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*Editorial*

**Hope-making for the Future: A Transitional Reflection**

Author(s): Henry S. Kuo

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## **Hope-making for the Future: *A Transitionary Reflection***

**Henry S. Kuo**

*Managing Editor (2018-2019)*

*Graduate Theological Union*

*Berkeley, California, U.S.A.*

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In Newtonian physics, friction between static solid objects prevents a brick from sliding down a sloped surface. Such static friction, however, could be overcome by applying an outside force (e.g. by pushing it), enabling the brick to slide down the surface. Of course, the initial effort to push a static brick is more than subsequent efforts needed to enable it to continue sliding down the sloped surface.

In many ways, this dynamic describes organizational change at the GTU. Over the past two issues, the Journal has joined the community in welcoming Dean Uriah Kim as the 7<sup>th</sup> academic dean in 2017, and Rabbi President Daniel Lehmann as the 8<sup>th</sup> president in 2018. With new leadership often comes a lot of expectations to rise up to the communities' hopes and aspirations. But sometimes, history necessitates leadership to dare new possibilities, allowing for a formerly static institution to begin moving forward. This was certainly the case this academic year. We've born witness to many acts of terror and destruction against churches, mosques, and synagogues across the nation and the world, each motivated by nationalist, racist, and/or religious-supremacist sentiments. And in too many of these instances, religion was invoked, reinforcing yet the prevailing stereotype that the existence of religion contributes to the

problem of violence and terror in the world. Certainly, there is much space for lament and mourning in such situations. But at the same time, in the midst of these atrocities and challenges are opportunities for people of faith to gather together to show the power of love and solidarity in the face of hatred and violence. These opportunities, which I call “hope-making,” may well define the nature of religious studies and praxis into the future.

## Hope-making

For the 2019 Commencement of the Graduate Theological Union, I had the honor and privilege of giving the graduate address. While I don’t wish to repeat the address here, I will explain in some more detail what hope-making entails for our time. The inspiration for this term comes from a theologian that featured significantly in my dissertation, Johann Baptist Metz. Like Metz, I was frustrated at the apathetic powerlessness that so many churches seemed to be afflicted with in the face of the varieties of systemic evils in the world, such as poverty, corruption, and attitudes that dehumanize and otherize peoples. And this was before the rise of Donald Trump’s presidency! Metz’s political theology was compelling to me precisely because he noticed in his context what some of us at the GTU has long noticed in our American contexts, and what most of our country is now witnessing in the form of concentration camps housing unjustly detained migrants and asylum seekers. At the time, he observed how his fellow German neighbors and theologians were turning their eyes away from the theological and moral ramifications of the *Shoah*, as if the German post-War reconstruction were an excuse to avert the public’s conscientious gaze away from it.<sup>1</sup>

Here we are in 2019, fifty years after he wrote those words, and concentration camps interning asylum seekers and migrants in unjust and squalid conditions dot our country. Zhou En-lai, the first premier of the Peoples’ Republic of China, remarked once that “one of the delightful things about Americans is that they have absolutely no historical memory.”<sup>2</sup> Zhou’s comment could be taken as a put-down of the United States, but in

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Love’s Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, ed. John K. Downey (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 95.

<sup>2</sup> William Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions since World War II* (London: Zed Books, 2003), 15.

some ways, he is right. The absence of historical consciousness and memory can indeed be delightful because a nation and its people would not need to carry the burdens of history. “Freed” from this burden, the United States is primed to assume the position of global exemplar of democracy while enjoying the privilege of overlooking its militarism, racism, and many of its ills. Or, to put it differently, to be “freed” from the burdens of having a historical consciousness and memory enslaves America to its own sins. This is how original sin degenerates into total depravity.

