

Prophetic Pragmatism and Descending to Matters of Detail

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James F. Keenan, SJ
Boston College, MA, USA

Abstract

This article names the three most urgent issues today in ethics: first, climate crisis and its impact on the poor and marginalized; second, the tragic banality of contemporary political leadership; and third, racism and antiblackness. Examining this last injustice reveals our failure in moral agency, for the first two crises derive from the incapacity of the American conscience, which has never acknowledged how racist and privileged our conscience has become. While arguing for conversion, the article also offers ways for imagining a more responsible expression of moral agency to rectify each present moral failure.

Keywords

antiblackness, authoritarianism, climate change, conscience, moral agency, moral incompetency, nationalism, racism, sustainability, white supremacy

I earnestly ask that we always recall a teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas and learn to incorporate it in our pastoral discernment: “Although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects ... In matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all, as to matters of detail, but only as to the general principles; and where there is the same rectitude in matters of detail, it is not equally known to all ... The principle will be found to fail, according as we descend further into detail. (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, art. 4).” It is true that

Corresponding author:

James F. Keenan, SJ, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA.
Email: frkeenaj@bc.edu

general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations.¹

In another text, referring to the general knowledge of the rule and the particular knowledge of practical discernment, Saint Thomas states that “if only one of the two is present, it is preferable that it be the knowledge of the particular reality, which is closer to the act.” *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, VI, 6 (ed. Leonina, t. XLVII, 354).²

From 1965 to 1984, Richard A. McCormick was the sole author of these “Moral Notes.”³ In 1985, he asked Lisa Sowle Cahill, David Hollenbach, and John Langan to accompany him in doing the notes, parsing the work among the four writers. When I took over the Notes fifteen years ago, we continued the practice of dividing the work of the Notes among at least three of us. By covering topics like virtue ethics, biblical ethics, Catholic social thought, and immigration, we have been able to introduce readers to the contemporary discussions of the various concentrations of Catholic theological ethics.

At a recent editorial board meeting, we reflected that though the assigned issues give our readers real depth on these topics, still the enormous span of issues that McCormick covered in each note of those first 20 years gave a sense of what was going on in the world and the Church today in moral theology. We decided that at least one of the annual entries ought to try something similar and that I should undertake that task. This article reflects, therefore, on the most urgent issues emerging in contemporary theological ethics during the past two years: climate crisis and its impact on the poor and marginalized, and the tragic banality of contemporary political leadership. The article closes by insisting that we cannot address these global and political issues if we do not address issues of race, the third topic of this Note.⁴

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1. Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (March 19, 2016), 304, https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf (hereafter cited as *AL*).
 2. *AL* n348. While this Note does not attend otherwise to Thomas Aquinas, I strongly recommend three new works: Nicholas Austin, *Aquinas on Virtue: A Causal Reading* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017); Mark D. Jordan, *Teaching Bodies: Moral Formation in the Summa of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); David Farina Turnbloom, *Speaking with Aquinas: A Conversation about Grace, Virtue and the Eucharist* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2017).
 3. Richard A. McCormick, *Notes on Moral Theology 1965–1980* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981); *Notes on Moral Theology 1981–1984* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1984); Charles E. Curran, “Notes on Richard A. McCormick,” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 533–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390006100306>. Reflecting shifts in the field, this section of the journal is now called “Notes on Theological Ethics.”
 4. Clearly the climate crisis’s relationship with immigration and refugee movements cannot go unnoticed. Kristin E. Heyer’s article, “Internalized Borders: Immigration Ethics in the Age of Trump,” and mine very much accompany one another; for this reason I will not be looking at the issue of migration in my Note except to recommend Elizabeth W. Collier and Charles R. Strain, *Global Migration: What’s Happening, Why, and a Just Response* (Winona: Anselm Academic, 2017).

Throughout the article, the above reminders about descending to matters of detail serve as a guiding unifying strategy. But let us not think of the descent as simply a cognitive exercise. Inasmuch as the admonitions considered in this article are from Pope Francis, we can think of how he has taught by example what the descent means. For instance, the photos of Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio in Buenos Aires remind us of his riding the subways to get to work, washing and kissing the feet of young people struggling with drug addiction, visiting prisoners and later refugees at their camps.⁵ These existential descents to matters of detail bring a proximity, an engagement, and an irrefutable understanding of life's challenges. The truth of these experiences animate him to ask his priests and bishops if they know the smell of their sheep and it prompts him to ask the local churches to rethink, fairly comprehensively, their approaches to the life of the family.⁶ Descending to matters of detail is much more than an operation that goes on in our heads; it is what is needed if the world and the Church are to survive.

Climate Crisis

In the beginning of his book, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice and Religious Creativity*, Willis Jenkins writes,

Ethics seems imperiled by unprecedented problems. The accelerating expansion of human power generates problems that exceed the competency of our laws, our institutions, and even our concepts. What does justice mean for climate change, a problem in which humans from many nations, traditions, and generations find themselves collectively responsible for how a planetary system will function over centuries?⁷

Echoing Aquinas, he claims, "The ethics of climate change is more complicated than applying received norms to novel objects." Why is it that general norms do not simply apply? "Received ideas of justice do not anticipate moral agency exercised cumulatively across generational time, aggregately through ecological systems and nonintentionally over evolutionary futures. Climate change involves dimensions of human action without precedent in our traditions and institutions of justice."⁸

5. Austen Ivereigh, "The Making of Pope Francis," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 20, 2015, http://www.philly.com/philly/news/pope/The_making_of_Pope_Francis.html.

6. Francis, *With the Smell of the Sheep* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017); Francis, *The Works of Mercy* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017); Grant Gallicho and James F. Keenan, "Amoris Laetitia": *A New Momentum for Moral Formation and Pastoral Practice* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2018).

7. Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice and Religious Creativity* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 1. See Larry Rasmussen, "Climate Change as a Perfect Moral Storm," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 14 (2014), <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/41>; Stephen M. Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

8. Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics*, 1.

