

Critical Theology

engaging
church
culture
society

Summer 2026 issue edited by Nicholas Olkovich

Introduction

By Nicholas Olkovich
St. Mark's College, Vancouver

In this issue's first essay, Doris Kieser develops a case for correlating certain Marian theologies that presuppose the notion of gender complementarity—and their closely related ecclesiological implications—with wider trends of sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy in society. While avoiding the stronger claim of causation, Kieser explores how these images of Mary and of women in the church more broadly, lend support to and are in turn influenced by a conception of women as “good girls” that is detrimental to their flourishing in Northern America. In responding to these theological and societal trends, Kieser commends an alternative vision of Mary, the Mother of God, as an active and choosing self that might contribute to the empowerment of women.

In the second essay, Stephen P. Millies draws a distinction between public theology—a subdiscipline concerned with articulating theological claims for various publics—and political theology, which focuses on the communication of normative theological claims for a political purpose. Notwithstanding the Roman Catholic Church's stated commitments to democracy and pluralism, Millies highlights how at least some magisterial statements regarding national identity and the common good reveal a continued commitment to “aspirational Christendom.” By contrast with this trend—a trend that shares much with contemporary expressions of integralism—Millies commends Pope Francis' emphasis on fraternity as more compatible with democracy and as more effective for public theologizing.

Contents

Introduction

By Nicholas Olkovich 1

Mary and the Good Girls

By Doris M. Kieser 3

Fraternity over Nationalism: On the Non-Normative Character of Public Theology

By Steven P. Millies 9

Jane Barter's *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*: Four Responses

Introduction – Timothy Harvie 15

Witness, Refusal, and the Vindication
of the Oppressed – Ryan Turnbull..... 16

The Aims of Redemption and Jane Barter's
Theopolitics in the Era of the Witness
– Christina Conroy 17

Remnant Witness in a Time of Ungrievable
Lives and Holocides – Anupama Ranawana..... 18

Trauma, Woundedness, Suffering, and the
Witness: Reflections and a Question
– Doris M. Kieser 20

Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness:
Author's Response – Jane Barter 22

Book Review

By Don Schweitzer24

The third piece is a collection of four responses to Canadian scholar Jane Barter's *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*, a new book that explores the relationship between theological and public forms of witnessing in the aftermath of contemporary political atrocities. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of "weak messianism," Barter develops a vision of "remnant witnessing" that overcomes the temptation to politicize testimony in the name of a redeemed futurity. In his response, Ryan Turnbull reflects upon Barter's engagement with settler colonialism and raises questions about the possibility of proximate justice for victims. Although agreeing with Barter on the need for "better-witnessing," Christina Conroy asks whether it

is possible to rethink redemption in apophatic terms. Anupama Ranawana focuses specifically on the remnant witnessing of non-human life that is a product of *holocide*. Doris Kieser concludes by exploring and complicating Barter's conception of trauma. These reflections are followed by a generous and insightful rejoinder by Barter herself.

This issue ends with Don Schweitzer's short book review of *Decolonizing Church: Emerging Voices Speak*, a volume edited by Néstor Medina and Becca Whitla that explores how decolonizing approaches to theology and church practices can assist Canadian churches in moving beyond apologies to concrete action.

Critical Theology: Engaging church, culture, and society

is a quarterly journal from Novalis

Available online at no charge at en.novalis.ca/products/critical-theology

CT website: criticaltheology.net

For further information or to submit articles, contact:

Don Schweitzer • McDougald Professor of Theology emeritus

St. Andrew's College • 926 East Centre, Saskatoon, SK S7J 3A1

don.schweitzer@saskatoontheologicalunion.ca • 306-373-4428 (H)



Mary and the Good Girls

By Doris M. Kieser

St. Joseph's College, University of Alberta

In this article, I will explore a particular question, although from a sharper perspective than first imagined. In recent years I have been exploring perceptions of Mary, Mother of God, in Roman Catholic teaching and theology, on the threshold of Catholic sexual theology and females. Here, I will explore Mary in Catholic consciousness, but will more narrowly consider ways in which some Marian theologies and a Christian theological anthropology of sex and gender complementarity have propped up the diminishment of women's hard-earned gains toward well-being in Northern America.¹ Has this connection been consciously articulated or, rather more likely, has a long-running stream of sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy simply watered and nurtured harmful perceptions enough to keep women in their place? I cannot say. But here, I make a case for correlation, if not causation.

Mary

I love Mary. Her person and her prayer were my solace as a child and remain so today. As the mother of Jesus, we know little about her but, as the Mother of God, her image has flourished in the Catholic imagination since early Christianity. Still today, creative expressions of Mary thrive in literature.² Multitudes of images aiming to capture her complex Christian persona show up in churches and holy sites around the world³ and in the street art of Texas,⁴ New Mexico, California, and Arizona.⁵ Sanctuaries offer devotional spaces in France,⁶ Portugal,⁷ and Canada.⁸ Celebrations of her place in the lives of Catholics continue to thrive in the Philippines⁹ and in pilgrimage sites across the Canadian prairies, in Alberta¹⁰ and Saskatchewan.¹¹ She is doubtless a captivating figure.

What is vexing about Mary is not actually Mary herself and her beloved place in Catholic tradition and devotion. Rather, it is how malleable she becomes in the hands of those whose Marian perceptions are such that they limit females, submit us to male hierarchy, relegate us to pious feminine obedience, and lock us out of positions of ecclesial (and other) power. In this construct, women have little to no authority in the decision-making realm of the Church precisely because of the lack of such ecclesial power. I have previously explored a theological anthropology of complementarity in relation to sex and gender¹² and in relation

to Mary and ecclesiology.¹³ By way of an abbreviated summary, the mid- to late 20th century saw the growth of a theological anthropology and ecclesiology based on the notion of complementarity, which holds to a female/feminine (Marian) aspect of persons and the Church, and a male/masculine (Petrine) aspect. These anthropological categories, deemed necessary and fixed in human persons, were forwarded by key influential thinkers such as Dietrich von Hildebrand,¹⁴ Louis Bouyer,¹⁵ and Hans Urs von Balthasar¹⁶ and taken up by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI),¹⁷ Pope John Paul II,¹⁸ and Pope Francis,¹⁹ and made their way into perceptions of the Church and the division of labour and privilege therein. This anthropology necessarily limits the actual expression of humanity to masculine for males (i.e., assertive, leading, hierarchical) and feminine for females (i.e., passive, receptive, deferential), regardless of individual character, interest, or vocation. In this light, while women might be emancipated and free to choose in some areas of our lives, as was Mary at the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38), still we are made for obedience to the men who reflect the physical embodiment of Christ and thereby have consonant authority.

In laying this anthropology atop ecclesiology, some thinkers, such as von Balthasar, claim that there is more power in the feminine, Marian, serving facet of the Church than in the masculine, Petrine, ordained ministry and hierarchical facet of the Church²⁰ and are happy to point to that circumscribed power while denying more substantial authority to females. Women are not suited for ministry *in persona Christi* because we do not physically look like Christ and bear his essential maleness. In this perception, also iterated in *Inter Insigniores* by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith²¹ and later reflected authoritatively, although with more cautious limitation, by Pope John Paul II in his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*,²² the theological vision of the male Christ as God leans heavily toward positing that males, who do look like Christ, must therefore more perfectly image God.

In this light, these influential male theologians have posited the following about women, Mary, and roles in the Church in the last century. Von Balthasar suggests that any demand for ecclesiastical office for women betrays the necessary roles of males (Petrine) and

females (Marian) in the Church.²³ Mary herself would know this and would decidedly not be a feminist, he argues.²⁴ He further supposes that Mary need not have given birth to Christ by any typical means, effectively erasing her incarnate body and the reality of childbirth among all mothers.²⁵ And finally, he notes, in concert with the likes of Pope Francis, that women seeking ministerial office in the Church would be “exchanging more for less.”²⁶ Bouyer warns that masculinizing women in the Church via equal access to ordained ministry would annihilate their feminine originality and identity and ultimately deny their existence.²⁷ Pope John Paul II identifies sexual difference in the Genesis 2 creation story, whereby Adam and Eve are essentially masculine and feminine humanity, and embeds complementarity into the creation of humanity.²⁸ In these particular expressions, females and males are bound to a construction of gender not necessarily their own.

Given this Christian underpinning and construction of masculine and feminine gender and sex, it is no great leap to assume the social, political, economic, and cultural power of males in relation to females. In such a scenario, women emulating Mary are framed as good girls and women, meeting the patriarchal expectation of their circumscribed roles: delicate, deferential, silent, and serving. This construction meets the theory of ambivalent sexism, whereby “benevolent” sexist persons admire and maintain a generally positive attitude toward females as long as they remain within traditional roles set out in patriarchal perceptions of sex and gender. When females do not remain within such roles, benevolent sexism turns “hostile” and maintains a generally negative antipathy toward females, whereby they are devalued and treated with antagonism.²⁹ Given the influence of the Church in Western social development in the past two millennia, the influence of such Marian perceptions on females’ place in the world could not help but reach beyond the Church. The power of stratified, ordained ministry denied us trickles into the boardrooms, national Parliaments and Senates, and homes of our communities. Again, I make a case merely for correlation, not causation; this phenomenon might be a reciprocal relationship whereby each element of society bolsters and boosts the others.

If good girls and women are characterized as less able to manage the affairs of the world, it might seem natural to keep them subordinate to males in relation to power and authority, in the same way that Mary is subordinate to Christ in the order of grace. Mary is female/feminine and Christ is male/masculine, and this necessary aspect of human living makes its way into all orders of society. In the broader social context, females then become available to males for the fulfilment of their wants, needs, and desires, rather than individual human persons in their own right; they

are interchangeable, expendable, marketable, and consumable.³⁰ Their bodies become less their own to understand and experience and more for social regulation and control via the manipulation of access to reproductive care and persistent surveillance,³¹ exclusion from medical research,³² and maintenance of beauty standards as social capital,³³ for example.

Beyond Mary

As a testament to gendered perceptions of power in the world, I reflect briefly on the question casually posed to women in a TikTok video from 2024 about who they would rather meet when alone in a forest, a man or a bear. Beyond the lack of rigorous statistical data and scrutiny of the making of the video, the responses are that seven out of eight women chose the bear.³⁴ A robust discussion ensued across social media platforms, wherein some men were affronted by women’s fear of being alone and isolated with a man, and many pointed out the ignorance of women about the dangers of encountering a bear.³⁵ But women do not choose the bear because they are foolish enough to believe that a bear is not dangerous; this perception misses the point. Rather, they choose the bear because they know that a man can be just as dangerous as, if not more so than, a bear.³⁶ Global statistics regarding violence against women (including harassment, assault, stalking, rape, or death) are staggering. The World Health Organization indicates that approximately 30% of “women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Most of this violence is intimate partner violence.”³⁷ Knowing this information from experience, women could be forgiven for preferring to take a chance at being mauled by a bear, who is just being a bear, rather than taking a statistically significant chance at being harmed by a man, who is just being a man.

Ultimately, the point is that men can be dangerous to women, and women have little by way of satisfactory recourse available to them should they be attacked by a man.³⁸ Studies demonstrate that perpetrators of violence against women, of any sort, are rarely held accountable before the law and are protected by social and judicial systems that afford them this luxury.³⁹ I am not blaming Mary for these realities. Rather, I merely point to the millennia of interpretation and manipulation of the most prominent female figure in Christian thought that will keep her relegated to the receptive, obedient, and serving role of the Mother of God and its possible correlation with contemporary questions facing females in 2026. When we look to Mary and women today, we frequently see the sexual vulnerabilities and dangers they face rather than the expression of autonomy in Mary’s choice to bear Christ. Despite first-, second-, and third-wave feminism (with a fourth

wave swelling) each making gains for women in their cultural contexts in the past century,⁴⁰ we remain subject to violence, humiliation, discrimination, and scrutiny regarding our bodies, our spirits, and our dignity in the world.⁴¹

Some recent global and local data regarding female general health and wellness in the world suggest that females generally fare better today than in any time in history, by most measurements.⁴² In the Northern America region, however, economic gender equity and parity for females is somewhat stagnant, which, according to the World Economic Forum, has gained only 0.6 percentage points since the inception of their index in 2006, that is, in 20 years.⁴³ Despite making gains in educational and political empowerment parity, economic gains for females continue to lag in Canada and the United States. In the current, relatively unfettered capitalist structure, economic gains represent gains in emancipation, choice, and independence for females.

