

People Are More Important Than Ideas: An Approach to Historical Reckoning
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Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I'm grateful and honored to be here.

The Oglala Lakota, whose land I live on in Pine Ridge, SD have a custom for a younger person to apologize before speaking in front of anyone who is older or wiser than they are; a gesture to acknowledge that even though they may be speaking it does not imply that they are a holder of answers or can claim authority. I appreciate this custom and find a great deal of meaning in it. And so, I would like to begin by apologizing for speaking in front of any of my elders in the room, elders in both years, experience, and knowledge and humble myself before you.

And I mean this sincerely for I have come up short in the task laid before me which is to say something meaningful on the topic of restoring or maintaining relationships amidst conflict. This ranks among the weightiest questions of our time: how to engender real human relationships in a time of such incredible and toxic polarization and division.

Anything I can share on the topic of imagining a way out of these divisions or at least living within them in a more human way, I've learned from my own failures or have been taught by my students and coworkers in Pine Ridge. I also must say at the outset that my approach to these questions is evolving and will continue to do so. So, I share them humbly and with recognition of their incompleteness.

After being approached about today's topic, I thought after a while that it would be best to talk a bit about lessons I've learned from various projects and research related to the topic of historical reckoning; how we move forward in the present based on pasts that have been impacted by significant conflict.

And so my goal is to do three things:

1. Ground us in the reality that our present is shaped by our past.
2. Share some stories of my own experiences and what I've learned working with community projects focused on historical reckoning.
3. And finally, propose why realities, particularities, and people are more important than ideas.

I hope this will open an orientation for human-centered conflict resolution and reckoning, protect the complexity of historical actors and victims, and move toward sustainable and change-oriented coalition building.

PAST IS PRESENT

Much of the division we experience in our public life today stems from questions or perspectives over our shared past.

James Baldwin felt strongly about this. For Baldwin, “history” did not refer, or even principally so, to the past. Rather, he says, “On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do.”¹

While many people have known this before and since Baldwin wrote it, many others have more conveniently been able to distance themselves from it.

And distorted understandings of history and its relation to the present can lead us into two pitfalls:

1. An unhealthy and unproductive blame/guilt mentality that turns us in on ourselves
2. An opting for performative ethics and dramatic narratives that distract from the real living conditions of people in the present moment.

It is popular knowledge today that the Jesuits enslaved people. This stolen labor and violent exploitation of human life is partially what made the flourishing of Jesuit education and ministry in this country possible. The flourishing of Jesuit education and ministry was of course also due to so many brilliant and holy Jesuits. It was made possible by the generosity of many donors and especially by the dedication of commitment of many non-Jesuit collaborators. But all of these things contributed to the present. The present was made possible and formed by the past.

Lesser known pieces of Jesuit history is that the same racist mindsets that permitted Jesuits to enslave people were active well into the 20th century, practiced by denying Black men entrance into the religious order into the 1950s. As Pope Francis writes, “Racism is a virus that quickly mutates and, instead of disappearing, goes into hiding, and lurks in waiting.”² The past ends up masquerading in the present.

And today, because of these mindsets and practices in the past: the Jesuit order today in the U.S. is made up of largely white and largely middle-upper class men. This isn’t necessarily a problem since here isn’t anything inherently wrong about white upper-middle class men. But, the racial makeup of our order *is* a direct result of a problematic past.

For a long time, I struggled with a sense of anger at the Jesuits in the past. How could I willingly belong to the same religious order as them? What was it that blocked their prayer and allowed them to believe that enslaving people was morally permissible? I focused on them as moral

¹ James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 410.

² Fratelli Tutti

actors and judged them harshly. And then it wasn't a big jump to judge the Jesuits in general with a harsh moral lens.

When a number of us younger Jesuits began 6 years ago to confront the presence of racism within the Jesuits (which is not to say others weren't doing this before us) with the Jesuit Antiracism Sodality, we missed the important perspective that Baldwin provides. We fell into two tempting mindsets: We focused on a dramatic critique of the present that was disconnected from the past, or we became focused on questions about the past, mired in anger at historical actors in a way that disconnected us from the present.

And this is where historical reckoning can go wrong.

Our invitation was not to dwell on a criticism of these past Jesuits or to decide that a largely white order was some sort of anathema. Rather, it was to examine the present conditions, the real consequences of history, before us and ask what was wrong with it.

Much more important than feeling bad that the order is so white or trying to find more people of color to join the Jesuits in order to feel better about ourselves, was to ask: what are the conditions before us *in the present* and how do they affect people? And when we ask this, we see that we live in a country of enormous economic and class injustice that ends up resulting in significant racial inequality.