Jenkins recognizes that moral agency, and specifically its incompetence, brought us a climate crisis. How then are we to respond to it? “Ethics must find a way to develop new and shared responsibilities among a pluralist and alienated human family. How to construct a global ethic from many moral worlds?”⁹

Moreover, the summons to develop a new moral competency cannot address the climate crisis without facing another unprecedented challenge that is not tangential to but rather constitutive of our record of moral incompetence: economic inequities. The current unparalleled movements of immigrants and refugees are an outgrowth of and further exasperated by the climate crisis.

As a scholar who promotes alternative, pluralistic methodologies in the face of ecological and economic challenges, Jenkins is, in my estimation, the most important ethicist in the English-speaking world advancing a global ethics in the face of the challenge of climate change.¹⁰ In *Ecologies of Grace*, Jenkins first entered the field reminding us that the resources of our religious traditions offer a plethora of possibilities for creating constructive pathways of justice. He argues correctly, using both Aquinas and Barth, that ethics can not only tolerate different hermeneutical contexts, but that it needs to explore and use them and offer methodologically pluralist models as ethically compelling and urgent.¹¹

Besides his methodological claims, his actual facility in engaging differing traditions is rather extraordinary. Indeed, he has gone beyond Aquinas and Barth. In “Islamic Law and Environmental Ethics: How Jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) Mobilizes Practical Reform,” he provides an “alternative practical strategy” from Islamic jurisprudence¹² that is not unlike the strategy of the indigenous climate justice movement he proposes in “North American Environmental Liberation Theologies,” where he provides insights, claims, and strategies from womanist traditions.¹³

Jenkins is not interested simply in conversion and repentance, though he acknowledges their importance: he is interested in getting moral agency right. He is interested in descending to matters of detail, in both the labyrinth of problems and the possible network of solutions.

Like others, Jenkins disparages prefabricated answers to new questions; rather, “ethics must help generate new possibilities of moral agency.”¹⁴ Jenkins proposes,

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9. Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics*, 4.
 10. I argue as much in “Ten Lessons for Helping Theological Ethicists, Other Theologians, Church Leaders, Religious and Laity to Respond to the Call to Sustainability,” in *Schöpfung Bewahren: Theologie und Kirche als Imusgeber für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung*, ed. Markus Patenge, Roman Beck, Markus Luber (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2016), 150–63.
 11. Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
 12. Willis Jenkins, “Islamic Law and Environmental Ethics: How Jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) Mobilizes Practical Reform,” *World Views: Environment, Culture, Religion* 9 (2005): 338–64, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853505774841641>.
 13. Willis Jenkins, “North American Environmental Liberation Theologies,” in *Creation and Salvation*, ed. Ernst Conradie (Berlin: LIT, 2012), 2:273–78.
 14. Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics*, 4.

therefore, a “prophetic pragmatism,”¹⁵ an ethics from below, not unlike liberation theology that looks locally to examine critically the right way of responding. From below, this ethics looks to issues of sustainability not in any of their abstractions but rather clearly in their concreteness, in the details of their local contexts. He does not, of course, mean here that we look to only our particular communities; rather, he prompts us to look beyond our own locality to see the communalities of our localities and to begin articulating a prophetic vision that helps us to intelligently articulate what it is that each community finds. I see him as calling us to a theological ethics that is plain talking, prophetic, pragmatic, and critically participative.¹⁶

A recent collection of essays on sustainability, published in the series of Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church, provides, I think, both that prophetic pragmatism and accompanying descent into the local: *Just Sustainability: Technology, Ecology, and Resource Extraction*, edited by Christiana Z. Peppard and Andrea Vicini.¹⁷

The book is divided into three sections: “Locations,” “Structures,” and “Theological Stances and Sustainable Relations.” Under “Locations” are reports by ethicists from Brazil, Congo, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, Micronesia, Nigeria, and the USA. Each account is different but the aggregate of narratives becomes overwhelming and clearly reminds us that the fate of the entire world is at stake. Still, the solutions regarding moral agency require attentiveness to the details of each particular context and to the persons in that context.

In “Structures,” we see that social structures and policies conspire to make the climate crisis even more difficult to resolve. Other forces, created by equally incompetent moral agency, give us an “intersectionality” wherein these structures overlap with the crisis, calling us to further appreciate its urgency and complexity. In a superb essay opening the second part of eight essays, John Sniegocki looks at the differing structures of political economies and their push and pull on sustainability.¹⁸ Mark Graham examines analogously the “unsavory gamble” of contemporary industrial agriculture,¹⁹ while Kenya’s Teresia Hinga considers the political structures that instrumentalize food itself as a weapon.²⁰ The Cameroonian ethicist Azetsop Jacqueineau investigates the drain that

15. Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics*, 7–12.

16. I develop this in “Ten Lessons.”

17. Christiana Z. Peppard and Andrea Vicini, eds., *Just Sustainability: Technology, Ecology and Resource Extraction* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2015). See their respective work in the field: Peppard, *Just Water: Theology, Ethics, and the Global Water Crisis* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2014); Vicini, “New Insights in Environmental and Sustainable Ethics,” *Asian Horizons: Dharmaram Journal of Theology* 6 (2012): 309–28, http://files.www.catholicethics.com/resources/publications/06.2.2012.6_Andrea_Vicini.pdf.

