

From the Editor

I am sitting at my desk and attempting to write in the immediate aftermath of the vile and murderous spectacle that was the white nationalist march in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 12, 2017. It is difficult to find words adequate to the many forms of solidarity we must engage and the many forms of repentance many of us must own. As an American, as a Catholic, and as the descendant of four Italian immigrant grandparents who experienced discrimination, oppression, and exclusion for being both Italian and Catholic, I reject the xenophobia, the racism, and the antisemitism of the various groups purporting to “unite the right.” On their side, they have no right.

As a second-generation Italian American, though, I am no longer considered someone of swarthy, olive-hued skin. I am now “white” and must own the consequences of that privilege and accept responsibility for my complicity in structural racism. My professional work, meanwhile, focuses on Jewish-Christian relations; and the sight of angry hordes with tiki torches chanting, “Jews will not replace us” and “Blood and soil,” renders me near-speechless as I contemplate the many times I have stood on the ground of Auschwitz-Birkenau with my students trying to honor the lives of those murdered there. Never Again?! The Nazi pure-blood obsession echoes loudly in the other chants used that day by those who think there are only a few “pure” people who are truly human: “White lives matter,” “You will not replace us,” and “Whose streets? Our streets.” The lynching tree remains the deep wound in our American body politic.

Our work as theologians compels us to bring our faith to bear on the oppressions that prevent us from approaching the gospel’s eschatological vision of peace and justice. James Cone puts the challenge to us explicitly and vividly: “Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a ‘recrucified’ black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy.”¹ From the perspective of a different project, Cornel West argues that “the very structure of modern discourse *at its inception* produced

¹ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), xv.

forms of rationality, scientificity, and objectivity as well as aesthetic and cultural ideals which require the constitution of white supremacy.”²

Historian David Nirenberg suggests another fault line in Western thought: “Anti-Judaism should not be understood as some archaic or irrational closet in the vast edifices of Western thought. It was rather one of the basic tools with which that edifice was constructed.”³ Sexism is surely to be added to these structural deformations of Western thought. It is merely a truism to say that the hate violently erupting from these and other “isms” that make our neighbor “other” must be confronted. But it must be said. Far better minds than mine have confronted these problems and provide us with warnings and analyses. I offer three perspectives, all of which shine light on the problems exposed by racist, neo-Nazi, white supremacist marches. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught:

It is such a situation that we face today when the survival of mankind, including its sacred legacy, is in balance. One wave of hatred, prejudice, or contempt may begin in its wake the destruction of all mankind. It is therefore of extreme importance that the sinfulness of thoughts of suspicion and hatred and particularly the sinfulness of any contemptuous utterance, however flippantly it is meant, be made clear to all mankind. This applies in particular to such thoughts and utterances about individuals or groups of other religions, races, and nations. *Speech has power and few men realize that words do not fade. What starts out as a sound ends in a deed.*⁴

Martin Luther King Jr. continues to hold us accountable and inspire us to courageous acts of solidarity; these famous words cannot be quoted too often:

I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.⁵

² Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 47 (emphasis in the original).

³ David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 6.

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations: A Memorandum to His Eminence Agostino Cardinal Bea, President, The Secretariat for Christian Unity,” May 22, 1962, <http://ajcarchives.org/ajcarchive/DigitalArchive.aspx>, 3 (my emphasis).

⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, ed. Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 428.

Oscar Romero joined King in the ranks of those martyred for justice:

A civilization of love that does not demand justice of people would not be a true civilization nor would it designate the true relationships between people. . . . True love begins by demanding what is just in the relations of those who love. But it is not enough to demand justice, for the civilization of love also demands truth. Truth, illuminated by faith, is the perennial source of discernment for our ethical conduct. If there is no truth in love, then we have hypocrisy. . . . A civilization where trust of one another is lost, where there is so much lying and no truth, has no foundation of love. Love cannot exist where there is falsehood. Our environment lacks truth. And when the truth is spoken, it gives offense, and the voices that speak the truth are silenced.⁶

Heschel, King, and Romero call us to reform, renewal, and repentance—certainly not easy tasks in the face of the deep deformations of Western thought. This year, *Horizons* has joined other journals and groups in commemorating the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation.⁷ Reverend Elizabeth Eaton, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, reminds us that “commemoration” not “celebration” was the word chosen to describe the October 31, 2016, prayer service in Lund, Sweden, that marked the beginning of a year of reflecting on the Reformation. At an event explicitly hosted by both the Lutheran World Federation and Pope Francis, she remarked that the choice of words was “not only to honor Catholic sensibilities in avoiding a celebration of separation, but also an act of making room for repentance on all sides.” The five authors of our theological roundtable, “Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses: Ecumenical Prospects on Its Quincentennial,” demonstrate the life-giving transformations that the difficult and painstaking work of honest reform, renewal, and repentance can produce.

