



THE SPIRIT OF STRUGGLE: WRITINGS ON RELIGIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS





This publication was made possible through the generosity of the Henry Luce Foundation.

October 2015

© Kairos: The Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice

Cover Images, clockwise from top:

- Restaurant Opportunities Center-NY (ROC-NY) holds a prayer vigil outside Del Posto, in honor of workers who were experiencing wage theft and other indignities by their employers. (Kairos Center)
- Charon Hribar from the Kairos Center - and native Pennsylvanian - opens a meeting of Put People First-PA, a grassroots human rights organization of the poor in Pennsylvania, with a song. (Media Mobilizing Project)
- Protesters pray together during the 2011 uprisings in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt
- Leaders from dozens of states across the United States walked 283 miles from Belhaven, NC, to Washington D.C., to raise awareness of and rally the public against the closure of 283 rural hospitals in the country. (Kairos Center)
- Young leaders from Abahlali base-Mjondolo (South Africa Shackdwellers Movement) stand with pride in the face of insecure housing and human rights. (Sleeping Giant)
- 1Love Movement in Philadelphia, PA, organizes a march in protest of unjust deportations of the Cambodian community in the city and across the United States. (Kairos Center)

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Religion and Human Rights Need Each Other <i>Larry Cox</i>	7
Shakti: The Power of the Poor <i>Shailly Gupta Barnes</i>	11
Reading the Bible with the Poor: A Biblical Hermeneutic for Social Transformation <i>The Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis</i>	15
Islam and Poverty in the Sahel: An Interview with Sheikh Maman Kiota <i>Adam Barnes</i>	25
A Moral Movement for the Nation <i>The Rev. Dr. William Barber II</i>	33
Abahlali base-Mjondolo and Building the Struggle From Below <i>An Interview with Mzwakhe Mdlalose and Dr. Richard Pithouse</i>	41
Women, Islam, and the Secular-Religious Divide <i>An Interview with Dr. Sheherazade Jafari</i>	51



Mistica at the 6th congress and 30th anniversary of Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Workers' Movement) in Brazil
(Oliver Kornblihtt/MST)

The mission of Kairos: The Center for Religion, Rights and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary is to contribute to building transformative movements for social change that can draw on the power of both religions and human rights. Recognizing that thought and action should not be separated, the Kairos Center's work combines rigorous scholarship, applied research, reciprocal education, and shared practice. The Kairos Center incorporates, builds on, and expands the work of the Poverty Initiative which for more than a decade has worked with religious and community leaders around the country and globe to build a social movement, led by the poor, to end poverty and related violations of human rights and dignity.

It is this experience and objective that drives our research, writing and practice. At a time when political, economic, and social systems are breaking down, inequality, injustice, conflict, and repression are on the rise, and social justice advocates are increasingly and necessarily grappling with the power and influence of religion – in all its expressions from progressive to fundamentalist – the need to look critically and in depth at the role of religion and the new forms it is taking in social movements has taken on new urgency.

The importance of this question requires addressing as fully and rigorously as possible its complexity. Religions have long played, and continue to play, a prominent and critical role in struggles around the world for dignity, freedom and social justice. The deep religious beliefs of people such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero, Shirin Ebadi and Aung San Suu Kyi have helped shape the vision and the strategy and tactics of their movements. The front lines of these struggles are often disproportionately composed of believers who attribute their inspiration, commitment and willingness to endure suffering to their religion. Even self-professed secular activists often describe their experiences of struggle in what can be characterized as religious terms.

At the same time, often overshadowing positive contributions, religious figures and interpretations have frequently been at the forefront of horrific and massive violations of human rights. Religion is used to encourage or justify attacks, often violent, on women and religious, national, and sexual minorities, or to defend unjust economic structures and abusive powers. Those seeking change of oppressive systems are frequently accused of, if not punished for, disrespecting what is sacred. In these far from unusual cases many social justice activists find religion more of an enemy than an ally. In addition, movements that need and want to mobilize increasingly diverse communities face the challenge of religion dividing, and aggravating conflicts between, people of different or no faith traditions.

Recognizing that even the term "religions" can be a highly contested and problematic one, the focus of this work and writing is on the "lived religion" of people fighting for social justice. The goal is to understand more deeply and communicate more widely how those fighting for their values, rights and

lives are confronting, adapting and drawing from religious traditions in their work as well as opposing the abuse of religious power. Putting aside preconceived ideas of what is and isn't "religion" makes possible going beyond only or mainly organized creeds and institutional forms of religion to explore and learn from all beliefs and practices that point to a transcendent or deeper source of meaning and power. This means engaging with both social justice efforts and movements that are fully or partly faith based and those that are explicitly secular but whose work inescapably engages the deepest beliefs and values of the communities with whom they work. In the process we understand better not only the role of religions in advancing social movements, but also of how these movements for social justice and human rights can advance religious understandings and practice.



2011 Poverty Scholars Leadership School Wilkes Barre, PA (Pat Grugan)

Questions Directing This Work

Some of the questions central to this work include the following:

Who are movements for social justice reaching and why? What are people who come into those movements looking for and what do they find?

How do these movements, and their participants, define the source(s) of meaning, power, and inspiration in their work? Are there collective definitions of these values and where do these come from? How do they deal with contending ideas and sources of value and meaning and how are tensions from these differences addressed? What is the relationship between individual and collective sources?

How in practice do social justice movements draw on these sources of meaning, power and inspiration? What kind of teachings, symbols, rituals and practices are used to help sustain and inspire those involved in diverse struggles for social justice? How explicitly do these social justice movements use religious teachings, practices and symbols in their work and if not, why not?

How do these movements, and their participants, define religion? How do these movements navigate the diverse religious beliefs of participants in their struggles? How do they view the relationship between religion and the social transformation they seek? What role do moral as opposed to purely political messages play in these movements?

To what extent, and how, have religious teachings influenced the vision of the changes being sought and the methods for achieving those changes? What philosophies and theologies are being drawn on in these struggles for social justice? Are there particular thinkers they draw on? What do these say about how to achieve social justice? How are they involved in the work of these movements?

What obstacles or strengths do religions bring to these efforts? How have movements and their participants learned to combat best the obstacles and build on the strengths? What personal experience have individuals in these movements had with religions and how has this influenced their work for social justice?

These questions are not abstract. They emerge and have had to be answered by the most important social movements of our time. (Below is a sample of movements from whom we are learning and with whom we are working) The questions form the basis for what is hoped will be an ongoing series of public discussions and more focused dialogues among engaged scholars and activists on the role religions are playing in the broadest sense play in struggles for social justice. Even more importantly, they are at the heart of efforts to combat the abuse of religions and instead enhance them as a powerful force for social justice and transformation.

A Selection of Case Studies

Some of the social movements from which we are learning and with which we are working include:

Abahlali base-Mjondolo (the South African Shackdwellers Movement) (South Africa) – The Abahlali base-Mjondolo Movement (AbM) began in Durban, South Africa, in early 2005. Although it is overwhelmingly located in and around the large port city of Durban it is, in terms of the numbers of people mobilized, the largest organization of the militant poor in post-apartheid South Africa. The movement that began with a road blockade in one shack settlement now has tens of thousands of supporters from more than 30 settlements. Since 2012, the movement has suffered more than a hundred arrests, regular police assault, and ongoing death threats and other forms of intimidation from local party goons. It

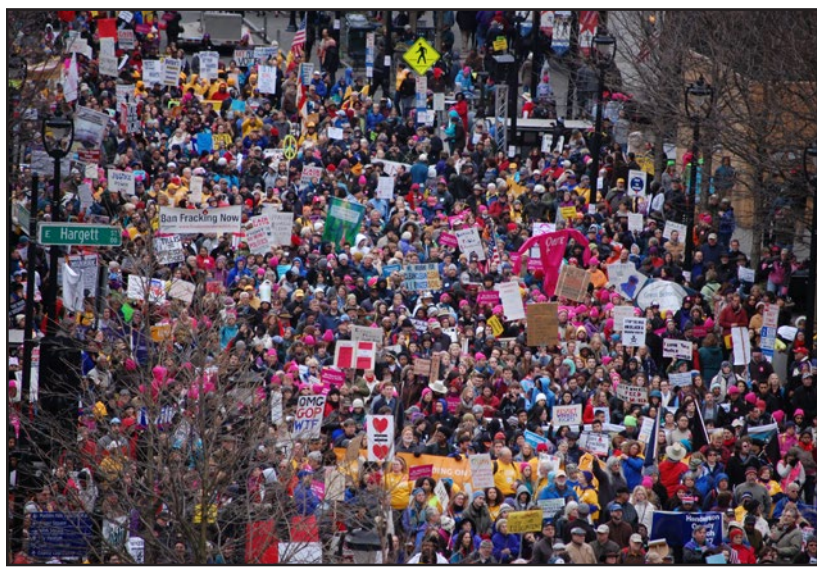
has developed a sustained voice for shack dwellers, and occupied and marched on the offices of local politicians, police stations, municipal offices, newspaper offices, and the City Hall in actions that have put thousands of people on the streets. The movement's key demand is for 'Land & Housing in the City' but it has also successfully politicized and fought for an end to forced removals and for access to education and the provision of water, electricity, sanitation, health care and refuse removal as well as bottom up popular democracy. In some settlements the movement has also successfully set up projects like childcare centers, gardens, sewing collectives, support for people living with and orphaned by AIDS, etc. Although not aligned with a specific religion, AbM has developed deep connections to the Church Land Programme and Bishop Philip Rubin, successor to Bishop Desmond Tutu. There are also Muslims, Hindus, and members of various religious traditions involved in AbM.

Faith in Community Scotland – Faith in Community Scotland works hard to support local people living in Scotland's economically poorest neighborhoods and provide a range of training, advice, funding, and support to faith groups in these areas and encourage them to work in partnership with others. Faith in Community Scotland is a charity, working with faith groups since its establishment in 2005, and has developed a strong track record in asset-based community development. Faith in Community Scotland is connected to the Priority Areas Project of the Church of Scotland that works in the 68 poor-

The need to look critically and in depth at the role of religion and the new forms it is taking in social movements has taken on new urgency.

est communities in Scotland. Many parts of the Church in Western Europe are in decline and nowhere is this decline sharper than in the poorest communities. In this area of work, the Priority Areas Committee supports a range of activities that are designed to help local Christians and congregations to share the Gospel in more appropriate and inspirational ways resulting in growth and deepening of faith.

The Forward Together/Moral Mondays Movement (North Carolina) – For nearly ten years, a fusion movement has been growing in North Carolina. In 2006, the Historic Thousands on Jones St. (HKonJ) People's Assembly Coalition was formed under the leadership of Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II and the North Carolina NAACP. It has grown to include over 150 coalition partners. Each year this fusion



Historic Thousands on Jones Street Moral March in Raleigh, NC, February 2014 (Jose Vasquez)

movement comes together on the second Saturday in February to hold a mass people's assembly to reaffirm its commitment to the 14 Point People's Agenda and to hold lawmakers accountable to the people of North Carolina. Since the first 17 arrests on April 29, 2013, more than a thousand demonstrators have been arrested as part of the Moral Mondays movement, and police have estimated weekly attendance at over 2,500. Cited reasons for the protests include legislation recently passed or proposed on changes to Medicaid, changes to voting regulations, school vouchers, tax reform, and abortion. The Moral Mondays movement is notable for its frequent and powerful invocation of religious teaching and values while still engaging large numbers of secular activists.

Musawah (Malaysia/Egypt) – Musawah is a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family. In 2007 a conceptual meeting was held in Cairo with 21 participants from 15 countries that laid the groundwork for a Musawah Framework for Action for justice and equality for women. Musawah was formerly launched at its first Global meeting in Malaysia in 2009 with 270 participants from 47 countries. Musawah works on three inter-related areas aimed at building a strong movement of women and men: knowledge building, outreach, and International advocacy. A possible case study would look at both Musawah's international work and the work of members of the network on the ground in various countries.

Ekta Parishad (India) – Ekta Parishad (meaning Unity Forum) is a people's movement dedicated to the principles of non-violent action for social reform in India to give the poorest peoples control over livelihood resources, especially land, water and forest. It is a federation of approximately 11,000 community-based organizations and hundreds of thousands of members in 12 Indian States. The movement is known for its mass land marches (video available at kairoscenter.org) such as the one in October 2102 which saw some 100,000 people march 350 kilometers from Gwalior to Delhi, demanding and winning an historic agreement from the government on land reform. Ekta Parishad's work and thinking is in the tradition of Gandhi and includes activists drawing from Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and indigenous religious traditions.

Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Worker's Movement – MST) (Brazil) – Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST) is a mass social movement, the largest in the Western Hemisphere,

formed by rural workers and by all those who want to fight for land reform and against injustice and social inequality in rural areas. It was born through a process of occupying large landed estates and became a national movement in 1984. Over more than three decades the movement has led more than 2,500 land occupations with about 370,000 families. Through their organizing these families continue to push for schools, credits for agricultural production and cooperatives, and access to health care. While a secular and non-denominational movement, the MST has been heavily influenced by Catholic social doctrine and its founding was closely connected with Catholic Church base organizations such as the Pastoral Land Commission. It is also known for what its activists call "mistica," cultural practices and rituals that capture the values of and emotional commitment to the cause and the hope for radical social change.

Defend Job (Philippines) is a movement fighting for decent employment, adequate housing, and other human rights "in the midst of unemployment, extreme hunger, and poverty." Defend Job emerged from the struggle by women workers in 2009 against illegal and unjust lay-offs and closure by Triumph International, a giant multi-national underwear company based in Germany. Defend Job has become a network of unions, workers associations and community based organizations. It is also the Secretariat of the Demolition Watch Initiative, created in response to the announcement by the Arroyo administration of massive evictions of the urban poor in Manila to make way for government infrastructure projects. In a recent submission to the Philippines' Congress, Defend Job documented violent evictions that have continued under the current president, Benigno Aquino. Defend Job has also been at the forefront of mobilizing national and international protest against the growing repression of labor leaders and other human rights defenders in the Philippines. In its work, Defend Job draws on the religious symbols and values that resonate deeply with many of the oppressed in the Philippine. It plays a leading role in the yearly procession during holy week that is used to dramatize the people's Calvary of poverty and oppression.



After 121 families were forcibly and illegally evicted from Corazon de Jesus, San Juan City in 2012, Defend Job Philippines submitted a formal complaint to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing. (Defend Job Philippines)

Kiota Community (Niger) – Niger is a West African nation that, despite rich uranium resources that provide Europe with clean energy, is consistently ranked among the poorest countries in the world. Kiota is a thriving spiritual community in Niger struggling to confront that poverty. Kiota was founded by the late Sheikh Aboubakar on three Qur'an rooted principles: 1) Food Security, 2) Education, and 3) Spiritual education. The Sheikh's efforts to live out these principles are carried on by his eldest son, Sheikh Moussa, and by his wife, "Maman" Niass. The town and the Sheikhs attract tens of thousands of religious pilgrims and disciples every year, 1000's of students, and many scholars, and business and political leaders from across West Africa and beyond. "Maman" Kiota, the daughter of Sheikh Ibrahim Niass – the founder of the most influential Islamic Sufi brotherhood in West Africa, has helped to start and run numerous schools, several women's gardens, a women's health clinic, and an organization of Muslim women leaders that has over 200,000 members in all eight departments of Niger.

The Spirit of Struggle

This publication is a compilation of writings on the relevant topic of the intersection of religions and human rights. We have selected current writings and interviews about some of the movements listed above. These articles also begin to answer some of the indicated questions in that they seek to explore the role that religions, in their broadest definition and sense, are playing in social justice struggles. Included are lessons from the Kiota Community in Niger, the Shackdwellers Movement in South Africa, the Forward Together Moral Mondays movement in the southern United States and Sisters in Islam in Malaysia. Also included are some of the principles and methods from Christianity, Islam and Hinduism that promote dignity and life and call for an end to poverty and oppression.

