focus

Boston University School of Theology 2024

Inside:

theological humility

For the sake of the church, the academy, and the world

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

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Boston University
School of Theology
2024

Dean
G. SUJIN PAK

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Director of Online Lifelong Learning; Associate Director of Alumni & Donor Relations; and Associate Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
ANDREW KIMBLE ('19)

Communications Director and Journal Reviewer
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Editor
STEVE HOLT

Contributing Writers
DZIDZOR AZAGLO ('24)
RICH BARLOW
MARC CHALUFOUR
MARA SASSOON (MET'22)
CORINNE STEINBRENNER (COM'06)

Designers
RAQUEL SCHOTT & TULIKA ROY

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DEAN'S MESSAGE

EQUIPPING THEOLOGICALLY HUMBLE LEADERS

BY DEAN G. SUJIN PAK

In 2023–24, the School of Theology has been reflecting upon the futures of theological education (page 6), revising our MDiv and MTS curricula (page 5), and anticipating the General Conference of the United Methodist Church (page 25). Across these key activities, a compelling call resonated: the call to theological humility. The School of Theology embraces the extraordinary vocation of cultivating religious leaders shaped in the character and practices of theological humility. We think such is necessary to meet a suffering world with compassion, wisdom, and the transformative possibilities that attend equally to justice and love.

"Theological humility is a brave space."

Theological humility is a brave space. It is not about being indecisive. It is not a lack of conviction about what one believes. It does not require one to embrace an "anything goes" perspective. On the contrary, theological humility navigates a space between profound *convictions* (deep beliefs that we hold about God and the world) and *divine, sacred mystery*—the sacred mystery of God, the sacred mystery of an other, the sacred mystery of even one's own self—recognizing and affirming the fragile sacredness and mystery that saturates life.

Theological humility opens us up to the possibilities of awe, surprise, and divine encounter, as Peng Yin points out (page 42). Theological humility is a spiritual virtue at the heart of faith itself, for faith is a matter of *conviction* not certainty, and *assurance* not a guarantee. Theological humility—much like faith—is anchored by conviction while embracing the unknown. It never loses sight of the limits of one's knowledge. Theological humility at its heart is *communal*; it reminds us of our entangled existences, our dependence upon one another. It hopes for divine encounter in, through, and with one another.

This issue offers multiple pathways of theological humility—from naming the pain of a divided UMC that calls the denomination to a renewed humility, embracing unity in diversity (page 24), to the humble recognition of the interdependence of all living things that rectifies a human-centric vision (page 16), to the power of the preached word, inspiring "a sense of awe," curiosity, and mystery that invites us to sit with another within the uncertainty of "life's hardest moments" (page 20). Key practices of theological humility include recognition of the limits of our knowledge, self-interrogation, interdisciplinary accountability (page 30), and the centering of minoritized communities (page 34). Authors reimagine a more robust apophatic theology (page 38), an evangelism grounded in the virtue of humility (page 48), and theological education as a journey in the exercises of humility and sacred encounter (page 42).

May you be inspired by this issue toward a posture of awe and joyful surprise to meet anew the neighbor, the stranger, and the Divine. ❑

FAT CHURCH

ANASTASIA KIDD ('04,'18) WANTS CULTURE—AND THE CHURCH—TO RETHINK FATNESS

BY RICH BARLOW

"If you care about systemic oppression, you need to start caring about fat people."

Anastasia Kidd ('04,'18) issues that challenge in her book, *Fat Church: Claiming a Gospel of Fat Liberation* (Pilgrim Press, 2023). Kidd, a minister in the United Church of Christ and a lecturer and director of contextual education at the School of Theology, declares war on popular notions about people who are fat, a word she embraces (and that *focus* therefore uses in this interview).

"The supermajority of fat people will remain fat people their whole lives," she writes. "Eighty years of research shows that employing restrictive diets and exercise regimens for sustained weight loss works for only the tiniest fraction of people." As for religion, she continues, "Fat activists specifically name the Christian church as an institution unyielding in its denigration of bodily appetites of all sorts, which makes it a happy bedfellow with diet culture."

Established medical opinion says obesity (which Kidd types with an asterisk replacing the "e"—"ob*sity"—because she considers the word, its Latin origin meaning to overeat, a slur) is a risk factor for

Dave Green

ailments such as hypertension, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. Kidd relies on contrarian research, in publications from *Scientific American* to the *International Journal of Epidemiology*, asserting that fat correlates with, but doesn't cause, unhealthiness.

With studies suggesting fat people face workplace discrimination, Massachusetts and other states are considering bans on size discrimination in employment. Kidd says Christianity must do its part, embracing "fat liberation" as it does the causes of other marginalized people.

***focus*: You write that being fat doesn't hurt health, but rather that social stigma drives fat people to harmful pathologies. Can you give some examples?**

Anti-fat bias, also known as sizeism, keeps many medical professionals from providing holistic care for fat people, choosing instead to focus first on weight loss above all or refusing to see patients above a certain size altogether. This leads to fat people being diagnosed at later stages of diseases than if they had been given dignified care from the start. Weight stigma causes insurance companies not to cover people beyond a certain size, monetarily blocking the largest fat people from access to healthcare altogether. Weight stigma causes all sorts of societal biases and discrimination—for example, in terms of housing and employment—and even overt discrimination against fat people in these areas is legal in all but a few states.

Social determinants of health are the conditions that surround a person and contribute to their overall health—things like where they work, their level of education, their financial stability, and where they live. Many fat people, especially the largest, do not enjoy the same level of access to these things as thin people do. And even those of us with steady jobs, decent housing, and plenty of education deal daily with the stress of weight stigma, experienced through media, strangers' gazes, and even family or friends. Studies show that the consistent stress of discrimination itself raises one's cortisol hormone, which can lead to all sorts of physical issues.

Has Christianity failed to embrace fat people or participated in their stigmatization? Are there contrary examples of support for fat people, from Christian tradition and scripture?

Christianity certainly has participated in the stigmatization of fat people. Early Christian writers like Augustine warned

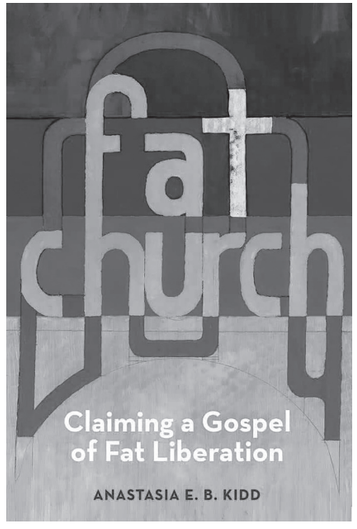
(Continued)

"There's no way to disentangle Christian purity culture, structural anti-fatness, and white supremacy in this country. They all came up together."
—Anastasia Kidd

of the body's sinful potential and invited Christians to favor "soul" and/or "mind" over the desires of the body—a philosophy called "dualism." Like sex and sensuality, eating certain types of food was considered a gateway for sin. Women's bodies were, in particular, held suspect, and their behaviors policed by the church through the pall of patriarchy, which lasts today.

Looking to more modern times, we can point to Christian colonialism, which was led by white, Protestant, and primarily Anglo-Saxon people. Sabrina Strings' *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* is the seminal work on how anti-fatness grew in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries, as white colonists encountered bodies unlike their own because of the transatlantic slave trade and immigrant waves from southern Europe and elsewhere. The racist and xenophobic fears of differently shaped bodies, different languages, different foods, different cultures, and different religious traditions threatened the ruling class, and rose within them a eugenic fear of keeping white bloodlines "pure." The ideal body type became the thin, tall, lithe form of northern European culture, and this imagery spread worldwide through colonial conquests.

Control of women's bodies for breeding "good Anglo-Saxon stock" materialized in the form of diet and exercise regimens mixed with Christian piety. It's all part of a larger Christian purity culture that holds as suspect anything but the most narrow definitions of holy behavior. And since fatness is assumed to be a behavioral issue rather than a genetic trait, fatness has often been considered sinful and treated as such in the church. There's no way to disentangle Christian purity culture, structural anti-fatness, and white supremacy in this country. They all came up together.



Other religions consider gluttony a sin. Why is that belief so widespread?

In some cultures, what one might call gluttony is a ritual of religious celebration. Different cultures throughout history and worldwide have different ways of thinking about food consumption and body size. The fact that some cultures hold fatness as a desirable trait and some consider it abject has everything to do with cultural norms, not some overarching truth about the goodness or badness of fat. Which itself proves the point of fat activists, that the way we feel about fatness in society is not based in truth, but in cultural beliefs and biases. A culture of anti-fatness exists in this country that back-ends to structural oppression for fat people. That can change if our culture changes to understand fatness not as a disease, but as a neutral body shape, the way we might say one is "tall." ❑

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

AN UPDATE TO THE MDIV AND MTS

STH REVIEWING ITS CURRICULA IN RESPONSE TO CHANGES IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

STH's legacy of advocacy and social justice work is a point of great pride. So, when Dean G. Sujin Pak and Associate Dean Bryan Stone began a review of the core curriculum of its Master of Divinity (MDiv) program in 2023, that legacy was a major consideration.

"It used to be the MDiv was like a pastoral ministry training degree, but that has really changed," says Stone, who is also the E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism and codirector of the Center for Practical Theology. "It's now only a minority, maybe 25 or 30 percent of students, who want to go into ordained ministry. There are still a lot who want to go into ecclesial ministry of some sort, but we really have to diversify the curriculum."

While the traditional use of the MDiv is as the credentialing degree for congregational and parish ministry, increasing numbers of graduates are looking to use their degrees in other ways, such as going into chaplaincy or pursuing community organizing and social justice work. Stone says many recent MDiv graduates have gone on to work in nonprofits, teach in religious schools, or facilitate interfaith dialogue. Some have pursued PhDs.

"Theological education has been shifting quite dramatically," Pak says. "We want to really be visionary about how we do the 'both, and,'

Facing page: Pilgrim Press
This page: Kimberly Macdonald

and have a degree that continues to prepare people for forms of church ministry in the more traditional sense, but that also has this innovative justice edge to it. We're trying to open up some flexibility within our curriculum."

Over the past year, Stone, Pak, and a curriculum review steering committee collected data through surveys of current students, alumni, faculty, and staff about their experiences at STH and their thoughts on what a theological education should include. They also surveyed representatives from credentialing bodies about skills and experiences they hope to see in graduates. They plan to roll out the revised MDiv curriculum in the fall of 2024.

Subcommittees charged with researching various aspects of the curriculum, such as the design, structure, and requirements of the MDiv program, have been reporting their findings to the steering committee. One subcommittee is looking into translating the MDiv program to an online or hybrid format. Stone estimates that they'll introduce such a program sometime in 2025.

Another key consideration in the MDiv curriculum review is ensuring the program considers students' spiritual formation, so that they have maximum impact in their communities after graduation. "A Master of Divinity should also form you as a spiritual pastoral leader," Stone says, adding that they still aim to open the program to an interreligious student body.

"We want to make sure that people who aren't Christian and who don't even plan on doing Christian ministry can still get a theological education and aren't required to take courses that aren't geared toward them," Stone says.

Next up for Pak and Stone is a review of the Master of Theological Studies program curriculum.

Pak sees the MDiv curriculum review as reevaluating how to best leverage STH's strengths. "We want to lean into the particular strengths of the school, like our Religion & Conflict Transformation and Faith & Ecological Justice programs, and the fact that we have psychologists and sociologists on our faculty," she says. "We're particularly equipped for these many ways of thinking about what to do with your MDiv. Yes, we support people in church ministry, but there are a series of other things that you can do with the degree."—*Mara Sassoon* ❑

THE LOWELL LECTURE LEGACY

BIANNUAL SERIES 'REMINDS WORLD OF THEOLOGY'S RELEVANCE'

BY MARC CHALUFOUR

Thought-provoking, illuminating, and encouraging. That's what Andrew Kimble has come to expect from the biannual Lowell Lecture Series at STH. Kimble ('19) attended the lectures as a student before coordinating them as a staff member and, he says, he appreciates how each one leaves the audience pondering big questions.

The series is part of a Boston legacy of free public education. The Lowell Institute, established from the estate of avid traveler and philanthropist John Lowell, Jr., has been funding free lectures and programs since 1836. Institutions ranging from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum to the New England Aquarium, as well as many Greater Boston colleges and universities, host lectures sponsored by the institute. STH's series began in 1966.

Kimble, associate director of alumni and donor relations and director of online lifelong learning, says the series gives STH an opportunity to focus attention on topics of particular import within the school or across society: "This is our chance to remind the world of theology's relevance." In 2021–22, the theme was diversity, equity, and inclusion. The 2022–23 lectures, about the spiritual dimension of artistic expression, combined speaking with performances. And for 2023–24, STH invited speakers to discuss the future of theological education.

What that future holds is the question at the heart of STH's ongoing curriculum review (see page 5). "The students coming into seminaries today are very different from generations past. Not everyone is going into a parish setting or pursuing ordination," Kimble says. "For example, chaplaincy is on the rise. And religious affiliation is on the decline; so how do we train people to move into those emergent fields?"

