



## *Trump and A Crisis in American Monotheisms*

### *Spotlight on Theological Education*

Miguel A. De La Torre, Guest Editor

*Spotlight on Theological Education* is a major initiative of the AAR Theological Education Committee and is an important venue for exploring opportunities and challenges in theological education. Each issue focuses on a particular theme, setting, or concern of theological education. *Spotlight* appears as a special supplement to *Religious Studies News* in the spring of each year.

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## CONTENTS

Contributors	iii
Rejecting US Christianity in Hopes of Saving the Soul of the Nation <i>Miguel A. De La Torre</i>	1
Why Trump, and What Next? An (Ex-)Evangelical Response <i>David P. Gushee</i>	4
Protest and Resistance in the Trump Era <i>Kwok Pui-lan</i>	8
American Muslims in the Age of President Trump <i>Amir Hussain</i>	11
Are American Jews in Deep Trouble? <i>Santiago Slabodsky</i>	14
Making America Inclusive Again: A “Catholic” Approach to Our Neighbors <i>Miguel H. Díaz</i>	18
You Can’t Just Teach Your Way Out of Trumpism: A Systemic Analysis <i>Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite</i>	22
Resources	25

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## Rejecting US Christianity in Hopes of Saving the Soul of the Nation

Miguel A. De La Torre, Iliff School of Theology

Christianity did not perish with the election of Donald Trump; it was stillborn upon first arriving to these shores. America was originally made great when Christian Pilgrims embraced their divine right to steal the winter provisions of indigenous people, thanking God for *his* merciful bounty. Only by stealing the land of others—justifying genocide as fulfilling God’s call to rid the Promised Land of modern-day Canaanites—could America ever have become great. Only by stealing the labor of others by capturing Black bodies—justifying slavery as God’s call to bring civilization and Christianity to lost primitive peoples whose only hope is to be servants to whites in this world and the next—could America ever have become great. Only by stealing the sovereignty of others—justifying a Manifest Destiny as God’s call to physically invade another nation to steal their land, their resources, and their cheap labor by economically expanding through Gunboat Diplomacy—could America ever have become great.

The election of Trump is not an aberration for he represents the fullest manifestation of the white Christianity feared by those relegated to the underside of US history. Trump is the prophetic fulfillment of an exceptionalism which is but the latest manifestation of white Christian supremacy that ensures the vast majority of the world’s resources flow to support six percent of the global population. And for America to ever become great again, it must return to an age of unabashed missionary zeal of white supremacy, preferring future Americans to come from nations like Norway (which is 83% ethnic white) as opposed to “shithole” countries like Haiti, El Salvador, and all of Africa.

The so-called intellectual elite and coastal-based pundits may claim they misread the forgotten Americans of fly-over red states; but the reality is those who for centuries have been relegated to their underside and margins were not surprised nor shocked by the 2016 election results. No misreading occurred for them. Trump is the natural next stage of the prevalent white Christianity practiced within the United States. This is neither the first time, nor will it be the last time, white US Christianity supported and elected white supremacist slavers (Washington), rapists (Jefferson), Indian killers (Jackson), addicts (A. Johnson), avowed racists (Wilson), petty criminals (Nixon), and sexual predators (Clinton). The election of Trump, a sexual predator, an adulterer, a liar, a swindler, and a racist, by Christian America is more the norm than the exception.

When we gathered to publish the book *Faith and Resistance in the Age of Trump* (Orbis, 2017), finishing our individual chapters barely a month after the inauguration, we feared that by the time the book was published six months later, our concerns with the incoming administration might appear overblown. The publication of the book and the warm reception it received revealed our concerns were totally unfounded. Trump policies and initiatives only got worse since those first early days which, from the start, were already death-dealing to marginalized communities—specifically communities of color. And while we seek strategies of resistance, we are cognizant of the deafening silence emanating from US Christians. But why should we be surprised? White Christians are, and have always been, the greatest

existential threat to disenfranchised communities. US Christianity ceased being a religious faith tradition rooted in the teachings of Christ focusing on a justice which seeks the betterment of humanity when it made a Faustian bargain for the sake of political power and influence. Rather than being a Christ-centered faith perspective, US Christianity has become a political movement whose beliefs repudiate all Jesus advocated. Since the foundation of the republic, white Christianity has reigned supreme justifying invasion, genocide, and enslavement with an all-inclusive say in US politics.

However, for much of the past thirty-five years, those benefiting from social structures which protected white supremacy began to see their power eroded. Same gender-loving marriage; white births representing less than fifty percent in demographics; affirmative action; scrutiny and accountability of police officers who once participated in the unchallenged norm of killing unarmed people of color; and the election of a Black president provided a challenge and threat to those who assumed white privilege as a birthright. By 2016, the United States became a different, scarier world for those accustomed to their power as they attempted to adjust to a more pluralistic environment where white privilege was being questioned and chipped away. To make America great again was more than an election slogan for those who pine for a time where I would have been relegated to mopping the floors of my graduate school's classrooms instead of teaching in them. Trump represented the last great white hope to reestablish the oppressive tendencies responsible for making America great in the first place. But alas, those who look for saviors among politicians only find anti-Christ. The US white Jesus in which Donald Trump and his apologists believe can never save the marginalized, those relegated to the underside of white spaces. To say no to oppression and its symbol (even when that symbol comes disguised as Jesus), is the crucial first step toward saying yes to the self, yes to liberation, and yes to God. For the sake of our very salvation, we who belong to communities of color must say no to this white US Jesus, especially since he first said no to us.

When an owner of Black bodies, who reserved for himself the legal right to rape those who were female, wrote the immortal words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," he never meant to include his slaves. And when these words first appeared in print, no one who read them thought Blacks or Indians had unalienable rights. *Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness* was exclusively for white Christians. Since the foundation of the Republic, whites always understood all rhetoric concerning freedom and equality were never meant for Indians, for Blacks, for Latinxs, for Asians, for non-Christians. The American Dream was never intended to be for everybody. For this American Dream to exist for the few, it was always understood that the many had to live the American Nightmare of genocide, land theft, slavery, wage exploitation, and invasion.

The current Trump administration has made it abundantly clear, even for those with colonized minds still attempting to assimilate, that US rhetoric of "liberty and justice for all" excluded many of us from the "all." The "all" of Euroamerican philosophical and religious thought only and always meant whites, definitely not the invaded, enslaved, and genocided; definitely not the colonized who followed their stolen raw material and cheap labor to the center of empires only to find walls being built that separate them from their goods. White Christianity and abstract Eurocentric philosophical thought were required to reconcile the quest for liberty and justice for whites with the purposeful exclusion of those who fell short of the white ideal. The issue is not so much hypocrisy on the part of white Christians who historically spewed rhetoric about liberty and justice; but rather, how their worldview was philosophically and spiritually constructed to justify oppression while employing freedom-based language. The move to abstract thought and a faith devoid of social justice serves a crucial purpose of obscuring the violence of dispossessing and disenfranchising the colonized and their descendants.



Even though all Eurocentric US philosophical thought and religious movements are detrimental to communities of color (yes—all), all too often the oppressed embrace the very social structures which are death-dealing. The guardians of white privilege normalized and legitimized a way of thinking and being which enslaves minds inasmuch as frees bodies; for if the mind can be colonized, then those whom society is constructed to benefit need not worry about resistance to oppression. Once those privileged by society determine what the colonized think by providing a particular white obsessed Christianity repackaged as universal, they need not be anxious about what those on their margins would do. The tragedy of faith is when Brown and Black bodies bend knees to the white Jesus of US Christianity and US Empire.