This is the first publication in what will be a series of resources the Kairos Center aims to compile and create as we seek to understand the role religions play in social movements. In responding to the urgency and inequality of our times, something new is beginning to emerge in our world, recalling the meaning of the name of the Kairos Center. Kairos is an ancient Greek word for a time that calls for opportune and decisive action and a biblical term for a moment when the eternal breaks into history. A Kairos time is marked not only by the breakdown of unjust structures and systems, but by the breaking through of new movements and awakenings that point in a radical new direction. We believe this indeed is a Kairos moment and that more scholarship and engagement on the issues of our day and the role that religion is playing in those are very much needed.

Please contact us with resources, articles, questions and movements that can continue to build out this work.



Global social movement leaders from Brazil, India, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Africa, Guatemala and the United States meet with leaders from Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, and Biloxi, Mississippi, as part of the Social Movement Working Group of the International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. (The Plaquemines Gazette)

Religion and Human Rights Need Each Other

Larry Cox

Co-Director of The Kairos Center

Religion and human rights need each other. Although the universality of human rights may require a secular presentation, the human rights movement's real power comes from its inherent religious dimensions. When today's human rights activists recognize and connect with those dimensions, they gain strength, new alliances, and the greater global legitimacy they so urgently need.

As preliminary evidence, remember that so many of the world's struggles for freedom and dignity were led by people of deep faith, including El Salvador's Oscar Romero, India's Mahatma Gandhi, Iran's Shirin Ebadi, the United States' Martin Luther King, and Burma/Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi.

These and other believers have been disproportionately active in movements for rights and social justice. They do so because their faith often gives them the moral inspiration, the popular legitimacy, and the internal strength to endure great suffering. As a result, faith-based action has been, and still is, one of the most important forces undermining repressive political systems everywhere.

Religions and rights often converge because of a shared belief in what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls "the inherent dignity" of "all members of the human family." Like the Declaration, most religions preach a love of all human beings, and the need for action when human dignity is violated.

Human rights and religions also share the claim that this dignity, along with the rights required to protect it, is not a human or government invention, but is rather present at birth in each and every one of us. Given these affinities, it is both surprising and tragic that relations between religion and human rights – especially of late – are so often problematic.

From Northern Ireland to the Vatican, Syria, and Central African Republic, religious figures and interpretations are often boldface contributors to abuse. Defenders of unjust structures and behaviors often use religion to suppress courageous voices for change, create divisions, justify oppression, and violate rights of vulnerable people.

Indeed, some of the most spectacular expressions of religious fervor come from groups that promote violence, intolerance, misogyny and homophobia. In the US, for example, religious activism is often associated with attacks on the rights of women and LGBTQ people, scientific inquiry, and criticisms of unregulated capitalism.

As a result, the media and many scholars often ignore religions' progressive expressions, viewing faith as an expression of superstition, fanaticism, or conservatism.

Many human rights advocates share this view, and stress the secular nature of human rights work. Among other things, they note that the Universal Declaration contains no reference to God or faith. The Declaration's drafters did this intentionally, so as to enable the document's acceptance by people of any, and no, religion.

As a result, many human rights proponents view secularity as key to the Declaration's effectiveness. As the eminent legal scholar Louis Henkin put it, "The human rights ideology is a fully secular and rational ideology whose very promise of success as a universal ideology depends on its secularity and rationality."

When today's human rights activists recognize and connect with their inherent religious dimensions, they gain strength, new alliances, and the greater global legitimacy they so urgently need.

Human rights professionals, many of whom are lawyers in international or domestic NGOs, typically speak to other professionals in NGOs, government, and inter-governmental organizations.

Although the website of Human Rights Watch and other likeminded groups provides abundant examples of moral outrage, these are rarely linked to any attempt at social mobilization, including among faith communities. The tacit message is that pro-human rights action is best left to secular professionals, media watchdogs, and liberal governments or intergovernmental organizations.

The increasingly sharp divide between human rights professionals and religion comes at serious cost. By portraying human rights as something secular, legalistic, and owned by professionals, practitioners distance it from the multitudes whose action is needed to move governments.

To improve human rights, mass publics must get involved, including those whose rights are most violated. And yet, even victims of the worst abuses are unlikely to engage with a concept and with organizations that appear unrelated, or even hostile, to the religions that give them comfort, strength, meaning, and practical assistance.

Human rights groups are aware of the power of religion, but their attempts to connect with that power are remarkably limited. Consider Amnesty International USA, a civil society group built around the principle of mobilizing the public for action. Although it has many public outreach programs, all are aimed at students, professionals, lawyers, educators, and youth. Remarkably, not a single one is aimed at religious leaders or communities.

This lack of engagement with religion is due not just to the distance between human rights and religious leaders, but also to human rights leaders' distance from the inherent religious dimensions of their own ideas.

These religious dimensions of human rights do not depend on particular religious beliefs or views on the nature and existence of a God. As legal scholar Ronald Dworkin notes, religion is any worldview that "holds that inherent, objective value permeates everything, that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring, that human life has purpose and the universe order."

Without saying why, the Universal Declaration asserts that every human being is born with the "objective value" of dignity and rights, and that these transcend the individual. This inherent dignity connects us with every other human being, and thus to the order and purpose of our world. Implicitly, this also

connects human rights with virtually every religious tradition, including both those that believe in – and do not believe in – a theistic God.

More importantly, the people who fight for human rights often experience this inherent sense of connection. This personal, individual, and powerful experience gives human rights their full meaning and social power. This experience, felt by secular and religious activists alike, explains the courage of a student standing in front of a Chinese tank in Tiananmen Square, of a woman standing alone with the placard, “give women their rights” in a Saudi square, and of all those who courageously risked their lives for rights from El Salvador to South Africa and Tibet.

It is important – vitally important – to translate the internal experience of rights into laws. If this legal translation denies this transcendent experience, however, those laws’ force and legitimacy is greatly diminished.

It is this loss, easier to see than to measure, that has contributed to the recent talk by British academic Stephen Hopgood of the “endtimes of human rights.”

This disconnect is also a great loss to religion. The power of faiths, which globally show no signs of diminishing, comes from the symbols, rituals, and texts that capture the transcendent and sacred reality people experience. We need human rights to protect the expression, and guard against the misuse, of this power.



Offering of mass following a fire that razed the Kentex factory killing 72 workers in May 2015. Defend Job and other organizations called for accountability from factory owners and the Aquino administration. (Defend Job Philippines)

As scholar Abdullahi An-Na'im explains, human rights are also necessary to safeguard the rights of believers to challenge religious orthodoxy and attempts to identify religion with rights violators. By passing laws based on human rights, the state helps different religious communities, and members of the same community who have different interpretations, live together in shared political space. And by struggling to align their values with human rights standards, religions grow in ways essential to their vitality.

To get a sense of how religion and human rights have worked together, consider the U.S. civil rights movement. As historians

document, many of the people who fought for civil and constitutional rights in America thought of their movement as a religious event. The same is true today for the remarkable Moral Mondays Movement that mobilizes thousands every week to risk arrest and fight voter suppression, economic injustice and other violations in North Carolina.

In 2007, the transformative power of religion was on view in Burma/Myanmar, when thousands of Buddhist monks joined protests and withdrew spiritual services from military personnel. In 2010/11,

religiously motivated activists beyond the Muslim Brotherhood played key roles in the Arab Awakening. As Yale professor Seyla Benhabib notes, “Just as followers of Martin Luther King were educated in the black churches in the American South... so the crowds in Tunis, Egypt and elsewhere draw upon Islamic traditions of Shahada – the act of being a martyr and witness of God at the same time.”

Sadly, the U.S., Myanmar and Middle Eastern countries also show how religious power, when untethered to human rights commitments, can turn demonic. Whether it is the American religious right that demonizes LGBT and other people, the Buddhist groups in Burma who kill Muslims, or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt that used state power to attack democracy, the harm done by organizations in the name of religion is often horrific.

Combating religious-based oppression is complex and urgent. Ultra-exclusivist religious groups often welcome secular criticism, portraying it as an attack on faith itself. As a result, some of the most effective work against religious-based oppression comes from human rights-minded co-religionists such as the Network of Engaged Buddhists, the Jewish T’ruah, the Christian Faith in Public Life, the Muslim Musawa, and many others.

Secular rights groups must support, protect and learn from these faith-based allies. Most importantly, secular rights workers must rediscover the faith and values they share with religions, and work together in movements that draw on the best of human rights and religions.

By reuniting faith and human rights worldwide, we can replace the approaching human rights “end-times” with growth, renewal, and resurgence.



A New Poor People's Campaign for Today Community Hearing in Brown Memorial Chapel in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of the crossing of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, AL (Kairos Center)

Shakti: The Power of the Poor

Shailly Gupta Barnes

Programs Manager at The Kairos Center

The gods came...saying, 'O Ocean; we have come to churn thy waters for obtaining nectar...After a while, the mild Moon of a thousand rays emerged from the Ocean...Then arose the divine himself with the white vessel of nectar in his hand. And seeing him, the Asuras [demons] set up a loud cry, saying, 'It be ours'...

But with the churning...the poison appeared...Engulfing the Earth it suddenly blazed up like a fire attended with fumes...And then Siva [Shiva], being solicited by Brahman, swallowed that poison for the safety of the creation.

– *The Mahabharata*, Section 18

Oxfam's January 2015 report on global wealth inequality, and its stark announcement that the wealth of just 80 individuals in the world is now equal to that owned by the bottom 50% of the global population, or 3.5 billion people, laid bare the expanding polarity between wealth and poverty.¹ After the 2008 global economic crisis, and amid unresolvable displacement, landlessness and homelessness, unemployment and underemployment, natural and man-made ecological devastation, the question of wealth and resource inequality has commanded widespread attention. This is especially true as limitations continue to be imposed on social welfare spending in a range of political systems around the world, fomenting conditions for widespread social upheaval.

While, therefore, arising out of an economic crisis, this global inequality is prompting a deep and profound moral crisis. Indeed, in a world that can allow this kind of polarity, the very value of human life – and all life – is in question, as is the kind of leadership that can move us beyond the chaos that is being unleashed today.

The Hindu myth of the Samudra Manthan, or the churning of the cosmic ocean, speaks to a time of existential threat. There are several versions of this myth, but they all share the same general story: The gods (devas) and demons (asuras) had been engaging in an epic battle for control over the universe. The gods had already suffered several defeats and approach Brahma, the God of gods, for advice. Brahma suggests that the gods convince the demons to help them churn the cosmic ocean – the source and life-bed of all creation – to access the sacred nectar of immortality (amrita) deep at the bottom of the ocean. He also says that the gods should not share the nectar with the demons, but keep it to themselves to finally prevail over them.

1 "Richest 1% will own more than all the rest by 2016," <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2015-01-19/richest-1-will-own-more-all-rest-2016>

The gods bring this idea to the demons, who, unaware of the gods' trickery, agree to work together on the strenuous task of churning the ocean. Their first attempt is unsuccessful and they are spent by their exertion; even so, their actions begin to release a lethal poison (hala-hala) into the waters that is powerful enough to destroy all of creation. This is described in great detail in the Mahabharata:

Then, O Brahmana, out of the deep came a tremendous roar like unto the roar of the clouds at the Universal Dissolution. Diverse aquatic animals being crushed by the great mountain gave up the ghost in the salt waters. And many denizens of the lower regions and the world of Varuna were killed. Large trees with birds on the whirling Mandara were torn up by the roots and fell into the water...The mountain looked like a mass of dark clouds charged with lightning.

This foreboding destruction does not, however, dissuade the gods and demons from their plan and they appeal to Brahma for renewed strength. It is granted. They continue to churn the ocean, finally accessing the nectar, but at the same time unleashing the full force of the hala-hala. To prevent its catastrophic potential, the gods approach Shiva who consumes the poison himself; however, Shiva, who holds the universe in his belly, has thereby threatened all that already exists in the world by drinking the poison. Shocked by his act, the Goddess Parvati (his partner) presses her hand to his throat, nearly strangling him, but ultimately saving both Shiva and the universe. In turn, Shiva's neck turns blue.



Image of the gods churning the ocean (Wikipedia)

There are three aspects of the Samudra Manthan that are particularly relevant to today's crisis: First, in the myth what releases the poison into the world is the effort of gods and demons, together, to access the nectar of immortality for themselves. There is a reason this nectar – necessary to the continuity of all life and creation – is kept at the bottom of the cosmic ocean. There, it remains both inaccessible, but still a part of and infused into all creation, thereby ensuring that life itself is eternal. When the gods and demons attempt to hoard this resource for their own benefit, exclusive of the rest of creation, they end up threatening all life. Likewise, an economic and political system that makes it possible for 80 people to have as much wealth as 3.5 billion people is threatening to all life, because it indicates that the bulk of the world's economic resources, wealth and productive potential are owned and controlled by the very few, thereby condemning the masses to poverty, dispossession and exploitation.

Second, in this myth the cosmic ocean and universe are distinct – the first is what creates life, and the second is where all life that has been created exists. The actions of the gods and demons do not just threaten the life that already exists, they threaten the source of life and therefore the possibility of life existing at all. Shiva drinks the poison to protect that essential resource of life, the cosmic ocean. In our society today, the essential resources of life – water, land, modern science and technology – are not harnessed for all humanity. Rather, they are increasingly held and controlled by a small number of people, used to produce profits for themselves instead of well-being for the rest of us. While some may claim that those profits ultimately benefit the masses, the reality proves otherwise: in the United States, 1 in 5 children in 2014 would have gone hungry had their families not qualified for public assistance (up from 1 in 8 children in 2007), yet, not only did Congress cut \$8.6 billion from food stamps funding in 2014, but 30 percent of the food that is produced in this country (over \$48 billion worth) is thrown away; a record 14 million (1 in 9) U.S. homes remain vacant while 3.5 million people experience homelessness each year; and while health care has been one of the most profitable industries after the economic crisis, medical debt remains the primary cause behind most bankruptcies. Our capacity to create food, homes and wealth is not being used for the masses of people in this country or around the world.

Finally, the third and most important detail of the Samudra Manthan has to do with what happens after Shiva drinks the poison, when Parvati chokes him to keep the poison from spreading to the universe in his belly. Parvati is the Mother Goddess in Hinduism and the embodiment of the energy force of the universe, Shakti. Without the universe, Parvati does not exist. She is, therefore, tied to the reality of life. And, in the Samudra Manthan, Parvati does not sacrifice the universe in Shiva's belly to save the cosmic ocean. Unlike Shiva, Parvati acts to save all life, and indeed everything is saved.

**It is the force
that is intimately
tied to the reality
of life – and the
all-consuming
possibility of
annihilation – that
ends up saving
all. Through her
creativity and
strength, Parvati
shows us what it
means to truly love
life.**

Where is Parvati today? Where can we find Shakti, this divine and sacred power that nourishes, protects, honors and saves all life? In its report, Oxfam appeals to governments, organizations, corporations and the influential individuals who have gathered in Davos for the World Economic Forum 2015 to build a “fairer economic and political system that values every citizen...to address the factors that have led to today's inequality explosion and to implement policies that redistribute money and power from the few to the many.” The assumption is that these people and institutions will act with the blessings and inspiration of Shakti. This position is widely believed, i.e., that those who are in power – or closest to it – are the most able and willing to change the status quo in the interests of all. With all the necessary resources at their disposal, it may be that appealing to their morality, responsibility, and even their economic interests could inspire a more just world.

Yet, as we see in the Samudra Manthan, it is not the forces that have unleashed catastrophe upon catastrophe into the world who end up saving the universe. Nor is it the well-intentioned savior whose actions actually threaten life by accepting the notion that some must be lost in order for some to survive. Rather, it is the force that is intimately tied to the reality of life – and the all-consuming possibility of annihilation – that ends up saving all. And through her creativity and strength, i.e. through the power of Shakti, Parvati shows us what it means to truly love life. Today, this life force is embodied in the social force made most vulnerable by the rampant inequality in the world: the poor and dispossessed who are fighting everyday for life, dignity and peace. These hundreds of millions of women, men and children know the myriad ways that life is compromised and threatened in this inhumane reality. And

they know better than any other social force that all life is sacred and that no life may be sacrificed (or asked to lengthen those bootstraps, tighten that belt one more notch and wait a little bit longer for their basic human needs). In our current, grossly unequal reality, because they're fighting for their lives, they fight for us all. Their fights are all of our fights. It is, therefore, this social force of the poor and dispossessed that we need to show us, through its creativity, strength and leadership, what it means to fight for – and love – all life today.



