

Introduction: Theologizing in a Time of Reckoning

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Reckoning (n.): (1a) The action of accounting to God after death for (one's) conduct in life; an account so given; the occasion of giving such an account, the Last Judgment. Also: God's judgment on or penalty for a person's actions. (1b) The action or an occasion of giving or being required to give an account of something, esp. one's conduct or actions; an account or statement so given. A calling to account.¹

THE REALITY OF RECKONING IS A CENTRAL CHRISTIAN conviction. From the moment God reckoned Abram's faith in the divine promise as righteousness (Gen 15:6 NRSV) to the reckoning on the day of judgment for every idle word we speak (Matt 12:36 Young's Literal Translation), the scriptures are replete with the action, promise, and threat of naming, enumerating, tallying, and assessing. Derived from Germanic etymological roots for *right* (as in straight or rule) and *rech* (to stretch out, as on the rack), to reckon indicated the giving of a verbal account or the act of monetary accounting (see, e.g., Matt 18:24 NRSV) for the purpose of reaching a considered and correct assessment or judgment. In some translations, the same Hebrew term translated as "reckon" (*chashab*, חָשַׁב) also indicates the artistic work of a skilled craftsperson; at times, the Greek term which becomes "reckon" is—intriguingly—*logos*.²

While such judgment is often construed in individual terms, its scriptural scope is fundamentally corporate—the calling to account of a people, specifically for the sins of idolatry, apostasy, the corruption of princes and judges, and the exploitation and oppression of the poor, widowed, sick, and stranger (Ezek 21–22, Jer 10 New Living Translation; Hos 5:9, 9:7 NIV, et passim). In the Hebrew Scriptures, key objects of this reckoning were the temple priests and false prophets, self-styled religious leaders who led the people of Israel away from God's law and life for their own power, influence, and profit. Jesus's woes likewise called out the ruling class within his own

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, "Reckoning, sense 1.a-b," March 2025, doi.org/10.1093/OED/5517692394.

² See *Bible Hub*, "Chasab"; and Heb 4:13, www.biblehub.com.

tradition who, by protecting their own privilege, became deeply implicated in the political economy oppressing the poor.³

The church in the US faces just such a moment of reckoning. From centuries of collusion in the idolatries undergirding the sacrifice and exploitation of vast peoples to the twisted account of ‘Christian nationalism’ that is the current apotheosis of this history, the church is finding itself called to give an account to itself, the wider public, and God. Part of that accounting relates to the role Christian theology has played in the church’s failure. The articles in this issue of the *Journal of Moral Theology* undertake this work, while also lifting up possibilities for (the beginnings of) reparation.

We draw this theme from Janna Hunter-Bowman’s opening article, “Reckoning in Mennonite Peace Theology: Reinhold Niebuhr’s Realism and Four Waves of Development.”⁴ Continuing our long commitment to furthering scholarship in the area of academic peace theology, Hunter-Bowman brings a rare and welcome Mennonite voice to the *Journal of Moral Theology*. She also provides, to our surprise, our first article that engages the work of Reinhold Niebuhr. She traces the (nonlinear, overlapping) development of Mennonite peace theology in four waves—nonresistance, transformation, reckoning, and self-critical responsibility—situating each *vis-à-vis* an ongoing argument with Niebuhr’s realism. The third wave is particularly pertinent now. Third wave Mennonite scholars call the church to self-reflection on our internal capacity for injustice and often “slavish and silent” acceptance of practices of violence that permeate both our culture and institutions. They “contend that Mennonites cannot adequately speak in the terms of our inherited tradition of peace unless we grapple with the reality of violence (sin), including sexualized violence, systemic racism, and colonialism within us.”⁵ Reckoning with such internal failures remains a crucial task, not only for Mennonite peace theologians, but equally for Christians across traditions.

Just such a reckoning has come on US immigration policy. The US is now six months into its latest chapter of state violence against immigrants. Masked ICE agents abduct tourists, students, asylum seekers, and long-time residents off the street, “detaining” them in state prisons, for-profit facilities, and concentration-camp like compounds with blatant disregard for their legal status, human rights,

³ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Orbis Books, 1988), 222.

⁴ Janna Hunter-Bowman, “Reckoning in Mennonite Peace Theology: Reinhold Niebuhr’s Realism and Four Waves of Development,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 14, no. 2 (2025): 7–34.

