“A time of hate? Race, Covid, and the rise of ethno-nationalism”

This issue of *Dialog* has been created over the course of 2020, one of the most unusual years in a century. Out of over 73,000,000 reported cases, the Covid 19 pandemic has killed over 1,600,000 people worldwide. Even as the first vaccines are rolling out, the cases and deaths are still skyrocketing. We have had to modify our lives and the ways we worship, in celebration and in grief, in ways we could not have previously imagined. In addition, global and national attention has focused on the systemic racism woven into the social and economic fabric of the United States. While many African American people previously have been killed by police violence, the video of George Floyd’s suffocation and death over an excruciating 8 minutes and 46 seconds under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer ignited even the hard of heart to pay attention. Mid-pandemic, people took to the streets in the United States and across the globe to protest the persistent killing of black, indigenous, and people of color by officials within local, state, and federally-funded systems. The very fact that we need a movement to argue that “Black Lives Matter” reveals that even the most basic idea of human value needs to be reclaimed.

When the topic of this issue was proposed, its sole focus was to address the alarming global rise of ethno-nationalist leaders and movements. The editorial board discussed how we witnessed this in our own countries and across the globe in ways that evoked the fascism of the World War II era. We were eager to understand the theological roots of movements and governments as they carve dangerous understandings of unity and identity based on explicit xenophobic and racist fear of the “other.” Elections within the United States over the course of 2020 amplified the divisive, other-demonizing tendencies of our time that fuel larger fascist impulses from the “left” and “right.” These polarizing tensions are a global phenomenon and are layered on top of struggles for racial equity and the pandemic. Due to the time of its birth, this issue’s articles naturally weave together the issues of racism, pandemic, and ethno-nationalism.

Do we live in a Time of Hate? And, especially in a time of immense fear and fragility, is there a basis of hope that we can address the deep divisions and consequent violence in our world?

The profound articles in this issue address this question directly. They bring a theological, ecclesial, and historical lens to the issues of Covid, systemic racism, and the dynamics that fuel ethno-nationalism. They also come from across the globe: South Africa, Sweden, Norway, and the United States. The articles define fascism and ethno-fascism differently but each describes governmental systems that suppress criticism, centralize power and control, carry a strong demand for loyalty, and forge a sense of ultra-nationalism, often through merging ideas of race and nation. Ethno-nationalism can more easily speak to movements with similar characteristics but not necessarily associated with a nation’s governmental systems. In her article, Jone Salomonsen notes that contemporary forms of fascism appeal to a fear in the current moment and (1) promise a form of rebirth of a better society, (2) appeal to a nostalgic imaginary of a better past culture or time, and (3) imagine themselves as an organic, natural, and pre-existent nation that is rightfully connected to the land itself, thereby forming an ultra-nationalism.

Across these articles, common topics recurred: (1) the role of science to reinforce or challenge fascist and xenophobic movements and their concomitant violence; (2) the Christian counter-cultural vocation of sharing food, stories, and reasoned dialogue astonic to the divisive dynamics that fuel ethno-nationalism; (3) the problem of air-tight “purity politics” from the left or right such that one becomes more loyal to ideologies than their fellow humans; and (4) the value of ritual in the process of bridging deep divides.

In gathering articles for the issue, it was a surprise that science recurred across articles in discussion of its role in refuting or corroborating ethno-nationalism. Perhaps reminiscent of biblical “proof texting,” science emerged in several articles as the 21st century form of “proof” of human relations to all creatures or, nefariously, to reinforce hierarchies between humans. Paul Hinlicky recounts Hitler’s “table talks” where he spread a “theology” of Aryan supremacy and marshalled science to falsely support his claims. Hinlicky labels this a form of “extreme scientistism,” which posed as irrefutable toward Hitler’s theories of race. Thus, Hinlicky cautions theologians today from too quickly adopting science as unqualified truth and
good because it, like religion, can be used to various ends. Likewise, Elisabeth Gerle discusses how science has been used in Sweden by some LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer) voices to back anti-immigration, anti-Muslim arguments. Here religious people are posited as a threat to science and human rights and thus should not be accepted or allowed to settle in Sweden. In her article, Jennifer Hockenberry describes how rejection of science also plays into deepening division in historically divisive moments; ancient Manicheans fostered a distrust of science to further their own ideology and, likewise, some people today bolster their base of supporters through rejecting some forms of science in particular: climate science and epidemiology. For the Manicheans, science was equated with Judaism and thus was to be rejected. For some groups in the United States today, science is seen as collaborating with leftist perspectives. While Hinlicky points to Hitler’s use of science to bolster white supremacy, Hockenberry reveals how rejection of science has been used today to achieve the same ends.

Each article discloses different factors that foster a time of hate and division. Some factions in our world demand an apocalyptic purging of those with opposing opinions. Some justify their positions with reason and science, others with nostalgia for an imaginary time of purity and greatness. Others adopt ideologies held at the level of religion that demonize and resist dialogue. Most often, one's own presumed “purity” or “superiority” is claimed as inherent to one’s identity, practice or method of reaching truth and fact. There is an “us” and “them” rooted in location (city vs rural, coast vs heartland), educational level, skin color, economic standing, religion, or anything assumed inherent within some people and not in others. As a human species, we seem to find endless ways to divide ourselves and attack those we deem “not us.”