In September 2014 leaders from Nepal, South African, India, Brazil, Italy and the United States gathered in India for a meeting organized by Ekta Parishad and International Initiatives on non-violence and global social movements, including the Kairos Center's Shailly Gupta Barnes, third from right. (Dan Jones)

Reading the Bible with the Poor: A Biblical Hermeneutic for Social Transformation

The Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis
Co-Director of The Kairos Center

Over the past twenty-five years, a paradigm shift in biblical studies has taken place at the same time as poor people have been compelled to mobilize, organize and theorize in new ways. The development of empire-critical biblical studies has brought to the forefront a view of early “Christianity” as a transformative and counter-imperial movement. Scholars describe the early Christian movement – called the Jesus Movement, the *basileia* movement, or Christ Cults by different writers – as a social movement seeking to transform the violent and impoverishing Roman Empire into an egalitarian society.

Although these scholars differ in their approach and findings, together they illuminate early Christianity as a social movement developing out of the subjugated nations, classes, and people of the Roman Empire. This scholarship not only proposes new insights about the historical Jesus and Paul, but also offers a new paradigm for reading and interpreting the New Testament, one that intersects with ideas and activism developing out of poor communities responding to growing poverty and homelessness in the United States today.

At the same time as empire-critical scholarship was developing, various movements of the poor in the United States were emerging and coming together. These include the National Union of the Homeless, the national Up and Out of Poverty Coalition, the national Anti-Hunger Coalition, the Kensington Welfare Rights Union from Philadelphia, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers from Southwest Florida, the Atlanta Labor Pool Workers Union, Arise for Social Justice in Springfield, Massachusetts, the Women’s Economic Agenda Project in Oakland, California, the Human Rights Coalition in Detroit, Michigan, the Big Creek People in Action from Welch, West Virginia, the Grassroots Alliance to End Poverty and many others.

The March of the Americas

In October 1999, this rich movement of the poor and dispossessed in the U.S. intersected with Union Theological Seminary’s more than 160-year legacy of social justice ministries when Union opened its doors to the March of the Americas. Union Seminary administration, faculty, and staff welcomed hundreds of poor and homeless families from the United States, Latin America, Europe, and Canada who were marching 400 miles from Washington, D.C., to the United Nations in New York City, calling attention to the deepening inequality in the Western hemisphere.

The March of the Americas was organized by the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign, a network made of over 100 grassroots anti-poverty groups including many of those mentioned above. Hundreds of leaders from poor people’s organizations and movements from the United States as well as Europe, Canada and Central and South America participated in this march. The march started at

the headquarters of the Inter-American Commission of the Organization of American States, where marchers filed a petition indicting the U.S. government for human rights violations because of poverty and social service cuts mostly due to Welfare Reform and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The march culminated at the Church Center at the United Nations, but before this celebration, we held two days of meetings and exchanges at Union Theological Seminary. I served as one of the lead organizers of this march and have vivid memories of being in James Chapel at Union Theological Seminary translating a public event where 13 languages including American Sign Language were all being spoken.



Social movement leader from Quebec marching over George Washington Bridge on the March of the Americas 1999
(Harvey Finkle)

New Biblical Scholarship

Leaders from the March of the Americas had been inspired by the theologies and philosophies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Myles Horton, and other Union alumni whose pulpits, professorships, and organizations have helped launch and sustain the major U.S. social movements of our time. Following the March of the America's, Union hosted other major events organized by this growing movement of the poor, including the "Poor People's World Summit to End Poverty" in 2000, the second "New Freedom Bus Tour" in 2001, and a "Strategy Meeting on Poverty, Welfare, and Marriage Promotion" with leaders from poor people's organizations, ethicists and denominational leaders in 2002.

In 2003-2004, with the support of students, administration, trustees, faculty, and staff, the Poverty Initiative was instituted at Union to formalize the relationship between the movement of the poor and the historic legacy of prophetic religion. The Poverty Initiative was founded with the mission of raising up generations of religious and community leaders dedicated to building a social movement to end poverty led by the poor.

Also in 2004, Professors Brigitte Kahl and Hal Taussig launched a series of New Testament and Roman Empire conferences and gatherings held at Union, with the participation of many of the most known empire-critical biblical scholars, including Richard Horsley, Neil Elliot, Sze-kar Wan, John Dominic Crossan, Michael Hardt, and others including the founders of the Poverty Initiative. At the first conference in November 2004, entitled "New Paradigms in Biblical Interpretation," Willie Baptist, Rev. Noelle Damico and I led a workshop on "Responses of the Poor to Empire: Then and Now." In it, we

addressed how poor and homeless people in the twenty first century, inspired by Jesus and the early Christians, were continuing the struggle for economic justice.

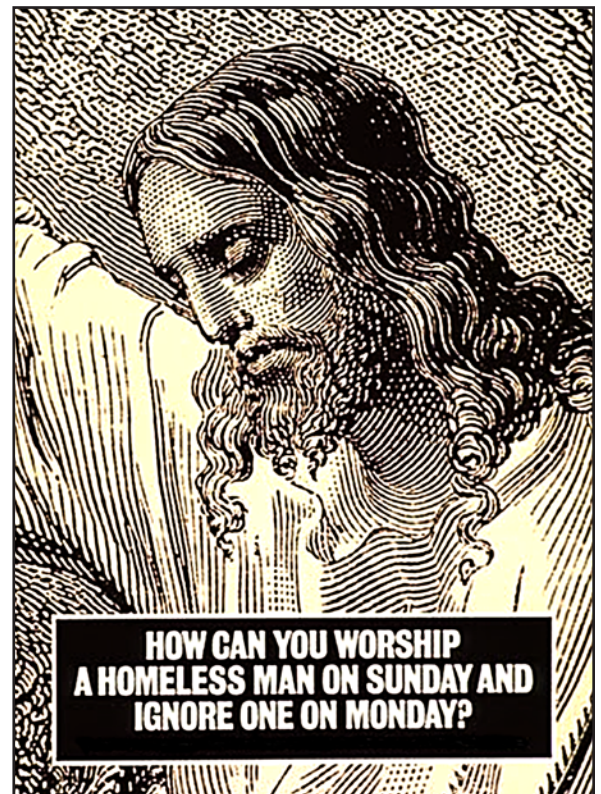
These crosscurrents are where the seeds of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” were first planted. The Poverty Initiative collaborated with each of the following convenings of scholars exploring the New Testament and Roman Empire, including a panel discussion with Michael Hardt about the poor “multitude” (Fall 2005), a second national New Testament and Roman Empire conference, with a special working group exploring the counter-imperial and transformative social movement of the poor ignited by the Apostle Paul (April 2008), a day-long seminar with Neil Elliot on responses of the poor to empire (September 2008), and a two-day workshop with Richard Horsley on rethinking Christmas (November 2008).

Poor People’s Struggles in the Roman Empire and Today

What became apparent in these gatherings were the uncanny parallels between the social (religious), political, and economic order of the Roman Empire and the growing economic disparities, proliferating wars, and concentrated power of the American (and global) system today. Richard Horsley’s (a important social historian of early Christianity) study of patronage and benefaction in the ancient Mediterranean shows how these practices and institutions bear resemblance to the current role of philanthropy and the social service system. Horsley has also developed a methodology of critiquing the power structure of the Roman Empire and drawing parallels with injustice and exclusion in a twenty-first century U.S. context.

The anthropological work that John Dominic Crossan (author of the groundbreaking *Historical Jesus*) and other biblical scholars have done on the social setting of the ancient Mediterranean, and the inclusion of Jesus in that region’s widespread poverty and misery, is a powerful counter to contemporary society’s ideology of blaming poverty on poor people. This work challenges the notion of “the culture of poverty” and the underclass, where poor people are understood to have no moral agency and where people are assumed to be poor because they are sinners and have no relationship with God.

Work on the historical Jesus asserts that the poor and excluded have a special relationship with God because of Jesus’ own life situation. Crossan therefore has put Jesus and Paul in their historical context, demonstrating the moral agency of those most affected by globalization and poverty. Additionally, Brigitte Kahl has recast Paul’s “justification by faith” into a theology of resistance and transformation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has demonstrated that the communities established by the early “Christians” were egalitarian and challenged the dangerous model of the charismatic leader, pervasive in historic and contemporary social movements. Each of these are key components and teachings in “Reading the Bible with the Poor”. This critical scholarship offers useful parallels between these two time periods as well as a framework for analyzing systems of power and dominance that is greatly needed by those engaged in poor people’s movements today.



The Development of “Reading the Bible with the Poor”

Following three Bible studies that the Poverty Initiative led in our January Immersion courses in 2004, 2005 and 2006, the methodology of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” was brought into being in a semester-long course entitled “Reading the Bible with the Poor” at Union Theological Seminary, co-taught by Rev. Dr. Brigitte Kahl and myself (Spring 2006), and subsequent courses including “The Gospel of Matthew” (Spring 2009) and “The Gospel of Paul: Poverty and Spirituality” (Spring 2010). In these courses we drew from many liberationist perspectives and used books including Bob Ekblad’s *Reading the Bible with the Damned* and Ernesto Cardenal’s *The Gospel in Solentiname*. We also included empire-critical scholars and their sources as a way to add historical context into our Bible studies, as well as material from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s Poor People’s Campaign, U.S. abolitionists, and contemporary critiques of charity.

We brought organized poor people into these classes who presented their plight, fight, and insight in the struggle to end poverty in conversation with the Bible, historical context, and theological and theoretical understandings. We balanced scholarly tools and approaches to reading the Bible and the lived experience of the poor taking up the Bible in their social movement organizing today. We matched videos of poor people organizing with specific Bible passages. We rewrote Bible stories with settings and characters from our contemporary context of the poor. We drew pictures of Bible stories and stories of the struggle of the dispossessed together.

Reading the Bible with the Poor is an important resource for combating the theologies that divide, alienate, and shame poor people.

We decided to focus on organized poor people and connect with poor people’s organizations because we believed that these folks would demonstrate more agency in biblical interpretation. This may have been the biggest methodological move that we made with the course. We were not attempting to invite random poor people off the street and into our class. Instead we were reading the Bible with the organized and socially conscious poor. We were interested in the effect of putting organized poor people and the stories of their organizing struggles into the center of biblical interpretation. From my part, this decision was informed by work organizing poor people across the United States for the past twenty years. By choosing leaders of these organizations, we were giving priority to the analysis that low-income leaders come up with in order to develop organization and plan campaigns for living wages, health care, housing, dignity, respect, and so on. I believed that these poor leaders had a deeper political and theoretical analysis than our students in the class did, for the most part.

“Reading the Bible with the Poor” was expanded and its applications widened through further activities of the Poverty Initiative as we started incorporating Bible study into all the major organizing and organizational work we were doing. This involved developing biblical studies with themes including: “Poverty and Economic Crisis” (James 5; Isaiah 5; Micah 2), “The Bible’s Anti-Poverty Programs” (the Jubilee; Manna; Paul’s collection; the community of goods), “The ‘Genesis’ of Poverty” (Joseph and the storehouses), “Parables as Pedagogy” (the tenants in the vineyard; the persistent widow), “The Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the Welfare Queen” (a study of poor women in the Bible and contemporary society), and “Religious Leaders Committed to End Poverty” (a study of the parallels of Jesus, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Archbishop Oscar Romero with plans to integrate Mahatma Gandhi).

The Poverty Initiative has advanced and implemented the methodology of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” as we’ve organized preaching, adult education, Bible study programs (including a “Lenten

Bible Study" series), mission trips, worship services, youth programs, conferences, and events to bring the issue of poverty to the forefront at congregations throughout New York City and around the country. On the campus of Union Theological Seminary, we have worked closely with Union faculty and seminarians to design curriculum for day- and semester-long courses, a fellows training program for seminarians, and immersion experiences.

Including the class on "Reading the Bible with the Poor" and the other courses mentioned above, the Poverty Initiative and Kairos Center have sponsored over twenty one-day seminars, twelve semester-long courses (e.g. "A Political Reading of the Bible," "World Religions and Poverty," "Preaching for Social Transformation," "Women's Experience as a Resource for Worship," "Social Theories and Social Movements") and twelve immersion courses. Our immersion courses take students, faculty, religious leaders, and community leaders to the epicenters of U.S. poverty to study and meet with local religious and community leaders. Past immersions have traveled to the Mississippi Delta, the post-Katrina Gulf Coast, Appalachia, North Carolina, the Mid-Atlantic States, and our own New York City and State. Internationally, we have journeyed to Haiti and Scotland for global immersions, and Poverty Initiative leaders have participated in immersions in Central America and other parts of the world with strong social movements of the poor. Each immersion includes a contextual Bible study component where we have explored Isaiah and exile, the entire Book of Ruth, the story of Joseph and the storehouses, Paul the apostle and organizer, slavery and abolition in the Bible, and many other texts focused on poverty and justice.

Rights and Religions

Since the launching of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice in November 2013, now the umbrella organization for the Poverty Initiative, this liberative biblical and theological work has become all the more important and the methodological approach of "Reading the Bible with the Poor" has been further refined. In the fall of 2014, we started our "Rights and Religions" program. The purpose of the program is to explore the role of religion (positive and negative) in advancing social movements. We see "Reading the Bible with the Poor" as an important resource for combating the theologies that divide, alienate, and shame poor people, and for developing the positive potential of religions to inspire and invigorate social movements.

**Human Rights
offers a
framework to
read the Bible
together and to
unite poor and
working people
across color lines
into a common
struggle.**

The Methodology of "Reading the Bible with the Poor"

Given this important social, political and ideological role that theology and biblical interpretation play in our society today and recognizing the exciting synergy of empire-critical biblical studies and contextual bible study methods developed out of struggles of the poor today, I want to explore a few of the main methodological approaches employed in "Reading the Bible with the Poor."

I will highlight five strategies here: critical reading of the text and context (historically and contemporarily); critical engagement with communities in struggle, especially the organized poor; the approach to the Bible as a whole text concerned with poverty; a focus on the two key concepts of human rights and a critique of charity; and a liberative ethics of interpretation. These five aspects help explain how we use the Bible in our work of developing leaders and building towards a larger movement for an end to poverty and economic insecurity. This biblical approach is called contextual Bible study to some,

popular reading of the Bible to others. It takes the Bible seriously, recognizing the role that the Bible plays in the life of society, especially the poor.

Critical “Reading” of the Text and Context

In the Bible studies themselves (in seminaries, immersions, community groups, etc.), we study both text and context. These texts include canonical and extra-canonical sources (with particular attention to the New Testament Gospels and Letters of Paul) and primary and secondary literature and images from first century Palestine, as well as poetry, prose, videos, photos, and other forms of texts documenting the poor organizing in twenty-first century America. We also use books and articles analyzing the growth and spread of poverty and the movements of the poor that are forming to counter poverty.

Offering the space for poor people to interpret biblical stories and apply these interpretations to their life situations constitutes a considerable contribution to the field of New Testament Studies.

In addition to drawing on participants’ experiences and opinions in the Bible study as individuals and leaders of social organizations of the poor, we integrate scholarly sources that make use of historical-critical, liberationist, and other forms of biblical interpretation. In many cases, the drive to explore the biblical text and context in more depth comes directly from poor people engaged in struggle who are coming up against serious issues and interpretations that impede their social change work. This praxis produces a rigorous engagement with the issues at hand, marrying academic study and scholarship with a sense of urgency and a clarity about the real problems of the day.

Critical Engagement with Communities in Struggle

One of the main purposes of contextual biblical interpretation is to allow poor people the opportunity to make their own interpretations of and draw parallels to biblical texts, thereby affecting popular conceptions of poverty, religiosity, and modes of social transformation. Since biblical interpretation has been in the hands of scholars and preachers

predominantly trained in institutions of higher education, offering the space for poor people to interpret biblical stories and apply these interpretations to their life situations constitutes a considerable contribution to the field of New Testament Studies.

