

THEOLOGICAL CONVOLOSIONS

Theology and Bravery

Laura Cheifetz

Theology is not neutral when it comes to our personal lives within community. How we think about God shapes how we interact with others and the world. Our theological understandings of how we relate to creation and other people are lived out in policy within the church, our communities, and the country of which we are a part.

Martin Luther saw himself doing theology considering serious problems and real issues in church and society. He made a big statement to bring attention to real problems he saw within his church, because like many of us, he believed in the capacity of his community of faith to change its practices and beliefs to align with its core faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, making faith accessible to the common people. Luther challenged the practice and belief of requiring a mediator (priest) between God and people. He wanted people to be able to worship God in their own languages, making worship accessible to the majority uneducated population. This was dangerous. He had to be brave. His statement and critique of the church quickly placed him in grave danger, and he had to fight for his life, like Esther before him. Like Martin Luther, we risk our belonging and our church when raising questions that open new ideas beyond what we now understand as Reformed theology and practice. The Protestant Reformation began a process that now allows us to engage in theological work not bound by education, class, gender, or institutions.

To stretch into this theological conversation means we must be bold like Martin Luther.

There is no way to predict what will happen in the next 500 years, given the change that has taken place over last five hundred. However, it is safe to say Christianity will continue to change.

Christianity has already changed since the Reformation. We in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are part of a dominant stream of theology that has worked in tandem with ruling powers, or empire¹. Miguel De La Torre describes this as a merging of goals,

using [Christian faith] to justify the [U.S. Empire, which is] . . . responsible for providing moral justification for a U.S. Christian history marked by the conquest of the land, the genocide of indigenous populations, and the enslavement of generations of people (p. 35).²

1. Empire describes Western Christian dominance, with Western Christianity considered normative or orthodox Christianity, holding the power to define the faith, with the economic resources to fund churches in other countries, and whose version of Christianity was spread throughout the world concurrently with military and economic expansion of Europe and the U.S. The Revolutionary War is one example of resistance to empire, in which the British colonies in North America fought for independence from the British Empire. Many of those seeking independence were Presbyterians.
2. Miguel A. De La Torre, *Latinalo Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking*. New Perspectives in Latina/o Religion, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press), 35.

Presbyterians took part in what some call the invasion, and others of us call the settlement of the Americas. Our nation-state was founded to favor white male land-owners and mission work with colonial reach. Presbyterians had direct access to governmental power for most of our history.

No matter where we find ourselves in this history, we will be, at the very least, uncomfortable. If this is uncomfortable for us, we need to be brave.

We are losing our grip on power. For years now, the center of gravity has been shifting from the west and the north, from Europe and even from the U.S., toward Christianity that is growing fastest in Africa and Asia and changing in Latin America. Instead of the seat of Christian power being Geneva or Rome, we are seeing it shift south to the areas we in the western world considered to be “our” mission fields.

When I was a college student, the Office of Women’s Ministries sent me as part of a delegation to a World Council of Churches consultation on women and racism. I spent a week in India with over 20 other women, in conversation about the ways racism and sexism are lived out in our various contexts. It was my first meaningful and sustained interaction with Christians from outside of the United States. I learned that I have no need to worry about the church. The church in the United States will change, and might even fade, but the church in other parts of the world is engaging in faithful rapid expansion and evangelism. The church will be okay. This has led me to ask if we in the west are afraid of our numerical decline and influence among our own, or if we fear that we in the mainline have no control over the direction of Christianity in other areas of the world.

Additionally, within the United States, white mainline Protestantism and white evangelicalism have seen a steady decline, while Christianity has seen vibrancy and growth among immigrant and people of color communities.³ The broad social influence of white mainline Protestantism, of which the Reformed tradition played a significant role, has slipped from its prominent role to a position of barely showing up in the national discourse. We are now far less likely to be called upon when the media and political leaders think of religious people.

We in the white-dominant Reformed tradition in the United States are the fading edge of the Christianity of empire. The empire is spiraling. But new possibilities for Christian life are emerging. We are asked to consider our participation in Christian faith and life beyond denominations or theological traditions. We who treasure the things that make our ministries possible—like our buildings, endowments, institutional structures, and special privileges—may find these will matter little in the years to come.

Even for those who think this is a good thing, it means we must be brave.

