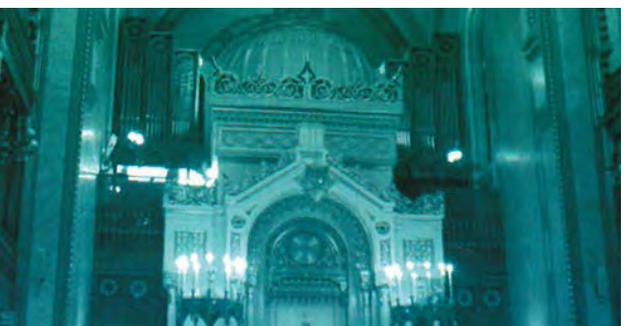
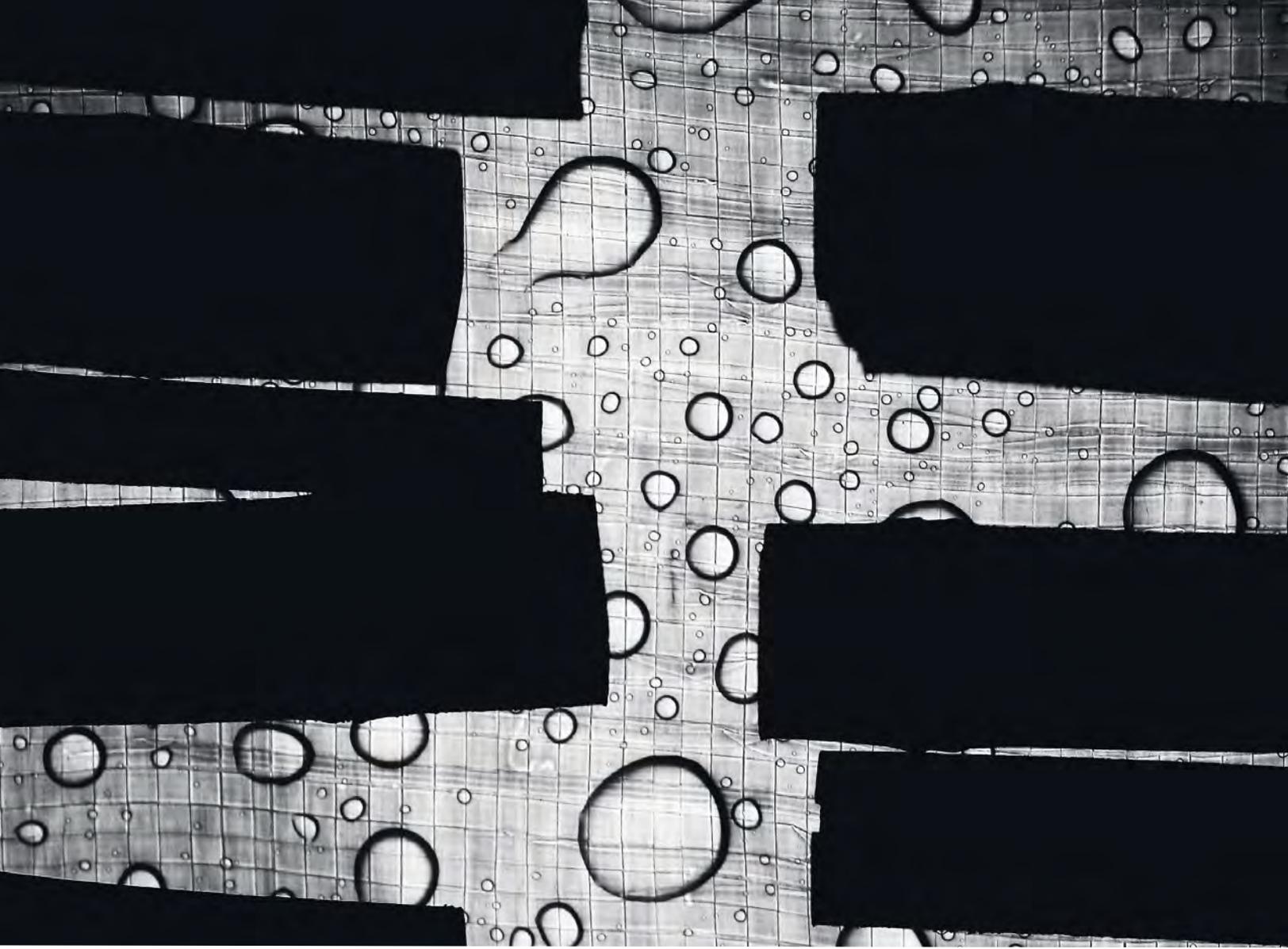