And so, we try to commit ourselves to be more accountable to the experience of the working class rather than filling some diversity quota; commit to political and good theological education rather than white guilt. We stop wasting time blaming historical actors or debating their moral culpability and we examine the lived consequences in the present.

My accountability as a Jesuit is not to the past. I was not a Jesuit when the Jesuits enslaved people or when they barred Black men from entrance into the order. I am not responsible for their actions nor should I feel guilt for what they did. However, I *am* responsible to the conditions that the past has created *in the moment and circumstances I live in*. And this responsibility is not because I'm white or because I'm a Jesuit. It is because we *all have a responsibility* to engage and respond to the social conditions we find before us, regardless of our identities. This responsibility should not be motivated by guilt or by some odd moral or time acrobatics that make someone in 2023 morally culpable for something in 1870. Rather, the responsibility should be motivated by a deep and shared commitment to liberation from all that would impede every person's ability to flourish.

In this way, the outcome of historical reckoning is more about things like: supporting unions, fighting for wage equality, education, advocating against all that blocks equal access to voting, fighting to ensure fair access to education, etc. than it is about "atoning" through guilt or performative ethical statements, apologies, acknowledgements, representation and plaques. (Not that these are always bad, but they can easily be distractions).

Lessons From Historical Reckoning

Today, I work at Mahpiya Luta Owayaya- Red Cloud High School on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Red Cloud, formerly known as Holy Rosary Mission, is a former Indian boarding school.

Holy Rosary was founded by the Jesuits in 1888 and quickly became affiliated with the United States government project of cultural genocide and assimilation for the ultimate purpose and land and resource theft. This meant that, in order to receive federal funding for the school, and to be present on the Reservation, ostensibly a prisoner of war camp, the Jesuits needed to follow the guidelines of the U.S. genocidal project ...which they willingly did. This meant suppression of Lakota language and culture, the forceful separation of children from families, and the racialized and violent teaching tactics.

The genocidal project was not ultimately successful: Lakota people are still alive, working to restore their language and develop their culture

Today, Red Cloud, one of two historic boarding schools on the Pine Ridge Reservation, is trying to reckon with this history. As you might imagine, it is very messy and very difficult.

When I first came to Red Cloud, I had an *idea* of what I thought the ethical implications of the history were. I looked at what I knew of the history and thought: the Church comes out as morally dubious and its presence on the Reservation or ability to authentically engage in a process of Truth and Healing was questionable. I figured, for “healing” to occur, the Jesuits would potentially need to leave the Reservation or at least basically tuck our tail between our legs and get out in order for the “Lakota people” to take charge. Implicit to this idea, however, was the assumption that “Catholic” and “Lakota” were different categories.

Here are a few things that have challenged these mindsets:

The Catholic parishes on the Reservation recently went through a process of gathering data to inform how they wanted to adapt to the present moment. This included a significant number of talking circles with Lakota parishioners. In one of the talking circles, a couple spent a good amount of time lambasting the Catholic Church for its complicity in cultural genocide. They stopped attending Mass because of the heightened consciousness about the boarding school era. In the same conversation, this couple shared their anger that the Church changed its teaching on the teaching on limbo (a centuries old teaching on the ultimate destination of babies who die before they can be baptized). It was changed by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007 to declare that unbaptized babies can go to heaven, and are not left in an eternal state of limbo. The couple was frustrated that the Pope had changed the teaching.

There was, without a sense of contradiction, both a criticism of the Church's historical actions and alignment with the U.S. Government and an anger with the Church for changing a traditional teaching that the couple found significant and meaningful at an important time in their life. So they ask: "How dare this Church exist and have been like it was? And at the same time ask: how dare this Church change? I want it the way it was!"

These individuals held in tandem both the right and ability to criticize the Church for its past and present without conceding that it was useless or has failed to provide any sense of meaning and solace to them or that it was entirely bankrupt.

Another example: The complexity of our history as a former Indian boarding school has meant a significant amount of controversy over how Catholicism is practiced and taught in the school. One big question is over Mass attendance. Should we require kids to go to Mass or is this just a vestige of colonial practices of forced assimilation?

For me, the easy and clear perspective when I was first arriving to Red Cloud was that we should just tone down Catholicism. Stop asking kids to go to Mass. I had a sense that in order for Lakota culture and identity to rise, Catholicism would need to dampen. Again though, this was rooted in a mindset that "Catholic" and "Lakota" were different.

But then, a number of my close Lakota friends who worked at the school, or parishioners, were angry that the Jesuits weren't standing up more for the Catholic identity of the school. Their families had been Catholic for generations. They wanted their children or other children to grow up in a Catholic school, which of course meant regular Mass attendance.

