There is something about the process of building—of laying a foundation, with stones and cornerstones, and seeing something emerge from the ground up—that can be instructive. Every new structure requires time, a plan, and a purpose. In rudimentary terms, it begins with clearing and preparing a space: from ensuring

the ground is suitable, to assessing the impact on the surrounding landscape, to removing old foundations. Once the new foundation is laid, then the structure is assembled. The design needs to resonate with how the space will be used. Those creating this new structure may not have a clear picture of exactly how it will look or interact with the structures around it, until near completion. To some extent, a certain degree of faith is required that those who developed the plan have taken every possible consideration into account.

Before we glorify this lovely metaphor of building upon a strong foundation, we should be reminded that it was used as a powerful call to bolster white supremacy by Alexander H. Stephens, vice president of the Confederate States of America, and well noted in his “Cornerstone Speech” given in Savannah, Georgia, on March 21, 1861. In this address, Stephens claimed that the foundation upon which the United States was established, including the Constitution that articulates that founding, “rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation, and the government built upon it fell when the ‘storm came and the wind blew.’”¹⁷

In contrast, the Confederacy was based on a wholly different premise:

Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery – subordination to the superior race – is his natural and normal condition ... This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.¹⁸

Stephens details this divinely mandated subordination:

They assume that the negro is equal, and hence conclude that he is entitled to equal privileges and rights with the white man. If their premises were correct, their conclusions would be logical and just but their premise being wrong, their whole argument fails ... They were attempting to make things equal which the Creator had made unequal ... With us, all of the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eye of the law. Not so with the negro. Subordination is his place. He, by nature, or by the curse against Canaan, is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system. The architect, in the construction of buildings, lays the foundation with the proper material – the granite; then comes the brick or the marble. The substratum of our society is made of the material fitted by nature for it, and by experience we know that it is best,

not only for the superior, but for the inferior race, that it should be so. It is, indeed, in conformity with the ordinance of the Creator. It is not for us to inquire into the wisdom of His ordinances, or to question them.¹⁹

This is our history as a nation. These are the cornerstones that have been unearthed. These are the structures emerging from the shadows—a neo-Confederacy—as violent backlash against those of us who believe unequivocally that all persons are made in the image of God, against laying new foundations upon which structures of human flourishing can be shaped. Some in the backlash want to enshrine those cornerstones and structures—including statues of this Confederacy—as idols of worship and monuments of terror for the next generation. This is precisely the hidden wound that Charlottesville and Puerto Rico have lifted for us to see; the Epiphany insurrection has only confirmed that deep, raw, swollen and infested wound.

If we want to envision structures of human flourishing that are established upon foundations of justice instead of the foundations of white supremacy, then we need to get our hands dirty to clear a space for them to be built. We will need to make time to gather in communities to listen deeply to each other and plan for a new construction and purpose. We will need to get out of our zones of comfort and complacency, pick up some tools, and start unearthing those cornerstones that have upheld structures—our judicial system, our corporate boardrooms, and, yes, our educational institutions—that have undermined the dignity and integrity of too many for too long. Otherwise, we run the deadly risk of building what we think are new structures upon the same foundations so resoundingly applauded in Stephens' speech. Our theology is one of those structures in need of that same unearthing, a *metanoia* or turning over of what we think we know and reverse.

Christianity and coloniality have been intricately intertwined for over 500 years, as manifested in the Western hemisphere and modern epistemologies. If we are interested in being a community based on love and justice and therefore agents in dismantling all that impedes love and justice—including white supremacy—then we must become decolonial thinkers and doers as Christian theologians.

What does that mean? First, we must look to the borders of our own categories. Again, let's examine the insights of Walter Mignolo:

This is the basic condition of border thinking: the moment you realize (and accept) that your life is a life in the border, and you realize that you do not want to “become modern” because modernity

hides behind the splendors of happiness, the constant logic of coloniality. For precisely this reason, border thinking that leads to decoloniality is of the essence to unveil that the system of knowledge, beliefs, expectations, dreams, and fantasies upon which the modern/colonial world was built is showing, and will continue to show, its unviability.²⁰

In some ways, Charlottesville, Puerto Rico, and January 6 have already done the work of decoloniality in that they have unveiled the “system of knowledge, beliefs, expectations, dreams and fantasies”²¹ upon which our vision of the world has been built. They have exposed the underlying architecture of white supremacy hidden behind the veil of democracy.

Second, we must engage those spaces of knowledge and meaning that we don't necessarily claim as theological or Christian. Here, I am inspired by the work of Rev. Dr. Bryan Massingale, who has privileged the wisdom of James Baldwin, Malcolm X, and other “non-traditional” sources to develop, for example, a Catholic moral theology that attends to race, racism, and white supremacy. He queries why Catholic moral theology hasn't addressed racism with the same rigour and analysis as war or poverty. He has concluded, and I agree with him, that the categories of Catholic moral theology do not excavate the ground upon which moral development is situated. In other words, Catholic moral theology has fixed its eyes on what has grown out of the soil and disregarded the toxic soil that has produced and reproduced that growth. If the architecture of white supremacy has revealed anything to us in its full and blatant exposure, it has shown us that no new foundation can be built without first attending to the quality and integrity of the ground upon which it is situated. The ground, the groundwater, and everything within it is toxic. How can we expect anything that grows from it to be anything but toxic, including our theology? Decoloniality compels us to affirm that “I am where I think”; being emerges from one's situated place, not divorced from it in some abstract sense. Theology—our thought and discourse about God—must also derive from such a context that is intentionally and explicitly situated in a non-white-supremacist place.

Third, we must challenge the singularity of mono-authorities, including the Christian Church, not because we don't believe in universal truth but because we know that truth is manifest in different ways. For African Americans, for Puerto Ricans, for any Black and Brown people, I contend, this is not an intellectual argument but a matter of life and death, of the ability to survive and thrive. Why can we not hear and, more importantly, believe when Black people tell us their truth? Why do we only seem to believe it, if at

all, when it's caught on videotape, with corroborating witnesses (and better if those are white)? Do we think for a second that what happened to George Floyd or Ahmaud Arbery or Sandra Bland or Philando Castile or 12-year-old Tamir Rice is new? Why are white people so shocked? "Racism is not getting worse; it's getting filmed," claimed a recent Tweet. When we listen to those on the borders and hear their truth, especially when it doesn't align with what we experience, we begin to engage in decolonial thinking: as Mignolo asserts, to "dwell in and think from the borders."²² We must apply this same method to our theology because when we do not, we silence the border dwellers and are complicit in perpetuating their silence. In doing so, we maintain the white supremacist cornerstones in Stephens' speech, in Columbus' landing, in UVA's founding, in Puerto Rico's annexation, in the Epiphany insurrection.

Thus, to theologize in a decolonial key—in the wake of Charlottesville, Hurricane María, and the Epiphany insurrection—we must imagine and reimagine community—indeed, the flourishing of all, the common good of the planet, aspiring toward a decolonial future. Employing Sobrino's categories for a spirituality of liberation, the task of decolonial theology requires us, then, (1) to be honest about the real: to be willing to look at white supremacy and its siblings—racism and colonialism—squarely and confront their ugliness with hope; (2) to be faithful to the real: to see and hear the truths from the borders and commit to carrying the burden of that truth with courage; and (3) to participate in the "more" of reality: to put one's very body on the line, to love out in the streets as one would love in private, to be an active player in the building of a more just society. A decolonial future—and the theology that imagines it as an act of resistance to white supremacy—must also embody liberating action.

We cannot unsee what we have seen. Why would we want to do so? "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12-13). Part of that seeing has also included deep theological introspection about January 6 as the Feast of the Epiphany in the Christian tradition, or *Día de los Reyes* for my people: a solemn remembrance of how far these wise men travelled to witness truth and love in the flesh. They served as witnesses to their great peril because those in power wanted them to lead Herod to Jesus to put him to death. When their conscience moved them to defy Herod—returning to their lands by a different route and Jesus' family taking refuge in Africa—Herod did what power-hungry leaders do: slaughter the innocents, lash out against the defiance to their power, and lay waste to the promise of the future.

If we are committed to defying white supremacist power and violence, then we must see clearly, love faithfully, and act courageously. The words of James Baldwin both inspire and haunt me in that effort: "I don't envy any white person in this century, because I wouldn't like to have to face what you have to face. If you don't face it, though, it's a matter of your life or death ... It's a matter of whether or not you want to live. All that can save you now is your own confrontations with your own history."²³

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1 This essay was first delivered as a virtual lecture to Dr. Rosemary Carbine's class on *Women and U.S. Liberation Theologies*, Whittier College, May 13, 2021.

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17 "Cornerstone Speech," Alexander H. Stephens, Savannah, Georgia, March 21, 1861, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/cornerstone-speech>.