When poor people gather to do Bible study, it is typically in the context of a Sunday school class, often times under the direction and leadership of a pastor or other established leader, and usually only addressing texts that those established leaders deem relevant. “Reading the Bible with the Poor” provides a more far-ranging approach by putting poor people’s agency and analysis at the center of the discussion. This means including a broad range of texts, including difficult biblical texts on poverty, along with insisting that leaders of the Bible study be organized poor people themselves.

Some assert that the theological condoning of poverty in the U.S. today can be traced to the fact that many American churches have lost their connection to the poor. There is some truth to this, but mere awareness of poverty does not automatically change people’s interpretations of “the poor are with you always” or other biblical justifications of poverty. Many poor people themselves believe that it is their own fault that they are poor and are ashamed of being poor. This is why we have found it important to base new interpretations of the Biblical text not just among individual poor people, but among the organized poor.

The need to directly confront the dominant ideologies around poverty is also why we return to and reinterpret the very religious texts that have been used the most frequently to justify poverty and to define obedience to God in the individualistic terms of being, between a human on earth and God in heaven. Just as not having any connection to the poor at all can justify middle-class ideas on why people are poor, not having a connection to organized poor people can justify a charity-centered approach that says that what the fortunate, especially Christians, need to do is to save the poor. This experience can often be transformative for poor people themselves intellectually and spiritually.

The form of leadership development and consciousness-raising employed in our method of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” combines rigorous study and applied practice. Therefore, churches and classrooms, anti-poverty campaigns and organized protests all become locations of contextual Bible study and general political education.



Bible study during a 2009 Poverty Initiative Strategic Dialogue (Kairos Center)

Approach to the Bible as a Whole Text Concerned with Poverty

In many cases biblical interpretation focuses on individual and isolated texts rather than bringing disparate texts together and seeing the connections and intertextualities. Rather than isolating a particular biblical text especially focused on poverty, which can lead to proof-texting, Reading the Bible with the Poor uses an arc of biblical texts woven from Genesis to Revelation that is representative of a biblical theology that focuses on poverty and liberation. We are interested in larger biblical themes of justice and connections/incongruities between texts. This does not mean that we find liberation in every text or biblical book. Instead we acknowledge the various and competing strands in the Bible and offer reflection on how they are influenced by power, inequality, and domination.

Overall, we use a poverty lens to look at the Bible. With any biblical text, beginning with the creation story, we ask the question: “Are the texts relevant to situations of low-wage work, hunger, homelessness, and the work of social and economic transformation?” We begin with the hypothesis that many of our biblical texts record stories of poor people coming together with God’s support to make meaning of their lives and improve their living conditions. From this starting point, we can find numerous parallels in the biblical stories to poor people organizing today.

Two Key Concepts: Human Rights and a Critique of Charity

There are two key content areas that both complement and serve as a focus for the biblical text in “Reading the Bible with the Poor”: a critique of charity and the role it plays in helping to maintain poverty, and the strategic use of a human rights and justice framework. First a nuanced, clear critique of charity/philanthropy/patronage runs throughout the Bible, especially the New Testament. Parallel to these Bible studies is the life experience of poor people who have been at the receiving end of charity, in many cases not receiving adequate resources to meet their needs, experiencing how charity assuages the compassion of those with more resources into complacency and seeing how some institutions benefit from the poverty of others. “Reading the Bible with the Poor” puts these experiences and a critique of charity at the center of biblical interpretation.

“Reading the Bible with the Poor” also puts priority on the social transformation agenda of the Jesus movement. Many biblical scholars and preachers tend to spiritualize the socio-economic context of Je-

sus's actions and sayings, which in turn make the Kingdom of God ethereal and exclusive, rather than a social movement to achieve equality and dignity for all on earth in the present. In *A Time to Break the Silence*, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. challenges the separation of the spiritual and the material, of heaven and earth:

It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.

As liberationist biblical scholar Brigitte Kahl explains, "non-idealist" forms of liberationist contextual Bible study privilege the living experiences of people who are struggling and insist that the Bible and interpretations of it are to affect the material present.

Feminist New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza elaborates that the Jesus or *basileia* movement proposed an alternative structure, a non-hierarchical one that blamed the Roman hierarchy and subjugation for the problems in society, not the subjugated themselves. This historical movement was not simply anti-imperial, but stood for a transformative mutual community that was a viable alternative to empire. The egalitarian society modeled by the early Christians serves to inspire the poor who are organizing in the U.S. today and thus is an important content piece for contextual Bible studies.

Schüssler Fiorenza challenges her readers to move beyond looking at simply the socio-economic context in Galilee two thousand years ago and look at the political context and power dynamics as well. She asks people to move past traditional understandings of the pre-Christian Jesus movement and see the roots of Christianity in the *basileia* movement that included the poor, women, the marginalized, and others in its leadership alongside Jesus. And she proposes that God's realm, kingdom, or empire is in opposition and conflict with the hierarchical system of the Roman Empire. She also asks her readers to look at our modern and postmodern interpretations of the historical Jesus in light of our own socio-political context (including a growing social movement to end poverty and an ever-expanding global empire) and to see common beliefs and understandings being influenced by "[w]ell-financed, right-wing think tanks . . . supported by reactionary political and financial institutions that seem to defend patriarchal capitalism."

A second key theoretical framework of "Reading the Bible with the Poor" is the concept of rights, especially human rights. Although human rights is often understood as a secular concept, we believe there are deep religious values undergirding it. The simplest way this is understood is through the notion of God-given rights or the idea that, because of the sacredness of human life, there are basic political, economic, social, and civil rights inherent to all human beings. In underscoring two of the most important historical influences on the thinking of the American people, the poor white abolitionist John Brown once stated, "The two most sacred documents in the world are the Bible and the Declaration of the Independence." Brown insisted that American society adhere to especially the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount as well as the Declaration of Independence. In fact, The Declaration of Independence is one of the clearest statements on the profound relationship between the concept of rights and religious faith: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The paradigm of human rights has a long history in U.S. social movements. In 1945, W.E.B. DuBois brought the violations of the human rights of African-Americans to the United Nations, raising the injustice of violence, inequality, and poverty to the international community. In July 1964, Malcolm X attempted to get African leaders through the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to bring the situation of African-Americans before the UN again. From Montgomery to Chicago to Riverside Church in New York City, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King took up the call for human rights as a call “to raise certain basic questions about the whole society.” In the 1980s and 1990s, poor people took up the mantle of human rights, donning slogans including “housing is a human right” and petitioning international bodies, including the Inter-American Commission of the Organization of American States, to indict the U.S. for economic human rights violations caused by welfare reform and NAFTA. Human Rights offers a framework to read the Bible together and to unite poor and working people across color lines into a common struggle.

Ethics of Interpretation: Liberative Exegesis

“Reading the Bible with the Poor” has an emancipatory agenda and therefore posits that liberation and the agency of the poor and dispossessed are the focus of biblical texts. This framework is stated explicitly in each Bible study. Putting liberation and the agency of the poor at the center of biblical interpretation produces a cohesive, directed way of doing biblical interpretation. This is not to say that Bible study participants are being coerced, but having a liberationist agenda on the biblical end and an organizing agenda on the interpreter’s end leads to a coherent program of Bible study of the poor. It also reflects the framework of the poor people’s groups who participate in the studies.

In such Bible studies, we raise questions of freedom and empowerment around each Bible passage; we urge the participants to make connections to the liberation theme and to the other biblical passages; we discuss the historical context around each biblical passage in order to understand the manifestations of poverty and wealth in each story; and we try to keep our biblical interpretation closely linked to the biblical texts. Thus these contextual Bible studies do not forsake biblical exegesis just to make a liberation point.

We often open with contemporary struggles for justice, thus asserting that the genesis for biblical interpretation is our contemporary context. This starting point also interrupts traditional and doctrinal interpretations. The Bible is replete with references to releasing slaves, proclaiming good news to the poor, resisting imperial rule, covenant economics, and God’s commandments to love and care for your neighbor. Indeed, over the course of leading such bible studies, the canon is reimagined and the value of contemporary stories rises.

In exploring the role that religion can play in a growing movement to end poverty, led by the poor, the role of the Bible and contextual biblical study comes to the forefront. These strategies of “Reading the Bible with the Poor” grow out of struggles of the poor to unite and organize in the U.S. and around the world and are fueled and deepened by an important movement in biblical studies. Liberatory and Contextual Bible study is still developing in our context, aided by empire-critical biblical studies. We look forward to moving this work forward together.

Reading the Bible with the Poor has an emancipatory agenda and therefore posits that liberation and the agency of the poor and dispossessed are the focus of biblical texts.



Sheikh Moussa Aboubakar gives a blessing after the afternoon prayer in Kiota, October 2014. (Adam Barnes)

Islam and Poverty in the Sahel: An Interview with Sheikh Maman Kiota

Adam Barnes

Coordinator of the Rights & Religions Program at The Kairos Center
PhD Candidate at Union Theological Seminary

The killings of Charlie Hebdo journalists in Paris led to an intense and ongoing wave of reactions across the globe. Protests in the West African nation of Niger turned violent and left 10 people dead, Christian churches burned, and schools and other “Western” buildings ransacked.

The editor of Charlie Hebdo is quoted as saying that their publication does not, “attack religion, but they do if [religion] gets involved in politics.”¹

In these times the notion that religion should play a role in social change makes many in the U.S. uneasy to say the least, especially if that religion is Islam. Some see religion as a strictly negative force - a remnant of an unenlightened time. Others view and tolerate it as part of personal identity, but strongly oppose it having any influence over how society is ordered. Oftentimes, this uneasiness about religion can be traced to very real experiences and memories of religion as a destructive, oppressive, and divisive force. Faced with this reality we must ask: are these tendencies inherent to religions themselves, or have religions been appropriated, used, and manipulated towards these ends?

History supports the latter conclusion. We can look at the Abolitionist movement in the U.S. as just one example. When the U.S. moved toward civil war in the middle of the 19th century people used Christian doctrine to both justify and condemn the practice of enslaving human beings. Both called themselves “Christians.”

If religions have indeed been appropriated and used for oppressive ends, then there are important implications to consider. First of all, it implies that religion is not being authentically expressed when it is used toward these oppressive ends and that a truer expression therefore exists. Second, it implies that there are interests that benefit from religion being practiced and portrayed as exclusionary, violent, personalistic, etc. and not as something that, at its core, is an expression of deep love for all life and is committed to fighting for a world that strives to realize that love. Finally, the fact that people in power seek to appropriate religion and use it to oppress implies that there may be something in religion - in its truest expression - that represents a direct threat to those powerful interests.

Contrary to what the editor of Charlie Hebdo asserts, most (if not all) religious traditions are committed to valuing and protecting human life, consequently they must necessarily be political. The political is one realm where the promise of life is fulfilled or denied. The question is not if religion should be involved in politics, but how.

¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2015/01/18/charlie-hebdo-editor-in-chief-religion-should-not-be-a-political-argument/>

It is toward the end of trying to answer “how” that I share the following interview with an influential Muslim leader in Niger, Sayyada Ummul Khayri Ibrahim Niass, or as she is more commonly known, “Maman Kiota.” Maman is a highly trained and widely influential Islamic scholar and spiritual leader, or “sheikh,” within the Tijaniyya Sufi order.² For several decades she has worked tirelessly to battle poverty and in her community of Kiota, Niger and far beyond.

Niger

Niger is a landlocked, Sahelian³ country approximately the size of Texas and California combined. Two thirds of the country lies in the Sahara desert and only 10% is arable. According to most indicators and measurements Niger is one of the poorest, (if not the poorest) countries in the world. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) lists it as 187 (last) on its “Human Development Index.” Life expectancy is 57 years. Infant mortality is seventh highest in the world at 86 out of a 1000. Nearly 40% of children under the age of 5 are underweight and over 60% of the country’s 18 million people live on less than a \$1.25/day, falling under the prevailing definition of “extreme” poverty.

Niger also holds almost 10% of the world’s known supply of yellow cake Uranium. For almost 50 years industrial Uranium mining in Niger has helped supply energy to France and the rest of Europe and make the companies that mine it extraordinarily wealthy; in particular the global multi-national energy corporation Areva. At the same time, Niger has remained one of the poorest countries in the world. In 2012 only 10% of the country had access to electricity.

The following interview is part of broader research that the Kairos Center is conducting in an effort to learn more about the vital role that religion plays in social movements. The interview was conducted over three days (October 25-27, 2014) at Maman’s residence in Kiota. The conversation was held in Zarma, the indigenous language of Niger. It has been translated, excerpted for length and lightly edited for clarity.

AB: When did you arrive in Kiota? What did you do before coming to Kiota?

Maman: 1972, I was twenty years old. At the age of eleven I memorized the Qur’an (hafiz), at fourteen I went to Dakar to continue my studies, after I had completed these (and attained the level of Sheikh) I came to Kiota. At that time (1972) Kiota was still a very rural area.

Maman’s assistant: You should know that when Maman came to Kiota people were really suffering. People didn’t even have soap to wash their clothes. But now since Maman has come you have this sign of progress and that sign of progress, everyone is really working hard to make life better.

Maman: When I first came here all of the women were afraid to make changes that could improve their lives. People were constantly coming asking for food and other things, I could see they were really suffering, so one day I went to Niamey (the capitol) to see a friend and I asked him to come and see

2 Al Ghazali, a highly respected Muslim scholar from the 11th century, described Sufism as the, “living spirit of Islam.” For most Muslims the Sufi tradition began during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Sufi orders in West Africa have a history of being rooted in rural communities and of providing education and other material resources to the community. They are connected as a larger network through a hierarchy of leaders and scholars and have a strong influence over political and cultural life in many West African nations, including Niger. One of the largest and most influential orders in West Africa are the Niass Tijaniyya. The town of Kiota in Niger, where Maman lives, is one of the most sacred spiritual spaces for followers of Niass Tijaniyya worldwide.

3 “Sahel” is an Arabic word meaning “shore” or “coast.” It refers to a semi-arid climate zone South of the Sahara desert and North of the African Savannah, stretching from Senegal in the West to the Red Sea in the East.

the suffering that women in this area were experiencing. Then he helped bring projects: one was a women's group that studied French, another studied English, another – Arabic. They helped us to start groups to engage in small businesses: one to raise animals, one to do small farming, one to sell things in the market. Back then I was president, I would follow up with all of these groups, I would go out to the villages. They also built a large fenced area to grow a garden, this was under my control at first, but eventually I handed it all over to the women's association.

I used to go (out to the villages) in the morning and stay until the afternoon. I would go by foot, because it bothered me that everyone who would come along to help had to go by foot and I would get to sit down in the car. We would bring out food and cook for everyone and spend the whole day together, until people started to get used to what we were doing. Back then husbands would keep their wives cloistered in their concessions, they couldn't leave, but when they saw that I was coming they wouldn't restrict the women, they would let them come out and meet with me and the other women. Now women are used to this across the community and they carry on these practices, and indeed are better at it than I am. Some (women leaders) are doing stuff I don't even know about, because they travel all over, some go all the way France, some go to Senegal, Belgium, Morocco and other places. All of this is great progress.

AB: These changes seem difficult to make, how did you work to achieve them?

Maman: You see, back then - when husbands cloistered their wives - I called a meeting and I told the husbands, I looked at them and said, "I'm looking for something from you, I want you to help your wives." I said, "That which you can't handle you should allow them to help with." I told them that it is not good when only one person receives (education, ability to work, etc.) and another gets nothing,



Shailly Barnes with Sheikh "Maman Kiota" Niass in Kiota at Maman's residence in 2005.
(Adam Barnes)

all should have these things so that everyone is able to live better. I kept talking and talking to them (the husbands) until they were satisfied and now they have changed, and you see now - some of these women go all the way to France and Belgium and other places to study and work.

AB: So, you saw the needs here, and as an influential Sheikh you had a certain understanding and knowledge and legitimacy that you shared with this community, especially the women. Have any of these women gone on to become leaders and teachers like you?

Maman: Yes, of course. Many leaders exist. They are all over the place, in the remotest villages, they have their own organizations and are operating on their own. They are teaching others.

AB: Whose idea was it to begin the women's organization Jamiyyatu Nâsirâtud Din (Association of the Assistants of the Path)?