Bravery Among the Cloud of Witnesses

I move around the world with an understanding of how policy has always affected me. Asian Americans have survived immigration, internment, land theft, building railroads, trafficking and indentured servitude, racist laws targeting Asians, wars in Asia among Asian nations, wars in Asia against Asian nations by European nations and the U.S. (like when England went to war to force China to import opium, creating addiction), colonialism in Asia, and the Immigration Act of 1917, a bill intended to bar immigrants on nativist grounds.

My ancestors were unwanted and that shapes how I interact with the world. My paternal great-grandparents ran from the pogroms in Poland and anti-Semitism in Russia. My maternal

3. John Sides, “White Christian America is Dying,” *The Monkey Cage* (blog), *The Washington Post*, August 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/08/15/white-christian-america-is-dying/?utm_term=.95a8039c255d

great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents came from Japan around the same time, but were prohibited from becoming citizens until the McCarren-Walter Act of 1952, which amended the above-mentioned Immigration Act of 1917. The California Alien Land Law of 1913 prohibited my maternal immigrant ancestors from owning land. In 1943, my entire family on my mother's side was sent to internment camps in the western U.S. by President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066.

My ancestors were brave. They came here on boats—most of them never to return to their homelands and families of origin. They had to learn another language and the ways of another people, without the same rights that I have today. Then after years of living, working, and loving in this country, that same country locked them up because they were related to the people who had bombed Pearl Harbor.

And I can say to you: be brave. Your people have stories of what they have managed to survive.

All of us have a cloud of witnesses, a group of people calling us into bravery by their example or their explicit action. I have the witness of four Japanese American women who taught me what it means to be brave. All of them came from the same generation: children of the 1920s and 1930s who survived the internment camps instituted in World War II. They were children when they were uprooted from their homes and made to live behind barbed wire, despite confirmation that the Japanese and Japanese Americans on the west coast were not a threat to national security.

Yuri Nishita

Yuri Nishita, my grandmother, lost her birth father as a young child, and her birth family when she was given up for adoption to another couple. They loved her very much, but her adoptive mother died just a few years later. Then she and her father found themselves in an internment camp. After she was released, she went to the city and attended a secretarial school, then worked for the Navy as an accounting clerk before marrying my grandfather and raising five daughters.

Yuri Kochiyama

Yuri Kochiyama committed herself and her family to liberation movements, including anti-war movements, freeing Puerto Rican political prisoners, and black liberation. I never met her, but her convictions inspire me. She worked for reparations for Japanese American internees and openly opposed racial profiling of Muslims and South Asians.

Kiyo Yoshimura and Kiyo Fujiu

I met Kiyo Yoshimura and Kiyo Fujiu in Chicago. They spoke about their internment experiences on a panel investigating the maltreatment of Muslims after the attacks on September 11, 2001. They were members of the Japanese American Methodist church, committed to sharing the stories of what happened to them, making sure the stories were told so that it would not be repeated. They worked on behalf of others throughout their lives. When I knew these two women, they were barely younger than my grandmothers, yet they came often to our parties and enjoyed interacting with recent seminary graduates, interfaith activists, and labor organizers.

Japanese American men also revealed many ways to be brave during World War II. The Federal Government sent a loyalty survey to the camps, and two questions identified whom the government considered loyal and disloyal. Questions 27 and 28 asked whether people would be willing to serve through combat duty or in other ways, and if the responder would swear unqualified allegiance to the U.S. Many of the men responded “no” to both questions, despite

knowing there would be consequences. The questions assumed there had been preexisting loyalty to Japan and asked if they would serve the same government that had imprisoned them. Those labeled disloyal were segregated into an internment camp known as the “Tule Lake Relocation Center.”

However, many of those men of the right age who answered “yes” to both questions were drafted into a segregated Japanese American battalion, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which worked alongside the 100th Infantry Battalion, composed of Japanese Americans from Hawaii. The 442nd is still the most decorated unit in U.S. military history of its size in part because they were used on the front lines and suffered heavy losses. Their motto was “Go for broke.”

These Japanese Americans were also brave; they stuck with their convictions, whether that meant harsher incarceration or death on a foreign battlefield. I am surrounded by a brave cloud of witnesses: people—women and men—who fought against governmental oppression from the inside, and people who fought for the right to exist as Americans outside of concentration camps.