No person can serve two masters for they will love one and despise the other. Any person of color who serves and loves the normative Eurocentric philosophical universalizing thought which excludes them, or the white Gods and Jesuses bent on their subservience, will despise the philosophical wisdom emanating from their own culture. For the sake of our very salvation, and the salvation of white Americans, we must hammer the last nail into the coffin of US Christianity. US Christianity must die, and let the dead bury the dead. For Christianity to maybe experience resurrection, US Christianity must first be crucified. The crucifixion of white Christianity and the empire it justifies begins with its total and complete rejection.

Over 125 years ago, Cuban revolutionary José Martí saw the danger of people relegated to the margins of empire adopting the very same Eurocentric worldview detrimental to their existential colonized spaces. He called the oppressed of the world to create a new way of thinking, a new way of being, a new way of contemplating the metaphysical based on their indigeneity. “¡Nuestro vino de plátano” he wrote, “y si es agrio, es nuestro vino!”—Let us make our wine out of bananas, and even if it turns sour, it is still our wine! Even if our jammy vine turns out sour, it would be more pleasing to our palates than opulent wines bottled in the center of empire. Why? Because it is ours, made from our indigenous ingredients. For our survival, for our sanity, for our liberation, we must all become winemakers who harvest the finest grapes from our own vineyards. And as new winemakers, not only can we find our indigenous voices by which to resist Trump; but also, whichever emperor follows him regardless as to how liberal and progressive he or she might be.

## Resources

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## **Why Trump, and What Next? An (Ex-)Evangelical Response**

David P. Gushee, Mercer University

### **Prelude: What White Evangelicals Just Did, in Violation of Their Own Proclaimed Values**

No group of American voters bears more responsibility for the election of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States than do white evangelicals. Their 81% vote on his behalf far exceeded his share of support in any other religious community, and it was a higher share of the white evangelical vote than any Republican candidate had received since the dawn of the Christian Right. So let us ponder for just a moment five propositions about the contradiction between the character and behavior of now-President Trump and what were once believed to be evangelical values:

- (1) The consensus white evangelical vote was for a candidate married three times and unfaithful in marriage, only nominally Christian, and known for his vulgarity and crude public talk about sex (not to mention the later-discovered bragging about sexual assault, along with the dozen accusations from specific women).
- (2) The consensus white evangelical vote was for a candidate whose character has revealed lack of self-control, lack of truthfulness, and lack of the most basic verbal discipline, and whose entire business career has been embroiled in false promises, ethics questions, and lawsuits.
- (3) The consensus white evangelical vote was for a candidate who launched his campaign with an attack on the character of Mexican immigrants, who pre-launched his campaign by leading the “birther” movement against Barack Obama, who during his campaign told lies about American Muslim responses to 9/11 and called for a ban on their immigration.
- (4) The consensus white evangelical vote was for a candidate who created rally environments latent with mob violence and hate speech, and who threatened to create a constitutional crisis by refusing to accept the results of the election if he lost.
- (5) The consensus white evangelical vote was for a candidate who articulated the most extreme form of nationalism seen at the presidential level in memory, who insulted many US allies, scoffed at international norms and institutions, and spoke favorably about the use of torture.

The consensus white evangelical vote for Donald Trump has shattered whatever survived of the moral witness of white evangelicals to American culture and to the world. The remainder of this essay seeks to discern why 81% of white evangelicals voted as they did, and how those of us who dissent must now respond.



## Why Trump?

What follows are my top ten surmises as to what attracted white evangelical Christians to Donald Trump. I will arrange these claims from the least to the most controversial.

- (1) White evangelicals were attracted to the security promises of Donald Trump. Donald Trump promised to protect US borders from unlawful immigrants and to protect US citizens from terrorist attacks. The latter was probably more salient for more voters, but a minority had become convinced of the (Fox News) narrative that “illegals” were running rampant and committing all kinds of heinous crimes. Voting their security fears, many white evangelicals found Donald Trump a more persuasive defender of their lives and their families than his competitors.
- (2) White evangelicals were attracted to the economic promises of Donald Trump. Here I speak especially of working-class and downwardly mobile white evangelicals, and notably small-town, rural, and exurban evangelicals. Donald Trump’s promises to restore American jobs, to negotiate tougher trade deals, and to shame American companies taking jobs to other countries were very appealing to many who have faced tough economic times.
- (3) White evangelicals were attracted to the nationalism of Donald Trump. Long after many Americans had either abandoned patriotism, abandoned religion, or both, millions of evangelicals are both deeply patriotic and deeply religious, and have not been taught any real differentiation between the two. Donald Trump strikes nationalist rather than globalist notes, promises to put “America First,” and conflates God and country. This was preferable to the alternative, for many evangelicals.
- (4) White evangelicals were attracted to the Christian tribalism of Donald Trump. Donald Trump often sent signals that the polite multifaith inclusivity that had prevailed under Barack Obama would be supplanted by a privileging of Christianity. In various ways, Mr. Trump communicated that Christianity would be restored to its privileged place in the American public square. One specific aspect of this would be that Christian moral sensibilities and religious liberty concerns would be protected. An ironic aspect of these promises, of course, is that President Trump has only practiced the most nominal Christianity himself. But that did not matter.
- (5) White evangelicals were attracted to the promises of Donald Trump related to the Supreme Court. One of the most enduring aspects of the Christian Right–GOP alliance since the late 1970s has been the GOP promise that its elected presidents would only nominate Supreme Court candidates who could be counted upon to overturn *Roe v. Wade*—and in other ways give conservative Christians what they seek from the Supreme Court. Donald Trump made perfectly clear that he would maintain this bargain. Evangelicals voted accordingly.
- (6) White evangelicals were attracted to the exaggerated masculinity of Donald Trump. Millions of fundamentalists and evangelicals believe that God’s will is that men should lead in homes, churches, and society. The advances of feminism have softened this patriarchalism to a profound extent, but male leadership remains doctrine in many thousands of churches. It’s not just maleness, it’s also masculinity that matters. Donald Trump won among Republican candidates because he exuded a certain hyper-masculine toughness, which included belittling other candidates who couldn’t quite measure up. Pun intended. And then, in the general election, when it was Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton, the potential first woman president, it was no contest.

- (7) White evangelicals were attracted to the authoritarianism of Donald Trump. Many evangelicals run their families and their churches in an authoritarian rather than democratic way. I think of the thousands of churches founded by one man and controlled by that one man with little oversight. I think of the continued popularity of Reformed church models, in which an all-male elder board functions as a kind of spiritual oligarchy. Then, of course, there are the millions of families run by the husband/father/patriarch according to the will of the Heavenly Father. While there are also millions of Christian families and churches that are governed as democracies, it is fair to say that the majority of churches in America are not democracies. It is my surmise that Donald Trump's tendency toward authoritarianism resonates deeply with many.
- (8) White evangelicals were attracted to the wealth, glitz, and celebrity of Donald Trump. I speak here not just of those churches that have explicitly embraced the "prosperity" or "health and wealth" gospel, in which preachers teach that God rewards the faithful with worldly success. I want to broaden out to the idea that especially the massive megachurch movement within evangelicalism and fundamentalism bears a striking resemblance in many ways to the business and political model offered by Donald Trump. Everything revolves around an attractive central (male) figure, who exudes power, wealth, and success, and is usually accompanied by an equally beautiful wife and children. Donald Trump fit that paradigm.
- (9) White evangelicals were attracted to the attacks on "political correctness" by Donald Trump. White evangelicals often feel embattled and belittled by the dominant powers of American culture—Hollywood, New York, Boston; CNN, *New York Times*, and Professor So-and-So at State University. Hollywood tells us who we are supposed to want to be, the *Times* tells us what we are supposed to count as news, and Professor So-and-So tells us what counts as truth. The fact that most of the time these authorities offer views that totally contradict those of white evangelicals is not lost on the latter. Donald Trump is not a white evangelical, but his bristling attack on "political correctness" spoke profoundly to shared resentments.
- (10) White evangelicals were attracted to the thinly veiled white racism of Donald Trump. This claim will of course be the most disputed. The vast majority of white evangelicals do not believe that they hold racially prejudiced beliefs or act in racist ways. Evangelical individualism also makes it difficult for white evangelicals to accept the reality of structural racism.