Maman: I saw what was going on. I thought about it, and I created this organization. It's better than women staying inside their houses, closed off from the rest. It was like that – there were whole villages where women didn't leave their concessions. I asked the Sheikh (Sheikh Kiota – Maman's husband), why are these women all covered? In Senegal (Maman's birthplace) we don't do that. In Islam you learn what God doesn't want, and you have a responsibility to watch out for these things. I said, "it's no good, it's like they're in prison." I said I didn't like that at all. The Sheikh agreed, but saw that it was a strong part of the people's habits, their customs. So, I set off to try and find a path to change it, and I suffered for a long time. I saw what was going on here (in Kiota) and I started to think about it and was still thinking about it when I went back to Dakar to study and I brought back the idea of the association (nassiratud) and thought it could help.

"Islam does not approve at all of the existence of widespread poverty in the world because poverty means that life is damaged, corrupted, poisoned."

AB: Who is responsible for making Kiota function? How is all of this work coordinated?

Maman: Everybody contributes in different ways. The Sheikh (Sheikh Moussa) has his work, we have ours here, everybody does what they can. We meet and talk together. If there is something that many people want to work on we get together and see how we can help.

There is a lot of work and everybody plays a different role and it isn't like you are always doing the same work. Depending on what is needed we work to fill the need. If there is a big gathering and we need people to help cook then we find the people to help cook. If there is a problem that discussion will help, we speak to it. If there is a problem that knowledge and wisdom will help resolve, we provide what we can. In this way all the work is done, everything has its place.

He (the late sheikh Aboubakar – founder of the Kiota community) would always say that first there must be peace in the community, nobody should create conflict, and second everyone who lives here should try and do what is halal (authorized by Islam). This helps keep away everything that is bad in a community, stealing, etc. When the Sheikh was alive he would protect and maintain these principals. Now that he isn't here, Sheikh Moussa (The Sheikh's oldest son) and I work to carry them forward.

AB: The money that people bring to you (Maman) as a donation, who is responsible for this?

Maman: It isn't set up where one person holds all of the money. If someone comes and gives money for the women, then the women meet and discuss how to divide and use the money. It's the same for the men, but it can't be that someone brings money just for the village in general because then we wouldn't know who it was supposed to help.

AB: Would you say then that many of the problems in Kiota and the broader world are primarily a result of lack of understanding?

Maman: Yes, certainly

AB: And this is why education, and spiritual education are so important to you and the community of Kiota?

Maman: Yes, exactly.

AB: Do people pay for school in Kiota?

Maman: No. Nobody pays anything if they come from somewhere far away to study here. People who live in Kiota will pay a small amount, 10,000CFA (\$20) per year. But, if you live here and don't have the money then you don't have to pay. These fees are primarily used to pay the teachers. The money is never enough, and me and the Sheikh often have to use other resources to make ends meet.

AB: Many people come to visit you. Some are very desperate to see you. How do you decide who to see?

Maman: If I have what people ask for, I give it to them. If I don't, then we think about another solution to try. If there is a way that learning will help something then we will help find a way to help with that. If none of this is available then we tell them to have patience and come back another time.

AB: Have outside groups ever hesitated to work with you because they perceive it to be too "religious"?

Maman: We are open to being a part of anything that helps to bring people forward. Yes, our work follows the Muslim path, but people must consider for themselves whether it agrees with their way of living.



Sheikh Kiota's public granaries. Grain stored in these structures is collected by donation and distributed to all who need it. (Adam Barnes)

AB: Do you work with civil society organizations like ROTAB⁴?

Maman: These organizations are helping people. If they contact us and ask us to play a certain role, then we will try and help, but we do not go and seek them out.

AB: You say that you work with anyone. Do you work with people who are Muslim but not following the Tijaniyya Sufi path?

Maman: Everybody. Anyone who wants to help we will work with. Even you (non-Muslim) if you are looking to help we will work with you (smiles).

AB: There are no criteria?

Maman: People do this - have conditions - but we do not.

AB: How do you avoid organizations that aren't helpful or maybe deceitful?

Maman: Well, we always meet with people and ask them these kinds of questions – what kind of work are you looking to do, and how, and we figure out a way to work best together.

AB: Are you willing to work with politicians?

Maman: If someone is offering something to help we must accept it, now maybe they have not-so-good intentions, but we often can't know or control that, but what we can do is make sure that whatever they offer we make our best effort to ensure that it ends up doing good, and that's what we do.

AB: What about when you meet more violent (aggressive) resistance from others?

Maman: You just act like you don't know what they mean. Then these people will either think you don't understand or that you're just stubborn, either way they will leave you be.

AB: How do you define poverty?

Maman: Poverty arises when people don't have what they need. When the land isn't producing and people don't have food. When people are suffering. When you can't buy clothes for yourself, you can't maintain your home by yourself, you aren't able to care for your children and they can't stay in your house because if they did they would die. We have all of these problems here in Niger and in Kiota. Poverty makes many different problems for people, but in general it makes people depressed and sad - their hearts become dark.

AB: Do you think that poverty can be ended in this world?

Maman: Poverty is not pleasing to God. God says that if you give one to God, God gives you ten. If you give ten God, gives you twenty. Therefore it is always you and God working together. Things will fall apart, then they will get better, back and forth like that until eventually one can stop poverty.

4 ROTAB - Réseau des organisations pour la transparence et l'analyse budgétaire or "Network of Organizations for transparency and budgetary analysis," is a civil society, or "third sector" organization that is focused primarily on monitoring Niger's extractive industries - in particular Uranium. Their goal is to inform the public about these industries and fight for the best interests of the Nigerien people. Their primary activities include: education and advocacy, organization of public protest, and ongoing research and analysis.



Crowd returning to the Sheikh and Maman's compound for the blessing after the mid-day prayer, October 2014. (Adam Barnes)

AB: What does Islam say about poverty?

Maman: The path of Islam – what it says – is that one should never give up, everybody, EVERYBODY, must search for what will stop the problems and help make a strong society. That's why we put in so much effort – we shouldn't even sleep – everybody should put in the maximum effort to get what is good and right. The path of Islam does not believe that it is ok to lie by and expect God to provide food for you, no, no, it is on our heads too. Because God sees when you are testing God to see if God will bring you food – this is no good, we must do, take initiative, be active. So, this is why we are always doing, always looking for projects and activities to help address the problems here. God says that the hand that gives is above the hand that receives. The person that gives is better than the one who receives.

AB: What is the importance of Zikkiri (dhikr traditional Sufi prayer practice of ritually chanting praises to God)?

Maman: Ok, so like right now I am happy to see you, I speak your name, I talk with you – we are near each other. It is similar with God – we like to always speak God's name, to try and draw near God, so God can then draw near us. And when we aren't distant from God, God can bring us what is of God. When you do Zikkiri you are constantly remembering God.

AB: When you say "remember" God, it isn't like remembering my mother or father right? Because God doesn't have an image right?

Maman: Not in that way, but God does have an image. And if God decides to show you then you will be able to understand it. It isn't seeing in the way that you see other things, but God definitely has something by which you perceive God's presence

AB: Would you say that study is a type of prayer?

Maman: Prayer without study is incomplete. When you pray you are able to see what you should by studying and why, and when you study you are able to understand more about what you are praying for and why. All study is for God.

AB: Is there a way where your time in Kiota and work with people here has deepened your understanding of Islam?

Maman: When I see the women here work hard and put in great effort to change their lives it makes me very happy and gives me a lot of strength to continue searching for more ways to help. Right now the group of women that I work with is very big. We have many different people looking to gain knowledge, people from all over, from Nigeria, - all over. They come to study at the schools I have. Many, many people come here.

I am also in the process of opening a University, but the process is difficult working with the Government. I have recently been given authorization by the government to go forward with it. But the money from the school is not enough to get the University going, so we are working hard to find another way. We wanted to open the University here in Kiota, but now it looks like the government thinks we should do it in Niamey. God willing we will find a way and it will open soon.

AB: Where do you draw inspiration to do your work?

Maman: It is just something one feels. I feel inside that I need to be doing this work.

AB: Not all who follow the Tijaniyya path have the same clarity as you. How do you know when you have reached a point of understanding, of being a leader like yourself?

Maman: You feel it in your heart.

AB: In the U.S. as well as here in Niger, there is enough food but people starve, there are enough houses but people go with out, this is not just a Niger problem, but a global problem, what do we do about this.

Maman: A solution to this is very difficult, because what I have in my heart is not the same that is in yours, and it is like this for everyone, not everyone has the same thing deep in their heart. In this way it is very difficult to get everyone to agree on what we should do to help everybody else.

You have to understand, Islam does not approve at all of the existence of widespread Poverty in the world because poverty means that life is damaged, corrupted, poisoned.⁵ Islam does not approve of widespread Poverty because it stops life from thriving. And, this is why we are struggling so hard every day to stop poverty here.

⁵ Maman uses the word "Hari," which is Zarma for water, so "Poverty ruins the water, poverty stops water from flowing." In a desert culture like Niger water's deep connection to life is even more pronounced.

A Moral Movement for the Nation

The Rev. Dr. William Barber II

President, North Carolina NAACP and Architect of the Forward Together/Moral Mondays Movement

This excerpted sermon was originally preached at Judson Memorial Church in New York City on September 30, 2014.

I was invited here to preach tonight. I want to start where I would always start, and that is with the word of God from *The Message Bible*. In the book of Ezekiel, you will find these words in the 22nd chapter beginning at the 23rd verse:

God's message came to me: 'Son of man, tell Jerusalem that you're a land that, during the time I was angry with you, got no rain, not so much as a spring shower. The leaders among you became desperate like roaring, ravaging lions, killing indiscriminately. They grabbed and looted, leaving widows in their wake. Your priests violated My law and desecrated My holy things, for they lost the ability to tell the difference between the sacred and the secular. They began to tell the people that there is no difference between right and wrong. They are contemptuous of My Holy Sabbath. They profane Me by trying to pull Me down to their level. Because of that, your politicians are like wolves, prowling and killing like those infected with rabies, taking whatever they want. Your preachers and your priests cover up for the politicians by pretending to have received visions and special revelations. They say: 'This is what God the Master says,' when God hasn't said so much as one word, because God does not endorse injustice. Extortion is rife, robbery is epidemic, the poor and the needy are abused, the immigrants and outsiders are kicked around at will, with no access to justice.' I looked for someone to stand up for me against all of this injustice, to repair all of the defenses of the city. I looked for someone to take a stand for me, to stand in the gap to protect the land so that I wouldn't have to destroy it, and I could not find anyone, not one.

The question tonight is: "Is there anyone who will stand in the gap and trust God for transformation?" I want you to ask your neighbors: "Neighbor, is there anyone who will stand in the gap and trust God for transformation?" We have to somehow answer the question God raised with Ezekiel: "Is there someone who will stand in the gap for me?"

The book of Ezekiel is the third of the major prophets. The name literally means, "God strengthens." To understand this text, Walter Brueggemann writes, we must understand the context and history around the scripture. The government in ancient Jerusalem was busy doing what governments do: deploying ambassadors, developing new weapon systems, designing new technologies, dealing with cost overruns, cutting taxes for the wealthy, raising taxes on the poor, levying taxes, holding press conferences, and as one songwriter said, lying to the masses. That's what governments do. The government was busy pursuing the things they thought would bring security, or at least an impression of security. We're going to have security, we're going to have power, and money, and technology.

But Ezekiel said the more it worked on security and defense, the more precarious public life became. And then the government did what governments sometimes do: instead of being honest and truly looking at its moral failings, the government held press conferences to give assurances that everything was all right. And then to take the people's mind off the inner moral failure, the government began to engage in war games. It showed the flags, said Brueggemann, and it reiterated the slogans and received innocent applause. All of these activities, however, had an empty ring. The commentator goes on to say that while these leaders engaged in war, and press conferences, and waving the flag, and were not dealing with the real struggles of the least of these in his midst, Jerusalem was staggering toward death. It was opening itself to being invaded by another empire, because it was spending its life in self-deception, which always leads to self-destruction. Because all the technology, power, and money cannot bring safety and peace ultimately. Most of the people in Jerusalem had not noticed what was really going on. But some had. And they were called "cranks," "strange," and "nuisances."

But the Bible calls them prophets or those who speak truth. And they were often hostile and abrasive. They knew how to curse. I'm not talking about mere profanity. The only ones who have the power to curse are God's prophets, because they know what is damned and what is blessed. They know the difference between God's way and the world's way. And these people, like Ezekiel and Jeremiah, their speeches were unwelcome. But they had to be strong; they had to use tough metaphors. It was not hatred; it was love, because they could see what no one else could see. And this is the significance of the prophet and the prophetic church and the prophetic ministry. This must be the goal of any seminary that is trying to create prophets for this generation. Not just to teach people how to read, and how to do research, and how to put in the footnotes, but you must teach them how to see what the nation doesn't want to look at. That is why we preserve their words, though harsh and abrasive, and that is why when we really want to hear truth, we look unto the prophets. They could see the death that was coming and they knew it did not have to be that way.

Ezekiel did not blame the king for this. He did not blame the Tea Party. He did not blame the government. He did not blame the Koch brothers' money. He did not blame the military for the terrible death that was coming upon Jerusalem. He blamed those who were commissioned to keep the moral movement alive, because they were selling their gift to the chaplaincy of the state rather than maintaining the role of being critics of the state.

In this text, Ezekiel does not blame the oppressor for being an oppressor. He says that is what oppressors do. The problem, he says, is the priests and the religious community – the clergy, the prophets – who are not doing their job. In fact, he says: "My hands," speaking for God, "will be against the prophets who see delusive visions and give lying messages." Ezekiel blamed the religious community because that community is responsible for standing in the gap and engaging in the necessary ministry of prophetic pastoral care for the nation. It doesn't say for you to stand in the gap and if things do not change in a week, you leave the gap. It doesn't say for you to stand in the gap, and then if you can get a better church that does not require you to stand on behalf of poor people, you move. Ezekiel says that to be called by God is to stand in the gap whether society listens to you or not.

In the first chapter of Ezekiel, when he sees God, Ezekiel has a Pentecostal falling-out. And God says: "Get up! I can't use you down there, in the middle of the floor! Get up here!"

I'm a Pentecostal. I understand there are times when you are slain in the spirit, but there are times that being slain in the spirit is nothing but a cop-out for not standing up when you need to be standing up. God said: "Get up!" He said: "I want you to go and sit among the people for seven days. I want you to understand the pain of those who are poor, and those who are hurting, and those who have been oppressed, because you cannot be some person who just makes a job out of speaking for people

because you read a couple of statistics, because you really don't love the people, because you will go wherever the grant goes. Oh no. I need you to go sit among the people so that the people's pain becomes your pain. And you have to do it, because you don't know any other way to live and please God if you're not standing for what's right."

And he said: "After you have sat among the people, I need you to go speak. But understand this: I'm telling you that your ministry, in the eyes of people, will be a failure. You will not change them at first. For I am assigning you to a nation that is full of stiff-necked people. And they love their power more than they love people. But you stand in that gap, because at least they will know there has been a prophet among them."

In fact, one writer says that the only time prophets arose in the Bible was when the priests and kings were not doing their jobs and the way of the nation was having more sway than the truth of God. And here the prophets and priests did fail. Instead of telling the truth, they distorted it. And they were telling the people: "Your walls will protect you." But the Bible says they were helping the people put up walls with untempered mortar, with cement that was not properly mixed and that could be easily torn down. And that the walls, instead of bringing security, would actually end up falling on the nation and bringing the nation down.

One commentator says this text in Ezekiel is like today when people call war, peace. That's a lie. Or we call self-interest, generosity. Or we call greed, opportunity. We call brutality, national interest. And we call exploitation, the free market. We just lie. And such lies, says Ezekiel, will lead to death.

This is the scene in Jerusalem. You cannot apply a text until you understand its original context. Knowing this context, I would suggest in our world today, thousands of years after Ezekiel, this analysis still has contemporary application. And I wonder if Ezekiel preached this message - Ezekiel 22 - during an Old Testament Moral Monday, standing before the seats of power.

We still build walls thinking that we are protecting ourselves. We build walls to create a distance between the haves and the have-nots. America right now is committing one of the greatest sins, being the wealthiest and the poorest nation both at the same time.

