

“The Heavenly Vision”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

I first encountered the well-known work by Justo González, *The Story of Christianity*, when I began teaching at the Lutheran college and seminary in Tokyo. This two-volume work had been translated into Japanese and was the recommended basic text for church history. It is an excellent introductory work, which I supplemented with readings for my students from the out of print Japanese translation of Williston Walker’s classic *A History of the Christian Church*. Revised many times, Walker’s church history was published during World War I, in early 1918, at a time when other historical works also appeared to mark the 400th anniversary of the Reformation. I found Dr. González’s history to be helpful in the early twenty-first century, because he gave additional attention to aspects of the church’s history that were coming into clearer focus by the end of the twentieth century, aspects like imperialism and colonialism, civil rights, and significantly, the gifts of the global church.

Historical research is always ongoing and history is reinterpreted in light of every generation’s own context. As Justo González states, “As we look at those and other past times and events, we do so through the lens of our own time, our own concerns, our own hopes. History is not the pure past; history is a past interpreted from the present of the historian” (*The Story of Christianity*, 1:5 rev. 2010). These words ring true to me as we currently face the painful reinterpretation of our own past as a nation that has been by no means perfect. It is my hope that we will interpret this past “through the lens of our own time, our own concerns, our own hopes.” Which makes me ask the question, “Where would we like to go, and how will we get there?”

This week’s meditation and reading come from an essay by Dr. Justo González, which is part of a collection written by a group of distinguished theologians for the 2003 Hein-Fry Lecture Series of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, observing the fortieth anniversary of the speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. titled, “I Have a Dream.” In light of Dr. King’s speech as a prophetic witness to Holy Scripture, Dr. González takes up the ongoing issue of a “multicultural” United States and its future.

González notes that Dr. King’s speech was not simply about a dream, but was really about *a vision* of the future informed by scripture. González writes,

It is important to remember that Dr. King’s dream was not only about the rights of an oppressed people. It was about black and white children playing together. It was about a society in which everyone’s contribution would be accepted and appreciated. Therefore, if that dream is to become a reality in America’s multicultural society, it cannot simply be a dream of a society where every culture will be allowed to exist, but rather of a society where the contribution of each culture will be accepted and valued.

This vision is linked to the words of the prophet Micah, “*They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but shall sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken*” (Micah 4:3-4). González writes,

It is a vision grounded of the promise of the One whom we call Lord of lords: “*People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will sit at the table in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last*” (Luke 13:29-30).

This vision recognizes that though we have come from “*east and west, from north and south,*” though we all have identities with histories of nation of origin, ethnicity, gender and social location, as people of faith we also have a visionary certainty that we will all sit at the table in the kingdom of God. We all bear the image and breath of the Creator, and though we have come from different places, our destination is the one table in the kingdom of God.

In order to reach the table of the kingdom, we are guided along the way by preparing tables on our journeys through this world – where all people are welcome. In answer to my question, “Where would we like to go, and how will we get there?” - we move toward the destination of the kingdom, as a people of faith gathered at the table the Lord prepares for us, where all are welcome, and were all come with hands outstretched. The table the Lord sets for us becomes the model for the tables we set in so many ways, from home, to workplace, to soup kitchens, and the many ways we provide food for the hungry. In doing so, we declare that the reality of God’s kingdom is *a vision for living into a new history* as people, as we move and point toward the kingdom of God as it is already present among us.

God’s mission is always larger than our vision of it. We will reach the kingdom by pointing to it, together with all people, through Christian hospitality, justice, and love, both at home and abroad. Dr. González writes,

But the dream, also like Dr. King’s, must go beyond the borders of this nation. If it is true that as long as someone is oppressed no one can be really free, then as long as the vision is not attained for the entire world it cannot really be attained in America...If we are content with having the riches of the world flow to America like so many waters, and think that we can close our borders to the miseries of the world, we shall not be true to the vision, and the dream will become a nightmare of violence and terrorism.

The Book of Revelation looks into the future of the new heaven and the new earth from the historical location of the New Testament era and its writer, John, on the island of Patmos. Much in the same way, Dr. King wrote of the intersection of this nation and the in-breaking of God’s kingdom. It is a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, of God’s kingdom into which all peoples “*shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations*” (Rev. 21:26). It is a vision that confronts our human sinfulness and the falsehoods we have told ourselves, so that, together with all people, we might reinterpret our history in light of God’s vision for the future and our present reality with its complex challenges.

Drs. King and González encourage us to be faithful to the heavenly vision of all nations and people bringing their glory and honor to God in the kingdom. It is both an eschatological vision, and one that requires us to be faithful in the present to that final vision. González writes, “The question is not, will it happen? The question is rather, as it happens, will we have been found to have resisted it? Or will we be found to have been obedient to the heavenly vision?” To be obedient to “the heavenly vision” means preparing for “the table in the kingdom of God” by preparing tables where all can sit together and experience “the breadth and length and height and depth” (Eph. 3:18) of the love of Christ. Amen.

Week 8 midweek meditation readings:

(Excerpts) “The Dream: A Future for the Present” by Justo L. González [pages 69-82]

I met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on February 17, 1962. It was in Puerto Rico during my very first year of teaching. He had been invited to Puerto Rico by the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and, simply because I had some friends in the FOR, I had been assigned to be the interpreter for his speeches. It was no easy task, translating for a man whose words cascaded in an avalanche of eloquence, and I

confess that I failed miserably! Still, I would not exchange that failure for any subsequent success, for if I was not able to capture his eloquence, his dream was certainly able to captivate me.