More detailed numbers regarding disparity between males and females are ubiquitous. Regarding recent social and health policy and legal action in the United States, we know that 412 women have been arrested for pregnancy-related crimes since the *Roe v. Wade* decision giving women access to abortion was overturned in June 2022.⁴⁴ By contrast, the number of American men arrested as a result of their connection to and involvement with the notorious trafficker of underage females Jeffrey Epstein, as named in the files connected to his criminal case, is exactly zero. At the same time, numerous males and females outside of the United States have been arrested, been publicly admonished, and lost their careers over the same issue,⁴⁵ while one female closely aligned with Epstein, Ghislaine Maxwell, is currently incarcerated in the United States.⁴⁶ While reproductive rights and bodily autonomy are compromised for females in the United States, the appalling behaviour of males in relation to the sexual exploitation of underaged females goes unchecked in that same country. Even if prosecution in relation to the Epstein files were not possible given legal requirements for legitimate prosecution, the fact that many of these men seem to remain in positions of power means, in the public eye, that their abhorrent actions are not quite abhorrent enough to cause outrage and reap consequences among their peers. It is unclear what level of abhorrent behaviour would be required for there to be legitimate recoil among their social, business, and familial relations, if this is not sufficient. Returning north to Canada, we see the intersectional violences committed against Indigenous women and girls. The many years it took for various levels of government to pull together inquiries and investigations into murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) and the meagre progress we have made in executing the Calls for Justice from

the Final Report of the MMIWG Inquiry speaks volumes on the ways in which violence against females is minimized, and even more so for Indigenous females.⁴⁷

That violence against and diminishment of women exist is not solely attributable to a Marian theology closely aligned with a theological anthropology of complementarity. The concurrent patriarchal economic and social structures that prop up sexist and misogynist attitudes continue to deprecate the concerns of all females in Northern America. However, the Christian and Catholic imagination operative around the globe does little to support the concerns of women.

Conclusion

I am writing something slightly different than I had anticipated because I am frustrated, disappointed, and angry. I have walked for and with women, I have written for and with women, I have taught for and with women, and I have advocated for and with women most of my adult life. And still, here we are. Males who continue to believe it is safe to ignore or revile contemporary feminist sentiments are part of the problem. Those who believe they advocate for women but would not dare call themselves feminist: who say, “Yes, but not all men.” Those males who do not speak up when their female family members, colleagues, friends, and neighbours are diminished by one of their own. Those who would rather teach their daughters self-defence than teach their sons respect for girls, women, and all marginalized people. Those males are the problem. Their micro-aggressions and silence allow for this state of affairs. In the same light, those who point to how highly respected Mary is without hierarchical power or how motherhood is the glory of being a woman without concomitant respect for actual mothers are the problem. Because they are abandoning the ones who birthed, raised, nurtured, taught, accompanied, dated, and married them. The fact that they have never harassed or assaulted a woman does not mean no woman has ever been harassed or assaulted and does not exonerate those who have quietly capitulated to patriarchal norms.

As a counselling therapist for over 25 years, of all the many and diverse females I have seen, I would estimate that only 5% of them have never experienced sexual abuse, harassment, or assault over the course of their lives. Many of these females have normalized and explained away male harassment and assault as part of the social contract to which girls and women are party. Many of these females do not identify these experiences as their presenting issue, although it frequently is predominant. Let us not think that telling girls to dress modestly, stay quiet, and emulate Mary does not contribute to the epidemic of male violence against females. Because males know that females

often will not speak up and that the females will fare worse than the males should they report. Men know that, despite abhorrent criminal behaviour and felony convictions, they could still end up as the president of the United States of America.⁴⁸

If holding up motherhood as the pinnacle of womanhood is true and necessary, then so ought to be supporting women and mothers in their lives—women who disproportionately (still) bear the burden of work in the home,⁴⁹ the mental and emotional load of childcare and maintaining a household⁵⁰ while holding full-time jobs outside the home—by advocating for affordable childcare, safe streets at night, hefty prosecution of child and adult sexual offences, equitable distribution of domestic work, support for females in roles of power, and equal pay for equal work. What we find in today's news, however, leans more in the opposite direction, such as males raping their sedated wives and monetizing their actions online or inviting other males to participate.⁵¹ In her prophetic article, Karen Lebacqz identifies exactly this reality: women enter potentially dangerous relationships knowing the possibility of intimate partner violence.⁵² The nature of gendered and sexed relationships is such that females have learned practical vigilance toward violence and abuse in their own partnerships. Whatever progress society in Northern America has made in respecting and supporting women in the last century, it is ever eroded by the lack of accountability for crimes against females among men, prominent and otherwise.

In the light of correlation, we might consider emphasizing a more robust vision of Mary, the Mother of God; less an essentially obedient, feminine, and receptive self and more an autonomous, active, and choosing self. As the bearer of Truth, Mary's choice to carry Jesus in what was likely a difficult circumstance was also an act of fortitude; she knew the social realities of her time. She was an embodied female who bore God's son in her womb—not only because she was obedient, but also because she was strong, faithful, resilient, and female. We might talk about Mary as a woman who persisted in her commitment to God, knowing full well that she was choosing a difficult road, with no promise of a life free from violence or diminishment. We might consider that Mary's suffering was not confined to her watching her son die a brutal death; it might also be located in the daily realities of being a woman in an historical context that was only marginally concerned with the women who fed, followed, and cared for Jesus; the handmaids; the good girls. Given the circumstances in which Mary birthed, raised, and let go of her son, we might conclude not that she was merely serving, obedient, and quiet. Rather, we might conclude that she was resolute, wise, and magnificent; that she was sexual, esteemed, and mighty. In taking that Mary as a model, we could be empowered toward

a womanhood that need not be silent in the face of our own oppression; that need not fear the hostility of males who fear us; and that does not assume violence or degradation but rather authority and respect. This is the Mary, full of grace, whose model lifts us more fully into the embrace of the Divine.

Doris M. Kieser is Associate Professor and Acting Vice-President (Academic) and Dean at St. Joseph's College, University of Alberta.

1 "Northern America" refers specifically to Canada and the United States as a designated "region" of the World Economic Forum; see *Global Gender Gap Report*, June 2025: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2025/in-full/benchmarking-gender-gaps-2025/#performance-by-region>. I also note the simultaneous undoing of the rights of other marginalized persons and groups (e.g., racialized, LGBTQ2S+, disabled) by reduced funding and support. For example, recent legislation in the province of Alberta substantially reduces monthly income for persons with disabilities and requires proof of their inability to earn an income: Inclusion Alberta, "Alberta Disability Assistance Program (ADAP) Would Cut AISH by \$220/Month: The Facts and How to Take Action," December 2025, <https://inclusionalberta.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/ADAP-The-Facts-and-How-to-Take-Action-Dec25.pdf>. This conflation of discrimination across marginalized groups is of a piece. However, a broad consideration of these intersections is beyond the scope of this short paper.

2 For example, Colm Toibin, *The Testament of Mary* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2012); Diane Schoemperlen, *Our Lady of the Lost and Found* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2001).

3 For example, "Salus Populi Romani," *Papal Basilica of Saint Mary Major*, Rome, Italy, 2026, <https://www.basilicasantamariamaggiore.va/en/basilica/storia-e-arte/salus-popoli-romani.html>; Re: "Our Lady of the Gates of Dawn," Gates of Dawn, Vilnius, Lithuania, Paul Jaskunas, "A Shrine for the Year of Mercy," *America*, November 17, 2016, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2016/11/17/shrine-year-mercy>.

4 Andre Joseph Perez, "Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe (Glass Mosaic Mural)," *Street Art Cities*, December 12, 2024, <https://streetartcities.com/markers/8723204b-da64-4a84-a6f4-aa8cf60666f5>.

5 Bob Eckert, "Our Lady of Guadalupe," *Bob Eckert Photography*, undated: <https://www.bobeckertphotography.com/lady-of-guadalupe.html>.

6 Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, Lourdes, France, 2026, <https://www.lourdes-france.org/en>.

7 Shrine of Fatima, Fatima, Portugal, 2026, <https://www.fatima.pt/en>.

8 Our Lady of the Cape Shrine, Trois-Rivières, Québec, 2026, <https://www.sanctuaire-ndc.ca/en>.

9 Rechilda Estores and Zeus Legaspi, "Flores De May: Commemoration of Mary in the Philippines," *Vatican News*, May 15, 2023, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-05/flores-de-mayo-mary-philippines.html>.

10 "Pilgrims, New and Returning, Come to Honour Our Lady at Skaro," Skaro Shrine, *The Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton*, August 21, 2025, <https://caedm.ca/pilgrims-new-and-returning-come-to-honour-our-lady-at-skaro>.

11 Kiply Lukan Yaworski, "Walking Pilgrimage to Mount Carmel Shrine During Jubilee Year of Hope," *Catholic Saskatoon News*, August 29, 2025, <https://news.rcdos.ca/2025/08/29/jubilee-walking-pilgrimage-to-mount-carmel>.

12 Doris M. Kieser, *Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls: Embodied Flourishing* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015), esp. 156–57.

- 13 Doris M. Kieser, "Four Popes and the Mother of God: Bodies, Complementarity, and Female Flourishing," *Horizons*, forthcoming 2026.
- 14 Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 1929, 1942, 1984) and *Man and Woman* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1965, 1966).
- 15 Louis Bouyer, *The Seat of Wisdom: An Essay on the Place of the Virgin Mary in Christian Theology*, trans. A.V. Littledale (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1960, 1965); and *Woman in the Church*, trans. Marilyn Teichert (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1976, 1979).
- 16 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theological Anthropology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963, 1967); von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, trans. Andree Emery (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1974, 1986); *Mary for Today*, trans. Robert Nowell (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987); and von Balthasar with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1980, 1997).
- 17 Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*; and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion*, trans. John M. McDermott (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1977, 1983).
- 18 John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1997), *Mulieris Dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html, and *Redemptoris Mater* (March 25, 1987), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html.
- 19 Francis, "Homily: Holy Mass on the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, XLVIII World Day of Peace" (January 1, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150101_omelia-giornata-mondiale-pace.html.
- 20 Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, 111; see also Balthasar, *The Office of Peter*.
- 21 Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores: On the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood* (October 15, 1976), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html.
- 22 John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (May 22, 1994), §4, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html.
- 23 von Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, 140.
- 24 von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 56.
- 25 von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 24.
- 26 von Balthasar, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, 111. See also Francis, "Homily: Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, 54th World Day of Peace" (January 1, 2022), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220101_omelia-madredidio-pace.html.
- 27 Bouyer, *Woman in the Church*, 11–26.
- 28 John Paul II, "General Audience of November 21, 1979," in *Theology of the Body*, 48.
- 29 Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, "An Ambivalent Alliance: Hostile and Benevolent Sexism as Complementary Justifications for Gender Inequality," *American Psychologist* 56, no. 2 (2001): 109–18.
- 30 An extreme example of the diminution of women and other marginalized people is the "manosphere," a general term encapsulating males who are discontented with female relationships, their own role in society, and feminism broadly construed. See Women and Gender Equality Canada, "What is the Manosphere: Key Terms, Meanings, and Why it Matters," Government of Canada, May 8, 2026, <https://www.canada.ca/en/women-gender-equality/funding/equality-action/manosphere.html>; United Nations, "What is the Manosphere and Why Should We Care?" UNWomen, May 15, 2025, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/what-is-the-manosphere-and-why-should-we-care>.
- 31 For explicit legal commentary on the surveillance of women regarding reproductive rights in the United States and the vast implications of such surveillance, see Jolynn Dellinger and Stephanie Pell, "Bodies of Evidence: The Criminalization of Abortion and Surveillance of Women in a Post-Dobbs World," *Duke Journal of Constitutional Law & Public Policy* 19 (2024): 1–108.
- 32 National Institutes of Health (USA), "History of Women's Participation in Clinical Research," National Institutes of Health, Office of Research on Women's Health, April 24, 2024, <https://orwh.od.nih.gov/toolkit/recruitment/history>; Government of Canada, "Guidance Document: Consideration for Inclusion of Women in Clinical Trials and Analysis of Sex Differences," Government of Canada, May 29, 2013 (esp. §1.5 for history): <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/drug-products/applications-submissions/guidance-documents/clinical-trials/considerations-inclusion-women-clinical-trials-analysis-data-sex-differences.html>.
- 33 Rachel M. Calogero, Tracy L. Tylka, Loic C. Donnelly, Amber McGettrick, and Andrea Medrano Leger, "Trappings of Femininity: A Test of the 'Beauty as Currency' Hypothesis in Shaping College Women's Gender Activism," *Body Image* 21 (2017): 66–70, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2017.02.008>.
- 34 Screenshoth, "The Question of Being Stuck in a Forest" (original TikTok video), April 10, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/@screenshot/video/7356208240008498465?lang=en>.
- 35 Conor Murray, "Man or Bear? Many Women Say They'd Rather Be Stuck in the Woods with a Bear in Latest Viral TikTok Debate," *Forbes*, May 3, 2024; A.J. Willingham, "Man or Bear? A Viral Question Has Spawned Scary Responses," *CNN*, May 6, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/06/us/man-bear-safety-tiktok-question-ccc>.
- 36 Rachel Ulatowski, "Men are Proving the Whole Point of the Man vs. Bear Debate," *The Mary Sue*, May 1, 2024, <https://www.themarysue.com/man-vs-bear-tiktok-debate-explained>.
- 37 World Health Organization, "Violence Against Women Fact Sheet," March 25, 2024, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women#:~:text=Estimates%20published%20by%20WHO%20indicate,sexual%20violence%20in%20their%20lifetime>.
- 38 Coordinating Committee of Senior Officials Working Group on Access to Justice for Adult Victims of Sexual Assault, *Reporting, Investigating and Prosecuting Sexual Assaults Committed Against Adults: Challenges and Promising Practices in Enhancing Access to Justice for Victims*, Federal-Provincial-Territorial Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Justice and Public Safety (November 15–16, 2018), Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat, 2018, <https://scics.ca/en/product-produit/reporting-investigating-and-prosecuting-sexual-assaults-committed-against-adults-challenges-and-promising-practices-in-enhancing-access-to-justice-for-victims>.
- 39 Michelle Wieberneit, Sascha Thal, Joseph Clare, Lies Notebaert, and Hilde Tubex, "Silenced Survivors: A Systematic Review of the Barriers to Reporting, Investigating, Prosecuting, and Sentencing of Adult Female Rape and Sexual Assault," *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse* 25, no. 5 (2024): 3742–57, doi:10.1177/15248380241261404.
- 40 Andrea Eiding, "Feminism," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, January 6, 2026, <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/feminism>; Martha Rampton, "Four Waves of Feminism," Pacific University, Oregon, October 25, 2015, <https://www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism>.
- 41 Dellinger and Pell, "Bodies of Evidence," 2024; UNWomen, "Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women," November 19, 2025, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-ending-violence-against-women>; World Health Organization, "Violence Against Women."
- 42 World Population Review, "Gender Equality by Country 2026," <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gender-equality-by-country#title>. The World Economic Forum identifies four sub-indexes of its Global Gender Gap Index: Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment. World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2025* (June 11, 2025), <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2025/in-full/benchmarking-gender-gaps-2025>; Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and

Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo, *Women, Peace and Security Index Report 2025/26: Summary* (Washington, DC: GIWPS and PRIO, 2025).

43 According to the World Population Review Report, *Gender Equality by Country 2026*, Canada currently sits at 0.751/1.0 in economic equity; the United States sits at 0.762/1.0: <https://world-populationreview.com/country-rankings/gender-equality-by-country>.

44 Pregnancy Justice, "Pregnancy Criminalization Two Years After Dobbs," Interim Update: September 2025: <https://www.pregnancyjusticeus.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Pregnancy-as-a-Crime-An-Interim-Update-on-the-First-Two-Years-After-Dobbs.pdf>; Wendy A. Bach and Madalyn Wasilczuk, *Pregnancy as a Crime: A Preliminary Report on the First Year After Dobbs*, September 2024: <https://www.pregnancyjusticeus.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Pregnancy-as-a-Crime.pdf>.

45 Alia Chughtai, "Epstein files: The arrests and the resignations," Aljazeera, February 24, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/24/epstein-files-the-arrests-and-the-resignations>.

46 United States Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York, "Gislaine Maxwell Sentenced to 20 Years in Prison for Conspiring with Jeffrey Epstein to Sexually Abuse Minors," Department of Justice, June 28, 2022: <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/gislaine-maxwell-sentenced-20-years-prison-conspiring-jeffrey-epstein-sexually-abuse>.

47 Assembly of First Nations, *Progress on Breathing Life into the Calls for Justice: A CFJ Report Card*, June 3, 2024; Alberta Joint Working Group on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (AJWG), *113 Pathways to Justice: Recommendations of the Alberta*

Joint Working Group on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (Government of Alberta, Indigenous Relations, December 2021), <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/113-pathways-to-justice-recommendations-of-joint-working-group-on-mmiwg#detailed>.

48 Ruthann Robson, "The Sexual Misconduct of Donald J. Trump: Toward a Misogyny Report," *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* 27, no. 1 (2020): 81–148, <https://doi.org/10.36641/mjgl.27.1.sexual>; David A. Graham, "The Cases Against Trump: A Guide," *The Atlantic*, January 6, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/01/donald-trump-legal-cases-charges/675531>.

49 Mylène Ross-Plourde and Mylène Lachance-Grzela, "The Gendered Division of Housework in North America: A Systematic Review from 2014 to 2024," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 17, no. 3: 691–720, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.700000>.

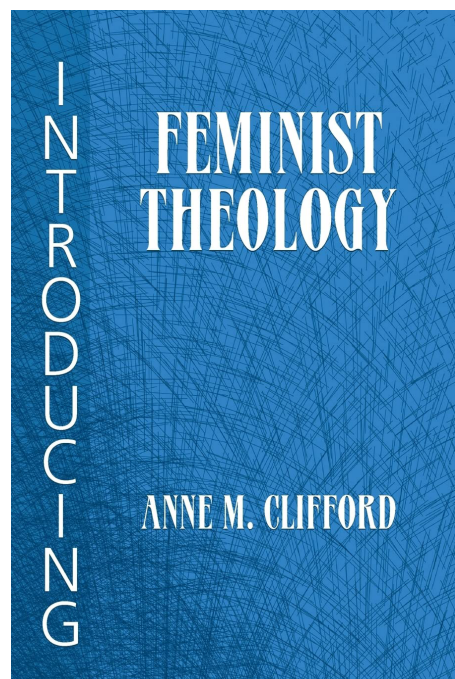
50 Natalia Reich-Stiebert, Laura Friehlich, and Jan-Bennet Voltmer, "Gendered Mental Labor: A Systematic Literature Review on the Cognitive Dimension of Unpaid Work Within the Household and Childcare," *Sex Roles* 88 (2023): 475–94, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-023-01362-0>.

51 Two stories, for example: Saskya Vandoorne, Kara Fox, Niamh Kennedy, Eleanor Stubbs, and Marco Chacon, "Exposing a Global Rape Academy," CNN, March 26, 2026, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2026/03/world/expose-rape-assault-online-vis-intl/index.html>; Gisèle Pelicot's experience, recounted in her memoir, *A Hymn to Life: Shame Has to Change Sides* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2026).

52 Karen Lebacqz, "Love Your Enemy: Sex, Power, and Christian Ethics," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 10 (1990): 3–23, <https://doi.org/10.5840/asce1990102>.

Introducing Feminist Theology

Anne M. Clifford



Introducing Feminist Theology responds to the questions "What is feminist theology?" and "Why is it important?" by considering the perspectives of women from around the globe who have very diverse life experience and relationships to God, Church and creation. Clifford introduces the major forms of feminist theology: "radical," "reformist," and "reconstructionist," and highlights some of their specific characteristics.

Anne M. Clifford was associate professor of theology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh and a Sister of St. Joseph. A recipient of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching at Duquesne (1995), she was the author of numerous articles in the area of feminist theology, ecofeminism, and science and religion.

288 pages, PB, ISBN: 978-1-57075-238-4 \$28.50



Available at your local bookstore, online at en.novalis.ca or call 1-800-387-7164 to order.

Fraternity over Nationalism

On the Non-Normative Character of Public Theology¹

By Steven P. Millies

Catholic Theological Union, Chicago

From time to time, I teach a course in public theology where I dedicate the first class meeting to making a distinction between public theology and political theology. Public theology, I tell the students, is concerned with presenting theological claims to one public or another. Those claims might be political, but as often as not they should express the other claims made by theology. The text that guides the Christian public theologian is Paul's discourse with the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17. Paul's discourse is not about politics. Instead, Paul attempts to relate the nature of God to the philosophers gathered at the Areopagus. And, perhaps most important of all, the philosophers are unpersuaded. They scoff and laugh. Luke records that Paul left on that day with just one or two new followers. Preaching the gospel did not carry the day, yet the most urgent task of public theology had been satisfied: the claims of theology were presented to a public. Whether those claims were accepted or not was far less important. Paul was untroubled. He went on to preach the next day.

Political theology is something else. Political theology is the presentation of theology for a political purpose. The purpose can be many things. A theology of liberation is a political theology. The claims of the pro-life movement present a political theology. But so also were the claims of Carl Schmitt as much as the contemporary theologians of integralism. Political theology, in its own way, can have many purposes, just as public theology does. Theology has been used to serve many different (often contrary) purposes down the centuries. But whatever purpose political theology aims to serve, what distinguishes it fundamentally from public theology is the normative quality of political theology. Political theology brings theology to the world in order to amend the world somehow. Political theology presents a claim to politics in the name of theology, and that claim is meant to be honoured.

With this essay, I do not propose to say much else about the distinction between public theology and political theology. Instead, I offer this distinction so that we may appreciate something else. Down the two millennia since the time of Constantine, the Church has acquired a normative habit of a more political theology

in its encounter with the world. The habit arose historically through circumstances, not as a natural fruit of Christian theology. But the habit was acquired. From Constantine to the Reformation, the Church governed and, though the distinction between the spiritual and temporal spheres is as old as Constantinianism, the spiritual power's claim to primacy is just as old. That language corrupts the ordinary presentation of theology to publics, often even when that was not the intention. It is this problem I intend to address here. A normative habit that privileges spiritual claims even when the language of theology does not intend to do so challenges and often thwarts the practice of public theology in the 21st century. The problem is tangled across theology and history. It is not easy to undo these knots. At the same time, in its own way, the problem is quite simple.

We commonly say that the Roman Catholic Church has made its peace with democracy, pluralism, and constitutional government. Most people inside the Church and many people outside the Church have taken that proposition for granted since the end of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). But the peace is not made. The habit is not broken. This essay only is a descriptive gesture. The work is too vast. However, if this essay succeeds in being persuasive about the nature and the scale of the problem, I shall feel entitled to offer some promising gestures toward what solutions might look like. In sum, those are the hopes with which I embark here.²

Nationalism in a New Light

After philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre died in 2025, I dug out my notes from a gathering of the Lumen Christi Institute at the University of Chicago in 2005, where four speakers—MacIntyre was joined by Cardinal Francis George, Jean-Luc Marion, and Charles Taylor—responded to the question “What can philosophers learn from the tradition?” I had noted how MacIntyre recalled a stray remark Joseph Ratzinger had made at some point. As MacIntyre recalled it, Ratzinger lamented that the Church sided with nationalism in the 19th century. MacIntyre glossed that remark to add that it was a shame the Church had

embraced the “idol” of nationalism rather than finding a way to embrace fraternity.³ The remark didn’t quite strike me in 2005 the way it suddenly brought me up short in 2025.

To begin, we surely can recall that “fraternity” would have been a fraught subject for the 19th-century Church only decades after shouts of “Liberté! Égalité! Fraternité!” had shattered Christendom with seeming finality. In the years since 2005, Pope Francis had begun a theological engagement with and acceptance of fraternity, as seen in his 2020 encyclical letter, *Fratelli Tutti*, “On Fraternity and Social Friendship.”⁴ But here we will address the implications of a Church that embraced nationalism so long ago and that let the embrace of fraternity wait until 2020.

If the Church turned to nationalism in the 19th century, the choice was understandable in a way but also consequential. In the immediate post-revolutionary climate, no doubt the Church would have sought some promise of continuity with the previous centuries’ arrangements of Christendom. Where once the Church exerted influence through the Christian monarchs over whom it claimed spiritual jurisdiction, now the Church would claim its place in partnership with nationalist leaders or, in democratic states, even seek to maintain its political influence through the participation of Catholic citizens.

At this point it seems useful to say a word about what we can surmise MacIntyre meant by “nationalism,” for certainly there are important differences between the nationalism of Franco and the nationalism of the United States. We want to focus our attention on what they have in common. I rely here on the definition offered by Peter Alter: “In nationalism, the nation is placed upon the highest pedestal; its value resides in its capacity as the sole, binding agency of meaning and justification.”⁵ As Alter’s treatment of the topic affirms, nationalism was a creation of the modern world. The modern national state did not exist before the Reformation era, and it was only reaching maturity in the 19th century. Therefore, at least one consequence worth noting is the way that in embracing nationalism, the Church also embraced the modern world. The modern state did not exist when the Church formed in the last centuries of the Roman Empire, nor did it exist during the medieval period of Christendom. For these reasons, first, it is telling that the Church would embrace nationalism in the 19th century. The embrace gives an appearance of using what the modern world provided to maintain continuity with Christendom. I would note, second, that the strangeness of embracing a characteristic of the modern world as a mode of resisting the encroachments of the modern world on the Church’s temporal power discloses something to us about motivation and context.