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19 *Ibid.*

20 Mignolo, "Preface," ix.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*, xx.

23 James Baldwin, "How to Cool It," *Esquire*, July 1968.

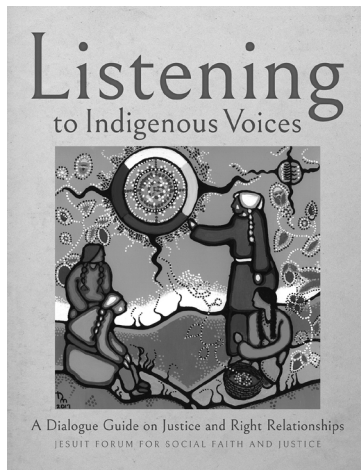
Continued from page 1

resources and practices for intersubjective and reciprocal relations of all creation—all to enable solidarity, collaborative eco-care, and reparative justice.

Concluding this issue in a synthetic and expansive way, Don Schweitzer's book review essay addresses multiple intersecting ideological, social, cultural, economic, and other political crises in contemporary global democracies that have fuelled the rise of far-right anti-democratic, anti-government groups. In conversation with *Degenerations of Democracy*, Schweitzer interweaves public/political theologies of sin with Christian theology, Jewish philosophy, feminist political theory, sociology, and interreligious studies to propose, akin to Delgado and Gandolfo, the renewal of democracy through social solidarity at local, national, and global levels—or what I have highlighted in my scholarship as the community-creating work (ekklezial work) embodied by social justice movements.

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Redeeming the Commons of Creation: Interreligious, Decolonial, and Ecofeminist Theological Yearnings for the Kin-dom of God

By Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo

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In 2010, the Puerto Rican hip hop band Calle 13 released a Grammy award-winning song entitled, quite simply, “Latinoamérica.” Taken as a whole, the song is like a prayer lamenting all that has been stolen from Latin America while celebrating pride in the beauty and love of lands and peoples that have kept walking even “without legs.” Although so much has been extracted, stolen, bought, and sold from what Eduardo Galeano called the “open veins” of Latin America,¹ the chorus of this song points to a foundational truth and a fundamental commitment that we will contemplate in this essay: the life-giving goods of Creation are not for sale! The wind, the sun, the rain, and the heat; the clouds, the colours, joy, and pain—these goods are not for sale. Nor should any of the sources and sustenance of life itself be converted into economic resources. Indeed, the chorus of this song concludes with a truth to which land and environmental defenders in Latin America bear witness daily: “You can’t buy my life.”²

Especially in Latin America, thousands of land and environmental defenders have been assassinated over the past several decades for their insistence on this fundamental truth and their concomitant refusal to remain silent in the face of extractivist industries that operate legally and/or illegally to rob marginalized communities of their access to the life-giving goods of Creation—access that is often communally managed. Multinational and national corporations specializing in mining, fossil fuel extraction, logging, agribusiness, ranching, and hydroelectric dam construction are colluding with international finance, local and national authorities, law enforcement, and organized crime in order to “buy,” “invest in,” or, better yet, *steal* the sources of life from the world’s most marginalized communities. Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples are especially under attack by the violent predations of these industries and by the reign of terror they impose on those who resist. I dedicate this essay to the memory of those whose lives have been stolen for their care and defense of their communities and of our common home, the commons of Creation.

For the vast majority of our 300,000 years of existence as a species, human beings organized our habitation on the earth and our consumption of its resources communally, with almost all human land and water usage conducted on what “commoners” and political ecologists call “commons.” In some cultures, the advent of agriculture around 10,000 years ago began a long process of movement away from communal access to natural goods and toward more hierarchical, patriarchal, and exclusionary systems of property access and ownership. Western Christian colonialism, beginning in the fifteenth century, led to the near-universal enclosure of commons around the world and the accompanying extensive and intensive extraction of labour and resources from women, the poor, non-European and non-Christian “others,” and the earth itself. The coloniality of such racist, patriarchal, and extractive violence undergirds and characterizes free market, capitalist systems of private property.

This essay introduces the phenomenon of the commons and interrogates Christian theology’s complicity in the gendered and racialized process of ecological enclosure, particularly with regard to how Western Christian colonialism attempted to destroy the place of both communal landholdings and women’s sacred power both in early modern Europe and in the religious/cultural traditions of Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Turning from critique to constructive proposal, I place Christian eco-theology in dialogue with Indigenous cosmovisions and practices of commoning to contribute to the decolonial tasks of *both* resisting the coloniality of global capitalism and its reliance on racist and patriarchal violence *and* reclaiming the commons of Creation as a site of shared pursuit of human and planetary well-being. Because of the epistemic, ontological, and political violence meted out by Christian colonialism on Indigenous commons and cosmovisions, I conclude with the suggestion that a commons-centred Christian theology of Creation should seek not only paths of interreligious dialogue with Indigenous communities and their spiritualities,

but also shared projects of reparation, solidarity, and collaborative care. Such projects point us toward an interreligious, decolonial, and ecofeminist theology not only of the commons of Creation but of the kin-dom of God as a process of commoning in which the shared abundance of Creation (our common home) is distributed justly and equitably among all life and the earth.

Commons and Enclosures in Europe

The “commons,”³ put very simply, are the diverse and often quite complex systems that human beings have created and implemented to organize and manage our use of various kinds of life-sustaining goods communally. There are many different types of commons, but for the purpose of this essay are commons that manage the created goods necessary for the reproduction and sustained maintenance of human life—for example, common fields for farming or grazing livestock; common forests for foraging, hunting, and/or gathering firewood; and common rivers for fishing, drinking, irrigating crops, bathing, and washing clothes. Commons are not natural goods in and of themselves, but rather, in the words of commons scholar and activist David Bollier, the social, political, cultural, and ecological “paradigms that combine a distinct community with a set of social practices, values and norms that are used to manage a resource. Put another way, a commons is *a resource + a community + a set of social protocols*.”⁴

Commons are *not* the open-ended, free-for-all resource grabs that ecologist Garrett Hardin erroneously assumed in his infamous 1968 essay, “The Tragedy of the Commons.”⁵ Rather, commons are carefully organized means of managing collective property rights and usage that often take into careful account the needs of not only the human community of commoners but the needs of the local landscape, waterways, flora, fauna, and other natural resources. Commons are therefore highly contextual, and the localized forms they take vary immensely across time and place, according to the distinctiveness of local cultures and ecosystems, even from one town or village to the next. They run the spectrum from egalitarian to hierarchical and can be more or less ecologically sustainable. The most successful, long-standing commons that best meet basic human needs over generations, or even millennia, are typically supported by decentralized, widespread, and active participation of commoners and by cultural, spiritual, and ecological practices that encourage and embody relationships of harmony and reciprocity with the more-than-human world.⁶

While commons have abounded around the world, we begin our journey in Europe because that is where the story of colonization and enclosure of the commons begins and then gets imposed on the rest of the world. Derek Wall, a political economist and Green Party coordinator from Great Britain, tells us that

[i]n England, medieval systems of land tenure incorporated features of much earlier forms of collective ownership. Records show that an open-field system of commons existed in the seventh century and ... that Roman Britain saw the use of usufruct rights that gave access to land along with varied notions of common property rights. The pre-Roman Iron Age societies seem to have practiced communal land ownership that may have shared features with the Irish Brehon system that derives from prehistoric roots. ... [A]rcheological evidence also indicates that commons created in prehistory may have influenced land-use patterns into the Anglo-Saxon period.⁷

This all begins to change in the early Middle Ages, or Anglo-Saxon period, when communal property was “brought under the control of local landowners within a manorial system”⁸ and then under the control of the Norman aristocracy after their conquest of the British Isles in 1066. Even under feudalism, which was cruel and inhumane in a multitude of ways, laws allowed commoners regulated access to the fields and forests that ensured provision of their daily bread.

Slowly but surely, the lords of the manors brought more and more land under their direct control, for their own benefit and use, and the erosion of English commons accelerated from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century. This process is known as the “enclosure of the commons.” Bollier sums up the English enclosure movement quite plainly:

The king, aristocracy and/or landed gentry stole the pastures, forests, wild game and water used by commoners, and declared them private property. Sometimes the enclosers seized lands with the formal sanction of Parliament, and sometimes they just took them by force. To keep commoners out, it was customary to evict them from the land and erect fences or hedges. Sheriffs and gangs of thugs made sure that no commoner would poach game from the king’s land.⁹

Commoners suffered greatly under this process and, though they resisted in myriad ways, they were by and large forced to migrate to the towns and cities to work for a pittance in the growing proletariat of the Industrial Revolution or to languish as beggars and paupers, who were criminalized, incarcerated, and/or shipped off to the newly established British colonies.