The space for this essay is too short to litigate these issues, so let me make a quite circumscribed claim. Many American voters, including millions of Christians, believed that the total body of statements made by Donald Trump during his public career and especially the campaign, related to, for example, Mexicans, blacks, and Muslims, itself morally disqualified him from the office of president. Those who voted for Mr. Trump obviously did not agree. This at least makes them complicit with what he said and now does in relation to race.

### **What Do We Now Do?**

Some of us have begun to face the fact that white evangelicalism is no longer our religious community. We must grieve, deeply. Perhaps we are now to be called post-evangelicals, or ex-evangelicals. Whatever we call ourselves, it is time to move on. We must then find others of like mind for shared dissent and resistance. Different ones of us will "feel called," in evangelical parlance, to different struggles. For some, it might be immigration/refugee issues. For others, it might be peacemaking and international relations issues. For a different group, it might be climate issues. Each individual has limited bandwidth, but all can do their part.

Ultimately, we must move into a posture of radical solidarity with those who are most threatened. We ourselves feel disempowered and afraid, but our disempowerment and fear pales in comparison to that of many, many others. Whatever privilege and power we might have, we must invest for others. We leave our morally bankrupt religious tribe. Find new community. State our clear dissent and give good reasons for it. Practice resistance where we can. Stand in solidarity with the oppressed. This is what we do now. At least, it is a start.

## Protest and Resistance in the Trump Era

Kwok Pui-lan, Emory University

I was in Greece when Donald Trump was elected president on November 8, 2016. I was there on a research trip and had just visited the Acropolis, the Agora, and several magnificent museums several days before that date. The fact that I was in Athens, the cradle of Western democracy, prompted me to think about the relationship between the struggle for democracy and empire. As a postcolonial theologian deeply interested in the relationship between religion, power, and empire, Trump's election and his administration's policies on border security—particularly the Muslim ban—and on healthcare, DACA, and tax reform demand serious theological reflection and acts of resistance.

For some, especially those in the Chinese media, the election of Trump showcases the dysfunction of democracy and the unreliability of populism. But seeing Trump's election as an aberration is to miss the signs of our time. His slogan "Make America Great Again" appeals to the imperial impulse of many American people, especially working-class white men who perceive that they have lost much power. Trump enjoys the support of the Christian Right. Eighty percent of white evangelicals voted for him. Many of us might think that the Christian Right misinterprets the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who was himself a political prisoner under the Roman Empire. But we cannot forget the church's historical complicity with empire and the lingering impact of Constantinian Christianity that has justified violence, colonialism, racism, war, and genocide in the past and in the present.

In Trump's era of alt-truth and alt-reality, the vocation of an intellectual and a theologian is to speak truth to power. Inspired by the example of the Barmen Declaration during the rise of Nazism, a group of theologians issued the Boston Declaration, calling upon Christians to follow the Jesus way and condemn the false ideologies of empire building, as well as the myths of racism, Islamophobia, and American exceptionalism.<sup>1</sup> It exhorts us to dismantle the legacy of white supremacy and to stand in solidarity with the vulnerable among us.

In mid-November of 2017, the College of the Holy Cross hosted a conference titled "Religion, Protest, and Social Upheaval," which brought together a diverse group of scholars from across national and religious divides to examine the impact of religion on social and political movements. Organized around six themes—nationalism, immigration, race, gender, ecology, and economics—the conference aimed to illuminate the complex dynamics of religion in protest and social upheaval.<sup>2</sup> The discussion at the conference had important insights for teaching and research for resistance in the Trump era. I would

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<sup>1</sup> "The Boston Declaration," accessed April 10, 2018, <https://thebostondeclaration.com/blog/2017/11/18/the-boston-declaration>.

<sup>2</sup> "Religion, Protest, and Social Upheaval," College of the Holy Cross Website, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.holycross.edu/faith-service/mcfarland-center-religion-ethics-and-culture/events-mcfarland-center/conferences/religion-protest-and-social-upheaval>.

like to share some of the highlights. First, we have to engage in *theological malpractice*. In medicine, malpractice means that medical professionals may not have followed established protocols, and their negligence and failure to care for the patient lead to personal injury or wrongful deaths, but J. Kameron Carter gives malpractice a twist and a totally new definition. He discusses black malpractice in the context of anti-slavery movements and the civil rights movement. Malpractice means the refusal to follow established procedures and orders of things. *Theological malpractice* means the refusal to follow traditional ways of teaching theology, which separate doctrine from context, theory from practice, and the theological from the political. Malpractice implies “other” practices of teaching theology, practices that question and subvert the status quo and decolonize the mind. In this way, malpractice is internally generative and always points to the theological surplus or excess that cannot be contained or policed by traditional ways of conceptualizing and teaching theology. In the case of black malpractice, theologians must disengage from theologies that support white supremacy and teach black sacred practices.

Second, we have to double our effort to research and teach counter-mythologies. Empires always want to imagine that they are omnipotent, constantly expanding, and totalizing. In fact, empires are full of internal contradictions and are threatened by external competition. Our neoliberal economy proclaims that it has no centers and no borders and that there is no alternative. Adam Smith calls the market the invisible hand of God. But Devin Singh points out that these pretentious claims, in fact, are simply attempts to mask the fragility and contradictions of the unstable system. Theologians must unmask, debunk, and demystify mythologies that have been generated to support the unsustainable system. In his 2017 presidential address at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Eddie Glaude asked us to reflect on how and for what purposes “frames of acceptance” and “symbols of authority” have been maintained.

In our era, we have to pay serious attention to how imperial power has been associated with divine power in our theologies, religious practices, and liturgies, both in the past and in the present. Learning from Foucault, we need to ask, “Is there something in Christianity that is productive and contributive to the discourse of imperial power?” When we say in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done” and when we sing “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” in the Hallelujah Chorus of Handel’s *Messiah*, what kind of images do we have for God? What if the Christian ethos inculcates a certain attitude toward authority and power? We must criticize the association of God with images of the sovereign in our political theology. This anti-democratic theopolitical imaginary has shaped political philosophy and theological doctrines, and it has provided justification for hierarchical practices of the church. But it is not enough to critique imperial and colonial mythologies without providing alternative imaginaries of the sacred. Such imaginaries often come from protest movements and what J. Kameron Carter calls “deviant sociality.” For example, during the Occupy Movement, protesters occupied public spaces and practiced direct democracy in decision-making. The movement generated images and slogans that denounced corporate greed and anticipated alternative forms of community. It pointed to the immanence of sacred power that was in us and among us.