18. John Sniegocki, “The Political Economy of Sustainability,” in Peppard and Vicini, *Just Sustainability*, 57–68.

19. Mark Graham, “The Unsavory Gamble of Industrial Agriculture,” in Peppard and Vicini, *Just Sustainability*, 105–16.

20. Teresia Hinga, “Of Empty Granaries, Stolen Harvests, and the Weapon of Grain: Applied Ethics in Search of Sustainable Food Security,” in Peppard and Vicini, *Just Sustainability*, 94–104.

health systems are on social structures, especially where HIV/AIDS demands attention.²¹ From South Africa, Peter Knox looks at the social structures promoting resource extraction as invariably unsustainable.²²

If the second part highlights the complexity of the climate crisis, the third provides us with multiple resources and strategies for the prophetic pragmatism that guides and empowers rightly moral agency. Mindful that we need to engage multitudinous traditions to respond to this unprecedented challenge, we must “develop new and shared responsibilities” across a variegated landscape and therefore we must mine those sources that can guide collective agency rightly. From Catholicism’s repertoire, Ann Marie Mealey taps into feminism,²³ Nancy Rourke engages straight-talking virtues,²⁴ Christine Firer Hinze explicates linguistic riches in the Catholic social justice tradition like common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the option for the poor,²⁵ and Daniel DiLeo explores Ignatian spirituality.²⁶

In a major book, Daniel P. Schied provides a “cosmic common good as the ground for constructing an Interreligious Ecological Ethics.” His is an exploration of the fundamental “interpretations of humanity’s relationship to God and to creation.”²⁷ The book divides into two parts. The first part examines the possibility for a Catholic cosmic common good, from classic sources like Augustine and Aquinas to contemporary prophets like Thomas Berry as well as evident resources from Catholic social thought. Then he examines in detail dharmic ecology from Hinduism, interdependency from Buddhism, and “balance” from American Indian traditions, especially the Lakotans.²⁸

Finally, when we turn to the obvious resources of *Laudato Si’* we do well to remember the splendid issue of May 2016 of *Theological Studies* dedicated to the papal encyclical. Since then, of all the collections on the encyclical,²⁹ I found the one from the Gregorian University particularly relevant. The book edited by the Argentinian Miguel Yáñez conveys a number of points similar to Jenkins’s agenda. In developing “an ecological conscience” in his own essay, Yáñez notes that while conversion is a

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21. Jacquineau Azétsop, “Health Systems Challenges, National HIV/AIDS Response, and Public Health Policy in Chad: Ethical and Efficiency Requirements for Sustainable Health Systems,” in Peppard and Vicini, *Just Sustainability*, 131–44.
 22. Peter Knox, “Sustainable Mining in South Africa: A Concept in Search of a Theory,” in Peppard and Vicini, *Just Sustainability*, 117–31.
 23. Ann Marie Mealey, “Feminism and Ecology,” in Peppard and Vicini, *Just Sustainability*, 182–93.
 24. Nancy M. Rourke, “A Catholic Virtues Ecology,” in Peppard and Vicini, *Just Sustainability*, 194–204.
 25. Christine Firer Hinze, “Unleashing Catholicism’s Stranded Assets in the Fight for Just Sustainability,” in Peppard and Vicini, *Just Sustainability*, 205–22.
 26. Daniel R. DiLeo, “Fostering Just Sustainability through Ignatian Spirituality,” in Peppard and Vicini, *Just Sustainability*, 250–58.
 27. Daniel P. Schied, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4.
 28. From India, Jipson Joseph Edappulavan, *Eco-Friendliness: An Essential Virtue of the Times* (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2017).
 29. Particularly noteworthy is Vincent Miller, ed., *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si’: Everything is Connected* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

first step, the aim is to develop a person capable of right moral agency. He focuses in particular on the necessary relationality of conscience and the unacceptability of the “isolated” conscience.” A conscience acting in solidarity with others leads to a collective approach that challenges consumerism and other vices that reduce the environment and its goods to singular commodities: a collective, responsible self-identity is constitutive of the new order of moral agency in this era of ours.³⁰

From Malta, René Micallef looks at Pope Francis’s encyclical and demonstrates a methodology for moral agents by following the famous threefold structure of applying Catholic social teaching to contemporary challenges. This method known as “See, Judge, Act”³¹ is not so much a method of applying principles deductively to situations as it is a descent into the circumstances of the issues before us—a descent illuminated by a variety of predominant moral claims. Micallef offers a helpful structure for understanding the stages of communal moral agency in responding to global crisis.³²

Micallef coauthors with Carlotta Venturi another essay where they address the challenge of the environmentally displaced (*gli sfollati ambientali*) and issue a summons for conversion and a new moral awareness of the rights of the weak and the interdependence of persons. Here again is the call for a new collective moral agency to descend to the matters of detail.³³

But who is attending to these issues?

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30. Miguel Yáñez, “Verso una coscienza ecologica,” in “*Laudato Si’*”: *Linee di lettura interdisciplinaria per la cura della casa comune*, ed. Miguel Yáñez (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2017), 295–317.
 31. “There are three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgment on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: observe, judge act.” John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* (May 15, 1961), 236, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html.
 32. René Micallef, “*Laudato Si’* e la sua metodologia: Un critic ascolto delle scienze empiriche?” in Yáñez, “*Laudato Si’*”: *Linee di lettura interdisciplinaria per la cura della casa comune*, 13–48.
 33. Carlotta Venturi and René Micallef, “Gli sfollati ambientali alla luce di *Laudato Si’*,” in Yáñez, “*Laudato Si’*”: *Linee di lettura interdisciplinaria per la cura della casa comune*, 193–222. On moral agency see also, Gerard Whelan, “La persona umana: Causa o soluzione dell crisi ecologica?,” in Yáñez, *Laudato Si’*: *Linee di lettura interdisciplinaria per la cura della casa comune*, 97–114 and Prem Xalco, “Da *EG* a *LS*: Prospettive del pensiero di Papa Francesco,” in Yáñez, *Laudato Si’*: *Linee di lettura interdisciplinaria per la cura della casa comune*, 223–46. Elsewhere on immigration, see Micallef, “Porous Borders, Priority Rules, and the Virtue of Hospitality,” in *Public Theology and the Global Common Good: The Contribution of David Hollenbach, S.J.*, ed. Kevin Ahern, Meghan J. Clark, Kristin E. Heyer, and Laurie Johnston (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2016), 51–61; also Kristin E. Heyer and Mark W. Potter, “From Exclusion to Engagement across Borders: Justice through Immigrant Participation,” in Ahern, Clark, Heyer, and Johnston, *Public Theology and the Global Common Good*, 26–36. In these two essays the virtues of hospitality and justice create a context where host cultures can better descend into the details of the immigrants and thereby be ethically responsive.