Ted Smith, associate dean of the faculty and Charles Howard Candler Professor of Divinity at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, addressed those challenges with the year's first lecture, "Affordances for Theological Education in an Age of Individualization," on November 2, 2023. Keri L. Day, a professor of constructive theology and African American religion at Princeton Theological Seminary, delivered the second lecture of the year on March 21, titled, "Testifying: Notes on the Futures of Theological Education."

The lectures are marquee events on the STH calendar, Kimble says. As is tradition with Lowell-sponsored events, they're free and open to the public. STH promotes the series to local churches and invites deans and senior faculty from other theological schools. GBH, a Boston public radio and television station, also promotes and broadcasts the lectures. ❑

For more information about the Lowell Lecture Series and to watch the talks, visit ***bu.edu/sth/lowell-lecture****.*

FACULTY RECEIVE PROMOTIONS, HONORS

School of Theology faculty received the following honors and promotions in the past year:

Shively T.J. Smith, assistant professor of New Testament

Shively Smith was appointed inaugural director of the school's Doctor of Philosophy program, effective in July 2023. She guides student and program assessment and PhD admissions and orientation and communicates with students about their program requirements and changes. Smith works closely with Associate Dean Bryan Stone, the Office of Academic Affairs, and other STH offices to strengthen the professional formation of the school's PhD students.

"The appointment of Professor Smith to this new role is a major step forward for the school's PhD program and its mission of forming the next generation of innovative teachers, cutting-edge researchers, and socially engaged thought leaders," Stone says. "Professor Smith brings vision, creativity, and a love for theological education that is precisely what we need in this moment."

Smith also was awarded a fellowship from the HistoryMakers, a nonprofit "committed to preserving and making widely accessible the untold personal stories of both well-known and unsung African Americans." The HistoryMakers awards fellowships annually to US faculty who are dedicated to diversifying higher education curricula and furthering student learning. Smith will use the award to broaden her online course, Howard Thurman: Biblical Interpreter for the Public Square, which will allow students enrolled in the online Master of Arts in Religion & Public Leadership to explore the actions of Thurman (Hon.'67), Marsh Chapel dean from 1953 to 1965 and the first Black dean at a mostly white American university, and "expand understanding about the historical moments, people, and institutions Thurman engages and influences."

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Rady Roldán-Figueroa ('05), professor of the history of Christianity

Rady Roldán-Figueroa was appointed to the Robert Randall Distinguished Professorship in Christian Culture at Providence College for the fall 2023 semester. During that time, Roldán-Figueroa directed student research, delivered public lectures, and contributed to undergraduate learning in his areas of expertise. "The Randall Professorship is held by a recognized scholar whose work concentrates on an understanding of culture that embodies a Christian view of human achievement," says Dean G. Sujin Pak. In early 2024, Roldán-Figueroa was promoted to full professor at the School of Theology.

Nicolette Manglos-Weber, associate professor of religion and society

Nicolette Manglos-Weber was promoted to associate professor just prior to the 2023–24 academic year. Manglos-Weber is an interdisciplinary sociologist who studies religious community life, focusing on how religion shapes politics and collective well-being. Her research has focused extensively on faith communities in English-speaking Africa, migrants in the US, and young adults in the US facing stress and adversity. Her current work examines Christian and Muslim leaders of community-based organizations in Africa.

Walter E. Fluker (GRS'88, STH'88), Martin Luther King, Jr., Professor Emeritus of Ethical Leadership

Professor Emeritus Walter E. Fluker received the 2023 Freedom of Worship award from the Roosevelt Institute at a September ceremony held at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum in Hyde Park, N.Y. The honor is one of Four Freedoms awards the institute presents annually to those who "exemplify core freedoms that uphold our democracy: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear." Fluker, who retired from the University in June 2020, was recognized for his work, from "helping students navigate the ethical questions of today to being a thought leader for Black churches." The other 2023 award recipients were Tracie Hall, executive director of the American Library Association (Freedom of Speech and Expression); the late Ady Barkan, founder and co-executive director of Be A Hero (Freedom from Want); and US Representative Bennie Thompson (D–Miss.), chair of the January 6th Select Committee (Freedom from Fear). US Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), speaker emerita of the House, was awarded the overarching Freedom Medal.

—*Steve Holt* ❑

FROM APARTHEID TO LGBTQIA+ RIGHTS

"Instead of asking, 'Where can the church be a part of the solution,' ask, 'Where has the church been a part of the problem.'" This statement, which Rev. Allen Stone delivered to my peers and me at Central Methodist Mission in Cape Town, South Africa, has stuck with me. It has resonated deeply as I reflect on the social issues that were exposed during our two-week travel seminar in South Africa, attended by STH students, alumni, faculty, and staff.

When our plane touched down in July 2023, the words and reflections of Black liberation activist Steve Biko, former first couple Nelson and Winnie Mandela, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu echoed in my mind. Our invitation was straightforward: to witness firsthand the ways that liberation echoed amid apartheid and to engage with South Africa's history of both violence and popular uprising—including how the country's people took their survival into their own hands. The hand was a powerful symbol throughout the trip, for it translated language and worlds on stones, within the spirit world and the physical world in the ancient days. It threw stones when violence was being forced on Black bodies, and it became a marker of resistance when saying the word *amandla*, Zulu for "power to the people." I was captivated by South

Sites visited by South Africa travel seminar participants included the Origins Centre in Johannesburg (left) and the Soweto home where Nelson Mandela lived for decades (right).

Africa's stunning natural beauty and vibrant culture. I sat with questions, words, wonders, and imaginations of alternative futures in South Africa. With the guidance of Professors James McCarty and Luis Menéndez-Antuña, we engaged with theologies of liberation, harm, and imaginations of new ways of living.

Visiting the GALA Queer Archive in Johannesburg, I was reminded that liberation from oppression doesn't always lead to freedom for all. Like many places we visited, the Queer Archive exposed the ongoing struggles and discrimination faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in South Africa, highlighting the importance of continued advocacy and support. We were asked, "Why theology?" when it represents and has committed crimes of violence on oppressed bodies who desire liberation. I didn't have the words then to conceptualize that there has to be someone who can speak against harm and work toward true liberation for all people. The visit to Robben Island was another powerful and emotional experience. Standing in the cramped prison cell that confined Mandela for 18 years, I couldn't help but feel a profound sense of the immense sacrifices made in the fight against apartheid. The stories of resilience and unwavering hope amid oppression deeply touched me and reminded me of the strength that lies within the human spirit.

Reflecting on my journey, I am filled with a profound sense of gratitude for the invaluable lessons learned and the connections made with individuals who are at the forefront of driving meaningful societal transformation. South Africa has left an indelible mark on my perspective, igniting a passion within me to actively contribute to social justice efforts and advocate for a more equitable world. Why theology? Because it is *amandla*, it is the stone; it is addressing the problem and asking the question. Theology constantly shapes the ways we define this world, our being, and God. —*Dzidzor Azaglo ('24)* ❑

STH HONORS DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI

The School of Theology's Distinguished Alumni winners for 2023 "have traversed international borders, impacting communities across the globe for social good, from South Africa and Austria to Indonesia to the Pacific Ocean to Puerto Rico," according to Dean G. Sujin Pak. "Each offers a stunning vision of hope for a hurting world."

Walter E. Fluker (GRS'88, STH'88) served as Distinguished Professor of the Howard Thurman Center and BU's Martin Luther King, Jr., Professor Emeritus of Ethical Leadership. He has written extensively on ethics, race, and public discourse, and was named a Franklin D. Roosevelt Freedom of Worship award winner in 2023 (see page 7).

Septemmy Eucharistia Lakawa ('11) was the inaugural female president of Jakarta Theological Seminary, Indonesia's oldest Protestant seminary, where she has established programs oriented toward ecological sustainability and integrated mental and spiritual health approaches into seminary life. Her research centers on mission studies, feminist constructive theology, trauma theology, the role of art in trauma healing, and interfaith women's networks.

An ordained minister in the California–Pacific Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, **John Michio Miyahara ('95)** has served as a US Navy chaplain since 2001, being assigned to shore and operational billets in New Jersey, Virginia, Louisiana, Florida, Guam, California, Washington, Hawaii, and Washington, D.C. Miyahara is pursuing a DMin from Vanderbilt University Divinity School.

STH's 2023 Emerging Leader is **Yara González-Justiniano ('14,'19)**. González-Justiniano is an assistant professor of religion, psychology, and culture with an emphasis in Latinx studies at Vanderbilt University. Her 2022 book, *Centering Hope as a Sustainable Decolonial Practice: Esperanza en Práctica*, explores what hope looks like amid socioeconomic crises. She is in the ordination process with the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in the New England region. —*S.H.*

Walter E. Fluker (from left), John Michio Miyahara, Dean G. Sujin Pak, and Septemmy Eucharistia Lakawa at the 2023 Matriculation service at Marsh Chapel.

Facing page: Andrew Kimble
This page: Michael Spencer

IN MEMORIAM

JUDITH OLESON, 1954–2023

Judith Oleson served at the school from 2016 until her retirement in 2022 and was a beloved mentor to students in her role as the director of the Tom Porter Program on Religion & Conflict Transformation (RCT). Oleson's research included reconciliation processes between indigenous communities, governments, and the church for years of child removal policies that resulted in cultural genocide in the US, Australia, and Canada.

"The death of Judith Oleson is a great personal loss to me and to all who care about peace and justice," says Tom Porter, a retired lecturer and codirector of the RCT program. "She worked as long as humanly possible, grieved by having to leave the work she loved. What a gift to work with Judith—principled, collaborative, excellent researcher, wonderful mentor, creator of partnerships, leader of travel seminars, even making her home a place of hospitality for peace and justice workers, and my friend."

Gifts in Oleson's memory can be made to the Tom Porter Program on Religion & Conflict Transformation Endowment Fund. —*S.H.* ❑

OBITUARIES
STH publishes alumni obituaries online at **bu.edu/sth/category/alumniae-deaths**.

CONNECTING WITH ALUMNI NEAR AND FAR

As **Dean G. Sujin Pak** enters her fourth year at BU School of Theology, she has had the privilege of meeting numerous alumni and friends in New England, across the country, and around the world. With the support of the Development & Alumni Relations office, she is committed to keeping STH's 4,000 alumni engaged and informed of the latest happenings at 745 Commonwealth Ave.

In the past year alone, STH leaders have connected in person with more than 300 alumni, in strategy meetings to receive input on the evolving strategic plan, as well as in vibrant social gatherings to hear about your STH experiences and vocational journeys. Luncheons and dinners took place in Massachusetts; Wells, Maine; Manchester, N.H.; Atlanta, Ga.; Los Angeles and Sacramento, Calif.; Baltimore, Md.; San Antonio, Tex.; and Seoul, South Korea. "Engaging with the amazing alumni of STH is among the most rewarding and joyful things I do," Pak says. "They inspire me, embodying hope for transformative action."

STH alumni met with Dean G. Sujin Pak in Baltimore, Md., in October 2023.

An outlier among these alumni events was a walking tour through Boston to *The Embrace*, the memorial on Boston Common honoring the life and legacy of **Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS'55, Hon.'59)**, and his wife, **Coretta Scott King (Hon.'69)**. On March 1, 2023, Pak joined **Andrew Kimble ('19)**, STH associate director of Alumni & Donor Relations, and **Ray Joyce (Questrom'91)**, STH assistant dean of development, on the tour, which focused on the Kings' lifelong pursuit of racial and social justice. Attendees included alumni, current students, and faculty members, and a talk was given at various stops by a featured speaker.

The tour started on Marsh Plaza at BU's *Free at Last* sculpture. **Rev. Charlene Zuill**, director of spiritual life, explained how Martin and Coretta met in Boston, emphasizing how Coretta's intellectual and spiritual formation made a lasting impact on Martin—who knew he wanted to marry her after their first date.

STH alumni joined students, faculty, and administration for a walking tour to honor the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS'55, Hon.'59), and his wife, Coretta Scott King (Hon.'69). Stops included BU's Free at Last *sculpture (right) and* The Embrace *sculpture on Boston Common (above).*

At *The Embrace*, **Rev. Mariama White-Hammond ('17)** spoke about the love ethic and its application in justice movements. She offered insight on how dozens of artists submitted proposals for the memorial and how the only rendering including both Coretta and Martin earned the final bid.

Since the unveiling, a nationwide discussion has ensued about the value, meaning, and role of public art. **Cynthia Perry ('23)** encouraged the group to embrace ourselves as an act of self-love. The memorial's significance, she reminded us, extends far beyond one's interpretation of the sculpture. It is about the universality of love.

The final talk of the day, from **James McCarty**, clinical assistant professor of religion and conflict transformation and director of the Tom Porter Program on Religion & Conflict Transformation, reminded us of the beloved community's future and the Kings' imprint on ethical and moral leadership. He noted the powerful symbolism of our tour coinciding with a Service Employees International Union rally to promote better wages and benefits for healthcare workers. *The Embrace* is a new site of advocacy for all persons striving toward equality and justice, he said.

We look forward to seeing you soon at an alumni event in your area. Feel free to visit bu.edu/sth/alumni/alum-events/ to view a current list of upcoming alumni events, and remember to check periodically for important updates. Many of these events are featured in our quarterly e-newsletter, *Focal Point*. If you recently updated your email address and no longer receive *Focal Point*, please send a note to sthalum@bu.edu to receive future issues. We encourage you to donate to the STH Annual Fund every year to help make our events possible and help publish *focus* magazine!