Children of Abraham: Essay and Discussion Guide



The accompanying exhibit, *Children of Abraham*, offers an opportunity to deeply engage with the prophetic potential of the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) as they seek to address the predicament of the poor, the peril of the powerless, and the life chances of all. These three faiths, rooted in the biblical stories of Abraham, play an important role in Ohio life and culture.

This discussion program, written by Seth Gaiters, takes the material in *Children of Abraham* and applies it to a contemporary social problem, namely the mass incarceration of African-American males. The program allows readers to reflect on the prophetic potential these religious traditions contain by considering their possible responses to racial injustice and mass incarceration.

We encourage participants to view the exhibit first and to note the similarities, differences, and continuities among the faiths. These faiths have strongly held teachings about the importance of justice, love, and compassion that are relevant to addressing the challenge of race relations today. The discussion program that follows will guide participants to consider the relationship between religious life and the experience of race in the United States.

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Prophetic Witness and the Abrahamic Religions

Seth Gaiters

Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.

—Cornel West

In *American Prophets*, Princeton professor of religion Albert J. Raboteau discussed what inspired him to write extensively about seven religious radicals—Abraham Joshua Heschel, A.J. Must, Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, Howard Thurman, Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Fannie Lou Hamer—and their struggle for social and political justice, by way of their deep compassion for the oppressed. While browsing in a local bookstore, Raboteau was questioned by two clerks who knew that he taught religion courses at Princeton. He sensed that they were vexed by the religious aspects of current events. They asked, “What good does religion do in politics?” And as he paused they added, “In twenty-five words or less.” Raboteau readily replied, “I don’t need twenty-five... My answer is Martin Luther King, Jr., and... Fannie Lou Hamer.” Though slightly surprised by this response, they agreed. They assented not because of the intellectual identities of these two radical figures, but because of their religiously infused struggle for those suffering oppression. These figures, and others, have lived the weightier matters of religion—love, justice, and compassion—by way of their prophetic witness. These radical figures remind us of the prophetic potential of religion and the progressive possibilities that can emerge on behalf of the oppressed.

Common Crisis

Cornel West argues that there is a profound and pervasive crisis in contemporary American religious life. This crisis is not due to a lack of precision in creed, but to a lack of prophetic vision and deed. American religion of all sorts has been weakened by the accommodations they made to the political and cultural status quo. Because of

this, religion in this country has forsaken its prophetic possibilities and moral responsibilities. West asserts that American religion has abandoned its deeper possibilities and spiritual depth for shallow navel gazing, personal interests, and petty provincialisms that mirror “the privatism and careerism rampant in American society.” West sharply notes that religion for many amounts to nothing more than a social club or a place to get self-help. Instead of carrying a substantive social consciousness, so many religious individuals suffer from “social amnesia,” just as American society does, and are unable to engage in “systemic social analysis of power, wealth, and influence in society.” The consequences of this are not evident in signs of material prosperity, such as ornate mega-churches, synagogues, and mosques, but in signs of spiritual poverty, such as a lack of care and compassion for the “least of these,” the poor, the wretched of the earth, and those outside congregational bodies of the faith traditions. West’s critique is that a lack of love, not of the sentimental type, but in the sense of prophetic advocacy and justice, is the real failing. Without this prophetic depth, religion is politically irrelevant and existentially empty for the needs of ordinary people. Without this depth, it lacks a moral compass.