The Lack of Global, Political Leadership

From July 26, 2018 to July 29, 2018, five hundred Catholic ethicists are converging in Sarajevo for the third international conference of Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC): “A Critical Time for Bridge-Building: Catholic Theological Ethics Today.”³⁴ After its first global conference in Padua in 2006 and another in Trento in 2010,³⁵ and a series of regional conferences on each continent (Manila 2008, Nairobi 2012, Berlin 2013, Krakow 2014, Bangalore 2015, and Bogotá 2016), its third global conference aims at promoting bridge-building in a world in urgent need.

Specifically, CTEWC is calling its participants to action in addressing three compelling issues. First, the climate crisis has raised innumerable challenges, not only in terms of the instability of the environment, but significantly in its impact on already marginalized populations. Second, the sustainability crisis is coupled with the tragic banality of contemporary political leadership in too many countries. Third, these two factors pose urgent challenges that demand theological ethicists to deepen their networks of solidarity and to develop a prophetic pragmatism.

With the notable exception of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the lack of a global mindset, interest, and competency in contemporary political leadership is remarkable. Nationalistic populism has delivered a variety of leaders who have attained power based in part on xenophobic claims that aim to convince citizens that their moral judgmentalism is valid and that separation and alienation rather than integration and global engagement is the way to a better future. The populist forces that achieved Brexit in Great Britain are in many ways comparable to those that gave power to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, President Donald Trump of the United States, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India. Not unlike China’s Xi Jinping or Russia’s Vladimir Putin, who have “pursued the toughest crack-down on critical voices in two decades” in their own countries, these elected officials have managed to persuade their citizens to hold fast to the belief that it is right to target populations within their borders *and*, in the pursuit of nationalism, to distrust treaties that are global.³⁶ Easily the most stunning of these actions was President Trump’s announcement on June 1, 2017 to pull out of the Paris climate accord, an announcement that followed the negation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership six months earlier.³⁷

34. Homepage, *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*, <http://www.catholicethics.com/>.

35. James F. Keenan, “What Happened at Trento 2010?” *Theological Studies* 72 (2011): 131–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056391107200107>.

36. Kenneth Roth, *The Dangerous Rise of Populism: Global Attacks on Human Rights Values* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/dangerous-rise-of-populism>.

37. On related repercussions, Jeffrey Sachs, “The High Costs of Abandoning International Law,” *The Boston Globe*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2017/03/05/the-high-costs-abandoning-international-law/OXGzXIJP3th3Fc9EGNsXTN/story.html>.

Evident in each of these cases is a “strong man” persona embodying authoritarianism, a veneer that hides the underlying incompetence that usually accompanies such strategies. These leaders, not inclined to the rigorous critical thinking that requires a descent into matters of detail, offer broad general claims that eclipse the engagement of the actual issues and the persons most affected. Worse, rather than encounter those most in need, these leaders want to round them up.

Written days after the presidential victory for Donald Trump, Kenneth Himes’s “The State of Our Union” in last year’s *Notes* gave readers a sense of the compelling challenges that face the United States after one of the most brutal presidential campaigns in modern American history.³⁸ Now a year later, we know better the type of political leadership exercised out of the Oval Office: clearly, authoritarianism is the overriding character trait of this presidency. As Michael MacWilliams noted, “A single statistically significant variable predicts whether a voter supports Trump—and it’s not race, income or education levels: It’s authoritarianism.”³⁹

MacWilliams’s data was not new. As early as 2009, political scientists Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler had discovered that behind the growing polarization in the United States was a rising authoritarianism.⁴⁰ As Amanda Taub notes,

Their book concluded that the GOP, by positioning itself as the party of traditional values and law and order, had unknowingly attracted what would turn out to be a vast and previously bipartisan population of Americans with authoritarian tendencies. This trend had been accelerated in recent years by demographic and economic changes such as immigration, which “activated” authoritarian tendencies, leading many Americans to seek out a strongman leader who would preserve a status quo they feel is under threat and impose order on a world they perceive as increasingly alien.⁴¹

Moreover Trump is distinguished not by his policies but by

his rhetoric and style. The way he reduces everything to black-and-white extremes of strong versus weak, greatest versus worst. His simple, direct promises that he can solve problems that other politicians are too weak to manage. And, perhaps most importantly, his willingness to flout all the conventions of civilized discourse when it comes to the minority groups that authoritarians find so threatening.

38. Kenneth Himes, “The State of Our Union,” *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 147–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916682469>.

39. Michael MacWilliams, “The One Weird Trait That Predicts Whether You’re a Trump Supporter and It’s not Gender, Age, Income, Race or Religion,” *Politico*, January 17, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-2016-authoritarian-213533>. See also The Editors, “‘I Alone’: Trump’s Dangerous Authoritarianism,” *Commonweal*, July 26, 2016, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/i-alone>.

40. Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

41. Amanda Taub, “The Rise of American Authoritarianism,” *Vox*, March 1, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>.

Taub adds, this is “classic authoritarian leadership style: simple, powerful, and punitive.”⁴² Finally, she reminds us that “Authoritarians are a real constituency that exists independently of Trump—and will persist as a force in American politics.”⁴³

In another survey, on the eve of the election, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), together with the Brookings Institution, studied American authoritarianism and found “that Americans overall tend to favor an emphasis on authoritarian traits over autonomous traits.”⁴⁴ One of the great indicators is economic stability, but education also seems to be a significant controlling insight, more so than race and gender:

[T]here are no significant differences between whites and non-whites in agreement about the need for a leader willing to break the rules. For instance, majorities of both white (62%) and nonwhite (56%) Americans with a high school degree or less agree that the country needs a leader willing to break the rules. Conversely, only about one-quarter of white (24%) and non-white Americans (22%) with a post-graduate education agree.⁴⁵

When it comes to religion, we see another difference:

Americans of different religious backgrounds also display varying affinities for embracing an authoritarian orientation. Roughly three quarters of black Protestants (77%), white evangelical Protestants (75%), and Hispanic Catholics (75%) have an authoritarian orientation. A majority of white Catholics (62%) and white mainline Protestants (55%) also express authoritarian preferences. In contrast, no more than one in three Americans who belong to non-Christian denominations (33%) and the religiously unaffiliated (30%) hold an authoritarian disposition.⁴⁶

Culturally formative issues like economic stability, degrees of education, and religious affiliation, more than race and gender, differentiate Americans on the issue of authoritarianism.

