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*Editorial*

**Theological Education in the Midst of Dual Pandemics**

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## **Theological Education in the Midst of Dual Pandemics**

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Greetings to the GTU community—both near and far. Our last volume of the Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology (BJRT) was published exactly a year ago from this writing—in December 2020—many months after the COVID-19 pandemic re-engineered the US’s entire social and economic framework, including how we offer and engage theological education and leadership in academia and provide ministerial spiritual care. In addition to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 and its ensuing strains, this past year also wrought the horrors of the January 6 insurrection at the White House and an ever-growing legion of US citizens who have united under the banner of “anti-vaxxers” to demonstrate their presumed autonomy, independence, and privilege in spite of its death-dealing implications to the innumerable people, communities, and populations of all stripes that make up the whole of this nation.

The murder of George Floyd in 2020, yet another in an exhausting cycle of police misconduct against Black communities leading to fatality, catalyzed communities globally to demand for change—specifically the police and justice system. One year later in November 2021, White privilege and blatant racism was once again on display during the televised trials of Kyle Rittenhouse for the killing of Black Lives Matter protestors in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and Gregory and Travis McMichael and William Bryan

for the murder of Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Georgia. The judge in the Rittenhouse case made racist jokes from the bench, while defense attorneys in the Bryan and McMichaels case publicly asked that no more “Black preachers” be allowed to quietly support the family of Ahmaud Arbery in the courtroom. The viciously casual racism of the past year, coupled with the ongoing realities and fatalities of the COVID-19 virus, are dual plagues that Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities bear the brunt of, and that require a systemic rebuke by a consortium of faithful leaders.

On a macro-national level as well as on a micro-institutional level we are face-to-face with a reckoning that has deep spiritual and practical roots. The GTU is not exempt from this reality, its idyllic social location on Holy Hill challenged to foster deeper practices of inclusion. In Spring of 2021, the GTU community lost the on-campus presence of the Starr King School for the Ministry (SKSM). SKSM was—and remains from afar—a prolific theological voice within the GTU community for amplifying minoritized and marginalized voices and faiths. While SKSM continues to offer courses, programming, and its eagerly anticipated annual symposium—the 2022 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium “Co-creating a Just Digital Future” led by Dr. Sylvester Johnson—the missing physical presence of a scholastic partner committed to developing a wide array of voices for 21<sup>st</sup> century theological education and praxis is felt by the central GTU campus community. Traversing the chasmic distances of physical space and religio-political ideologies that currently exist within our broad-based academic community to lead and guide with spiritual and theological integrity is the challenge we are called to face, together.

Individually and institutionally, we have been challenged to invigorate our spiritual praxis as leaders, scholars, and consumers with deeper levels of reflection, compassion, and accountability to meet this unprecedented moment. In its first year of GTU 2.0—the Graduate Theological Union’s 5-year strategic plan—the GTU has valiantly attempted to meet this moment with transparency, while simultaneously advancing new technological offerings that weave together diverse theological perspectives on ecology, politics, justice, and faith. Some important initiatives include:

- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Guided by an external consultant, the GTU invited an intersectional cohort of students to share their experiences of institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion practices and offer recommendations for inclusion within the overall organizational framework. According to a November 2021 update from the GTU President's Office, these recommendations were shared with the GTU Board and, with structural guidance by the GTU Leadership Team and others, are procedurally being interwoven into the overall organizational framework for prayerfully deeper and more inclusive policies, offerings, and representation.
- GTUx: A global destination for digital learning, GTUx has been a vibrant new offering that allows the excellence of GTU scholarship to be experienced by learners across the globe. An on-demand praxis of teaching and learning, GTUx has embraced the need and demand for digital learning opportunities guided by academic, spiritual, and theo-ethical interrogation, and claimed a unique space that provides interreligious perspectives on topics as diverse as politics, ecology, and justice.
- Spiritual Care: From the earliest days of the pandemic, the GTU has made sincere attempts to meet the practical and spiritual needs of concerned students and the wider GTU community. From ongoing projects such as the "Spiritual Care and Ethical Leadership for Our Times" series which features reflections by GTU scholars, students, and spiritual leaders, to program offerings from the Center for the Arts and Religion (CARE), and the establishment of the GTU Black Students' Caucus, among others, the GTU has offered sanctuary for students needing the comfort of community as well as a constructive outlet to express their challenges and concerns.

As the student-run, peer-reviewed Journal of the Graduate Theological Union, the BJRT remains committed to sharing the interreligious perspectives and research of its diverse student body, the scholars who call this place home, and those who have brought their illustrious words and research into our midst. In Volume 7, we are excited

to once again feature the publication of distinguished lectures given at the GTU over the previous academic year. This begins with the 2020 Distinguished Faculty Lecture “Haciendo Memoria: Revisiting Our Blessings at the GTU” given by Dr. Eduardo Fernández, S.J., and response by Dr. Judith Berling. Also from 2020, we are honored to include the Surjit Singh Lecture “Rethinking the Study of African Indigenous Religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” given by revered international scholar Dr. Jacob Olupona. Then in 2021, Dr. Kathryn Barush presented an illuminating Reading of the Sacred Texts Lecture titled, “‘Shield, Help, and Bring to Joy’: Pilgrimage through Sacred Song,” and Dr. Devin Zuber gave a timely Borsch-Rast Lecture, “Looking at the Earth with a Language of Things: Emanuel Swedenborg and the American Environmental Imagination,” both of which are published in this volume.

In addition to these exceptional lectures, the BJRT is also excited to include another round of important peer-reviewed articles that highlight critical research in the authors’ respective fields. Diverse topics include the development of a theology of kinship in Appalachia coal-mining country, a dialogue around social trinitarianism drawing on the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher and philosophy of Immanuel Kant, an exploration of hope in the political theology of Jürgen Moltmann, and an intellectual journey through concepts of modernity and post-modernity. We are also excited to publish a special report from the student-scholars who comprise the Koret Fellowship in Interreligious and Intercultural Facilitation, before concluding the issue with book reviews of Teresia Hinga’s *African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters* (2017), Devin Zuber’s *A Language of Things: Emanuel Swedenborg and the American Environmental Imagination* (2020), and Catherine Keller’s *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (2018).

The BJRT remains committed to serve as a platform for diverse, prophetic, rigorous, and courageous scholarship for the GTU community – and beyond. As we collectively commit to make communal meaning out of our collective circumstances and reflect deeply on our role as theological educators and consumers, there will inevitably be times that we will stumble, when we will say too much—or not enough—but there will also

be times when we get it just right. May those times outweigh the others,  
and may we press on toward the realization of community, together.