

## Volf: God's Grace Surrounds Virginia Tech Shooter Cho's Photos, Video Message Made Scapegoating Difficult

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Photo Credit: Virginia Tech.

Virginia Tech student prays at makeshift memorial.

The killing of 32 students and faculty members at Virginia Tech served as a disquieting reminder that the grace of God is available even to those who commit horrific acts, theologians said in the wake of the worst shooting spree by a single gunman in U.S. history.

Further, they said, the shootings focused attention on a human tendency to scapegoat one person so that harmony and peace may be restored to the community. However, in this case a television network may have served as the scapegoat along with the shooter, Seung-Hui Cho.

As scandalous as it might seem, God's grace was immediately available to Cho, his parents and family, said Miroslav Volf, who is Henry B. Wright Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale Divinity School. Cho was

the triggerman in the slaughter on the campus in Blacksburg, Va.

"Even that person who commits such a horrendous deed is already enveloped by God's grace," and so are his parents and immediate family, said Volf.

Grace needs to go primarily to those who have suffered, said Volf, and in this instance that is the family members of the students and faculty who were killed. But Christians must also try to reflect on what bearing grace may have on the shooter himself.

"Grace does not have any doubts," said Volf. It is a core conviction of the Christian faith.

Volf said the theological grounding for this understanding is found in *2 Corinthians 5:14*. There the Apostle Paul writes, "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are all

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convinced that one has  
died for all; therefore all  
have died."

As much as people tend  
to look immediately for  
ways to stop the shooting  
while it is going on, said  
Volf, Christians also "want  
to show grace to this sort  
(of person) to make sure  
that he finds . . . redemp-  
tion of this obvious, incredible  
torment that was in his soul."

Volf is one of four theologians *Vital  
Theology* interviewed after the shootings  
at Virginia Tech. He is director of the Yale  
Center for Faith and Culture. He is a  
member of the Episcopal Church in the  
U.S.A. and the Evangelical Church in  
Croatia, where he was born and educated  
through his undergraduate years in college.

The newsletter also interviewed theo-  
logians S. Mark Heim of Andover Newton  
School of Theology, Harvey G. Cox of  
Harvard Divinity School (see related story,  
page 6), and Paul J. Griffiths, of University of  
Illinois at Chicago (see related story, page 5).

## Grace for All

To illustrate how people resist the idea  
that God's grace is available to all, Volf  
tells a story about Carlos M. N. Eire, a Yale  
historian who was airlifted from Cuba to  
the U.S. as a child.

Eire's mother and a group of Cuban-born  
women were discussing whether Fidel Castro  
would go to heaven if he repented of his sins  
on his deathbed. Unable to resolve the ques-  
tion, they asked the professor, who serves as  
their resident theologian.

When Eire told them that God's grace is  
greater than anyone's failings, one woman  
responded that if Castro gets to heaven, she  
would not want to be there.

Said Volf: "When we feel that we have  
been violated, we can't imagine being in  
community with that person who violated us.

"The Christian faith is about creating com-  
munion between enemies," he said. Grace is  
not an end in itself. It is about bringing the  
estranged person together with the person  
who has been wronged for reconciliation.

**"When we feel we have been violated,  
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The Christian faith is about creating  
communion between enemies."**

When societies try to regulate all types  
of failings through legal means, as Volf main-  
tains is occurring, the rules tend to push out  
the offender rather than set up an environ-  
ment in which that person can be engaged  
and understood.

Although it is not easy for television to  
portray the sharing of grace, a stellar exam-  
ple occurred last October after a gunman  
killed five girls and himself in a school in  
Lancaster County, Pa.

Suddenly, the media were reporting on  
a community that showed extraordinary  
generosity to the family of the killer and to  
the dead gunman, Charles Carl Roberts IV.

"It was probably one of the most power-  
ful witnesses that has occurred in public  
life," said Volf. It was no accident that the  
Amish were modeling forgiveness. Their  
whole lives are about forgiving the enemy,  
so when the moment for forgiveness  
arrived they were ready.

The Amish are easily written off as people  
with quaint customs, said Volf. They ride in  
horse-drawn buggies, don't use telephones  
and forgive killers. Because their attitude  
about technology is easily dismissed, their  
moral views may also be rejected.

But many people were profoundly moved  
by the display of generosity, he said.

## Praying for Cho

In Blacksburg, media reports captured  
small groups of students praying, including  
some prayers for Cho.

After a memorial of 32 stones was erected  
on campus by a student group, Katelynn  
Johnson, a senior sociology-psychology major  
sneaked onto the site at 4 a.m. to add a 33rd  
stone to honor Cho.

"My family did not raise me to do what  
is popular," she wrote in a letter to the  
campus newspaper in which she explained

*continued on page 4*

## Perspectives on Heroes; Seeking Meaning in Chaos

By Larry D. Bouchard



Some models of heroism are not very workable and others are not easily discerned. Questions of heroism arose in these pages two years ago, after the Army declared Pat Tillman a posthumous hero in Afghanistan and covered up his death by friendly fire. Tillman may have been heroic in volunteering to serve, even while critical of the war in Iraq. But some officials desperately needed a better story than that.

The term *hero* appears now in reports from Virginia Tech. Some are named heroes because they survived to become witnesses; others because they barred a classroom door as shots pierced it. Among the latter was an esteemed professor of engineering who shielded students without hesitation; Liviu Librescu, a Holocaust survivor, died on Yom HaShoah, the day commemorating an event that challenges ideas of redemptive meaning in history. But we are drawn to the hero idea in part because it proffers meaning in catastrophes that resist meaning, though not always with clarity.

I do not dispute that there were heroes in Blacksburg, nor even that ideas of heroism can give meaning to chaos and pain. But I would reflect on hero-meanings in light of classical epic, romance, and theologies of the cross.

James Redfield, in *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector*, notes that classical heroes were typically heroes by vocation: usually male warriors, they embodied their culture's values and lived expecting to die upholding them in combat. But the epic hero was a matter of some ambivalence, due to his violence and his hesitancy. Homer must strain to make us accept the climax of the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus—returned to Ithaca long after given up for dead—bars his wife's suitors' escape and dispatches them with a rain of arrows. Achilles, in the *Iliad*, is famous for his long pout after Agamemnon insults him; he returns to war only after learning his beloved Patroclus has died disguised in Achilles' armor. Achilles is enraged by his own hesitancy, and his culminating atrocity is to drag the corpse of Hector behind a chariot. In *Hesitant Heroes: Private Inhibition, Cultural Crisis*, Theodore Ziolkowski traces the theme of the "hesitant hero" from classical to modern literature, where hesitancy can arise when the hero notices the futility of the violence he is obliged to undertake. We are invited to ask whether the classical hero is defined more by the arbitrary violence of his

role than by the values or virtues he would embody.