The survey describes the authoritarian orientation as feelings of personal insecurity and acute cultural anxiety, sounding not unlike the fears of white South Africans with the pending collapse of apartheid. “Americans who express an authoritarian disposition

42. Taub, “The Rise of American Authoritarianism.”

43. Taub, “The Rise of American Authoritarianism.”

44. Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, E.J. Dionne, Jr., William A. Galston, Betsy Cooper, and Rachel Lienesch, eds., *How Immigration and Concerns about Cultural Changes are Shaping the 2016 Election: Findings from the 2016 PRRI/Brookings Immigration Survey* (Washington, DC: Public Religion Research Institute, 2016), 24–25; <https://www.prii.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/PRRI-Brookings-2016-Immigration-survey-report.pdf>.

45. Jones, Cox, Dionne, Jr., Galston, Cooper, and Lienesch, *How Immigration and Concerns about Cultural Changes are Shaping the 2016 Election*, 24n2.

46. Jones, Cox, Dionne, Jr., Galston, Cooper, and Lienesch, *How Immigration and Concerns about Cultural Changes are Shaping the 2016 Election*, 26–27. As we will see later the authoritarian stance of many American Roman Catholics might suggest their resistance to Francis’s innovation, but as we descend to the matter of details this too departs from the expected norm.

are much more likely to view cultural changes negatively.⁴⁷ Elsewhere, the Cambridge University psychologist Peter Rentfrow notes that “individuals high in authoritarianism score low in openness.”⁴⁸

While the report shows surprisingly different attitudes on immigration issues like wall building and banning Muslims,⁴⁹ it concludes its reflection on immigration with a fairly interesting note: “Only 15% of Americans report that they live in a community that has a large number of recent immigrants. Roughly one-third (32%) say they live in an area with some new immigrants.” Then they add,

Notably, Americans who live in communities with a high number of new immigrants are more likely than those who do not to view the economic contributions of *illegal* immigrants positively. Nearly half (49%) of Americans who live in communities with high numbers of recent immigrants say that illegal immigrants help the economy by providing low-cost labor, compared to about four in ten (44%) who say they hurt the economy by driving down wages. In contrast, Americans living in areas with almost no new immigrants are about half as likely to say illegal immigrants help the economy as they are to say immigrants hurt the economy (32% vs. 61%, respectively).⁵⁰

The actual lived encounter with undocumented immigrants clearly provides a new perspective that counters the fears of those not so engaged. As Thomas and Francis remind us, the actual descent into details brings us away from predominant modes of thought and into a new capacity to understand. That engagement is a key for going forward; without it we remain trapped in myopic fears that do not let us see reality as it is.

As we conclude this topic of voter authoritarianism, we should note that while everyone agrees that Trump is authoritarian, not everyone agrees that authoritarian tendencies put him in the White House.⁵¹ Recently the London School of Business did an extensive study of the general phenomenon of “why voters might be choosing dominant authoritarian leaders around the world,” and they found not that voters were necessarily by nature authoritarian, but rather that “economic hardship creates feelings of powerlessness that draw people toward dominant, authoritarian leaders.” Here they

47. Jones, Cox, Dionne, Jr., Galston, Cooper, and Lienesch, *How Immigration and Concerns about Cultural Changes are Shaping the 2016 Election*, 27.

48. Thomas Edsall, “The Trump Voter Paradox,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/28/opinion/trump-republicans-authoritarian.html>.

49. Jones, Cox, Dionne, Jr., Galston, Cooper, and Lienesch, *How Immigration and Concerns about Cultural Changes are Shaping the 2016 Election*, 40–43.

50. Jones, Cox, Dionne, Jr., Galston, Cooper, and Lienesch, *How Immigration and Concerns about Cultural Changes are Shaping the 2016 Election*, 50.

51. Wendy Rahn and Eric Oliver, “Trump’s Voters Aren’t Authoritarians, New Research Says. So What Are They?” *Washington Post*, March 9, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/09/trumps-voters-arent-authoritarians-new-research-says-so-what-are-they/?utm_term=.6955914557b2. See also Michael Kazin, “Trump and American Populism,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 6, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-10-06/trump-and-american-populism>.

pinpoint a psychological strategy: the “threat of economic uncertainty leads people to prefer leaders whom they see as decisive, authoritative and dominant, even if they are morally questionable, over other types of leaders who might be more respected, knowledgeable and admired.” As one of the researchers noted, “People engage in all sorts of compensatory strategies to vicariously get that sense of personal control.”⁵²

Still, authoritarianism is the president’s defining “style” and that style is shared by other national leaders: from Duterte to Erdogan. The style is bullying, uncivil, intolerant, xenophobic, and fundamentally antinomian, unless a norm serves the particular agenda. Quite apart from whether these authoritarian strategies offer anything but a “sense of personal control” to their national electorate, it does not work well when national authoritarian leaders need to work collectively on global issues like the climate and immigration crises. Moreover, at a time when the climate crisis requires a multitude of mutually tolerating, collaborative, and respectful strategies of responsible moral agency, the array of authoritarian national political leaders represents an inherently contradictory epistemological strategy for addressing the issue.