Third, we have to be vigilant of how Trumpian ideology is reshaping the world. The Muslim ban, the withdrawal of the United States from trade treaties and from the Paris Climate Agreement, and the escalating tension with North Korea have global consequences. Trump visited Asia in his first foreign trip as president and wanted to influence the realignment of power in that region. As a theologian of Chinese descent, I am keenly aware that the relationship between China and United States will determine the politics of the twenty-first century. We need to pay attention to how President Xi Jinping’s “China Dream” is competing with Trump’s desire to “make American great again.” Thus, we need a new political theology that goes beyond its Eurocentric roots to address the political and economic rise of the Asia Pacific, and especially the emergence of China as a global power. To this end,

we cannot simply focus on European and American empires, without paying attention to the formation and logics of other empires. Books such as *Empires of the Silk Road* and *Legacies of Empire: Imperial Roots of the Contemporary Global Order* are invaluable resources. Within the fields of theology and philosophy, Enrique Dussel's *Politics of Liberation: A Critical World History* provide an alternative periodization and history of the world, which does not place Europe at the center.

Fourth, we have to attend to the ways in which protest and resistance create and form political beings. During the conference at College of the Holy Cross, we discussed the protests that brought the downfall of South Korean President Park Geun-hye. Leading up to her impeachment, thousands of Korean protesters took to the streets in Seoul every weekend for several months. They organized rituals, sang songs, shouted slogans, and broadcast videos to create a protest culture. These political performances shaped the political views and formed new coalitions among protesters. For example, a group of queer protesters got to know some of the masculinist union leaders and began sharing protest strategies and tactics with one another. Protest and prophetic witness for justice require training and a cultural and religious ethos that encourages people to do so. As theological educators, we need to reflect on whether the rituals in churches, our pedagogies in the classroom, contextual education, and community activities form a *habitus* for producing docile political subjects or for stimulating a culture of resistance and the formation of new political beings.

The challenges to theological education include not only financial shortfall, but also declining enrollment of students. Mainline churches have failed to capture the imagination of the “nones,” especially millennials who are committed to social justice but not interested in organized religion. For many of them, the church is outdated and conservative. How can theological education contribute to the formation of a new ecclesial culture, provide a space for critical inquiry for the “nones,” and form new political beings?

If 2040 will be a time when there will not be a racial majority in the nation, we need to begin thinking about building infrastructures so that racial and ethnic minorities will share increasing leadership in the church and society. We have to facilitate dialogue across differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, and culture. Increasingly, I see my role as a theological educator to be teaching students how to build inclusive communities and coalitions so that they will be prepared for a changing America, and prepared to serve as global leaders in the future. We are teaching in a challenging time, but it is also an exciting time, with open possibilities of new visions and practices.

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## American Muslims in the Age of President Trump

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Muslims, both within America and around the world, are the religious community that is most affected by the presidency of Donald J. Trump. I write this *Spotlight* reflection as both an American citizen—a Muslim from Los Angeles—and a scholar of Islam in North America. Wearing either or both hats, it is clear that the next three years of the Trump administration will continue to be difficult times to be an American Muslim. These difficulties were anticipated in the last century by John Carpenter in his 1996 film *Escape from L.A.* In the film, set in 2013, Los Angeles has become a penal colony for those who do not conform to the high moral standards of the American president. One of the residents is a young Iranian woman named Taslima, who tells the protagonist: “I was a Muslim. Then they made that illegal.” In the last century, I used to think that that line was very funny. Now I’m not so sure. In the 2006 film *V for Vendetta*, set in a future neo-Fascist Britain, one of the characters (Dietrich) is taken away by the authorities for owning a copy of the Qur’an. As a presidential candidate, Mr. Trump said famously on CNN on March 9, 2016, that “I think Islam hates us,” and his first year as president has not been a good one for American Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

From the time of Mr. Trump’s remark that “Islam hates us,” one has seen a shift from the rise of Islamophobia to what I term “misoislamia,” a neologism that captures the move from a fear (*phobia*) to a hatred (*miso*) for Islam and Muslims. The line that has been running over and over in my head comes from a local California band, Counting Crows: “All the anger and the eloquence are bleeding into fear.” America’s Muslims fear for our country—our home—and what will become of it. We saw the open intolerance to Islam in opposition to new mosques proposed throughout the country. We saw seven states (Alabama, Arizona, Kansas, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Dakota, and Tennessee) passing anti-sharia laws when not a single Muslim group had asked for the implementation of sharia laws. Oklahoma also voted for such a law, but it was struck down in 2012 and never implemented. We saw Lt. General Michael Flynn, who became President Trump’s National Security Advisor, tweet that “fear of Muslims is RATIONAL” and heard him claim that Islam is a political ideology (and not a religion, and therefore not protected under the US Constitution) which has become a “malignant cancer.”<sup>2</sup> However, he resigned on February 13, 2017, not for his comments about Islam and Muslims, but for misleading Vice President Mike Pence about his telephone calls with the Russian ambassador.

We saw Islam-haters such as Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka come and go in the Trump administration; Stephen Miller remains. We saw President Trump retweet anti-Muslim videos from a

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Schleifer, “Donald Trump: ‘I think Islam hates us,’” *CNN*, updated March 10, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/09/politics/donald-trump-islam-hates-us/>.

<sup>2</sup> Maggie Haberman and Matthew Rosenberg, “Michael Flynn, Anti-Islamist Ex-General, Offered Security Post, Trump Aide Says,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/us/politics/michael-flynn-national-security-adviser-donald-trump.html>.

right-wing fringe British group on November 29, 2017, to the dismay of British Prime Minister Theresa May.<sup>3</sup> However, we also heard President Trump's press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, defend the president by saying that it didn't matter if the videos were real or not, as "the threat is real."

On Friday, January 27, a week after his inauguration, President Donald Trump ordered that the United States ban travelers and refugees from seven Muslim-majority countries (Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen). He did this in the afternoon, after making comments that morning for International Holocaust Remembrance Day that made no mention either of the Jews or of anti-Semitism. Thousands of people protested the ban at airports across the country in the following days. I flew back to Los Angeles from Washington, DC, on January 29, and those protests were quite powerful to see: people standing up for us not just or only as refugees or immigrants, but as Muslims. That was extraordinary. What has also been amazing to see is the response from the American Jewish community. They have been at the forefront of the protests, both because they know that the commandment that is repeated more than any other commandment in the Torah is to not oppress the stranger, and because they know with the painful history of the Holocaust of where the road of prejudice and intolerance ends. And with the rise of hate crimes against Muslims, over half of the hate crimes committed against a religious group in America were against Jews.

The first travel ban was rejected by the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit on February 9, 2017. President Trump introduced two subsequent versions of the ban, the most recent of which was ruled unconstitutional on February 15, 2018, by the US Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit in Richmond, Virginia.

Instead of celebrating American Muslims as an American success story of an educated and wealthy community, we are openly discriminated against by the Trump administration. And that hatred has been exported to other countries, with the perpetrator of the January 29, 2017, terrorist attack that killed six at the Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec City expressing support for President Trump.<sup>4</sup>

American Muslims, it should be pointed out, are very different from European or Canadian Muslim communities, other places where we are also minorities in a Western context. Canadian Muslims do not have the same history that American Muslims do. So while there was a small Muslim population in Canada at the end of the nineteenth century (the first Canadian census in 1871 listed a Muslim population of 13), it was nothing like the number of Muslim slaves that were present in America generations earlier. There is no comparable component in Canadian Muslim life that resembles African American Muslims, who represent at least one-quarter of American Muslims. African American Muslims, as Americans, have for centuries been part of the history of the United States.

In Europe, the situation is markedly different, both among the Muslim and non-Muslim populations, which each tend to be much more homogeneous than they are in the United States. So in Britain, the majority of Muslims have their origins in South Asia. In France, Muslims are mostly from North Africa. In Germany, Muslims are usually Turks or Kurds. Contrast that with the American situation, where Muslims are equally African American, South Asian, or Middle Eastern (to take only the three largest groups).

