



GTU

Berkeley Journal of
Religion and Theology

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology

Volume 5, Issue 2

ISSN 2380-7458

**The Persistent Widow through Latina Eyes:
Mission as Political Theology for Comprehensive Immigration
Reform in the U.S.A.**

Author(s): Marcia L. Ledford

Source: *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 5, no. 2 (2019): 53-73

Published by: Graduate Theological Union © 2019

Online article published on: January 25, 2020

Copyright Notice:

This file and its contents are copyright of the Graduate Theological Union © 2019. All rights reserved. Your use of the Archives of the Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology (BJRT) indicates your acceptance of the BJRT's policy regarding the use of its resources, as discussed below:

Any redistribution or reproduction of part or all of the contents in any form is prohibited with the following exceptions:

- You may download and print to a local hard disk this entire article for your personal and non-commercial use only.
- You may quote short sections of this article in other publications with the proper citations and attributions.
- Permission has been obtained from the Journal's management for exceptions to redistribution or reproduction. A written and signed letter from the Journal must be secured expressing this permission.

To obtain permissions for exceptions, or to contact the Journal regarding any questions regarding any further use of this article, please e-mail the managing editor at bjrt@ses.gtu.edu

The Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology aims to offer its scholarly contributions free to the community in furtherance of the Graduate Theological Union's mission.

The Persistent Widow through Latina Eyes: *Mission as Political Theology for Comprehensive Immigration Reform in the U.S.A.*

Marcia L. Ledford

*Political Theology Matters, LLC
Detroit, Michigan, U.S.A.*

ABSTRACT: Christ calls progressive Christians as public square advocates to challenge systematic injustice of the US immigration system and other forms of oppression. A priest/attorney explores First Amendment rights and limitations of free expression and Gospel imperatives. Exegesis juxtaposes Christian Latina’s real-life deportation protest for her husband who endured a year-long detention prior to deportation. Her call for justice echoes the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8) entitled to protection by Torah for which she fought. Discussion includes current wholesale squalid detention of asylum seekers and migrants as continuing systemic racism and injustice, and political-theological remedies available to charities.

*Published in: Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology, Vol. 5, no. 2 (2019)
© 2019 by the Graduate Theological Union*

I sensed a call to ordained ministry as a teenager, but women at the time generally were not welcome to preach or preside at the pulpit or altar. Hence, law was an obvious choice for me to work for equality, especially LGBTQ equality. As an attorney, I dedicated my life’s work to social justice by focusing on constitutional law, civil rights prosecution, and criminal defense. In my view, American jurisprudence generally fails to employ mercy and compassion. The justice and legal systems are not designed to practice grace. Consequently, I pursued ordination and became an Episcopal priest. In legal language, I changed venues to argue the gospel, to “sue for social injustice in the court of public opinion.”

In ministry, I have been an eyewitness to unspeakable acts of cruelty foisted onto the Latinx community. I have witnessed first-hand how families are torn apart by a federal legal system that was founded on African chattel slavery and bent towards upholding that logic of white supremacy. Hence, the decision was made to pursue a Doctor of Ministry (D.Min) degree to write and speak about this issue for a wider audience and to spur my work for social transformation. This pursuit was profoundly motivated by the courage and agency of my parishioners who are in the struggle, *en la Lucha*,¹ to stop deportations and to humanize the American immigration system and its ethos.

My dissertation² explores how progressive Christians are protected by the Constitution and case law to advocate for just public policy that effects positive social change for those on the margins. It examines what our rights are as faith members in voicing political theology in the public square. This is an emerging field of public or political theology and must be a major focus of twenty-first century Christianity. The motivation to pursue this study stems from hearing from well-meaning white, progressive Christians who, while concerned about injustice, also fear that if they speak publicly about matters of faith, they risk the revocation of the 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status for their faith organizations.

The focus of this article describes a constitutionally protected anti-deportation demonstration in 2015 led by a Latina whose husband had been detained for over a year. A community organizing group hosted a challenge to the husband's impending deportation. This story serves as an example of how we can conduct political theology in the public square. It highlights the importance of the gospel imperative for public theology to alleviate suffering, and specifically in this instance, from a Latina perspective. It features an exegesis of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge (Lk. 18:1-8), which is then juxtaposed with a real-life event at a deportation protest. The article then connects this protest to the worsening immigration crisis through the development of numerous concentration camps along the U.S. southern border. The Latina's cry for

¹ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha/ In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004).

² Marcia L. Ledford, "Christian Progressive Political Theology: An Example of Acting on the Word for Immigration Reform" (D.Min. Diss., Pacific School of Religion, 2019).

justice continues on through the myriad additional voices of Central American asylum seekers fleeing for their lives, only to wind up in a fresh hell of American auto-criminalization and incarceration.

