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Interview: "Can Theology Make a Difference in Achieving Racial Reconciliation?"

William T. Cavanaugh



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VITAL Theology

Helping People Think Theologically

Can Theology Make a Difference in Achieving Racial Reconciliation? Reflections on **Brown v. Board** and the 1964 Civil Rights Act

This special double issue of *Vital Theology* examines racial discrimination as we approach the anniversaries of two landmark events in the history of U.S. civil rights.

May 17 marks the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* that declared separate schools for blacks and whites unconstitutional. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, which turns 40 on July 2, enforced the right to vote, provided a means to end discrimination in public facilities and public education, and established the Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity.

In a departure from our usual format, we asked eight people to reflect theologically on a set of five questions. The questions pertain to democracy's ability to cope with issues of racial injustice, segregation, and inequality. Although panel members praised the two key civil-rights measures, we asked them to focus

on how civil-law remedies for ending discrimination may have fallen short, and where Christian theology can illuminate issues of inequality.

The panel offered numerous and creative ways in which theology can play a central role in achieving racial equality. Recurrent themes include concepts of sin and grace, the role of memory, the establishment of homogeneous Christian community, proper relationships between church and state, legal-theological divisions, erasing white supremacy and black inferiority, the power of the Eucharist, and the requirement that Christians cherish all of humanity in ways that legal standards cannot encompass.

Panel members were not hesitant to highlight the complicity of the Christian church in allowing racism to flourish.

Our panel includes such established scholars as James H. Cone, who is the iconic figure of black theology, and Jean Bethke Elshtain, a political

philosopher who has focused on making connections between democracy and Christianity. We also sought out the thoughts of scholars who came of age after the civil rights movement and asked for analysis from Sojourners' Jim Wallis, who works daily in the fight for justice and equality.

The panelists' comments have been edited for length.

In addition to the always-excellent guidance of our advisory group, we are indebted to Willie James Jennings for helping shape the contents of this special issue. Jennings' scholarship focuses on theology and the black church, and he is senior associate dean for academic programs at Duke University Divinity School. ◀



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Publisher

panelists

Harlan Beckley

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Beckley helped create and is the first director of the Shepherd Program for the Interdisciplinary Study of Poverty and Human Capability at

Washington and Lee University. He received the state of Virginia's highest award for excellence in education in 2002. He was

editor of *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* for five years and is a past president of the society. Before beginning his academic career, he served as pastor to small United Methodist churches in Tennessee.

Ph.D. (Christian theological ethics) and
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- ▶ *Economic Justice: Selections from Distributive Justice and A Living Wage (Library of Theological Ethics)* (editor)
- ▶ *Passion for Justice: Retrieving the Legacies of Walter Rauschenbusch, John A. Ryan, and Reinhold Niebuhr*

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Carter teaches courses in both theology and black church studies. He teaches a course entitled, "Race, Modernity, and Theology" that considers the modern construction of race as a theological problem. He is pursuing research on theology and the black activist tradition.



- ▶ *Race: A Theological Account*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

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A Civil-Law Vision of Integration Has Failed to Overcome America's Racial Divisions:

Beckley: Sin Distorts Justice

Persons interested in theology and persons who come from religious background ought to be interested in what Martin Luther King Jr. was interested in and pushed in his latter years: economic justice.

We have made considerable advances in opening up jobs and housing and public accommodations, although I don't want to deny there continues to be unjust discrimination to this day. However, many minorities, particularly African Americans, remain concentrated in areas of poverty in very high percentages. That's measured by income, but it is also measured in educational and health opportunities. Studies have shown that African-American males in Harlem are less likely to live to the age of 40 than are Bangladeshi males.



Part of the theological obstacle to dealing with these problems is an attitude that people deserve what they get. I think that has

to do with misunderstandings of justice that result, in part, because we don't take seriously some things that Reinhold Niebuhr and others have said about the pervasiveness of sin and how it distorts our conceptions of justice. Also, we don't take seriously the notion of grace and the extent to which it informs us about who we are as agents.

Those of us who have achieved enough to participate in society don't recognize to what extent we have had support from a whole lot of different sources that are not of our doing. Furthermore, we don't recognize how far we fall short of being able to identify with others who have not had those same supports.