Learn more about the ways to make a financial contribution at bu.edu/sth/alumni/giving. Thank you! ❑

Facing page: Ray Joyce
This page: Andrew Kimble

FEATURE

A MORE WELCOMING CHURCH

Claudia Alvarez Hurtado ('24)

CLAUDIA ALVAREZ HURTADO ('24) WORKS FOR LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION BY CONNECTING QUEER-AFFIRMING CHURCHES ACROSS LATIN AMERICA

By MARA SASSOON

When Claudia Alvarez Hurtado was growing up in Colombia, she attended Catholic school and went to church regularly. But as she got older, she started to become disillusioned by what she felt was a lack of inclusivity at church.

So, at age 16, she stopped attending church services. "I had the feeling that there was a contradiction in identifying as queer and also being Christian," Alvarez says. She also saw contradictions with her feminist views.

In college in Colombia, Alvarez ('24) studied sociology and became active in LGBTQIA+ and feminist organizations, including Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (Catholic Women for the Right to Choose). "When I met them, I was like, I guess you can be Christian *and* feminist," she says. It was the first time she learned about feminist theology, which re-examines scriptural teachings on women from a woman's perspective. "I didn't learn about that in church. When I had this realization, I was like, 'Wow, I wish someone had talked to me about this—not only about the role of women in Christian history, either in the Bible itself or in the making of the Christian tradition—but also about the feminist critique to normative theology.'"

Soon after college, Alvarez was introduced to Jhon Botia Miranda, pastor of Iglesia Colombiana Metodista de Bogotá Príncipe de Paz (Prince of Peace Church) in Bogotá and the first openly gay clergy in the Latin American Methodist Church. "I attended his church, and it was incredible," she says. "I had never before seen queer people worshiping together. I saw men with their husbands, women with their wives, even people with tattoos—it was a very different congregation [from what I was used to] that really showed me another side of the church. If I had seen that before, I probably would have kept going [to church]."

After meeting Miranda, Alvarez arrived at STH motivated to learn more about the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in the church, as well as "how theology is challenging the heteronormative understandings of Christianity that manifest through churches." With encouragement from STH faculty and leadership, Alvarez joined forces with Miranda in 2022 to create a cohort of churches across all of Latin America that affirm and support LGBTQIA+ people. In August 2023, they held their first meeting of "Inclusive and Dissenting Churches" in Bogotá. It marked the first time that leaders from these communities met in person to discuss issues such as the challenges for women in inclusive churches, religious fundamentalisms in Latin America, and the pastoral care of LGBTQIA+ people.

Alvarez organized this meeting with the understanding of the fraught history of LGBTQIA+ people in Latin America. While some Latin American countries have expanded LGBTQIA+ rights in the last decade, queer people still face discrimination and their rights have been threatened. For example, Jair Bolsonaro, president of Brazil from 2019 to 2022, notoriously clashed with Brazil's Supreme Court when it ruled to criminalize homophobia. Alvarez also notes the continued systemic exclusion of and violence against trans people and adds that "conversion therapies" are still being practiced in many religious communities in Latin America.

Johan Salcedo, a pastor from Medellín, Colombia, prays at the Bogotá gathering.

Facing page: Dave Green
This page: Courtesy of Claudia Alvarez Hurtado, Dave Green

"The main goal of the event was that these pastors can see each other's faces," Alvarez says, "so that they know where they are, know their experiences, know their challenges, know their strengths, and exchange all that so the movement of inclusive churches in Latin America can be stronger based on unity and exchange of knowledge."

RELIGION AND LIBERATION

At STH, Alvarez has also been interested in exploring the legacy of Latin American liberation theology, a movement that emerged in the 1960s with a focus on human rights and economic justice. "Latin American liberation theology is very much about not just practicing charity with the poor, but also interrogating why the poor are poor—what are the structures that created poverty and inequality?" she says. "Even though it's been many years since the emergence of Latin American liberation theology, I'm inspired by its legacy that religion must have a liberating role in our lives."

Alvarez has found a mentor in Cristian De La Rosa, the associate dean for students and community life and a clinical assistant professor of contextual theology and practice, as well as a Methodist minister. De La Rosa's research interests include Latin American liberation theology.

"The Latinx community at STH is very strong, especially because of Dr. De La Rosa," says Alvarez, now a member of De La Rosa's congregation, First Community United Methodist Church in Medford, Mass. "She has worked a lot on putting on the table indigenous methodologies,

STH's Cristian De La Rosa has served as a mentor to Alvarez in her organizing work.

A conference panel included a presentation from the creators of Teología Sin Vergüenza ("Shameless Theology"), a digital media project by and for queer Latinx people developed in response to the Religious Right's stronghold on Spanish-language religious media across the United States and Latin America.

decolonial theology, and the ideas of Latina feminist theologians like Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz. She has worked so hard to strengthen our community and to make our theologies known."

Working with De La Rosa gave Alvarez the idea for the meeting of inclusive churches in Latin America, which until then had been interacting online only. She asked De La Rosa if she'd be interested in supporting an in-person gathering. "She said to me, 'Organize it.'"

A FIRST-OF-ITS-KIND MEETING

At the end of the summer in 2022, Alvarez met with Miranda to start planning the event, which would fulfill one of Alvarez's MDiv contextual education requirements.

They formed an organizing committee with Liliana Huerta, a pastor at Mision Cristiana Incluyente in Mexico; Jose Silvera of Cristianos Inclusivos del Paraguay; and Gabriela Guerreros, pastor of Iglesia Pentecostal Dimension de Fe in Argentina. Miranda offered his church building in Colombia for the meeting, and they consulted with pastors from inclusive churches across Latin America about what topics they wanted to discuss and what sessions they'd want to lead, so that the event would reflect multiple views, needs, and interests.

Around 30 attendees from 14 LGBTQIA+-affirming churches and ministries from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Chile gathered for the four-day event in August 2023. The Hispanic Youth Leadership Academy, which De La Rosa directs, covered most program costs—including the attendees' flights, housing, and meals—and Alvarez raised the rest of the funds through donations.

Each day of the program began and ended with a devotional. "That was beautiful because we got to see the pastors being pastors, reading and delivering the messages that encourage us as an LGBTQIA+ community to claim this good news for us as well," Alvarez says.

There were panels, conversations, and worship sessions. One panel, for example, included women pastors from Argentina, Mexico, Guatemala, and Brazil discussing their experiences in church leadership. "In the LGBTQIA+ movement, often the more visible church leaders are men," Alvarez explains.

Another talk was led by Alexya Salvador, a pastor at Iglesia Metropolitana de Sao Paulo in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Salvador, the first transgender pastor in all of Latin America, shared her experiences and her thoughts on how best to support trans people. "She was like, 'This is who we are. This is what we need from you. And this is what you're not doing,'" Alvarez recalls. "She was telling us how we are not doing the job of being more intentional with welcoming trans people and knowing about them. I think we all learned a lot, and we were challenged."

Alvarez sees the event as just a first step in strengthening the ties of inclusive churches throughout Latin America. "This was the beginning of a network that is still alive, and we want to keep it that way," she says. Since the meeting, she says, some of the churches have come together for additional panels and talks. Alvarez herself has since visited one of the Brazilian churches that participated in the meeting, the Arena Apostolica Church in Brasília. "I realized how grateful they were [for the meeting of inclusive churches]. They told their congregation, 'God is doing the same here as everywhere else.'" Alvarez says she envisions hosting more gatherings in the future. "Connections keep happening. We want to become a network."

De La Rosa, who attended the meeting, is impressed with what Alvarez brought together. "Claudia did something amazing in this organizing," De La Rosa says. "The gathering was a first one of its kind in a very difficult context for LGBTQIA+ communities in Latin America. She is an amazing leader, creating a greatly needed space for communities of faith that are inclusive and affirming."

The event, Alvarez says, "was very political, but also very spiritual. Both things go together when we're talking about this movement." ❑

"The main goal of the event was that these pastors can see each other's faces, so that they know where they are, know their experiences, know their challenges, know their strengths, and exchange all that so the movement of inclusive churches in Latin America can be stronger based on unity and exchange of knowledge."
—Claudia Alvarez Hurtado

Courtesy of Claudia Alvarez Hurtado

FOR GOD SO LOVES THE EARTH

CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS ARE FULL OF LESSONS ABOUT CARING FOR THE PLANET AND NATURE, AND MORE AMERICAN CHURCHGOERS SHOULD HEED THEM, SAYS STH'S REBECCA COPELAND

By CORINNE STEINBRENNER

Jackie Ricciardi

In the biblical book of Matthew, near the end of his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asks his listeners to "consider the birds of the air." But few readers of Matthew truly do, says Rebecca Copeland, an assistant professor of theology.

Taking time to consider birds, their behavior, and their place in the food chain can offer readers of the Bible alternate ways to understand this well-known passage, Copeland argues in a paper in the journal *Biblical Interpretation*. Paying attention to the nonhuman characters in the Bible, she says, can also help individual Christians and their congregations incorporate a concern for the environment into their daily lives.

In her research and teaching, Copeland focuses on the intersection of ecology and theology: she examines Christian texts and doctrines through an ecological lens, and explores ways Christian teachings can influence environmental activism. Her 2020 book, *Created Being: Expanding Creedal Christology*, discusses the relationships among God, human and nonhuman creatures, and nature. In peer-reviewed papers, she's studied human responses to animal suffering; the ancient cultural, economic, and ecological significance of fig trees (which Jesus curses as part of a lesson in the book of Matthew); and the commodification of water and women.

"When I started my theological studies," Copeland says, "it bothered me that the rest of the world kind of gets ignored in most theological work—that Christian theology has a tendency to focus on human beings and human salvation and neglect everything else."

But the idea that Christians should be paying attention to the natural world has been around for centuries, she says. Augustine of Hippo, a theologian and philosopher born in 354 AD, for example, wrote of two ways to learn about God: through Scripture and through nature. This focus on nature isn't often emphasized in modern American Christianity, Copeland says, but she believes today's Christians should care about the natural world—and use their social and political influence to protect it.

"The Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, and almost all of the mainline Protestant churches have statements that say climate change is real, humans are causing it, and we have a responsibility to address this, but the research indicates that's not filtering out—at least not in the US." —Rebecca Copeland

"John 3:16 says that God loves the whole cosmos," says Copeland, who also directs STH's Faith & Ecological Justice Program, which helps students prepare to do faith-based ecological work. "And Genesis 1 repeatedly says that creation is very good. So, the idea that we can just destroy it, or use it up, or neglect it seems irreligious to me."

AMERICAN CHRISTIANS' ENVIRONMENTAL VIEWS

Many Christians do care deeply about the environment. Groups like Interfaith Power and Light, Creation Justice Ministries, and the Evangelical Environmental Network mobilize Christians around environmental issues, including climate change.

A recent survey by the Pew Research Center, however, paints a complicated picture of American Christians' environmental views. While 82 percent of Christians completely or mostly agreed that God gave humans a duty to protect and care for the Earth, only 50 percent agreed that climate change is an extremely or very serious problem, and only 45 percent agreed that the planet is warming mostly because of human activity. (NASA reports 97 percent of actively publishing climate scientists believe humans are causing climate change.)

Copeland believes more Christians would accept and care about human-caused global warming if they heard more about the climate in their local congregations.

"The Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, and almost all of the mainline Protestant

Copeland (center) and students in the Faith & Ecological Justice Program attended a climate rally on Boston Common in 2023.

churches have statements that say climate change is real, humans are causing it, and we have a responsibility to address this, but the research indicates that's not filtering out—at least not in the US," she says. "So, the Pope can say something, but if the parish priest doesn't, and if there aren't congregation members bringing it into the life of the local community, it's not making a difference there."

Another way American Christian churches can encourage members' interest in climate change, she says, is to foster conversations with people whose daily lives are more affected by its consequences—something that churches, which are often international organizations, are uniquely positioned to do. Many Americans think of the effects of global warming as existing in the distant future or in faraway places, Copeland says, but their perception of climate risk might change if, say, they belonged to a church that received regular environmental updates from sister congregations in other parts of the world.

For his final project in BU's Faith & Ecological Justice Program, Copeland's student Abel Aruan ('23) organized an international panel discussion via Zoom in the spring of 2023. Speakers from Zimbabwe, Ukraine, and Indonesia talked about ways climate change is affecting their countries and what Christian communities are and should be doing to mitigate it. The conversation often highlighted connections between climate change and traditional Christian causes such as hunger and poverty.

In the Pew Research Center's surveys, Christians who expressed little or no concern about climate change were asked the reasons for their views. "There are much bigger problems in the world today" was the most popular answer.

"The fact is—and this is the whole point of the environmental justice movement—there is no issue that you can be concerned about that the environment is not part of," Copeland says. "If you're concerned about hunger, if you're concerned about health, if you're concerned about communities that suffer from hurricanes, typhoons, heat waves, cold snaps, any of these things, climate change and environmental degradation is involved in that."

Facing page: Courtesy of STH
This page: iStock Photo

A BIBLICAL METAPHOR OR ECOLOGICAL DISASTER?