Constitutional Rights and Faith-based Non-profits³

First, to set the stage for our theological reflections, we must understand the rights granted by, and the limits of, the First Amendment which reads:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. (Ratified 15 December 1791)

These forty-five words, though seemingly modest, established the enumerated rights of individual expression, the likes of which the world of monarchs and emperors had not seen before it. James Madison was a chief architect of the Bill of Rights. As a Christian and privileged white male, Madison had not known persecution. However, he believed in eradicating persecution.

To believe and to champion freedom—that was Madison’s accomplishment . . . In the phrase ‘free exercise’ that the

³ Briefly, the U.S. Tax Code allows for the creation of nonprofit entities to serve the public good in various ways. Some examples include religious organizations, educational institutions, and societies for the humane care of animals. These organizations receive a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status. Nonprofit entities are exempt from paying property taxes. Revenue streams, like tithes to a religious nonprofit, are not taxable either. However, congregants have repeatedly shared a fear of losing the tax-exempt status when I guest preach and call for participation in Latinx mission. It is surprising to hear how prevalent the “mystique” of the separation of church and state really is and how this mystique clouds the opinions and understanding of parishioners are typically well-educated and who follow current events. Progressive Christians need clarification on what 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status is and what leads to its revocation by the Internal Revenue Service. Such education will allow progressive Christian voices to galvanize for a stronger public/political faith-based message in the public debate over oppressive policy and law. All religious traditions that meet the criteria in the tax code are eligible for tax exemption and are constitutionally protected to participate in the public debate. Therefore, the First Amendment interpretation prohibiting preferential treatment is satisfied. In order to maintain tax-exempt status, non-profit entities cannot engage in specific *election-related* activities such as endorsing a candidate or conducting prohibited campaign intervention actions relating to ballot measures. See also <https://www.stayexempt.irs.gov/home/existing-organizations/political-campaigns-and-charities>.

founder of seventeenth century Maryland had brought to America, Madison found the perfect expression, an expression that in his mind excluded the establishment of a church as well as the enforcing of religions opinion . . . For Madison, the whole burden of freedom was carried by the formula of free exercise. It was his belief and hope that freedom of religion “promised a lustre to our country.”⁴

The First Amendment has been called the “American Experiment” by Madison, and indeed his characterization remains accurate.⁵ The amendment continues to be interpreted by the succession of varying compositions of the federal Supreme Court over the centuries. First Amendment cases have continued to move the country towards more freedom. There may have been some fits and starts along the way, but the general trend is markedly towards greater liberty.⁶

The goal of our study is not to violate the anti-establishment clause, but to position voices of all faith traditions to participate in public debate as we aim to advocate for and participate in the crafting of, hopefully, more compassionate laws for those suffering on the margins of society. In actuality, we have the right and opportunity to call on our political representatives to enact more humane immigration laws (as just one example of the many social crises in the U.S.). Progressive Christians must understand that we are well-protected in speaking out about injustice according to our religious teaching – political theology “derives political values from an existing faith tradition.”⁷

Jesus gave us multiple gospel mandates to advocate for the “least of these.” Jesus’s profound call to engage in public ministry naturally fosters action. He showed in his life and ministry that acting honorably *with and* on behalf of “the other” cultivates spiritual growth in individuals and communities as well. Christian advocates who deeply understand or identify with the “why” will find innovative ways to deal with the “how.”

⁴ John T. Noonan, *The Lustre of Our Country: The American Experience of Religious Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 4.

⁵ *Ibid.* See introduction, 1-9.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Benjamin T. Lynerd, *Republican Theology: The Civil Religion of American Evangelicals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 35.

Advocates become spiritually and emotionally motivated and committed through mission.

Praxis theology, described by Stephen Bevans,⁸ frames my dissertation. This praxis model of contextual theology is practical theology played out in public. It is properly described as “faith seeking intelligent action.” It constitutes a process that must incorporate the specific elements of seeing or recognizing an issue, thinking or processing and reflecting on it, and acting upon it. These learnings and experiences are incorporated into the next cycle of see-think-act. My D.Min. project offers clarification on how the law protects people of faith via their actions and speech in the public square. Action is essential to mission in the twenty first century, and Christians must be visible at the fore, in the public square, calling for justice as participants in public policy debate.

The parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge is a lesson on how public theology is done (Luke 18:1-8). Jesus’s ministry advances social justice through his clear-eyed, scorching critique of Roman-occupied Israel for failing to follow the Torah, obligating the community to respect and care for the widow, orphan, stranger, and the poor. These duties were mandatory under Torah and were largely ignored by the elders (Deut. 24:14-21). In furthering the teachings of Torah, Jesus exhorts the people to pray unceasingly to God *who hears the people* (v. 7). Prayer is a form of crying out, a lament that vocalizes suffering and injustice. Prayer, lament, and crying out are essential for naming oppression and achieving social transformation.

Walter Brueggemann proposes three dimensions of transformed life and personhood through crying out: 1) The critique of ideology; 2) the public processing of pain; and 3) the release of new social imagination.⁹ The oppressed reject the ideology of exploitation and give voice to their cry publicly by proclaiming that injustice is systematically entrenched. And the

⁸ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Faith and Culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 70-87. See also 141-144 for a synopsis of his six models of contextual theology.