Finally, we tend to think of persons who have succumbed to difficulties and their own inabilities to participate—for example they haven't been able to get jobs or they've got problems with addictions or family life—we tend not to think of them as persons who have had obstacles to overcome but as autonomous agents who simply have failed in their lives. That is a mistake and I think theology, both in terms of understanding sin and understanding grace, has significant resources to bring to bear on those understandings. ◀

"Those of us who have achieved enough to participate in society don't recognize to what extent we have had support from a whole lot of different sources that are not of our doing. Furthermore, we don't recognize how far we fall short of being able to identify with others who have not had those same supports."

— Harlan Beckley

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Cavanaugh has written on the themes of the state, civil society, capitalism and

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- ▶ *Theopolitical Imagination: Christian Practices of Space and Time*
- ▶ *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*
- ▶ *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (editor with Peter Scott)

James H. Cone

Charles A. Briggs Distinguished
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Cone is acknowledged as having defined the role of the black church as liberator of the poor and the oppressed. His research and teaching are in Christian theology, with special attention to black theology and the theologies of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as well as twentieth century European-American theologies. He is an ordained



minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

- ▶ *A Black Theology of Liberation*
- ▶ *God of the Oppressed*
- ▶ *Martin & Malcom & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*

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What Theological Understandings Must Americans Arrive at to Make Equality Possible?

Carter: Virtue Must Be Present

There are some things that law can't get at. I'm thinking about Augustine's engagement with various political figures of his day. How he engaged the arguments of Seneca or Cicero and how they understood civic virtue and Augustine's response to that. It's a question of what makes for a virtuous citizen in the first place. It seems to me that civil law remedies that we've been coming up with—in some sense integration imposed by legal writ—don't get at it. There's a certain kind of virtue that has to be operative. Certain kinds of people have to be in place in order for laws to do the work that those laws are supposed to do. Laws make sense under an interpretation of what it means to be a people. If that's not really clear, what then do the laws do? Do the laws then begin to implode on themselves? Perhaps that's what we're sensing in regard to the *Brown v. Board* decision. ◀

Cavanaugh: Church Is Mostly Brown, Black

We shouldn't fail to say that *Brown v. Board* and the Civil Rights Act are achievements and that things are better in a way. But there is a tendency to think that that has solved the problem. If you're thinking about theological resources you would certainly want to talk about the body of Christ and how it overcomes divisions between Jew and Greek, slave and free. Part of the problem is we are so used to speaking in terms of the state and not in terms of the church. So Christians leave ecclesial language behind when we discuss these kinds of matters.

To talk about the church and the body of Christ would be a first step in remedying this in some ways. Certainly, 1st Corinthians 12 with the whole emphasis on diversity and unity is going to be helpful here.

So the question is who is the "we" that we're talking about? I think it helps if we talk about the "we" as people made in the image of God and potential members of the body of Christ rather than as Americans. It helps also in terms of thinking about the church catholic. Once we think in terms of "we" as the church, then it becomes clear that whites are a minority in the church and the church is predominantly brown and black. ◀



"The most important thing for Americans to understand theologically is that white supremacy

and black inferiority are the foundation of American culture and religion."

— James Cone

Cone: Dislodge White Supremacy

The most important thing for Americans to understand theologically is that white supremacy and black inferiority are the foundation of American culture and religion. As many have said, it is America's original sin. It is deeply embedded in America, both in the religion and in the cultural and political life of this nation.

Theologians in America and the churches in America, particularly the mainstream white churches and white theologians, have not engaged this problem of race and problem of white supremacy and black inferiority. Because

Jean Bethke Elshtain

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Elshtain is a political philosopher whose task has been to show the connections between our political and ethical convictions.

tions. She writes widely for journals of civic opinion and lectures, both in the United States and abroad, on whether democracy will prove sufficiently robust and resilient to survive. She is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, co-chair of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, chair of the Council on Civil Society, and political science team leader for the Pew Christian Scholars program.

- ▶ *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social Thought*
- ▶ *Democracy on Trial*
- ▶ *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*
- ▶ *Real Politics: At the Center of Everyday Life*

William E. Pannell

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Before he joined the faculty, Pannell was the first African American to serve on Fuller's board of trustees. In 1992 he was appointed as the Arthur DeKruyter/Christ Church Oak Brook Professor of Preaching. He served as dean of the chapel from 1992 to 1998, and also served as director of the African American Studies Program.



▶ *The Coming Race Wars: A Cry for Reconciliation*

about "re-membering," reconstituting ourselves.

