
Calling a Thing What It Is: Confronting the American Genocide of Indigenous Peoples

Dedicated to the Life and Legacy of the Rev. Dr. Gordon J. Straw

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We live in a land haunted by the traces of indigenous people: place names, historical sites, mounds, reservations. Not only are these reminders of a tragic history but a call for us to engage tribal people today on their own terms. At the start of this article, I invite you, wherever you are located, to call to mind the Native American people who first lived on the land you now occupy. In Iowa that means paying respect to the Illini, Ioway, Otoe, Missouria, and Dakota people, among others. We acknowledge the tragic history of the displacement of the indigenous people by the European immigrants and their descendants. Today the Sac and Fox Tribe of the Mississippi in Iowa, also known as the Meskwaki Nation, is federally recognized. I invite you to take up the practice of acknowledging and paying respect to indigenous people as you travel from place to place in this land.

Autobiographical reflections

My family in this country were immigrants from Norway, arriving in the U.S. through Canada in 1868 to homestead in South Dakota, north of Sioux Falls at Renner and Baltic. Many are familiar with the depictions of rugged pioneer life through the books of Ole Rolvaag (1876–1931), especially his *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie*, first published in Norwegian in 1924–1925 and in English in 1927.¹ The book depicts the difficult life struggles in the new land of the Dakota Territory, including homesickness, poverty, harsh weather, locusts, hunger, isolation, the challenges of relating to an alien culture, and raising their immigrant children. The narrative portrays the lives of my immigrant ancestors in oftentimes heroic terms—and in some respects, they were that. The Norwegian immigrants, like those from other European countries in the mass migrations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, like the indigenous people whose land they occupied, suffered the effects of dislocation. Theirs, however, was by choice and not by imposition and violence.

The first four generations on my paternal side grew up in this country as Norwegian speakers, my father being the last. I was

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born in Michigan after he and my mother moved there, where after eighty-four years of our family in the U.S., I was the first as a child to learn only English. On our annual family pilgrimages to visit family in South Dakota, I recall no reference at all to stories about the indigenous people who predated my ancestors living there. While my childhood memories include depictions of Indians on TV and as mascots of team sports, relationships with indigenous people and stories about their dislocation were absent. As I reflect today, this silence overwhelms me. Although every place in this land is filled with traces of indigenous people, we are scarcely aware.

My graduate education introduced me to the study of Latin American liberation theology, which became the theme of my doctoral dissertation written in Germany in the mid-1980s.² As part of those studies I discovered the intersection with black liberation theology in the U.S., beginning with the writings of James H. Cone. Subsequently, I was introduced to the liberation theologies that emerged in many other contexts: anti-apartheid theology in South Africa and Namibia, Minjung theology in Korea, Dalit theology in India, and Palestinian liberation theology. Yet it was not until my sabbatical in 2008–2009 that I came to the reckoning of being called to devote new attention to the historical experiences

1. Ole E. Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie*, trans. Lincoln Colcord and Ole E. Rolvaag (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999).

2. Craig L. Nesson, *Orthopraxis or Heresy: The North American Theological Response to Latin American Liberation Theology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

of indigenous people and the experiences of enslaved people from Africa, as well as their descendants in my own country.

What I had learned in my teaching and research about Bonhoeffer and the Church Struggle in Germany—a history that culminated in the Holocaust—compelled me to recognize that each of the characteristics used to define the Shoah as genocide applied correspondingly to the history of both indigenous and African American people in America. To explore this as an area for research, I began to teach each fall semester a seminar on American Genocide 1: Native American History and Theology and each spring semester on American Genocide 2: African American History and Theology. Each semester students read and discuss two texts (different selections each term) as a graduate seminar.³ Moreover, I have been the faculty of record for annual cross-cultural immersion courses at Pine Ridge. Because of our family's immigrant roots in South Dakota, I am particularly committed to education and advocacy in relation to the history and experiences of the Lakota people. In this regard, it was ironic when I discovered that a land speculator from Dubuque, George M. Staples, organized the Western Town Company of Dubuque in 1865, which laid claim to the land near the falls for a town which became Sioux Falls.⁴