Thus it is awkward to align Christianity with such heroism. The heroic paradigm Christ would fit is one that renounces violence. To a cold eye of reason, Christ's passion is passive, as Milton observed in *Paradise Regained*, where Christ defeats Satan's temptations simply by standing, motionless, on the Temple's pinnacle. The story pattern of the Christian martyr, who witnesses a peace beyond understanding, fits this paradigm, as does the pattern of the knight of chivalric romance—a Percival or a Galahad—whose militancy is channeled toward a holy token of healing or peace, such as the Grail. But this pattern of heroism resonates today far less than the faux-classical Rambo hero. The knight of faith is regarded as a tilter at windmills, because the peace beyond understanding is rarely celebrated in a nominally "Christian culture" that tends to measure the rightness of its wars by their results. Perhaps stories of scientists in arduous pursuit of knowledge can approximate the quest for truths beyond violence or self-interest, but these quests are ever being co-opted.

A secular hero from modern literature is Dr. Rieux in Camus' *The Plague* (where the disease signifies both itself and political oppression). Rieux pours himself into his vocation on behalf of others. He has no confidence that a transcendent horizon limns the meaning of his life, and he has no consoling grasp on the confluences of nature, chance, and history with wounded, culpable personalities, which make for tragedy in life and art. Critics often decry the fragility or rootlessness of such existentialist accounts of duty. But I think these stories can sometimes approach theologies of the cross, as understood by Jürgen Moltmann and others who affirm that God becomes God-forsaken in solidarity with the God-forsaken. Here the paradigm of heroic action is kenotic love.

Kenotic solidarity or integrity probably flourishes more than we know. But because it "passes understanding," it may go unremarked. I suspect that women and men who allow themselves to be alongside those who suffer—lifting up one another in fellowship, with little regard to "what this means" in the realms of history and nature—have been noticed in Blacksburg. Some heroes died there; other heroes are living still; many perhaps are known mostly to God. ◀

Larry D. Bouchard is associate professor in religion, literature and the arts at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville



Miroslav Volf

her actions. “They raised me to do what is morally right. We did not lose only 32 students and faculty members that day; we lost 33 lives.”

The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reported that Cho’s name was included in many church services and in memorials on campus.

One of the challenges after a tragedy in which someone has wronged another person is to find ways to remember

the event well, said Volf.

“How do we remember it in ways that are not destructive to the community, that are not bitter and resentful?” he asked. It is difficult to find ways to remember that promote healing and reconciliation.

Rules-based methods will not succeed, said Volf. Instead, the answers must attend to the inner lives and character of people.

In Volf’s view, the concept of forgiveness will make little sense when many areas of our lives are dominated by a buy-and-sell culture.

“If you are in a buy-and-sell mode, then you operate in rough equivalents,” he said. “I give you this and I get that in return.”

In that context, forgiving can seem almost wrong and certainly unjust, said Volf. Such a commercial-transaction mentality shapes justice as retribution rather than restoring things to their proper order.

### Scapegoating Dynamic

Responses to the shootings in Blacksburg had both similarities and contrasts with classic scapegoating, said Heim, who is Samuel Abbott Professor of Theology at Andover Newton in Boston.

In scapegoating, a community that has been wronged unites in condemnation or violence against one person. This serves to unify the community, he said.

The seemingly random violence that erupted at Virginia Tech set off people’s anxieties and disrupted their sense of security and peace.

“We want to reestablish a sense of harmony and peace, so we want to identify a cause, identify somebody who’s to blame,” said Heim.

At Virginia Tech, scapegoating occurred after a clear violation of established order, but is also occurs when the facts of the offense are less clear. Two examples cited by Heim are the McCarthy hearings to ferret out

Communists in the 1950s and the sexual-abuse hysteria at day care centers in the 1990s.

“When we look back we can see that this was such an affront to us—that our children should be threatened and sexually abused—that we had to find people who were responsible for this, even if it didn’t happen,” he said.

In classic scapegoating, the scapegoat victim is not allowed to provide a defense. That wasn’t the case at Virginia Tech, where the person who committed the crimes documented his feelings and that information was spread around the world via the news media.

As a result, it was hard for the community to unite against Cho because he removed himself from the scene and his testimony was heard and seen through the video clips and photographs that he sent to NBC. In addition, said Heim, the willingness of people to wonder aloud what motivated Cho and to show some sympa-

**“In scapegoating, a community that has been wronged unites in condemnation or violence against one person. This serves to unify the community . . . We want to reestablish a sense of harmony and peace, so we want to identify a cause, identify somebody who’s to blame.”**

thy for him indicate an awareness of the scapegoating dynamic and a desire not to fall prey to it.

“I attribute a lot of that awareness of this dynamic to the biblical tradition,” which has made people more sensitive to victims, said Heim. The public has heard much less from the shooting victims than from the perpetrator.

NBC’s decision to air the video and photos made the network a substitute scapegoat for some people, said Heim. When there is no immediate answer to preventing such a tragedy from occurring again, some blamed the media for making the situation worse.

### Infallible Sign

According to Heim, the infallible sign of scapegoating is when the scapegoat victim is deemed to have influence far greater than what is merited.

“Then we know that they are beginning to serve another function for us than just somebody who is guilty of an offense,” he said.

That is precisely what the Amish in Pennsylvania avoided by expressing empathy and concern for the killer and his family, said Heim. From the beginning, they included

Roberts, the shooter, among those memorialized. By doing so, they did not let him become larger than life or a model for others to copy.

By striking a moral balance, the Amish community prevented Roberts from becoming the protagonist, or hero, of the story.

"I think that is a real concern about the Virginia Tech story," said Heim. "Somehow (Cho) has gotten what he sought, which is this sort of global prominence," even if it is in a form that people detest. By contrast, telling the story of the common humanity of the person who was the criminal mitigates against the event becoming a "ritual act beyond its own true character."

Scapegoating has many pernicious qualities, said Heim. Those who do it would never refer to it by that name. When we identify scapegoating in others, we say that we will be careful and never scapegoat someone in that position.

What happens, said Heim, is that we simply put a different person in that role.