And in the language of Ezekiel, these walls that create gaps have a name. It is an old name. It is a name I learned from my grandmother: sin! The greatest sin in the Bible is not your personal failings, because everybody has some of those. That is between you, your God, and your person. The greatest sin in the Bible is when you use public power to create public harm on God's people who have been made in the image of God. That is sin! When you use the systems of this world to create inhumanity against other human beings, that is sin! And we liberals and progressives need to start calling sin, sin. And we need to be bold enough to say that it doesn't matter who the governor is. It doesn't matter who the legislature is. It doesn't matter who the president is. It doesn't matter what your party is. When you use public power to produce harm in the lives of people, that is sin.

**Somebody must
expose the gaps
in our walls and
the weaknesses
produced in
society when
political power is
used to trample
on the common.
And that's your
calling. Is there
one who will
stand in the gap?**

On March 18, 1968, sixteen days before he was killed, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., preached a sermon. Many people have read "I Have a Dream," and maybe "I've Been to the Mountaintop," but

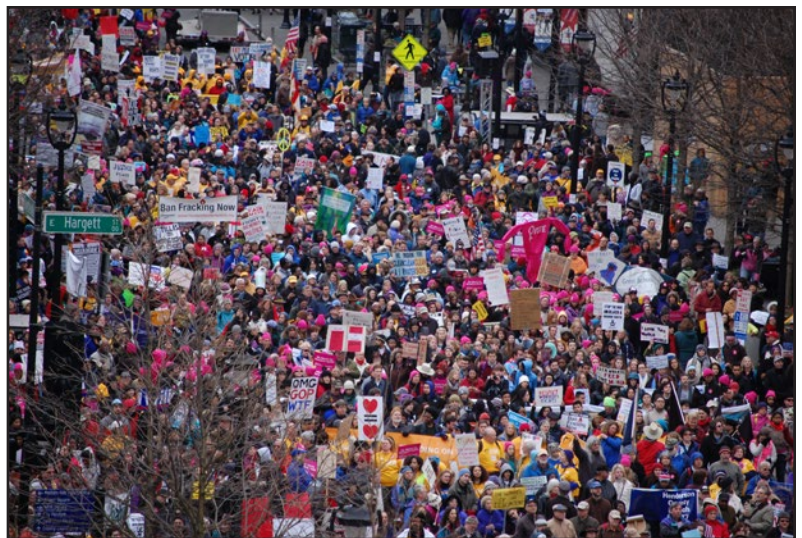
he had more to say than that. That day, he preached a sermon called "Paul's Letter to American Christians." He talked about how capitalism was on the side of the 1%, and leaving in its wake the 99%. They were already saying Dr. King was a failure and that nonviolence was coming to an end. He was being fought by preachers, he was being fought by young people, he was being fought by the media, and he was being fought by J. Edgar Hoover. And he stood up in front of 17,000 people and called them to stand in the gap.

And he said: "Let me tell you why we're marching with these sanitation workers. You know, Jesus reminded us in a parable one day that a man went to hell because he didn't see the poor. That man was named Dives. And the man at the gate was named Lazarus, and Dives wouldn't even let the man eat the crumbs that fell down for the dogs." He said to notice the text. There is nothing in that parable that says Dives went to hell, because he was rich. Dives went to hell, because he maximized the minimum and minimized the maximum. Dives went to hell, because he wanted to be a conscientious objector in the war against poverty.

And then Dr. King said: "And I come here to say tonight that America, too, is going to hell if we don't use her wealth, if America does not use her vast resources of wealth to end poverty, to make it possible for all of God's children to have their basic necessities of life. She, too, will go to hell." That is heavy language, but that was Dr. King standing in the gap, saying, I might be the only one out here, but I am not going to turn to violence, I am not going to stop speaking the truth, I am not going to give up hope, but I am going to tell it like it is. And then he said: "I can hear historians in the future saying, 'Didn't we build gigantic buildings to kiss the sky? Through our spaceships didn't we carve highways into the stratosphere? With our airplanes didn't we draw through distance, place, and time and change? With our submarines, like the one I just saw coming here, didn't we penetrate the oceanic depth?'" And he responded to his own question, saying, "Yes, the historians will say that, but then I will hear the God of the universe saying, 'Even though you've done all of that, I was hungry, and you didn't feed me. I was naked and you didn't clothe me. The sons and daughters that were in need of economic security, you did not provide it for them.'" And then he said: "This may very well be the indictment on America. And this is why, right here in Memphis, we must stand if there's any possibility of saving the soul of the nation."

Today, we must still stand at the gap and speak this kind of truth. We must have a moral focus, not merely a Democratic version, a Republican, or a liberal version, but a moral focus of what our government ought to be. We ought to pull from our deepest moral and faith traditions and our Constitution. It is time for people of faith to come out of the sanctuary and preach in the public square.

In fact, we must make sure the people in the sanctuary understand that preaching in the public square is not a sideshow of the church. It is, instead, the calling of the church. Why would you keep all of this truth just inside the four walls of a sanctuary? We must have a focus, a moral focus, that is not just Democrat/Republican: that's too weak, too minimal. That language is too puny for the desperateness in the souls of America right now. We need a language, a moral language that reclaims the language of love and liberty and light and justice and the common good and says that



Historic Thousands on Jones Street Moral March,
February 8, 2014 (Jose Vasquez)

anything less than words and actions that follow that language is a weak, anemic, hellish, brutal form of pretentious democracy.

We must also expose the weakness produced in our society when political power is used to hurt and harm rather than heal and help. There must be somebody who will stand up and say to leaders: "You are losing your humanity. You are allowing the power to transform you into wolves and lions, and not servants." There must be moral voices that say to power: "You are wrong. You are just wrong!" You are wrong when you govern on behalf of the powerful and step on the poor. You are wrong when you cater to the wealthy and disregard the weak. You are wrong when you seek to take us backward into more racial and social division rather than forward into unity and life. It does not matter what your party is, it does not matter if you're my mama. You are wrong.

But the greatest sin in the Bible is when you use public power to create public harm on God's people who have been made in the image of God. That's sin!

Somebody must expose the gaps in our walls and the weaknesses produced in society when political power is used to trample on the common. Is there one who will stand in the gap?

Do you know Dr. King stood up and preached one of the most subversive things you could ever say in America: "I Have a Dream?" That is subversive language, particularly when you are saying it in the face of the nightmares of racism and injustice. When you dare, not with missiles, not with guns, to stand tall and look right at the creator of the nightmare and say: "Yes! It's true! You are producing a nightmare! But I will not accept that as final reality. I have a dream!" That will get you killed. In fact, it will get four girls in a Birmingham church, fifteen days after you said that, also killed.

When you stand in the gap it may get worse before it gets better. The politicians may not change, you might not be able to elect a Messiah candidate who is going to fix everything. That cannot be your hope. The hope must be standing in the gap and working until you not so much change who is elected, but change the context in which they are elected. If that happens, you might end up with a Chief Justice Warren, who was bad on the issue of Chinese immigration, and everybody thought he was just prejudiced and racist and would never be the chief justice presiding over *Brown v. Board of Education*, but when the context changed, and when the consciousness shifted, it disallowed people to do what maybe they had been appointed to do. Or you may get a former segregationist like Lyndon Baines Johnson, who never planned to sign the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. But when the prophets stand in the gap, and when prophetic people stand in the gap and shift the context, then somebody elected to do one thing might end up having to do another.

But none of that will happen until you are willing to stand in the gap. It can't be a matter of political parties. It must be a matter of heart and soul. My grandmother said: "Son, if you're going to preach, make sure there ain't nothing else that you can do." She said: "Make sure you don't have any options, because if you truly preach, you're going to be made to consider those options sometimes. So you need to make up in your mind you've been called - humbly so - but you've been called to do this."

Reverend Reeb, who was killed a year later, said at All Souls Church: "If we're going to be able to meet the needs right now, we're going to really have to take upon ourselves a continuing and disciplined effort with no real hope that in our lifetime we are ever going to be able to take a vacation from the struggle for justice." That all who live in freedom won by the sacrifices of others be untiring in the tasks begun. And that is why Ezekiel warned, lying is death. Allowing the nation or the state or the city to lie to itself is a form of death.

Some would say: "Why would you come to New York and preach an almost depressing text?" But to somebody who would say that to me, I would say you do not understand prophetic exegesis. This is not a depressing text. It is a truthful text. And only truth sets you free. You cannot go to get to hope without going through hell. You cannot get to resurrection without going through Calvary. The Bible says when the anointing came down on Jesus and said, "This is my son, with whom I am well pleased," the same spirit drove him in the wilderness. When he went in the wilderness, he was driven by the spirit; when he came out of the wilderness, he was in the power of the spirit. You cannot get the power without going through the wilderness.

This is what the Moral Monday Movement is. The Moral Monday movement, if I would use this text to examine it, is performing Ezekiel's pastoral care to the state. We are being the prophets of pastoral care to a sick state and some sick politicians that can be redeemed, but they will never be redeemed unless somebody stands in the gaps and loves them enough to speak the truth. We are not partisan. We just decided to be God's one movement in North Carolina. We are engaged in truth-telling. We are saying to the power structure in a state where there are 1.6 million poor people, and lingering structures of systemic racism and discrimination, and powerful politicians who put their hands on the Bible and swear to uphold the Constitution but then choose to follow whoever paid them and don't know what's in the Bible or in the Constitution: "We have a problem."

Faith is what you believe about God, but works is what you do because of what you believe about God. Faith without works is dead, but faith with works is dynamic, and it'll change your destiny.

So we stood in the gap on April 29th with 17 others. They arrested us. Seven preachers, ten others. One lady with cerebral palsy. They took her walker from her. Brought 25 officers out. Put her in a van. The next Monday, 34 came. You keep asking me how did you get [all those people] – I don't know. All I know is, God said: "Can I find one?" And we stood in the gap. And when we stood in the gap, somebody saw us standing in the gap, said: "Well, maybe I'll try it." And then the next

Monday, 68. Then we had to sit down and figure out the movement, because we had not planned for one. We had to give it a name. We had to start getting some food together. And by the end of the summer, 25,000 people had come, and preachers and rabbis and Muslims and Hindus and Baha'is and even people that don't believe had come, standing arm in arm. Standing in the gap.

When we started, they said we were morons and outsiders. When we started, the governor was at 50% [popularity in the polls], now he's at 30% and falling. When we started, the legislature was at 40% in the polls, and now they're 17% and falling. When we started, the majority of North Carolinians didn't believe in Medicaid expansion or in expanding healthcare or unemployment. And they didn't believe you ought to raise taxes to pay teachers and support public education. But after 79 straight weeks of Moral Monday and conscious education, and after 80- to 100,000 people came in the dead of winter on the second weekend of February 2014 to stand in the gap, every issue that was under 50% is polling over 50%.

Somebody must stand in the gap, because God has a promise. God says that if somebody will stand in the gap, He will save the nation. And somebody must stand there against the polls and against the editorials and against the death threats and say there is a better way. We can have living wages. We can educate our children. We can reject hate and division and mean attempts to write people out of their Constitutional protections and out of their own humanity. We can and somebody must stand. Not just to expose the wrong, because a movement that is just rooted in what you are against is not standing

in the gap. If you are going to stand in the gap, have something to close it. Have an agenda besides "I just hate the Tea Party, I just hate the Koch brothers." Come together around an agenda that puts bridges over the gaps, that tears down the walls of divisions and opens up the walls until everybody can be contained within the protection of our democracy and of our society.

I want to try it. Because my God said: "If I could just find one..." God, to Ezekiel once again, is saying to us tonight: "I'm looking for a man. I'm looking for a woman. I don't care if they're gay or straight. I don't care if they're rich or poor. I don't care if they're black or white. I don't care if they're rural or urban. There's no prerequisite." He does not say: "I'm looking for a seminary professor, I'm looking for the best trained theologian, I'm looking for a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, a great humanitarian." He says: "I'm looking for a person, not an exceptional person, just a common person. Somebody who will stand in the gap and speak. Somebody who will stand in the promises of God, Christ, my savior. Somebody who will stand in the dreams of God over against the nightmarish realities of our world."



Bob Zellner, Mayor Adam O'Neil and Rev. Dr. Barber at the culmination of the March to Save Rural Hospitals in Washington, D.C. (Kairos Center)

And I want to tell you like I would at home as a country preacher: when we do what God tells us to do, God will show up. This faith is not some academic experience. God will show up. God will bless our efforts. God always has and God always will. Faith is what you believe about God, but works is what you do because of what you believe about God. Faith without works is dead, but faith with works is dynamic, and it will change your destiny.

Ezekiel found out that if you just stand in the gap and speak God's truth long enough, God will take you down to a valley of dry bones and He will say: "Those are my people down there. I ask you, can those bones live?" And if you are like Ezekiel you will say: "Lord, I don't know," and then you will say: "But God, what do you want me to do?" And God will say: "Speak to the bones," and if you speak, the bones will start standing up, and the old folks say the toe bone will connect to the foot bone, and the foot bone will connect to the ankle bone, but it won't be about bones, it'll be about people. And when you've done your part, then God will say: "Step back. Now let me blow on those bones, and fill them with My spirit, because now there is an army rising because you stood in the gap."

I'm here to tell you: Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass and white abolitionists, they found out that when you stand in the gap, God will show up and you can defeat slavery. Thurgood Marshall, white and Black Jews and lawyers, they found out when you stand in the gap, you can take an all-white Supreme Court with one former Ku Klux Klan member and get them to vote nine to zero to overturn "Separate but Equal." Sojourner Truth and Elizabeth Stanton showed us that if you stand in the gap, you can overturn the chauvinism of America and you can force them to begin to treat women right. Dr. King, the NAACP, and the unions showed us that if you stand in the gap, you can resist Jim Crow and you can get a Civil Rights Act passed, a Voting Rights Act passed, even when all of the pundits say there is no way that will ever happen. Nelson Mandela proved that when a few black folk and white folk stand in the gap as freedom fighters, you can bring apartheid down and lift justice up.

When Moses stood in the gap and stretched out his rod, God opened the Red Sea and the people went over. When Esther and her uncle Mordecai stood in the gap, they were able to stop the plot and destruction against the Israeli people. When David got his little rock, his little slingshot, and stood in

the gap on the battlefield, Goliath fell, and the next morning in Jerusalem Times it read "The Bigger They Come, The Harder They Fall."

If I was down South, I would say that when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stood in the gap, God showed up, stood in the fire with them, and calmed it down. When the disciples stood in the gap in an upper room, God brought his spirit in the room, and when they came out, they were not scared of Pilate, they were not scared of Herod, they were not scared even of Caesar. All they feared was God. And when my Jesus stood in the gap on a hill called Calvary, oh, he stood in the gap and the old folks said he died until death died. He died until the earth shook like a rabbit in the middle of the day. He died until the earth got as dark as midnight around about noonday. And the Pharisees had a party, the Sadducees started shouting, and Satan thought it was all over. But Jesus stood in the gap. Didn't somebody hear him say, "If I stand in the gap, if I be lifted up, I will draw all men underneath me." And every Sunday morning, God stood him up one more time with all power in his hand.

All I know is if you stand, God will take care of you. All I know is if you will stand in the gap, God will make a way out of no way. Touch your neighbor and say: "Neighbor, is there anybody that will trust God and stand in the gap?"

If you make that decision tonight, I have a word for you. What do you do when you've done all you can and it seems like it will never be enough? And what do you say when your friends turn away and you are all alone? Tell me, what do you give when you've given your all and it seems like you can't make it through? You just stand when there's nothing left to do, you just stand, and watch the Lord see you through. Don't you dare give up through the storm. Stand through the rain, stand through the hurt. Don't you bow. Don't you bend. Don't you give up. Don't you give in. Hold on. Yes, be strong. God will step in. And it won't be long. Just stand. Stand. Hallelujah.

Has the Lord kept anybody standing? Turn to your neighbor and say: "Neighbor, I'm here by the grace of God and I am standing! I am standing in the power of His love!"

What could God not do, if we simply provided God our lives as a platform? Y'all try it. There's healing when you stand. And even if they don't listen, here is your success: at least they will know there hath been a prophet among them.