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Hope within History* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1987), 14–26. Brueggemann identifies the public cry as the beginning of rejection, of insurrection against injustice.

oppressed articulate their future liberated lives, their new social imagination, say, in the “good and broad land.”¹⁰

Jesus models this process repeatedly. He critiques social injustice, processes pain publicly through healing, restoration of relationship, and commensality. Furthermore, Jesus “cries out,” or “releases” the good News in his preaching and teaching, during his death, and through his resurrection, and ascension. Jesus’s carefully crafted characters in the parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge serve as vehicles to instruct us about critiquing injustice, crying out, and dreaming of a just future.

The Parable of the Persistent Widow

In this story, the unjust judge acts as if the widow is without legal standing and, consequently, no recourse; thus, his actions aim to erase the widow from society. Jesus intentionally uses the widow as the protagonist because a widow was significant in Torah, the law. Automatically, upon learning she was a widow, the community was now on notice regarding its obligation to care for her as a member of one of the Torah’s clearly defined groups of protected persons. Jewish listeners would immediately understand the significance of “widow” as freighted with cultic legal responsibility. Just by Jesus telling this parable with the protagonist widow stating, “Grant me justice,” Jesus ratifies her proper reliance upon biblical precedent for judgment in her favor (Deut. 24: 14-21). This request is personal to her, whatever the harm may have been, including the further harm in being denied judicial action. This widow is the injured party.

In creating the parable, Jesus does not say what the legal injury is, and in this sense it is immaterial. What matters is that she knows she is supposed to be protected as a widow through the Torah. It was easy for Jewish women to become disenfranchised from the greater community were they to find themselves without a father, a husband, brother, or married son. The Torah addressed these situations by mandating a sacred legal duty to care for the widow, the poor, the stranger, and the orphan. However, if the community failed to

¹⁰ Ibid., 10-21.

practice this care, women and orphans could quickly find themselves in dire straits. In Hebrew, the term “widow” means *[O]ne who is silent, unable to speak. In a society in which males played the public role and in which women did not speak on their own behalf*, the position of a widow, particularly if an eldest son was not yet married, was one of *extreme vulnerability* ... Left out of the prospect of inheritance by Hebrew law, widows became the stereotypical symbol of the exploited and oppressed.¹¹

Jesus underscores the importance of communal *shalom*, wholeness, and *hesed*, relationships. Yet, society treats her like she has no standing without the imprimatur of her father, husband, or son. Further, the patriarchal Jewish society treats her as ignorant to her rights and expects her subordination. Thus, the widow of this parable serves as an amalgam for the protected classes—the orphan, stranger, and the poor—of Torah.

Jesus extols the widow’s virtue as he tells her story by highlighting how she always prays and keeps demanding justice. Jesus uses the parable as a teaching tool to underscore the importance for the people to “pray persistently” (*pántote proseúchesthai*), a continuing or persevering prayer.¹² The English verb, “to prosecute,” indicates an inherently unending action of petition and contest against the status quo until justice wins out.

While Jesus does not directly call the judge a hypocrite, he allows room for listeners to draw this conclusion while weaving this judge’s starkly constructed hypocrisy into the story. Although a judge of Israel who was expected to, by virtue of his office, respect God and God’s laws in order to exercise justice appropriately for the people, he instead does not fear God and demonstrates no regard for people. The Greek term, *hypokritēs, ou*, denotes “one who pretends to be other than what he is.” The preposition, *hypo*, translates as the following: “by, by means of, at the hands of, under the authority of, or under.” *Hypokrisis, eōs*, includes descriptors of

¹¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, “Widow,” in *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 423. Italics mine.

¹² Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina: Luke*, Vol. 3, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 268-269.

insincerity and pretense.¹³ Everything in Jesus's narrative suggests that the judge's lack of integrity would prevent the widow from securing the justice for which she fought. Surprisingly, the judge anticipates the possibility that he could be damaged by a "weak" widow's hand. His motive to act is underhanded, and he lacks honor. This judge fears the widow will wear him out and, figuratively, either black his eye or sock him in the eye.¹⁴ Without compunction, the judge breaches his ethical duty; he merely wears a mask of fairness to cover a face of treachery.

Interestingly, the widow craftily employs a social construct called challenge-riposte¹⁵ by continually confronting the judge to preserve her honor. One can indeed argue that the widow is the superior party because, although lowly from society's view, she has the courage to challenge a societal leader and authority, the judge. Instead of the judge, the widow recognizes injustice, and the judge is the one who needs to be corrected. The widow champions righteousness by asking for what the Law, Torah, demands.

Because honor was a limited good, competition for the scarce resource could be intense. In this competition the game of challenge-riposte is a central and very public phenomenon. Ideally, it is a game played among social equals: to challenge those lower on the social scale is to be a bully, while to challenge those above is a failure to know one's proper place.