3. Among the texts we have employed for American Genocide 1 have been Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Owl Books, 2007); Steven Charleston and Elaine A. Robinson, *Coming Full Circle: Constructing Native Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); Steven Charleston, *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus* (New York: Morehouse, 2015); Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red: A Native View of Religion—30th Anniversary Edition* (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003); Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014); Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *All the Real Indians Died Off and Other Myths about Native Americans* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016); George E. Tinker, *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008); James Treat, ed., *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996); David Treuer, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019); and Daniel R. Wildcat, *Red Alert: Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge* (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2009). Among the texts for American Genocide 2 have been Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012); James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000); William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, eds., *Slave Narratives* (New York: Literary Classics, 2000); Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Katie Geneva Cannon, Angela D. Sims, and Emilie M. Townes, eds., *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011); James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011); Drew G.I. Hart, *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Race* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Herald Press, 2016); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University, 2010); and Vincent W. Lloyd and Andrew Prevot, eds., *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017).

4. Minnehaha County Historical Society, "Sioux Falls," <https://www.minnehahahistory.org/sioux-falls>, Accessed 11 September 2019.

American genocides

As one response to the atrocities committed during the Second World War—specifically the Holocaust against the Jewish people of Europe and genocide against other vulnerable minority populations (including Communist Party members, disabled persons, Freemasons, Homosexuals, Roma/Gypsies, Jehovah Witnesses, and other religious minorities)—the General Assembly of the United Nations passed the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide on December 9, 1948. According to Article II of the Convention, "genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."⁵

Article III lists those acts that are punishable accordingly: "(a) Genocide; (b) Conspiracy to commit genocide; (c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide; (d) Attempt to commit genocide; (e) Complicity in genocide."

In two major works, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen has analyzed both the Holocaust against the Jews and the characteristics of genocide, which he calls "eliminationism."⁶ Eliminationism, according to Goldhagen, describes more accurately those beliefs, ideologies, acts, and policies that have been a consistent phenomenon throughout human history: "the desire to *eliminate* peoples or groups should be understood to be the overarching category and the core act..."⁷ He articulates five central features of elimination:

Transformation: "the destruction of a group's essential and defining political, social, or cultural identities, in order to neuter its members' allegedly noxious qualities."⁸

Repression: "keeping the hated, deprecated, or feared

5. For this and the following, see United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf, Accessed 9 September 2019.

6. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) and *Worse Than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008).

7. Goldhagen, *Worse Than War*, 14.

8. Goldhagen, *Worse Than War*, 14.

people within territorial reach and reducing, with violent domination, their ability to inflict real or imagined harm upon others.”⁹

Expulsion: “removes unwanted people more thoroughly, by driving them beyond a country’s borders, or from one region of a country to another, or compelling them en masse into camps.”¹⁰

Prevention of Reproduction: “those wishing to eliminate a group in whole or in part can seek to diminish its numbers by interrupting normal biological reproduction.”¹¹

Extermination: “promises not an interim, not a piecemeal, not only a probable, but a ‘final’ solution to the putative problem.”¹²

Among other authors, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz documents how eliminationism against the indigenous people of North America qualifies as genocide according to all five criteria, whether by the U.N. Convention definition or those of Goldhagen.