Bravery in the Face of Despair

Some of us have felt despair at the decline of the PC(USA), but I have not. I do not feel bothered by the changes taking place in Christianity because I put my faith in God and the capacity for human beings to change institutions to remain relevant. Reform is who and how we are, after all. I do feel despair, but its source is more recent.

I know many of us have despaired over all the rapid changes in our lives and our church. Fair warning: as I share my despair and how I need to be brave as a Christian, you may find yourself offended. That’s not my goal. But like Esther living her brave faith out, I need to live out the faith God has given me. I believe God calls us to a faith that is a gift, a salvation in Jesus Christ we do not need to earn through our actions or correct beliefs. And I believe God has called those of us with the ability to respond to that gift of faith to show our gratitude with actions. I try to live my life bravely, grateful that I am loved by God no matter what.

My despair is recent. I wake up every day like I always have. I’m a “get up and get going” type of person. And two seconds later, I remember who was elected president, and I feel sick to my stomach.

If my feelings are offensive to you, please keep reading. I ask you to be brave amid disagreement and read a little further.

If you feel the same way I do, and you struggle with your terror, please stick it out and keep reading. I ask you to be brave, again and again.

Whoever you supported in the election, or if you couldn’t vote because you are a sojourner in this land, or if you didn’t vote because you couldn’t bring yourself to do so, you must admit that this is not a typical transition of power. Our current state of being is not normal. The forty-fifth president’s business discriminated against black people in housing and fought against paying undocumented Polish construction workers for their labor on Trump Tower. He bragged about sexual assault. He hired a white supremacist as an advisor, chose a group of cabinet appointees remarkable for not reflecting his populist base, and disparages the intelligence establishment.

Even if you fall into the “wait and see” camp, you must know some of us feel we are being strangled by the government that has dropped all pretense of respect for scientific discovery and for persons of different races, religions, and genders.

Regardless of my despair, I am surrounded by reminders that I have work to do. Even my childhood taught me to be brave.

When I was a pre-teen, my father read *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy to me. One of us posted a quote from *The Return of the King* on my bedroom wall.

It is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule.⁴

For all the resources we have—the great cloud of witnesses, personal and religious histories, theologies and legacies of brave people—our bravery is not guaranteed to result in what we want to see, whether that is a policy change, congregational growth, or a return to our earlier political and cultural influence.

To be Christian is to stand for something. We are to be brave because our faith demands it and because the reign of God is “already-not yet.” We follow a Christ who both prayed and continued to act, to preach, and to heal, even in the face of persecution. We are called to be brave for Christ’s kingdom.

We Have a Brave Faith

I asked Niece Number Two, aged five, “Who is your favorite person in the Bible?” She didn’t need time to consider her answer:

I like Queen Esther. When I get scared, I think of Queen Esther, and I remember to be brave like her.

She resumed eating her lunch while my spouse and I sat for a moment—stunned.

There are many types of bravery. There is the bravery of people in socially dominant groups who go against the status quo, for white people who stand with black lives matter, citizens who accompany immigrants and refugees, and straight people who worked for equal marriage rights for those in same-gender marriages. There is bravery for people in socially minoritized groups, people of color who demand an end to injustice of all kinds; Native Americans who protect the water from corporate exploitation on behalf of the generations to come, women who work to end gender-based violence, minimum-wage workers fighting for a living wage.

Do you remember Shiphrah and Puah and their story in Exodus? They were the midwives for the Hebrew people during their time as slaves of Egypt. They were told to kill the baby boys; instead, they lied. They made sure Hebrew women had protected births, so they hid their presence at the births of boys. They risked their lives for life.

Being brave means we choose bravery over safety. Diversity and anti-racism trainers say they cannot create “safe space” in those conversations about injustice, but they can create “brave space.” Safety can be a way to still be cushioned and protected, risking little. Brave space seeks to change.

I have decided I do not have the choice of falling silent, hiding in my house, isolating myself with like-minded people, although I reserve the right to be kind to myself here and there. I come from people who lost parents when they were very young. I come from people who were interned

4. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001), 861.

in desert concentration camps. I come from people who spent their whole lives seen as a threat because of their Jewishness or their Japanese-ness. If my teenage grandparents could be brave, going from their homes and farms to the desert, then who I am to shrink away to nothing? If my young adult great-grandparents could run from pogroms to a country halfway around the world, with a different language and legal system, and never see their homes again, then who I am to give up?