In this politically charged moment, the Children of Abraham discussion program offers an opportunity to reflect, stimulate critical consciousness, and hopefully to expand how one thinks about the possibilities of prophetic advocacy across traditions, faiths, and races for those who dare to take it up. This project endeavors to spur a critical discussion, particularly within Ohio, which considers the possibilities of a principled prophetic witness, and

a justice-seeking faith that disrupts the unjust political, economic, and cultural foundations of our society, for one more just and compassionate and equitable.

Let us set a couple ground rules for discussion. We are here to have a pragmatic discussion, regarding racial injustice, rather than a dogmatic one. We should converse in a way that is functional and civil, while grounded in the awareness of these religions. It is not helpful to be combatively doctrinal.

First, let's sit with these questions for a moment:

- What is the role of religion as it relates to racial injustice?
- How are religion and social justice connected? What happens when they are disconnected?
- How do religious communities mold their members into morally responsible citizens?
- As human beings, as people of faith, as American citizens, and as Ohioans, do we share a moral responsibility to resist social injustice?

To bring this discussion to a finer point, we will take up one of the most challenging contemporary issues, the interconnected problems of racial injustice and mass incarceration. The discussion will follow two paths: First, what is the relationship between race and the criminal justice system and its destructive consequences. And second, what role can religion play in this era of mass incarceration and police brutality?

Common Challenge

Economics, politics, and sociology are at the very center of the theological task. Not to understand them and their role in the societies around the world guarantees inadequate theology.

—Gordon “Tim” Huffman

This is likely to be challenging conversation, but we believe that engaging in challenging, yet civil conversations is an essential part of being an American citizen. Fortunately, the humanities offer a powerful way to address the harsh realities of the racial climate in Ohio and beyond.

Let's begin by considering news events that have had a strong racial component in the last few years. The gore of state-sanctioned violence shook the nation in the summer of 2016 through the surreal feeds of video streaming on social media—live on Facebook. Many were aghast at the merciless public and extrajudicial executions of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile; while others looked on with steady masochistic voyeurism, where they seemed to assent to the use of systematic state violence. As such, one senses an acceptance of the status quo as justifiable. Sadly, these names are part of a long list of human beings from the Black community that have been similarly discriminated against and discarded: Michael Brown, Jordan Davis, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Terrence Crutcher, Keith Lamont Scott, Tyre King, and many, many more unnamed others.

Police brutality (by excessive force and even murder) is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to America's criminal justice system, and its tragic past. The brutality of this form of policing should be understood within the context of the systematic mass incarceration of Black people, and Black men in particular; what Michelle Alexander calls 'The New Jim Crow.' A prison industrial complex, stimulated by the “War-on-Drugs,” has led America, which is only 5 percent of the world's population, to account for 25 percent of the world's prison population. This racialized criminal justice system with its complex legal framework places its greatest burden on black and brown men and their families and neighborhoods.



A few statistics are worth keeping in mind to inform this discussion.

- African American males are 6% of the U.S. population, but they account for 40% of those incarcerated.
- Black men are incarcerated at a thirteen times higher rate than white men overall.
- African Americans and whites use drugs at remarkably similar rates, but the imprisonment rate of African Americans for drug charges is almost 6 times that of whites.
- African-Americans constitute 12.5% of illicit drug users, but 29% of those arrested for drug offenses and 33% of those incarcerated in state facilities for drug offenses.

A common response to the incarcerated is to focus on the dereliction of their “personal responsibility” (i.e., “it’s just their fault that they’re in that condition”). The racial biases in the drug war constructed a discriminatory public consensus, often through ‘if it bleeds, it leads’ style media coverage and self-interested politicians using the divided electorate to further their own interests by blaming drug crime on black and brown people.