As one who lives in a liberal community, Heim said the Duke University lacrosse story was particularly disturbing.

It is easy for a story to quickly transcend reality and for people to construe events into a morality play about profoundly larger issues, he said.

In this case, three white lacrosse players were charged with the rape of a black woman. Students, faculty and community members spoke out angrily against the players. Only after being in the public eye for a year were the players declared "innocent" of all charges by the state's attorney general.

Some were so eager to show their commitment to being on the right side of the issues of racism and privilege that the actual guilt or innocence of those people involved was submerged in the process. The moral of that story, said Heim, is to understand how hard it is to address the question of scapegoating to oneself.

Heim recently has reflected on the Scripture passage that describes the scene at the Last Supper in which Jesus tells the Disciples that one of them will betray him. One by one, they ask, "Is it me, Lord?"

In previous readings, said Heim, he has scoffed at the notion that each man didn't already know whether he was going to betray Jesus.

But there is profound insight in asking ourselves whether we could participate in such a thing, said Heim. "It is a sobering reality." ◀

Miroslav Volf is the author of *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* and *The End of Memory: Remembering in a Violent World*.

S. Mark Heim wrote about scapegoating and atonement theology in *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*. Two related articles, "Christ's Death to End Sacrifice" and "Why Does Jesus' Death Matter," both published originally in *Christian Century*, are available at [www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org).



S. Mark Heim

## After Much Mourning, Lamentations Tells of Hope

The classical expression in the Bible for dealing with overwhelming tragedy is the Old Testament book of Lamentations. The book of only five short chapters tells of the destruction of Jerusalem.

The text makes it clear that not only has a horrible destruction been visited upon the city, said Harvey G. Cox, of Harvard Divinity School, but the people are also distraught because their regular channels for imploring God for



Harvey Cox

mercy have been destroyed. Dead bodies lie in the streets, there is no food to eat and missing are the temples, altars and priests.

"They have a double dose of tragedy to deal with and much of it is given to this lamentation," said Cox, Hollis Professor of Divinity and an ordained American Baptist clergyman.

Modern-day mourners, such as those who grieved after the shootings at Virginia Tech, may suffer similarly.

"I think that happens with a lot of people," said Cox. "They feel that in the midst of a tragedy their regular

means of expressing grief in prayer or in some other way has also been undermined." There is a feeling that everything has been taken away.

But the final verses of Lamentations are an expression of hope and faith, he noted.

"It's not an easy resolution," said Cox. "It is a 'despite-all-this-we-will-continue' attitude. It's a very relevant text for this moment." ◀

Harvey Cox is currently writing on Lamentations. His most recent book is *When Jesus Came to Harvard: Making Moral Decisions Today*.

## 'Person Who Did This Is Like Us' All People Are Damaged, Griffiths Says

*Vital Theology* interviewed Paul J. Griffiths, Schmitt Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a scholar of Augustine, four days after the shootings at Virginia Tech. An edited transcript of that discussion follows.

**Q** ♦ It seems easy to demonize this gunman, especially because he is dead. But maybe that's our tendency anyway.

**A** ♦ This is a very natural tendency that we want to separate people who do dreadful things like this from us, and we want to define them, therefore, as some dreadful other. The *Chicago Tribune* had a headline ("As campus grieves, 'monster' revealed," April 18, 2007) in which this young man was called a monster. I think that's a very natural tendency, though it is something that Christians need to avoid, need to check themselves on, natural as it is. The truth is, from a Christian point of view, the young man who did this is like us and we are like him. We could do this too. The damage and evil that have affected him affect all of us in various ways as well. The first and most fundamental Christian response to things like this is one of lament. We have to lament what happened to the people who were killed and injured and we have to lament the (actions of the) person who did this. We have to lament for him and for his family as well. And that's because evil, as Christians understand it, is a kind of damage that is universal. It's not that there are some evil people and some not-evil people. It is that we are all damaged.

**Q** ♦ Does lament connote a need for silence?

**A** ♦ I have to think lament is a lot better when it is public, vocal and repeated. Wailing and beating of breasts and gnashing of teeth is what I have in mind. It's not that Christians have no resources for this. The Psalms are full of people lamenting this or that or being surrounded by their enemies or dying or their children being taken away. We've got the book of Job. We've got Jesus's lament on the cross. All of these things I have in mind. It's not a private, introspective thing at all. For Christians it's public.

**Q** ♦ We saw the president and other dignitaries at a memorial service on the campus and then a student vigil that evening. The high note of the first event was the rousing conclusion of a poem written for the occasion by Nikki Giovanni—"We will prevail. We will prevail." The student event ended with a football cheer—"Go. Hokies. Go. Hokies." Is it possible we don't have the resources for proper lament in such a setting?

**A** ♦ It's very difficult. I teach in a university just like Virginia Tech, public and secular. I think the habits and tendencies of Americans, among whom I count myself, do lead us very quickly to look at the light at the end of the tunnel, to look for the triumph over evil, to look for making it all better. Hence the football cheer. Hence the encouraging words. There's nothing bad about that, but I worry from a Christian point of view that we move much too quickly to that, that we want to get over the grief and lament immediately, as if somehow it can all be fixed. But the truth is, from a Christian point of view, it's not going to be finally fixed until the end of everything—until the world of blood, and tears and violence and death

(of Revelation). We should look that firmly in the face and not slide right past it.

**Q** ♦ The two public events were powerful rallies of the Virginia Tech community in the face of tragedy but they also served to exclude the shooter, Seung-Hui Cho. It sounds sometimes as if he just wasn't a good enough Hokie.

**A** ♦ Because of the world we live in, these things are both good and bad. Of course, rallying is good. It's a solidarity, it's the establishment of a connection with those one lives, works and spends time with. But rallying very quickly (may also place) a kind of fence between us and those who are not like us or who weren't sufficiently like us. The Christian impulse, I think, ought increasingly to be to pay attention first to the sinner, the enemy, the violent one, because that is the person who most needs to be included, even now dead. From a Catholic point of view, we pray for the dead and we're praying for this guy. At least I hope we are because he is the first person who needs our prayers. He needs them much more than those he killed, which isn't to excuse the action. The action is dreadful beyond belief, but it is not to deny the truth, which is that this was a deeply damaged young man and it's a Christian duty to be concerned for those.

**Q** ♦ We seem to look quickly for answers to prevent evil from occurring in the future. After Columbine, the solution was metal detectors in schools. Here the discussion is focused on alarm systems, locking down every room in a university of 25,000 students, and guns. Which solution would Augustine have chosen?