The game consists of (1) a challenge (almost any word, gesture, action that answers in equal measure or ups the ante (thereby challenges in return). Both positive (gifts, compliments) and negative (insults, dares, public questioning) challenges must be answered to avoid a serious loss of face.¹⁶

¹³ Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, *The Greek New Testament*, Fourth Revised Edition (Stuttgart: Bibelgesellschaft, 2001), 188-189. Italics mine.

¹⁴ Johnson, *Luke*, 270. Johnson indicates that "black his eye or sock him in the eye" is a plausible translation of the Greek in this verse. See note 5.

¹⁵ Malina and Rohrbaugh, "Widows," 334-335.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Presumptively the widow, as the inferior party in this spar, risks loss of face in not knowing her place, if she were defeated. If she prevailed, the judge would lose the contest and lose face.

The judge avoids this plight by deciding to grant her petition, not as an act of jurisprudence, but rather as an act of self-preservation. His primary role should be to ensure the integrity of the judicial system. In reality, he is unscrupulous and much more prideful than just. In deciding to deem a widow as the protagonist, Jesus automatically triggers communal responsibility for her as sacred duty through Torah. Her own agency in knowing her rights under Torah empowers her to call the judge's bluff. Though risky, given her subordinate social status to the judge's, the widow is willing to test how long the judge will shirk his duty before he finally does his job. This is jarring and disjunctive for them both, but it ultimately works.¹⁷

Reading the “Persistent Widow” Parable via Latina Eyes

We can read this parable of the Persistent Widow through twenty-first century Latina eyes. A Latina, Palma, is effectively a widow because she is deprived of a shared life with and comfort from her husband, Miguel, for over a year while he was detained awaiting a decision on his deportation.¹⁸ I participated in a deportation demonstration during which Palma bravely shared her story.

The setting is in front of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office in Detroit, ironically housed in a building named for African-American civil rights leader, Rosa Parks. Palma steps up to the microphone to speak her truth, haltingly, as she looks down at her notes. Her big tears fall and form rivulets splashing off the smeared page. The crowd hears her plea for mercy and justice:

Thank you all for being here to support my husband, Miguel. He has been detained for over a year now. If he is deported, his life is in danger. He is my loving husband and I miss him so much. I lost our baby because of the stress. But I know that

¹⁷ Brueggemann, *Hope within History*, 8.

¹⁸ Palma and Miguel are pseudonyms.

when God reunites us, we will have children, a bright happy family. I ask the ICE Regional Director, Rebecca Aducci, to exercise her prosecutorial discretion by releasing my husband. Please pray for us and all of those who suffer over deportation. Thank you.¹⁹

With her short but intense plea, Palma climbs out of the land of exile and crosses the border of white privilege to challenge racial discrimination in public, exercising her prophetic imagination and speaking truth to power through her profound faith. The U. S. Congress operates extra-judiciously, outside of law and legal procedure through inhumane treatment, and in opposition to Torah. The regional director for ICE acts as the unjust judge. Congress and the regional ICE director each work to erase both the aggregate Latinx contributions²⁰ to American society, as well as their personhood. They refuse to be just.

Though emotionally and spiritually naked, Palma's tiny frame grows larger than life as she echoes the Israelite cry of oppression across so many human centuries. Palma defies a socioeconomic assumption that she would allow herself to be silenced, and she stares down Congress, the ICE regional director, and ambivalent or hostile voters.

Palma makes this demand for justice according to Torah, by adoption through Abraham and Sarah, Mary, and Jesus. She throws down the challenge to preserve Miguel's honor as well as her own. She draws strength from God, makes bold statements of faith, and requests intercessory prayers from the community, the place of transformation.²¹ Palma speaks her truth about how the law is morphed into the grotesque and made to criminalize and debase human beings who beg to survive. As I stood beside her, I observed how she breathed new life into the Parable of

¹⁹ Palma, Speech (presented at the Anti-deportation Protest, Rosa Parks Immigration Center, Detroit, MI, June 10, 2015).

²⁰ Miguel A. De La Torre, *The U.S. Immigration Crisis: Toward an Ethics of Place* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 63. De La Torre states, "More than 3.1 million undocumented workers, using fake or expired social security numbers contribute \$13 billion annually into the system while on receiving \$1 billion in return benefits." Stephen Goss, chief actuary to the Social Security Administration credits over \$100 billion in contributions from undocumented workers between 2005 and 2014. Goss maintains that the Social Security System remains functional because of this source of tax revenue.

²¹ Brueggemann, *Hope within History*, 8.

the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge and brought it into her reality, and into ours. As Ada María Isasi-Días describes,

For us [Latinas], theology is a task, a doing; it is an attempt to change, in a radical way, oppressive structures. It aims to transform the world by making the voice of Latinas heard, by having our understandings impact what is normative in society. This is why our concern is with orthopraxis, with transformative action, with the ways in which religious understandings are at the heart of Latinas' struggle to survive; with how our struggle impacts religious understandings and practice; and with helping to enable the development of Latinas' moral agency.²²

Palma demonstrates how actions like this result in further faith formation, not just for herself but for the witnesses. She makes this public theology normative for all who suffer. She contributes to re-centering the moral compass on the bearings of justice and offers three important actions that draw attention to the trauma of her husband's detention and impending deportation. In doing so, she provides a profound example of what Brueggemann describes in *Hope within History* as the process by which public theology results in transformation through the public cry, the public processing of an unjust reality.²³ It is the act of crying out that begins the journey to restoration, to *shalom*.