Dominant racial narratives of black criminality, which date back to slavery, have legitimized an unjust and racialized criminal justice system that has devastated the black community. It is a narrative with its roots in America’s original sins of Native American genocide and the enslavement of Africans and African descended people (i.e., black people). This is our history and it must be humbly and honestly confronted, not ignored or forgotten. This racial narrative has broad, far-ranging effects, such as the cruel separation of migrant Mexican and other Central Americans parents from their children, the strong language about building the ‘Wall’ along the U.S.-Mexican border, the infamous Muslim flight ban and conversations about a Muslim registry, the mass incarceration of black and brown folk, and several other contemporary matters pointing to a violently uneven society.

It is worth reflecting on how Muslims have begun to be racialized as an ‘other.’ The result is an Islamophobia that draws on fears of religious and racial difference. As Muslim Americans are accused of being terrorists who deserve torture, surveillance, and banishment from the U.S., black people are deemed criminals who warrant surveillance, extrajudicial brutalization and even execution at the hands of police. Franz Fanon pointed to a similar interconnection between anti-Semitism and anti-black racism when he stated “At first glance it seems strange that the attitude of the anti-Semite can be equated with that of the negrophobe...[but] quite simply...the

anti-Semite is inevitably a negrophobe.” This narrative of white supremacy cuts across many oppressions of race, gender, and class.

Common Struggle

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states...Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.... Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.,
Letter from a Birmingham Jail

A broader push for human rights will require sharing, movement building, a common compassion, and a concern for “the least of these.” American citizens of all ages, colors, and creeds must be moved to take up a common struggle. “In a real sense,” as Martin Luther King, Jr. indicated, “all life is inter-related.” Ideological or racial divides across religious or secular spaces do not alter the lived experience of our uneven society. It affects everyone, but most harshly the poor. To embrace a prophetic witness requires one to focus on what matters the most. Ten days before his death, Abraham Joshua Heschel summed up this prophetic call: “I’ve learned from the prophets that I have to be involved in the affairs of man, in the affairs of suffering man.” Necessary in the common struggle is a common suffering with fellow humanity. To be engaged in the affairs of the suffering is to discover transcendent purpose and community.

We must be able to hear that larger calling and purpose, one that rings of justice, freedom, and love. We must move outside of our small worlds, so that we can bring about equality. We must make the world a more habitable place for all humanity. Without diminishing individual freedom, we have to root ourselves in certain convictions which are transcendent and be concerned with the well-being of all humanity. We must see and grasp the task of building a habitable world for us all. When we lose compassion for each other, we will bite and devour one another. If we hate one another, that same hateful habit will endanger our world, and all of us.

We must always remember our common humanity, and the inspiration for this can be found in each of the Abrahamic traditions. Foundational to all three is a radical monotheism, which results in a profound sense of the oneness of humanity. The primogenitor of each tradition points back to Adam, with the undergirding thought that from one blood did God create one

humanity. Each tradition bears witness to our common humanity, and fundamentally carries elements which can provoke compassion and common struggle.

These ideas of humanity and struggle and suffering are instructive for our society, reminding us of our place in matters that affect us all. We must find ways to creatively usher in a new Ohio. Our beliefs and values, attitudes and sensibilities, and our way of life must be directed toward the struggle for justice, instead of legitimating and preserving the social, political and intellectual status quo. Universities and churches, schools and synagogues, mass media and mosques must become critical terrain for the possibilities of prophetic advocacy on behalf of justice in all its forms, for the benefit of humanity. We must become allies in the fight for justice and human rights. We have far to go to collectively achieve this self-less, other-centered, and world transforming love for “too many people have been religious in their creeds but not enough in their deeds.”

Consider the following questions:

- How might we be more attuned to the pressing concerns of justice?
- How might we work more collaboratively towards that profitable end?

- Without trivializing our differences, how might we decipher and negotiate our differences?
- Can we overcome the stifling opposition, by turning toward the ultimate ends of justice, democracy, and liberation?
- What role does religion play in all of this?
- What is the responsibility of the religiously-minded?