Feminist scholar Silvia Federici reminds us that the enclosure of the commons affected women and gender roles in particularly harmful ways. Women were especially dependent on the commons for their “subsistence, autonomy, and sociality,” and they were

denied the private property rights that some men managed to acquire after enclosure. Furthermore, enclosure of the commons facilitated the rise of modern capitalist patriarchy, in which men generally left home to work in the Industrial Revolution, while women came to be more and more confined to the domestic realm, expected to reproduce labourers for the growing workforce. Women who resisted enclosures, who maintained the old ways of communing (e.g., gathering medicinal plants from the woods), or who were not dependent on a male authority were often accused of witchcraft and drowned or burned at the stake.¹⁰

The rest of Europe followed a similar pattern of enclosure and displacement and the conquest and colonization of the Americas by European powers starting in the late fifteenth century, with the racist and genocidal additions of widespread slaughter of Indigenous people, along with Indigenous and then African chattel slavery. The landed aristocracy who sought to expand their empires in the “new world” were ironically, tragically, aided and abetted by displaced European commoners (and their descendants), many of whom benefited from the access to land grants under settler colonialism. Independence from European colonial powers paved the way for American-born persons of European descent to further accelerate the enclosure of commons throughout the Americas via Manifest Destiny, liberal progress, and, more recently, development.

Indigenous Commons and European Conquest in the Americas

Indigenous peoples made their home on the land that many call Turtle Island and others call *Abya Yala*¹¹ from tens of thousands to over 100,000 years before the arrival of Europeans.¹² In the Western cultural imagination, these lands were viewed not only as a “New World” but as *terra nullius*, a pristine or virgin wilderness belonging to no one. This myth, however, was created precisely to serve the interests of conquering powers and settler colonists. Rather than a wilderness untouched by human intervention, the lands of the pre-Columbian Americas were skillfully tended and cultivated by Indigenous peoples for millennia via diverse and sophisticated—and, most often, *communal*—systems of agriculture, forestry, transportation, trade, game management, and governance. From hunter-gatherer communities to semi-nomadic agricultural peoples to vast empires, pre-contact Indigenous peoples sustained themselves by adapting to local landscapes and by adapting these landscapes to communally meet human needs.¹³ Far from *terra nullius*, the pre-Colombian Americas were a vast network of *commons*—managed by human communities via cultural practices.

Indigenous cosmovisions, spiritualities, sacred stories, and ceremonial practices nurtured and reinforced the practice of commoning through the cultivation of mutuality and reciprocity between human beings, the land, and more-than-human creatures.¹⁴ Indigenous peoples of the Americas were and are fallible human beings, and were not and are not always perfectly attuned to harmonious relationships with Creation. Indigenous scholars and activists therefore warn against the romantic, yet dehumanizing, myth of the “noble savage.” To be indigenous to the land does not mean that Indigenous peoples are essentially “closer to nature” or are more communal or have attained ecological perfection. Rather, Indigenous peoples developed ecological sensibilities and environmentally responsible practices of commoning together, through trial and error, honed over many generations and millennia.¹⁵

In many Indigenous communities, women played (and continue to play) important leadership roles in this process as knowledge-keepers who pass on the wisdom of Indigenous commons. For example, in the Lenca cosmovision, feminine spirits and human women are considered to be the guardians of the rivers, which are sacred commons essential to the community’s physical, cultural, and spiritual survival.

Upon the arrival of Europeans in the Americas, Indigenous cosmovisions were demonized, and the ecological safeguards of the commons were too often destroyed by the genocidal displacement of Indigenous peoples from the lands to which they belonged. A population of between 60 to over 100 million people throughout the Americas was reduced by 90 per cent in the century following the arrival of Christopher Columbus and the beginnings of the Spanish invasion in 1492.¹⁶ As other European powers began their own colonial campaigns, the death toll mounted. While the introduction of new diseases accounted for massive amounts of death, scholars have identified many other factors that impacted Indigenous peoples’ ability to survive: “war, massacres, enslavement, overwork, deportation, the loss of will to live or reproduce, malnutrition and starvation from the breakdown of trade networks, and the loss of subsistence food production due to land loss.”¹⁷ Each of these factors contain elements of environmental violence and ecological degradation that harmed not only the land itself but the ability of Indigenous peoples to depend on their communally managed lands for subsistence. As Dina Gilio-Whitaker puts it, “[i]n one way or another these are all environmental factors that were rooted in settlers deliberately blocking Native peoples’ access to resources necessary for maintaining an Indigenous way of life.”¹⁸ The conquest of Indigenous commons meant, as George Tinker puts it, that genocide and ecocide went hand in hand.¹⁹

Christian Complicity in the Destruction of Indigenous Commons

There are many angles from which to analyze Christian complicity in this genocide, ecocide, and accompanying destruction of Indigenous commons. Spanish and Portuguese conquest and colonization of the Americas were sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church. The problem goes back even further, to Roman Catholic authorization of Portuguese enslavement of Africans in 1452 and dominion over African lands in 1454. When Christopher Columbus was sponsored by the Catholic monarchs of the kingdoms that would become Spain and made landfall on the islands that are now known as the Bahamas in 1492 and in 1493, Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull that divided dominion over the non-Christian world between Spain and Portugal. The “universal destination of created goods,” which would become so central to Catholic social teaching, required careful administration by the pope and his monarchical emissaries to ensure the proper ordering of the “common good” via proper sovereignty over the non-Christians and the “common” goods of Creation that they had previously managed. Given the Christian supremacy of European Christendom, it would have been inconceivable that non-Christian peoples would have been “rational” or even “human” enough to order their societies according to God’s best intentions for humanity. Thus, what we now know as the “Doctrine of Discovery” provided both Catholic and later Protestant colonizers religious justification for laying claim to non-Christian lands and people who in the colonial Christian view lacked true religion and full humanity.

Decolonial scholar Sylvia Wynter cites a Genú commentator regarding the absurdity of this doctrine: “About the Pope being the Lord of all the universe in the place of God, and that he had given the lands of the Indies to the King of Castile, the Pope must have been drunk when he did it, for he gave what was not his.... The king who asked for and received this gift must have been some madman for he asked to have given to him that which belonged to others.”²⁰ What was the particular theological concoction that had inebriated the pope and had driven the king of Castile out of his mind with the preposterous notion that they had the authority, the right, and even the sacred responsibility to displace, enslave, or destroy entire human populations and their millennia-old systems and spiritualities of commoning? Liberation, feminist, womanist, post-colonial, and decolonial theologies have posited any number of responses.²¹ Two important dimensions of colonial Christian theologies are antithetical to commoning and are deeply entwined with white Christian European impulses to conquer, colonize, enclose, and dominate the commons of Creation.

First, in the Western Christian imagination, the Christian doctrine of Creation is characterized by *racialized displacement* rather than the kind of *localized in-placement* that is characteristic of commoning, particularly when it comes to the Indigenous cosmologies that support practices of commoning. Native American scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. made this critique over half a century ago: Christian doctrines of Creation as “fallen” displace and alienate Christians from the land and orient us toward a linear concept of time in which Creation requires salvific intervention to ensure its movement toward its final goal or eschatological consummation. Perhaps this conception was helpful for ancient Israel or maybe even Christian Europe, but, in Deloria’s words, “[w]hat has been the manifestation of deity in a particular local situation is mistaken for a truth applicable to all times and places, a truth so powerful that it must be impressed upon peoples who have no connection to the event or to the cultural complex in which it originally made sense.”²² Willie James Jennings draws on Deloria to make a similar argument, but with closer attention to the way in which the Christian doctrine of Creation toward displacement is also racialized: “In the minds of the European settlers, the instability of both land and people called for the stability of transition. The natives, black, red, and everyone not white, must be brought from chaos to faith. The land, wetlands, fields, and forests must be cleared, organized, and brought into productive civilization. The stability is in the transition, held together by racial attribution.”²³ The commons of Creation maintained by Indigenous peoples were seen as disorganized chaos in as much need of salvation as the racialized non-Christian original peoples who had belonged to these lands for millennia. Such salvation required the voluntary and forced displacement of European explorers, colonists, and settlers from lands that were being enclosed by the aristocracy and subsequent bourgeoisie; displacement of Indigenous peoples from their common lands by European colonial powers; displacement of African bodies from their own lands to work private plantations; and even displacement or alienation of the land from itself. Whereas commoning requires intimate place-based knowledge passed on across generations, the Christian missionary impulse has displaced and attempts to continually erase such knowledge and practice, in the name of salvation (which transmutes into enlightenment, progress, and development).

Second, in addition to the racialized nature of colonial Christian displacement from the commons of Creation, such displacement is founded on and furthered by a *colonized conception of gender and the natural world* in which the earth, like “woman,” requires the intervention of masculine power to impose order on the chaos of female embodiment and all of the processes that

produce and sustain life. We briefly considered how this process played out in Europe, displacing women from the commons to extract domestic and reproductive labour from their bodies, to the detriment of women's ability to survive, let alone thrive. Ecofeminists have been making this link between the domination of women and the domination of the earth for decades. However, displacement has especially harmed women of colour, who have been disproportionately displaced from the land, objectified and commodified for their sexual and reproductive capacities, and persecuted for their resistance to these violent realities.