**A**◆ He would have wanted to find a way, if it were possible, to establish and preserve what he liked to call a tranquility of order. He believed strongly, as I take it we all do, in the importance of an ordered, tranquil situation whether in a university or at the national level. So he would have wanted to do that but at the same time he would have said decisively and repeatedly that no matter how hard we try to do that we will fail at doing it and we need to acknowledge that as we try. We all like to think that we can actually succeed, that we can prevent anything like this from ever happening again. But as a matter of fact we can't. And then to move from that Augustinian position to perhaps a more personal view, I, as somebody who lives and works in universities and has done so for the last 20 years, enormously value the physical openness of university communities. They are about the most open communities left in the world, I think. This means you get some of these people walking in from the street, at least where I work in Chicago. And I really, really do not want to see universities turned into the functional equivalent of the security check at airports or the way that courthouses are. This would be a total disaster, even if it were to prevent one or two events like this.

**Q**◆ There's also a turn toward instant heroism. It is similar to what happened after Sept. 11—everyone who died here has been declared a hero.

**A**◆ It's the flip side of the demonization. If you have real villains you have to have real heroes. Again, there's something good about it. These regular Joes and Janes—these students—many of whom were able to show decisive heroic response, I don't have any problem

with that. But when the next move is taken, which is to say that these everyday students were in every way different from this monstrous young man who was killing them, that's the move that I worry about and that's the kind of move that leads to a kind of Manichean distinction between the good and the bad, the elect and the damned. It can easily go there. It doesn't have to go there but it easily can. So as a Christian I would want to begin with the lament for it all and follow that with a confession of my own sin as greater than that of others. That's what Paul says in *1 Timothy 15*. I think he was right, that he must confess himself as the first and foremost among sinners—that's a fundamental Christian thing. And only then move to an affirmation of the good and heroic actions that were done in response to this tragedy because then you've framed it right. But if you start with the heroism, all too easily you get the opposite as well. You get the villain. You get the monster. You get the damned. And that's not what we want.

**Q**◆ Can you say more about Manichaeism?

**A**◆ The Manichees were a group in the third, fourth and fifth centuries—a quasi-Christian group, you might call them. They had a radically dualist view of the world so that there were two opposed forces—good and evil. Each was equally real. Neither was reducible to the other, so the world was a battleground between two forces and people aligned themselves with one force or another. Hence people could also be divided into the good or the evil. This is not the Christian view because it gives evil an independence of God and that is something that Augustine said could not be defended, though he was a Manichee to begin with.



Photo Credit: Virginia Tech.

Poet Nikki Giovanni rallies mourners at Virginia Tech.

It's a view that makes this division between good and evil fundamentally real, and that's where the problem lies. For Christians, it's not like that.

**Q**◆ Lastly, why are we talking about this evil, the madness of one person breaking loose with guns and killing more than 30 people? Aren't there other evils in the world that don't grab our attention but are perhaps just as horrible?

**A**◆ My own view is that the kind of event that happened at Virginia Tech is happening every day, every hour, all over the world. It's not in the least unusual. Slaughter of the innocent by the deranged is a constant fact of human existence. It always has been. So this isn't unusual. We focus on it for two reasons. One is that we Americans empathize with these students and Virginia Tech because we are like them. We know who they are. If we do not know them personally, we know the kind of people they are. They are just like us. We empathize with that in a way we can't empathize with slaughter in Sudan or in Iraq because (the people there) are not like us. We acknowledge it, but we can't feel it. But in fact this isn't at all unusual. Some 30,000 people a year get killed by guns in the U.S. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, get killed by guns worldwide every year. It's the way we are. ◀

Paul J. Griffiths recommends *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* by Charles T. Mathewes.

This question was posed to alumni of the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation, a two-week summer program for selected high school students to live in an intentional Christian community on the Duke University campus:

**What from your experience in the church and from your theological learnings has helped you respond to the shootings at Virginia Tech?**

## Hope Is in Responses

I found myself bewildered when the news came that there had been shootings at Virginia Tech. I was shocked, sad, and scared for the life of a friend, who though thankfully was safe, did lose fellow students and friends.

I couldn't help crying out to God, what if he hadn't been all right? What would his friends and family have done? What about the families who did lose those they love? How will this broken school community heal? Why did this poor, angry student do this terrible thing?

It often seems that there are no answers to these questions in the face of such needless violence. I find that is easy to become hopeless and see the future of this world as bleak and one revolving around hate rather than love.

But I have found that God refuses to let me or any of us lose hope. In the aftermath of the shootings, God's work was still evident—in the loving response of the student body, the care of the communities that now surround the victims' families, the

Virginia Tech students and faculty, and the cry of prayer that was heard worldwide. In these responses there is hope. Hope that God's love does not end with the pain of tragedy, violence, conflict and hate. Hope that even amid the hopelessness and fear that arise from such pain, love ties us together in the body of Christ. ◀

### Hannah Cartwright

*Valparaiso University student  
DYA student '02*

## Three Facets of Faith

Three important facets of Christian faith have helped form my understanding of tragedy. The first is confession. We are always able to lay down our burdens. Confession is not only admitting our transgressions but also a statement that we are in need of help and cannot make it alone. The second element is redemption. Nothing that we will ever do can move us to the point where God will not forgive and love. Grace is active in our lives at all times, and the depth and width of such grace is infinite. We cannot escape it. God's redemption is not a



one-time act; it does not end at the point of salvation. Like his grace, it is ever present and always available. The third is resurrection, which yields hope. Hope is what sets Christianity apart. Hope is not tangible but it is essential. As Christians we have to believe that God's will is good and perfect. Out of the deaths of the students and victims of the Virginia Tech massacre, God will bring healing to a broken world. We cannot understand God's ways but it is important that in this time of mourning and grief we never lose sight of the cross for at the cross we confess, we are redeemed, and we overcome. ◀

### Whitney Fautleroy

*UNC Wilmington Graduate 2006  
Youth Director, Winter Park Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, N.C.  
DYA Student '01, Mentor '06*

## Mortality Limits View

*"[God] wounds, but he binds up; He shatters, but his hands heal."* —Job 5:18

On Monday, April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho upset the collective idealism of college students worldwide.

I asked God why such an evil could be allowed. Yet this act has generated vigils, Facebook groups of solidarity, and reflection upon the hope of resurrection, ultimately rejuvenating the intercollegiate Christian body. But why did these good acts require a malicious motivation?