By virtue of Palma's very presence, she refers to American systemic injustice—an injustice that allows for detaining people of color without proper judicial discretion and action.²⁴ People of color have been relegated

²² Ada María Isasi-Días, *En la Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 181. For another definition of subjugated knowledge, see also Justo L. González, *MAÑANA: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 25.

²³ Brueggemann, *Hope within History*, 14-26.

²⁴ The practice of chattel slavery of Africans began 400 years ago at the Jamestown Settlement in 1619. For a discussion of how legal practices of abusing and exploiting African slaves has been transferred to peoples of the Hispanic diaspora, and other people of color, see chapter four of my dissertation. That sense of entitlement grew during the rampant post-Civil War lynching of African Americans, as well as First Nation Peoples, Mexicans and Mexican Americans. See Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States from 1848-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

to the most physically demanding, dangerous and menial jobs for centuries as a function of what Benjamin Lynerd calls, “republican²⁵ theology,” which is rooted in white exceptionalism, individual freedom, limited government, and being the “keepers of moral virtue.”²⁶

Palma personifies the persistent widow as the so-called “inferior” contestant in a match of challenge-riposte. The bargaining power rests unmistakably with the U. S. Government and its agents. However, as the presumed inferior party, like the persistent widow, Palma jettisons herself into the position of the superior party by demanding justice in the public square. Despite her vulnerability, she engages her right of free exercise of religion. She joins a peaceable assembly and courageously petitions the government for the redress of grievances through political speech. Palma articulates the cost of systematic separation of families, infants and small children, rampant ICE raids, often legally unwarranted, years-long detentions, and deportations. She exhorts the cessation of these practices. She invokes intercessory prayer, not only for herself, but for “all who suffer over deportation.”²⁷The unjust judge of the Parable finally grants the widow judicial relief. Had the judge failed to act under the law, and as the social superior, he would have lost face and damaged his reputation. The widow was able to finally force his hand.

But in the Latina’s protest, the unjust judge (US Government and its ICE managers) are wholly unconcerned about whether its powerful reputation is damaged by the Latina widow because she has been deemed as dispensable and insignificant. Palma and the many sharing her plight, along with allies, will one day force the hand of the US Government through persistent advocacy and the endless cry for justice. This assumes that the people exercise their constitutional protections to bring justice to

²⁵ Lynerd, *Republican Theology*, 35. This is national civil religion, not a part of the Republican Party, although its adherents are overwhelmingly Republicans. Another term for this ideology is American civil religion. This ideology has been present since the inception of the U.S. and Lynerd maintains it was especially influenced by the First and Second Great Awakenings.

²⁶ Ibid. Former US Attorney General Jeff Sessions justified policies at the southwest border with the Bible to support separating young Latino immigrant children and teens from their families. See “Sessions Cites Bible in Defense of Breaking up Families, Blames Migrant Parents,” *NBC News*, accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/sessions-cites-bible-defense-breaking-families-blames-migrant-parents-n883296>.

²⁷ Palma, Speech.

fruition and to enact comprehensive immigration reform—a humongous assumption at present.

Yet Palma stands there, a woman of color and a constructive widow, speaking truth to power, refusing to be silent and just accepting the humiliation one more time. First, she overtly rejects the American ideology that requires people of color contribute to the American economy to the point of wastedness and then acquiesce to being discarded or “disappeared” through deportation, in ways that are most convenient to the white privileged class.

Second, Palma adds her voice to the ongoing cry of the people, the essential articulation of suffering, the lament that rises to heaven and garners the attention of a salvific God. While her story is based on her personal pain and hardship, it also echoes a common story of suffering through separation and emotional distress, increased poverty, and lost hope. She has been rendered a tacit widow for more than a year, as her husband was detained by ICE, a situation that was so was so stressful she miscarried her baby.

While succinct, her address clearly exposes her pain. Palma speaks for all of the “Palmas” who have lost their husbands, husbands who likely were brought to the US as children themselves, the “Dreamers.”²⁸ Consequently, the women struggle to raise families as sole provider. Their children agonize from emotional torment due to the forced abandonment.²⁹ She speaks aloud to tell the American people, the unjust ICE manager/judge (Rebecca Aducci) and the unjust lawmaker (the U.S. Congress) that this is fundamentally immoral and inhumane. Palma gives her pain and vulnerability as an oblation, publicly and stalwartly.