Indigenous women in the Americas were not only violated and enslaved by Spanish conquistadors and colonial powers but also disproportionately persecuted by the Spanish Inquisition in Mexico under suspicion of witchcraft or idolatry due to their persistent connections with the land and ancestral practices of commoning.²⁴ Furthermore, ecowomanist theologian Melanie Harris identifies the interrelationship between the oppression of African women and the oppression of the earth as central to the claims of ecowomanism:

Pointing to parallel oppressions suffered by enslaved African women whose bodies were raped and violated for the purpose of breeding slaves during the history of American slavery, and the similar ways in which the body of the earth, including mountains, rivers, and farming fields, have been used and overused for economic gain and resource, ecowomanism claims that the same logic of domination that functioned as a theoretical underpinning for the transatlantic slave trade (and other forms of systemic oppression) is the same logic of domination at work in cases of ecological violence and control.²⁵

Moreover, white women (including myself) must reckon with the fact that bourgeois European women's displaced "place" in the order of Creation as domestic angels of the house demanded a capitulation to white patriarchy that further displaced us from the land and place-based labour. Our displacement from the commons and our new "place" on the pedestal of white femininity have thus contributed to the oppression of Indigenous, Black, and other women of colour who are conceived as "closer to nature" and the earth. Ecowomanist analysis and praxis, therefore, encourages us to go deeper than Euro-centric forms of ecofeminism to diagnose the patriarchal *and* white supremacist nature of the ecologically destructive world order that emerges with enclosure of the commons and the advent of colonialism and chattel slavery. As Christian theologians, we cannot overlook how deeply our theologies of Creation have been and are complicit in this violent enclosure of the commons of Creation.

Learning from Indigenous Commoning Today: Reanimating the Commons of Creation

How might Western Christian theology decolonize our theologies of Creation so that we might participate in the commons of Creation rather than wittingly or unwittingly contribute to its continued enclosure and colonization? What might Christian theology learn from Indigenous peoples as an important part of this theological decolonization?

Much contemporary Christian ecotheology—especially Catholic theologies akin to or inspired by Pope Francis' integral ecology—encourages a fundamental paradigm shift to overcome the logic of domination and extractivism that have brought about the twin terrors of colonial violence and ecological devastation. Four decades of advances in Christian ecotheologies and ethics, paired with the ecological turn in Catholic social tradition solidified by Pope Francis, have reminded us that the Hebrew Bible, Christian Scriptures, and two thousand years of tradition contain a vast array of spiritual and theological resources for cultivating an ecological conversion toward the earth and its most marginalized and vulnerable communities. The turn to what Daniel Scheid calls the "cosmic common good" and to what John Hart articulates as a "sacramental commons" point toward how Catholic social tradition and theologies of creation have great potential for reclaiming the commons of Creation.²⁶

Pope Francis' highly visible and charismatic leadership has brought the social and ecological dimensions of Christian faith centre stage, and his theologically inspired critiques of extractivism and throwaway culture have inspired many Christians to stand in solidarity with oppressed and marginalized communities, and with the earth itself, to demand that we care for rather than exploit our common home. He has also encouraged intercultural and interreligious dialogue with Indigenous peoples, especially in the Amazon region, so that non-Indigenous Christians might learn from Indigenous peoples about "good living," harmonious and communitarian existence, and responsible care of nature.²⁷ Francis' ecological stance is decidedly anti-extractivist and has much potential to support a theology of Creation that reclaims commoning as a practice of love and care for our common home.

However, Melissa Pagán challenges those of us inspired by Pope Francis' integral ecology to dismantle not only the coloniality of power wielded by the anti-ecological paradigm of extractivist neoliberal capitalism but also the coloniality of being and of gender that undergirds the violent conception of the human subject imposed on colonized lands and peoples. This is precisely the logic that undergirds the enclosure and

destruction of commons in general and Indigenous commons in particular. Pagán's work also reminds us that humble listening to and learning from the *gritos*, or cries, of Indigenous communities must be done with great care, for romanticization, commodification, and cultural appropriation are ever-present dangers. In her words, "we must be cautious to ensure that the cries to which we are listening are not simply being placed within the broader frameworks of our own traditions or considered only through the lens of modernity and/or the modern anthropological subject. We must be willing to listen to the *gritos* on their own terms, from their own contexts, and in their own modes of expression."²⁸ This task will require a great deal more study and care, as these *gritos* emerge from an incredibly diverse and complex landscape of Indigenous commons and cosmovisions.²⁹ This essay is an initial attempt at humbly listening to and learning from two particular aspects of the ecological witness and spiritual wisdom that arise from Indigenous cosmovisions and support practices of commoning.

First, many Indigenous practices of commoning are supported by a sacred sense of place, and commons are often established through intimate relationships of reciprocity between human beings and the more-than-human places and creatures that have local spiritual significance. These relationships subvert colonial hierarchies of humanity over the more-than-human world. Christian ecotheologies have been challenging these hierarchies, but often with a sense of nonhuman or planetary passivity that leaves in place a paradigm of modern liberal *human* agency, albeit a more liberatory kind. Pagán's concern for superimposing the modern anthropological subject will be warranted if we attempt to falsely conflate Christian ecotheology with Indigenous cosmovisions on this point. In contrast, Indigenous understandings of human agency are usually set within relationships of intersubjectivity and reciprocity with the more-than-human world, which is often understood as inspirited, alive, sentient, intelligent, and even communicative. For example, in studying the life and work of the murdered Indigenous environmental defender Berta Cáceres, we learn that the animism of the Lenca cosmovision is passed down by women in the Lenca community through practices that challenge the primacy of *human* agency with an affirmation of both the agency of female guardian spirits within the more-than-human world and the subjectivity of the more-than-human world itself. Berta's own accounts of her defense of the Gualcarque River (arguably a commons) from a hydroelectric dam project indicate that the Gualcarque River is *protected* by the spirits of young girls, and it *beckons* to the Lenca people to swim in its calming waters. The river *told* Berta that the movement to protect the Gualcarque would prevail. And the Gualcarque and all the threat-

ened rivers of the world *call* on humanity to take action on behalf of the rights of rivers and of Mother Earth.³⁰

Anishinaabe botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer uses the phrase "the grammar of animacy" to describe this recognition of subjectivity and aliveness at work in the more-than-human world. Western anthropologists' use of the category of "animism" to describe Indigenous worldviews often presupposes a hierarchical dualism between spirit and matter. But the grammar of animacy refuses any such bifurcation of created existence. Lands, landscapes, and waterways, along with the plant, animal, and mineral elements of local ecosystems, are not only sacred in most Indigenous cosmovisions; they are often understood to be sentient subjects of interrelational coexistence, communication, and co-creation with one another and their human relatives. Kimmerer notes that recognition of and respect for this animacy is woven into the Ojibwe language, in which all elements and inhabitants of Creation are imbued with an aliveness that is expressed in the form of verbs that show their particular ways of being in the world.

The Western Christian imagination's distorted displacement from the land and its aliveness might not be entirely healed by a sacramental imagination in which God's glory or grace are experienced in and through the natural world, or even by a theological vision of the world as God's body. There is much beauty and promise in these ecotheological advances. But they tend to fail to honour the agency and personhood of the more-than-human world, creatures, and forces that inhabit it. Christian theology would do well to retrieve a sense of how the divine presence in Creation undergirds not only the sacredness but the sentient aliveness, the animacy, at the heart of all reality. Unlearning the anthropocentrism of modern liberal agency and honouring the living sentience, relationality, and agency of the more-than-human world has the potential to cultivate relationships of deep respect, humble listening, and mutual protection between human beings, the earth, and all of its inhabitants: between human beings and the land and its living spirits, its soil, animals, plants, and trees, between human beings and rivers, their living spirits, their water, fish, shrimp, swimming holes. A cosmovision steeped in a grammar of animacy affirms all of this beautiful abundance, along with all of the limitations and constraints that must accompany building a commons that exists within the bounds of such relationships. And it requires local, contextual relationships of mutuality with the land, water, and creatures in the places in which we make our homes, not just a stewardship of inanimate resources, a relationship with Creation in general, or even with God through Creation. Might a robust retrieval of Christian animism support localized in-placement of Christians in the commons of Creation?

Second, Indigenous cosmovisions and their connection to practices of commoning beckon us to rethink the relationship between the divine, women, gender, and the more-than-human world. In many Indigenous cosmovisions, mother goddesses are central to cultural and spiritual practices that support commoning by centring reverence and care for the power of Creation to cyclically reproduce life. These goddesses are not necessarily the equivalent of or symbolic of what we often hear referred to theologically and colloquially as “mother earth,” nor are they always confined to the role of local fertility goddesses. Rather, mother goddesses can also be experienced in ontologically cosmic terms. For example, Cecilia Titizano argues that for the Quechua and Aymara peoples in the Andes, *Mama Pacha* is not identified with the earth itself, nor is she one fertility goddess among many, but rather is understood to be the mother of all space/time—of the cosmos and our entire reality, of earth, water, air, and fire.³¹ Reverence for the life-giving and sometimes chaotic power of divinity in female form requires living in communal relationships of mutuality with and respect for that which *Mama Pacha* has provided. Christian conquest and colonization attempted to either domesticate or erase the power of Indigenous mother goddesses, supplanting both cosmic and localized goddesses with a multitude of Marys that are powerful in their own right, but only in subordination to a male God and often in the service of colonial conceptions of gender and sexuality.