Micah 6:8 calls God's people "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

Loving God and doing justice are not about sitting back or seeking safety, so I must live my brave Christian faith out loud. Loving God is leaning forward, not for a promotion, a new job, or better parental leave, but for a more just world. What I see is that the election of our new president has revealed some dynamics that we Christians must confront. Before the national election on November 8, 2016, we had a different type of call to bravery. We needed to resist empire and find hope in our better selves. This resistance means working for meaningful immigration reform, ending mandatory minimums for detentions, changing the criminal justice system, and doing something about climate change. But now, in a post-election world, we who have relied on our occasional leaning forward, or the leaning in of others, are called to be brave in new ways.

As Christians, let us make this new era a brave one, not a cautious one, not "wait-and-see," not one in which we avoid conflict with members of our congregations, not one in which we smile instead of saying the words seething behind the lumps in our throats, not one in which we edit out the harsh words that bubble into our sermons, not one in which we sit back and ignore that our religious leaders rarely discuss the reality we live in.

Today we speak out loud through our hesitation and fear, like Esther, Shiphrah and Puah, and Martin Luther. We proclaim that black lives matter. We pledge to protect the lives of the most vulnerable, with the most to lose from the coming administration, such as Muslims, immigrants, people of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and transgender people. We pledge that women are the sole stewards of their strong God-given and beautifully created bodies. We speak up for native sovereignty and self-determination. We say that disabled people are beautiful as they are. We say out loud that Asian Americans are more than the model minority or perpetual foreigners, and Latinxs are more than immigrants, but immigrants also deserve to be treated with dignity, as if they are created in the image of God. Because they are.

I believe in these times we are called to be in full-throated love-fueled rage against all that would cut life short, diminish us into shadows of our own (personal, congregational, national) selves. We were created by God for love, delight, joy. We were called by Jesus the Christ to justice and mercy (Matthew 25:31-46). We were created to be the manifestation of Christ in the world. Sometimes that means we will be outraged along with God's prophet Amos.

We live out theology in our everyday lives, whether we are five or ninety-five. Theology is personal, and the personal is always in community. Our theologies shape our actions: whether we vote or not, how we vote, what we give our money to, with whom we interact, how we spend our money, what we think about climate change or economic policy or human rights.

Our theologies lead us to be brave, or not, within these communities and with these actions. Today, I ask you to think of Esther. If she could face possible death and still speak up for her people, we can face the possibility of thinking and acting different, theologically.

Be brave. Like organizer Mother Jones said, "Fight like hell for the living." Our elders, our young ones, our Christian faith demands it.

Theology and Bravery

Conversation starters: Discussion Questions

Michelle Bartel

1. The writer shares the story of Shiprah and Puah, describing their story as an example of “strategic bravery.” In their story, how do they show they were strategic? Why is their story one of bravery?
2. Bravery seems to be needed most when we are facing powerful people or structures of power, for instance, testifying in a courtroom or protesting injustice. How does this dynamic—and other dynamics as well—show up in Esther’s story of strategic bravery?
3. Cheifetz makes it clear that we Christians “have a brave faith,” and Shiprah and Puah show us that respecting God doesn’t always mean going along with what authorities want us to do. Of the authorities we have in our society today, which might our respect of God lead us to resist, and why?
4. We meet Martin Luther briefly at the beginning of this article. In addition to “bravery,” what words would you use to describe his actions 500 years ago? Why would you choose those words?
5. The author shows us that Christian faith has been brave from the beginning and was a beginning part of the Reformation 500 years ago. How can Presbyterians offer this gift of bravery to the church and world in the next five, ten, or 500 years?
6. Cheifetz brings her own narrative into this article in a way that allows us, the readers, to connect our own histories. What stories about Christian bravery do you have in the history of your family, community, or church?
7. Finally, we often hear the scripture passage from Jeremiah that calls on the people of God to “seek the welfare of the city in which you live, for in its welfare you will find yours.” The word “politics” comes from “polis,” which means “city.” How is God, in your community, calling you and others to seek the welfare of your city? What definition of welfare would you and your fellow citizens agree on? If you and your congregation seek the welfare of the city, what bravery might be required of you?