Job offers a meditation on this paradox. Somehow, God's hand is in both injury and mending. Not that God causes evil—his very nature is antithetical to malevolence. But God operates on a different, eternal morality, beyond humanity's "good and evil," which is "as a breath" before God's majesty (*Psalm 94:11*). Mortality limits our own perspective on the perfect cosmological tapestry that God weaves with the pain and healing of his beloved children. Eventually, God's promised remedy will restore

harmony to our lives, replacing sorrow with a sober joy surpassing the innocence we knew on April 15. Let us trust Christ to guide us in forgiving and reconciling. ◀

**Thoman Hopper**

*UNC Chapel Hill student  
DYA student '04.*

## Jesus Also Weeps

I always try to have the right words when tragedy strikes. However, on April 16, I was speechless, and I wept. I wept for the dead, for the injured, for the families whose children were not picking up their cell phones, for a young man brimming with hatred. I wept for people I did not know. Tears seem weak, but *John 11:35* says that Jesus wept for Lazarus, and I believe he weeps with us.

In *Luke 13:34*, Jesus cries, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" One day, God will gather us all to him, and hatred will be no more. Until we are willing, we sit together and weep. We weep, not in order to fix things, but in order to grieve with a hurting world, knowing that Jesus weeps with us. ◀

**Sarah Stockton Howell**

*Duke University student  
DYA student '03*

## Love Conquers Death

Jesus wasn't kidding. Jesus said that in this world, we would have trouble (*John 16:33*). And we need only to look at the Virginia Tech massacre to see that he could not have been more right.

Although Good Friday has come and gone, I am still reminded of what the Prophet called Christ: a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering. And I remember that Jesus knew pain and suffering and grief firsthand. Even more, I remember that he knew of his fate before he ever stepped a foot in Gethsemane.

But he did not stop there—either in the garden, or in the 16th chapter of John. He continued on: he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! But death could not and can not hold him, and the empty tomb cries, "Death: where is your victory? Where is your sting?" He continued: "But take heart! I have overcome the world."

And as I sit here today in sadness, wondering why, uncertain, and tired, that is where I wind up. I remember that the poor in spirit will inherit the kingdom of God; that those who mourn will be comforted; and that the pure in heart will see God, yet I feel I need more. And I receive more—a love which is stronger than my fear, a love which conquered death, and a love which knows no bounds.

As we live through times like this, all I can think to do is trust the One who loves us more than we could ever ask or imagine, and take comfort in the fact that He will wipe every tear from our eyes and that one day there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. ◀

**Andrew Phillips**

*Woods Charter High School student  
DYA student '06*



photos: page 6 and 7 courtesy of Virginia Tech

## Rutgers Team Called 'God's Reps' Coach Speaks for Excluded Blacks

Photo Credit: Rutgers University.



Coach C. Vivian Stringer said her team was in the process of forgiving broadcaster Don Imus.

After repeated, nationwide airings of the ugly remarks made about members of her team, Rutgers women's basketball Coach C. Vivian Stringer had the opportunity to portray her young stars in a different light. She chose to use theological terms.

"They are God's representatives in every sense of the word," said Stringer.

Days earlier, radio host Don Imus had created a controversy by casually referring to the players on air as "nappy-headed hos." Eventually, Imus was fired for the remarks.

By contrast, Stringer's words combined theological and democratic concepts, said Marcia Riggs, J. Erskine Love Professor of Christian Ethics at Columbia Theological Seminary, in Decatur, Ga.

The coach was expressing "the ways in which black Christians in particular have always thought about how one interprets the founding documents of this country," said Riggs. "Part of that is you understand something about being created in the image of God."

Riggs believes that during Stringer's public appearances following the incident, the coach was speaking on behalf of black people, not just her team.

"Rather than talk in straight theological language about how they represent the image of God, I think she wants to talk about the fact that there are many ways in which black people, in general, have always been excluded from the moral community," said Riggs. "Theologically, that's rooted in the notion of who is part of the image of God."

Imus's remarks were widely viewed as belittling members of the team, which surprised the sports world by

going all the way to the national championship game before losing to the University of Tennessee.

"You objectify them, you dehumanize them when you say they're 'nappy-headed hos,'" said Riggs, a womanist theologian.

Stringer put Imus's offending words in a broad context.

"It's about us as a people," said Stringer, during a news conference following the team's meeting with Imus only hours after he had been fired. "When there is not equality for all, or when there has been denied equality for one, there has been denied equality for all."

One of the earliest expressions of black women's consciousness comes from Anna Julia Cooper, an educator who was born into slavery in Raleigh, N.C., but rose to earn a degree from the Sorbonne late in life. Cooper famously wrote, "Only the Black Woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.'"

Within black women's consciousness there is not a singular individual, said Riggs. Instead, there is an understanding of both the individual and the community.

"I and we are always interrelated," said Riggs. "If you are going to deny equality to one, obviously you are denying it to a whole group of people."

"Things like this heighten our identity as a social group," said Riggs.

Stringer's use of theological language comes from her background as a religious woman, Riggs noted. Stringer engaged her pastor, the Rev. DeForest B. Soaries Jr., to moderate the conversation between Imus and the team.

A day after the meeting, Stringer said that her players had accepted the apology from Imus and that they were "in the process of forgiving."

"I think it was wonderful," said Riggs. "She hooks up the process of forgiving and the process of healing. She makes it clear that they're accepting the apology. They're in the process of forgiving him for the remarks and they are in the process of healing. I think theologically what she does is push us to remember that grace shouldn't be cheap grace."

In the days after Imus was fired, a host of black leaders announced a nationwide movement against hip-hop culture.

Speaking on MSNBC, Niger Innis, spokesman for the Congress for Racial Equality, said that Imus, a white man, would not have felt free to characterize the Rutgers women as he did if it were not for the prevalence of hip-hop music. He blamed media companies, including Black Entertainment Television, for making money by spreading "filth" that demeans women.

But calls from some African-American leaders to abolish hip-hop culture as a way to eliminate offending

language are misguided, said Riggs. Racist and sexist attitudes will continue to flourish so long as American culture remains “deeply patriarchal and racist and capitalist,” she said.

“I’m not going to say hip-hop culture is the culprit,” said Riggs. “Hip-hop culture exists because we live in a culture that is deeply patriarchal and racist and capitalist. The three interacting, those dynamics interacting, creates the ground for a kind of socialization of men and women into racist, sexist and capitalist attitudes. That’s the bottom line. We need a whole structural, societal transformation. The dissolution of hip-hop will not solve the problem.”