It is common today to speak of Christian nationalism, the organization of political power of a national state around the political theology of the Christian revelation. For the Roman Catholic Church, it is somewhat different, because for the Catholic Church this is a project of recovery more than aspiration.⁶ The Church in Rome enjoyed considerable temporal power during the age of Christendom, from the fall of Rome until the Reformation. Still, in substance, the hopes of the new integralists are the same as the Christian nationalists.⁷ Quoting from Louis Bouyer, Timothy Troutner characterizes the particularly Catholic variety of those hopes as “‘absolutization of authority,’ ‘petrifying of tradition,’ and nostalgic longing for the Church to wield political power as it did in the Christendom of old.”⁸ The old dream of integrated spiritual and temporal power under the Church never fully went away.

An Eschatology of the Nation

It is true that Pope John Paul II embraced solidarity (a Francis synonym for fraternity) much earlier than *Fratelli Tutti* in his 1987 encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. But as quickly as we draw some relief from John Paul, we should consider a long quotation from a different source in his writings—a quotation that may raise some alarm. It suggests not just the embrace of nationalism by the Church but what motivates that embrace. John Paul wrote:

The history of every individual, and therefore of every people, possesses a markedly eschatological dimension.... The eschatological aspect means that human life makes sense and the history of nations also makes sense. Admittedly it is people and not nations that have to face God’s judgment, but in the judgment pronounced on individuals, nations too are in some way judged. Can there be such a thing as an eschatology of the nation? Nations have an exclusively historical meaning, whereas man’s vocation is eschatological. Yet man’s vocation leaves its mark on the history of nations.... In the light of these considerations we can now clarify further the concept of “native land.”⁹

This is from a 2005 book John Paul wrote as an individual—*Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium*—and it is not an authoritative statement that arises from the Petrine office. Still, John Paul’s later reflections point toward the larger dimensions of the problem that was largely unexamined across decades and centuries.

Many years earlier, in remarks he offered at a UNESCO meeting on the role of culture in the life of nations, John Paul was careful to say that “What I say here concerning the right of the nation to the foundation of

its culture and its future is not, therefore, the echo of any ‘nationalism,’ but it is always a question of a stable element of human experience and of the humanistic perspective of man’s development.”¹⁰ But there are reasons why that qualification should not soothe concerns. Nationalism existed long before John Paul II was elected in 1978. Yet, to essentialize national identity in this way with eschatological significance seems extraordinary. Perhaps, though, it is not so surprising when we begin to untangle the long and difficult time the Roman Catholic Church has had with the modern world and especially with the meaning of national community since the Peace of Westphalia. Settling once and for all that a civil government controls what happens inside its borders, Westphalia thwarted the claims of supranational Christendom. The long struggle over the separation of church and state was underway, and the trouble perhaps was that the Church had spent so many centuries from Eusebius to Bellarmine conditioning its identity on establishing Christendom.

In an especially important passage in his 1961 encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*, Pope John XXIII writes how “groups must themselves necessarily present the form and substance of a true community, and this will only be the case if they treat their individual members as human persons and encourage them to take an active part in the ordering of their lives.”¹¹ It is perhaps the first place where the Church begins at the level of authoritative teaching to grapple with the challenge of moving past Christendom as its aspirational model for social and political life. We know John XXIII was alert to the need for bringing the Church up to pace with the modern world; otherwise, he would not have convoked the Second Vatican Council, which was in preparation when *Mater et Magistra* appeared. The encyclical named itself as concerned with “Christianity and Social Progress,” and it abounds with fresh expressions about the Church’s relationship to the world. Yet, not all of them are so fresh, and many problems remain.

That passage from paragraph 65 is important because it deals with the most bedeviling problem in the Church’s engagement with modern constitutional states: the common good. The phrase “common good” sounds benign. A few years after *Mater et Magistra*, the Second Vatican Council rather helpfully defined this term, which is a very old idea nurtured from Aristotle and Aquinas, in a modern-seeming way. Its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) tells us that the common good is “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.”¹² Very few people of any religious faith or no religious faith would disagree. But the Aristotelian

and Thomist language about the common good signals trouble just as much as the Aristotelian and Thomist language we find in *Mater et Magistra*: “the form and substance of a true community.” John XXIII is writing in paragraph 65 of the encyclical about social groups. The larger context is revealing:

We consider it altogether vital that the numerous intermediary bodies and corporate enterprises—which are, so to say, the main vehicle of this social growth—be really autonomous, and loyally collaborate in pursuit of their own specific interests and those of the **common good**. For these groups must themselves necessarily present the form and substance of a **true community**, and this will only be the case if they treat their individual members as human persons and encourage them to take an active part in the ordering of their lives.¹³

As before, most people will agree. But it is the relationship between “common good” and “true community” that needs to concern us.

The critical question comes when we ask who determines what is “true,” what is the “good” of the “common good.” Is it something that can be settled at the ballot box because “Praise is due to those national procedures which allow the largest possible number of citizens to participate in public affairs with genuine freedom,” as *Gaudium et Spes* tells us?¹⁴ Or could we define the common good in a constitution because John XXIII praised “the observance of constitutional procedures” in *Pacem in Terris*?¹⁵ But maybe we could ask the question this way instead: What if every citizen of a plural political community like the United States does not share the moral vision of the Roman Catholic Church? Quickly we discover that the Church does not think the common good is actually susceptible to being identified by a deliberation of the whole community in freedom or a judicial finding about the meaning of a constitutional provision. Rather, the common good has objective moral and ethical content. And, at least theologically, whatever falls outside the boundaries of that objective understanding named in the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church fails to be the common good. That would be despite how the Second Vatican Council found to be “greatly in accord with truth and justice” the fact that “the demand is increasingly made that men should act on their own judgment.”

Immediately after, *Dignitatis Humanae* “professes its belief that it is upon the human conscience that these obligations fall and exert their binding force ... [and that] Religious freedom, in turn ... has to do with immunity from coercion in civil society.”¹⁶ If one has a religious conviction that is at odds with how the Roman Catholic Church understands, for example,

abortion or euthanasia (as even many believers do), we know that the Church will not acknowledge that conscientious position as fitting within the scope of the common good (or, we might add, religious liberty). Such things are beyond democratic and constitutional settlement under our theology still today.¹⁷ The “true community” in our theology still is one that will not permit the common good to be defined in the way that democratic and constitutional states—republics—most ordinarily think about the common good as being identified by all of the people together in some democratic or constitutional act. And so, there is an unresolved tension here. It is not between our moral theology and how Catholicism understands the state. That is the surface of a conflict that runs much deeper. The deeper conflict is at the level of how the Church understands what a community is.

Authentic and Correct

This is a précis of a very large and mostly subterranean problem. One finds it peeking out from beneath things the Church says (and does not say) with startling frequency once one begins to listen for it. Listen to John Paul II in his otherwise wonderful 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*: “**Authentic** democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a **correct** conception of the human person.”¹⁸ Notice those qualifiers and take them seriously—“authentic” and “correct.” He goes on with an astonishingly cranky complaint:

Nowadays there is a tendency to claim that agnosticism and sceptical relativism are the philosophy and the basic attitude which correspond to democratic forms of political life. Those who are convinced that they know the truth and firmly adhere to it [Catholics] are considered unreliable from a democratic point of view, since they do not accept that truth is determined by the majority, or that it is subject to variation according to different political trends. It must be observed in this regard that if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism.¹⁹

For faithful Roman Catholics, perhaps this poses no problem. But this is not good news for other citizens in our community with different belief systems arising from different faiths or no faith.

At this point, it becomes important to return to the earlier discussion about nationalism and how the Church embraced it in the 19th century—particularly John Paul II’s suggestion that there could be an “eschatol-

ogy of the nation,” which tells us something about how the Church thinks about nation and community. John Paul’s construction of this eschatology is revealing: “man’s vocation leaves its mark on the history of nations.” His 1983 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that the fundamental vocation of every human being is the call to holiness—a deep personal relationship with God and a life lived in accordance with God’s will.²⁰ This is an undifferentiated claim that does not exclude non-Catholics. And so, when John Paul wrote later about “Poland’s baptism” at the time when the gospel came to Poland “around the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries” as “not simply referring to the sacrament of Christian initiation ... but also to the event which was decisive for the birth of the nation and the formation of Poland’s Christian identity,” he was explicitly including all Poles, Christian or not.²¹ Yet, we know from the testimony of a contemporary Andalusian trader, Ibrahim ibn Yaqub, that “Christian” Poland certainly included Jews and probably others.²² As he was a student of Poland’s past, it would be surprising if John Paul did not know about the presence of other believers at the time of “Poland’s baptism.” And, without impugning John Paul or his motivations, especially where the Catholic relationship to Judaism is concerned, it seems necessary to point out how unexamined a lot of assumptions about community and nation are in the Catholic Church. Those unexamined assumptions arise from a long history of aspirational Christendom that does not correspond closely to the gospel or even to recent authoritative teaching. They have consequences for how the Church engages the world, and those consequences are an immediate concern for the public theologian.

Fraternity and Public Theology

There are many opportunities in Catholic theology to identify a better conception of community and nation that can accommodate the reality of the modern world without abandoning what Catholics believe. There also are obstacles, the largest of which is the underdeveloped state of the question that prevents us from seeing its true character not as a moral problem for the individual voter or the individual Catholic politician, but a theological problem for the whole Church.

Being the Church that could prefer to embrace nationalism in the 19th century is a problem we still are living with in the 21st century. Because the effects of that embrace linger, our public theology has a counterproductively normative quality. Too often it is political theology, really. The Church still claims authority to determine the shape of the world and its possibilities for people who do not believe in our revelation. How the Church reached this point was understandable. Fraternity was tainted by Revolution. Nationalism, on the other hand, offered a way to hold

on to the temporal and civil power Christendom once made possible, presuming the Church could exercise control through Catholic states, Catholic leaders, and even Catholic voters. That hope has been visible not just in Franco's Spain but, in a different way, in efforts to deny communion to Catholic politicians in the US. Still, nationalism was the wrong choice, built on centuries of flawed assumptions. They are assumptions of a political theology rooted in the moral claims of the Catholic Church, claims that every Catholic believes and that the Church contends are apprehensible to the reason of any person of good faith. But those assumptions bring more trouble than it first appears within the contexts of plural societies or modern constitutional governments. They look a lot like the way nationalism was adapted in the 19th century to maintain the Church's temporal power. They have a stubbornly normative quality.

Therefore, those assumptions will frustrate public theology so long as the plurality of modern social communities at least equals if not exceeds the plurality of the 11th century's "Christian" Poland. Telling the people of modern political communities that their consciences agree with the moral claims of Catholicism will look very much like baptizing Poland despite its plurality. It is an aggrandizing claim that will look like yet another effort to make normative claims in the temporal realm. Especially after so much history, it only can arouse suspicion that will make the Church's wider revelatory message harder for people to hear.

Better choices still exist. Pope Francis has given us permission to think in terms of fraternity, and in *Fratelli Tutti* he gave us an elegant and fruitful reflection on what it means to be a people in the sense of a community or a nation.²³ That reflection tells us that our community arises from "social and cultural bonds," not normative claims of faith.²⁴ Francis asks us to encounter one another as friends. Dialogue is the method that Francis suggests. Dialogue means really listening more than it means explaining; and, critically, it "involves the ability to respect the other's point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns."²⁵ Yet, such attention to relationships builds bonds that lead us together in new directions. Beginning from that sense of fraternity nurtured in social life or culture perhaps does entail some risks for the Church as it proclaims its gospel and seeks to promote the dignity of every human person from conception to natural death. It means that the Church will need to win people over instead of presenting them with normative assertions. But this is an approach that accords better not only with the ethos of constitutional government and free societies as we know them, but also with that dignity of conscience praised so fulsomely by the Church at Vatican II. It sets the Church in

place as accompanying the people of the world more than determining their futures.

Fraternity is greater than nationalism, socially and theologically. Fraternity offers an approach that will make the task of the public theologian both easier and more effective. And, in this way, it will be for public theologians both to show the world what the Church can offer and to show the Church how it can best make that offer.

Steven P. Millies is Professor of Public Theology and Director of the Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, IL.

1 A portion of this essay is adapted from a presentation given on August 11, 2025, as a contribution to "The Future of Catholicism Symposium" at the annual meeting of the Association of the Sociology of Religion in Chicago, IL.