⁵ Hunter-Bowman, “Reckoning in Mennonite Peace Theology,” 24.

or constitutional due process.⁶ Recent legislation triples federal and state spending for “border security and interior enforcement” to at least \$145 billion over four years which, “combined with application fees and benefit limitations, fundamentally alter American immigration policy to a degree not seen since the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996.”⁷ While many are rightly horrified, recent events have simply brought into full view the dehumanizing treatment many immigrants to the US have received at the hands of federal and state agents since at least the 1970s. It has also made newly visible the acceleration of mass incarceration in the US since 1980 along with our now highly militarized domestic security forces. To their credit, a handful of US bishops have objected to these practices and legislation and taken new steps, dispensing immigrants from Mass attendance and appearing in immigration courts.⁸

Thus, our second article, “Romero, Migration, and the Grammar of Creation” by Matthew Philipp Whelan and Victor J. Hinojosa (also a Mennonite scholar) could not be more timely.⁹ The authors helpfully trace the history behind the recent era of unprecedented migration across the Americas unveiling its roots in hunger, political and criminal violence, and climate change, fomented in various ways by US involvement in Latin America since at least the turn of the twentieth century. Drawing on the work of San Oscar Romero and Pope Francis, they complexify the conversation by articulating not only the familiar right *to* migrate—to leave one’s home when the conditions for living in dignity are not met—but also the right *not* to migrate—to remain in one’s home under dignified living conditions. Romero’s witness and Pope Francis’s advocacy stand in judgment of “Christians” who enact state violence against immigrants, tacitly support it, or stand silently by. Whelan and Hinojosa’s analysis points

⁶ Maureen Tkacik, “Meet the Disaster Capitalists Behind Alligator Alcatraz,” *The American Prospect*, July 17, 2025, prospect.org/power/2025-07-17-meet-disaster-capitalists-alligator-alcatraz/.

⁷ The National Immigration Forum, “One Big Beautiful Bill Act: Immigration Provisions,” July 7, 2025, immigrationforum.org/article/one-big-beautiful-bill-act-immigration-provisions/.

⁸ Elizabeth Dias, “Catholic Bishops Try to Rally Opposition to Trump’s Immigration Agenda,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/06/29/us/catholic-bishops-trump-immigration.html; Kate Scanlon, “Catholic Opposition Grows to Trump’s Big Bill; 20 Bishops Rally to Oppose It, but Bishops’ Conference Does Not Go That Far,” *National Catholic Reporter*, June 27, 2025, www.ncronline.org/catholic-opposition-grows-trumps-big-bill-bishops-conference-waffles; Associated Press, “California Bishop Excuses Weekly Mass Obligation Amid Immigration Raids,” *The Guardian*, July 10, 2025, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jul/10/california-bishop-mass-immigration.

⁹ Matthew Philipp Whelan and Victor J. Hinojosa, “Romero, Migration, and the Grammar of Creation,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 14, no. 2 (2025): 35–64.

toward new possibilities for state policy and Christian practice. Again to our surprise, this is only the second article on migration the *Journal of Moral Theology* has published. We would welcome more.

This turn to Romero underscores a key piece of the process of reckoning: to dismantle the structures of sin in which we participate requires centering the experience-based knowledge and the constructive theological and practical gifts of those on the underside of those structures. Toward that end, SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai highlights the African practice of palaver.¹⁰ The Catholic Church has only just begun to reckon with its role in the vicious and lethal exploitation of the peoples of Africa, the Americas, and Asia and with the attendant erasure of their cultures. In his article, “Palaver as a Synodal Praxis of Belonging in the Catholic Church,” Ahiokhai joins other African scholars who lift up palaver as a generative framework for the church’s ongoing ecclesiological renewal, applying it here to the current conversation on synodality.¹¹ Retrieving this deeply-rooted cultural praxis not only provides the basis for a unique African consciousness of how to be church; it likewise generates new possibilities for the global church and the ongoing development of theological ethics.

Undergirding such practices are alternative conceptual frameworks—different anthropologies, sociologies, and theologies. While not addressing the praxis of palaver directly, Colman Okechukwu Nwokoro unpacks one piece of its undergirding conceptual framework in his article “From *Ubuntu* to *Fratelli Tutti*: ‘I Am Because We Are’ and Relational Solidarity.”¹² Nwokoro explores the resonances between the African concept of *ubuntu*—shifting Desmond Tutu’s phrase to “I am because *we* are”—and Pope Francis’s call for relational solidarity in *Fratelli Tutti*. For Nwokoro, this African concept holds the potential for rectifying much of the pain caused by a Christianity allied so deeply with hyper-individualism, capitalism, and Eurocentric xenophobia.

As Hunter-Bowman’s essay makes clear, reckoning with internal failures to recognize and address the violences that have permeated and shaped our theologies and institutions remains a crucial task across denominations. For the Mennonite tradition, one of these has been its failure to deal with problems of sexual violence within its own

¹⁰ SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai, “Palaver as a Synodal Praxis of Belonging in the Catholic Church,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 14, no. 2 (2025): 65–91.

¹¹ See, for example, Stan Chu Ilo and Caroline N. Mbonu, eds., *Under the Palaver Tree: Doing African Ecclesiology in the Spirit of Vatican II—The Contributions of Elochukwu E. Uzukwu* (Pickwick, 2023).