The idea that human-caused environmental harms can lead to hunger and suffering may even be discussed in the Bible, she says. The book of Ezekiel, for example, includes a description of a vision of an arid, salty landscape where no vegetation grows. While this vision has traditionally been interpreted as a metaphor, Copeland's scholarship suggests these passages might be referencing the ancient Israelites' actual experience with soil salinization caused by unsustainable agricultural practices. She explores this idea in depth in a 2019 *Biblical Theology Bulletin* article, writing that her goal is to draw a "description of the land east of Jerusalem into conversation with a modern example of soil salinization…identifying the necessary conditions for healing the ecological trauma of the land and fostering the future resilience of the human-land community."

"Most Christians agree that the Bible says we should take care of the Earth," Copeland says, "but I don't think they recognize when many of the texts might be pointing to ecological degradations as a serious and underlying problem." ❑

PREACHING TODAY

PHILOMENA HARE BELIEVES IN THE CONTINUED POWER OF THE SERMON—AND SHE HOPES TO INSPIRE THE NEXT GENERATION OF PREACHERS

BY MARC CHALUFOUR

Philomena Hare grew up in a Catholic family and, in her experience, a woman didn't preach. Hare joined a convent after high school but, disillusioned that she couldn't be a priest, eventually left to become a social worker.

"I wasn't even aware of this at the time, but this first love of being in ministry was still in my heart," says Hare ('11). Several years later, a chance encounter resparked that dream. Hare and her son were walking through Brookline, Mass., when he suggested they step into a church. Inside, a United Church of Christ pastor was delivering a sermon. "I looked around and everybody was quiet and listening," Hare says. "I remember sitting on the edge of my seat and being drawn in and saying to myself, 'I want to do that.'"

Hare is now the pastor at First Congregational Church in Wareham, Mass., where she gets to preach every Sunday. She's also trying to create preaching opportunities for others. In 2023, she established the Edith P. and Augustus G. Hare Preaching Prize at STH (see page 23), to honor her parents and to give aspiring preachers at STH a broader audience.

Courtesy of Philomena Hare

Hare spoke with *focus* about her passion for preaching and why she considers it as relevant as ever in the 21st century.

focus: What's your goal when you deliver a sermon?

Hare: The goal is always an encounter—not just with the text, but to encounter God in a way that informs how we live in community. For many of us, sometimes there's a disconnect between what happens on Sunday and what happens on Monday. My family went to church with a gentleman who was a banker. My dad was trying to get a mortgage, but the bank said no. They didn't come out directly and say, "We're not giving mortgages to Black families," but it was pretty clear. My dad called this gentleman out on it privately and said, "This is not what we learned yesterday [in church]." My dad got the mortgage, but, being who he was, he said, "I wasn't talking just about my family. I was talking about a whole change in the system." That may be asking too much for a Sunday service, but that's the goal.

Do you have a special writing process?

Sermon preparation shouldn't be done in isolation, so I've joined a group called Backstory Preaching and prepare as part of a preaching circle. Some of the biblical texts are not easy. I want to befriend that text. I want to love the text. I read it multiple times and sit with it. And somewhere in that space, I want to be listening to the Spirit. I often wonder where the good news is in this message—what's God doing and what is humanity doing, and how are those two things coming together?

The other thing I do is I bring my people into my sermon: What are they celebrating? What are they concerned about? There's nothing worse than going to church and listening to a sermon that is removed from what people are experiencing.

"A sermon is one place where people can get together to talk about how things have become unglued—not so much to say, 'How do we glue it back together?' but to say, 'Where are the opportunities for new growth, for new life, for something different than what we had been accustomed to before?'"—Philomena Hare

What makes a great sermon?

I want the sermon to meet me where I am, right in the moment, but not leave me there; to point me to something bigger than I am. I don't believe in a magical God who's going to defy the laws of nature and swoop down and do this or that or the other thing. But I want to know that there is a God who will not forget me and to remind people that the work of God is done through the people of God. That's why we need to show up for one another, because whatever God is doing, God will do it through us. The sermon is a reminder.

Who is preaching for?

The easy answer is that it's for everyone. And I would say it's specifically for someone who feels a yearning for something beyond themselves. When I'm listening to a sermon that brings everything together, it fills me with a sense of awe, curiosity, and satisfaction. This is part of the mystery of life: I matter to the universe in that my being here, the things I've touched, the people I've interacted with, all mean something. We sometimes think the most important thing about us is what we have accomplished or what we own; and yet, it's not about those things. My identity needs to be grounded in something outside of me.

Did you change your approach during the pandemic?

I found it hard to preach, because we were in a place we had never been before. In Jeremiah, where the people are in captivity, false prophets come and say, "Don't

worry, everything will be fine in a little while." But Jeremiah says, "No, you're going to be here for a while." He encourages people to build homes, get married, have children. So, I stayed the course and I kept saying that one way for my community to get through it was to keep rereading the sacred text, because similar things have happened before. Let's get some comfort out of that, because if God showed up once, God will show up again.

And some of this must've been happening remotely?

I never dreamed that I would be a movie producer or a videographer—then the pandemic happened. I thought, "We have to do something. We can't just let people stay home." So I grabbed my iPhone and I watched one video after another and tried to figure it all out. I bought a piece of equipment that allowed me to lock in an FM radio station, and we invited people to the church parking lot so they could listen to the service. We did Zoom worship. I kept saying that in St. Paul's time, he used the technology of his day, which was letter writing. We would have been completely cut off without the technology that we have. So my message was, let's embrace it.

Do divisions in society impact what you do?

It makes preaching harder, but it also is an opportunity. Some people will say that politics shouldn't be in the pulpit, and then other people are wondering, "Why didn't you talk about that?" It goes beyond not wanting to offend people to considering if my words are leaving a person unopened to the leanings of the Spirit. We are experiencing an unraveling in our society, and it has discombobulated us. It's an identity issue. Who are we? Where am I? This isn't only in the church. A sermon is one place where people can get together to talk about how things have become unglued—not so much to say, "How do we glue it back together?" but to say, "Where are the opportunities for new growth, for new life, for something different than what we had been accustomed to before?"

How has preaching changed with the times?

Many of the sermons I've heard in the past focused on getting people into heaven and reminding people that this world is not a final resting place. Heaven was always pictured as a place in the clouds somewhere distant from us, where God dwelled. As I listen to today's sermons, there's a movement in the opposite direction—and rightly so. The emphasis is on God's love for creation and God's desire for humanity to live in harmony and peace. The major shift I see is the movement away from getting folks into heaven and toward reminding us that God's presence is within each person. ❑

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

PRIZED PREACHERS

By establishing the Edith P. and Augustus G. Hare Preaching Prize, Philomena Hare hopes to motivate aspiring preachers at STH. Two $1,000 prizes will be awarded annually, one for a sermon based on biblical or scriptural text and another based on a situation of the student's choosing. The inaugural winners, chosen on May 17, 2023, shared their thoughts about their sermons. —*M.C.*

KATY FAZIO ('26)

Best text-based sermon, "Sinews of Solidarity"

Writing this sermon was a healing experience for Fazio. "At the time, three different communities I'm a part of were in mourning, so my life was just steeped in grief," she says. "I was trying to make sense of how violence, repression, addiction, and mental illness were affecting so many people I loved at the same time across different contexts."

EXCERPT:

In Ezekiel's vision, God walks them through the valley of bones and even Ezekiel, who was a miracle worker, is not so sure that they can live again. But God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, and then to prophesy again. We are preachers in the School of the Prophets, maybe this sermon should be about the power of prophecy to create new worlds of possibility, to speak life itself into existence with the help of God.

But sometimes.

Beloved friends, sometimes it feels like God is walking me through a valley of bones, and there are so many bones and all I can see is death. We are here in this school because we feel a call to care for people. And so we bare our hearts to the world, we sit with people through life's hardest moments, and we bear their burdens in addition to our own."

MADISON BOBOLTZ ('23)

Best situational sermon, "Let the Children Come"

"'Protection of children' is often identified as the incentive for efforts to regulate queerness out of the public sphere," Boboltz says. She wrote her sermon as a response to laws banning drag performances in the presence of children. "Like drag queens, Jesus was a subversive figure, and children were better off for having spent time in his loving presence."

EXCERPT:

What do we do when it is Jesus calling to our children from the top of the rock-climbing wall? Calling them to risk their own safety for the sake of his mission? Do we let them go? Do we trust them to make it? Or do we hold them back so that their feet stay planted firmly on the ground? 'Safe' under our own supervision?

Again, we might be quick to make an exception for Jesus. After all, he is Jesus. But I invite us to ask ourselves: When we encounter figures in our own contexts who we may interpret to be 'dangerous' or 'subversive,' do we treat them as figures we are willing to trust our children *with*, or do we treat them as figures we must protect our children *from*?"

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This page: Courtesy of STH

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AFTER THE SCHISM

AMID DENOMINATIONAL TURBULENCE, BISHOPS OFFER UMC CONGREGATIONS A WAY FORWARD IN LOVE

BY STEVE HOLT

As the spiritual leader of two US conferences of the United Methodist Church, Bishop LaTrelle Miller Easterling ('04) has always prayed for unity. She never wanted to see a single member leave the denomination, let alone an entire congregation. In fact, the loss of 120 congregations—the number of churches in the Baltimore–Washington and Peninsula–Delaware conferences that have disaffiliated with the denomination since 2019—saddens her. The departing churches in the two mid-Atlantic conferences Easterling leads were among more than 7,600 United Methodist congregations that have left since 2019, leaving existential questions about the future of the denomination in their wake.

The cause of the denominational exodus: disagreement about whether the United Methodist Church (UMC) should welcome and affirm LGBTQIA+ members and noncelibate, gay clergy. Since 1972, the UMC has held an official policy that homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching." Over the years, however, individual congregations and conferences have defied that restriction, affirming LGBTQIA+ members and leaders and hosting same-sex weddings. The denomination's Council of Bishops has for years grappled with how to handle both the open defiance of the official policy and the frustration traditional churches have had with the more tolerant approach in some US conferences. (UMC conferences in many other parts of the world, including Africa and Eastern Europe, remain largely opposed to LGBTQIA+ inclusion.)

In 2019, Easterling was hopeful the denomination could remain unified. But delegates to the General Conference voted to ease the process by which churches could request to leave the UMC, which sped up the fracture in the second-largest Protestant denomination. (With 7.6 million members in the US, the UMC is just behind the Southern Baptist Convention, which has 16 million members.)

"I wept at the annual conference after we finalized the vote, because I firmly believe that we are called to walk together," says Easterling, who holds an MDiv from STH. "I wept because it was painful. It was painful to know that brothers and sisters who have served God together would be absent from the body moving forward. It's been painful to hear the derogatory language. It's been painful to stand in the middle of the arguments. It's been painful to watch the myths and disinformation that were promulgated as scare tactics. But it's also required me to have more intellectual, spiritual, and moral courage as a leader to stand on my own convictions and to lead in a way that points us toward a future filled with hope and greater inclusion."

As of December 31, 2023—the date by which congregations had to finalize disaffiliation under the 2019 policy—one in four

Bishop LaTrelle Miller Easterling ('04)

UMC congregations in the US have chosen to leave the denomination. The majority do not affirm LGBTQIA+ behavior, but a handful of progressive congregations have fled the denomination as well. Some have joined a newly formed denomination, the Global Methodist Church, while others have dropped denominational ties altogether.

At its meeting in April and May of 2024, the General Council voted to strike down its decades-old prohibition of queer clergy and repeal a number of policies restricting ministry to and by LGBTQIA+ people.

With additional disaffiliations possible if church leaders decide to extend the window for leaving, the future of the approximately 24,000 congregations that remained in the denomination—the denomination on which BU was founded—remains unclear.

But three alumni who are UMC bishops—Easterling, Sally Dyck (CAS'76, STH'78), and John Schol ('81,'95)—share an optimism for the future of Methodism and the broader cause of LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Here are their encouragements, as told to *focus* editor Steve Holt. (Note: Their responses have been condensed and edited for clarity and length.)

BISHOP LATRELLE MILLER EASTERLING ('04)

Bishop of the Baltimore–Washington Episcopal Area and interim Bishop of the Peninsula–Delaware Conference

At both of the annual conferences that I have the privilege of serving, disaffiliations had to be approved by a majority vote. At the conclusion of that process, I said to both annual conferences, "We have all now failed." Because I think an inability to live with one another in our diversity and in our differences is a failure. God's love is more expansive than that. That doesn't privilege one theological understanding over another. It says we all failed, because we couldn't find a way to live together as the Body of Christ in our diversity.

And let me also say this: There are congregations who chose not to leave, even though they can't envision themselves becoming fully open and affirming. But they don't believe that they must leave to be able to serve in integrity. So, do we have to be fractured going forward? No, we don't. But it comes right back to humility, born out of an understanding of who God is, how God loves us, and how we are called to love one another. How we choose to live into the future of this denomination is wholly dependent on whether we are willing to put Christ first and live into the call that we have in Micah; if we can do that, in our different theological understandings, in our different readings in scripture, we can [stay together], I firmly believe, with integrity. We need to stop privileging the lens through which we interpret scripture as the only lens—and we all come to scripture with a lens. If we focus on the love that we ought to be offering to our communities—meeting them at their deepest point of need, helping to create justice, equity, and the opportunity for them to thrive and be everything God has intended for their lives—that will transcend this whole discussion.