2 This essay was prepared before the release of Leo XIV's 2026 encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, in which he takes a step toward addressing the problem treated here. Gesturing toward the literature of political theory with a quotation from Hannah Arendt, Leo describes democracy in paragraph 134 as "a means of contributing to the common good" and helpfully characterizes democracy as more than "rules and principles alone, but above all as a solid concordance with the facts and a genuine commitment to the good of individuals and society as a whole." That acknowledgement is a step, but it is still insufficient as a theological remedy to the problem this essay addresses. Leo has opened the door wider for theologians to describe how and why the Church can accept modern constitutional forms of government. This essay accepts that invitation.

3 Alasdair MacIntyre, "What Can Philosophers Learn from the Tradition?" public conversation, Lumen Christi Institute, University of Chicago, April 30, 2005. MacIntyre may have been thinking of Ratzinger's remarks to the Italian Senate on May 12, 2004, which appeared later as "Europe and Its Discontents" in *First Things* 159 (2006), and later in *Without Roots: Europe, Relativism, Christianity, Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 2007). In "Europe and Its Discontents," Ratzinger lamented the way "technology, nationalism, and militarism" had overtaken Europe since the French Revolution (19). If we look back farther, Ratzinger expressed similar ideas in a 1962 lecture, published later as *The Unity of Nations: A Vision of the Church Fathers* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2015), in which he argued that Christianity "was revolutionary in an ultimate sense, since it could not be identified with any state but was, rather, a force that relativized everything that was included in the world by pointing to the one absolute God and to the one mediator between God and [humanity], Jesus Christ" (115–16). Ratzinger wanted to highlight how Christianity's universality disrupts particular national claims and in turn how its universal character renders Christianity revolutionary in a sense that is more subversive than Jacobins or (presumably) Marxists could imagine. The lamentation about choosing nationalism over fraternity seems to have been MacIntyre's own response to Ratzinger. Whatever its relationship to Ratzinger's ideas, MacIntyre's gloss was my own starting point for these reflections.

4 See Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* – On Fraternity and Social Friendship (2020), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

5 Peter Alter, *Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Arnold, 1985), 5. Alter's work is 40 years old yet retains its place as an essential treatment of nationalism. Certainly, part of the reason owes to the care Alter takes with defining nationalism. His effort begins with addressing head-on "Problems of Definition" on page 1. Those problems are real. Yet, here, the definition Alter himself settles on serves our purpose well.

6 See Steven P. Millies, “‘Pick One of Those Pieces Up and Begin Again’: The New Integralism and the Persistence of a Dream of Christendom,” in *Understanding Christian Nationalism: Perspectives on the Political Religion of Trump’s America*, ed. Mark R. Silk and Rhys H. Williams (New York: Routledge, 2026), 112–28.

7 For a brief but excellent treatment of the new integralists that places them in historical context, see Timothy Troutner, “The New Integralists: What They Get Wrong, and Why We Can’t Ignore Them,” *Commonweal* 147, no. 10 (November 2020), 32–37. To find the hopes and ambitions of the new integralists presented in full, see Thomas Crean and Alan Fimister, *Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2020); Adrian Vermeule, *Common Good Constitutionalism: Recovering the Classical Legal Tradition* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2022).

8 Louis C. Bouyer, *The Decomposition of Catholicism*, trans. Charles Underwood Quinn (Cincinnati: Franciscan Herald Press, 1969), 71, quoted in Troutner, “The New Integralists,” 32.

9 John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 75–76.

10 John Paul II, “Address of John Paul II to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),” June 2, 1980, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1980/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19800602_unesco.html.

11 John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* – On Christianity and Social Progress (1961), 65, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html.

12 Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes* – Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965), 26, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

13 John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 65. (Emphasis added.)

14 Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, 31.

15 John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* – On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty (1963), 79, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

16 Paul VI, *Dignitatis Humanae* – Declaration on Religious Freedom (1965), 1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html.

17 See Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas* – On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence (2026), 55–56, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/encyclicals/documents/20260515-magnifica-humanitas.html>. “Human rights are inviolable, since they are ‘inherent in the human person and in human dignity.’ Consequently, they are universal and inalienable. Precisely because they are grounded in the common dignity of every man and woman, they have practical consequences and legal effects, for ‘it would be vain to proclaim human rights if, at the same time, everything were not done to ensure the duty of respecting them, respect by all, in all places and for all.’ Among these rights, the first is the right to life, from conception to its natural end, without which it is impossible to exercise any other right. When this fundamental right is denied — as in the cases of induced abortion, killing of the innocent and euthanasia — we are faced with choices that the Church considers gravely wrong. Looking at our own time, we cannot ignore the fact that the protection of human rights has been exposed to two particularly serious dangers. The first is that these rights are declared in a purely formal sense, while technological progress continues alongside covert or overt violations of human dignity. The second, which is in fact the root of the first, is the inability to recognize the foundation of their universality, since we have abandoned ‘the search for the solid foundations sustaining our decisions and our laws.’”

18 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* – On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* (1991), 46, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html. (Emphasis added.)

19 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 46.

20 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), cf. 1700, 1719.

21 John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, 76–77ff.

22 See Dmitrij Mishin, “Ibrahim Ibn-Ya-Qub At-Turtushi’s Account of the Slavs from the Middle of the Tenth Century,” *Annual of Medieval Studies at the CEU 1994–1995* (Central European University: Budapest, 1996), 184–99.

23 See Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 154–97.

24 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 158.

25 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 203.

Jane Barter's *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*: Four Responses

Introduction

By Timothy Harvie

St. Mary's University, Calgary

Some academic works are able to blend prodigious learning, thoughtful rigour, moral clarity, and insight so as to merit discussion from those not only within the immediate sphere of research, but also from those outside. Such is the recent book by Jane Barter, Professor in the department of Religion and Culture at the University of Winnipeg. The book, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*,¹ examines the role of testimony and witnessing in the aftermath of mass atrocity. Using Walter Benjamin's theopolitics, which "is a type of reading ... that undermines sovereignty" (9), Barter examines the historical trajectory witnessing takes in the Shoah, in South African apartheid, and in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. In doing so, she charts the historical trajectory of the witness as a figure bearing testimony to something material and historical, and therefore external, to the internalization of testimony in its therapeutic and psychological uses. The role of lament in witness-bearing is foregrounded, highlighting that tragic reality that the most authentic witnesses to atrocity are unable to give testimony because their lives have been taken by the violence that was inflicted. Paul Celan and Primo Levi offer visions in which lament is a "counter-testimony to the complacent acceptance of God's justice" (27) and attempts of theodicy to make sense of the aporias of mass violence.

Barter charts the trajectory of witnessing in the post-Shoah era as a preservation of the concrete historical reality of the horrors and atrocities in the concentration camps. The move toward a therapeutic approach to witnessing shifts the ground of testimony from historical events to the inner lives and workings of the human psyche. This makes the recounted events current not only to the historical victims; instead, it becomes "a speech act that forges solidarity between listener and witness/victim so that they both become participants in the surfacing of the traumatic event" (64).

What Barter does so impactfully is to continually attune the reader to the material conditions in the aftermath of testimony. It is relevant that in striving toward reconciliation, it is possible to do so cheaply; in ways that function to placate perpetrators and acting as an enforcement of forgiveness and absolution from victims. It is relevant that decades after South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the material and economic conditions remain largely unimproved for Black South Africans (120). It is important to recognize in Canada the ongoing deficit of justice for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG), the disproportional incarceration rate for Indigenous people, and the economic disparity between Indigenous Peoples and settler Canadians. Such attunement leads the reader to envisage the ongoing material deprivations and human degradations occurring in Palestine, even as we are capable of witnessing this atrocity in real time, live-streaming genocidal acts of destruction and death.

Barter's work is wide-ranging in both its research and its implications. To highlight this, the four respondents to *Theopolitics in the Era of the Witness* approach the discussion from a variety of perspectives, both academic and practical. Bringing together a constructive and critical dialogue that addresses concerns from politics, theology, ecology, psychology, and history not only exhibits the wide-ranging contribution of Barter's work but also the fruitful questions that may be posed to a book such as this. This exchange occurred originally at the annual meeting of the Canadian Theological Society in Winnipeg in June 2026. The facilitated dialogue there was its own witness to the vibrancy of critical theology in Canada.

Timothy Harvie is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at St. Mary's University in Calgary, Alberta. Among his several publications is the forthcoming Routledge Handbook of Ecotheology, which he co-edited with Matthew Eaton.

¹ Jane Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness* (New York: Routledge, 2025). References to Barter's book are found in the text of this introduction.

Witness, Refusal, and the Vindication of the Oppressed

By Ryan Turnbull

Visiting Fellow, St John's College, Winnipeg, Canada

In 1940, Walter Benjamin articulated a vision of an angel bearing witness to the piled-up wreckage of the one long catastrophe of history.¹ In Jane Barter's 2025 monograph, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*,² we discover that Benjamin's angel does not merely have a temporality but also has an affiliated geography: the contested territories of settler-colonial nations. Barter persuasively weaves together accounts from the settler-colonial societies of Israel, Canada, and South Africa. In assembling these geographies, Barter reveals the subtle theopolitical structure of settler colonialism—especially how it routinely recruits the witnesses to and of mass atrocity into fodder for the “inventive settler”³ narration of these societies such that settler colonial nations prove immune to the critiques of even the most articulate witnesses.

Taking her cues from Benjamin's “weak messianism,” Barter articulates a powerful refusal of the “inventive settler.” The inventive settler, according to the settler-colonial triad of Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang, is the hegemonic narrator of settler societies that at once guarantees settler futurity and naturalizes structures of domination and oppression that define “slave” and “indigenous” in settler societies. Though not explicitly using these categories,⁴ Barter deftly reveals the various strategies by which the role of the “inventive settler” appropriates witnesses to mass atrocity and transforms the confessions of their trauma into a shared currency of exchange through which both victims and perpetrators can articulate their existence. This translation of trauma became excruciatingly clear in Barter's discussion of the Anglican Church of Canada Primate, Michael Peers, in his apology for the harms of residential schools. Peers' apology translated the wounds inflicted by a genocidal system operated by the Church into wounds that the Church itself bears and, more personally, wounds and grief that Peers as Primate vicariously bears in the performance of his apology (77). While it is undoubtedly the case that the Church is in need of healing, the blurring together of the wounds of those “sinned against” with the moral hazard wounds of those “sinning” in the moment of apology serves as an almost textbook example of a “settler move to innocence” that uses the cover of shared trauma to diagnose our common political challenge as one of “healing” rather than attending to the thornier questions of Indigenous sovereignty and Land Back.

For Barter, the ubiquity of trauma—the trauma of victims, witnesses, and perpetrators—becomes the

shared medium through which recognition and, so the promise goes, reconciliation are made possible (92). Because Christian theology depends on redemption coming through trauma, faithful testimony to trauma seems to offer the possibility of transformation *through the testimony itself*. This transformative possibility of testimony, Barter argues, was particularly exploited in the South African context as Archbishop Desmond Tutu presided over the performance of testimony from perpetrators and victims alike, bent toward the shared project of healing South Africa and transforming it into the Rainbow Nation wherein all people are recognized. Yet, this performance of testimony leaves unaltered the political economy of the settler states that deploy these techniques. Land and capital are left undisturbed and the structural conditions of domination are left untouched even as discrete traumas are confessed and repented of. Barter goes so far as to note that this performance in fact forecloses on the possibility of unsettling those structures of domination, and so she refuses the false eschatology of transformative testimony, seeking to defer resolution indefinitely for the sake of the oppressed (149).

But is deferral enough? The “weak messianism” that Barter develops throughout her book to refuse the foreclosure of the inventive settler on the victims of history is vital. As Barter has elsewhere argued in an extended critique of Stephen Harper's 2008 apology, the inventive settler cannot be permitted to “turn the page” on various “dark chapters” of history in order to preserve futurities for the hegemon that once again consign the victims of mass atrocity to the piled-up wreckage of history.⁵ But while deferring foreclosure upon victims is surely necessary, when will they be vindicated? Barter's “remnant witnessing” is politically crucial, for it forestalls the closure of futurities wherein justice can be secured for victims, where missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls can be found, where Palestinian life is made possible. But while endlessly deferring the ability of the inventive settler to foreclose on these futurities seems necessary, can a future be realized where justice, even proximate justice, is realized for victims? Perhaps the bill is too big to ever be repaid, but it seems to me that without some account of even a penultimate vindication for the victims of mass atrocity, we risk setting in motion precisely the cycles of resentment that have transformed witnesses to the Shoah into perpetual justification for an Israeli nationalist project that is performing against Palestinian life in uncanny similitude many of the worst atrocities perpetrated in the Holocaust some 80 years ago. What might an iterative approach to victim testimony look like? Could there be a generational mechanism, such that no one event like a Truth and Reconciliation Commission can ever fully move on from the wounds left by genocide, while also

offering new ways to achieve proximate justice now when the limits of the last settlement are realized?⁶

Ryan Turnbull is a decolonial settler theologian living and working in Treaty 1 Territory.