One important dimension of hope-making is the insistence and recovery of memories, particularly those that endanger our senses of superiority and security. These memories certainly contain the power to shatter our senses of superiority, fragile as they always are. Yet, its shattering is liberation, for it frees people away from being smug in their self-regarded and self-confirming righteousness. Liberated from the slavery of self-interestedness, such dangerous memories impel the people towards the pursuit of what is good and just. The hashtag #NeverLookAway is one way in which people on social media are trying to affix the dangerous memory of those camps, the children who suffered separation from their parents and some of whom perished due to disease, malnutrition, and the terrible weight of America’s trinity of original sins: White supremacy, idolatries of success and militarism, and American exceptionalism.

A second important dimension of hope-making is the critical place of actual praxis. The response to the memory of injustice is not inaction, but more strategic action that demands we speak truth in courage against Trumpian attitudes that dehumanize others in the interests of forwarding the success of narrow privileged peoples. Inaction or avoiding the fight for justice makes a mockery of any calls for justice. The battle against White supremacy cannot be won with “woke” White Americans misunderstanding progressivism as sitting quietly by the sidelines, consumed by their senses of White guilt, or by Asian Americans seeing this as “not their fight” since they do not fit in the Black-White racial binary. Inaction through ignorance indicates complicity.

## Remembering the Future

In light of the many acts of religiously and nationalistically motivated terror and violence that has occurred throughout the world this year, the temptation was always there for religious institutions to just sit down pat and do nothing. This was the sort of religious apathy that was characteristic of institutional religion in the United States for the past few decades. This was the religion of comfort, a national religion comfortable in its assumed influence and cushy endowments, one that can afford to withhold solidarity and witness to the poor, the marginalized, and the suffering in our neighborhoods. This is Metz was referring to in describing “bourgeois religion.”<sup>3</sup> Surveys of the American religious landscape have revealed the precipitous decline of such religion, and as if that were insufficient, the closing of religious centers and seminaries, and the downsizing of religious studies and theology programs is further evidence of such decline.

And this, perhaps, is something that is worth mourning if we wished to continue imbibing the selective narrative of the “good, old days,” forgetting conveniently that the “good, old days” were not universally good to all peoples. The promise of hope-making is to remember the future, to help the world remember that there are ways forward for a more loving and gracious world than the ideological drugs of nationalism and racism. With the many instances of hate-driven massacres at houses of worship throughout the world this year, leaders of the GTU, GTU consortial seminaries and centers, and neighbors such as Zaytuna College, convened interfaith prayer vigils. I attended the vigil held on March 2019 in the wake of the massacre at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. It made a big impression on me, seeing people of all religions and traditions of the GTU gathering together in solidarity and mourning, naming the innocent victims killed, and remembering them as we went forth. And I could not forget the powerful testimony of four presidents from four different religious traditions leading the community in solidarity and mourning. This is hope-making in action, and is what the GTU has demonstrated exceptional competency and leadership in.

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<sup>3</sup>Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 47.

And this is the vision of what the world needs now.

But interfaith prayer vigils alone are insufficient. At some point, if those vigils and acts of solidarity do not translate into lasting systemic change in our communities, nations, and indeed the world, then such gatherings lose their power. They become convenient substitutes for concrete action. This effort to move from prayer to praxis demands significant and rigorous reflection. To contribute to this *boni ardui* is why the BJRT has and continues to publish religious and theological scholarship across various disciplinary, religious, and academic boundaries.

At the same time, this Journal has always been envisioned to be a student-run journal, a vision that is strongly supported by me and the GTU's academic dean and the journal's editor-in-chief, Uriah Kim. Having just graduated, I look forward to passing the reins of managing the journal to Justin Staller, who has been the BJRT's book review editor since its inception. I look forward to serving the BJRT through being a member of the peer-review board, and to (unofficially) publicize it wherever my callings take me. I thank the leaders of the GTU, such as former Dean Arthur Holder, former Dean Kathleen Kook, Dean Uriah Kim, and President Daniel Lehmann, as well as the many students and faculty of the GTU who have contributed to the success of this journal. In all these changes, the mission of the BJRT remains the same as that of the GTU: to grow in knowledge together, to thrive in spirit, and to unite in solutions. The journal will fulfill its purpose if it continues to contribute however little can to that lofty mission.

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