Bishop John Schol ('81,'95)

I think we have a tremendous opportunity before us right now. I say that because when was the last time most of us examined whether or not we wanted to remain within the United Methodist Church? When was the last time we stood back and said, "Do I really want to remain a member of this denomination? Do I still resonate with its beliefs?" I would hope that most of us who have remained have done so out of a belief in the theology that the United Methodist Church offers: our beautiful understanding of grace; our expansive understanding of an open communion table; our understanding of how we believe God is calling us to serve one another. If we focus and center ourselves there, we have an opportunity to come out of our buildings and do tremendous mission and ministry together. And I think if we live into that ethos, we will fully and finally become the Beloved Community. We've come through a tremendous time of trial and travail, and we have nothing but opportunity before us. If we don't capitalize on it and live into it with excitement and vigor and grace, shame on us.

BISHOP JOHN SCHOL ('81,'95)

Bishop of the Greater New Jersey Conference in the Northeastern Jurisdiction and Interim Bishop for the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference, Philadelphia Episcopal Area

United Methodism is best when there is diversity of thought. Jesus gathered 12

Facing page: Courtesy of the Baltimore-Washington Conference
This page: Corbin Payne

Bishop Sally Dyck (CAS'76, STH'78)

disciples who didn't all think alike. One was still carrying a sword, for God's sake, on the last night of Jesus's life! So, Jesus could tolerate diversity and differences of opinion and thought, but then bring all of that together for a focused mission.

Jesus was able to say, "You follow the law if you love God and you love your neighbor, and by the way, I'm going to keep expanding the boundaries of who our neighbor is, and what love looks like." And I think that's when the United Methodist Church becomes more like Christ, when we continue to help people understand what it means to fully love God, what it means to love our neighbor, and we keep expanding the boundaries of what love is and who our neighbor is. That's really critical, because right now in our world, we're in a time where everything is being narrowed. And this is where the church has the important responsibility to continue to call the world and the church to the expansiveness of God and the broadness of God's love.

There will always be people in the United Methodist Church who do not agree on human sexuality. There will always be people in the United Methodist Church who have a different viewpoint or understanding in terms of LGBTQIA+ persons. But there can never be any tolerance in the church of hatred, discrimination, or preventing people to live out God's calling on their life. That's what I'm calling for: a church that can hold these differences in one hand, and yet be a church that is tolerant, is open, and is not going to get in the way of God's calling on somebody's life. If the church isn't continuing to deepen and expand its welcome, it has a short life ahead of it.

Seminaries need to stay in the conversation. I think seminaries too often have tried to turn out people just like the seminary, when what I think is most important is a solid theological education that helps people think theologically. We find with most clergy, when they come from the seminary and they start to serve the church, the people in their congregation are nothing like the people in the seminary. So, they really wrestle and struggle, because they've heard their professors talk about things, they've been in classes, they've talked about things, and they try to have those conversations in the congregation, and the congregation's just not ready. They haven't brought them along. That's why I think seminaries really need to focus on helping students, graduates, and leaders think theologically and how to apply that thinking in ways that help the congregation to grow and understand.

BISHOP SALLY DYCK (CAS'76, STH'78)

Retired Bishop of the North Central Jurisdiction and Ecumenical Officer of the Council of Bishops

I work for unity in the universal church, and so to have a schism in the United Methodist Church is very painful for me. For years, I've worked on what is called holy conferencing: how we engage with others. It is painful for me to have people leaving, but what I've realized is that in personal relationships and in ecclesial relationships, all you can do is, "as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with others" (Romans 12:18). For me, that means that I will listen and I will stay in relationship. "Disagree if we must," as Lincoln said, and not react in antagonistic ways. But what I've found is that there are individuals in my own life or in my community or in this church who are not staying in relationship. They've stopped listening. They've stopped conferencing or talking, and they don't want to hear it. They're done. And they're right and we're wrong. They're good and we're bad. It's important that I not fall into that from my side: "I'm good and they're bad." Because that's what puts us here. That's the incompatibilist.

I think this can potentially be a time when there could be less energy focused on our disagreements…and we can really get back to what I think is a strength in the heart of true Methodism, which has to do with personal holiness and social holiness. John Wesley said personal holiness means the practices of the faith—prayer and worship and all of those things that help us to draw closer to God. Social holiness is really what helps us to love our neighbor, which could be the neighbor sitting next to us in the pew and should also be the neighborhood in which we go to church or live, and our neighbors as countries, and our neighbors who are on the margins.

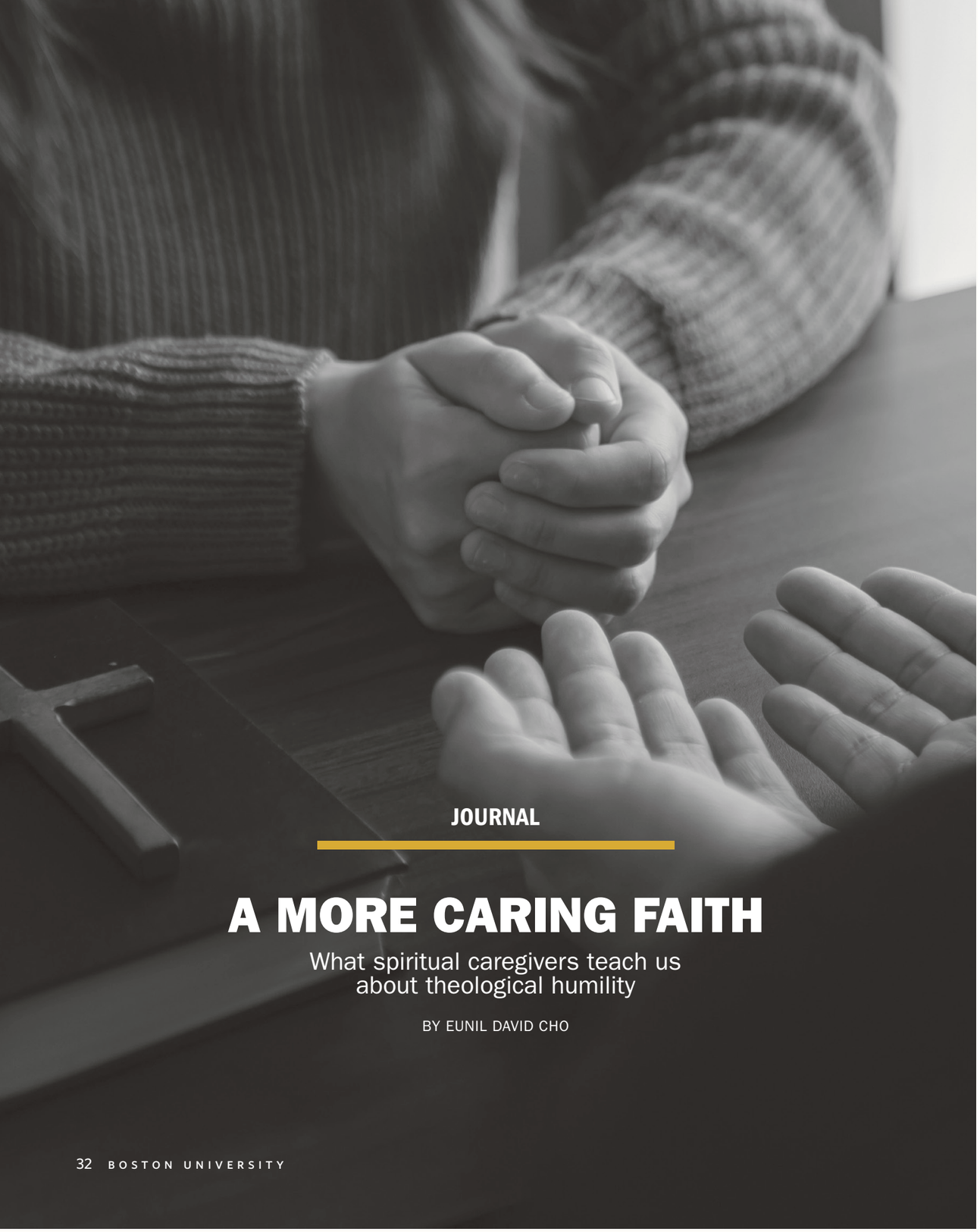
"I think this can potentially be a time when there could be less energy focused on our disagreements…and we can really get back to what I think is a strength in the heart of true Methodism, which has to do with personal holiness and social holiness."
—Bishop Sally Dyck

I'm the president of the General Board of Church and Society, which provides advocacy on [Capitol Hill]. Ironically, proposed revised social principles before the General Conference don't say anything about homosexuality, and I think it should be that way. Because global social principles need to be able to play in Nigeria as well as the United States. In the United States, if there's nothing that restricts homosexuality, that's good. In Nigeria, they can't afford to be a part of a church that supports LGBTQIA+ people, and that's the same for Russia. So, how can we be neighbors again, and how can we grow in our personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ?

After almost 45 years of ministry, I don't think forcing people has worked. Love has worked. A grandparent's love for a grandchild—that's worked. I don't know that pointing out the incompatibility of someone's thinking has often helped anybody rationally come to a different conclusion.

I would hope that anybody walking into a United Methodist Church would feel welcome. Being LGBTQIA+, that should not be a factor—just as your ethnicity, your nationality shouldn't be factors. Right now, there are people who see that the United Methodist Church has restrictions around LGBTQIA+. But look, these [affirming churches] over here, they stand up for what they believe. I want to be a part of a church that stands up for what it believes, sometimes at their own risk. And so whether it's making it a place that's truly open for all people, I want to be a part of a church that acts justly, loves mercy, and walks humbly with our God. And that can be a big witness, even in the midst of our horrible situation around LGBTQIA+ people. ❑

Jake Belcher



JOURNAL

A MORE CARING FAITH

What spiritual caregivers teach us about theological humility

BY EUNIL DAVID CHO

"How are you, as a Christian, able to practice interreligious spiritual care?" "How are you, as a Christian scholar and minister, engaged in research and teaching in a secular research university?"

These are two of the most compelling questions I frequently receive both in the church and academy. In response, I often share a personal story of how my Christian faith shapes my scholarship, teaching, and activism. What I intend to share is how my life experiences—including my transnational family history, theological education, and professional experiences in churches and chaplaincy—have taught me what it means to practice *theological humility.*

My Christian ethics teacher, [Emory University professor] Ellen Ott Marshall, explains that theological humility is the most appropriate posture for Christians living in a pluralistic society.[1] Theological humility is necessary, especially in interreligious engagement, because it helps us to resist religious authoritarianism. Like other kinds of authoritarianism, religious authoritarianism often "demands unquestioned obedience, dismisses all other sources of knowledge, and denies legitimacy to all other positions."[2] Marshall argues that Christians in North America must practice theological humility by bringing their faith into this pluralistic world as *one voice among many voices*.

How do we practice theological humility as Christians? How do we as people of faith avoid the pitfall of religious authoritarianism so that we can foster more interreligious engagement, engage in democratic conversations, and pursue justice for all? Seeking to answer these questions, I offer my reflection on how Christian leaders can practice theological humility in the work of interreligious spiritual care. What does theological humility look like in the practice of spiritual care? How can theological humility enable Christians to provide spiritual care for people from different religious traditions and spiritual expressions?

The first feature of theological humility is admitting the limits of knowledge and partiality of perspective.[3] Theological humility reminds us to recognize the role of subjectivity in discernment, which means we all have diverse ways of understanding and experiencing God, humanity, and the world. In *The Meaning of Revelation*, H. Richard Niebhur wrote, "All knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower."[4] *(Continued)*

1. Ellen Ott Marshall, *Christians in the Public Square: Faith That Transforms Politics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), xviii.

2. Ellen Ott Marshall, "Theological Humility in the World of Law," *Journal of Law and Religion* 32, no. 1 (2017): 94.

3. Marshall, *Christians in the Public Square: Faith That Transforms Politics*, 75–76.

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About the Author

Rev. Dr. Eunil David Cho is an assistant professor of spiritual care and counseling and codirector of the Center for Practical Theology at STH. He is also an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Every theological point of view is mediated through sacred texts, traditions, communities of faith, and human experience. For Christians engaging a pluralistic society, we should always begin with critical self-reflection to admit that our knowledge and experiences are limited. That means we must acknowledge that my understanding of God's will is not the same as God's will; my experience of God is not the same as my neighbor's experience of God. Likewise, in spiritual care, caregivers pursue theological humility by practicing *self-reflexivity*. Self-reflexivity involves "disciplined, accountable practices to decrease our unconsciousness and increase in depth our understanding of our life narrative, sense of self, participation in relationships, and social-historical location."[5] By practicing self-reflexivity, caregivers can critically examine their theological beliefs and values and sociocultural locations, which is a crucial competency that makes caregivers accountable for monitoring how their own theological beliefs and values could potentially influence their spiritual care encounters. Before learning about care-seekers' theological, spiritual, and cultural values, caregivers must begin with a critical examination of their own beliefs, values, and cultural identities.