1 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253–64 at 257–58.

2 Jane Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness* (New York: Routledge, 2025). References to Barter's book are found in the text of this response.

3 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 14ff.

4 Although Tuck and Yang are clearly in the background, see especially Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*, 131.

5 Jane Barter, "When Sorry Is Not Good Enough: The Displaced Christology of Canada's 2008 Apology," *Modern Believing* 62, no. 3 (2021): 252–61, <https://doi.org/10.3828/mb.2021.17>.

6 While Barter thoroughly critiques the logic of the politics of recognition, nevertheless some sort of procedural recurring recognition process seems necessary to avoid the build-up of resentment that indefinite deferral seems to inevitably require. See James Tully, "Recognition and Dialogue: The Emergence of a New Field," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 7, no. 3 (2004): 84–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369823042000269401>.

The Aims of Redemption and Jane Barter's *Theopolitics in the Era of the Witness*

By Christina Conroy
Ambrose University, Calgary

I am honoured to be in conversation with Jane Barter's *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*. It is the role of the scholar to apply a very particular lens onto a very particular problem. We do this not because it is the only lens available (and indeed it can confound those using a different lens), but because we might be able to see something new and incite change if we apply our honed strengths toward a critical question. Likewise, it is the role of the theologian to register why a particular question matters, and for whom, and to then demonstrate how the intellectual life can remain grounded in love. This brings us to Barter, who, using the lens of theopolitics, discerns a momentous question: How can the phenomenon of bearing witness to the horrors of the Holocaust have led a persecuted people to prop up a nation-state that goes on to duplicate those horrors onto others, with an impunity wrought by their very commitment to "Never Again"?¹

To begin to answer this question, Barter curates the robust scholarly conversation around the history of testimony as it produces the Christian-coded archetype of "the witness" and tracks the shifting demands of witnessing to the current mass atrocities against Palestinian life. This is an ambitious undertaking. We move from the early accounts of Holocaust survival in the written work of Primo Levi and Paul Celan, through the development of Holocaust archives, to the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of South Africa and Canada. In our collective desire to *not* abandon witnesses to the unspeakable horrors they have faced—both Primo Levi and Paul Celan eventually succumbed to despair—witnessing to horrors takes a therapeutic, cathartic turn and thus gets caught up in the promise of redemption. Redemption itself as colonizer? Barter is careful here. She suggests that

atrocities and trauma have been colonized by a "faulty witness," one who hovers above history, beyond reproach because of their wounds, unquestionable and unquestioned, justified (and here we get specific) in their genocide of Palestinian people (140).²

Through the lens of theopolitics, Barter demonstrates how theological concepts such as redemption are "recapitulated in political formulations" and moves us toward a moral reckoning for the violence that has been wrought in the name of healing (8). This is particularly helpful in my own thinking, as Barter's moral reckoning is both concrete and temporal. I get the strong sense that the last thing Barter wants is for her scholarship in *Theopolitics* to produce another kind of "pure knowledge" that shuffles us beyond the structures at play within the demands of history (90). Using Walter Benjamin's vision of "remnant witnessing" and "weak messianic identity," Barter suggests that for us to become "better witnesses," witnessing must relinquish its forward-looking rush toward a new future and sustain, for a while longer than perhaps comfortable, a backward-looking posture of lament.³ Such attention to the past informs the necessary political analysis and organizing of the "better witness," one that resists atrocity without simply reproducing suffering in a new location. These two characteristics of a better kind of witness constitute, in part, what Barter suggests could be a new politics of the "tradition of the oppressed" (152). It is the third characteristic that I see as inhabiting the tradition of the apophatic in Christian theology in a way that lends itself to my own lens: the fundamental stance of the better witness is renunciatory. Barter uses the term "renunciatory" to describe the willingness "to reframe one's own cause for the sake of another who suffers" (152). In other words, the sufferer must resist the temptation to enshrine their (our!) vision of the future. As history has taught us, any vision of the human, of society, of the shared world may be good for some but not good for all. Therefore, the vision must be revisited and realigned toward the inclusively common good.

“Yes” to better witnessing (though as my own experience in the Fortunoff Archive and with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada suggests, good luck trying to get an individual witness to conform to much of anything). But, why not better redemption? The theological category of redemption becomes the unexamined concept operating tacitly in these negotiations. The aim of redemption itself must certainly seek the kind of apophatic political practice that resists the workings of colonization.

I gesture toward the theological in part because it is not the scope of psychoanalysts mentioned in the text (Laub and Felman) to guide how symbols function in our society. But it is the job of theologians (60). Has not the Christian notion of redemption itself been “enveloped by mystique” and an easy futurity that obscures the mechanisms of harm?⁴ That humans hope in the midst of despair is remarkable, but the vision that hope affords can “crystallize” and be “weaponized.”⁵ Redemption, like the better witness, must be invested in the flourishing of *all* living things, and the human participation in redemption must be concerned with the here and now: Barter’s political analysis and organizing.⁶

The capacity to imagine our version of redemption as divinely sanctioned and beyond reproach is built into what Paul Tillich calls the “structure of ambiguity.”⁷ The human capacity to mistake the finite for the infinite is natural, as all the tools we have at our disposal exist in the finite realm. That realm, which includes language and symbols, is ambiguous, capable of being used for good or harm. It is the apophatic theologians who give us practices that help us to not cling to finite things too tightly, lest we cast them in the divine image. Redemption is associated with the infinite—however, to name it and aim at it is to forge it into a tool that, like any tool, acts imperfectly, often obscuring some lives, some living things, as less worthy. In our hands, there is no guarantee that redemption will enact the law of love.⁸ If redemption itself were to take on Benjamin’s “weak messianic identity,” if suffering was mourned and not colonized by some notion of a greater purpose, if redemption was cast as concrete and renunciatory in the ways Barter has described, could not redemption, distinguished from her description of the “aims of

redemption,” maintain its relationship to witnessing?⁹ I am hanging on for a couple of reasons. First, redemption and its association with the infinite realm is often only loosely interrogated. But second, and most fundamentally, I wish Primo Levi and Paul Celan had not been abandoned to their despair. Lament, and the better witness, are structured by ambiguity as well. They, too, are capable of good or harm.

What does all this mean for Palestine? For this is why Barter writes. Can we embrace the moral reckoning she calls forth and resist the further diminishing of life? As Barter suggests at the end of her work, we cannot do this alone. The Christian imaginary around what it means to witness has its limits, and the conversation must expand out from here.

Christina Conroy is Associate Professor of Christian Theology at Ambrose University. She teaches and writes in the area of truth-telling and trauma.

1 Jane Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness* (New York: Routledge, 2025), 46–47. Barter discusses this responsive cry of the Shoah at length, including in her chapter on “The Witness as Bearer of History.” References to Barter’s book are found in the text of this response.

2 Barter speaks of faulty witnessing at several points in the text, notably in her discussion of the Palestinian slaughter in Gaza, the memory of which is framed by the kind of faulty witnessing she has established as her main argument.

3 Barter’s goal is not to denigrate the witness but to unmask the evolution of the production of the witness in service of some kind of aspirational future that glosses over the concrete structures of the past that gave rise to the harm and thus build capacity for a better witness. This restrained inclination toward the future is part of Benjamin’s “weak messianic identity.” See Barter, *Theopolitics*, 18, for example.

4 The witness as enveloped by mystique is discussed as part of what establishes a sacrality and untouchability around survivor testimony. See Barter, *Theopolitics*, 70.

5 Barter uses these words to describe what happens to the politics of witness, which she actively resists in her three suggestions. See Barter, *Theopolitics*, 151.

6 What the divine does with redemption, beyond the here and now, is, by definition, not our work.

7 This concept flows through Tillich’s writing and lectures. See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 32.

8 That there is no guarantee that anything we do will enact the law of love is a concept of Tillich’s.

9 Barter identifies the aims of redemption with the theodical impulse of witnessing. This impulse is seen when witnessing moves toward the vindication of suffering, a focus on futurity, tacit soteriology, and the conferring of new identity. See Barter, *Theopolitics*, 139.

Remnant Witness in a Time of Ungrievable Lives and Holocides

By Anupama Ranawana

Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Durham University, UK

Jane Barter’s *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness* ends by telling us that the book has done very little in the way of “theology proper.”¹¹ This strikes an odd note, perhaps, for a book that is so strongly theological and that in style and tone calls to mind the concept of *par-rhesia*. Barter writes with urgency and boldness. The work itself witnesses. For theologians writing in this

present moment and even reflecting on the decade that has preceded us, we know we have been witness to countless violent and traumatic events.

For a theologian like Barter, who lives on occupied land and who, I am sure, reflects daily on what it means to live within the violence and trauma of such a space, the act of witnessing is built into the everyday. Calling our attention to the struggle to make sense of such “witnessing” also suggests that for political theology, a liberative act is performed in the writing or the telling. However, as Barter herself queries, when we bear witness publicly, what is really achieved? Is the confessing, the acknowledgement, collectively healing? Are the victims of these atrocities retraumatized through some of these processes of retelling and witness bearing? Who is allowed to speak, and how? Who is grievable? These are, of course, all questions that Barter, in much more eloquent terms, raises.

The great strength and the boldness of the book lie in the ways that Barter does not valorize witness, memorialization, or confession but demonstrates, through a variety of examples, how these can both harm and heal. Barter, importantly, reminds us of the danger of triumphant witnessing. For Barter, it is very clear that public trials and witness do not “end there” but must be a constant exercise, constant work, because the consciousness raising and solidarity that emerge from these is how political resistance is built. Importantly, this is also the role of theopolitics—to disrupt through reflection, humility, and spirituality, but not triumph.

It was a strange experience to read and be asked to reflect on Barter’s work in a time when we are witnessing, almost every day, terrible political atrocities the world over. By this, I do not only mean the genocide in Palestine, but also the atrocities being visited upon the populations of Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Videos and photographs of women and scared children fleeing war competed for our attention. Poetry and written testimonies from collectives and human rights groups are readily available, providing excruciating detail of the grief, anger, and violence being experienced.² Not long after I received the printed copy of Barter’s text, we began to see the same techniques of carpet bombing and displacement that Israel had used in the Gaza Strip on Lebanon. A petrol storage facility in Tehran, Iran, was struck by an Israeli missile, burning the air around it and sending hot oily rain down onto the populace.

These are things that we are witnesses to but for which no trial, no confession, and no justice seem forthcoming. Journalists documenting these atrocities, from Palestine to Sudan, are being silenced. In the case of Sudan, for example, there is documented fact that each side—the Sudanese Armed Forces and

the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces—are supported by either the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia and that the country is a proxy for the war between these two nations.³ These resource-rich countries are powerful on the global stage.

Protesters who are demanding an end to these brutalities are being gaslit or arrested. In the United Kingdom, where I live, terrorism charges were brought against Palestine Action activists. A trial held for some of these individuals also denied the defence barrister his closing speech—thus effectively silencing the possibility for any spoken or written witness to the atrocities these individuals were protesting.⁴ This raises the question: What happens when witness is not allowed? What happens when the perpetrator of an atrocity is excused their brutality? What is a theopolitics of witness when only certain lives can be witnessed to, when only certain events are grievable, and when memorialization is denied?

As I was reflecting on the human cost, my thoughts also turned to those costs that perhaps are less recognized. When we speak of what is grievable, there is a hierarchy in terms of which human lives are attended to and also the seriousness with which non-human life is drawn into these conversations. In all these places where brutalities are being inflicted on human populations, other parts of the created world are also suffering.

