

INNOVATIVE THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO INTEGRATING  
PEACEBUILDING AND NONVIOLENCE – INTEREST GROUP

Convener: Eli McCarthy, Georgetown University  
 Moderator: Leo Guardado, Fordham University  
 Presenters: Ki Joo (KC) Choi, Princeton Theological Seminary  
 Tina Astorga, University of Portland  
 Byron Wratee, Loyola University Maryland

Ki Joo (KC) Choi presented a paper titled “Racialization: ‘Self-Gift’ and Cultural Violence.” The paper adjudicated two claims that Pope Francis makes about the practice of encounter, specifically, its inner logic of self-gift, in *Fratelli Tutti*. The first claim underscores self-gift (or kenosis) as the antidote to interpersonal and intercommunal enmity. The second claim, perhaps deviating from or at least complicating somewhat the first claim, underscores the identarian impediments to the practice of self-gift. Choi argued for the veracity and thus priority of Francis’s second claim in light of Asian immigrant discourse on civic recognition (i.e., visibility and belonging). This discourse illustrates how self-gift can be easily overlooked as a contributing factor to ingroup bias and exclusion: first, as constituting the “performance” that is befitting of (problematic) forms of belonging and, second, as making us susceptible to an uncritical allegiance, embrace, or validation of such forms of belonging. Consequently, if we want self-gift to do the kind of moral work that we want it to do, that is, narrow divides between persons and communities, and to build a culture of nonviolence, then self-gift must be practiced subsequent to an epistemological conversion, namely, the unsettling if not dislodging of our identities, and perhaps replacing them with new, more liberating ones. Such conversion will require, in part, asking why we are invested in the kind of identities we have or that we desire: What are the socio-economic realities that incentivize us to long for and hold onto particular identities? Without making this epistemic commitment first (or without this prior epistemic conversion), any practice that we think is crucial to peacebuilding (such as self-gift, encounter, or accompaniment), will likely end up being counterproductive.

Tina Astorga presented a paper titled “Interfacing Filipino ‘Lakas Tawa’ Power of Laughter and Lament as Two Pathways of Resistance.” Examples drawn from the 1986 Filipino revolution were interfaced with lament based on the Book of Lamentations and with parallel examples from W.E. Burghardt Du Bois’s “A Litany at Atlanta.” Astorga argued that “lakas tawa” and lament are two ways of being and doing in the face of suffering and death, and that both are intrinsically woven into the tapestry of one human reality.

When Filipino “lakas tawa” and lament are interfaced, there are three aspects that run across both: paradox, self-transcendence, and subversion. Laughter draws from the song and celebration of faith and religion, while lament draws from its sorrow, grief, and mourning. In both God is experienced. In laughter, God is experienced as one who stuns with playful incongruities to free the spirit from gravity and to lighten its load. In lament God is experienced as hope, amid ruins, fragile and fleeting, yet abiding and faithful. But where they diverge and converge, they have the power to create

communities, for when people laugh together, they are deeply connected as human beings, and when they cry together, they bear each other's pain and burden. Laughter and lament have the power to subvert oppressive systems and the potential to transform them. Mourning, grieving, and cursing, lament speaks truth to divine and human power assailing the ears of God with its relentless protest and calling to question all structures of oppression. Refusing to settle for things as they are, lament is iconoclastic of anything that stands in the way of justice. Convergent and divergent, laughter and lament offer two ways of approaching life—two ways of being human.

Byron Wratee presented a paper titled "Just Peace and Just Survival: An Exploration of Howard Thurman's Nonviolent Theological Anthropology." Wratee discussed how Thurman, a mystic and theologian, unpacked Jesus' nonviolent virtues of courage and love. He also identified three types of conversion and how nonviolence requires all of these. In regard to mysticism, he explained how nonviolence draws us into an interfaith spirituality, way of being, and a particular spiritual way of Black communities. Peacebuilding, civil disobedience, and survival were all named as key nonviolent tactics.

The presentation examined the dialectic and creative tension of survival and just peace ethics in the context of anti-Black violence. As victims of violence and activists for nonviolent peacebuilding in the United States, Black Christians offer an approach to peacebuilding that relies deeply on the nonviolent theology and ethics of Howard Thurman. For Thurman, Jesus offered a survival technique to disinherited Black communities. Wratee argued for a more nuanced approach that integrates the themes of just peace and survival.

During the presentations, military fighter jets hovered over the hotel, making it nearly impossible to listen to the panelists. The triggering experience was a visceral reminder of the need and urgency of nonviolence in all forms, and of the cultural ways in which violence becomes mass entertainment.

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