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<sup>3</sup> Karla Adam and William Booth, "Trump's Retweets Elevate a Tiny Fringe Group of Anti-Muslim Activists in Britain," *The Washington Post*, November 29, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/trumps-tweets-elevate-a-tiny-fringe-group-of-anti-muslim-activists-in-britain/2017/11/29/02489a42-d515-11e7-9ad9-ca0619edfa05\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/trumps-tweets-elevate-a-tiny-fringe-group-of-anti-muslim-activists-in-britain/2017/11/29/02489a42-d515-11e7-9ad9-ca0619edfa05_story.html).

<sup>4</sup> Mahita Gajanan, "Quebec City Mosque Shooting Suspect Criticized Refugees and Supported President Trump Online," *Time*, January 30, 2017, <http://time.com/4654434/alexandre-bissonnette-quebec-mosque-shooting-donald-trump-marie-le-pen/>.

There are also narrower definitions of what it means to be French or English or German than what it means to be American, which incorporates all of those European identities and many others.

There is also a socioeconomic difference. American Muslims are an American success story, solidly middle class and mostly professional. There are thousands of American Muslim physicians, for example, perhaps as many as 20,000 if one looks at information from the Islamic Medical Association of North America. European Muslims by contrast are more marginalized, often in a much lower socioeconomic class with much higher rates of unemployment. Sometimes, as is often the case in Germany, they are in the status of migrants or guest workers, not citizens.

Finally, there is a difference between American-style secularism, which doesn't seek to abolish religion but to give all religions an equal seat at the table, and various kinds of European disestablishment of religion, which seek to make the public space nonreligious. In the United States, America's seven million Muslims are free to live out their Islam in the public space. And there are so many American Muslims who do this, none who did it better than my childhood hero, the Greatest of All Time. Look at the life of Muhammad Ali, and you begin to understand the contributions that American Muslims have made to what it means to be American.

American Muslims need to live the legacy of Muhammad Ali. We need to continue to stand, as he did, for justice. "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth," Ali would often say, and we need to not only remember that saying, but to act on it. In this way, we can live out the best of our ideals, both as Americans and as Muslims.

## Are American Jews in Deep Trouble?

Santiago Slabodsky, Hofstra University

No, they are not. But the American Jewish establishment might be. For the American Jewish communities at large, however, Donald Trump's presidency may well be a once in a lifetime opportunity.

For the last two generations, American Jews have been taught to analyze national politics through the lenses of a very simple slogan: "what is good for Israel is good for Jews." Over the last fifty years, this narrative was nourished by robust institutional support through educational structures, advocacy organizations, tourism programs, powerful museums, and political lobbies. Yet the equivalence between Israel and the life of American Jews is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

On the one hand, while past American administrations reaffirmed the strategic alliance between the United States and Israel, their aim—successful or not—was to preserve an appearance of neutrality in order to play a role as mediator. One year into his presidency, it is clear that Donald Trump has decisively altered this appearance. Some may argue that this shift attests to the influence of evangelical Christian Zionism, while others may attribute it to the identification with Western settler projects, but Trump's words and actions are unequivocally partisan. Just to name a few indicators, early on in his term he appointed a controversial ambassador who vocally supported settlements in and the annexation of Palestinian territories. Shortly afterwards, he designated his son-in-law, a person with deep personal and financial ties to Israeli nationalist elites, including the prime minister, as the "deal-maker" in the region. And, as his first year in office drew to a close, he announced the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and threatened to cut off Palestinian aid if they refused to accept his terms. It is clear to any political analyst that the US-Israeli strategic alliance continues to hold, but is soaring to new heights beyond appearances.

The American Jewish communities may be experiencing the current administration differently. In November 2016, following a convulsive electoral campaign, Jews held fast to their historical loyalty. They voted overwhelmingly for the defeated Democratic candidate (71% vs. 24%), showing a larger gap between their support for each party than in the 2012 presidential elections won by the Democrats (69% vs. 30%).<sup>1</sup> In the months that followed, Jewish institutions were the targets of threats or attacks, joining a diverse group of collectivities (Muslims, African-Americans, LGBTQI, Latinxs, and others) that reported harassment by either agents of the new administration or self-appointed representatives of the new era. The voices of Holocaust survivors began to inundate the press in full-

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica Martínez and Gregory A. Smith, "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 analysis" Pew Research Center, November 9, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.

length articles linking the present-day rhetoric with their European nightmares while the new generation ensured that this memory was overrepresented in protests against the successive immigration bans of Muslims and/or the raids against Latinxs. Late in the summer, white nationalists, officially characterized as “fine people,” marched in Charlottesville, not only shouting the Nazi slogan “Blood and Soil” but also more straightforwardly the anti-Semitic motto “Jews will not replace us.”

The apparent divergence between the international and domestic realms has made it increasingly difficult to sustain the dictum that “What is good for Israel is good for (American) Jews”. This is, of course, a problem for American Jewish institutions that, for two generations, have been capitalizing on the connection between the one and the other. This is less of a problem for the American Jewish communities at large. For them, it stands as a once in a lifetime opportunity to awaken from a rare trend in Jewish history: the existence of a hegemonic dictum and the power to enforce it nationally (and, one could even argue, globally). This sheds light on how all ideological constructions—from nationalist ideologies to intergovernmental alliances to nation-states themselves—are not pure, natural, or eternal. Just as historical-political motivations sustained the construction and “naturalization” of the relation between the State of Israel and the American Jewish community, contemporary politics may require a reevaluation of that relation.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the Zionist project only garnered the support of a minority and was in constant competition with more persuasive alternatives. The American Jewish communities were no exception and only a small elite supported Zionism. This was not a surprise. Most Liberals viewed Zionism with distrust, as their own efforts aimed to practice Judaism in the private sphere, in the hope of enhancing assimilation to American society and escaping prevalent anti-Semitism. The minority of religious orthodoxy generally refused to support Zionism, which they perceived as a secular project that tried to impose an anthropocentric perspective which rushed messianic times, and insisted on transnational ethnic networks of support. And the majority of Jewish radicals, largely socialists of different persuasions, trusted more in internationalist revolutions that would create a new humanity and overcome the need of ethnic identification or nation-state building.

It is commonly argued that it is the Holocaust that changed this situation. But this justification is largely anachronistic. Between the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, the majority of local Jews had little use for empowering Holocaust narratives. American Jews, thanks to federal programs including the GI Bill, were too busy becoming white in America to make themselves vulnerable to the accusation of dual loyalty. This accusation of dual loyalty was particularly dangerous considering that the position of Israel in the Cold War struggle was not clear until 1956, when it sided with European imperial powers during the Suez crisis. During the intense McCarthyist witch-hunt, a community that was already associated with international socialism/communism in the Euro-American imaginary was logically cautious of demonstrating any allegiance that contradicted its aspirational middle-class Americanism. In other words, Jews would have been more inclined to support the Yankees than Zionism.

What made support for the Jewish State a distinctive mark of the American Jewish community was not an allegedly timeless Zionist longing, nor was it the Holocaust. It was the Americanization of the Holocaust narrative that turned the State of Israel into the natural solution for this narrative. During the Six Day War (1967), a State of Israel successfully mobilized the fear of a new Holocaust among Jewish communities worldwide. Despite its quick victory, which should make us question how imminent the threat was, Israel not only gained the support of a new active generation of Baby Boomers, but the latter started to become avid consumers of what would be known as post-Holocaust thought, action, and institution building. The Baby Boomers and the early Generation X were the ones who ultimately naturalized the dictum (“What is good for Israel is good for Jews”), justifying Jewish empowerment,

often in relation to other historically racialized communities, as a way of preventing a new Holocaust. What they omitted was that the perpetrators of the first Holocaust were not these communities but some of their new allies.