Ethno-nationalism in the United States has long been built on the basis of white supremacy and literally on the backs and bodies of black, brown and indigenous people of color (BIPOC). Thus, the issue of systemic racism is interwoven with ethno-nationalism. Black Lives Matter and books like Kelly Brown Douglas’ Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God speak to the historical and current deep roots of “whiteness” and its economic, legal, social, and religious ramifications in the United States. Douglas recounts how the concept of Anglo-Saxon was forged in Europe and England as a way to connect Caucasian people to a mythology of an advanced, freedom-loving Roman people with higher rational ability. This myth of a superior Anglo people was imported by Protestants, transmuting into the notion of “whiteness” and becoming embedded in the history of the United States. White supremacy supported the multiple, layered horrors of slavery, and a diminished legal standing of all people who were not included in the label “white.” Douglas recounts a 1923 US Supreme Court case where an Indian-American man literally argued that he should be granted citizenship since Aryan (and therefore Caucasian) roots are initially in high-caste people of India and therefore he was “ethnologically white” (Douglas, 2015, p. 38). He lost his case. Another account recalls a man of probable Italian origin running away from armed police while yelling, “I am white! I am white!” (Douglas, 2015, p. 34).

Denise Rector’s article offers an abbreviated history of systemic racism within the Lutheran church in the United States—from 1600 to the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Rector recounts the role of lament in scripture and community and proposes a ritual of public lament and repentance as a pathway for the current ELCA to initiate steps in the direction of embodying anti-racist stated commitments.

Other articles also highlight the power of rituals to address a divided culture, society, or nation. The opening essay by Anna Cho offers powerful understandings of church that persevere and unite across our lives divided by the pandemic as we “Shelter in place” or “Stay home stay safe,” in our global collective attempt to reduce the transmission of Covid 19. Her reflections on ritual, speech theory, and church affirm its resilience and ability to bring hope. Cecelia Nahnfeldt describes the power of community public ritual and gathering as an opening to conversations and relationships. This is evidenced in one rural community in Sweden that sought to disarm and dismantle firm, volatile boundaries of the extreme right in their town. Using the example of the church and community leaders, Nahnfeldt calls us to an “uncomfortable vocation of love” where Christians live out a tenuous “theology of the cross,” a risk-accepting extension of oneself to those who intentionally deepen divides. In a similar vein, Jennifer Hockenberry offers three accounts where sharing meals and rational, open dialogue had the effect of weakening hardened, racist ideologies of even the most extreme kind: the Ku Klux Klan. Hockenberry recounts the work of Saint Augustine, who countered disbelief and despair in the power of dialogue with a Christian hope forged in debate and engagement.

Elisabeth Gerle employs theology and political theory in her analysis of contemporary Swedish struggles over identity and belonging. Through her article, she examines the nationalist notions of “us” and “them,” where immigrants and others are deemed dangerous and invasive and are denied “belonging” by those who hold power. She challenges all of these notions of firm boundaries and “others” with Scandinavian Creation Theology’s earthly understanding of embodied grace and salvation that assumes permeability and interconnection across borders and throughout creation. In particular, Gerle
points to the pandemic as uncovering our vulnerability and interconnectedness—between humans and with all non-human creation.

Articles by Paul Hinlicky, Amy Carr, Christine Helmer, and Jone Salomonsen directly examine roots of fascism today and in history. Hinlicky develops a deep understanding of the dynamics that feed the rise of fascism, referencing World War II Germany. From this, he extends an evocative critique of both the “left” and “right” factions in the United States that quickly employ theology as a tool of their ideologies. He examines Hitler’s theology in comparison to today’s theological landscape and asks whether churches and theology have been too readily coopted to fascist tendencies on both sides rather than relying on a Christ-centered understanding of righteousness and belonging.

Jone Salomonsen’s article examines the extreme ethnonationalism of Anders Behring Breivik who bombed downtown Oslo in 2011 while simultaneously timing an attack on a teen summer camp, killing 77 people. Breivik fashioned his own ideology from a well-worn path of fascist movements and still has disciples today. Salomonsen focuses on a leader and group in California that has adopted Breivik’s agenda. Her article, along with Hinlicky’s, expose and examine the way that religion and politics become intertwined through the use of a powerful blend of the mythological and theological. Hitler’s and Breivik’s fascism were propagated through elaborate, intentional “theologies” that evoked the religious to serve hate.

There are many political and social commentaries on our deeply divided societies. But here is what is different about the articles you will find here: In a time of hate, when everyone wants to point fingers at others as the source of any problem, these articles’ authors (without being asked) examine the way we all feed these dynamics—whether we identify on the “right” or “left.” Better yet, they offer stories of Christian hope and tonic, rooted in a shared identity and grace as well as possible methods to recover and thrive. As I read them, they educated and reminded me of commitments to loving God and neighbor that are deeper than division.

Quite honestly, I have not read such a collection of analyses in any other place; they balance a call for accountability and justice with profound humility—a call to hope and practice dialogue, to employ critical thinking to one’s own ideas and others, to the vocation of love, and serve the neighbor in all settings. In their article here, Amy Carr and Christine Helmer write, “Humility as Christian activists and visionaries means being grounded—not made exceptional—in and by the transforming power of the gospel. An anti-fascist Christian practice can say with Paul, quoting Hosea, “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,” and her who was not beloved I will call “beloved”’ (Romans 9:25).”

Jennifer Hockenberry’s article ends with a story of Augustine rushing to his desk to improve his theology during the sacking of Carthage. He feverishly worked to deepen his work on Christian hope and love, even as his town was being attacked and burned by extremist factions. He spent his career trying to address religious and societal divisions with a deep Christian hope and trust in reasoned dialog and the power of grace to heal. **We offer this issue of Dialog as a tool of hope** that acknowledges the strong powers of fear and division that wrack our global context. It offers examples of simple and complex paths to connection with one another forged from a Christian vocation that does not give up on one’s neighbor.

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**REFERENCE**

Douglas, Kelly Brown. (2015). *Stand your ground: Black bodies and the justice of God*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.