Another example: Each year I read Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* with my Junior American Literature class. Larsen's Harlem Renaissance story about two African American women who pass for white provides a very helpful lesson for all of us. Many students *and myself* learn again that the racial categories we think dictate our life, experience, and relationships, are far more complex than we are led to believe.

I have students who begin to realize that they've been fed and have reproduced a narrative that white people are inherently opposed to their own progress even though one of their own parents is white or their grandparents...or even themselves. And many students open up to their classmates about the pervasive effects of bullying for "not being Lakota enough" because their skin is too white.

I began to realize that the ideas I held both about race and religion were not rooted in reality; they weren't connected to the lived histories and complexities of these families.

I was quickly taught that my mindset that “Lakota” and “Catholic” or even “Lakota” and “white” were different or essentially contradictory/conflicting categories was colonial. The idea that Catholicism is only colonial or inherently colonial or “white,” dishonored the Lakota people for whom Catholicism is deeply meaningful.

And to persist in these mindset is to ask Lakota people...and others... to fit neatly into categories that are not consistent with reality. It violates the complexity that *is* inherent to every person’s life. In essence, it is a repetition of history to say who can or cant be or and how they should or shouldn’t be Catholic or Lakota.

Maka Black Elk, the Executive Director of the Truth and Healing project, says that the easie decision and outcome of a Truth and Healing process is just for the Jesuits or the structural Church to leave the Reservation. The much harder decision is to stay and build or discover together a Catholic community that does the daily work of transforming into a humbler, more inclusive and universal community that is also committed to the liberation of all of the people on the Reservation.

An Approach

The weight of these histories makes the easy solutions enticing. These are the solutions that divide us and that end in tribalism, where we distance ourselves from history and from each other.

The orientation I propose and that I’ve learned in Pine Ridge, is rather to center people and realities over ideas. And this is more difficult since people and realities are much more complex than ideas, less coherent and not static. It’s more difficult, but I believe it is more sustainable and can help save us from the pitfalls mentioned earlier and can move us toward a coalition building that seeks real progress.

And to lay this out I will draw from two people who as sources may also seem not to cohere, and that’s fine! Pope Francis and Fred Hampton, a major leader of the Black Panther Party.

In his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis writes “There exists a constant tension between ideas and realities... There has to be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities.” Ideas get worked out in reality. Reality is not worked out by ideas.

Francis continues by advising that we reject, then, the “various means of masking reality: angelic forms of purity (i.e. wokeness!), dictatorships of relativism, empty rhetoric..., ethical systems bereft of kindness, intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom.”

These are the easier pitfalls and they mask reality because they provide very little room for nuance which is to say: reality and people. These idea systems, Francis rightly says, are “capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action. What calls us to action are realities illuminated by reason.”

We cannot let historical reckoning end in classifying and defining...this is insufficient.

Ideas, when divorced too much from realities, can lead us back to a form of historical reckoning that dishonors the complexity of victims' experiences by asking them to be devoid of any nuance. It pushes us toward a temptation mentioned earlier to be distracted from the present situations and focus solely on blame/guilt and ultimately alienates us from each other.

And this is where Fred Hampton is helpful. Hampton, I doubt, would refer to his work as historical reckoning and, to my knowledge, he wasn't focused on “history” as it is generally thought about but rather in this Baldwinian sense of history being active in the present. And for Hampton, it was about the living conditions of the lower class which were a result of an oppressive, racialized, and capitalist system. He wasn't concerned with bourgeois identity politics that classified responsibility and guilt based on identitarian concepts.

And the reality that Hampton saw (and experienced) was that the living conditions of the black working class were similar to the conditions of the white working class and of the, in his term, “yellow” working classes. And that everyone needed to respond to this.

As Hampton put it: “honestly, people, we've got to face some facts, that the masses are poor. The masses belong to what you call the lower class. When I talk about the masses, I'm talking about the white masses. I'm talking about the black masses. I'm talking about the brown masses, and the yellow masses too. We've got to face the fact that some people say you fight fire best with fire. But we say you put out fires best with water. We say you don't fight racism with racism. We're going to fight racism with solidarity. We say you don't fight capitalism with no black capitalism. We say you fight capitalism with socialism.”

So, at a place like Marquette, rather than a conversation around language or definitions of race, racism, etc. or conversations about “safe spaces” and who should be “stepping in and who should be stepping out” or diversity quotas, Hampton would advocate a conversation rooted in circumstances and reality: who can afford to go to school here? Why/why not? Can the workers who mow the lawn here afford to send their kids here? Why/why not? Will the student loans of lower class students provide an intense hindrance for future flourishing after graduation? These conversations are rooted in the actual consequences of history and they are questions and answers that everyone has the same responsibility in addressing.