In Ukraine, for example, aside from facing death from bombs and other missiles, birds are often caught in the protective nets placed above roads. Sometimes these birds are rescued, but many suffer major injuries to their wings and limbs. After the Vietnam War, it was found that nearly 50% of mangroves had been destroyed, along with natural habitats for rare species such as leopards and bears. From Ukraine, to Sudan, to Congo, to Lebanon and Palestine, missile fire damages forests and vegetation, trenches destroy natured habitats; animals are often seen shaking because of trauma from constant bombs, and the deliberate targeting of economic assets like factories and refineries pollutes air, soil, and water. The use of chemical weapons in Gaza has destroyed olive groves and farmlands for generations. When Donald Trump wages war on the Persian Gulf, he is also making more precarious the lives of a marine community of reefs, hawksbills, 700 species of fish, green sea turtles, and the world’s second-largest population of dugongs. It is because of what war does to the environment that activists and academics have long pressed for the recognition of ecocide as a war crime in and of itself. First appearing in international discourse as a desire to enhance the protection of the environment during armed conflict, it now also includes the need to curtail the excesses of corporate crime and extractivism and to respond to

the ever-more urgent climate crisis. It remains a complex conversation within international law because it interacts at the various levels of international humanitarian law, international criminal law, and domestic law. International lawyers have demonstrated how pathways for criminal accountability involved charges of a crime against all kind, or what some activists and academics term *holocide*—the deliberate annihilation of an entire social and ecological fabric.⁵

The point of what might seem like a strange tangent is to call back to Barter's thoughts on the remnant. For Barter, the remnant is the "trace of the dead," where loss and death are not converted into meaning but where suffering speaks into the present. The scorched lands, the unusable orchards, the silence of areas that once bustled with multiple species are also an important remnant for us to take into account because when the humans are dead, the land may remain scorched for generations. The land speaks. The land screams. So, too, do the decimation of dugong populations, the burning petrol on a jasmine tree, the chemicals leached into soil. These material harms turn an accusatory gaze upon human atrocities.

Ecotheologians often turn our attention here to the cosmological Christ, the Christ who entered *into all of Creation*: God's incarnation in Christ reaches into the heart of material, biological, and social existence. How do we think about solidarity and remnant witnessing

in this cosmological sense? Where we as humans have caused holocides, Barter is correct that we need to remain with unresolved grief but also anger and sinfulness for the almost incomprehensible nature of violences that have occurred.

Anupama Ranawana is a Research Associate in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Durham University.

1 Jane Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness* (New York: Routledge, 2025), 160.

2 See Atef Alshaer, "Writing Gaza during a Genocide," *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 16 (2024): 6–12;

Nisrin Elamin, "The Politics of Hunger in Sudan," *Transition* 138, no. 1 (2025): 109–27, <https://doi.org/10.2979/tra.00077>.

3 Bilal Irfan, Eyad Ali, Amal Elamin, et al. "What Are the Drivers in the Neglect of Sudan's War and Humanitarian Crisis? Reframing Global Disengagement," *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 42, no. 1 (2026): 176–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13623699.2025.2572942>; Abigail Kabandula and Federico Donelli, "Drivers of Influence of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in East Africa: Evidence from Sudan," *South African Journal of International Affairs* 31, no. 4 (2024): 389–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2025.2457061>.

4 Nandini Archer, "Inside the Palestine Action Trial that Could Redefine Protest as Terrorists," *Open Democracy*, June 10, 2026, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/inside-the-palestine-action-trial-that-could-redefine-protest-as-terrorism>.

5 For further reading on these topics, see Rachel Killeen, "Ecocide's Evolving Relationship with War," *Environment and Security*, June 24, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1177/27538796251347111>; Matthew Gillett, "Ecocide, Environmental Harm and Framework Integration at the International Criminal Court," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 29, no. 6 (2025): 1009–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2024.2433660>.

Trauma, Woundedness, Suffering, and the Witness: Reflections and a Question

By Doris M. Kieser

St. Joseph's College, University of Alberta

I thank Jane Barter for writing this very thought-provoking book.¹ Her work invites us into her world of theopolitics and inspires in me reflections and questions from my commingled theologian and therapist self.

As I made my way through Barter's book, I was struck primarily by how frequently trauma, suffering, woundedness, healing, and reconciliation were adjoined in her exploration of the witness giving testimony to mass atrocities inflicted by humans on other humans: the Shoah, apartheid, and Canadian Indian Residential Schools. And the hunch that somehow the trauma, suffering, and woundedness would be healed and reconciliation effected, individually and corporately, by the very fact of giving public voice to the experiences.

She refutes this possibility by naming the social and institutional structures that maintain the scaffolds

of oppression systemically imposed upon human persons, which she names "racial capitalism and Neo-imperialism,"² even while the witnesses give testimony. These structures and the perpetrators within elude scrutiny when the vocal witness, the individual, is foregrounded as the victim (which they are) somehow separately from the whole of humanity. We are invited to enter the articulation of the survivor's trauma and work toward healing and reconciliation, without the benefit of dismantling the master's house (or scaffolding), precisely because the work is undertaken with the master's own tools, as Audre Lorde observes.³

Barter outlines the many factors and reasons why such a task is generally destined to fail: why healing and reconciliation will not be manifest by public testimony alone. Not because public testimony is necessarily an unworthy effort (it might or might not be), but because disclosing trauma is, in the first instance, a private act of fortitude. While I cannot speak to the experiences of the many witnesses who have attested to their wounds of trauma, I can say that the shame, guilt, and anger that frequently accompany trauma are meant, first and foremost, to be explored in a space that will hold those emotions sacred in the heart of the survivor. When

such feelings are indiscriminately open to the scrutiny of the hoi polloi, they are made profane. They become less about the victim/survivor and the circumstances that brought them to that place and more about the spectacle of public indignation. Thus, as Barter notes, the *event* of their trauma is the focal point to the hearers, and the survivor's personal self is a vehicle to denounce the event.

Fundamentally, however, the event itself is not the trauma: it is the cause of the trauma. That is why people who experience the exact same event respond differently over time. My trauma is not your trauma. My woundedness is not your woundedness. My suffering is not your suffering. And none of these experiences (trauma, woundedness, suffering) are interchangeable. When we confuse the event with the trauma, it is far easier to promote healing and reconciliation because the event has passed. The trauma is over. But for the person living in trauma, the event is embedded in their psyche, their body, their relationships, their future—and memory of the event regurgitates the trauma, often in unexpected and uncontrolled ways. Once victim/survivors' own trauma is disclosed, they are left not to find healing for themselves but to forward the communal healing of the rupture from the event. Reconciliation becomes, as Barter points out, performative and largely to the benefit of the perpetrators managing the drama of disclosure.

Thus, the individual, concrete, and lasting experience of trauma is lost in the spectacle and rush to reconciliation (noticeably absent the atonement). Trauma is not a monolith easily carved into a *pietà* of compassion. It is rather more slippery and gelatinous, finding its own way into the cracks and crevices of the human spirit. It shapeshifts its way from living being to living being, inviting the personal exploration that attends to woundedness. This ought not to be, I suggest, the stuff of public consumption: personal trauma adjudicated, in the first instance, in the public sphere rarely ends well for the survivor. For until the survivor is at home with their trauma (sees it, understands it, enters it, and wanders through it), public consumption will serve to diminish them, their story, and their possibility for healing.

Arising from this perspective is my attention to trauma itself and how the term is used in disparate ways.

My one question for Barter is: What exactly do you mean by “trauma” in the context of theopolitics? It is unclear to me how you understand the term and the reality. As a therapist, I do not equate trauma with suffering or woundedness. Suffering and woundedness frequently accompany a person's trauma, but not all suffering and woundedness arise from trauma. The indiscriminate use of the word “trauma” in our general vocabulary makes it susceptible to reduction to a concept. It is, rather, I suggest, a reality that extends from a rupture in one's equilibrium, one's expectation for life experience, one's sense of self, one's sense of community, one's possibility for joy, one's capacity for trust, one's very body. It does not require another's mirroring of self to be real.⁴ Rather, it is manifest in the day-to-day-ness of living in an unpredictable, fragile, and hostile world that is not of one's own making. Although it can be addressed (trauma need not have the last word), the survivor of the trauma, the one who has endured the traumatic event(s), ought to be our focus, not necessarily their witness. As Bessel van der Kolk posits in *The Body Keeps the Score*,⁵ trauma is held in bodies: in the vigilance of the hyperactive amygdala, the neurological rewiring that diminishes memory capacity, the chronic physical illness regularly recalling the trauma, or the draw to self-harm from the diminished hippocampus managing logic and regulation; trauma often invokes a messy and angry survivor. In this sense, we do not witness trauma well or easily. Our social discomfort with the traumatized survivor is manifest in our paltry resources available to survivors of all manner of traumatic events, precisely based on the political will that allows merely for the performance of the survivor rather than the reality of their expression of trauma.

Doris M. Kieser is Associate Professor and Acting Vice-President (Academic) and Dean at St. Joseph's College, University of Alberta.

1 Jane Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness* (New York: Routledge, 2025).

2 Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*, 4.

3 Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (Toronto: Penguin, 2018).

4 Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*, re: Caruth, 88ff.

5 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2014).

Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness: Author's Response

By Jane Barter

University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Canada

I want to begin by thanking my colleagues for taking the time to read my book so carefully and for responding with such depth and clarity—I am humbled and honoured—and to the organizers and editors who made the panel and publication possible.¹ Through their responses, I have discovered new questions and new paths to follow as I continue to think through the tangled web of memory, testimony, theology, and politics.

I will begin by responding to Anupama Ranawana's intervention. When I read Anu's response, it evoked in me profound gratitude for her steadfast challenge to contemporary theology, including critical theologies, for its failure to address massive suffering in Palestine, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, and—as is evident in this fulsome response—this suffering planet and all its creatures.²

My project takes for granted what Anu aptly identifies as the asymmetrical structures of relation that treat some lives as grievable and others as dispensable, and it insists that these affective and symbolic asymmetries are material and political in nature. The lives not testified to in our memorial reckonings are the very lives deemed inconvenient to the march of colonialism and racial capitalism. She names them: birds, olive trees, frightened animals shaking in the aftermath of carpet bombing, disappearing sea turtles, and skies raining hot oil, seeping into and contaminating the earth for generations to come. In short, this *is* holocide: the deliberate and unceasing destruction of life, a death that eclipses the possibility of regeneration or healing for generations.

Ranawana is correct when she suggests that the politics of the remnant wishes to grieve these losses, too; indeed, it wishes to prophesy over the valley of dry bones. What is compelling to me about Walter Benjamin's messianic remnant is that hope is not contingent upon the redemption of these subjects of violence into a renewed humanity or ecology. Rather, hope is contingent upon the *interruption* of present structures that would render them contingent and expendable. This other register is one that sees each sparrow fall. It remembers and bears witness, not for the sake of any calculated political end but because it grieves all life, and it grieves especially the ungrievable.³

I would like to treat the challenges of Christina Conroy and Ryan Turnbull together, since they offer complementary critiques. Both press me to articulate a

positive theology of redemption grounded in a hope beyond wide-scale suffering that I seek to attend to in my work.

Despite its sweeping (one may say hubristic) engagement with diverse moments of contemporary politics and biblical, theological, and philosophical conceptions of testimony, my book has a rather modest aim. The question I sought to interrogate was not whether there can be redemption—divine or political—from atrocity, or what redemption looks like, but rather how testifying to trauma and atrocity becomes captured⁴ by the very forces it seeks to unsettle precisely through its truncated accounts of redemption.

My interlocutors are nevertheless right to ask why I choose to remain apophatic about the nature of redemption. My own sense is that any articulation I might give risks reproducing colonial notions of redemption's temporality and end. And yet, throughout the book, I defer to those who, I think, have earned the right to speak into a future beyond the endless replication of human violence and despair. These prophets include Frantz Fanon, whom I will discuss in a moment, Dian Million,⁵ Glen Coulthard,⁶ Karl Marx (*passim*), and, above all in this book, Walter Benjamin—who ties redemption not to a specific community or temporal telos but to the breaking down of such forms. Redemption does not belong to a single people, nation, or identity. It cuts across them. Identity here is neither denied nor *recognized*,⁷ to use Turnbull's terms, but de-captured—detached from nationalism and sovereignty and reoriented toward solidarity with all those presently subjected to violence.

Proximate justice can and must be sought and even achieved. Chapter 5 offers the example of the Khulumani Support Group, which demanded reparations for victims of apartheid and even sought to bring to trial large international corporations, including IBM, that directly benefited from apartheid. But we cannot confuse such proximate ends with the material transformations required for a fuller form of justice to occur. In South Africa, as in Canada, that fuller justice would involve the utter transformation of the enduring and wily settler colony.

I also should say more about the Nietzschean concept of resentment here,⁸ which Turnbull presses me to consider. When Israeli UN ambassador Gilad Erdan appeared before the General Assembly wearing a yellow Star of David badge, explicitly invoking the Shoah in defense of Israel's military actions in Gaza, he was making a case for proximate justice, which he, like his fellow Likud party members, understood to be nothing less than Israel's full control of the Gaza Strip.⁹ While Nietzsche locates resentment historically among the powerless, modern states frequently weaponize the language of victimhood and historical injury

to renounce power even while exercising it without restraint. The question becomes not resentment vs. justice, but rather, *whose* justice and how are affects such as resentment deployed in testimony to entitle already dominant nations' "will to power"?