Feminist theology has attempted to retrieve female language and imagery for the divine that is friendlier to women’s well-being and the well-being of the planet, while Pope Francis has attempted to give the earth a “feminine face.” Have either of these lines of eco-theological reflection grappled with the ways in which Christianity supplanted goddess traditions that supported commoning in both Europe and the Americas? Does renaming the Christian God as “mother” or imaging her in female form successfully recover what was lost in the destruction of goddess-based religious tradition? Might we need to revisit the relationship between colonial enclosures of the commons, ecological ruin, and mother-loss? I ask these questions with some trepidation because of the many dangers that feminist theology has pointed out regarding gender essentialism, but I suspect that there is something here—part wound and part promise—that we might need to tend as we seek paths of care for the commons of Creation.

Reparations, Restoration, and Solidarity: Practising the Kin-dom of God

Despite making up just 5 per cent of the global population, Indigenous peoples around the world protect 80 per cent of the planet’s biodiversity and are therefore frontline defenders against the worst-case climate

change scenarios. Practices of commoning are central to the cultural autonomy of Indigenous people, along with their ability to stave off the predations of neo-liberal extractivist economics and to thereby resist climate chaos. Yet, Indigenous commons are still being threatened, expropriated, and enclosed by powerful interests in the Americas and around the world. Perhaps the paradigm shift that ecotheologians have been announcing for decades will only come to fruition if and when a critical mass of non-Indigenous people enter into relationships of solidarity with Indigenous peoples to demand the return and restoration of commons that have been stolen, to defend the commons that remain, and to embody an alternative world. In that other possible world, the commons of Creation more concretely resembles what Ada María Isasi-Díaz suggested we Christians should call the kin-dom of God and what the Zapatistas of Chiapas imagine as a world in which many worlds fit, a world that makes room for a multitude of interconnected commons to coexist and flourish in relationships of abundance, justice, peace, and ecological well-being.³²

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1 Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, 25th Anniversary ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997).

2 Calle 13, “Latinoamérica,” from the studio album *Entren Los Que Quieran* (Sony Music Latin, 2010).

3 The word “commons” can be used as a singular or plural noun. “Commoning” is a gerund that is often used to describe the practice of creating, sustaining, and living from the goods accessed within a commons.

4 David Bollier, *Thinking Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2014), 15. Emphasis in the original.

5 Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162:3859 (Dec. 13, 1968), 1243–48.

6 On the phrase “more-than-human,” see Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2011). Ecologist and geophilosopher David Abram introduced the term to describe human immersion in a larger, sentient whole in *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

7 Derek Wall, *The Commons in History: Culture, Conflict, and Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 24.

8 Ibid., 25.

9 Bollier, *Thinking Like a Commoner*, 42.

10 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

11 Néstor Medina explains that “Abya Yala is a term from the Kuna nation (they are located in the North region of Colombia and Southeast region of Panama) which means ‘land in full maturity’ or ‘land of vital blood,’ and which rejects ideas of the Americas as the ‘New World.’ ... Turtle Island refers to the way the Ojibway and other First Nations of Canada speak about the creation of the world.” See Néstor Medina, “Indigenous Decolonial Movements in Abya Yala, Aztlán, and Turtle Island: A Comparison,” in *Decolonial Christianities: Latin American and Latinx Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 148n2.

12 Paulette F.C. Steeves, *The Indigenous Paleolithic of the Western Hemisphere* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2021).

13 Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 27.

14 See Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020); George E. “Tink” Tinker, *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008); and Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

15 Thanks to Taína Díaz-Reyes, my former student at Wake Forest School of Divinity, for introducing me to this concept and body of work about the Indigenous accumulation of “Traditional Ecological Knowledge.” See *Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Learning from Indigenous Practices for Environmental Sustainability*, ed. Melissa K. Nelson and Dan Shilling (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

16 Researchers have actually identified a period of global cooling that followed this devastation of the Indigenous population of the Americas, due to such a drastic reduction in the practice of agriculture. See Alexander Koch et al., “Earth System Impacts of the European Arrival and Great Dying in the Americas after 1492,” *Quaternary Science Reviews* 207 (March 2019), 13–36.

17 Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows*, 40.

18 Ibid.

19 See Tinker, *American Indian Liberation*, 57 ff.

20 Sylvia Wynter, “The Pope Must Have Been Drunk, the King of Castile a Madman: Culture as Actuality, and the Caribbean Rethinking Modernity,” in *Reordering of Culture: Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada in the Hood*, ed. Alvina Ruprecht and Cecilia Taiana (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 18.

21 See, for example, the analysis of Katie Geneva Cannon in “Cutting Edge: Christian Imperialism and the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24:1 (2008), 127–34.

22 Vine Deloria, Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 30th Anniversary ed. (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2003), 65.

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24 See Theresa A. Yugar, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Feminist Reconstruction of Biography and Text* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 100.

25 Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017). See also Melanie L. Harris, “Ecowomanism: An Introduction,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 20:1 (2016), 5–14.

26 See Daniel P. Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), and John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

27 Pope Francis, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, February 2, 2020, §71, www.vatican.va.

28 Melissa Pagán, “Extractive Zones and the Nexus of the Coloniality of Being/Coloniality of Gender: Towards a Decolonial Feminist Integral Ecology,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 22:1 (Spring 2020), 22.

29 See Kaitlin B. Curtice’s more recent *Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020). Daniel Scheid is one white Christian ethicist who has sought to dialogue more extensively with Indigenous ecologies and ethics in *The Cosmic Common Good*, 163–79.

30 See Berta Cáceres, “Goldman Environmental Prize Acceptance Speech,” April 22, 2015, <https://youtu.be/AR1kwx8b0ms>; Nina Lakhani, *Who Killed Berta Cáceres? Dams, Death Squads, and an Indigenous Defender’s Battle for the Planet* (New York: Verso, 2020); *Las Semillas de Berta Cáceres*, documentary film produced by the Entre Pueblos journalism project, EntrePueblos YouTube Channel, March 3, 2021, <https://youtu.be/gBC5116oKO4>; and *Guardiana de los Ríos*, documentary film produced by Campaña Madre Tierra and distributed by Radio Progreso (www.radioprogreso.net), Radio Progreso YouTube Channel, September 13, 2016, <https://youtu.be/Lwwe4MOGfmo>.

31 Cecilia Titizano, “Mama Pacha: Creator and Sustainer Spirit of God,” *Horizontes Decoloniales* 3 (2017), 127–59.

32 See Ada María Isasi-Díaz’s use of “kin-dom” language for the reign of God in “Solidarity: Love of Neighbors in the 1980s,” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 34. See also Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, 10th Anniversary ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), and *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996). “Otro mundo posible” is the language used by the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, to describe the world they envisioned in their 1994 uprising and continue to embody in their construction of an autonomous Indigenous homeland and a world in which all people are free to fully exist. Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena-Comandancia General del Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, “Cuarta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona,” January 1, 1996, www.enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx.

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Book Review

Democracies in Crisis

By Don Schweitzer

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Craig Calhoun, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor. *Degenerations of Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022. 353 pp.

Democracies around the world are in crisis. This important book by three social theorists, Craig Calhoun, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor, analyzes the underlying causes of these interrelated crises, focusing mostly on the United States, Europe, and India. The book begins with a collectively authored "Introduction." Chapter 1, "Degenerations of Democracy," by Taylor, addresses cultural causes of this crisis. Chapters 2 and 3, "Contradictions and Double Movements" and "Compromises with Capitalism," by Craig Calhoun, deal with its economic causes. The fourth chapter, written by Calhoun and Taylor, examines how the ideologies of authenticity and meritocracy have contributed to the decline of democracies. In chapters 5 and 6, "Making the Demos Safe for Democracy?" and "The Structure of Democratic Degenerations and the Imperative of Direct Action," Gaonkar responds to Calhoun and Taylor. Chapter 7, "What Is to Be Done?" by Calhoun and Taylor, explores what will be required to repair and restore democracies to health. The book ends with a "Conclusion" written by all three contributors.

The authors offer their thoughts as "a plea for democracy."¹ They seek to renew "the French Revolution's great call for *liberty, equality, and solidarity*" (286). The tone of their writing is urgent. At stake are the quality of public life, social institutions, and, in many cases, people's lives. The authors' outlook is hopeful but not optimistic. They argue that democracies can become healthy again, but this renewal will require leadership, grassroots commitment, and effort.