Though only fifty-plus not five hundred years in the making, the remarkable renewal of Jewish-Catholic relations since *Nostra Aetate* provides yet another example of reform, renewal, and repentance that offers hope that structural injustice in thought and actions can be effectively confronted. Philip Cunningham’s “Emerging Principles of a Theology of Shalom” focuses on how building a recognition of interrelationship between communities while fully respecting another’s self-understanding can yield relationships of mutuality. Of course, repentance with regard to all forms of racism, antisemitism, sexism, and other forms of structural injustice cannot be rushed, or renewal and reform will not be authentic. The analyses of

⁶ Oscar Romero, “Love, Law of the New Covenant,” April 12, 1979, http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/homilies/150/150_pdf.pdf.

⁷ See *Horizons: Journal of the College Theology Society* 44, no. 1 (2017): v-x, 137-47.

Cornel West, David Nirenberg, and others lay bare the profound depths of injustice. Reform, renewal, and repentance are not easy or quick tasks. Yet, they are the currency of people of many faiths and all people of courage who care about what it means to be human and what a world of justice might look like in the twenty-first century. Cunningham suggests that progress in Jewish-Catholic relations may be a model for other difficult relationships.

Michael Jaycox's interrogation of Catholic ethics in terms of the Black Lives Matter movement and James Sabak's analysis of the difference between public candlelight vigils in the wake of violent attacks and the Easter Vigil are eerily timely this week after the Charlottesville demonstrations and the terrorist attacks in Spain. Jaycox contends that "the major moral critique of the Black Lives Matter movement [is that] a nation professing adherence to cultural values such as freedom, justice, and equality before the law is in fact complicit in an extensive and complex system of white dominance that devalues black life as an object of particular scorn and disregard." Consider for a moment what this analysis of the Black Lives Matter movement means when we reflect on the fact that a statue of Robert E. Lee was central to the Charlottesville melee. Cone sheds further light on the controversy: "Although white southerners lost the Civil War, they did not lose the cultural war—the struggle to define America as a white nation and blacks as a subordinate race unfit for governing and therefore incapable of political or social equality."⁸ In response to the violence, the statue of Chief Justice Roger Taney, a Catholic and author of the Dred Scott decision, was removed, after a vote by the State House Trust board, from the grounds of the Maryland State House. Even if some acknowledge this act by the State of Maryland's government as a very small first step in a process of repentance, since a system of white supremacy is written into the very structure of Western thought, our reform, renewal, and repentance will take a very long time indeed.

Sabak suggests that the efforts of "the public, civic vigil" to respond to the violence that erupts in societies (from entrenched systems of oppression, from acts of terror) can "obviate tendencies toward any type of determinism" and be more effective if understood in terms of its origin in the practice of Christian liturgical vigil. Though Jaycox cautions us that a renewed practice of the Catholic sacraments may not be enough for Catholics to "'unperform' their whiteness," Sabak reminds us that Christian vigils are grounded in "a firm trust in the power of God to redeem and transform humanity." Though we fail constantly (*simul justus et peccator*, to give Luther his due

⁸ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 6.

in this issue), the Christian faith tradition provides us with the hope that we can reform, renew, and repent. Jaycox and Sabak offer ways to begin that process.

The notion of the importance of memorialization is addressed in yet a very different context by Maureen Walsh as she explores how a growing set of practices surrounding pregnancy loss is being experienced in terms of the “broader ritual tradition of the church.” She asserts that “bringing hidden pregnancy losses to light, and drawing on the church’s long-standing sacramental imagination,” can provide significant experiences of reform and renewal.

Reform, renewal, and repentance can be dismissed as pious words easily tamed. They can also be embraced as the radical practices of Christianity that they are from the tradition of the biblical prophets and Jesus to Martin Luther, the radical reformers, and the Catholic reformers to Pope John XXIII and Pope Francis. The commemoration of the Reformation has given us an opportunity to consider more deeply the ongoing meaning of constant renewal. The structural sins of racism, antisemitism, sexism, and other assaults on the dignity of human persons challenge us to accelerate our repentance and reform. As Pope Francis said in Lund, Sweden, “We Christians will be credible witnesses of mercy to the extent that forgiveness, renewal, and reconciliation are daily experienced in our midst. Together we can proclaim and manifest God’s mercy, concretely and joyfully, by upholding and promoting the dignity of every person. Without this service to the world and in the world, Christian faith is incomplete.”⁹

* * *

As always, I thank our authors for sharing their scholarship with our readers, and I thank all of the members of the *Horizons* editorial team for their inspiring creativity, diligent work, and unwavering commitment to excellent scholarship. In particular, I offer a special expression of gratitude to Colleen Carpenter, St. Catherine University, as her excellent service as book review editor concludes with this issue.

⁹ Pope Francis, “Common Ecumenical Prayer at the Lutheran Cathedral of Lund, Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis,” October 31, 2016, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20161031_omelia-svezia-lund.html.