Ideological constructions, however, are not eternal and can be ultimately deconstructed. The clear gap opened during the Trump era can offer an opportunity to reevaluate whether this construction continues to be current. This new political stage, however, may not be completely new. The opposition to Trump may be correct in its assessment that the new stage exacerbated divisions and prompted mobilizations against them. Yet, a quick look beyond Jewish life will show with clarity that neither Trump nor Trumpism are responsible for inaugurating the concentration of wealth, the disregard for Black lives, the invisibilization of Native communities, violent Islamophobia, and the deportation of human beings without papers. Indeed, movements such as *Occupy Wall Street*, *Black Lives Matter*, *Standing Rock*, and the *Dreamers'* networks took shape during the Obama years and followed in the steps of movements that emerged during both Democratic and Republican administrations. It is in this context that some Jews, especially Millennials and veteran activists of the previous two generations, have been engaging in community building to confront dehumanizing trends that, half a century after the Holocaust, seem to have again begun to target Jews. Some organizations have been at the vanguard in extending their solidarity to racialized communities, both within and outside the United States, even before this racialization touched Jewish bodies and voices. These organizations include but are not limited to *Jews for Racial and Economical Justice*, an NGO led by Jews of color, and *Bend the Arc* whose focus is urban advocacy, the alternative religious community *Tzedek Chicago*, *Open Hillel* whose focus is campus life, *If Not Now* and the more longstanding *Jewish Voice for Peace* for justice in Israel/Palestine. While these organizations are better equipped to deal with the new era, the official representation of the community still remains in the hands of outdated institutions.

The election process of 2016 was indeed a turning point, not because it inaugurated a new era but because it exacerbated previous tendencies. The Democratic and Republican establishments were both situated in a spectrum marrying neo-liberal economics and liberal social policies. The rebellion in the Democratic Party critiqued the former and the insurrection in the Republican Party largely targeted the latter. And the establishment's failure to understand how their defeat revealed something about them follows their inability to recognize that their proposal was exhausted. Problematically for the establishment of the Jewish community, this was not the only proposal that was shattered. Much can be said about the alliance of Jewish institutions with the Democratic version of both neo-liberal economics and liberal social values. I will focus here on their common failure to grasp the internal contradictions of their outdated proposals. While Jewish institutions are shedding tears over the abysmal un-affiliation of late Generation X and Millennials, they remind blind to how their institutional inability to recognize the new reality is self-defeating. It is important, however, to recognize that some may want (and have the right) to support the dictum twinning the well-being of Israel and that of all Jews. But the gap between the two invites them to critically engage with this dictum, evaluating its currency, questioning its monopoly, and taking responsibility for the implications of this position in the alliances and tensions that it requires. The new generations are creative, original, and are developing other struggles. And we may need to start paying more attention to their networks of solidarity in order to recognize the part Jewish collectivities could play in American politics in the next decades.

The new activism is generating new solidarities that extend domestically and internationally well beyond a hermetic community that seems to constantly compete for its supremacy in the Olympics of suffering. Decades ago Frantz Fanon reflected on a comment from a philosophy instructor: " 'When you hear someone insulting the Jews pay attention; he is talking about you' ... And I believed at the time he was



universally right... [W]hat he meant quite simply was that the anti-Semite is inevitably a negrophobe.”<sup>2</sup> Building on Fanon, we can see not only that “the anti-Semite” is inevitable “a Negrophobe,” but also that it is a system, one that predates the current administration by decades if not centuries and that operates domestically, internationally, and transnationally to strip Black, Brown, Muslim, Cis-Women, LGBTQI, and Palestinian bodies, among others, of their humanities. This system would sooner (for those with overlapping disfranchised identities) or later (for others) come for Jews, no matter how white they appeared to have become after their post-war reclassification. This is why dangerous exacerbations of longstanding processes may well provide an opportunity for Jewish voices and bodies to overcome anachronistic dictums, learn from past struggles and join in solidarity communities that they should never have abandoned.

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<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 101.

## **Making America Inclusive Again: A “Catholic” Approach to Our Neighbors**

Miguel H. Diaz, Loyola University Chicago

Shortly after the election of Donald Trump, a number of religious scholars and activists put together some critical reflections on the Trump administration from a variety of faith perspectives and covering a wide range of issues. These reflections were published in Miguel A. De La Torre’s edited book, *Faith and Resistance in the Age of Trump*. In my contribution to this book, I offered some thoughts on Catholics and the Trump administration. Engaging Catholics in the United States with respect to support and his policies is important, especially in light of the Pew Research poll which noted the following:

White Catholics supported Trump over Clinton by a wide, 23-point margin (60% to 37%), rivaling Romney’s 19-point victory among those in this group. Trump’s strong support among white Catholics propelled him to a 7-point edge among Catholics overall (52% to 45%) despite the fact that Hispanic Catholics backed Clinton over Trump by a 41-point margin (67% to 26%).<sup>1</sup>

The percentage of Catholics, however, who voted for Trump from Latino/a, African-American, Asian-American and other marginalized communities paints a different story and points to a fact often forgotten: the majority of Catholics who compose the present and future of the Catholic Church—although currently poorly represented within the leadership of the Church and its institutions—did not support the election of Mr. Trump. I do not point out this fact in an effort to pit one Catholic group against another. That would only contribute to what is already a deeply divided and polarized faith community that in many ways reflects our deeply divided nation. Rather, I simply point out this fact as a way to lift up the “catholicity” of the Roman Catholic faith community here in the United States with respect to socio-political issues. But even more importantly, regardless of where Catholics stand in the realm of politics, Catholics have an ethical obligation to hear the cry of the poor (Matthew 25), just as God hears their cry (Psalm 34). Issues of race, of poverty, of incarceration, of profiling, of protecting the earth, of immigration—all these touch upon the dignity and health of God’s creatures. Becoming a faithful citizen necessarily implies supporting and voting in accordance with this Judeo-Christian principle.

At the 2017 AAR Annual Meeting in Boston, I summarized some of the key arguments from my chapter in De La Torre’s book entitled, “Who is my Neighbor: Catholics and the Trump Administration.” Highlighting Catholic social teaching and in a particular way, Pope Francis’s papal teaching, I underscored the Pope’s central teaching, namely, the condemnation of human indifference. Undoubtedly, this teaching, which stems from his Jesuit background and Latin American roots, seeks to

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica Martínez and Gregory A. Smith, “How the Faithful Vote: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis, Pew Research Center, November 9, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.

discern the presence of God in all things but especially in those creatures, who, like Jesus, suffer the yoke of the cross. Pope Francis has devoted much of his energy to defending the life of the poor, the life of marginalized communities, the life of immigrants, and the life of our impoverished and increasingly fragile and neglected earth.