While the book is not theological or religious in any way, I will discuss it from a theological perspective. I will argue that spiritual progressives need to mobilize religious and spiritual communities and resources to address the multiple, overlapping crises of democracy discussed here. First, I will outline Calhoun's, Gaonkar's, and Taylor's analysis and arguments, then I will analyze the roots of the crisis using Mark Lewis Taylor's understanding of sin—along with support from Seyla Benhabib, Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, and Gregory Baum. This analysis suggests

that addressing this crisis will require the resources of world religions.

This crisis is a theological concern because democratic ideals of freedom, respect for others, solidarity, and inclusion align with the reign of God. The reign of God is not a democracy. However, as societies more fully actualize these ideals, they do in some ways draw closer to it. I will conclude by a) showing how a Christian understanding of sin can aid in this attempt to renew democracies and b) briefly noting how world religions can help to inspire the envisioning and implementing of massive social transformation that Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor argue healing democracies will require.

The Crisis

Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor begin in their "Introduction" by arguing that democracies around the globe are in crisis, though this crisis has different permutations and is more extreme in some countries than others. Public life has become riddled with social conflict. Societies have become polarized into competing groups, whose members deny one another's truth claims and reject sources of information that contradict their own views. Movements seeking to exclude or marginalize minorities have gained significant power or, in some cases, have been elected to government. Democratic ideals, practices, and institutions are being subverted and attacked.

This crisis is partly caused by transnational factors like the globalization of trade and communication as well as technological innovations. As the authors note, technological innovations and shifts in communications media have "exacerbated problems of honesty, accurate information, and legitimacy in democratic politics" (233) and have thrown the legacy media of print and broadcast journalism into disarray (233–35). These shifts have damaged democracies, as accurate, independent journalism is necessary for informed public debates and decision making, which are essential to healthy democracies. The fragmentation of societies,

climate change, and the international refugee crisis are other transnational factors pressuring democracies. However, the biggest threats to democracies are posed by factors internal to them (263). The current crisis of democracies results predominantly from a process of self-jeopardization. Even the most iconic democracies are being “corrupted and undermined from within” (262). Governments, social institutions, and citizens committed to democratic ideals have been unable or have struggled to check these internal threats to their societies. Anti-democratic movements have seized the opportunities these trends present to gain social power and influence.

For members of such movements, this is not a crisis but an exciting opportunity. In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the dominant political wing of Hindu nationalism known as Hindutva led by Narendra Modi, was elected in 2014 and again in 2019 by an overwhelming majority. BJP members see India’s version of this crisis as the government carrying out its democratically approved mandate. In Sweden, on September 12, 2022, the Sweden Democrats, a far-right party with Nazi roots, received 20.6 per cent of the votes in a general election. Its members jubilantly celebrated their electoral gains. They and other conservative parties have formed Sweden’s new government. In Italy, on September 25, 2022, Giorgia Meloni’s far-right Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy) party achieved election results that made her Italy’s first female prime minister and the head of a right-wing government. For supporters of such political parties and their agendas, the present state of democracies is a time of opportunity they have long awaited.

However, for those who value dialogue, inclusion, and respect for others as well as freedom, democracies are in crisis. For Americans, this crisis was highlighted by an insurrectionist mob’s forced entry into the US Capitol building on January 6, 2021, following Donald Trump’s refusal to accept defeat in the 2020 presidential election. For Canadians, it was dramatized in the “Freedom Convoy” of several hundred trucks and other vehicles and thousands of protestors that converged on Ottawa on January 28, 2022,² occupying its downtown core for several weeks and demanding an end to COVID-19 restrictions.

Causes of the Crisis

After laying out a basic outline of the crisis, Taylor, Calhoun, and Gaonkar each offer an analysis of the situation and make suggestions for how democracies can be renewed. Taylor, author of the first chapter, begins by defining democracy as a “telic concept”; it is a process geared toward an end rather than being an end state in itself (19). Theoretically, democracies are social projects guided by ideals of freedom, equality,

and inclusion. Yet, these ideals can never be fully realized in history. While democracies may more fully approximate them, they may also move away from them or do both at once. Contingent factors, such as economic and technological developments, may require that democracies reconceive the strategies and concrete goals by which these ideals are pursued.

According to Taylor, measured against the ideals of freedom, inclusion, and equality, Western democracies have backslid since around 1975 (23). Taylor dubs this trend the “Great Downgrade” (23). It involves decreases in the actual freedom, inclusion, and equality that democracies provide to their citizens and a decline in the support for these ideals among significant portions of their populations. This slide has been propelled by three “axes of degeneration” (45). The first axis is a decline in citizen efficacy, the ability of most citizens to shape their lives and societies based on beliefs that democratic work can be done via its procedures and institutions. This ability has generally declined because of growing economic inequality and a heightened individualism that has contributed to the fragmentation of social issues (24). This decline is self-feeding, as experiences and perceptions of it lead to decreasing citizen involvement in politics and social issues. Taylor does not stress here that this decline and the frustration it generates leads some to support political candidates like Donald Trump, who present themselves as political outsiders who will do things differently and effect radical change.

Movements toward exclusion form a second axis of degeneration. Taylor has argued that for democracies to function well and fulfill their ideals, their populations must have a strong sense of common identity (33).³ This inclusivity provides a basis for respect and trust in other citizens which are foundational to democracies. This sense of common identity is subject to debate and redefinition. It has formal and substantive dimensions. Formally, anyone with citizenship shares it, but this common identity can be defined substantially and more restrictively in terms of race, religion, class, or ethnicity. It can be turned in xenophobic directions and defined in ways that exclude, denigrate, or demonize so-called others. Taylor notes that such movements toward exclusion and denigration can be overcome mainly through interactions with diverse peoples (36).

The importance of such diverse social interaction for the health of democracies has also been noted by others. In his book *Bowling Alone*, political scientist Robert Putnam described this knowledge of others gained through interaction with them as “bridging social capital.”⁴ He, too, saw this as important for the health of democracies and argued that it can “generate broader identities and reciprocity”⁵ between members of different social groups. Developing such

social capital works against movements of exclusion, which divide populations into competing or warring factions and destroy the respect for others that is fundamental to democracy.

Taylor notes that movements toward exclusion tend to be driven by fears that immigrants or other social groups may change or destroy a cherished culture or by a sense of resentment that a country's "real" citizens are being neglected while public funds and institutions aid minorities and newcomers. Such movements often invoke democratic ideals in a restricted sense, as applicable to and existing for the benefit of narrowly defined "real citizens" of a country.

The third axis is polarization, the process by which governing parties mount ideological campaigns and twist democratic procedures and institutions to make their governing power permanent by ensuring continued electoral victories. Taylor argues that Republicans in the United States have adopted this strategy since 2012 (44). The axis of polarization involves struggles over the definition of a country's political identity (45). When such struggles become polarized, debates about a country's identity and who should govern it become something like "a civil war without guns" (44), in which opponents and opposing institutions are considered enemies to be defeated or destroyed. This polarization introduces "a ruthlessness into political life" (46) and makes it increasingly difficult for people across the political spectrum to collaborate on overarching issues like climate change or a pandemic.

These three trends are mutually reinforcing. For instance, as the sense of citizen efficacy declines, people with moderate views tend to disengage with civic and political issues, leaving the field to those with more extreme positions.⁶ In this way, the decline in citizen efficacy feeds polarization. Thus, Taylor describes these three trends as dangers endemic to democracy. The extent of the current global crisis is the result of all three simultaneously afflicting even the most well-established democracies. These trends are stimulated and reinforced by other self-feeding degenerative spirals, such as the "growing opacity of the representative system" (27–29). As the knowledge stocks available in contemporary societies continue to increase, the percentage of this knowledge that any one person can comprehend decreases, thereby making it difficult for individuals to arrive at informed decisions regarding many public issues and causing some people to disengage from them. Others respond by endorsing even irrational policy proposals, as long as these proposals seem to accord with and represent their self-interests (27–28). What can remedy the Great Downgrade? Taylor argues that we need to generate a new solidarity, reaching across social divides that can

overcome the paralysis created by social and ideological conflict and enable societies to address the shared challenges they face.

Craig Calhoun, the author of the second and third chapters, pays special attention to economic causes of this crisis. He, too, locates its beginning in the early 1970s, when the economic growth that sustained the golden years of welfare capitalism ended. In the 1970s, the economic and political philosophy of neoliberalism rose to prominence and gained political power through the elections of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister of the United Kingdom in 1979 and Ronald Reagan as president of the United States in 1980. Many other North Atlantic democracies followed suit by electing neoliberal governments in the 1980s. Subsequent decades have been marked by a retreat from government regulation of the economy (115). Using Karl Polanyi's notion of a double movement,⁷ Calhoun argues that the turn to neoliberalism has been accompanied by the disembedding of markets from local communities and political control (77). Technological innovations, such as computers and the internet and the intensification of globalization, contributed to this disembedding, which has frequently disrupted local communities and economies in ways that contribute to growing economic inequalities between the rich and the poor and to increasing disparities between the life opportunities afforded to people in each group.