And this is something I have learned from my students and my fellow teachers and collaborators at Mahpiya Luta.

I'm a white Jesuit teaching English and theology at a former Indian boarding school. The potential ethical implications of this I once found troubling. But this tendency was rooted in *ideas* about race, history, and responsibility and it was rooted in a sense of guilt and shame that ultimately alienated me from my students and collaborators.

Ultimately, my experience in a classroom environment and in the community project of Truth and Healing, is based on relationships more than it is based on race. What I've learned from many of my students and from my Lakota coworkers is that my responsibility and their responsibility *is the same*. It is to study, understand, and then change the unjust conditions we live within: chronic poverty and economic isolation, and the possibility to discover how varied religious and spiritual traditions affect us all.

I also teach a class called Liberation Theology to the seniors at Red Cloud. We read James Cone, the father of Black Theology, and the students love learned from Cone why he believes that Jesus was black. Two days after reading Cone and discussing Jesus's identification with the lower class and victims of racial oppression, a number of the students had a basketball game at another Catholic school off the reservation: one made up of largely white upper class students.

They came back to class the day after and reported: "Dang, Billy...the Jesus at their high school is soo white. All the statues, pictures...just white." And I said yeah...well, did you say anything? And they said, "Yeah! We needed a way to talk smack on the court so we just kept saying: Jesus wasn't white! Jesus was Black!"

And when reflecting back on this story and based in further conversation with the students, it wasn't the students saying: Jesus is bad and so are you because you're white, or Christianity is bad. It was the students saying: look, your Jesus is actually Black and that asks something of you (and of us)...not to stop being white...but to think about the conditions in our world that harm people of color and make the conditions of my students' lives so drastically different than the lives of these other students.

I'll quote here from a paper from one of my students who says: "Christianity much like many religions of the world, has historically been used as a tool by Governments to enforce imperialism and exonerate capitalism, but when you dive into the core of religion, it's based in the empowerment of the oppressed- lifting those who can't lift themselves up and calling those who participate in these teachings to always fight for the oppressed...Uniting together against one cause or even multiple is a much better and compassionate way to deal with social issues"

I don't want to advocate some sort of politics of respectability or a racial romanticism, because these are also pitfalls and are dangerous.

What I do want to advocate is that complex human lives and relationships are a better starting point *always* than our fixed ideas, and that we all have a shared responsibility to change the conditions of our world that allow for such devastating inequality...and not to let blame, guilt, dramatic or performative ethics and rhetoric distract us.

Nicholas Black Elk, the holy man of the Oglala Lakota who is in the process of canonization for sainthood in the Catholic Church is the source of some controversy. Could he really be Catholic? Did he just pretend to be Catholic as a strategy in order to gain respect and influence on the reservation? Did he forsake his Lakota spiritual practices and beliefs when he became Catholic?

These are natural questions because Black Elk breaks our ideas apart and he provides a challenge to the categories we'd like to use to deal with our present moment. But as his 7th great grandson, Maka Black Elk says, "those who feel he wasn't truly Catholic or those who feel he completely abandoned his Lakota spiritual traditions have simply not taken into account the words and actions of Black Elk himself."

What Black Elk, who was a mystic, reminds me is that while people and realities are more important than ideas: mysticism and mystery are more important than all, because these humble us and open us to new imaginations and possibilities.

We cannot hope to move beyond our present circumstances and approach a more human way of living together without a reverence for mystery and an openness to a mysticism which draws us into holding the world before us in eyes of love. And love, as bell hooks taught us "is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust."

And as Jesus taught us, it is to participate in the very life of God.

And so I'll close with the words of Black Elk. And if nothing before this was helpful, again, I apologize and hope that these words of Black Elk lighten your burdens today.

Great Mysterious One,
You have been always and before You nothing has been.
There is nothing to pray to but You.
The star nations all over the universe are Yours,
And Yours are the grasses of the earth.
Day in and day out You are the life of things.
You are older than all need,
Older than all pain and prayer.

Grandfather, all over the world the faces of the living ones are alike.
In tenderness they have come up out of the ground.
Look upon Your children with children in their arms,
That they may face the winds,
And walk the good road to the day of quiet.
Teach me to walk the soft earth,
A relative to all that live.
Sweeten my heart and fill me with light,
And give me the strength to understand and the eyes to see.
Help us, for without You, we are nothing.

Thank you.