In the words of Brueggemann, “All the way from the cry in Egypt to a theology of the cross, this tradition has affirmed that fresh and mature

²⁸ The term “Dreamers” refers to DACA, or “Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is an immigration option for undocumented immigrants who came to the United States before the age of 16. Although DACA does not provide a pathway to lawful permanent residence, it does provide temporary protection from deportation, work authorization, and the ability to apply for a social security number.” See “Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA/DAPA) | ILRC,” accessed May 16, 2019, <https://www.ilrc.org/daca>.

²⁹ Lisseth Rojas-Flores, et al., “Trauma and Psychological Distress in Latino Citizen Children Following Parental Detention and Deportation,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 9, no. 3 (May 1, 2017): 352.

faith has been strangely given the disjunctions which are [so] costly.”³⁰ Transformation, like the sort Palma calls for, does not happen in a state of peace and equilibrium,³¹ but rather in the fracture of space and time when injustice is fully acknowledged and the work for restoration to *shalom* begins.

Third, Palma voices her imagination for a future with hope and happiness. Somehow, she envisions herself hopefully reunited with her beloved Miguel and a house full of their children. Strength and power emanate from her as she cries aloud to the crowd. Her entreaty inspires. Reduced to begging, her speech nonetheless exudes formidability, dignity, eloquence, and confidence, testifying to her faithfulness to God in describing her beautiful future in stating, “But I know that when God reunites us, we will have children, a bright happy family.”³² In these heart-felt words, Palma sees the future she has dreamed of and prayed for ceaselessly. It is an articulation for her, for her extended family, and her community. Palma prophesizes for the future in a “practice of social imagination, authorized and energized by the public processing of pain, [as] an act of dangerous subversion but also an act of concrete hope.”³³ She stands with allies against Empire, she intervenes for the “lowly ones,” and calls for a new future based on her faith. She describes and bids for the coming of the Reign of God on earth.³⁴ Palma’s public cry and advocacy demonstrates how people of faith and faith organizations have rights through the First Amendment to challenge these disgraceful actions of separation, detention, and deportation of people who have lived here most of their lives.

The Devolution to Concentration Camps

Since Palma’s demonstration four years ago, the immigration crisis has devolved to such a nadir that Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez declared the U.S. has created concentration camps around the country,

³⁰ Brueggemann, *Hope within History*, 24.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

³² Palma, Speech.

³³ Brueggemann, *Hope within History*, 24.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

euphemistically called “detention centers.” Merriam Webster’s definition of a concentration camp is:

[A] place where large numbers of people (such as prisoners of war, political prisoners, refugees, or the members of an ethnic or religious minority) are detained or confined under armed guard —used especially in reference to camps created by the Nazis in World War II for the internment and persecution of Jews and other prisoners.³⁵

Latinx migrants, children and asylum seekers are housed, as reported by an independent inspection team that determined the following:

Overcrowded, squalid conditions are more widespread at migrant centers along the southern border than initially revealed, the Department of Homeland Security’s independent watchdog said Tuesday. Its report describes standing-room-only cells, children without showers and hot meals, and detainees clamoring desperately for release.³⁶

Both the backlash and support for Ocasio-Cortez’s assessment have been swift and strong. In retaliation, “Trump used a version of a well-worn insult to tell four congresswomen to ‘go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came. Then come back and show us how it is done.’ All but one are American-born, but all are women of color.”³⁷ Two of the congresswomen are Muslims, and one wears the hijab. The hue and cry over this blatant race-baiting has also been swift and strong.

³⁵ “Definition of CONCENTRATION CAMP,” accessed July 18, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concentration+camp>.

³⁶ Zolan Kanno-Youngs, “Squalid Conditions at Border Detention Centers, Government Report Finds,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 2019, accessed July 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/02/us/politics/border-center-migrant-detention.html>.

³⁷ Katie Rogers, “The Painful Roots of Trump’s ‘Go Back’ Comment,” *The New York Times*, July 16, 2019, accessed July 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/16/us/politics/trump-go-back.html>.

While there are no gas chambers in these detention centers, people are dying while detained.³⁸ Ocasio-Cortez's characterization has merit. Freelance journalist Lauren Duca offers a critique of the ensuing semantic question of whether the detention centers are, by definition "concentration camps." Duca opines,

*This entire conversation is a "tremendous disservice" to our moral intelligence. The concentration camp debate is about whether things are "that bad," which is to say, "as bad as the Holocaust." There is no forced labor or routine executions at the migrant detention centers, but gas chambers are not required for moral atrocities. Arguing about what is "worse" is a slippery slope of relativism, and it leads straight to hell, where I suppose we can ask Hitler's ghost to weigh in all of this. Insofar as we have stood by and watched while human beings are deprived of the requirements for basic survival: it's that bad, it's been that bad, and it is only going to get worse if we continue having a slap-fight with a thesaurus.*³⁹

Duca highlights our inability to move beyond rhetoric and look to the reality of what is happening. The United States is "en-forcing" the federal administration's racist policies that pointedly demean and terrorize people of color. Duca blasts the government and its citizens over its tautology on what to call the detention centers as a colossal *time-waster*, instead of dealing directly with the crisis to eradicate suffering. She exhorts the citizens to demand reform and justice:

If we're distributing blame, the lion's share goes to the Trump administration, and there's a hefty portion to be split among such equivocating cowards as Liz Cheney and Chuck Todd — *but we all participate in upholding the status quo that has given birth to this crisis.* Take responsibility for your statistically non-significant role in setting room temperature, *and insist on choosing action over despair. Speak up, in real life*

³⁸ Liam Stack, "Mother Whose Child Died After ICE Detention Sues for \$60 Million," *The New York Times*, November 28, 2018, accessed July 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/us/migrant-child-wrongful-death-lawsuit.html>.