This disembedding is the first of Polanyi's double movement. The second involves the re-embedding of markets and economic practices within social relations by laws and measures that protect society from the destructive social consequences of an unregulated free market.⁸ A major source of the current democratic crisis, Calhoun argues, is the lag between the first and second movements. There has yet to be a second movement equal to the first. An important cause of this lag is neoliberalism's attack on institutions that provide public goods and on the idea that governments should intervene in the economy to ensure that it serves the public good (63).

Calhoun also notes three negative trends latent in the welfare state that have continued under neoliberal governance. First, the provision of services by welfare states was typically administered and delivered through bureaucracies and rationalized procedures that often frustrated and alienated those they were intended to serve. Second, while the welfare state delivered services and assistance to many in need, its delivery mechanisms often occurred with a disciplinary effect. Both these tendencies contradicted the democratic theme of freedom. Third, while welfare states sought to address inequalities, they often perpetuated these in new, less visible ways (103–106). Any attempt

to re-embed the economy must also try to correct these three negative trends.

While some respond to trends like increasing climate change and the economic disruptions brought by globalization by living “off the grid,” for the vast majority there is no way to turn back technological innovations or changes in modes of transportation and manufacturing that have led to globalization. The authors of this book recognize that these innovations and their spread have benefited many. However, they have also brought great disruptions to communities and societies that have tended to benefit the upwardly mobile while adversely affecting the status, income, and life opportunities of others (135). For Calhoun, re-embedding the economy so that it serves the common good is central to addressing the current crisis of democracy.

Chapter 4, written by Calhoun and Taylor, focuses on authenticity⁹ and meritocracy as two ideologies contributing to this crisis. While both were instrumental in earlier struggles that advanced equality, each has become distorted by exaggerated notions of an individual’s autonomy and self-sufficiency (130). Democracy requires a commitment to solidarity and equality as well as freedom. The distorted individualism championed by debased notions of authenticity and meritocracy have led to a loss of solidarity and legitimated inequality.

In chapters 5 and 6, Gaonkar argues that democracies are being “hollowed out and undermined from within” (163) through strategic exploitation of democratic procedures and privileges by anti-democratic groups. What has emerged as a result, Gaonkar calls “ugly democracy” (165). He highlights movements of Hindu nationalism that do not hold to democratic ideals of inclusion, dialogue, respect for others, and equality but, ironically, mobilize their adherents to seek power by democratic means. Once elected, they then work to undermine the democratic nature of political processes, institutions, and the civil sphere, shaping them to perpetuate their rule.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. argued, there is a sense in which the ideals of democracy—inclusion, respect for others, dialogue, and freedom—are ultimately unenforceable. Societies can enact laws and create procedures that ensure space for the exercise of these ideals, but ultimately people only pursue these ideals because they value them, and this valuation cannot be legislated or enforced.¹⁰ When the tools of democracy are wielded without respect for these unenforceable ideals, democracies can devolve toward forms of mob rule.

Drawing attention to the case of India, Gaonkar points to a potentially hopeful reality. In most cases of ugly democracy, regimes that have won power through democratic processes and then worked to undermine these have been elected with less than 50 per cent of the eligible votes (179). In India, the majority who did not vote for the BJP represent, in Gaonkar’s terms, “the sleeping giant” (179). Any emancipatory project that would seek to wrest power from “ugly democrats” must awaken this majority, who have allowed undemocratic parties to achieve power through democratic means. Direct action in the form of non-violent protest (193–200) is needed to effect this awakening. Such protests address both the government in power and the general population and seek to mobilize the latter by appealing to its sense of justice.¹¹ Today the lag between Polanyi’s first and second movements is calling forth direct action around the globe. Gaonkar interprets these rising global direct actions in terms of a perennial struggle between elites and non-elites (195). Through such protests, non-elites renew democracy by making their presence known and gaining a voice in public debates, which too often feature only elite voices and perspectives. A successful example of such direct action was India’s farmers’ protest, which in 2021 forced Prime Minister Narendra Modi to back down on proposed laws that would have subjected farm produce prices to free markets.

Suggested Solutions

Chapter 7, written by Calhoun and Taylor, presents strategies by which democracies can be renewed. By renewal, they mean a restoration of civil discourse in the public sphere, of respect for citizens regardless of their political inclinations, and of the ability of democracies to constructively deal with overarching threats like climate change that require concerted action by the majority of the population. Renewing democracy in this way entails renewing the social foundations of democracy, economic equality, and equality of opportunity, as well as a public discourse and social engagement with public issues. They also stress that strategies for renewal, while guided by certain theoretical ideals, will have to be context dependent and innovative. Renewed democracies will take place differently from the past.

The authors emphasize that populism is not the problem. They accurately describe it as an ambivalent phenomenon that can be either dangerous or “a creative push for change” (215). Recently, right-wing populist movements in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Italy have tried to limit publicly funded healthcare or healthcare insurance.¹² Yet, many examples of progressive populism exist. For example, in Canada, a left-wing populist leader, Tommy Douglas, was instrumental in bringing publicly funded health

care to the province of Saskatchewan, from which it spread to the rest of Canada. Gaonkar's argument that the renewal of democracies depends upon the awakening of the people, "the sleeping sovereign" (281), itself represents a call for a new populism. The authors also emphasize that anxieties fuelling the appeal of right-wing populists need to be heard and the social problems underlying these anxieties addressed.

A Theological Response

The crisis afflicting democracies around the world results from the confluence of Taylor's three axes of degeneration, the lag between the disembedding of economies and an effective and large-scale second movement to protect societies against its ill effects, and the apathy of large segments of democratic populations to the crisis afflicting their countries. Renewing democracies will require initiatives focused on the public good at the local, regional, national, and global levels. It will need the development of coalitions in which people from different communities, organizations, and movements work together. It will also require an ideological struggle against the hegemony of neoliberalism and its distorted version of meritocracy.

Theology can contribute to this book's call to renew democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and solidarity (283) by analyzing how these ideals have deteriorated. According to the authors, a central challenge for democracies is balancing the competing claims of these three ideals. Important and enduring tensions exist between them. A significant contributing factor to the current crisis of democracy is the way freedom has been extolled apart from the other two. Calhoun and Taylor argue that neoliberalism and its meritocracy celebrate freedom in this way and thus obscure how this isolated focus on freedom has fostered and legitimated growing inequality and a loss of solidarity. Taylor also notes how movements toward exclusion and polarization define the common identities of democracies in restricted terms.

For example, in an analysis of how the combination of American patriotism and Christian faith were used to support George W. Bush's foreign policy in the wake of the 9/11 attacks,¹³ Mark Lewis Taylor drew on Augustine's notion of evil as "a 'privation of the good'"¹⁴ to understand how civic virtues of American citizens like patriotism and love of God could be turned into destructive vices.¹⁵ According to Augustine, as interpreted by Mark Taylor, "evil is bound up with the good, ... habits buried in the good delight of human beings in history are what generate evil and give it its force. Evil often latches on to whatever humans delight in, take as good. Evil for Augustine becomes a generative, creative power in history by exploiting its parasitic

relationship with the good."¹⁶ This form of evil is not the opposite of good but rather a diminished or one-sided appropriation of a publicly acknowledged good that retains its appearance and motivating power and yet twists it "toward destructive ends."¹⁷ The diminishment of certain aspects of a good enable such a good to be twisted in this way. This account of sin helps explain how meritocracy and neoliberalism have gained such traction in North Atlantic democracies. They present themselves as expressions of freedom and justice, ideals fundamental to democracy and difficult to oppose. However, both strip the notion of freedom of much of its substantive ethical content so that it can mask indifference, greed, idolatry, or will-to-power. In the New Testament, Paul critiqued this kind of debased notion of freedom when he argued that freedom should not be an opportunity for self-indulgence but for love of others (Gal. 5:13-15). Without the accompanying ideals of equality and solidarity which give it substantive ethical content and incline it toward the pursuit of peace and justice, the democratic notion of freedom becomes self-defeating and can inspire anarchy and aggression, themselves enemies of freedom.

Mark Taylor's analysis of how evil insinuates itself into diminished notions of the good points toward one way to resist the attraction of ideologies like meritocracy and neoliberalism. Empirical analysis of the consequences of these ideologies is necessary. Yet, as Martin Buber argued, in a polarized situation, shared values are lacking to evaluate these consequences. Instead, engaging people who endorse these ideologies in dialogue may lead them back to where their support of these debased notions of freedom conflicts with other ideals essential to their identity as citizens of a democracy.¹⁸ The notion of democratic freedom, the sovereignty of the people, "derives its legitimacy from its adherence to fundamental human rights principles."¹⁹ The phrase "We, the people" asserts freedom and dignity but also commits to associated ideals of equality and solidarity.²⁰ Asserting notions of freedom without these accompanying commitments contradicts the identity of democratic citizenship and puts one in conflict with one's self.