From the colonial period through the founding of the United States and continuing in the twenty-first century, this has entailed torture, terror, sexual abuse, massacres, systematic military occupations, removals of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories, and removals of Indigenous children to military-like boarding schools.¹³

Furthermore, policies of genocide intensified during four identifiable periods: “the Jacksonian era of forced removal; the California gold rush in Northern California; the post-Civil War ear of the so-called Indian Wars in the Great Plains; and the 1950s termination period.”¹⁴

Goldhagen offers a trenchant critique of the United Nations Convention for its failure to prevent the occurrence of genocide in any single instance since its adoption in 1948. One complicating factor is rooted in the very definition of genocide due to its focus on intent: “acts committed with intent.” He argues that in the absence of “a mass-murdering regime’s secret records, it is almost always impossible to meet a legal threshold of proving intent.”¹⁵ Furthermore, as Goldhagen contends, the convention “contains no effective enforcement mechanism.”¹⁶ This leads him to conclude:

The genocide convention has utterly failed to serve as a practical impediment to regimes slaughtering or expelling

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their peoples. In its sixty years, it has never been triggered or used for intervention, despite the many tens of millions of people that mass murderers (and the practitioners of eliminationism) have victimized around the world.¹⁷

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The imperative of right remembering

The conventional narrative of American history is fatally flawed. We are forced to contend with a master narrative that inextricably entangles Christianity with civil religion. According to civil religion, America is God’s New Israel, a unique nation chosen as God’s agent in history with a manifest destiny to fulfill divine purposes.¹⁸ America has inherited this holy calling from God.

Within this narrative, the genocides against both indigenous and enslaved peoples are subsumed and disregarded as inconsequential to the stream of American progress. According to the Christian religious right, God has ordained special blessing on American nationalism as embedded within the global capitalist system. God, capitalism, and patriotism merge to form a single entity. William Connolly describes this nexus as the “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine.”¹⁹

Claims to “American exceptionalism” authorize special privileges to America in its violations of international law and human rights standards past and present.²⁰ Catherine Keller writes:

To outgrow our anthropic exceptionalism may, oddly, mean outing the string of white-heterosexist-nationalist-

9. Goldhagen, *Worse Than War*, 15.

10. Goldhagen, *Worse Than War*, 15.

11. Goldhagen, *Worse Than War*, 17.

12. Goldhagen, *Worse Than War*, 18.

13. Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States*, 9.

14. Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States*, 9. The book documents the genocidal practices throughout this history.

15. Goldhagen, *Worse Than War*, 239.

16. Goldhagen, *Worse Than War*, 239.

17. Goldhagen, *Worse Than War*, 240.

18. Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

19. William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008), Chapter Two, 39–67.

20. Roberto Sirvent and Danny Haiphong, *American Exceptionalism and American Innocence: A People’s History of Fake News—From the Revolutionary War to the War on Terror* (New York: Skyhorse, 2019).

classed-religious exceptionalism that so unexceptionally rule.²¹

The tangled web of American exceptionalism requires analysis, prophetic critique, and deconstruction as it erases from memory atrocities committed against both indigenous people and the enslaved people from Africa.

The intergenerational trauma imposed on indigenous and enslaved people is embedded in the structures of white supremacy first established through the foundational events that gave enduring privileges to Euro-Americans: the conquest and occupation of indigenous land and the systemic exploitation of slave labor for economic gain.²²

White supremacy could not justify the enslavement of an entire people through violence alone. It needed to create a variety of narratives that reinforced the inferiority of the slave and the superiority of the slave master.²³

This claim is as true for genocide against indigenous as it is for enslaved people. The advantages once gained by white Americans have been passed down over generations, interpreted through racist ideology, and defended through systemic violence.

Especially pernicious has been the imposition of an individualized work ethic that asserts the hard work of the individual as the way to success. The converse of this myth of meritocracy holds that those who are not prospering are blameworthy for their plight. The privileges that American genocides afforded to white people are masked thereby, fueling white resentment and rage.²⁴

Martin Luther King Jr. declared:

Our nation was born of genocide.... We are perhaps the only nation which tried as a matter of national policy to wipe out its indigenous population. Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade. Indeed, even today we have not permitted ourselves to reject or feel remorse for this shameful episode.²⁵

We are called to the work of righting the historical narrative so that the suffering and trauma of indigenous and enslaved peoples are not only acknowledged but respected as integral to and inextricable from American history.