For instance, in the *Journal of Language and Politics*, Robin Lakoff examines how “Trump’s victory and his communicative strategies compromised the culture’s notions of ‘truth’.”⁵³ Here the concern is not Trump’s impact in winning the presidency, but in governing. Does his way of communicating compromise our ability to descend to matters of detail? On this very point Oscar Winberg positions “the Trump campaign in historical traditions of right-wing populism, incendiary political language, and insulting rhetoric.”⁵⁴ He argues that Trump’s rhetorical strategy “fits into a long tradition of insult politics,” but that it “remains controversial and politically dangerous.” In particular he notes the president’s inability to develop a new strategy now that he enjoys presidential power. “Yet even in victory, the candidate was unable to abandon insult politics and consequently was incapable of shedding the lasting stigma of his rhetoric, assuming the office as the most divisive president in modern history.”⁵⁵

Finally, these rhetorical strategies exercised by Trump as well as by many of his fellow authoritarian heads of state lead to concerns about these leaders’ competencies—assuredly so, since the rhetoric is itself a mask hiding the incompetency behind it. In a memorable essay, Mollie Wilson O’Reilly argues that “because there is no precedence for covering a president as incompetent as Trump,” “reporters go on treating him like they would any other commander-in-chief instead of making his unprecedented

52. Robert Ferris, “Why Voters Might Be Choosing Dominant Authoritarian Leaders around the World,” *CNBC Science*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/12/why-voters-might-be-choosing-dominant-authoritarian-leaders-around-the-world.html>.

53. Robin Lakoff, “The Hollow Man: Donald Trump, Populism, and Post-Truth Politics,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 16 (2017): 595–606, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.17022.lak>.

54. Oscar Winberg, “Insult Politics: Donald Trump, Right-Wing Populism, and Incendiary Language,” *European Journal of American Studies* 12 (2017), <https://ejas.revues.org/12132>.

55. Winberg, “Insult Politics.”

incompetence the headline of the story.”⁵⁶ Reflecting specifically on the president’s comments on North Korea last August, David Graham investigates how Trump’s dangerous (compulsive?) love for improvisation distracts many from knowing what the president’s strategies actually are.⁵⁷ In *Foreign Policy*, Stephen Walt makes it clear: “the real issue isn’t Trump’s nonstop boorishness; it’s his increasingly obvious lack of competence.” He argues that “foreign-policy competence requires the ability to identify ends that will make the country more secure and/or prosperous and then assemble the means to bring the desired results to fruition.”⁵⁸ Competency therefore requires descending to matter of details, the very task our national leaders refuse to do.

Prophetic Pragmatism and American Racism

In this last week of October, as I finish this Note, two major lectures on the phenomenon of populist authoritarian leadership were delivered. Pope Francis noted “extremist and populist groups are finding fertile ground in many countries; they make protest the heart of their political message, without offering the alternative of a constructive political project.” He added, “The voice of dialogue is replaced by shouted claims and demands. One often has the feeling that the primary goal is no longer the common good, and this perception is shared by more and more citizens.”⁵⁹

In a speech at the American Enterprise Institute, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks addressed the polarization in Trump’s America, reminding the audience of America’s deep connection with biblical values, echoing a concern for the common good being lost and the attendant issues of human dignity and equality. “Today, one half of America is losing all those covenantal institutions. It’s losing strong marriages and families and communities. It is losing a strong sense of the American narrative. It’s even losing *e pluribus unum* because today everyone prefers *pluribus* to *unum*.”⁶⁰

These prophetically pragmatic lectures are important. On the world stage we have today religious leaders, like Pope Francis and Rabbi Sacks, prodding us to attend to these twin challenges of climate change and political alienation, telling us that within the resources of communities of faith there are the multitude of tools of a prophetic

56. Mollie Wilson O’Reilly, “The Man Who Knew Too Little,” *Commonweal*, October 20, 2017, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/man-who-knew-too-little>.

57. David Graham, “Trump’s Dangerous Love for Improvisation,” *The Atlantic*, August 9, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/get-on-board-the-trump-trane/536379/>.

58. Stephen Walt, “The Global Consequences of Trump’s Incompetence,” *Foreign Policy*, July 18, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/18/what-happens-when-the-world-figures-out-trump-isnt-competent-macron-europe/>.

59. Gerard O’Connell, “With Populism on the Rise, Pope Francis Calls for Unity and Dialogue in Europe,” *America*, October 28, 2017, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/10/28/populism-rise-pope-francis-calls-unity-and-dialogue-europe>.

60. David Brooks, “The Week Trump Won,” *The New York Times*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/opinion/the-week-trump-won.html>.

pragmatism that can help us overcome our nationalistic vices and attend to our global crises. Can we overcome those vices?

I have been arguing for several years that a critical problem for the American conscience has been its inability to acknowledge its own long-standing and deeply held complicity and guilt on race, slavery, and anti-blackness. In “Redeeming Conscience,” I reflected on how M. Shawn Copeland and Bryan Massingale, among others, have called us to a new self-understanding: America chose to be racist when it chose slavery and later compromised its liberty by “accommodating” slavery and therein living the false witness of “all men being created equal.”⁶¹ America cannot live the lie of its constitutional claims; either it seeks to rectify what it has done, as other countries have, or it continues to live in an apartheid culture of white supremacy and anti-blackness.⁶² As we witness just the most obvious forms of the anti-blackness in our society—mass incarceration and the police killings of black men and boys on our streets—we can see that we remain inept at responding to the twin crises of climate change and the banality of political leadership unless at least simultaneously we clean our own house. We cannot think morally if our consciences are sick.

We must realize that as a national culture we are compromised in our very conscience. As Massingale notes, “What, then, can free us from culturally induced blindness? If conscience is responsible to the truth, and the culture of racism blinds those who belong to the socially advantaged and privileged groups to a full awareness of moral wrongs/harms, what needs to happen for conscience to overcome such an ethical handicap?”⁶³ In America, I believe that just as the matters of economic impact cannot be separated from the climate crisis and climate crisis cannot be separated from the banality of contemporary political leadership, similarly we cannot address these two global issues without addressing at the same time the national crisis of anti-blackness.