³⁹ *Ibid.* Italics mine.

*and online. Contact your representatives in Congress, and let them know they must prioritize this issue. Donate, if you're able — I recommend RAICES — and join a local protest, or organize one of your own.*⁴⁰

At present, this federal government daily fails to find more humane and cost-effective ways to handle the immigration crisis, just as with Palma three years ago.

Palma's story fell on deaf ears that day, just as in Jesus's parable of the persistent widow had many times. Palma expected the same thing would happen to her, too. That notwithstanding, she recognized injustice, thought, reflected and processed the implications of that injustice, and she acted by publicly demanding justice. Palma breathed new life into the parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge and brought it into her reality, and into ours. The US continues to lose face with greater and more fatal implications for those in our "protective custody," despite the availability of more humane and economical means of processing asylum and applicants requesting to migrate to the US.

Requesting asylum is not against the law, so there's no legal requirement to jail them like criminals. Under past administrations, the Department of Homeland Security has usually chosen to lock up both asylum seekers and those who cross the border without a visa, but the agency also created several effective alternatives to detention. The White House could prioritize these programs instead of keeping migrants in such inhumane conditions.⁴¹

Yet the Trump administration has instead elected to discontinue programs that would relieve the squalor and reduce costs:

⁴⁰ Lauren Duca, "Opinion: They Are Concentration Camps. That's the Whole Point," *The Independent*, last modified July 3, 2019, accessed July 15, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/aoc-migrant-detention-centers-trump-administration-holocaust-concentration-camps-a8986806.html>. Italics mine.

⁴¹ Alexia Fernández Campbell, "Reminder: Trump Doesn't Need to Keep Migrants in Detention Camps," *Vox*, last modified July 4, 2019, accessed July 18, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/7/4/20681298/trump-migrant-detention-camps-alternatives>.

Until a few years ago, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was running two alternative programs at the national level: the Intensive Supervision Appearance Program (ISAP), which involves electronic monitoring, and the less restrictive Family Case Management Program (FCMP), which relied on community monitoring. The administration ended one of the programs and has not expanded the other. The methods used in these programs are available to DHS, and are much cheaper than traditional detention — but the Trump administration is operating as if locking everyone up in squalid conditions is the only way.⁴²

As described by Ada María Isasi-Días, Palma engaged in a liberative praxis to wrest herself and her community from this oppressive system. Praxis is not something that she just went out and did. Rather, praxis is part of her life; it is about living out her conscience. Like the widow, Palma relied on faith to reorder her reality through faith.

Churches and the faithful can look to this parable and Palma and Miguel's story as an example and as evidence that public theology is a powerful tool for social change. Like any major change, it takes time.⁴³ It is the hope that this public cry against separating families of color will inspire many more acts of public/political theology, not only to enact fair immigration laws through bipartisan reform, but also to address the many complex social injustices of our time. The work is very hard, but we can persist until our cries are heard by a loving God who will act with and through us. Just as history looks back to the heroes and martyrs who challenged the Holocaust, Palma, inspired by the Persistent Widow and her faith, will be remembered as one who joined in the much-needed collective cry for justice and humane treatment. As members of faith-based houses of worship and people of faith, we have a duty to utilize our constitutional

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Consider the centuries and decades of work for equality through: 1) women's suffrage beginning in 1848 in Seneca Falls, NY; 2) the modern civil rights movement, commencing in 1865 with the enactment of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U. S. Constitution; and 3) LGBTQ equal rights movement beginning at the Stonewall Inn of New York City in 1969. Each of these movements, bolstered by the First Amendment protections, unfolded through tireless work of activists, legislators, volunteers, theologians, civil rights attorneys, the Supreme Court, coalitions, and people acting on their faith-based sense of compassion and justice. Martin Luther King Jr. quoting the Rev. Theodore Parker, said, "Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

rights on behalf of those who suffer in squalor at the hands of a racist and cruel administration.⁴⁴

Miguel was deported a few weeks after the protest. Palma is a public theologian despite Miguel's deportation because she spoke faithfully to continue the cry of injustice. We are all theologians.⁴⁵ As progressive Christians who follow the Way of Jesus, we are called to exercise our rights and our faith to undue this systematic dehumanization of people of color. The world's religions all observe some form of the Golden Rule, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

We are empowered through the constitution, our faith traditions, and our charitable organizations to work in coalitions to reverse this escalation of racial atrocities. We can attend demonstrations, hold public liturgies, offer prayer and anoint those who fear deportation of a loved one. We can lobby and testify before governmental committees with our expertise. We can fill billboards with messages of hope and courage. We must vote for representatives who will legislate fair laws, and when they are elected, we must call and write to demand they act on their campaign promises. We can hold voter registration drives and candidate forums for voter education.⁴⁶

The faithful on earth will continue unceasingly in the prayers for justice amidst profound challenges, in the struggle, *en la Lucha*.