The path to right remembering must pass through acts of public confession, truth telling in public education materials, and correction of the historical record through memorials and

21. Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 161.

22. Cf. Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Portland: Joy DeGruy Publications, 2017).

23. Sirvent and Haiphong, *American Exceptionalism and American Innocence*, 102.

24. Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

25. As quoted by Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*, 78.

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monuments that revise the distortions that have been perpetuated for generations. This work requires intentional effort and must be carried out with persistence over the next generations. America must engage in a sustained process of truth telling, if we are to make amends for the crimes committed against indigenous and enslaved peoples and rectify the distortions embedded for generations in a false historical narrative.

If we are serious as a nation about truth and reconciliation, this process will entail earnest reckoning with what it would mean to make "reparations."

Native Americans, including those who are legal scholars, ordinarily do not use the term 'reparations' in reference to their land claims and treaty rights. Rather, they demand restoration, restitution, or repatriation of lands acquired by the United States outside valid treaties.²⁶

In the case of indigenous people, the equivalent of making reparations includes a process for restoring significant tracts of land to native tribes.²⁷

Calling a Thing What It Is

At the Heidelberg Disputation (1518) Luther defended the following three theological theses that became the foundation for both a theology and an ethics of the cross:

#19 That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Romans 1:20].

#20 That person deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

26. Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*, 206.

27. For example, Sam Levin, "This Is All Stolen Land: Native Americans Want More Than California's Apology," *The Guardian* (June 21, 2019): <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jun/20/california-native-americans-governor-apology-reparations>. Accessed 25 October 2019.

#21 A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil.
A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it
actually is.²⁸

To seek to uphold American exceptionalism and preserve American innocence in the face of this genocidal history against indigenous and enslaved people (“things which have actually happened”) is to mask American history within a theology of glory, calling “evil good.” Concomitant to this is the failure to call “settler colonialism” on the frontier what it really was.

Some recent developments have contributed toward a shift in calling things what they really are. In those states and municipalities where Columbus Day has been renamed as Indigenous Peoples Day, we recognize a harbinger of the right remembering and truth telling required for transforming the false narrative of American history. This renaming provides an occasion for reexamining the genocidal policies by European empires that authorized Columbus and other *conquistadores* in their conquest of indigenous people and land.²⁹ It begins to expose the harm caused by a false historical narrative that perpetuates divisiveness, stereotypes, racism, segregation, fear, and hatred. Moreover, this renaming provides an entree for learning about the contemporary challenges facing indigenous people in relation to poverty, unemployment, housing, health care, education, and opportunities for self-determination.

The repudiation of the doctrine of discovery has potential to become an even more effective means of calling things what they actually are, were it to become an impetus for other churches and for local, state, and federal governments to do the same. The following provisions were affirmed in the memorial approved by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 2016:

To repudiate explicitly and clearly the European-derived doctrine of discovery as an example of the “improper mixing of the power of the church and the power of the sword” (Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII, Latin text), and to acknowledge and repent from this church’s complicity in the evils of colonialism in the Americas, which continue to harm tribal governments and individual tribal members;

To offer a statement of repentance and reconciliation to native nations in this country for damage done in the name of Christianity; ...and

To affirm that this church will eliminate the doctrine of discovery from its contemporary rhetoric and programs, electing to practice accompaniment with native peoples instead of a missionary endeavor to them, allowing these partnerships to mutually enrich indigenous communities

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and the ministries of the ELCA.³⁰

While church resolutions easily remain insignificant in effect, we are called to attend to this commitment through persistent educational efforts and engaging in “accompaniment with native peoples” characterized by intentional listening within processes of establishing life-giving relationships.

This article has been an exercise in calling things what they are under the sign of the cross. John D. Caputo writes:

For Luther, the cross is first of all Christ’s cross, but it is also ours; it is not only an objective event in history but the personal cross each of us bears. In the toil and trouble of the life in time, ours is the way of the cross, and any attempt to adopt a theology of glory here on earth will lead to grief, consorting with presumption and paganism. The theology of the cross is the theology of the church militant, still embroiled in battle with the powers and principalities.³¹

The practice of calling things what they are is not exhausted by efforts to remember rightly the genocidal policies and actions of the past. A theology and ethics of the cross also requires right representation of the struggles by indigenous people to overcome in recent times up to the present.