Sophia Theoharis Caruso and Indi Barnes (front) travel with the Kairos Center for the 2015 Historic Thousands on Jones Street Moral March in Raleigh, NC. (Kairos Center)

Abahlali base-Mjondolo & Building the Struggle From Below

An Interview with Mzwakhe Mdlalose & Dr. Richard Pithouse

The following interview is excerpted from a conversation between two leaders from Abahlali base-Mjondolo (AbM), the Shack Dwellers Movement in South Africa. It was conducted during "Spirit of Struggle," a strategic dialogue between global social movement leaders and scholars to explore the intersection of religions and social movements, convened by The Kairos Center at Union Theological Seminary in April 2015. Mzwakhe Mdlalose has been part of AbM since its founding at the Kennedy Road informal settlement outside of Durban in 2006. Dr. Richard Pithouse teaches contemporary political theory and urban studies at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa.

Kairos: What was your motivation for getting involved with Abahlali?

Mzwakhe Mdlalose (MM): After I have completed my matric [high school education], I had to move to the City to look for a job. I did not have a place to stay therefore I was residing in my sister's place in the Kennedy Road informal settlements. Afterwards I decided to build my own shack in Kennedy Road. While living there, I was elected to the Area Development Committee and I was serving on the committee until such time that we realized that we had to form a Movement as a result of the tremendous ideas we had for our community. It was like we were neglected by the local authorities following a number of meetings we held regarding our basic services and accommodations, but all they could do is to turn a blind eye on all our proposals. Empty promises were always made. We then decided to form this Movement and to name it Abahlali base-Mjondolo, Zulu for "people who live in shacks," as it was formed in an informal settlement. It focuses not only on Shack Dwellers but also for all whose rights are violated, because we are very much concerned about the lives of the poor in the shacks not only in Kennedy Road, but all over South Africa.

What inspires me most is to build up the struggle from below, to build the connection of the poor from below, to fight the system in South Africa, because we know at the end of the day if we don't stand up for our rights, which are in our Constitution, nobody else will. More particularly, the service delivery, which is something we deserve, if we don't fight for it, nobody is going to bring it to us. Nobody is going to do that freely, because nobody cares about us.

Dr. Richard Pithouse (RP): I have also been there since the beginning in 2005. I had been an activist in various different moments and struggles going back to when I was in high school in the 1980's.

Kairos: How would you characterize Abahlali's work?

RP: First of all Abahlali is an organization primarily committed to land and dignity. These are not things that fit comfortably into the civil society paradigm, or the sort of left-orthodox paradigm, but you see the same things all over much of the (global) South. The same kind of language. There are people

who don't participate in this process, who just assume that Abahlali is copying this from somewhere else, the Zapatistas or whatever, but they're not. These are the kind of commitments that come out of their own discussions. Land is a very concrete thing that gives people security, and gives them a place in the city.

MM: Our movement is especially based in the people on the ground. That is where we have the strength to fight against our enemy, those who are putting profit before the lives of the people.

Our movement is especially based in the people on the ground. That is where we have the strength to fight against our enemy, those who are putting profit before the lives of the people.

Most especially our work is to bring awareness campaigns to our communities about their rights, our human rights, and we do that by organizing workshops in our communities, general meetings, whereby people share their thoughts about what they know about their rights and the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. We are informing them in order for them to defend themselves from where they are, in order to make sure that their rights are being protected. We formed Abahlali in order to organize every poor family in South Africa to fight against the system, more particularly because we don't have land. Our rights are being violated now and again – we don't have anything – so we have to educate ourselves in order to defend ourselves, in order to build up our struggle from below. Our main perspective is to make people be respected and bring back their dignity from those officials of the government who deny them.

Poor people are the people that have been forgotten, nobody cares about them. So, if we sit down and wait for the government to do things for us, nobody will do anything for us. We need to stand up and fight for what we deserve as South Africans.

Kairos: It seems the government has been, and continues to be, a main source of oppression. What is Abahlali's relationship with the government?

MM: First of all, Abahlali has been labeled by those who feel threatened by us as the rebels. We know that we are a threat to some of our local councilors [local politicians] because most of the things they are supposed to be doing, they are not doing, and we are putting pressure on them. We are raising things that are supposed to have been done for people a long time ago and exposing their corruption. We refuse that this should be confined to dark corners, while other people are enjoying our benefits. So we have a bitter relationship, even though we are very much willing to engage the Government, because we believe that we own the Government and also the State's resources. The incompetency of our local councilors has created a very huge gap between the government and the people on the ground, because they are not doing enough to provide for all of those who need houses. Instead of developing accommodations, there is a lot of corruption. That is why we have a backlog of housing, not simply because there is no money to build houses for people, but because there is a lot of corruption inside of the government.

Even if we approach the councilors on the IDP (Integrated Development Plan) for housing development, they run away from us, because they know that the IDP speaks to the truth that there must be houses from one ward to another ward to reduce the escalation of shacks in the city. At the same time we are fighting to be recognized as a people in South Africa, as a people that deserve to be in the city, because that is where there is a better life, better education and better opportunities for employment.

Kairos: How have you responded to the government's inaction on this matter?

MM: We have made a serious effort to engage with the Government, i.e., writing to them, meeting with them, but this has not been fruitful. We have also put people on the street sending memorandums, but they have not replied to this. But our peaceful protests are being violated by the same Government's police force. Different communities have organized road blockades, they do not seem to bother [the Government] at all, but we receive death treats and are getting killed. While our Government is busy attending to other parts of the communities who are in good standing with them, they are neglecting us and keeping us on a long lists. Our plan is to stand up on our own. We have now adopted a few operations with which we are hoping to meet our Government half way, for instance, Operation Fakumbani/Operation Kanyisa, for the people's power/electricity connection. We also seek to connect water ourselves. And for people who do not have land, we make sure that we make use of every vacant land. The Government's excuse is that there is no land where they can build houses, but there is land – it is only kept for their own people.

So, we decided, "No." We are saying "No!" Simply because the Government has forgotten us, does that mean we are no longer the people of South Africa, because of our status as being poor? No. So, we decided to grab the land.

We are occupying the land because our families keep on growing. We cannot squeeze in one shack with all of your adult children. We are squatting in one shack, entire families, brothers and sisters, and there is not enough space to keep them. So we decided, no. Because the government doesn't do what is expected, it is better for us to look for our own places to stay. That is why we decided to occupy the lands, in order to accommodate our families, our kids, more especially. I have four children and my sister living at home; there is no place to accommodate my whole family and my relatives.



(Sleeping Giant)

That is why we find ourselves in resistance. There is a law that says if you are getting evicted, you cannot be left out on the street, but only evicted to a new place to stay. But the municipality will simply evict people, without even a court eviction order.

Kairos: Can you say more about Abahlali's acts of resistance and solidarity?

MM: Solidarity is very important to us. It works with us. I remember in 2009, some of the departments of the Government were shaken up because of our solidarity with other countries and communities. It can make an impact to change the situation even if you are not very close to South Africa. It means a lot. And it works. It works.

Our rights are being violated now and again, so we have to educate ourselves in order to defend ourselves, in order to build up our struggle from below.

RP: From the very beginning, Abahlali wanted to break with the colonial model of one way of solidarity, of the model in which nice white people in the U.S. or England care about poor black people in Africa. It was very clear that solidarity was going to be mutual. That was worked out very thoughtfully in meetings. And it has been adhered to despite real hostility from that part of the (usually white) left that is backed by donors and organizes through the NGO form.

It has also been important to connect people with the reality of the movement. There's never been any attempt, as has often happened with other struggles, to instrumentalize the movement or say that everyone must come out for something that has just been set up to impress someone visiting from Europe or North Africa. What passes for international solidarity is often seriously toxic. A lot of the professional organizers sustain their power from donor money rather than popular support. You become world-known in South Africa if donors support

you. You can have a history of 20 years of unmitigated and relentless failure in terms of getting anyone on the ground to accept your political authority, but if you have the donors behind you then you are a big player. In both the human rights and socialist camps of the NGO world there is a fairly consistent delusion that a movement is something to be captured and then directed like a tool.

This is an important question, though. It's not going to work to have some expert say, from above, that there is a movement here and a movement there and they must all come out and target a common enemy. The reason why Abahlali has endured for 10 years despite the extraordinary repression – and not just from the state, but from a whole variety of actors who are hostile – is because the members control it. What would work much better would be for people with the power to make connections across space to listen, as closely as they can, to what people in struggle are actually saying and to work to enable the development of a shared common sense between struggles and direct connections between them.

One thing that Abahlali has done very effectively is draw a distinction between people who are willing to give money at the expense of the movement's autonomy and those who are willing to respect that autonomy. When money is aimed at containing autonomy it is not solidarity. It is an attempt to buy influence, to take control and to direct oppressed people to support projects chosen by donors and NGOs.

So money has frequently been refused, and that's just vital. As soon as you say yes to everyone who offers money, you give up your autonomy. Money is sometimes vital for sustaining a struggle. For instance after the serious repression faced by Abahlali in 2009 having an office in downtown Durban, a

centrally located space that is also a safe space, became vital. The thing about political violence is that certain people are vulnerable and that it also happens in certain spaces and not others. Money to rent an office in a safe space can be hugely important in a repressive situation.

It is also essential to refuse the monopolization of the language on the terrains where we can meet – whether this happens in terms of orthodox concepts of socialism or liberalism and human rights – and talk honestly about the actual way in which our struggles work to forge a common language and a recognition of a common set of practices.

Kairos: What are some of the changes that Abahlali has seen over the past 10 years?



(Sleeping Giant)

RP: I think in the beginning most people felt they had been forgotten. At most meetings – and there is always a diversity of opinions in any community, any movement – most people felt that they had been forgotten and that they needed to assert themselves and be recognized. But, in the beginning it was very difficult to do that, because marches got banned or attacked. Abahlali was treated essentially as if it was illegitimate, although it wasn't operating on an illegal basis. It was treated as illegitimate, because it was presented as politically illegitimate. That was tied up with the idea that the National Liberation Movement, and this is tied up with a particular moment in the post-colonial situation in South Africa, which will not be the same as in the U.S. The National Liberation Movement came to represent the nation because you didn't have a nation before liberation. That's the whole point about Apartheid: people were excluded from the nation. So an organization that was organizing against, or was critical – not necessarily hostile in the beginning – to the ANC was read through the lens of conspiracy. Of course that is also an element of this that appears across space and time. There is always supposed to be a foreign agitator, third force in our case, that is behind [this resistance]. In South Africa this is also often [racialized]. Black movements or struggles that are seen as disobedient in some way have – before, during and after Apartheid – routinely been ascribed to white agitation. In this regard, the authoritarian white left, organized through NGOs, has shown itself to be indistinguishable from the state.

That was the first phase. The second phase, I suppose, was of negotiation. And that was won through sustained organizing and through demonstrating strength on the ground – big protests and so on – but also engaging in the elite public sphere, the newspapers, etc.

Kairos: Can you say more about the importance of pursuing legal action in the courts?

RP: One of the things that is very useful about getting into the terrain of the courts is that, if the State in fact is acting in a systemically unlawful and even criminal way, showing this really makes it very difficult for people in struggle to be dismissed as criminal. Taking the struggle onto the legal terrain also opened up space for people to make alliances and it took things off the terrain of violence. At that point the State wanted to act unlawfully against poor people, but it also wanted to be seen as conforming to the law. There are some States that just don't care about how they are perceived with

regard to the rule of law. But others do. And when they do and that contradiction in their behavior gets surfaced in the public sphere through going to court, the State gets embarrassed and contestation gets taken off the terrain of violence for a while. You can't win on that terrain – the terrain of violence – because [those in power] are always going to be better equipped than you there and anything you do will just be used against you. But it is very useful to get things off the terrain of violence and onto the terrain of negotiation through the courts. This can enable a movement to regroup after a period of repression.

By 2009 Abahlali had negotiated quite a remarkable deal with the local municipality to change the way they do things. It was groundbreaking. But what happened is that the ruling party then turned to the armed mobilization of violence – not through the State, not through the police, but through armed members and supporters of the ruling party. You can sue the police and we've done that successfully, but you can't contest the armed mobilization of local party structures in the same way. That's what happened in 2009 in Kennedy Road. Many people, including Mzwakhe, were driven out. They lost everything. Their houses were destroyed. There was a complete breakdown of the rule of law. It wasn't just a moment, but for months afterward, every Sunday, Abahlali members would just have their houses destroyed.

The Constitution is there, human rights are there to protect everyone in South Africa and the world.

MM: We would need to go to the court and apply for our right to not be evicted, only to find out that when we are producing that particular paper from the court, the municipality just go ahead and demolish our shacks, without providing notice or finding us an alternative place. Simply demolishing the place and leaving us on the street. That is why we are always taking them to court, to defend ourselves. The Constitution is there, human rights are there to protect everyone in South Africa and the world. We are always taking them to court and we defeat them in court, because they are offending the law.

So that is where the movement finds itself, always in the very difficult position of being evicted from one's place. Right now we have cases in court that are continuing, but hopefully because we were evicted illegally, we are hoping that these cases we are going to win, definitely for sure.

Kairos: What challenges are currently being faced by Abahlali in South Africa?

MM: Each and every day we have vicious evictions that are taking place, especially in Durban in the city. In fact there is no clear plan or program on how the government can accommodate people from the villages and outside towns. This is a very big problem, because from the time of Apartheid, people were moved from their places (rural areas) and the land was taken. Now life is very hard in the village, so everyone comes to the towns in order to make a living, in order to have a better life, but there is no clear program of how the government is going to accommodate them. Instead when people are flocking to town, they are building houses on their own even though it is the government's responsibility to build houses.

RP: When Mzwakhe was driven out of Kennedy Road, he and others, he occupied land somewhere else – you said you had been evicted from there ten times?

MM: Yes, 10 times.



Rebuilding after a shack fire (Sleeping Giant)

RP: When you are evicted, you are not just removed from your house. It means that your house is destroyed. That intimate space is broken. It is turned inside out. There are children in that space. It is incredibly traumatic and it is violent.

The question is how do you just keep going? There are people who have been evicted 20 times in the land occupation in Cato Crest. Three people have been killed in that struggle and a number have been grievously injured. And just 10 days ago there was a protest that Abahlali supported that was organized by the Congolese. Abahlali made sure that the Congolese led the protest and drafted their statement (Abahlali holds to their principles also in how they relate to other groups). One woman had her leg broken by the cops.

So the law is not something that the state is always going to conform to. Middle class society as a whole is becoming more reactionary and prone to paranoid discourses around criminality. Reactionary ideology is being built from above to bring in people from below via the mobilization of various forms of chauvinism in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality. The terrain on which organization and struggle happens is very challenging.

Kairos: Is there a religious dimension to your fight for rights?

RP: The demand for land is sometimes, although not always, framed in terms that are in direct contradiction to the market, the state, and the law. It is sometimes framed in terms and in ways that have resonance with radical Christian theology, for example, the idea that land is a gift from God and it should not be bought and sold, that it is somehow wrong, or blasphemous to buy and sell land. And human dignity exceeds the way it is codified in something like human rights. Human rights can be useful when you are trying to get off the terrain of violence where you are criminalized, but, certainly in South Africa, it has become the preserve of professionals, completely technocratic and depoliticized.

Dignity, however, is something that people can assert on their own, from below, and outside of liberal and other institutions.

It is very striking to me that all of the movements I have been a part of after Apartheid have, to some degree, taken the question of the human seriously. Prior to Apartheid, it was about affirming the Nation against an oppressive alien force. But after Apartheid, one of the key formulations has been for people to assert that they're human. People often say, for instance, that they are human and not dogs. And that affirmation of humanity often does have aspects to it that are analogous to certain kinds of spiritual practices. It can easily fit within them, although it not necessarily easily reducible to them and can happen outside of that context too.

The word for dignity in Zulu has connotations of casting a shadow, that each person should be able to cast that shadow, should be someone. So, while tactically it is simply necessary to think about rights in the legal sense, thinking about the human being and the value of the human being, the integrity of the human being, in a way that exceeds all of that is vital.

Kairos: How does this manifest in Abahlali's organization and struggle?