Seyla Benhabib has argued that there is always a healthy disjunction between the "universalizing values, norms, and principles of just constitutional government"²¹ and a people's particular culture and context in terms of the way these norms take shape and are lived. In other words, there is always disjunction between the formal and the substantive aspects of what Charles Taylor calls a democracy's common identity. In Benhabib's view, there is a context-transcending validity claim in the formal aspects of a democratic identity, to which the downtrodden sometimes lay claim in order to expand the substantive dimensions of this common identity.²² "We, the people" may apply substantially to

a particular group of individuals, but this notion contains a formal, context-transcending claim that applies in principle to all people.

Equality and solidarity are context-transcending ideals that in principle apply beyond the bounds of race, religion, culture, and ethnicity. Part of the renewal of democracy will involve an ideological struggle against a) debased notions of freedom which feature diminished notions of solidarity and equality in their substantive content and b) the appropriation of religious and cultural traditions to redeem and restore these now debased notions. As Gaonkar stresses, this ideological struggle needs to be waged through direct action, such as the Black Lives Matter protests (251), that confront the evil present in debased notions of freedom and the suffering they cause through personal presence and symbolic actions. This struggle also needs to be waged on an ideological level by showing, as Buber suggested, how these restricted notions put those who live by them in conflict with themselves. Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor's excellent analysis of the causes of this crisis provides a basis for doing so.

There is an awareness in the biblical traditions of how societies can endanger themselves through restricted understandings of the public good. These traditions describe "the self-jeopardizing of human societies primarily in terms of the decay of their internal justice."²³ As ideals of equality and solidarity become forgotten and as freedom becomes conceptualized without reference to them, a society's notions and practices of justice also decline. The current crisis of democracies reflects partly a diminished sense of the justice and respect that citizens owe each other. As Jon Sobrino argues, running through Scripture is a dynamic notion of divine justice as the preferential option for the poor, which adds inclusion to the ideals of freedom, equality, and solidarity and also establishes a new framework for discerning the public good.²⁴ The preferential option for the poor is not foreign to democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and solidarity. It indicates how these should be pursued and why. Through implementing this transcendent principle, the divine will is fulfilled, democratic ideals are upheld, and people, both those with and without power, experience a fulfillment they would otherwise lack.

Mark Taylor's appropriation of Augustine's notion of evil as a privation of the good also suggests another task of theological discernment and dialogue. If evil gains social power by twisting and distorting a good, then it is important in confronting destructive social movements, such as the support for Donald Trump or the "Freedom Convoy," to ask what good may be distorted and hidden in this evil. This good can be the articulation of suffering and alienation or a concern to protect a cultural identity that is allegedly threatened.

In the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2016 American presidential election, Mark Taylor and Joan Williams noted that Trump drew substantial support from middle- and lower-income white voters. Mark Taylor focused on their economic concerns, created largely by successive neoliberal regimes in the United States.²⁵ Williams focused more on cultural concerns, particularly those of white middle- and working-class male voters, especially their sense that their dignity as men and breadwinners had repeatedly been disrespected.²⁶

A dialogue that seeks to renew democracy by strengthening the ideals of equality and solidarity needs to include a discerning listening to the rage and aggression being articulated in movements toward exclusion and polarization. Seeking to understand such rage is not to agree with it. Paul Tillich recognized in German support for fascism in the early 1930s an element of legitimate protest against the destruction of German culture and values. This support stemmed partly from a people's love of their community, a community which they saw to be threatened.²⁷ While Tillich recognized an element of legitimacy in this, he also argued that those who truly love their culture and country desire it to "embody social justice."²⁸ Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor recognize this need for discernment, particularly in their call to heed the impact of 50 years of neoliberalism on middle- and working-class incomes (16, 136, 157, 209). They also recognize that the social foundations of democracy include cultural factors of identity, community, and tradition. They recognize that "wounded male pride" (223) is one source of some "exaggerated assertions of liberty" (223) and that the economic and cultural challenges facing many men should be recognized. Rather than express liberty as a licence for aggression and violence, this sense of injustice can be channelled constructively. In the US, the Poor People's Campaign effectively mobilizes many working-class and poor people to address the impact of neoliberalism on their lives, along with racism and militarism which intersect with and exacerbate poverty.²⁹

Think Big

Calhoun and Taylor conclude that to renew democracy we must think big (247). We must break out of the restricted social imaginations characteristic of neoliberalism with sweeping proposals that address simultaneously the issues that matter to people, such as climate change, employment, access to education, and health care. What is required is something comparable to Franklin Roosevelt's promise in 1932 of a New Deal (248). There needs to be a sustained cooperative movement that will address the multitude of issues threatening democracies but that will also be open to

people participating in it where and as they can. What will motivate this vision?

Pondering this same issue several decades ago, Gregory Baum argued that “world religions are the major social sources for an ethic of solidarity and self-limitation.”³⁰ Despite their ambiguity, “they also bear within them, sometimes deeply hidden, the message that people belong to one another, that they are – as the Bible says – their brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, and that compassion and solidarity belong to the very nature of human being.”³¹

German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas has also argued that secular reason, facing a process of modernization in danger of spinning out of control, must open itself to the moral resources of world religions in order to sustain solidarity, a passion for justice, and a social imagination capable of envisioning a just and diverse social order.³²

There is a spiritual dimension to the crisis of democracy that Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor analyze. Religious resources are needed to adequately address it. While these authors do not address the need to mobilize religious and spiritual communities and teachings to inspire people to address the multiple crises of modernity, there have been many attempts to do so. At the same time, movements toward “ugly democracy” have also mobilized religious resources.³³ The ambiguity of religion is clear here, which makes it even more urgent that spiritual progressives form networks of solidarity and social action to save both democracy and their traditions and communities.³⁴

1 Craig Calhoun, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor, *Degenerations of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 286. Subsequent page numbers for references to this book will be given directly in the text.

2 For a discussion of this, see Alan Davies, “‘Mass Man’ and the Mob: The Ottawa Freedom Convoy,” *Critical Theology* 4:4 (Summer 2022), 14–16.

3 Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 124–31.

4 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 22.

5 *Ibid.*, 23. Putnam argued that the health of democracies depends in part upon both bonding and bridging social capital and that both have declined in the United States in recent decades.

6 *Ibid.*, 342.

7 For an analysis of Polanyi’s notion of the double movement, see Gregory Baum, *Karl Polanyi on Ethics and Economics* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996).

8 *Ibid.*, 6–12.

9 For Taylor’s earlier analysis of the ethic of authenticity, see Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, ON: House of Anansi, 1991), 25–29.

10 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Bantam, 1968), 118.

11 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 383.

12 Ewen Speed and Russell Mannion, “Populism and Health Policy: Three International Case Studies of Right-wing Populist Policy Frames,” *Sociology of Health & Illness* 42:8 (2020), 1979.

13 Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 29–34.

14 *Ibid.*, 28.

15 *Ibid.*, 29.

16 *Ibid.*, 28.

17 *Ibid.*, 31. Drawing also on Paul Tillich, Mark Taylor argues that “Christian theologies that reflect New Testament understandings of evil stress that evil often comes as a distortion of the good, that it comes distorting publicly appealing structural forces that pose as good.” *Ibid.*, 32.

18 Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London: Fontana, 1961), 139.

19 Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 178.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*, 82.

22 *Ibid.*, 123–24.

23 Michael Welker, “The Self-Jeopardizing of Human Societies and Whitehead’s Conception of Peace,” *Soundings* 70:1–2 (1987), 326.

24 Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 79–82.

25 Mark Lewis Taylor, “Fearing Trump and Voting Clinton: Some FAQs,” *Counterpunch*, Sept. 9, 2016, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/09/09/fearing-trump-and-voting-clinton-some-faqs>.

26 Joan Williams, “What So Many People Don’t Get About the U.S. Working Class,” *Harvard Business Review*, Nov. 10, 2016, 3; <https://hbr.org/2016/11/what-so-many-people-dont-get-about-the-u-s-working-class>.

27 Gregory Baum, *Nationalism, Religion and Ethics* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 64–65.

28 *Ibid.*, 82.

29 <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org>

30 Gregory Baum, “The Catholic Left in Quebec,” in *Culture and Social Change*, ed. Colin Leys and Marguerite Mendell (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992), 152.

31 *Ibid.*, 152–53.

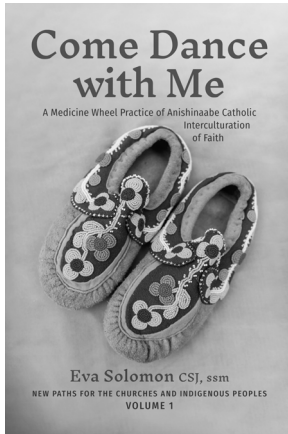
32 Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 18–19.

33 Mark Juergensmeyer, “Religious Nationalism in a Global World,” *Religions* 10:2 (2019), 1–8.

34 I thank Lorne Calvert and David Seljak for helpful comments on an early version of this article.

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