To return to Christina Conroy's suggestion that an account of redemption is what enables us to resist despair: that may be true, but I would not conclude from this that Primo Levi and Paul Celan were "abandoned to despair." Both displayed, in my view, a kind of hope: not in a futurity in which all Jewish life would be safe from persecution and death, but precisely its opposite, namely that Jewishness survives in its traces, in diasporic state, which regards an ethnonationalist state as the very antithesis of Jewish redemption. While it is true that both men died by suicide, as did Walter Benjamin, I think we make a grave and moralizing leap when we say that these acts, known only to them and to their God, are signs of despair rather than, for example, a hope that transcends this world and the tragic political possibilities available to them. I am haunted, for example, that Paul Celan visited the newly formed State of Israel only once and never returned. As Kafka put it, "Oh, there is hope, an infinite amount of hope, just not for us."¹⁰

I now wish to turn to Doris Kieser's practical challenges to the theoretical work I bring. Her critique is an important one as she asks the question straightforwardly: "What exactly do you mean by 'trauma' in the context of theopolitics?"

The task I set before myself in writing this book was, again, rather limited. It had to do with exploring the nature of testimony to atrocity and its relationship to theological forms of witnessing. In this context, the notion of trauma became a prominent one, especially within post-Christian settings such as South Africa and Canada during their Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. Here, I am not examining the phenomenon of individual trauma itself, but rather how the concept of trauma is used by theorists and, eventually, becomes deeply embedded within public consciousness. Following the work of psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk¹¹ and Cathy Caruth,¹² trauma becomes ubiquitous. I use the term "discourse" intentionally because I believe, following Michel Foucault,¹³ that even psychiatrists are caught up in regimes of power/knowledge when classifying such a seemingly self-evident concept as trauma. I am not alone in this critique of the "Empire of Trauma."¹⁴ I rely heavily on critics of the turn toward trauma, such as Dian Million, Didier Fassin, and Richard Rechtman.

If I were so bold as to reground the concept of trauma, I would do so through Frantz Fanon, who, in his clinical practice as a psychiatrist in Algeria, refused to isolate the victim of trauma from the political circumstances

of colonial harm. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he explains that when it comes to traumatic injury, "the events giving rise to the disorder are chiefly the blood-thirsty and pitiless atmosphere, the generalization of inhuman practices and the firm impression that people have of being caught up in a veritable Apocalypse."¹⁵ It is such analysis that I find wanting in many trauma theories today.

That many live in a veritable apocalypse today there can be no denying. To seek to attend to these lives is a fraught and delicate task, one that I cannot claim to have accomplished adequately in my book. For this reason, I am grateful to my colleagues, whose careful witness to this work has no doubt brought me closer.

Jane Barter (she/her) is Professor of Religion and Culture at the University of Winnipeg. She holds a PhD in Theology from the University of St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto.

1 I thank Timothy Harvie, Ryan Turnbull, and Nick Olkovich for their behind-the-scenes labour.

2 Anupama Ranawana, *A Liberation for the Earth: Climate, Race, and Cross* (London: SCM Press, 2022).

3 The term *grievability* is borrowed from Judith Butler, who states: "Without grievability, there is no life, or rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead 'there is a life that will never have been lived,' sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost." Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 15.

4 On the concept of capture, see chapter 13, "7000 B.C.: Apparatus of Capture," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, ed. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 424–73.

5 Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013).

6 Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

7 See Glen Coulthard, chapter 1, "The Politics of Recognition in Colonial Contexts," in *Red Skin White Masks*, on the problems with the Hegelian politics of recognition. See also Frantz Fanon, chapter 7, "The Black Man and Recognition," in *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

9 Anna Barsky, "'Full Israeli Control of Gaza': Likud Members' Plan for Post-Hamas Rule," *The Jerusalem Post*, January 19, 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-782884>.

10 Franz Kafka, "Conversation with Max Brod," quoted in Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 141.

11 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014).

12 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

13 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

14 Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

15 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 202.

Book Review

Decolonizing Theology in Canada

Decolonizing Church: Emerging Voices Speak, ed. Néstor Medina and Becca Whitla. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2025. xiv + 230 pp.

Néstor Medina is Associate Professor of Religious Ethics and Culture at Emmanuel College, Toronto. Becca Whitla is Professor of Practical Ministry at St. Andrew's College, Saskatoon. Together they have edited this collection of essays on decolonial theology in the Canadian context. The book begins with a foreword by Michel Andraos, who argues that although Canadian churches have apologized for participating in colonialism, they remain deeply colonial in many of their worldviews and practices. Medina and Whitla provide an introduction that defines coloniality as the "Eurocentric web of relationships that continues to condition peoples and societies" (6). The book's topic is how decolonizing approaches can and should reshape theology and church practices in Canada and challenge churches to move beyond apologies to concrete action.

Chapter 1, by Carmen Lansdowne, argues that traditional Indigenous worldviews, which teach balance between people's needs and those of others, along with respect for interdependency, can help Christianity be more life-giving in a time of climate change. Chapter 2, by Ahmeda Mansaray-Richardson, notes that a key part of decolonizing is to recognize who is speaking through you, which worldviews and perspectives your speech may be channelling. Chapter 3, by Chung Yan Lam, emphasizes the importance of storytelling by marginalized peoples to present their histories and views of reality and offers a rereading of the Samson and Delilah story from Yan Lam's marginalized perspective. Chapter 4, by Emo Yango, examines how Filipino immigrants to Canada typically bring a colonial consciousness with them and how this inclines them to acquiesce to white supremacy here. Decolonizing involves exposing, criticizing, and unlearning this colonial mentality. Chapter 5, by Hyejung Jessie Yum, reflects on how while racialized persons like herself are marginalized by white society, they are also involved, consciously or otherwise, in various oppressions of others. Chapter 6, by Rafael Vallejo, describes the difficult and precarious life of migrant farmworkers in southern Ontario and their struggle for a better life. Chapter 7, by Miriam Spies, argues that disability or Crip theologies need to acknowledge anger

and lament over the limitations of crip bodies so they can be present within the Church on their own terms. Spies highlights the transformative nature of people like herself failing to perform to the expectations of others. Chapter 8, by Joëlle M. Morgan, describes her involvement in working to decolonize Indigenous-settler relations in Canada as a queer white settler woman and reflects on how the Canaanite woman calls Jesus' presentation of a settler God to account in Matthew 15:27. Chapter 9, by Adele Halliday, explores how on Turtle Island, the relationships and histories of Indigenous and Black Peoples are intertwined and complex. She concludes that Black and Indigenous Peoples need to stand in solidarity and work together toward decolonization. Chapter 10, by Medina and Whitla, explores how liturgy can be a form of resistance to the heritage of colonialism by embodying a decolonial theoethics. They argue that marginalized peoples' lived experience and cultural contexts need to be recognized as sources of knowledge for decolonizing ethics and liturgical expressions. Chapter 11, by Ray Aldred, highlights differences between Indigenous ways of knowing and being and those of Euro-Canadian society. He argues that churches in Canada need to develop emotional intelligence so they can relate to the trauma Indigenous Peoples have experienced through generations of oppression and work at honouring, respecting, and learning from them so the two can work together to find a way to live as relatives. The afterword, by Carol B. Duncan, notes that the presence of non-Indigenous racialized minorities and others who have also experienced various forms of colonizing oppression disturbs a simple binary between Indigenous and settler and complicates the work of decolonization.

Many of these authors emphasize the importance of storytelling, particularly regarding their own experience and the history of their community. Some buttress their personal narratives with social-scientific analysis and data. The emphasis in each chapter is on the alienation and oppressions that each author has experienced and is primarily engaged with. It is odd that there is no chapter by a francophone person in this collection, as the francophone community has

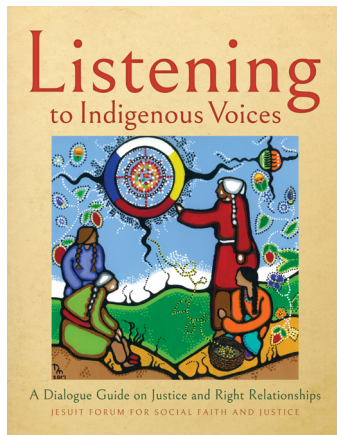
been resisting colonization and marginalization by English-speaking Canada for over 200 years. Still, this is a solid and important collection of essays that sets an agenda on an important topic in contemporary theology. It will be useful for theological educators, clergy, and educated lay people in the Church. Every theological library should have a copy.

Don Schweitzer

St. Andrew's College, Treaty 6 Territory

Listening to Indigenous Voices: A Dialogue Guide on Justice and Right Relationships

Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice



Listening to Indigenous Voices explores Indigenous worldviews, examines the history of colonization, and concludes with sessions on righting relationships, decolonization, and indigenization.

The guide features writings from authors such as Arthur Manuel, Beverly Jacobs, Lee Maracle, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum, John Borrows, and Robin Wall Kimmerer, along with works from a variety of Indigenous artists including Christi Belcourt and Kent Monkman.

Each session includes questions to guide sharing circles as well as curriculum ideas for use in secondary and post-secondary educational settings. The guide is also available in French under the title *À l'écoute des voix autochtones*.

The **Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice** promotes small-group sharing circles to foster transformative learning and engagement on themes related to ecology, justice, spirituality, and right relationships.

112 pp, PB, 978-2-89688-676-0 \$19.95

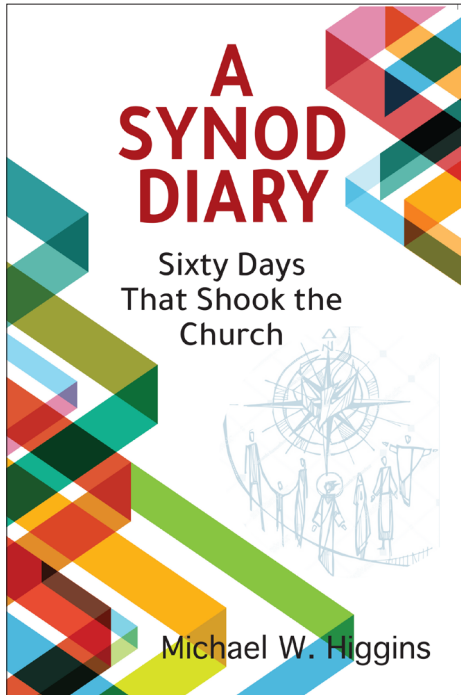


Available at your local bookstore, online at en.novalis.ca or call 1-800-387-7164 to order.

A Synod Diary

Sixty Days that Shook the Church

Michael W. Higgins



Modelled on John Reed's celebrated *Ten Days that Shook the World*, his lively chronicling of the October 1917 Russian Revolution, this is a journal and commentary on and during the high point of the Bergoglio papacy—the October 2023 and 2024 Synod on Synodality.

“This is a sketchbook by a journalist and English literature professor, not a theologian's measured summary of the synodal proceedings. The latter is, of course, indispensable to a full appreciation of what unfolded at the synod—but it is not what I set out to do. I wanted to create a written gallimaufry: a potpourri of perceptions, characters, factions and tensions, intrigues and turmoils, epiphanies and graced moments of insight.”

—from the author's *Prelude*

Michael W. Higgins is Basilian Distinguished Fellow of Contemporary Catholic Thought, St. Michael's

College, University of Toronto, and Distinguished Professor of Catholic Thought Emeritus at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT. He has produced several documentaries and authored numerous books, including *The Jesuit Disruptor: A Personal Portrait of Pope Francis* (House of Anansi Press).

144 pages, PB, ISBN: 978-2-89830-320-3 \$29.95



Available at your local bookstore, online at en.novalis.ca or call 1-800-387-7164 to order.

Critical Theology: Engaging Church, Culture, and Society is published quarterly by Novalis © Novalis 2026.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical or otherwise, without prior permission of and proper acknowledgement of *Critical Theology: Engaging Church, Culture, and Society*.

Founding editor: Gregory Baum – **Editorial team:** Rosemary P. Carbine, Christine Jamieson, Scott Kline, Nicholas Olkovich, Don Schweitzer

Contributing editors: M. Shawn Copeland, Lee Cormie, Charles Curran, Marilyn Legge, Harold Wells

Design: Gilles Lépine and Audrey Wells – **Layout:** Audrey Wells

Available online at no charge at en.novalis.ca/products/critical-theology

ISSN: 2562-0347

Please send submissions and correspondence to don.schweitzer@saskatoontheologicalunion.ca.



NOVALIS