Rapper Snoop Dogg said it was wrong to call the accomplished women of Rutgers such names and that rappers would not do this. Instead, he maintained, rappers use the offending term only to describe women in black neighborhoods who are not doing what they are supposed to be doing.

Snoop Dogg’s comments illustrate her point, said Riggs. There’s a problem when the culture allows the objectification and degradation of any woman, and rappers know that the offending term is flung at lots of women in the black community and for many reasons.

The Imus episode came only months after another attention-grabbing outburst when comedian Michael Richards used “the n word” during a comedy club tirade against an African-American man.

Will public apologies from high-profile entertainers help curtail vile words against women and minorities?

It’s not very likely, said Riggs. Changing that is the work of educators, ministers and others who have a role to play in the counter-socialization of people involving issues of diversity and toleration.

“I know that for my part I’m going to continue to try to teach people in a kind of counter-socialization way,” she said. “I think that’s the only way for change to happen.”

Specifically Christian practices can be used for counter-socialization or to reinforce the values that prevail in society, she said.

“Whether it’s preaching, praying, or even celebrating the Eucharist, the language of our liturgies in worship every Sunday has something to do with the way people are either socialized or counter-socialized,” she said.

“So, all of it is fair game as far as I’m concerned.” ◀

Marcia Riggs is working on a book about counter-socialization. She began the conversation with the 2003 publication of *Plenty Good Room: Women Versus Male Power in the Black Church*.



Marcia Riggs

## Vital Theology Honored for Editorial Courage

The top honor for editorial courage was among eight awards presented to *Vital Theology* newsletter at the 91st annual awards ceremony of the Associated Church Press.

The editorial courage award went to Editor and Publisher David W. Reid for his reporting on the nationwide trend to exclude from American society ex-offenders who committed sex crimes. The stories focused on how online registries have been shown to be counterproductive and lacking in the theological concept of grace, how televised stings condemn those who are caught to a lifetime of shame with little opportunity for reconciliation, and how a rising tide of new legislation that restricts where ex-offenders may live has resulted in increasing homelessness.

*Vital Theology's* reporting provided “a direct confrontation of conventional mindset and prejudice with a Christian perspective,” noted

contest judge William Thorn, chairman of the Marquette University Journalism Department.

The same story won the award of merit (second place) for news story: news service, newsletter or Web site.

*Vital Theology* won two other first-place awards. William T. Cavanaugh, associate professor of theology at St. Thomas University, St. Paul, Minn., won for best short-format theological reflection. His essay was headlined, “Threat of Torture Plays with More Minds than You Might Have Imagined.” Laura Hughes, of Durham, N.C., won for best newspaper or newsletter design for an entire issue.

Ted Grimsrud, associate professor of theology and peace studies, Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Va., won an honorable mention in biblical interpretation for “The Lamb’s Power and Modern America.”

The newsletter also won honor-

able mentions for best-in-class newsletter; for a feature article for “Can Medicine Offer Salvation?” and for best department for “Vital Question.”

“*Vital Theology* consistently presents intelligent, wise, and lucid writing,” wrote ACP judge Duane Stoltzfus, chairman of the Communication Department at Goshen College in Indiana and a former staff editor at *The New York Times*.

ACP is the oldest interdenominational press association in North America. The awards were presented April 24 in Chicago. The complete list of awards is posted at [www.theacp.org](http://www.theacp.org).

Links to *Vital Theology's* award-winning stories are posted at [www.vitaltheology.com](http://www.vitaltheology.com). The newsletter has won more than 25 national and international journalism awards since it was founded in 2004. ◀

Achieving immigration reform in Congress hinges on one key issue: how to deal with those who entered the U.S. illegally. Some argue for a path to citizenship; others oppose any notion of “amnesty.” **What course of action should be taken and what theological themes should come into play in shaping our immigrant-related policies?**

### Learn from History

While many have commented with fire and passion about the need for reform, few have stated the obvious: The current laws governing immigration are unenforceable. I would compare the confusing clauses, exceptions, bureaucracy and general confusion about today's immigration regulations to the unworkable solution proposed during Prohibition. Even with a constitutional amendment, it was impossible to stop the people of the United States from obtaining a glass of wine, a mug of beer or a shot of whiskey. It seems almost ludicrous today that the government took upon itself the task of enforcing the total ban on alcohol. Moreover, the effects of Prohibition included the rise of organized crime, an unprecedented rise in murders and fear in the streets taken over by gangsters.

This brief reflection on history helps one decide which to follow of the two paths of reform. The path of stricter crackdowns, immigrant sweeps, mass deportations and the building of a 700-mile wall on the border is the path of the unenforceable remedy. The only sane solution is the path to comprehensive reform. Restrict illegal entry, yes, but simultaneously integrate needed workers into the economy, educate the children, and work across the border to develop jobs in places like Latin America that will make U.S. immigration less likely.

Religion urges the comprehensive approach because the Scriptures of many faiths reflect a belief in the universal brotherhood/sisterhood of humanity. No person is created as an “illegal” by God: that unfortunate tag comes from nations who fight bloody wars over land and treasure. In fact, the division of the American continent into borders separating the nations also reflects the exploitation of conquered peoples, the enslavement of many and the ungodly focus upon material possessions and political power. One should be loyal to “God and country,” but God comes first. ◀

### Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens

*Professor of Church and Society  
Union Theological Seminary  
New York*



### A Claim on Conscience

Immigration is a very complex subject, which brings us not only to the border of Mexico and the United States, but also to the borders between natural law and civil law, national security and human insecurity, citizenship and discipleship. Each group in the debate has a point to make and a truth to defend, and it is not easy to sort out this complexity. Yet as one contemplates

the fact that more than an immigrant a day dies crossing the treacherous deserts, mountains and canals along the border—and thousands have died over the last 10 years since more restrictive policies have been implemented—the priorities become easier to sort out.

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) gives us one way of sorting out the complexity. It speaks about a God of Life who challenges the human community to build a civilization of love. It says that the moral worth of any society is judged according to how it treats its most vulnerable members. In this light, immigrants today make a clear and pressing claim on human conscience. CST acknowledges that 1) People have the right to find opportunities in their homeland, 2) People have the right to migrate to support their families, 3) Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders, 4) Refugees and asylum-seekers should be afforded protection, and 5) The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants must be respected.