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Ledford's ministry is in Southwest Detroit's Latinx population--an international port with an aggressive regional ICE director. She is a civil rights attorney who has represented society's most marginalized. An Episcopal priest, she holds a Master of Divinity from the Church Divinity School of the Pacific and a Doctor of Ministry from Pacific School of Religion. She founded

⁴⁴ Alexia Salvatierra, *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014). For ideas on how to do public theology from a faith-based perspective, this is an excellent resource.

⁴⁵ Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013). These seminary professors maintain that we are all theologians whether we have letters after our names or not; we have an innate litmus test for knowing right and wrong. Sometimes our imbedded theological paradigms must change. This is an excellent book for group discussion in Christian formation classes.

⁴⁶ Consult with IRS guidelines for the specific rules for these activities. See this website for more information, or consult with legal counsel, <https://www.stayexempt.irs.gov/home/existing-organizations/political-campaigns-and-charities>.

Political Theology Matters to help the faithful develop political theology mission and broadcast messaging.

Bibliography

- Aland, Barbara, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger. *The Greek New Testament*, Fourth Revised Edition. Stuttgart: Bibelgesellschaft, 2001.
- Bevans, Stephen B. *Models of Contextual Theology: Faith and Culture*. New York: Orbis Books, 2002.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Hope within History*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1987.
- Campbell, Alexia Fernández. "Reminder: Trump Doesn't Need to Keep Migrants in Detention Camps." *Vox*. Last modified July 4, 2019. Accessed July 18, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/2019/7/4/20681298/trump-migrant-detention-camps-alternatives>.
- Carrigan, William D., and Clive Webb. *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States from 1848-1928*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- De La Torre, Miguel A. *The U.S. Immigration Crisis: Toward an Ethics of Place*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016.
- "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA/DAPA) | ILRC." Accessed May 16, 2019. <https://www.ilrc.org/daca>.
- "Definition of CONCENTRATION CAMP." Accessed July 18, 2019. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concentration+camp>.
- Duca, Lauren. "Opinion: They Are Concentration Camps. That's the Whole Point." *The Independent*. Last modified July 3, 2019. Accessed July 15, 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/aoc-migrant-detention-centers-trump-administration-holocaust-concentration-camps-a8986806.html>.
- González, Justo L. *MAÑANA: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990.
- Isasi-Díaz, Ada María. *En La Lucha/ In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Sacra Pagina: Luke*. Volume 3. Edited by Daniel J. Harrington. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991.
- Kanno-Youngs, Zolan. "Squalid Conditions at Border Detention Centers, Government Report Finds." *The New York Times*, July 2, 2019, sec. U.S. Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/02/us/politics/border-center-migrant-detention.html>.
- Ledford, Marcia L. "Christian Progressive Political Theology: An Example of Acting on the Word for Immigration Reform." Dissertation, Pacific School of Religion, 2019.
- Lynerd, Benjamin T. *Republican Theology: The Civil Religion of American Evangelicals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

- Malina, Bruce J., and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. "Widow." In *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003.
- Noonan, John T. *The Lustre of Our Country: The American Experience of Religious Freedom*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Pfeifer, Michael J. *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Rodríguez, Palma. Speech presented at the Anti-deportation Protest, Rosa Parks Immigration Center. Detroit, MI: June 10, 2015.
- Rogers, Katie. "The Painful Roots of Trump's 'Go Back' Comment." *The New York Times*, July 16, 2019, sec. U.S. Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/16/us/politics/trump-go-back.html>.
- Rojas-Flores, Lisseth, Mari L. Clements, J. Hwang Koo, and Judy London. "Trauma and Psychological Distress in Latino Citizen Children Following Parental Detention and Deportation." *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 9, no. 3 (May 1, 2017): 352-361.
- Salvatierra, Alexia. *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014.
- "Sessions Cites Bible in Defense of Breaking up Families, Blames Migrant Parents." *NBC News*. Accessed April 13, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/sessions-cites-bible-defense-breaking-families-blames-migrant-parents-n883296>.
- Stack, Liam. "Mother Whose Child Died After ICE Detention Sues for \$60 Million." *The New York Times*, November 28, 2018, sec. U.S. Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/us/migrant-child-wrongful-death-lawsuit.html>.
- Stone, Howard W., and James O. Duke. *How to Think Theologically*. 3rd Edition. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013.