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61. James F. Keenan, “Redeeming Conscience,” *Theological Studies* 76 (2015): 129–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563914565296>; Keenan, “Collective Conscience and Collective Guilt,” in *VATICANUM 21 Erschließung und bleibende Aufgaben des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils für Theologie und Kirche im 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Christoph Böttigheimer and René Dausner (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 78–86; Keenan, “The Arrested Development of the American Conscience,” *America*, January 2, 2017, <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2016/12/22/arrested-development-american-conscience>; Keenan, “Guilt, Conscience, and Confession,” *Confessio. Schuld bekennen in Kirche und Öffentlichkeit*, ed. Julia Enxing and Jutta Koslowski, Beihefte zur Ökumenischen Rundschau Band 118 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2018).
62. See Patrick Phillips, *Blood at the Root: A Racial Cleansing in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017).
63. Bryan N. Massingale, “Conscience Formation and the Challenge of Unconscious Racism/Racial Bias” (paper presented at Conscience in Catholicism: Rights, Responsibilities, and Institutional Policies, Santa Clara University, September 10–12, 2014). Massingale answered the question in “Conscience Formation and the Challenge of Unconscious Racism/Racial Bias,” *Conscience in Catholicism: Rights, Responsibilities, and Institutional Policies*, ed. David E. DeCosse and Kristin E. Heyer (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2015), 53–68.

In a way, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., anticipated the intrinsic interconnection of these issues when he decided to oppose the Vietnam War as he was leading the civil rights movement.⁶⁴ Acknowledging that the way we think at home affects the way we think elsewhere is, as King could tell us, a difficult task.

A conscience riddled with guilt cannot function in anything but denial and darkness. When a conscience acknowledges its guilt, it becomes capable of developing its capacity by the epistemic virtue of humility, as Lisa Fullam calls it, a virtue integral to conscience formation.⁶⁵ This virtue is animated by what Margaret Farley calls the grace of self-doubt.⁶⁶ Together they help us to see that the work of realizing ourselves as disciples of Christ is a formidable life-long task fraught with misperceptions and yet possible precisely because of that humility. Certainly conscience does not make us infallible; quite the contrary, as *Gaudium et Spes* reminds us, we frequently err. But we can only get to the truth through conscience. Humility then is constitutive of the Christian quest for moral truth, but humility can be acquired only when conscience admits its guilt.

Before Trump, the American conscience, unable to confess its guilt, was trapped in racist sin;⁶⁷ now, it is safe to say that that racist sin helped get Trump elected. With the American conscience having hitched its hope on authoritarian and incompetent leadership, what are we to do?

Now more than ever, we are called to engage the details of race through a new prophetic pragmatism. The ground-breaking pragmatic work of Copeland and Massingale in Catholic circles, like the approaches of others like Emilie Townes, Cornel West, and Victor Anderson,⁶⁸ and the important work of white Catholic theologians like Laurie Cassidy and Alex Mikulich⁶⁹ have paved the way for new accompanying theologians. Here, I want to feature the work of Andrew Prevot, Vincent W. Lloyd, Jeannine Hill Fletcher, and Katie Grimes.

Read Prevot's latest blog to get a taste of his prophetic pragmatism: "Race, Roots and Blood."⁷⁰ It is engaging, meditative, liberative, and concrete, not unlike his first

64. Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–68* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007); Branch, *The King Years: Historic Moments in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013).

65. Lisa Fullam, *The Virtue of Humility* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2009).

66. Margaret Farley, "Ethics, Ecclesiology, and the Grace of Self-Doubt," *A Call to Fidelity*, ed. James J. Walter, Timothy E. O'Connell, and Thomas A. Shannon (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 55–77.

67. On America's original sin of racism, see Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the Commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of the 13th Amendment" (speech, The White House, Washington, DC, October 12, 2015), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/09/remarks-president-commemoration-150th-anniversary-13th-amendment>.

68. Karen Rucks, "Pragmatic Philosophy, Theology, and Practices: Pointing Directions for African-American Public Theology" (PhD diss., Boston University, May 2013), <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/8463>.

69. Laurie Cassidy and Alex Mikulich, *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2012).

70. Andrew Prevot, "Race, Roots and Blood," *Daily Theology* (blog), October 25, 2017, <https://dailytheology.org/2017/10/25/race-roots-and-blood/>.

book, *Thinking Prayer: Theology and Spirituality and the Crises of Modernity* where he turns to prayer as constitutive for our way forward, encountering the freedom of God and developing a sustainable theology for the twenty-first century. That turn to prayer must attend to the prayers of the oppressed who found in prayer a way to resist the effects of racialized violence.⁷¹ Hearing their prayers, we learn to think about prayer rightly.⁷²

Vincent Lloyd offers his constructive *Black Natural Law* and therein achieves four strategic platforms.⁷³ First he roots the black natural law in black experience marked by the oppressive forces of civil law and its culture. To combat that oppression, Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Martin Luther King, Jr. invoked an appeal to God's law as constitutive of black political authority. This move from experience to God's law is not an arc found in white political strategies, but it is in black natural law. Second, he constructs a tradition of resources, a theological anthropology if you will, that integrates the political, religious, and philosophical claims of these writers, a synthesis that cannot be ignored. Third, he insists that a black natural law interrupts the work of natural law theologians in particular in three ways: it shows the politically strategic dimension of natural law, it eschews the individual or personal understanding of the tradition for its social, collective understanding; and it argues that a natural law cannot ignore God's own option to privilege the experience of the poor. Fourth, he establishes this tradition as normative and critiques black social, and political strategies that do not acknowledge the inevitable appeal to God's law.⁷⁴

Like Francis and Sacks, Prevot and Lloyd return to the religious authorities as a way of promoting a prophetically pragmatic strategy for greater social equity. Naturally they team together and edit an extraordinary collection, *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, which begins jarringly with the words, "We are angry."⁷⁵ Anti-blackness, they write, concentrates precisely "on the harms being done to black bodies, selves, and communities" and "primes black communities to fight back."⁷⁶ Looking at a people long under attack, the editors turn to Christian ethics so as to "function as a powerful,

71. Andrew Prevot, *Thinking Prayer: Theology and Spirituality amid the Crises of Modernity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

72. See also, Andrew Prevot, "Hearing the Cries of Crucified Peoples: The Prayerful Witness of Ignacio Ellacuría and James Cone," in *Witnessing: Prophecy, Politics, and Wisdom*, ed. Maria Clara Bingemer and Peter Casarella (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), 45–59; Prevot, "No Mere Spirituality: Recovering a Tradition of Women Theologians," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 33 (2017), 107–17, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.33.1.09>.

