

# WHAT KIND OF COUNTRIES?

With you, perhaps, I have struggled with how to respond to the latest outrage from the White House. When this article arrived in my inbox this morning, I thought Bill (a church historian and an acquaintance of mine) did a pretty good job of addressing the kinds of things I've been feeling . . . .

## Out of Africa: White supremacy and the Church's silence

**OPINION** [BILL LEONARD](#) | JANUARY 15, 2018



*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled [Caucasian?] masses, yearning to breathe free.*

Three days before the 2018 Martin Luther King Jr. memorial observances, and in the 50th year after Dr. King's assassination, the plague of racism in America continued, even as white supremacy, long lingering just below the surface, reasserted itself with a vengeance.

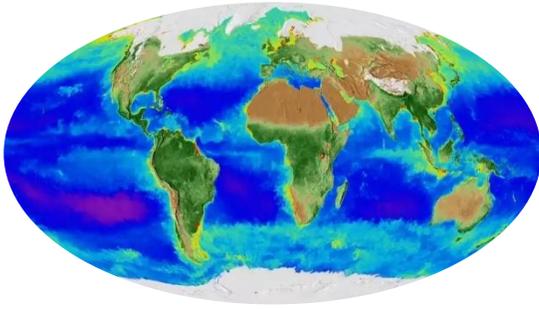
On Jan. 12, the president of the United States, at a White House meeting on immigration, allegedly asked why "all these people from shithole countries," specifically Haiti and Africa, should be admitted to the U.S. He was also said to have wondered aloud why the U.S. could not secure more immigrants from countries like Norway (83 percent Caucasian). Confirmation of his remarks vary from those in attendance. Some confirm the alleged statements; others deny them. Somebody's lying.

The mere report of the comments was immediately celebrated across the country's white supremacist network, much as when Trump affirmed "good people on both sides" in last year's violent neo-Nazi-led demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia. White nationalist Richard Spencer chastised Trump's defenders for suggesting the statements were related to law or economics, since they were actually "all about race." Spencer was, of course, delighted. The Neo-Nazi blog, the *Daily Stormer*, hailed the President's words as "encouraging and refreshing" since they indicated that "Trump is more or less on the same page as us" regarding "race and immigration." In America, 2018, white supremacy is now apparently "refreshing."

Dallas Baptist pastor Robert Jeffress defended the president, noting that "apart from the vocabulary attributed to him," Trump's comments were "right on target" with his presidential responsibility "to place the interests of our nation above the needs of other countries." That's unlike Christians' "biblical responsibility" to "place the needs of others" above themselves. (Racism's OK; it's vulgar language that's the problem.)

Amid debates over the veracity of witnesses to the White House event, the fact remains that the dogmas of white supremacy lie at the center of America's long night of racism, in politics, social structures, and racial stereotypes. At this moment in history, how can American Christians, themselves deeply divided over scripture, doctrine, sexuality, abortion,

and other culture war accoutrements, foster a common compulsion to speak out against white supremacist fiction before it gains an even stronger implicit or explicit influence?

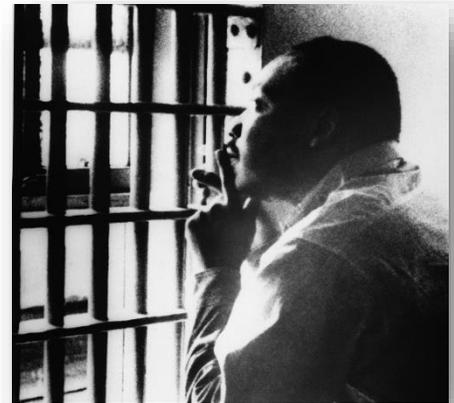


Even if President Trump did not use vulgar words to highlight his views on immigration, did he in fact wistfully promote a 21st century America where Aryans (remember the history of that word?) are preferred to immigrants of color? Surely it is time to break the silence, not simply because of those shameful remarks, but because they are part of a larger litany of racial dog whistles from Trump's birther campaign, to attacks on a "Mexican" judge and a Gold Star Muslim family, to the infamous Charlottesville slurs.

We have many reasons to break the silence: First, because white supremacy itself is an inherently evil yet an enduring vision of the nature of humanity, and must be resisted for that fact alone. It has polluted our national psyche long enough!

Second, we break the silence on this matter because we hear again Dr. King's words from that Birmingham jail: "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

Third, we Aryan Christians cannot be silent because it's our racial ancestors who first planted the banner of racism in our laws, our institutions (churches included), and in our hearts. And some among us still won't let it go. We need to get "saved" from it.



Fourth, we speak out now because American churches, at least many of them, remained silent for too long. Indeed, Trump's only a symptom; we scapegoat him at our peril. When his remarks hit the fan, I returned to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, a book that has taught me, shamed me, blessed me, and broken me for decades. Baldwin writes: "It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible) must first divorce him[her]self from all the prohibitions, crimes and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has had any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him." (Whatever God is, God sure isn't white supremacy.)

Mercer University professor Robert Nash illustrates Baldwin's point in a superb essay entitled, "Peculiarly Chosen: Anglo-Saxon Supremacy and Baptist Missions in the South," documenting that ecclesiastical collusion with the case of James Franklin Love, corresponding secretary of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1915-1928. Nash notes that Love "was profoundly influenced by the concept of Anglo-Saxon supremacy . . . that white races possessed a superior intellect, religion, and civilization."

Love's mission strategy focused on evangelization of Europe since white Christians could more readily convert the darker races. He wrote: "Let us not forget that to the white man God gave the instinct and talent to disseminate His ideals among other people and that he did not, to the same degree, give this instinct and talent to the yellow, brown or black race. The white race only has the genius to introduce Christianity into all lands and among

all people.” (In 2017, the Southern Baptist Convention went on record condemning white supremacy then and now. *It’s about time.*)

Finally, we break the silence, confronting white supremacy and its accompanying racism at this moment because we will neither deny nor sully the African heritage of our **African**-American sisters and brothers, who as W.E.B. Dubois wrote, “would not bleach [their] Negro soul in a flood of white Americans,” since they know “that Negro blood has a message for the world.”

On what would have been his 89th birthday, Dr. King retains his prophetic voice for black and white alike, declaring from his jail cell then and now: “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men [women] willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.”

A few weeks ago, during Advent, we read again Matthew’s haunting assessment of the Holy Family’s immigration from Herod’s not-so-holy-land: “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” Sweet Jesus, Egypt’s in Africa! Amen.

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Along this line, I have recently read the anthology, *Trouble the Water: A Christian Resource for the Work of Racial Justice*. It’s an edgy book, but I think it has the potential to spark meaningful conversation. If you’d be interested in being in such a discussion, just let me know.

Lift Ev’ry Voice . . . and Sing!

Dave