Now how do we do that in such a way that is actually productive in that it doesn't remain enclosed within the very cycles of injustice that "dis-member" us and therefore call for the act of "re-membering?" This is a very important question when we think about issues around the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. At some mundane level, what the decision was seeking to remedy is the kind of atomization that was marking American culture, particularly at the sites and interstices of race relations. Race relations were operative in such a way, and arguably remain operative in such a way, as to atomize us, to fragment us. What the decision was trying to do with respect to this problem was to break up this "dis-integration" and enact a kind of communal grouping beyond race. ◀

Cavanaugh: Eliminate Amnesia

There is such built-in amnesia in the way we normally approach these things. Liberalism itself is built on forgetfulness of the past. The Enlightenment is meant to liberate us from our past, from our traditions and from our particularities.

And that, I would suppose, is a common take on how to overcome racism—that you overcome racism by starting from scratch where we level the playing field and see each of us as a universal bearer of rights and not someone who comes from a particular background or from a particular color. But, unfortunately, that builds amnesia into the whole process so that we intentionally disown history and think that we're starting from scratch. So there's only an illusion of a level playing field being created.

A sort of individualism that's inherent in liberalism makes it very common to hear people say, "I'm not personally responsible for what happened in the past so I can't be held responsible for that. And besides, it was fixed back in 1964." If you're thinking about Christian ways to resist that, part of the solution is the idea that sin is social and salvation is social as well. We too often think of salvation as the individual getting into heaven. But the vision of the Old Testament is clearly one where sin is the rupture of harmony.

The other theological resource for thinking about these matters is the weekly Eucharist. The Eucharist is based on remembrance, the whole idea of *anamnesis*, the Greek word for the part of the Eucharistic prayer that talks about remembrance: "Do this in remembrance of me." The word itself, *anamnesis*, is related to the word amnesia. It is a sort of "un-amnesia." It is based on a remembrance and is not just a remembrance of what Christ has done for us. It is a remembrance of our own betrayal of Christ. There's a kind

of penitential moment in the Eucharist that's built in there. So we have the resources for remembering and remembering in a penitential key. ◀

Cone: See Humanity of Blacks

We remember when we see the problem as inherently a part of *our* existence as well. That is to say, if the humanity of black people becomes a part of the humanity of all people, then it is much easier for us to remember what has happened to black people. But if black people are marginal in our consciousness and if we believe that it is not essential for us to engage their existence as a part of human existence, then black people will always be an afterthought. When you look at the history of this country and you see how race is so central to America's self-understanding, one has to wonder how it is that theologians can understand what they do as something that is marginal to the history of race. ◀

Elshtain:

Make Practices Match Principles

Jefferson knew that this was an issue that would come back to haunt the United States, even though he was a slaveholder himself. That it was simply incompatible with the principles of the Declaration of Independence. But, of course, you have the two basic systems in the North and the South and if you're going to try to get people together under one constitution, certain compromises were made. We look back with considerable sorrow on those compromises, even if we recognize the difficulty of trying to uproot an institution (slavery), as pernicious as it is, that's been around for some time.

There was a great speech made by Frederick Douglass, the Fourth of July oration that he delivered in Rochester, Minn., that was called "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" He argued that it's a moment that closes the gap between the principles and the reality and asked, what do we do in light of that? Well, we don't overthrow the principles. We try to bring the reality more into line with those principles. I think one of the great things about America as a civil society is the fact that a good bit of our history can be understood as Americans striving to bring their practices into a closer relationship with their principles. I think that's a way to keep intact an appropriate appreciation for the American system along with the criticisms of the way we have fallen short. ◀

How Can Christians Envision Their Future Together?

what it means to be truly integrated with one another.

One way in which this does not become a pipe dream that only theologians talk about is to view the sacrifice of Christ as not simply an act that happened back then, but rather, as an act in perpetuity. The very ground of creation exists in the eternal sacrifice of the Son toward the Father and the Spirit, and that's concretely happening every time we get together and break bread. In the breaking of the bread and in the drinking of the wine, in the Eucharistic communion together, we are actually entering into Christ's communal mode of existence, the form of community that constitutes the life of the triune, which is the ground of creation. ◀

Cavanaugh: Envision Body of Christ

Much of the talk about racism is bound up in the talk about rights and tolerance. So the ideal is to keep us from interfering with one another rather than any sense of a community. I think this is the original vision of liberalism. It is certainly the vision of Hobbs and Locke—the idea that the role of the state is to keep all of these little atomic individuals from interfering with each other and that's what we would call freedom.