The second feature of theological humility requires Christians to interpret *well*, which is to be "deliberate, explicit, and self-critical about processes of interpretation."[6] For Marshall, practicing hermeneutics with theological humility is to ask a series of questions: Why do you interpret that passage as you do? What are commitments that you bring to the text? How do your understanding of God and your experience in this changing world inform one another? This task of interpretation is not limited to scriptural exegesis, but spiritual care as well. In spiritual care, a caregiver's primary goal is to interpret "the living human document"[7] as a primary text. Particularly in the interreligious context, caregivers not only interpret care-seekers' personal stories, but also examine their interconnected web of relationships, communities, and cultures. When Christian caregivers listen to care-seekers' stories, caregivers should not interpret care-seekers' stories through Christian perspectives. Rather, caregivers must attend to how care-seekers make sense of their experiences in their own terms. The purpose is to support and empower care-seekers to tell their own stories and accompany them in the process of cocreating stories in companionship.[8]

"For Christians engaging a pluralistic society, we should always begin with critical self-reflection to admit that our knowledge and experiences are limited. That means we must acknowledge that my understanding of God's will is not the same as God's will; my experience of God is not the same as my neighbor's experience of God."

The third feature of theological humility encourages Christians to be accountable to other sources of knowledge.[9] Marshall challenges Christian leaders to foster interdisciplinary conversations with scholars and practitioners in religious studies, social science, healthcare, and law. Marshall also challenges them to consider the lived human experience more seriously by "granting epistemological privilege to those who have experienced the problems they address."[10] For instance, ethicists who study immigration must listen to the voices of migrants. Theologians who study racism must center the lived experiences of people of color. In many ways, spiritual caregivers have been practicing this aspect of theological humility already, because spiritual care as a discipline is inherently interdisciplinary. From the inception, it has been a mutual conversation with theology and psychology. Now, spiritual caregivers engage sociology, anthropology, public health, and gender and sexuality studies to examine the varieties of human experience.

Finally, spiritual caregivers can practice theological humility by paying close attention to the voices of historically marginalized communities. The public and liberative task of spiritual care is to empower minoritized individuals and communities to tell their "stories seldom heard."[11] In other words, practicing theological humility indeed is to be committed to social justice and compassion and seeks prophetic responses to various kinds of social oppressions for the liberation of all people. ❑

4. H. Richard Niebhur, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York, NY: Macmillan 1941), 5.

5. Kathleen J. Greider, "Religious Location and Counseling: Engaging Diversity and Difference in Views of Religion," in *Understanding Pastoral Counseling*, eds. Elizabeth A. Maynard and Jill Snodgrass (New York, NY: Springer, 2015), 249.

6. Marshall, "Theological Humility in the World of Law," 95.

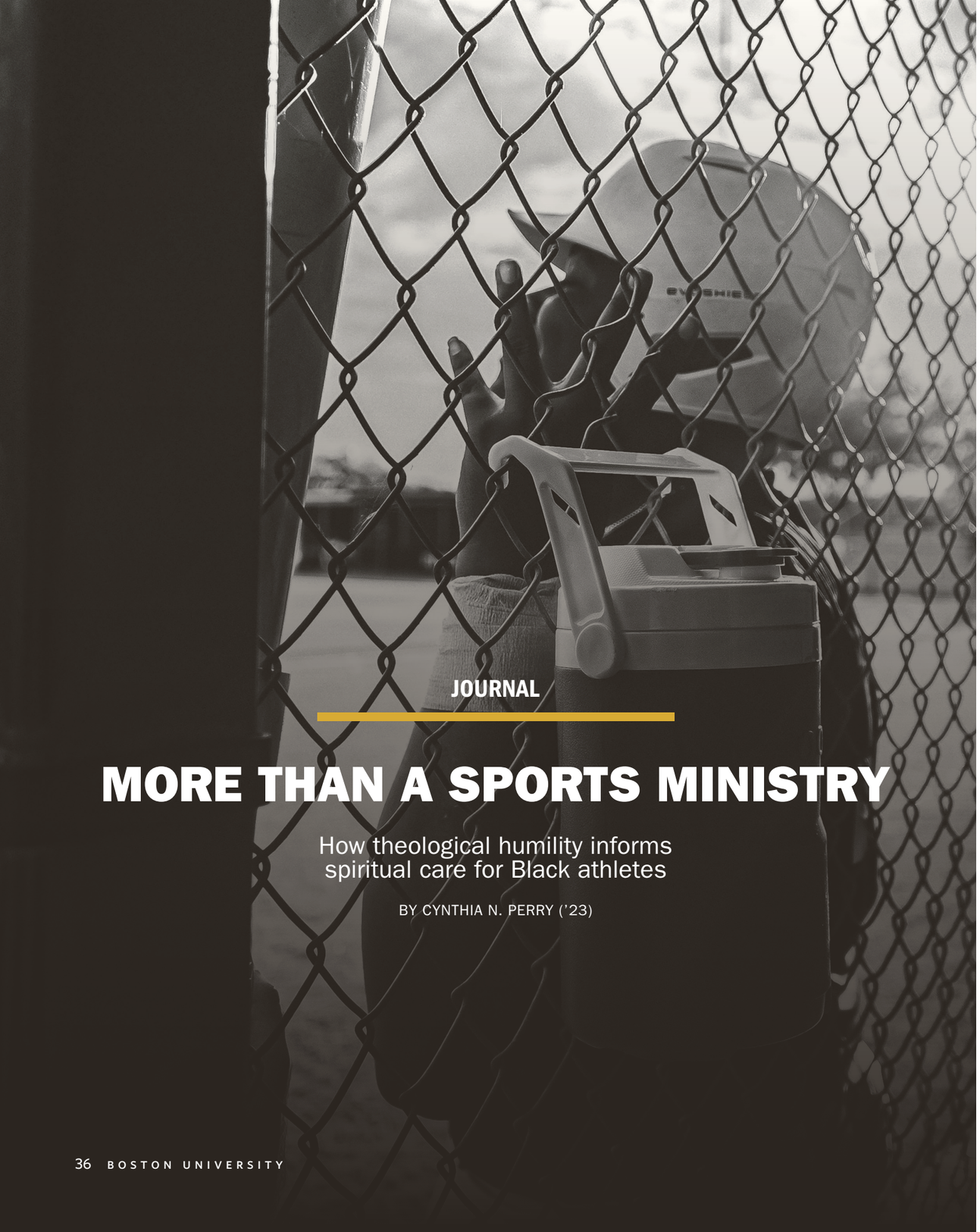
7. Charles Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984).

8. Karen Scheib, *Pastoral Care: Telling the Stories of Our Lives* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2016).

9. Marshall, "Theological Humility in the World of Law," 96.

10. Marshall, "Theological Humility in the World of Law."

11. Mary Moschella, "Practice Matters," in *Pastoral Theology and Care: Critical Trajectories in Theory and Practice*, ed. by Nancy J. Ramsay (Chichester, UK; Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 24.



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JOURNAL

MORE THAN A SPORTS MINISTRY

How theological humility informs spiritual care for Black athletes

BY CYNTHIA N. PERRY ('23)

In my former career as an athletic trainer, I had the privilege of serving high school and college student-athletes. Athletic trainers are "highly qualified, multiskilled healthcare professionals" responsible for many tasks: injury prevention, care of acute and chronic illnesses, emergency management of injuries, healthcare administration, and equipment and facilities management.[1]

When I was assigned to the University of Maryland–College Park's softball team during the 2014 season, we had the worst record in the school's history. Yet we pressed onward, and the softball players played the best they could, both at home and away. Upon entering a rival team's softball field in North Carolina at one away game, we were greeted by white parents and fans who had hung toy turtles representing our mascot from trees, cars, and tailgating tents. They had lynched them. There was no denying it.

Our entire team was taken aback. As one of three Black women on the team, we all (including the team) chose to continue our pregame routines without addressing the shocking display before us.

I recalled a memory from my childhood summers in North Carolina. My grandmother had me pick a bale of cotton and shared the history of my enslaved ancestors on that very land. To me, those turtles hanging from trees symbolized more than mere toys. They represented the spirits of my ancestors and the enduring presence of white supremacy in athletics.

As a person of faith, I grappled with feelings of righteous anger while also striving to maintain peace, not just in the face of the opposing team's fans but also within the softball team, who remained silent and carried on as though it were an ordinary day. Nothing in my medical kit could help me with what we experienced or heal the disappointment I felt with my team.

After that game, I needed spiritual care. I needed the God in James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation*, the "God that reveals [God's self] as the God of liberation," the God of the oppressed.[2] Since that experience, I have been extremely motivated to create opportunities to provide support for athletes of color (primarily women), who must navigate their own spiritual beliefs in the presence of white supremacy while pursuing their athletic passions.

Imagine spiritual care where sports and Black theology intersect. It's a spiritual care that believes God rejoices when you dance on the tennis court, when you protest on *(Continued)*

1. "About Athletic Training," National Athletic Training Association, accessed November 7, 2023, https://www.nata.org/about/athletic-training.

2. Cone, J. *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 19.

About the Author

Cynthia N. Perry ('23) is executive director of the Black Sports Ministry Network, an initiative that educates, empowers, and provides spiritual care to athletes, coaches, and athletic support staff of the African diaspora. She is also the recipient of a $15,000 grant from the Louisville Institute for her project, A Womanist Sports Ethic of Care for Black Women Athletes.

the sacred football field, and when you embrace your beauty with long braids and long nails. It's a God who swims beside you in holy water when other swimmers doubt your capabilities because of your glistening Black skin. It's self-awareness of your humanity and divinity in the water—*because* you are an extension of God's image.

Now, envision an organization with a clear and vital mission to provide essential support and spiritual guidance to Black athletes. This is the endeavor I have undertaken as the founding executive director of the Black Sports Ministry Network (BSMN), a title given to me by its founding members, Rev. Dr. John H. Vaughn, Rev. Dr. Regina Graham, and Rev. Dr. Gary F. Green II.

While at STH, I enrolled in two online sports and theology courses offered by Baylor University. Through these courses I was introduced to Rev. Dr. Vaughn, executive pastor of the Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.[3]

Rev. Dr. Vaughn introduced me to both Rev. Dr. Graham and Rev. Dr. Green,[4] who together graciously believed in my capacity to lead this initiative. It's a humbling experience to have my mentors, from whom I have gained invaluable knowledge, place their trust in my vision for a national organization that encompasses spiritual care grounded in Black spirituality, Black liberation, and womanist theologies.

As I contemplate the significance of manifesting something that has no previous example or existence,[5] I am drawn to Ellen Ott Marshall's concept of "theological humility," which encompasses three key components. First, it involves acknowledging the limitations of our knowledge and the partiality of our perspectives. Second, it calls for a deliberate and explicit approach to hermeneutics. Third, it emphasizes transparency regarding our faith commitments and our accountability to other sources of wisdom.[6]

"To me, those turtles hanging from trees symbolized more than mere toys. They represented the spirits of my ancestors and the enduring presence of white supremacy in athletics."

A significant aspect of my responsibilities involves building relationships to raise awareness and secure funding. This has been humbling, as I have had the opportunity to engage with individuals from diverse backgrounds and varying levels of professional success. Despite my experience in national-level fundraising and grant writing, I approach this task with unwavering passion, integrity, and the art of compelling storytelling.

3. "Our History," Ebenezer Baptist Church, accessed November 7, 2023, https://www.ebenezeratl.org/our-history/. Notably, this is the church where Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., co-pastored alongside his father.

4. Rev. Dr. Graham, the associate director of Black church studies at Duke Divinity School, and Rev. Dr. Green II, assistant professor of pastoral theology and social transformation and director of anti-racist initiatives at the United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities.

5. There are several popular white evangelical/conservative sports ministries, including Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Athletes in Action, and Intervarsity; however, they are limited in their scope and practice to provide care to Black athletes. No sports ministries offer spiritual care exclusively for Black athletes, coaches, and support staff nationally while leaning on the foundations of Black theology. BSMN will be the first.

6. Ellen Ott Marshall, "Theological Humility in the World of Law," *Journal of Law and Religion* 32, no. 1 (2017): 93–97.

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7. Ibid., 94–95.