Powerful defenders of the status quo conspire against the poor and people of color. Faith communities have a moral imperative to link arms with justice fighters and resist the centers of power for the sake of the most vulnerable in society, “the least of these.” This moral imperative trains faith communities to be prophets of resistance and not merely chaplains of empire. Some examples of prophetic work for racial and economic justice actually being done on the ground can be seen in Ohio congregations and religious centers such as Mt. Olivet Baptist and Liberty Hill Baptist Churches in Columbus, the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati, and the Jewish Community Relations Council of Cincinnati. We must keep the faith. We must keep pressing. And we must do more.

For discussion:

Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

- Is social justice central to the Abrahamic Faiths? If so, why do so many religious persons resist the idea of a fair distribution of goods in society?
- Where are the prophets today willing to challenge the status quo? Where should we be looking for the prophets?
- Do you live or work in any racially segregated space today?
- How are religious communities impacted by matters of race?
- How have the religious communities that you are aware of addressed racial issues? Have you participated in any of these activities? What was that like?

- How do you see the connection between religion and racial justice?
- What does racial justice look like? How would you define racial justice for America? What images come to mind when you think about racial justice?

Seth Gaiters is a doctoral student in religious studies, critical cultural theory, political theology, and Black studies at the Ohio State University.

He has earned master's degrees in theological studies at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, of Columbus, Ohio, and Fuller Seminary of Pasadena, California, and is an ordained minister. He is married to his best friend Candace Gaiters, and has one daughter, Carise Gaiters.

Facilitated Conversation:

Let us begin by reflecting on the prophetic possibilities of the Abrahamic faiths. It is important to be respectful of each traditions' differences. Notice what emerges when we compare these traditions.

- Does a human desire for justice and equity surface in their texts?
- What is their concern for social justice and equity?

Each of the texts mentioned were written by oppressed and minority peoples, who themselves experienced systemic oppression. And each sacred text views the practice of social justice as a form of worship/service (Isaiah 58), spiritual anointing (Luke 4), or even spiritual cleansing ("zakat").

Take a moment to reflect on these texts, with these ideas in mind.

Judaism:

Context: The book of Isaiah is a composite work of prophetic ministry occurring in three different periods in the history of Israel: Chapters 1-39 refer to the pre-exile period, which is the period of prophetic warning before Israel is carried off into Babylonian exile; chapters 40-55 refer to the actual period of exile, and the prophetic ministry that occurs in the experience of Babylonian exile; and chapters 56-66 refer to the post-exile period, being attributed to the prophetic ministry that occurs after Judah returns from Babylonian exile.

The prophets of the Hebrew Bible -- Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos -- preached values of social justice and righteousness.

Chapter 58 takes place after the exile has ended. Here the prophet is contrasting mere religious ritual (that God does not desire) with the worship/service and social justice that God desires.

Isaiah 58:6-12: Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.

Jews often describe these values with the phrase tikkun olam, or "heal/repair of the world."

Or consider in the Hebrew Bible the deep concept of chesed ("love; lovingkindness; or steadfast love"). To be spiritual, to be human is to spread chesed to the weak, the most vulnerable, the marginalized--the widow, the orphan, the fatherless, the stranger/immigrant/refugee, the poor.

- What should tikkun olam and chesed look like in the world today?
- What concrete acts can be taken?



Christianity:

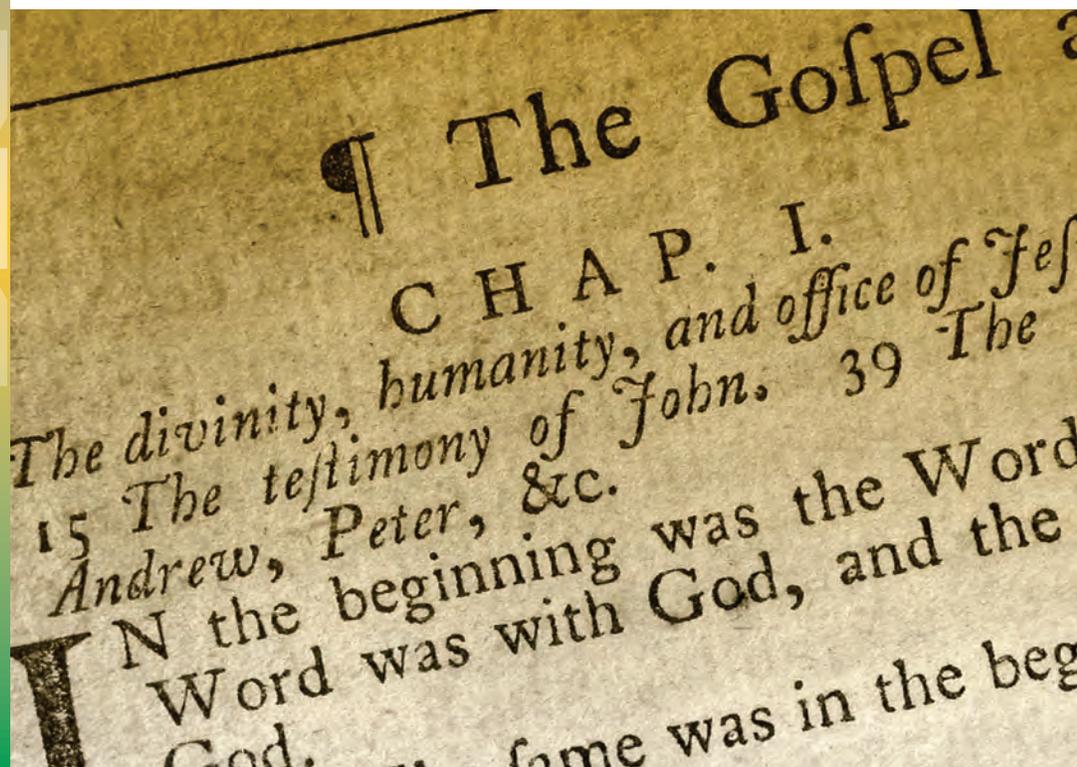
Context: The Gospel according to Luke is a book that tells of the life, teachings, and time of Jesus of Nazareth. According to Luke, Israel's heritage legitimates this Jesus as the promised Messiah and Savior of God. This book, with three other books (Matthew, Mark, and John), is a part of the early Christian collection of Gospels.

Jesus proclaims justice as central to his messianic mission. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, he described his mission as “bringing good news to the poor,” “freedom for the prisoners,” “recovery of sight for the blind,” and deliverance for “the oppressed.” He later said in Matthew’s Gospel, “I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did it for me.”

Chapter 4 depicts Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry. Interestingly, Jesus quotes a passage from Isaiah 61 and claims his role in fulfilling its prophetic content and Spirit-filled message of social justice.

Luke 4:16-21: He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

- How might followers of Jesus follow this mission concretely in the world?
- What would be the real-world effect of taking this manifesto seriously?
- What structures would be changed and how?



Islam:

Context: The Qur'an literally means "recitation" in Arabic. It is the central sacred and authoritative text for Islam. The book does not follow a chronological order but is a collection of prophetic statements and visions over a number of years. Muslims believe that these prophetic messages and visions were divinely revealed to the prophet Muhammad, through the Archangel Gabriel. The Qur'an expresses Islam as an institution of social justice and moderation.