On his first trip outside of Rome, Pope Francis chose the island of Lampedusa to preside at a Mass for immigrants. His homily focused on condemning human indifference, especially with respect to immigrants. Similar to our Ellis Island, the island of Lampedusa in southern Italy is where African immigrants first enter the European Union after fleeing from various socio-political, economic, and environmental hardships. Commenting on the book of Genesis, the Pope's homily offers a theological reading of the human condition after the fall of Adam and Eve and attributes to this postlapsarian condition the proclivity of human beings to turn away from loving their neighbors. Three questions frame Pope Francis's homily: 1) Where are you, Adam? 2) Where is your brother? and 3) Who among us has wept for these things and things like this (referring to the tragedy of migrants)?<sup>2</sup>

The Pope argues that Adam's disorientation or "loss of place in creation" prevents him from understanding and living in right relationship with self and with others. He associates dislocation and disorientation with the experience that comes with the human failure to live in right relationship with God and one's neighbor. As a consequence of sin, people fail to recognize their God-given orientation toward their neighbors. In the Pope's mind, this disorientation causes particular human persons to displace their creator, creating a false sense of human greatness and power. "The dream of being powerful, of being as great as God, even of being God," the Pope warns, "leads to a chain of errors that is a chain of death, leads to shedding the blood of the brother!"<sup>3</sup>

Pursuing my objective of relating Catholic faith to the proposed and actualized policies of President Donald Trump's administration, I argued that the president's policies threaten life in various forms and stages (especially with respect to particular human communities within and outside the United States and with respect to care of our planet). Rooted in Pope Francis' teaching, and more specifically, in his Christian theological anthropology derived from the book of Genesis, I argued that Mr. Trump's excessive capitalistic focus on economic competition and profit promotes a false and reductionist understanding of what it means to be human (*homo economicus*). His vision to put "America First" is dangerous not only because it politically undermines global interdependence and the kind of international relationships needed to sustain various forms of creaturely and communal life in our planet, but, judged theologically, his political vision stands in opposition to fundamental affirmations of our Judeo-Christian tradition.

The cornerstone of Christian teaching is the love of God and neighbor. Because human persons are political creatures (as Aristotle rightly argued in his *Politics*), loving one's neighbor necessarily includes social-political engagement. While not serving as a blueprint for particular political parties or policies, this central Christian teaching, which lies at the heart of Pope's Francis' papacy, offers a Christian signpost that can guide communities and nations to map out political policies that measure greatness as rooted in human dignity rather than in profit, in compassion rather than in apathy, and in bridge-building rather than in wall-building human actions.

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, "Homily of Holy Father Francis," *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, July 8, 2013, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130708\\_omelia-lampedusa.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Over a year later after Mr. Trump has been in office, our country's greatness has lessened. Within the realm of national and international relations we have entered unprecedented and uncharted territory. I noted in my conclusion to the chapter in De La Torre's book that during his inaugural speech, President Trump underscored the need to return power to the people and vowed that, "The forgotten men and women will be forgotten no more." I voiced my concern then that Mr. Trump's vision for America would only threaten the lives of those already vulnerable communities, whether in urban or other areas. Only a short year later, threats to vulnerable populations continue to rise.

Neither those who live in cities nor those hard working families in rural America will reap the benefit of the recently passed tax code that favors those on top of the economic ladder. Adding insult to injury, significant budget cuts have been predicted to increase health risks to various populations, having the most severe effects on poor and marginalized communities. This kind of economic policy enshrines an already tested and failed trickle-down economic vision that Pope Francis has characterized as an economy that kills innocent lives.<sup>4</sup>

But the threat to living a decent life and to human dignity goes beyond economic policies. The policies of the current administration continue to set off alarm bells with respect to basic human rights. Despite strong national support for DACA immigrants, and for enacting immigration reform, as of February 2018, this administration has sabotaged every bipartisan effort to protect these human lives from deportation and human exploitation. Persons within the LGBTQI community, especially transgender persons; women who have suffered from sexual violence and harassment; religious minorities, especially Jewish- and Muslim-Americans; and youth in this nation, threatened and killed by gun violence—all of these persons feel America's greatness chipped away in Mr. Trump's America. In the face of a White House that refuses to take action on behalf of vulnerable populations and the common good of this nation, preferring instead to attack the freedom of the press and perpetuate the ideology of "fake news," the people of this nation continue to march for justice, and through grassroot organizing, ordinary men and women are seeking to change the course of Mr. Trump's exclusive vision for America.

Internationally, the policies of the Trump administration have already created much harm, even with respect to our most trusted allies. The administration has basically ignored or denounced time-standing diplomatic practices and ways of cooperating on global challenges with our partners. President Trump's disavowal of the nuclear arms deal with Iran, his ongoing dangerous tweets with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, and his withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement (despite international appeals not to do so, including from the Vatican and from scientists who have provided evidence that climate change is real and not fake news<sup>5</sup>) all provide concrete examples of how his policies threaten life not only here at home in the United States, but also within the place Pope Francis has called "our common home."

These national and international policies will continue to affect concrete human lives. Of course, they

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<sup>4</sup> On Trump's massive cuts, see Allan Coukell, "Proposed Budget Cuts' Potential Effect on Public Health," The Pew Charitable Trusts, June 7, 2017, <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/analysis/2017/06/07/proposed-budget-cuts-potential-effect-on-public-health>.

On Pope Francis's use of the phrase "economies that kill," see Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Vatican Website, 2013, 53–54, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

<sup>5</sup> See R. S. Nerem et al., "Climate-change-driven Accelerated Sea-level Rise Detected in the Altimeter Era," Proceedings of the *National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, February 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1717312115>.

carry the greatest impact on vulnerable populations who live across this earth. The question of neglecting to care for vulnerable populations and neglecting to care for the future of this planet led me one year ago, and leads me once again, to conclude my reflections with questions of power: “Who is ostracized based on arbitrary criteria determining the norm? Who is privileged and who is excluded when a particular norm is assumed as common? Who is silenced? Who loses agency? Who are the gatekeepers controlling access?”<sup>6</sup>

Our country will be made great again when power is at the service of making America “catholic” again. As faithful Christian citizens of these United States, we have an ethical mandate to advance this cause. Writing now *from* and *to* my Catholic faith community, I invite Catholics to consider that we cannot contribute to the work of perfecting our union, of creating oneness from our increasingly diversified national body (*e pluribus unum*), if we don’t do everything personally and politically speaking to support just action and legislation that protects and defends the dignity of all persons, especially and preferentially, the least of our brothers and sisters in whom we must see the face of Christ (Matthew 25:40).

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<sup>6</sup> Carmen Nanko-Fernández, *Theologizing en Español: Context, Community, and Ministry* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 19–20.

## You Can't Just Teach Your Way Out of Trumpism: A Systemic Analysis

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, Chicago Theological Seminary

Structural injustice in our time can be called “Trumpism,” but it is a system that has been decades in the making. I do not believe you can confine your opposition to this system to the classroom. The very structure of our institutions and the broader social, political, and economic context all need to be actively addressed. If we limit our engagement of this system to the classroom, we end up teaching hypocrisy.

The current occupant of the White House is a symptom, not the cause. This system is multinational and rooted in economic and political trajectories that deprive human beings of a living wage and basic human rights in order to enrich a staggeringly few people. This system is growing. The world's wealthiest people became one trillion dollars richer in 2017.<sup>1</sup> In fact, right now, the three richest Americans own more wealth than *the bottom 50% of the United States combined*.<sup>2</sup>

This larger system is a powerful teacher; it is often called the “informal” curriculum, and the way power is distributed in our institutions as well as in our society is often a far more potent educator than our “formal curriculum” of lectures, readings, and discussions. You know this in theory, but these are the days when moving from theory to practice is indispensable. Taking a hard look at the informal curriculum, from our institutions to the situation of our society, is key to understanding what theological education needs to be and do today. If, for example, the informal curriculum of our institutions replicates the structural injustice that is gaining momentum not only in the United States, but also around the world, then whatever we say in the classroom that seems to contradict that might as well be called “alternative facts.” Or, more accurately, lies.