Dorothy Day was good at critiquing these sorts of things. She said we relate to each other through the state, kind of like spokes to the hub of a wheel. So we relate to another person not directly, but through the state and through legal mechanisms with things like welfare instead of directly taking care of the poor. We pay taxes to the state; the state sends a check to a poor person; and we never have a face-to-face encounter. In a lot of ways, that's how we deal with racism.

There's a kind of individualizing dynamic in the state, although at the same time there's an attempt to overcome the individualism of liberalism through the ideology of nationalism. Precisely because we don't have any common goals, we have to create common goals by creating a rhetoric of nationalism, which most obviously comes forth in questions of war. It's alarming to note that wars are often fought by persons of color. I don't think that's just a coincidence. There's a way in which people of color are co-opted into this very process of forgetfulness so issues of class and race get marginalized by the rhetoric of unity—that we're all in this together.

How do we respond to that? What we have to offer is the vision of people in communion and people who are

part of the same body. It is such a powerful image that Paul uses—the body of Christ—that we are all members one of another. When one suffers we all suffer, and when one rejoices all rejoice together. So there's that deeper sense of community that the church brings.

To return to this image of the international nature of the church is really crucial. The rhetoric and the reality of the nation-state is overcome when we begin to think of ourselves as part of an international body of the church catholic, which is and should be a living sign of unity.

In the Catholic Church, you see the College of Cardinals and they are black and Asian and Latino and white, all together in ways that you don't often see. I think what we really need is an African pope. That would be a wonderful sign. We're also seeing in the reverse missionary movement all kinds of Africans coming to the United States to study in seminaries and stay here as part of the diocese. Vocations in the Catholic Church in Africa are skyrocketing while they're plummeting elsewhere. So Africa is now sending missionaries here to remote rural dioceses. In the middle of white America, we see African priests taking up residence. I think that's a really powerful sign of the international nature of the church and a hopeful sign of overcoming racism. ◀

Cone: Separate Churches Divide Us

As long as Christian churches are separate, it is hard for Christians to envision being together. As long as there are black and white churches and all other kinds of ethnic and racial churches, there is very little in our churches that distinguish us from the society. And as long as that is the case, it is hard for the church to envision a future that transcends the barriers of race.

Other kinds of issues also separate us. Martin Luther King is such a highly visible person in our society and in our memory largely because he symbolized a common humanity, a common future that Americans could create together beyond the issues of race and other things that separate us. We certainly loved King and buy into his Beloved Community and his sense of America as becoming a nation that transcends in some way the problem of race. Yet we know we have not achieved that. It is hard for us to envision a future together as long as our lives are so rigidly separate. What is amazing to me, is that America is becoming a much more divisive society than it was when I was growing up.

side the areas of concentrated poverty do not tend to think of themselves as having any particular responsibilities for those who find themselves in concentrated poverty. ◀

Carter: Failure Is Own Implication

One could say the inability of a civil-law vision of integration to actually affect integration is a theological implication. Its inability to accomplish that is what we see in the re-segregation gesture. ◀

Cavanaugh: Moving Backward

Obviously it's bad and it's a sign of backward movement instead of progress on this issue. ◀

Cone: Indictment Against Church

I think what re-segregation says about us is an indictment against the church and theology. Any time you have an indictment against the church, you have an indictment against the intellectual side of the church, which gives it some kind of self-understanding. I think social equality has been the one thing that has defined the central expression of racist hate and uncomfortable feeling about being next to somebody different from you. School integration suggests social equality. It suggests social relations. It suggests social community of young boys and girls of all races going to the same school and it suggests that we are one humanity. It is mostly whites who want to re-segregate. You find blacks who want to re-segregate only because whites hate them and make them feel so uncomfortable. That happens because whites deep down in their being find social equality as something that is unacceptable. They'll give every excuse that's imaginable about why they don't want that child going to that school. But the real reason has to do with socializing with black people in a way in which whites are no longer the superior group. ◀

Elshtain: Many Factors at Work

Theologically, I would say that how we interpret this would depend a great deal on what the dynamic is.