In his book, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee*, David Treuer dismantles every narrative that would foreclose the history of American Indians by concluding with Wounded Knee in 1890. Instead, he constructs a fresh story of the resistance and resilience of indigenous people that demonstrates how their hearts are still beating. Throughout the trials endured by Indians under the policies of the U.S. government from 1891–1934—which included the trauma of boarding schools, attacks on reservations and Indian sovereignty through the allotments policy, and the imposition of

28. Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation” (1518), in *Luther’s Works* 31:40.

29. See Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University, 2010), 65–116 and 220–233.

30. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery,” Social Policy Resolution CA16.02.04, Adopted by the Churchwide Assembly in August 2016: http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Repudiation_Doc-trine_of_DiscoverySPR16.pdf. Accessed 27 October 2019.

31. John D. Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 80.

“law and order” to disrupt Indian culture, family, and ceremonial life—Indians continued to resist.

During the period of “termination and relocation” from 1945–1970—when federal policies were implemented to relegate Indian policy to states and terminate tribal sovereignty, thereby weakening the political position of Indian people—tribes reinvented themselves and Indian people reasserted themselves. Eventually, by the 1970s and under the pressure of the Red Power movement, legislative initiatives, such as the Indian Education Act (1972) and the Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978), opened new paths for reclaiming Indian traditions and ways of life that are still manifesting themselves.

In more recent decades, the influx of capital through tribal gaming and other enterprises have established new economic possibilities. These gains have been secured through litigation to strengthen the economic position of Indians. Treuer argues that being Indian has become less a matter of “blood quantum” and more about “kinship, geography, language, religion, lifeways, habits, and even gestures.”³² He testifies how this recentering of Indian life has been fostered by reclaiming authentic and healthy ways of being Indian, including new forms of activism, education, enterprise, ceremonial life, lifestyle, and involvement in electoral politics.

Treuer’s work contributes to a paradigm shift for how we are called to understand indigenous people and their significant contributions to American history. Treuer argues that the “net effect of all this diversity is a sense that we are surging” and “using modernity in the best possible way: to work together and to heal what was broken.”³³ Calling a thing what it is means acknowledging and affirming these creative elements that are contributing to a new narrative about Indian struggle and accomplishment that is “much greater and grander, than a catalog of pain.”³⁴

The life and witness of Gordon J. Straw adds a significant chapter to this new and promising narrative. A member of the Brothertown Indian Nation, he brought this identity as a gift into every relationship and every endeavor. Straw was a scholar of Native American thought with specialized knowledge in the work of Vine Deloria Jr. He integrated indigenous practices, such as the use of sage and smudging, in deeply spiritual ways to heighten awareness of our life-giving relationships with God, neighbors, and all creation. Straw engaged in multifaceted ministry within the ELCA, serving as interim minister for the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, Program Director for American Indian and Alaska Native Ministries, and Program Director for Lay Schools for Ministry and Missional Leadership. In relation to the latter position, he was a strong advocate, educator, and supporter for the ministry of all the baptized through the Life of Faith Initiative.

Upon receiving his call to serve as Cornelsen Chair for Spiritual Formation and Coordinator for Candidacy at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in 2017, Straw fulfilled the dream

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of a lifetime, a vocation that brought together his gifts and professional experience in exquisite ways. He was a deeply spiritual person, articulate, wise, and courageous. Straw embodied “the heartbeat of Wounded Knee” through living testimony among his family, friends, colleagues, and students, whose legacy lives on among us and challenges us to call a thing what it is.

32. David Treuer, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019), 382.

33. Treuer, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee*, 443.

34. Treuer, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee*, 453.