In our own academic venues, this trajectory of the rich-get-richer and the poor-get-poorer is represented in many types of changes. The “for-profit” schools (Trump University!) are the worst offenders as they systematically exploit more vulnerable student populations, get them to take out loans, overpromise post-graduation employment, and drive these students into debt. The whole structure of student debt has taken a turn for the worse as the current Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has rolled back protections for students who have gone in to debt due to for-profit education.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Metcalf and Jack Witzig, “World's Wealthiest Became \$1 Trillion Richer in 2017,” *Bloomberg News*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-27/world-s-wealthiest-gain-1-trillion-in-17-on-market-exuberance>.

<sup>2</sup> Chuck Collins and Josh Hoxie, *Billionaire Bonanza: The Forbes 400 and the Rest of Us* (Washington, DC: Institute for Policy Studies, 2017), 2, <https://inequality.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/BILLIONAIRE-BONANZA-2017-Embargoed.pdf>. Cited in Jake Johnson, “Three Richest Americans Now Own More Wealth Than Bottom Half of US Combined: Report,” *Common Dreams*, November 8, 2017, <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2017/11/08/three-richest-americans-now-own-more-wealth-bottom-half-us-combined-report>.



She has been sued by eighteen states. “Since day one, Secretary DeVos has sided with for-profit school executives against students and families drowning in unaffordable student loans,” said Maura Healey, the Massachusetts attorney general, who led the multistate coalition in the lawsuit. “Her decision to cancel vital protections for students and taxpayers is a betrayal of her office’s responsibility and a violation of federal law.”<sup>3</sup> DeVos is a prime example of Trumpism.

While it is the case that the vast majority of theological education is not a private, for-profit, enterprise, our seminaries and graduate schools of religion get students who have been victimized by this system. It is, therefore, crucial that our schools do debt counseling and in turn provide as much scholarship money as we can. Another crucial area for activism is in stemming the trend toward part-time and contingent faculty. The American Academy of Religion Academic Labor and Contingent Faculty Working Group (see Facebook page<sup>4</sup>) highlights the precipitous decline in tenure-track positions (45% in 1975 to 30% in 2015) and the staggering increase in part-time and contingent faculty (55% in 1975 to 70% in 2015).

I went by the booth run by the Academic Labor and Contingent Faculty Working Group at the 2017 Annual Meeting to compliment them on the excellent poster campaign they were doing during the Annual Meeting. I wanted to ask them about its reception. They, in turn, asked me to wear the #AARSolidarity ribbon for the campaign and the person in the booth indicated that they were asking tenured faculty to wear them as contingent and part-time faculty often “felt vulnerable” if they wore the badge. “Felt vulnerable” is a revealing insight into how this unjust structure replicates the same kind of economic and social pressures perpetrated by Trumpism. School administrators will tell you that they “have to” turn to part-time and contingent faculty because of “economic pressures” and there is some truth to this, as higher education itself is under attack by Trumpism, but it is not the whole truth. Here is a more complete picture from the American Association of University Professors:

***The turn towards cheaper contingent labor is largely a matter of priorities rather than economic necessity.***

- *While many institutions are currently suffering budget cuts, the greatest growth in contingent appointments occurred during times of economic prosperity.*
- *Many institutions have invested heavily in facilities and technology while cutting instructional spending.*
- *Though incoming students may find finer facilities, they are also likely to find fewer full-time faculty with adequate time, professional support, and resources available for their instruction.*<sup>5</sup>

We do have choices and we privilege some over others. I was the president of Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS) for ten years, from 1998 until 2008, and I know that at smaller schools like my own—and progressive theological seminaries in particular—the economic pressures are real. But it is also a matter of institutional priorities. Progressive seminaries have lofty mission statements, but these are hollow if the structure of the school itself replicates Trumpism. CTS has struggled with this issue for years, and while we cannot claim to be the Kingdom of God’s justice on earth, I believe we have made just and equitable decisions. We do have a robust, full-time, tenured and tenure-track faculty. We hire in tenure

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<sup>3</sup> Stacy Crowley, “18 States Sue Betsy DeVos Over Student Loan Protections,” *The New York Times*, July 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/06/business/dealbook/massachusetts-betsy-devos-lawsuit.html>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pg/AARSolidarity/posts/>

<sup>5</sup> “Background Facts on Contingent Faculty,” American Association of University Professors, <https://www.aaup.org/issues/contingency/background-facts>.

track positions. We do not have a huge number of adjuncts. Yet, it is the case that we can always do better.

But there are many, many wealthy schools that are doing far worse. The Yales and Harvards in this country have high numbers of part-time and contingent faculty, and efforts at unionization have been met with institutional resistance. This is “Trumpism” in higher education and it is appalling. At the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Boston in November of 2017, many of us attending left the conference venue and held a press conference at the landmark New England Congregational Church, Old South.<sup>6</sup> We wore sackcloth over our heads and put ashes on our faces to mourn the corruption of US Christianity and how it has sold itself to the basest kind of political maneuvering. Later, at our AAR panel on our volume *Faith and Resistance in the Age of Trump*, I was still wearing my ashes, but the sackcloth fell off when I stood up to speak at the podium! I connected what we had done in mourning to the depths to which many in conservative white Christian evangelicalism were willing to stoop to gain political power with the degrading employment situation of many who teach in higher education. I referenced the campaign by the Academic Labor Working Group and held up my badge. I charged the audience to show solidarity with the “serfs” of academia. I said, “If you want to change theological education, it’s not what you as teachers say, it’s what you do. Don’t tell me you are going to resist Trump and not resist this system in your own institutions.”<sup>7</sup>

This informal curriculum of the exploitation of students through debt and exploitation of faculty through adjunct and contingent “serfdom” is teaching our students far more than anything I may assign on “liberation theology” in the classroom. The larger context in which we do our work, including activism to resist its most pernicious trends, has to be part of the whole of theological education. Let me be specific about what I mean when I say activism. I mean that as a faculty member (or as an administrator) I need to call my institution to account for how it handles student debt and the hiring, promotion, benefits, and tenure structure. Adjunct and contingent faculty are particularly vulnerable in this process, and I believe it is up to those with tenure and senior administrators to step forward in this process. Our students, many of whom are at the graduate level, are often being ground down as adjuncts at other institutions, or even at our own, and we should be frank about this structural inequality and supportive of their efforts to get better wages, to get proportional benefits, and to advocate for paths from part-time and contingent to full-time and tenure-track.

In regard to the larger social and political spheres, I often have students design activist projects that they plan to carry out to engage the many social and economic injustices we face. I share my own engagements and commitments, though dictating to students about what they should do is, in my view, totally inappropriate. We cannot defend freedom by suppressing freedom. But I believe if we do not connect teaching and activism, then we make a mockery not only of the word “resistance” as in the title of our recent book, but also the term “faith.” And God will not be mocked.

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Thistlethwaite, “Repent and Believe in the Gospel: Over 300 US Christian Theologians Challenge the Corruption of U.S. Christianity,” *Huffington Post*, November 20, 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/repent-and-believe-in-the-gospel-over-300-christian\\_us\\_5a13384fe4b08b00ba6732d2](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/repent-and-believe-in-the-gospel-over-300-christian_us_5a13384fe4b08b00ba6732d2).

<sup>7</sup> Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Religion scholars turn activist in the shadow of Trump,” *Religion News Service*, November 21, 2017, <https://religionnews.com/2017/11/21/religion-scholars-turn-activist-in-the-shadow-of-trump/>.

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