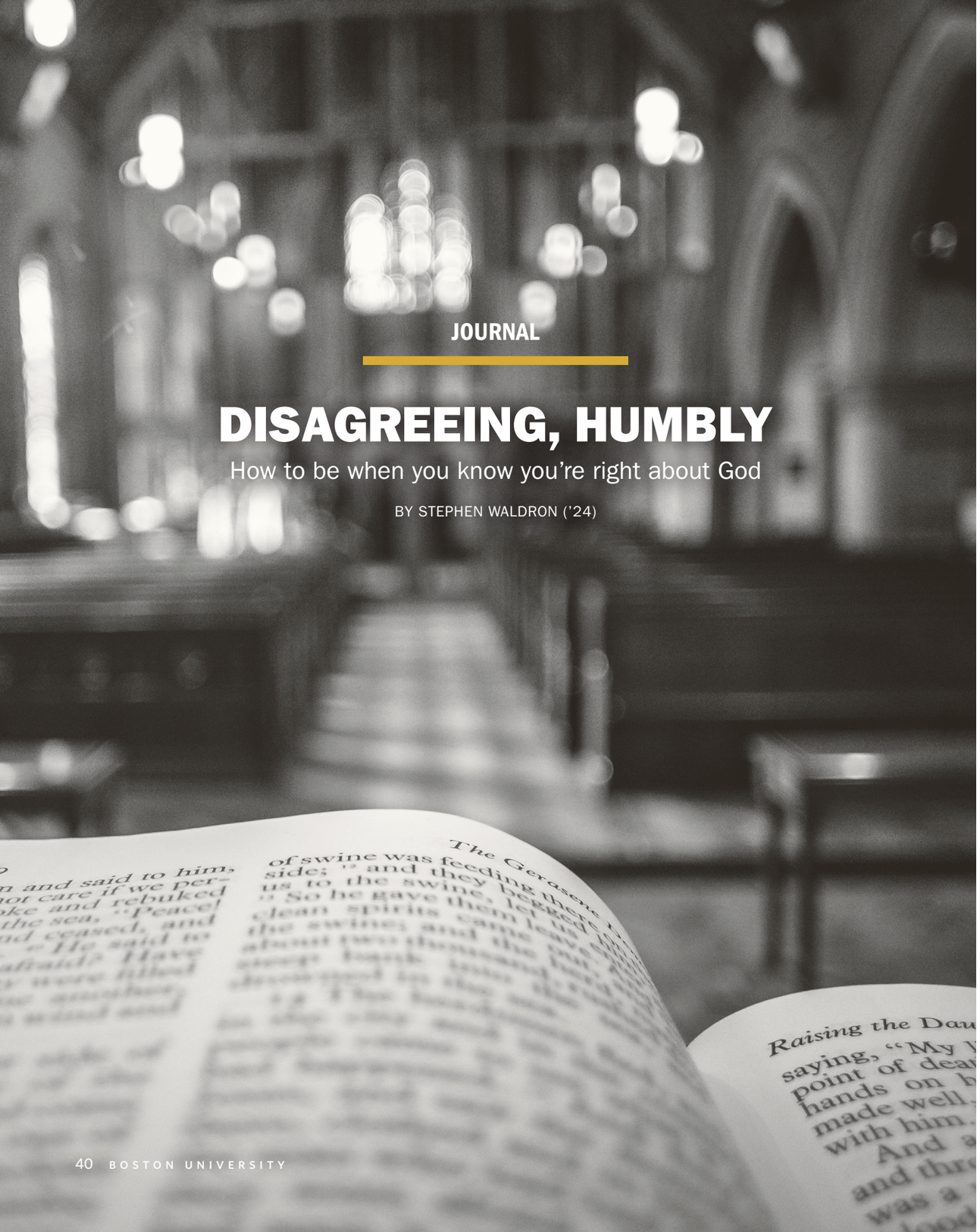
8. Ibid., 96.

9. Ibid., 97.

It is also humbling to find myself in a position where I must explicitly distinguish our sports ministry from others and educate those who may have little to no knowledge of Black liberation or womanist theologies. I resonate with Marshall's perspective on careful hermeneutics as a conversation, one that involves asking questions like, "How does your understanding of God and your experiences in this ever-changing world inform one another?"[7] I aim to bring this approach to Black athletes, fostering their spiritual well-being and ensuring they are theologically informed.

Lastly, Marshall calls for theologians engaged in theological humility to be bold about their convictions. She states that closeted convictions only amplify the voice of religious authoritarianism.[8] I feel a calling and an obligation to uplift the voices and narratives of Black athletes to affirm their experiences and attend to them spiritually. It is their lived experience on the field or court for which I must be accountable as an athletic spiritual care provider.

I believe the God of the oppressed stands by, supports, and loves Black athletes *regardless* of their religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, class, and physical or intellectual abilities; regardless of their perfect or imperfect speaking skills, their clothes, their hair, their physique, their "nontraditional" celebration dances, or their protests against injustices. Theological humility means that as executive director of the Black Sports Ministry Network, I must "practice a posture of learning as well as proclamation"[9] to better serve Black athletes and help them navigate being Black, being an athlete, and being a person of faith. ❑



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JOURNAL

DISAGREEING, HUMBLY

How to be when you know you're right about God

BY STEPHEN WALDRON ('24)

On Christ the King Sunday last November, I walked into the Lutheran church that I attend and saw the Christ candle held high on a tall stand, lit, and surrounded by dozens of packs of clean underwear. I was unnerved. Yes, I knew that our congregation had collected donations for people staying at local shelters. And I also knew that Christ in all his divinity was, rather famously, made flesh. Still, as we besieged a symbol of the most sacred one with a stack of still-clean briefs and boxers, wrapped in swaddling plastic and lying in a sanctuary, our efforts to mitigate harm by caring for our neighbors and our reverence for the pure Son of God might have instinctively clashed.

Of course, there was no inconsistency, and this display perfectly embodied the true heart of Christian faith. But was it so simple? We should not be too quick to dismiss my passing moment of uneasiness (and maybe yours as well), because it is a deeply human impulse that connects with some of our fiercest conflicts about how we should live alongside other people.

With a little more conscientiousness and a stronger disgust impulse, I might have ultimately prioritized sanctity over care.[1] Psychological research has found correlations between brain structure and political orientation, which are also related to the moral weight that we give to authority, purity, and in-group loyalties.[2] Had I been shaped by slightly different biological or cultural influences, I might have walked out of church, *(Continued)*

About the Author

Stephen Waldron ('24) is a PhD candidate researching theology and psychology, political theology, and theological method. His dissertation is titled "Moralizing God: The Moral Psychology of Theological Polarization Among U.S. Protestants."

1. E. J. Horberg et al., "Disgust and the Moralization of Purity," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 97, no. 6 (2009): 963–76, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017423. Yoel Inbar, David A. Pizarro, and Paul Bloom, "Conservatives Are More Easily Disgusted Than Liberals," *Cognition & Emotion* 23, no. 4 (June 2009): 714–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930802110007. Yoel Inbar et al., "Disgust Sensitivity, Political Conservatism, and Voting," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3, no. 5 (September 2012): 537–44, https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550611429024.

2. John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Alford, *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Ryota Kanai et al., "Political Orientations Are Correlated with Brain Structure in Young Adults," *Current Biology* 21, no. 8 (April 2011): 677–80, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2011.03.017; David M Amodio et al., "Neurocognitive Correlates of Liberalism and Conservatism," *Nature Neuroscience* 10, no. 10 (October 2007): 1246–47, https://doi.org/10.1038/nn1979 John T. Jost, "'Elective Affinities': On the Psychological Bases of Left–Right Differences," Psychological Inquiry 20, no. 2–3 (August 25, 2009): 129–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/10478400903028599; Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian A. Nosek, "Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 5 (2009): 1029–46, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015141.

offended on behalf of God's holiness. You also might have done that.

We often hear about our political divisions, especially between left and right (and, more recently, between Red States and Blue States). From multiple angles, social scientists have pointed out parallel moral disputes. Sociologists and historians have described "culture wars," while some psychologists have described a divide in "moral foundations" or competing sets of fundamental "ethics."[3]

But we might imagine a third set of tracks, running parallel to the political and the moral, often drawing on those. Our theological divisions have likewise taken on a "left-right" shape that now exists alongside similar divides on politics (how we will live together) and morality (what our obligations are to one another). These differences in what we believe about the most sacred reality are reflected in what religious institutions we join or which religious services make us most uneasy to sit through.

"These differences in what we believe about the most sacred reality are reflected in what religious institutions we join or which religious services make us most uneasy to sit through."

In my research, I analyze exactly what distinguishes "theologically liberal" Protestant theology from "theologically conservative" Protestant theology in the US. I have found that frameworks from moral psychology research help to make sense of these distinctions and of how they so often correlate with political inclinations.

There are some things we can say about these differences without using psychological categories. For instance, theological progressives have tended to characterize God or the sacred as present within the world and even within human beings. Theological conservatives, in contrast, have mostly emphasized the transcendence or distinctness of God from anything human or this-worldly (such as underwear). Theological liberals have emphasized the roles of contemporary contexts and modern scholarship in interpreting scriptures, while theological conservatives caution against imposing any of our own thinking on God's Word.

Theologians have often made these distinctions themselves. For instance, near the beginning of the 20th century, Walter Rauschenbusch contrasted his own social gospel theology (which he considered "prophetic") with "priestly" theologies that, in his view, clung to repressive notions of ritual purity and sacred authority.[4] A few years later, J. Gresham Machen charged that theological liberalism was a different religion than "Christianity," since it questioned biblical authority and the need for purification through blood atonement.[5]

3. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control The Family, Art, Education, Law, And Politics In America* (Basic Books, 1992); R. Marie Griffith, *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics* (Basic Books, 2017); Peter K. Hatemi, Charles Crabtree, and Kevin B. Smith, "Ideology Justifies Morality: Political Beliefs Predict Moral Foundations," *American Journal of Political Science* 63, no. 4 (October 2019): 788–806, https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12448; Lene Arnett Jensen, "Different Worldviews, Different Morals: America's Culture War Divide," *Human Development* 40, no. 6 (1997): 325–44, https://doi.org/10.1159/000278737.

4. Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997 [1917]).

5. John Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Macmillan, 1923).

These positions closely parallel what psychologists who study morality have claimed about moral and political disputes: moral conservatives tend to appeal to authority, sanctity, and in-group loyalty as the basis of moral views, while moral progressives mostly emphasize preventing harm, promoting care, and achieving equality among people and communities.[6]

Over the century since Rauschenbusch and Machen wrote, the theological differences they recognized have become intertwined with political positions.[7] At the same time, we have increasingly moralized God, typically in the image of moral forms of life that we find valuable. Our theological disagreements have, understandably, taken on even more weight in a time when we (perhaps rightly) fear that such cherished things as democracy, the nation, gender roles, and all living things on our planet are threatened. Most of us cling to at least two of those things as what makes life meaningful, and we easily (and understandably!) tie what we value most to our deepest theological values. And, of course, we reject the other values when they conflict with our own, such as when gender roles harm people or when ecological concerns interfere with national interests.

What does theological humility mean when my theology is tied to values that I cannot and will not compromise, even as those who disagree with me will also refuse to compromise? Is it worthwhile and possible to lessen our theological polarization?

I don't know that we can (or should) seek out some kind of middle way. But there are two things that we can and should do, I think, to develop humility in the face of our serious disagreements. First, we can draw on the long tradition of negative or apophatic theology and admit that, like Moses on Mount Sinai, we are unable to see God's face.[8] We have limited knowledge of who or what the divine or the ultimately real is. This does not mean that the sacredness of God is unimportant. On the contrary, the reality that theologians Karl Rahner and Elizabeth Johnson have called "holy mystery" should shape our entire lives.[9] And our inability to say much about that reality should motivate us to remain patient with others who stand before and within this same mystery and to be "quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger."[10]

Second, even while I know that I hold the correct position on every issue, I should hesitate before too confidently saying so. As a human being, I am subject to the same inclinations that psychologists can measure in others, and those affect my deepest moral views. Because theology is infused with morality, my value judgments, which may be highly arbitrary, are part of the process of thinking theologically. As we do theology, which intrinsically involves moralizing, we do so as human beings, as creatures who moralize through our bodies and our communities. It is worth remembering that this is also true of the people who are wrong about all the things about which I am right. ❑