RP: Some of the spaces for deliberation and the kinds of practices that tie people together take the form of practices that are not understood by civil society or by the left. Sometimes Abahlali draws on practices that come from what are incorrectly called syncretic churches (incorrectly because all churches are syncretic). Things like all night meetings, prayer, collective participation in song, and creating spaces where people can speak to their suffering and have it recognized by other people all draw, in part, from practices developed in churches.

There was a very interesting meeting last year, the Land Summit. Mzwakhe, you were there?

MM: Yes, I was there. There were a lot of churches there.

RP: What really struck me at the Land Summit was that people were talking about how they got land. And the concept that came out, a concept that refers to where you get the strength to occupy and hold land, is a word that in Zulu, and in other languages in the region, is "inkani." There is no direct English translation, but it speaks to a kind of stubborn determination, a determination that is really ongoing, and also has a sense of forcefulness about it. There have been times when the word has been used to refer to something that soldiers require, but we were talking mostly about women [at the Land Summit]. And the discussion there was about where you get this inkani.

At that meeting, a woman got up and said that there had been some really serious violence in her home. She had woken up and struck a match to see what had happened. Someone in her family, maybe her son, had been stabbed and his intestines were spilling out. She had to push them back in and take him to the doctor. She didn't think she could do it, she just didn't think she could handle that traumatic situation. But she did and that is where she had found that inkani. These very personal situations where people confront the limits of what they think they can manage can be a source of this kind of strength. And the discussion over two days was about where you find this strength. Often it

Things like all night meetings, prayer, collective participation in song, and creating spaces where people can speak to their suffering and have it recognized by other people all draw, in part, from practices developed in churches.

was in terms of what you have to do for your family, or your neighbor, where people have been pushed beyond their ordinary capacity for resilience.

The thing is that people are going to be killed. This was the discussion at the Land Summit – some of us are going to die. This was said again and again. This struggle is about resilience, about winning and enduring relentless attacks and making steady progress over time. But the horizon for winning things, and they are often very modest wins, is not the short term. It is over years. For people to take land and hold it is a long-term process. That question of where people get their strength is vital and theology can speak to it very fruitfully. I don't think it is reducible to just a theological question, but I think most of the orthodox ways we have of talking about politics just can't even pose that question or not in any useful way.

In fact, Abahlali realized a long time ago that real political commitment is not simply individual. If someone comes to Abahlali and says they want to join, they might be told, you can come to our meetings, you can see what we are doing, but you cannot join now, you must wait three months, see what's going on, and then you'll have to come back with 50 people from where you live. And those people must be your family, your neighbors, because it is those thick bonds of sociality – family, community – that people already have that enable that strength. So inkani is not an abstract idea. It is the resources and net that people already have. That is part of where this resilience and this determination come from. And it is more than that.



Zodwa speaks to a crowd (Sleeping Giant0



A gathering of leaders from Musawah, the global movement for equality in the Muslim family.
(Musawah)

Women, Islam, and the Secular-Religious Divide

An Interview with Dr. Sheherazade Jafari

At the “Sprit of Struggle” gathering in April 2015, The Kairos Center interviewed Dr. Sheherazade Jafari, whose research focuses on how women’s rights activists in Muslim-majority societies are engaging religion and working across religious-secular divides in response to rising politicized religion and extremism. Two of the organizations she has been working with are Sisters in Islam, which promotes an understanding of Islam that recognizes the principles of justice, equality, freedom and dignity within a democratic nation state, and Musawah, the global movement for equality in the Muslim family.

Kairos: Can you tell us about the research you’ve been doing with Musawah and Sisters in Islam?

Dr. Sheherazade Jafari (SJ): My research questions have been first, broadly: “how are women right’s activists in Muslim-majority societies responding to these global trends of increasingly politicized religion and extremism in many places?” And second, “how are they working across the supposed religious-secular divides that so often define the discourse on women’s rights, especially when it comes to Muslim women’s rights?” Sisters in Islam was my main case study, and not just Sisters in Islam but also the secular Malaysian organizations and activists with whom they have partnered over the years, looking at the relationships among both religious and secular activists within the broader women’s movement. And then I also looked at Musawah and included a small sample of interviews with activists from other Muslim-majority societies as well, mainly to draw on insights from other regions, i.e., Egypt, Bahrain, the Northern Caucasus, and the Balkans.

Kairos: While you were in the process of doing your research, the political context was constantly changing. How did you take all this into account?

SJ: It’s a continuously evolving situation. As one example, one women activist that I spoke with from Egypt, she is pretty young, in her mid 20’s, and she really strongly identifies as an activist; she is involved in a number of different types of human rights initiatives and has also founded some groups for young women. She grew up in a Muslim family but she always identified very strongly as secular. But when the revolution happened and in the years now since, she says that she now has to better understand religion, she has to better understand Islam. So, it was a necessity to go back to engaging with religion for herself. And then, through that process, she has learned a lot about some of the early women in Islamic history, for example, the leadership roles of some of the prophets’ wives, daughters and so on, and how inspiring and influential they have been. It’s been the revolution and the uprisings that brought her to a place of learning this for herself.

Kairos: Since she saw herself as secular, she wasn't involved in something like the Muslim brotherhood?

SJ: No, she wasn't. I spoke with another women who also wasn't involved with the Muslim Brotherhood but who very much identifies as a religious woman and has for years worked with women in the Muslim Brotherhood and also Salafi groups. And so she has built these relationships over years. But the younger woman who identifies very strongly as secular, she said that after the revolution she really wanted to attend some of the meetings of the Sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood because she was

curious, but couldn't because they didn't trust her as a secular activist. So she had to go through some people who knew people who knew people to be able to go.

Kairos: Do you have a sense to whether there is a middle ground that has emerged, if there are people who are Muslim and are trying to represent a different kind of Islam?

SJ: I don't want to make broad generalizations or anything, but with the activists I spoke with from Bahrain as well as in Egypt, especially those who were engaging religion in their women's rights work and drawing on these religious resources before the uprisings, they have said that



Some of the early founders of Sisters in Islam (SIS).

they've noticed a huge difference in how their work is now being perceived after the uprisings. Now, increasingly, other women's rights activists are turning to them for support on how do we deal with this new reality. There is an increasing demand for their religious-based approach. Whereas before, especially in a country like Egypt, the women's rights movement was defined as secular, as elite and really didn't want anything to do with religion. So some activists are seeing a shift.

And in Malaysia there are mainstream Islamists, members of the opposition party who have been advocating for more conservative interpretations of Islamic law, but then there are these newer groups that have emerged that are more violent in their ideology and in their way of going about things. When I was in Malaysia a couple years ago, one major issue was the relationship between Muslims and the Christian community, and who has the right to use the word "Allah." In Malay, the word "Allah" refers to God, so Malaysian Christians also use it. These more extremist groups were actually attacking churches and burning Bibles. Many Malaysians are also increasingly concerned about the influence of transnational extremist groups within the country.

Kairos: And are there problems associated with secular groups who are seen as anti- Islam? Do Musawah and Sisters in Islam have to watch those groups?

SJ: They do to a certain extent but I think for Musawah, it's very intentional that the movement is for secular and religious women. They are about equality in the Muslim family and in Muslim family law, which affects both Muslim and secular women, and requires the engagement of both. In Malaysia, they have great partnerships within the women's rights movement, between Sisters in Islam and the secular group, in fact, much better relationships across supposed religious-secular divides than with other religious groups. In other words, the intra-religious tensions are much stronger in practice, on the ground, than the religious-secular divides.

Kairos: Do you feel any effects of this kind of increasing fear of Islam in this country?

SJ: Personally, because I don't wear a hijab, I visually am not recognized as Muslim, compared to my friends that do wear hijab. And there is a difference--I see how they are perceived versus how I am perceived. My experience as a woman is different because of that. I also think Muslim men are targeted in different ways here. My brother for instance, he clearly looks Middle Eastern and he has been targeted, stopped in airports, things like that.

Kairos: We know that Islam has this long tradition of the "ulema" – with men and the hierarchy of scholarship that allows you to speak on Islam. How is this being understood today with the new leadership of Muslim women and activists taking up their religion in the way you are describing?

SJ: It is definitely a belief and core argument among the women I worked with that anyone has the right to read and understand and interpret the text for themselves. They make this argument based on the Quran's emphasis on human beings' intellectual capacity and the Islamic concept of "ijtihad," or independent reasoning. The traditional understanding is that the gates of ijtihad were closed centuries ago when the major Islamic schools of thought were established. Sisters in Islam and other progressive Muslim scholars and activists are saying, no, in fact the gates of ijtihad were never meant to be closed. It is our duty, our responsibility to be able to understand Islam for ourselves as we interpret it for our modern realities.

The emphasis is not on just reciting and memorizing the Quran, but to really understand it for oneself. And then they also emphasize the fact that core to Islam is that there is one God and ALL humans are then equal under God, and directly connected with God. For example, Islamic scholar Amina Wadud, who was also one of the co-founders of SIS, talks about the tawhidic paradigm, the concept of the oneness of God and the connection--the ultimate oneness--of all beings. If that's the case, then patriarchy or any sort of hierarchy that is saying that men are somehow above women or religious scholars are somehow closer to God or know or understand God better, goes completely against this core concept within Islam.

Kairos: How are these arguments gaining ground? Are there more women joining Musawah or Sisters in Islam?

SJ: One measurement of Sisters in Islam's success is the fact that they have been doing this for some 25 years and they really have gone from this very small group of professional women in an urban setting to now increasingly working with different women's groups across the country, in both rural and urban areas. They have a signature campaign for Islamic Family Law reform and they have thousands of signatures. Groups that don't necessarily identify as women's rights groups, such as single moms groups, are wanting to come and work with them and implement similar types of trainings on Muslim women's rights within their communities. This certainly speaks to Sisters in Islam's success and continued impact. Also, many of Sisters in Islam's publications and resources have been translated and are being used in other countries. Further, of course, there is now Musawah, as a growing transnational movement connecting women's rights activists groups and activists in Muslim communities around the world.

There are incredible examples everywhere of how Muslim women's rights scholarship and religious arguments are being used locally and how local realities are influencing the scholarship.

At the same time, there is a lot of backlash against Sisters in Islam, but it is often not about their religious arguments. This is because Sisters in Islam is actually pointing to verses in the Quran to make

their religious arguments, so it's hard to argue against them on that basis. Instead, their detractors say things like, "you're not an ulama (scholar), you're not an ustad" or "what do you know, you're a woman," or "you are an elitist, out of touch with real Islam." These attacks are not about the actual content of their arguments.

Kairos: Are they experiencing any state repression or other difficulties based on the perception that somehow this is subversive or dangerous activity?

SJ: Absolutely. Some of the messaging is that Sisters in Islam is "anti-Islamic, they're dangerous, they're going to confuse the Muslim community. It's about delegitimizing the women's religious voices, ultimately that's what the attacks are trying to do, to say that somehow Sisters in Islam is not really Muslim, that it's dangerous to Islam.

It is our duty, our responsibility to be able to understand Islam for ourselves as we interpret it for our modern realities.

Kairos: But they haven't faced actual imprisonment or violence?

SJ: Not actual imprisonment or violence, but they have faced threats of violence. For instance, one time an opposing organization organized a big rally and event that was focused on how Sisters in Islam is anti-Islamic. There was this huge banner on a main street very close to Sisters in Islam's office. It had an image of Zainah, one of the founders, and then an image of a Muslim woman with hijab and a whip. Really terrible images.

Kairos: Is Zainah and other women that are leaders within Sisters in Islam, have they pursued advanced levels of scholarship?

SJ: Some of these women have pursued degrees in Sharia law. Some form of religious education is also mandatory for all Muslims within Malaysia, although each state does it differently. But in terms of pursuing higher levels of religious education, the Executive Director and a few others in [Sisters in Islam] have. But they really do emphasize the fact that you don't need a religious degree or to have studied with religious scholars to have a religious voice, that everyone has a right to understand their religion for themselves.

Kairos: And what is the basis of their legitimacy among the wider public?

SJ: I think that legitimacy comes in part from the fact that they've been around for so long. They started by writing letters to the editor. That was their way of getting their voice out initially. And then they started doing other types of activities, such as providing legal aid, trainings and so on. These letters to the editor are incredible. They draw on people's lived realities but they go right into this verse and that verse and here is how the current law contradicts these verses, and so on. It's right there, even for a religious scholar, the argument is clearly laid out.

Kairos: We've talked about the Poor People's Campaign and this idea of uniting the dispossessed, the poor, and the ways in which this idea has manifested across the world. What might that look like in the communities you're connected to and how people might respond to something like that?

Jafari: These type of connections, partnerships and networks are so important. Especially in some of the interviews I've had with women from Kosovo and the Northern Caucasus, they all emphasized how isolated they felt from other Muslim women's rights activists and movements. On the other hand, the activists with whom I spoke in the Middle East and North Africa region and Southeast Asia felt they at

least have access to some resources and networks regarding Muslim women's rights. Even if they don't identify as Muslim women's rights activists or Muslim feminists themselves, they know of individual or groups who make these types of arguments. But in the other regions, in the Northern Caucasus and the Balkans, the activists felt alone and disconnected. They said that while they really don't want any sort of Western intervention, if there was to be involvement from the West, the best support would be to give them funding so that they can connect on their own terms with other women's rights activists within the region but also across regions as well.

For instance, one woman in the Northern Caucasus spoke about how her organization has had a few opportunities to attend international conferences. For some of the women in the group, this was the first time that they were leaving Russia. They said that the most incredible part of that experience was actually meeting women from the Arab region who were these powerful, strong women. Now they could go back and say – especially given the growing influence of the Gulf in the Northern Caucasus – that in fact we met these strong Arab women, one who was a judge and who who was this and that, and then they can counter the local narrative that says if you're a good Muslim you are subordinate, you must submit to the will of men. Instead, they have these examples of women who are coming from the Arab region, and that's not how they are living or what they believe. These examples were very important for them in their own local advocacy.

Kairos: Is there a conscious effort to reach beyond the more elite audience to a more popular community based audience?

SJ: Since 2000, there has been an important shift in Sisters in Islam's approach and their advocacy in order to better reach the grassroots, but there is still much work to be done to truly reach across class lines. For Musawah, this is something I would love to talk with them more about, as a relatively new movement. What I see as a challenge for any kind of global movement that is engaging religion in this way, is on the one hand to be able to immerse oneself in the text and theology, which is an intellectual experience in which you need the time and space to do it, and not everyone has the time and space to do that. A lot of the major Muslim feminist voices are scholars who are in the comforts of their universities, oftentimes based in Western countries. On the other hand, there are also these incredible examples everywhere of this intersection of scholarship and practice and how Muslim women's rights scholarship and religious arguments are being used locally and how local realities are influencing the scholarship. I think that's something that needs to be talked about more, to think about how to do this effectively and how to ensure that the voices of the poor are informing and shaping the movement, and how to be inclusive of both local and global, rural and urban voices and experiences.

Sisters in Islam is actually pointing to verses in the Quran to make their religious arguments, so it's hard to argue against them on that basis.

Kairos: Does Musawah have a presence in Iran?

SJ: No, Musawah has a rotating secretariat. They started in Kuala Lumpur and were supposed to go to Egypt but then decided it wouldn't be good to go given the instability and difficulties facing women's rights groups there. Just recently they've announced that they are moving next to Morocco. I think the plan has been that wherever they move they'll have a host organization for a few years, and then they'll move again in order to stay global. There are some important progressive religious scholars in Iran, but within the last several years and especially after the 2009 Green movement a lot of human rights and women's rights activists were arrested or have fled the country. So for now, it would be very difficult for Musawah to have activities there.



Harriet Tubman was an African-American abolitionist and key historical figure in the fight to end slavery in the United States. Known as "Moses" by slaves and abolitionists, she escaped from slavery herself and then returned some thirteen times to rescue dozens of other slaves. Her life, courage and commitment to freedom are an inspiration to contemporary struggles against poverty and oppression.
Auburn, New York, 2011 (Amelia Van Iwaarden)



Kairos: The Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice
At Union Theological Seminary
3041 Broadway, New York, NY 10027
KairosCenter.org
Info@KairosCenter.org