The “I Have a Dream” speech was still in the future, but the dream was clearly there. It was a vast and valiant dream, one that dared see beyond the racism that had always engulfed his life. It was a very realistic dream, one that began by acknowledging that everything was stacked against it...He was staying at the seminary where I was teaching, next door to my apartment. In my living room, which was also my study, we talked about slavery, and Jim Crow, and lynchings, and the KKK. He spoke of all these things as very real and very powerful, yet he also spoke of them as enemies that did not stand a chance against truth and right. At that point it dawned on me that his dream was not just a dream. It was a vision of the future – a vision one could ignore or resist, but never undo...

The dream is now a worldwide dream, one that encompasses many races, many cultures, many religions, many wrongs that need to be righted...But there is still far to go! There is still an unholy relationship between race and poverty, between race and incarceration, between race and underschooling, between race and premature death...

And therein lies the power of Dr. King’s dream. It is not just a dream. It is also a vision. It is akin to the vision of the prophet of old: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but shall sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (Mic. 4:3-4)...It is a vision grounded of the promise of the One whom we call Lord of lords: “People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will sit at the table in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last. (Luke 13:29-30).

But let us not hasten to rejoice in this present multicultural reality without acknowledging the evil it reflects. America is also a multicultural reality because the Europeans who conquered these lands – mostly British along the East Coast, and Spanish in the West and Southwest – did not find these lands unoccupied. Therefore America first became multicultural through a massive land grab. Then, relating more directly to the issues that were close at hand for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., America became multicultural through a genocidal importation of slave labor from Africa. And then, just as the national conscience was being aroused to the injustices and the crime of slavery, America became even more multicultural by grabbing half of the land belonging to Mexico. And what about the manner in which not only America but also many other parts of the world, particularly Europe, have become multicultural and multiethnic in recent decades?...

There is a passage in the Book of Revelation that deals directly with this matter. It is a passage often quoted, but seldom read in its socioeconomic context. In Revelation 17, John speaks of the great harlot, which clearly is the city of Rome, sitting on seven hills. The vision also refers to the “many waters” on which the harlot is seated. This is clearly an allusion to the wealth of Rome, for in ancient times most long distance trade took place by means of water transport, and the image of a city sitting on water was frequently used to refer to its wealth. In this particular case, however, we are told more. The angel explains that “the waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.” In other words, that Rome is rich because the wealth and the resources of all these many lands and peoples and languages have been made to flow towards it...John has much positive to say about how these many tribes, and nations, and languages are called into God’s future. But he is also aware that the growing multicultural reality of Rome is not just the result of people

moving because of mere curiosity or wanderlust. People come to Rome because the wealth of the nations flows to Rome...

It is not enough just to be multicultural. American society was multicultural before the Civil Rights Movement. But this was a patently unjust multiculturalism – indeed, it was a multiculturalism where cultural and other differences between the dominant and the oppressed were used to justify the unjustifiable.

At this point, it is important to remember that Dr. King's dream was not only about the rights of an oppressed people. It was about black and white children playing together. It was about a society in which everyone's contribution would be accepted and appreciated. Therefore, if that dream is to become a reality in America's multicultural society, it cannot simply be a dream of a society where every culture will be allowed to exist, but rather of a society where the contribution of each culture will be accepted and valued...

If all we strive for is a multicultural America, even in the sense I have just described, then there is no future for such an America. The dream, like Dr. King's, must deal with the issues at hand, with the politics and the culture of America. But the dream, also like Dr. King's, must go beyond the borders of this nation. If it is true that as long as someone is oppressed no one can be really free, then as long as the vision is not attained for the entire world it cannot really be attained in America. If this nation follows policies that undercut freedom and democracy in other nations, our own freedom and democracy will eventually be undercut. If the rich and powerful in this country export to other nations the inequities that are no longer tolerated here, those inequities will come back to haunt us. If we are content with having the riches of the world flow to America like so many waters, and think that we can close our borders to the miseries of the world, we shall not be true to the vision, and the dream will become a nightmare of violence and terrorism.

The dream is true. The dream is irresistible. The dream will come true. The question is not, will it happen? The question is rather, as it happens, will we have been found to have resisted it? Or will we be found to have been obedient to the heavenly vision?

Reading recommendations:

González, Justo L., "A Future for the Present," in *I Have a Dream: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Future of Multicultural America*. Edited by James Echols, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.

González, Justo L., *The Story of Christianity* (2 volumes). Harper, revised edition 2010.

González, Justo L., *A History of Christian Thought* (3 volumes). Abingdon, revised edition, 1987.

Justo L. González (1937-) is a Cuban-American church historian, theologian, and Methodist minister. Born in Cuba, he graduated from United Seminary in Cuba, and received an M.A. and Ph.D., both from Yale University. He taught at the Evangelical Seminary in Puerto Rico, at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, and is currently an adjunct professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia, and at the Interdenominational Center, Atlanta, Georgia. He is the author of over forty books, and his two works, *The Story of Christianity* (2 volumes), and *A History of Christian Thought* (3 volumes), have been translated into other languages and are widely used in university and seminary education. He is a retired member of the Rio Grande Conference of the United Methodist Church. His wife, Catherine Gunsalus González is professor emerita at Columbia Theological Seminary.