73. Vincent Lloyd, *Black Natural Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

74. One thinks here of the *Summa Theologiae* 1–2, q. 93, resp.: "All laws, insofar as they partake of right reason, are derived from the eternal law." *St. Thomas Aquinas, The Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1225-1274,_Thomas_Aquinas,_Summa_Theologiae_%5B1%5D,_EN.pdf.

75. Vincent W. Lloyd and Andrew Prevot, introduction to *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, ed. Vincent W. Lloyd and Andrew Prevot (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), xiii.

76. Lloyd and Prevot, introduction to *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, xxiv.

prophetic critique.” As the spirituals once were, so too Christian ethics must be today an instrument of resistance. Its ten essays are riveting, foundational for classroom teaching on race, experience, and power. Copeland provides an indispensable grammar of white supremacy and an accompanying logic for anti-black resistance.⁷⁷ Massingale highlights how deep anti-blackness pervades white supremacy by looking at how black bodies and sexuality are stigmatized, humiliated, and maligned by law enforcement and by porn marketers.⁷⁸ Prevot’s poignant essay argues that “when black bodies are attacked, so too is black selfhood.”⁷⁹ In an act of authentic resistance, wherein he urges Christian ethics “to affirm the possibility of black selfhood,” he proposes Sojourner Truth as a theological exemplar.⁸⁰

In *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism and Religious Diversity in America*, Jeannine Hill Fletcher establishes a fundamental claim that white supremacy is prompted, generated, and sustained by Christian supremacy, that insistence on the primacy of Christian revelation and faith.⁸¹ In her thoughtful, provocative, and compelling narrative of how Christian supremacy gave birth to white supremacy she highlights the complicity of Christianity in anti-blackness and other forms of racism. Summoning Christianity to its roots in the self-sacrificing life and death of Jesus she at once provides a trajectory for Christians to rediscover their call and a pathway to undermine white supremacy.

Katie Walker Grimes is a powerfully prophetic, pragmatic writer.⁸² In *Christ Divided: Antiblackness as Corporate Vice*, she looks at the historical formation of our American neighborhood parishes to investigate “racial segregation as a corporate habit of antiblackness supremacy in the Body of Christ.”⁸³ In particular she looks at the sacramental lives of white supremacy incarnated in parishes across the country and wonders what happens to baptism and Eucharist when used to further the antiblackness supremacy of the so-called Christian community. Grimes is indefatigable in highlighting how white Christianity corrupts itself by its unchecked and unexamined privilege-turned-antiblackness-supremacy and in doing so interrupts our way of worship so as to help us see how our own idolatrous practices harm others as they harm ourselves.⁸⁴

77. M. Shawn Copeland, “White Supremacy and Anti-Black Logics in the Making of U.S. Catholicism,” in Lloyd and Prevot, *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, 61–75.

78. Bryan N. Massingale, “The Erotic Life of Anti-Blackness: Police Sexual Violation of Black Bodies,” in Lloyd and Prevot, *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, 173–93.

79. Andrew Prevot, “Sources of a Black Self? Ethics of Authenticity in an Era of Anti-Blackness,” in Lloyd and Prevot, *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, 7–95 at 78.

80. Prevot, “Sources of a Black Self?” 95.

81. Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism and Religious Diversity in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017).

82. See her “Black Exceptionalism: Anti-Blackness Supremacy in the Afterlife of Slavery,” in Lloyd and Prevot, *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, 61–75.

83. Katie Walker Grimes, *Christ Divided: Antiblackness as Corporate Vice* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 123.

84. Katie Walker Grimes, *Fugitive Saints: Catholicism and the Politics of Slavery* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

Conclusion

Let me close in noting two other works that bring all three topics together. In *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, Melanie Harris concretely brings our three issues together by looking at the exemplars of women like Alice Walker and Mercy Oduyoye.⁸⁵

Finally Cathleen Kaveny does us a great service by her landmark contribution, *Prophecy without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square*. She reminds us that to get to the heart of the matter, great American leaders were not afraid of invoking the jeremiad as a corrective so as to get discourse back on track. Moral deliberation—the descent to the matter of details—is our basic and ordinary moral language. But here, looking at historic figures, most especially Martin Luther King, Jr., she realizes the effectiveness of the prophetic indictment: “Prophetic rhetoric is, by its very nature, an extraordinary form of moral discourse; its purpose is not to replace moral deliberation but to return it to health.” Kaveny considers moral indictment a form of “moral chemotherapy.” “It takes aim at morally cancerous assumptions or perspectives that threaten the possibility of reliable practical reasoning within a particular community at a particular time.” Chemotherapy is “inherently destructive,” but administered judiciously, with humility and compassion, it can bring a cure.⁸⁶

The triple summons to address antiblackness, climate change and political leadership impose on the American conscience unparalleled challenges to develop a new competency of collective moral agency. In order to get there, we need to descend to the issues before us and remember the enormously diverse resources we have at our disposal. We do well to remember, however, that these challenges are the result of our own agency and so we must find the place where we should begin as a fitting point of departure, and that place needs to be where we can make an appeal to mercy.

Author Biography

James F. Keenan, SJ, is the Canisius Chair and Director of the Jesuit Institute at Boston College. He is the founder of Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC) and is preparing a third international conference of CTEWC to be held in Sarajevo, July 2018. His most recent book is *University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2015) and is presently writing another book, *A Brief History of Catholic Ethics* (Paulist).

85. Melanie Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017).

86. Cathleen Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 315–16. On what political discourse ought to look like, see her *A Culture of Engagement: Law, Religion and Morality* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016).