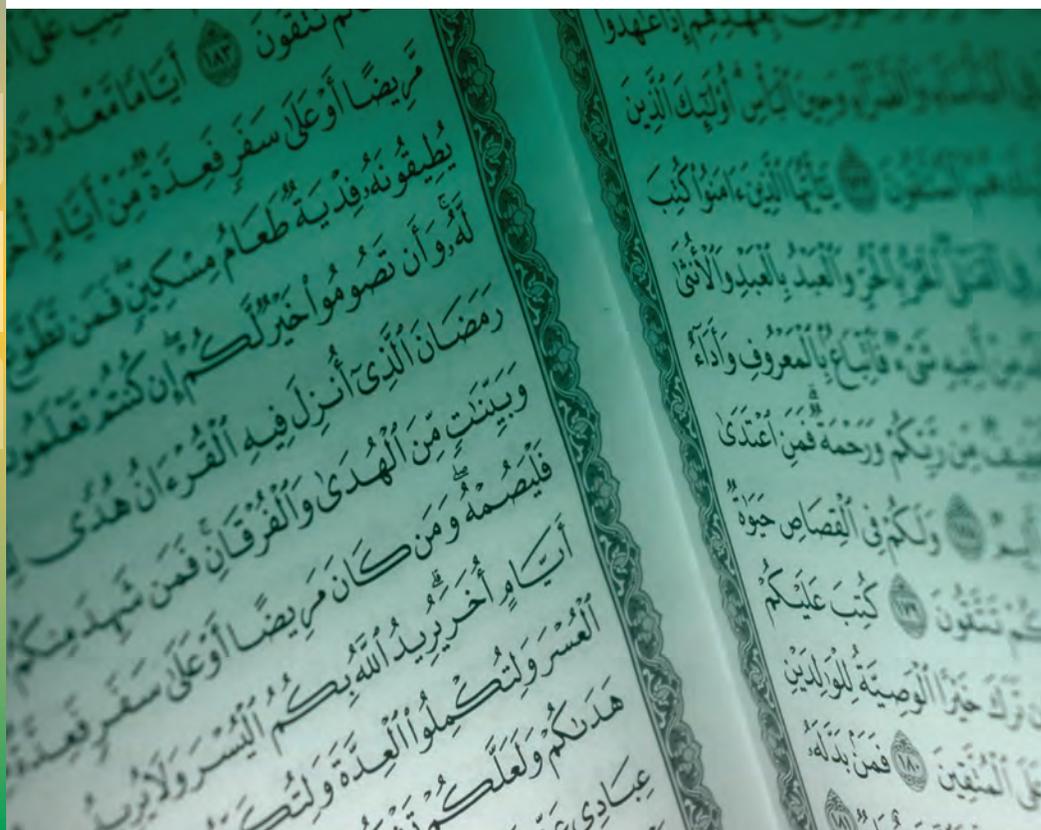
The tradition of social justice is central to Islam. One of the five pillars of Islam is a practice of sharing called the Zakat. This is not optional charitable giving, but an obligatory payment made annually under Islamic law to be used for benevolent and religious purposes. By Quranic reasoning it ranks next after prayer (salat) in importance.

Quran 2:215 and 9:60 below are both Zakat (Charity) verses in the holy Quran, which refer to alms-giving as the third pillar of Islam.

Quran 2:215: They ask you about giving: say, "The charity you give shall go to the parents, the relatives, the orphans, the poor, and the traveling alien." Any good you do, God is fully aware thereof.

Quran 9:60: Charities (Sadaqaat) shall go to the poor, the needy, the workers who collect them, the new converts, to free the slaves, to those burdened by sudden expenses, in the cause of Allah, and to the traveling alien. Such is GOD's commandment. GOD is Omniscient, Most Wise.

- How might the principle of Zakat be concretely applied to America's criminal justice system?
- What would its ideas of social harmony, equity, social solidarity, and concern for the well-being of others do to a system driven by greed, bias, and discrimination?



Reading List:

Books

The New Jim Crow, Michelle Alexander.

Between the World and Me, Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays, Abraham Joshua Heschel; Susannah Heschel, ed.

American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice, Albert J. Raboteau.

From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor.

Black Prophetic Fire, Cornel West and Christa Buschendorf.

Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture, Cornel West.

Race Matters, Cornel West.

Articles

“How Racism Invented Race in America,” *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates.

“Slavery Made America,” *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Documentary Film

13th, Ava Duvernay.