¹² Colman Okechukwu Nwokoro, “From *Ubuntu* to *Fratelli Tutti*: ‘I Am Because We Are’ and Relational Solidarity,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 14, no. 2 (2025): 92–117.

institutions and the elements of its theology and polity that made that possible. This, of course, is not unique to the Mennonite tradition. While the Catholic Church and other institutions have instituted safeguarding practices and other necessary policies, most have yet to deal honestly with the theological frameworks and institutional politics that long enabled these failures. The symposium on “Christian Family Ethics and Shame” featured in this issue forms one effort to move the needle on these matters.¹³ Out of a panel organized by the Families and Social Responsibility interest group at the 2024 annual meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics, Marcus Mescher, Kari-Shane Davis Zimmerman, Grace Kao, and M. T. Dávila grapple with the damage done to persons, families, and communities by normative claims of Christian ethics surrounding sexuality and the family. They address the intergenerational shame, censure, and social stigma surrounding sexual transgressions, childlessness, the use of reproductive technologies, and queer Catholic families. These honest accounts blend the personal and academic, inviting further exploration and conversation.

This July 2025 issue comes to a close with Joseph S. Flipper’s review essay “‘Killing in the Name’: Three Books and the Exigencies of Antiracism.”¹⁴ Akin to the current situation on immigration, the US is simultaneously facing a reckoning on its steadfast refusal to accurately and adequately address the violence of African enslavement and subsequent forms of structural racism at the very heart of its national identity and history. As he notes,

the federal government is aggressively dismantling policies, structures, and offices that redress inequality or simply enforce nondiscrimination law. The Supreme Court majority has signaled its perspective that entrenched racial inequality is no longer a sufficiently significant social problem to find redress in the court system. States have passed laws that proscribe the discussion of race and gender, which may include the history of slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation. The federal government has launched an ideological purge that Julian Vazquez Heilig has likened to the Cultural Revolutions in China and Iran. The current administration now prohibits public funding of programs that seek to remediate historical or contemporary

¹³ See Marcus Mescher, “Christian Family Ethics and Shame: Three Perspectives,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 14, no. 2 (2025): 118–123; Kari-Shane Davis Zimmerman, “Families, Social Responsibility, and Experiencing Shame,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 14, no. 2 (2025): 124–134; Grace Kao, “Shame and Censure in Family Planning,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 14, no. 2 (2025): 135–151; M. T. Dávila, “‘Falling Short of Our Humanity’: Shame and Queer Catholic Families,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 14, no. 2 (2025): 152–162.

¹⁴ Joseph S. Flipper, “‘Killing in the Name’: Three Books and the Exigencies of Antiracism,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 14, no. 2 (2025): 163–173.

inequalities and punishes universities for allowing social justice protest. . . . The escalating rhetoric by political figures targeting immigrant and ethnic groups can reasonably be described as stochastic terrorism.¹⁵

The US Catholic Church bears significant responsibility for this, insofar as 54 percent of Catholic voters—including six of ten white Catholic voters—voted for this regime, an outcome spurred by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic “influencers,” and the growing network of Catholic dark money.¹⁶ Over against internal failures, Flipper highlights three Catholic scholars who seek—via metanoia, virtue, and prophecy—to point a way forward toward an antiracist ecclesial practice. These are Alex Mikulich, *Unlearning White Supremacy: A Spirituality for Racial Liberation* (Orbis Books, 2022), Conor M. Kelly, *Racism and Structural Sin: Confronting Injustice with the Eyes of Faith* (Liturgical Press, 2023), and Matthew Kappadakunnel, *The Catholic Church and the Struggle for Racial Justice: A Prophetic Call* (Paulist, 2024).

In the end, reckoning is not simply judgment. As Hunter-Bowman notes, “Reckoning . . . is a necessary form of peace theology; it illuminates the importance of critical self-reflection in a time of disillusionment with the church and Christianity and sets new parameters for peace witness, including constructive interventions for ‘justpeace’ in practice and theory.”¹⁷ This issue brings together a rich set of practices—the theo-critical accompaniment modeled by a Latin American bishop, palaver, *ubuntu*, bold testimony, metanoia, virtue, prophecy—which as manifestations of peace reorient theological ethics toward faithful, generative resistance. **M**

¹⁵ Flipper, “Killing in the Name,” 164.

¹⁶ Associated Press, “Trump Boosted Support Among Catholic Voters,” *National Catholic Reporter*, November 11, 2024; www.ncronline.org/news/trump-boosted-support-among-catholic-voters; Mary Jo McConahey, *Playing God: American Catholic Bishops and the Far Right* (Melville House, 2023).

¹⁷ Hunter-Bowman, “Reckoning in Mennonite Peace Theology,” 7–8.