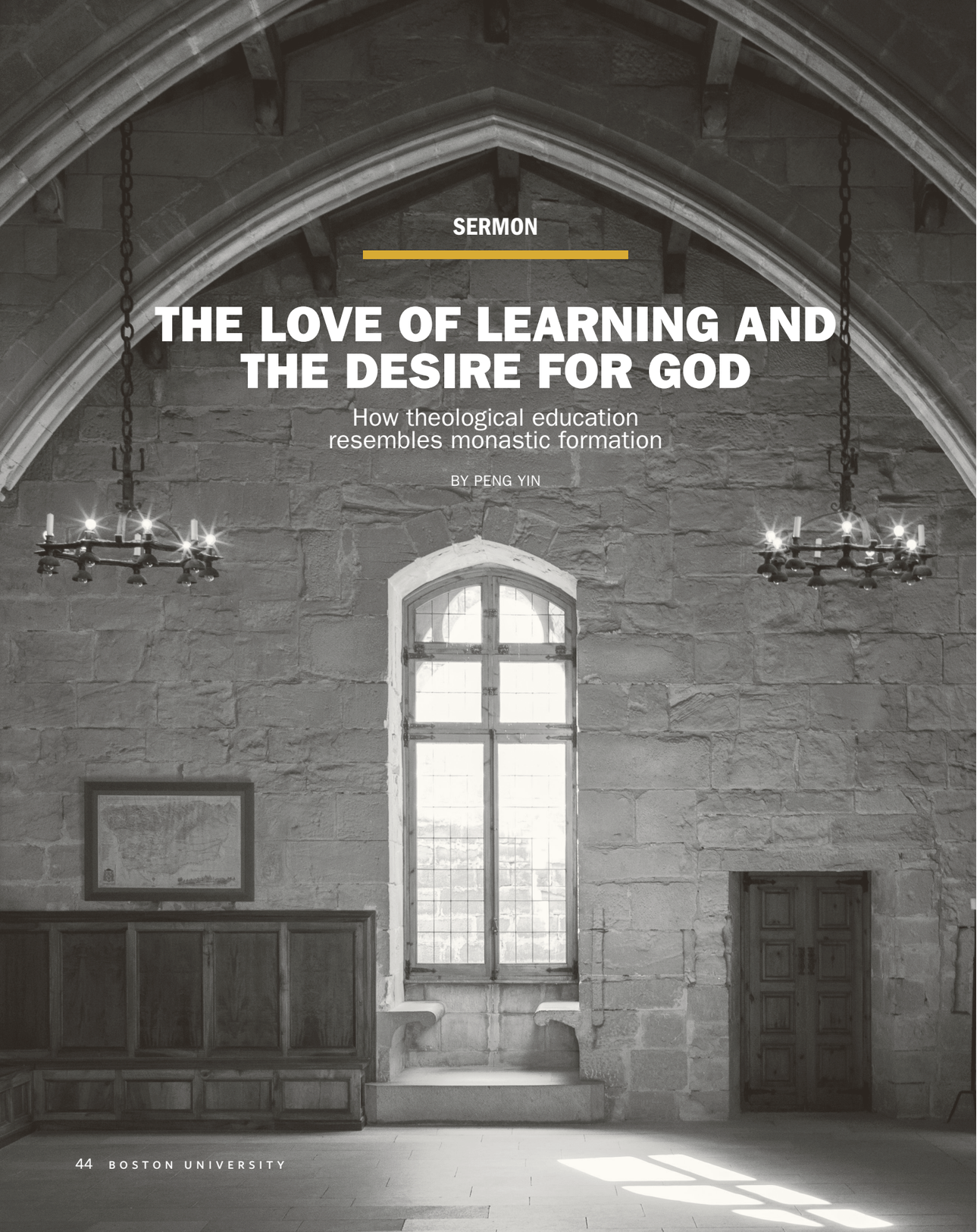
6. Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham, "When Morality Opposes Justice: Conservatives Have Moral Intuitions That Liberals May Not Recognize," *Social Justice Research* 20, no. 1 (June 1, 2007): 98–116, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-007-0034-z; Lene Arnett Jensen, "Moral Divisions within Countries between Orthodoxy and Progressivism: India and the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 1 (March 1998): 90–107, https://doi.org/10.2307/1388031.

7. Michele F. Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

8. Gregory of Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, 1978).

9. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2011).

10. James 1:19.



SERMON

THE LOVE OF LEARNING AND THE DESIRE FOR GOD

How theological education resembles monastic formation

BY PENG YIN

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The title of my sermon, ***The Love of Learning and the Desire for God***, is taken from a book by Jean Leclercq on Benedictine monastic culture. Leclercq argues that the love of letters and search for God are intrinsically intertwined in the monastic life. This book meant a great deal to me as a graduate student. Four years ago, my spirit was running dry after a protracted sense of disconnect between academic study and spiritual formation in my doctoral program. As a remedy, I spent a semester in a rural Benedictine monastery, away from the noise and ambition of Cambridge, Mass., immersing myself in the rhythm of liturgical hours. That was the best thing I did for my theological formation. There and then, I was utterly convinced by the book's thesis: our love of learning is incited and nurtured by our desire for God; our desire for God is a constant fuel for our love of learning. Thereafter, I began to think about the ways in which a theological education resembles, or ought to resemble, a monastic formation. Now, I want to share three similarities.

The first resemblance is simply the oddity, the strangeness, or dare I say, the queerness of the subject of our study, God. God is by definition beyond this world, beyond our ability to grasp, and yet, as St. Augustine reminds us, God is more intimate to us than we are to ourselves. So, a paradox between radical transcendence and immanence. God's love is equally extraordinary: God is pure love, love incarnate. God's love does not simply *respond* to the loveable things as we humans sometimes do, but *creates* the loveable character in the first place. God's love is extravagant, leaving plenty of slack for obstinate sinners, and yet this love can sometimes strangely feel like wrath, violently tearing us away from whatever stands in our way toward God, burning away our false and illusory attachment, for our sake, for the love of us. So, a life-giving tension between love's tenderness and severity. The strangeness of the subject shatters our familiar ways of talking and thinking, issuing an imperative—an invitation—to find a new language for God's actions in the world.

The second resemblance is the all-consuming, wildly ambitious nature of our knowledge. The knowledge we pursue in the School of Theology is not just information, skills, or even a program for personal formation. All these are vital, but our striving in learning aims at nothing short of receiving God Godself. Our whole being must be devoted to this endeavor. This posture of knowledge is most evident in how the monks handle the letters in the Holy Scriptures. The practice of *lectio divina*, divine reading, is about reading the letters devotionally: reading not just principally with eyes and minds, but with lips pronouncing what they saw, ears hearing the *(Continued)*

About the Author

Peng Yin is a scholar of comparative ethics, Chinese Christianity, and religion and sexuality. His forthcoming volume, *Persisting in the Good: Thomas Aquinas and Early Chinese Ethics*, explores the intelligibility of moral language across religious traditions and rethinks Christian teaching on human nature, sacrament, and eschatology. To watch Yin's entire sermon, visit *https://vimeo.com/858705627.*

"voice of the pages," and tears—of joy, of compunction, and of lament. This is deep learning, deep attention, reading a text and learning it "by heart": "with the body, since the mouth pronounced it, with the memory which fixes it, with the intelligence which understands its meaning, and with the will which desires to put it into practice."[1] All of our body, memory, intellect, and will must be activated in the search of God, because "our God is an all-consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29).

Third, the formation of a monk, the training of a seminarian, is as much about the mind as it is about the body. *The Rule of Saint Benedict* is filled with consistent attention to the monk's diet, labor, and hours of waking and sleeping. And most importantly, the Rule is about commanding the monk to simply stay in one place, to commit oneself to one locality with the same monks alongside them throughout a whole life. The reason for this bodily attention is simple: That's how Jesus taught. Jesus's teaching was not a spiritual instruction at a safe and sanitized distance. He puts his hands in the ears and spat and touched the tongue of a man with hearing and speech impairment. Jesus asked us to remember him not by an idea, a line in a book, a school of thought, but by eating and drinking, by this bread and wine: "Do this in remembrance of me." Therefore, a monastic formation, a seminary formation, is about aligning the body with the incarnate savior, and that requires a rule, an arduous process of habituation.

The peculiar nature of our learning requires a special kind of humility, not self-abasement, not self-doubt, but a habit of putting a proper limit on our certitude, on confident knowingness. As we just heard from Apostle Paul: "We now see in a mirror dimly, we know only in part" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Theological humility chastens our narrow sense of what counts as knowledge, who can possess it, or which accent or language can utter it most eloquently. The source of our knowledge shuns all those hierarchies.

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Humility disposes us to be startled. There will be tough times when your most cherished beliefs are challenged. There will be times when you must change your mind. Seminary is not about preserving what you already have; it's about setting you in motion to that one who is always doing a new thing. The whole of the Christian story is about unexpected surprises. None of us were there to expect that God would create and love a world that is finite, frail, and sure to die. None of us could expect an infinitely exalted God could incarnate to the humble material world, suffering an execution. And none of us could expect what is to come: "No one has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived, what God has prepared for those who love God" (1 Corinthians 2:9). So, be ready to be startled, even if it brings growing pains.

Humility requires us to recognize the limits of the classroom. The pursuit of knowledge requires a character. I can teach you the elements of goodness through, say, Plato's *Republic* in one day, but I can't teach you to *love* goodness in one day. Besides the classroom, God teaches in other ways, in other invisible schools: in plants, rivers, animals; and through people long dead, your family, or spiritual beings whose contours we cannot trace. That also means you can take your time. This means you can be patient with yourself. Our ardent love of God "grows under the trail of time."[2] Your learning will continue, long after the degree program. This patience frees you from punitive demands on yourself. It frees you from mistaking us, the faculty of divinity, or the authorities in the books, as your final end, as your ultimate teacher. You must pierce through them to seek God Godself, the one "who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ," as Paul assures us in the Philippians 1:16.

Attend to your humble body. My spiritual director often advises me by saying: So much of what we do as teach-

1. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 17.

2. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, 31.

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ers and carers of the soul does not see visible results, does not see conclusions. You should cultivate hobbies where you see growth and sense closure: photography, gardening, cooking a meal, that kind of thing.

Your body might also be a reliable teacher. For example, by breathing during meditation, your body might train you to attend to the present. Another group of monks, the desert mothers and fathers, often say, "It is the devil who wants to distract away from the present: to the past and its regrets, and to the future and its anxieties." Only the present is real, only the monk's cell, your study room at present is real, and God is fully, indivisibly present in the moment.

Another way your body might help is the bare fact that they are the humble tools, sometimes the only tools, for you to approach the Divine in a time of distress. For example, in a night of heartbreak, when the pain becomes physically manifest, maybe touch a cross, a rosary, or bring an icon to bed. Pet it, feel its closeness, and that might be more potent than any grand formulations of theodicy. Put signs of Christ within reach. Place yourself in places where you might sense the ubiquity of grace. For example, take a walk along the Charles River. Let the stream of the water remind you of God's grace as the constant subcurrent of our life, in all its upheaval, loss, dispersal, and failure.

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Given the radical transcendence, the persistent incomprehensibility of God, the knowledge we acquire in seminary cannot be treated as exclusive possessions—tools for domination, advantage for competition. As Willie Jennings reminded us, so much Western theological education has been distorted by desires for mastery, domination, and possession.[3] If those were our desires, we would be half dead on arrival, as a monk or a seminarian. Jesus instead wanted to gather a crowd, to celebrate a love feast. The knowledge that Jesus imparts is infinitely sharable, rather than relentlessly competitive.

Dependency is a frequently pathologized word in the West. But being humble means recognizing that all our knowledge is dependent. Before we ever spoke a word, we were spoken, we were made. Our speech about God is always following on, always responding, living in the wake of or in the shadow of a love whose full scale is still obscure to us.[4]

Theological humility requires us to hold ourselves open to something beyond what we can reach, which can reveal itself through us. The Latin word humility, *humilitas*, is closely connected with the word *humus*, earth. Our bodies are not just a lump of stuff, embarrassingly holding us back from spiritual ascent to seventh heaven. We are instead embodied spirits, soaring into the Heavens in our earthly encounter with our Creator. If we are so busy with climbing up the spiritual ladders, we might miss the one who has already come down to meet us. So, let us hear the call to humility as a call to getting earthy, messy, and down to the ground. Don't think of your theological education as a frantic ascent in these halls of prestige. But think of it as coming downstairs and playing in the mud joyfully with your friends.

So friends, put on the vest of humility, now go out, play in the mud, and have a great school year. Amen! ❑

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3. Willie Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2020).

4. Paraphrasing Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London, Bloomsbury, 2014), 170.

Dave Green

SHARING OUR FAITH, HUMBLY

A CASE FOR BRINGING HUMILITY INTO EVANGELISM

Bryan Stone is associate dean for academic affairs and the E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism at the School of Theology. Stone's teaching and research interests are in the areas of evangelism and congregational development, faith and film, and ecclesiology. He has written, cowritten, or edited nine books and is finishing this year a book on Christianity and horror film.

BY BRYAN STONE

Christian belief in the virtue of humility is longstanding and fairly universal. Yet Christians have not always been widely known for their humility. It turns out that centuries of power, privilege, and hegemony tend neither to cultivate nor to reinforce humility. But perhaps no Christian practice is as likely to neglect humility as evangelism. After all, it's pretty hard to be humble when you are absolutely certain in your beliefs, and one of your highest priorities is getting others to think and believe as you do. It's almost as if effectiveness at evangelism is negatively associated with humility. Perhaps the less confident, assured, and bold someone is about their faith, the less likely they are to commend that faith to others.

One could, however, make a strong case that humility is a virtue that is vital to the practice of evangelism—at least when evangelism is understood as faithful and embodied witness to the good news and an exercise in sharing beauty, rather than an attempt to win, convince, or secure results. On this understanding, saints rather than church growth experts are our best exemplars of evangelism practiced well, for it is virtues such as love, patience, and humility—or the practices of forgiveness and asking for forgiveness, listening, and being present—that are determinative in passing along the faith.

A few years ago, with the help of an amazing group of student researchers, we finished a nationwide study of how people come to faith in the US.[1] For all the importance given to programs, events, tracts, and apologetics in evangelism, and despite the emphasis that television and radio personalities place on their ministries as crucial to reaching the world evangelistically, about 86 percent of all new Christians identified a person, persons, or a congregation as the primary factor in coming to faith. They spoke of faith as a journey in which belonging comes before believing, and they highlighted the importance of being able to witness firsthand the Christian faith embodied in persons and communities. That made all the difference. Only 1 percent of the 1,200 new Christians we surveyed identified television and radio as the primary factor.[2]

We need more saints. Saints help us to touch, taste, and see the beauty of the good news. They don't always know how to win arguments; they aren't as glossy as an expensive television ad; they don't always feel comfortable buttonholing the passenger next to them on an airplane in order to make a convert. But they know how to listen and love; they can accept correction and are willing to entertain the positions of others as much as they are willing to commend their own. Far from being inversely proportional to evangelistic excellence, humility may be its most compelling characteristic and its greatest ally. ❑

1. Bryan Stone, *Finding Faith Today*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018.2.

2. Ibid.

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Rev. Dr. Dianne Reistroffer ('82,'89)