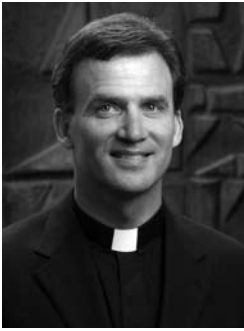
CST also draws its inspiration from the Scriptures, where migration is a fundamental theme. In the Bible, immigration is not simply a sociological fact but also a theological event. Migration is at the core of the history of God's people (*Gen. 12:1-9; 42:1-2; (Ex. 1-18; Mt. 2:13; Deut. 10:19)*). When considered in light of the New Testament, we

realize migrants undergo a way of the cross every day. They experience an economic sentencing in their poverty, a social crucifixion when they separate from their families, a cultural crucifixion when they leave behind their culture, a legal crucifixion when they are labeled “illegal aliens,” and those who die in the deserts and mountains experience an actual crucifixion, dying some of the most horrible deaths imaginable.

In the end of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks about the judgment not only of individuals but of the nation, which will be determined by how we treat the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned and estranged; that is, the least among us. When we contemplate that migrants are hungry in their homeland, thirsty after crossing merciless deserts, naked after being robbed even of their clothing by smugglers at the border, sick from heat-related illnesses, imprisoned in detention centers, and if they make it, estranged in the United States, we face even more challenging questions about where we look for Christ today. If we saw that our identity resides in being a pilgrim church, or an immigrant people, we might see in the stranger not only a reflection of ourselves but the image of Christ (*Mt. 25:31-46*). In the process, as immigrant-rights advocate Father Lydio F. Tomasi says, we might discover that in the end it is not the church that saves the immigrant, but the immigrant who saves the church. ◀

**Fr. Daniel Groody, CSC**

*Assistant Professor of Theology  
Director, Center for Latino Spirituality  
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University of Notre Dame  
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**Preference for the Young**

Current national policies create conditions antithetical to the so-called family values that are touted by leaders of church and state. Viewed through the lens of the option for the young, proclaimed at the Roman Catholic Church’s Puebla Conference on Latin America in 1979, immigration reform and church advocacy need to address more explicitly not only the social and economic factors that drive hemispheric and global migrations, but also the effects on children: those left behind in countries of origin; those detained at the borders; those separated from families in detention facilities; those born U.S. citizens who fear the repatriation of their parents; those raised in the U.S. who discover, usually in adolescence, that they must live in the shadows or be returned to lands they don’t even remember as home; those seeking to earn citizenship through military service in time of war; those whose legality and U.S. citizenship is questioned by virtue of the color of their skin, the cut of their appearance in the wrong neighborhood, or the languages they speak in their bilingual lives.

In light of the damage done to families and youth, perhaps it is not coincidental that in their Fourth General Conference in 1992 in Santo Domingo, the Latin American Bishops proposed the following pastoral directive in response to migration and immigration: “Offer migrants



a catechesis adapted to their culture and legal aid to protect their rights.” Short-sighted policies that restrict access to education, health

care and social services, that disrupt the daily rhythms of the workplace and neighborhood, that criminalize rather than humanize the alternately documented, will only cultivate a climate of resentment, fear and mistrust. A failure to create just means to achieve citizenship or recognized residency for those among us who are alternately documented will result in a permanent underclass—our neighbors—with limited options and no hope. ◀

**Carmen Nanko-Fernández**

*Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry  
Catholic Theological Union, Chicago  
Vice President, Academy of Catholic Hispanic  
Theologians of the United States*

**Love the Alien**

The biblical injunction of neighbor love in Leviticus (*Lev. 19:18*) is specified by love of the resident alien (*Lev. 19:33-34*). In remembering her history, Israel must remember the stranger, “for you yourselves were once aliens in Egypt (*Lev. 19:34*). So



too, Christian disciples must “go and do likewise,” in responding to the material claims of the stranger in our midst (*Luke 10:37*).

From a Christian ethical perspective informed by justice and hospitality, immigration policy, accordingly, must favor porous borders, respecting the universal human rights of migrants. No person is justly described as “illegal”; those who suffer greatest deprivation have the greatest claim. ◀

**William O’Neill, S.J.**

*Associate Professor of Social Ethics  
Jesuit School of Theology  
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## Religious Folk Fear Immigrants But Leaders Urge Humane Treatment

By Lynn Schwebach

Standing at the U.S.-Mexican border in April, President George W. Bush said he wanted congressional leaders to work out a new immigration plan by August. A new bill was introduced in May, but finding common ground will be a challenge, even within the Republican Party where many of the more conservative members disagree with the president's proposals.

The religious community mirrors the politically heated and divisive debate over illegal immigration with the strong opinions of prominent religious leaders often pitted against the opinions of those sitting in the pews.

"It's not unusual for the laity to disagree with the bishops," said Michael Moreland, assistant professor of law at Villanova University, referring to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Moreland, currently finishing his doctorate in Christian ethics at Boston College, worked on immigration policy at the White House in 2005-06.

"As the survey data indicates, the people in the pews aren't always following the lead," he said.

Those who hold religious views are more fearful of immigrants than the general population, according to a 2006 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and Press/Pew Hispanic Center.

Among all Americans, 52 percent agreed with the statement that "Immigrants today are a burden because they take our jobs, housing and health care." Only 46 percent of those who identify themselves as secular agreed.

White evangelicals take the lead in fearing the impact of immigrants with 64 percent in agreement with that statement; 56 percent of non-Hispanic Catholics agreed and 52 percent of white mainline Protestants agreed—the same as the general population. These three religious groups make up 60 percent of the American population.

By contrast, a number of prominent religious leaders in the three groups have made a number of pro-immigrant statements and are united in pushing for comprehensive immigrant reform.

In March, synod bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) met with members of Congress and other congressional staff leaders to press Congress for humane immigration reform. The Rev. Edward R. Benoway, bishop of the Florida-Bahamas Synod in Tampa, Fla., said "our theology and practice call us to be a public church and to speak boldly and confidently in the public arena. Being a church of immigrants, we must pull from our own life stories to give encouragement and

support to new immigrants of our present day."

While meeting with Congress, the ELCA bishops asked for elimination of family visa backlogs, fair and humane enforcement provisions, elimination of the detention of families and children, earned legalization of the nation's 10 million undocumented people, a future worker visa program to meet the economy's unemployment needs, and a path to permanent residence and citizenship.