You can say patterns of housing were never fully integrated and since the patterns of housing determine what schools kids go to, it's not surprising that you're going to get a disproportionate number of African Americans going to some schools and Mexican kids going to another school. There is pretty general agreement, interestingly among black scholars, too, that busing didn't really work. In fact, it led to a widespread estrangement in the African-American community because parents were so separated from the schools that their kids were going to.

Maybe what we should be concentrating on is improving schools, overall, and paying special attention to the schools that have fewer resources to work with so that all kids are getting a vibrant, decent education. I think that is more of a problem, honestly, than the re-segregation issue. The quality of education helps to determine whether kids are going to be marginally employed or well employed. Or whether they're going on to higher education.

Another phenomenon that we have to take into account—and we can't blink when we talk about it—is the principles of self-segregation that emerge within the African-American community itself. For example, when I was at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, it was the black students who demanded the creation of a dormitory for black students and a special cafeteria for black students. This utterly perplexed many of us who had been committed to integration. If King and others were imprisoned, why turn your back on that goal? But at the same time one could understand this cultural and sociological phenomenon that people feel more comfortable with the folks with whom they have the most in common. And I think that was a part of it. This is a really complicated phenomenon, and I think to interpret it only as America backsliding would be very incorrect. ◀



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the African-American community itself."

— Jean Bethke Elshtain

Carter: Governments Can Heed

Incorporating the prophetic into civil government might be difficult, perhaps impossible. Nevertheless, it seems to me there are moments by which civil governments, even if regulated under the rule of law, might hear or be spoken to in the process. Then the question becomes what compels that government to heed the voice of the prophetic?

Martin Luther King's witness is instructive. What makes his expression of the civil rights movement compelling was that it was backed by a certain type of community that embodied a certain type of life. It was the kind of community that invited a certain kind of life that in some sense compelled the government to take heed of the voice that was being articulated here.

There are other ways one can speak about the prophetic version of this. At the center of the forms of life of the people who were galvanized around civil rights were not simply melodramatic expressions that would attract news cameras. It is what's at the interior of that. It is the preaching of a word in churches where those who experienced segregation and indignities are honored. Those who were called boy at the workplace were named deacon at the church, were named mother at the church. All of that was made possible again out of a certain vision of life centered on Jesus of Nazareth. ◀

Cavanaugh: Governments Thwart It



I'd say no. I just don't think that's the function of government in a modern nation-state. Quite the opposite. Its function is to throw prophets in jail. It is designed to eliminate prophecy. ◀

"I just don't think that's the function of government in a modern nation-state. Quite the opposite. Its function is to throw prophets in jail."

—William T. Cavanaugh

Cone: Prophecy Stands Apart

I think that's difficult. As I understand the prophetic, the prophetic is outside of government. The prophet is the one who is the critical side and speaks on behalf of the people who government ignores. So it's hard to imagine. I don't care whether it's President Bush or President John Kennedy, when you read the history of black/white relations it is very difficult for anybody inside the government to become very prophetic. They almost always become conservative because they want to speak to a majority of the people. But the prophetic process is always speaking for the marginal, for the minority, for the weak, for the voiceless. It's hard to have the government a part of that particular prophetic voice.

The prophetic stands apart and that's why King did not seek a political office. That was a part of the rules because he knew he would lose his prophetic edge if he sought it. I like the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rev. Al Sharpton and other ministers who have been elected to public office or who have sought public office. But when they really get in there and start doing the politics, it is impossible for them to remain prophetic. ◀

Elshtain: Lincoln Was Prophetic

Certainly you can incorporate a part of the prophetic as part of civil society. Let's take King again as our example. You have someone speaking to a polity that promises the brotherhood and sisterhood of all, and yet denies to some that status that is theirs as a God-given right. So speaking prophetically to citizens in a free society, yes. We have had examples of that throughout our history.

When you get into actual government offices there are understandings of what has to be done given one's purview. There, the prophetic voice is going to be somewhat more rare, in part, because there are certain norms and rules and regulations that define what this person is to do and how she or he is to do it. So it is hard to think, for example, of someone from the Dept. of the Interior speaking prophetically, or the head of the post office speaking prophetically.

When you get to the presidency, you can think of a few examples such as Lincoln's second inaugural, for example. Although Lincoln would deny that he was speaking prophetically, he was certainly speaking biblically. You can ask, was that a prophetic moment? Looking back, it seems to us that it was. ◀