Moreland said that gospel values have led church leaders to their statements on immigrants, but that people in the pews have concerns about crime and drugs on their street and the burden on the health care system. This leads people in an anti-immigration direction, and trying to reconcile these two viewpoints is a huge challenge for the churches.

The Pew survey reported that even among white Catholics and mainline Protestants, whose leadership

**"We have built highways into their countries to extract goods; now the immigrants are following the goods that we have stolen."**

repeatedly tells churchgoers that Americans should welcome immigrants, only one in four Americans says that illegal immigrants should be able to stay permanently in the U.S.

Arturo Chavez, vice president of the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas, said that one reason for this dichotomy of views is that many advocates for immigrants try to paint immigrants as perfect people.

"There are no perfect people. There are going to be immigrants that I don't want moving into my neighborhood," Chavez said. "But it has nothing to do with their ethnicity."

Chavez said that the immigrants coming to the U.S. now are much like the Irish, Polish, Italian and other immigrants who came to this country in the 1800s and early 1900s. He said Americans need to re-hear the stories of where their ancestors came from and the struggles they went through because many have forgotten these stories or have chosen not to remember.

All Christians are called to listen to the stories of the immigrants, why they're coming and what their lives are like, he said, just as they listened to the stories of past

immigrants. Churches provide a safe environment for people to tell their stories without judgment.

A bill in the House that would have made it a felony to be in the country illegally failed last year and only recently has a new immigration bill surfaced in Congress. Meanwhile, towns across the U.S. have become frustrated with the slow progress the federal government has made on immigration issues. More than 80 cities and towns have decided not to wait and have passed their own laws dealing with illegal immigration.

Many have taken the lead from Hazelton, Pa., where the mayor and city officials wrote one of the harshest anti-immigration policies in the country. The law imposes fines on landlords who rent to illegal immigrants and denies business permits to companies that employ them. Another part of the law requires tenants to register with City Hall.

Based on the argument that the Constitution permits only the federal government authority over



Photo Credit: Albert Yee

Marchers raise a question at Philadelphia immigration rally.

**“There are no perfect people. There are going to be immigrants that I don’t want moving into my neighborhood.”**

immigration issues, Hispanic groups and the American Civil Liberties Union sued the town of Hazelton. A ruling is expected by June.

In addition, the federal government has pushed to crack down on illegal immigration by raiding several worksites across the country. Illegal immigrants found working at these sites are taken to detention centers, leaving children in day-care centers or with younger siblings.

Moreland said these attempts to crack down on illegal immigration show there is a need for immigration reform. The system is obviously broken, he said. But, he continued, “you don’t need to see the rule of law as necessarily a tension against a commitment to a just, fair and compassionate immigration system. In fact, arguably, it’s by making sure there are no exploitative employers and that people who come here are treated fairly, given a fair chance to become citizens or to obtain a green card.”

Moreland, who described himself as “pro-immigration,” said the U.S. has a responsibility and right to protect its

border and the integrity of its citizenship. But, he said, from an economic perspective, the U.S. doesn’t have an adequate supply of workers, so people are forced to come here illegally. The number of visas in some labor categories is extraordinarily small so that the annual cap for visas is reached within a few months. But once people get here the system works against them, he added.

Some Americans believe that the U.S. must choose either to be a nation of immigrants that lets anyone come in without enforcing the law or a nation of laws that mandates a strategy for reducing the number or immigrants. Moreland said the real issue centers on how to find a middle ground.

“That’s what President Bush is committed to, and I think that’s what a lot of people in good faith in both the Democrat and Republican parties are committed to as well.” Moreland said.

But Miguel A. De La Torre, associate professor of social ethics at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, opposes Moreland’s view.

“The rule of law basically exists to protect the wealth and privilege of those in power,” said De La Torre. “What needs to be broken is the rule of law. Any ‘solution’ that we may come up with at the very best will be a short-term mandate because we refuse to deal with the issue of justice.”

*continued on page 16*

## Religious Folk Fear Immigrants

*continued from page 15*

Justice, De La Torre argued, means starting with the question of why migrants actually come to America.

The reason they come is because U.S. foreign policy has claimed labor and natural resources of Latin America for the past century.

"We have built highways into their countries to extract goods; now the immigrants are following the goods that we have stolen," De La Torre said. "For many, they didn't just cross our borders, our borders crossed over them."

De La Torre cited the example of the infamous United Fruit Company, which was widely criticized for controlling the banana trade throughout Central America, beginning in the early 1900s. When peasants tried to rebel against this economic exploitation,

the U.S. sent in marines to establish military juntas and dictatorships that allowed American businesses to continue to exploit the land and the people, he said. Today, he said, multinational corporations take care of such work themselves.

Restitution is one of the major themes of biblical texts, said De La Torre, and the U.S. must consider what it owes to exploited people. He said he is

fed up with discussions about offering hospitality to the "poor foreigner because we're such good Christians." Charity is important, he said, but it's not the real issue.

"The Hebrew Bible says that you have to return everything that you have stolen four times. Will that ever happen? Of course not," De La Torre said.

Restitution means discussing treaties such as NAFTA, which he said continue the exploitation. But the government and corporations will never start discussing what the real issue is because they profit from this arrangement.

Restitution is a form of justice, but Christians are misguided when they think reconciliation can occur without cost, he said. Christians are as reluctant as others to give up privileges such as the \$2 cup of coffee or the ability to send kids to college on a middle-class income.

"Justice," De La Torre said, "will require a redistribution of the world's wealth and resources. "(That) means every one of us will have to struggle more financially."

But no one wants to struggle, so Christians often create a veneer of Christianity that makes them feel good and still refuse to deal with justice the way the biblical text commands, he said.

Chavez, of the Mexican American Cultural Center, said systemic dysfunction is the result of systemic evils, such as racism.

De La Torre agrees. He said that racism continues to justify brown people working in U.S. fields for substandard wages because Americans think it is the only work for them to do. When Americans say we need to increase the number of visas for agricultural jobs, what they really mean is that they are superior and won't do the work; therefore brown people can do this kind of menial work ◀

Miguel De La Torre is co-editor of *Rethinking Latino(a) Religion and Identity*. His most recent book is *A Lily among the Thorns: Imagining a New Christian Sexuality*.

**"Christians often create a veneer of Christianity that makes them feel good and still refuse to deal with justice the way the biblical text commands."**

*Vital Theology* is available on the Web at [www.vitaltheology.com](http://www.vitaltheology.com).