

COLLEGE THEOLOGY SOCIETY PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

On Studying and Teaching Religion in Dark Times

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In the midst of a pandemic, an ongoing global climate emergency, violent white supremacy, economic inequality, and fraying democratic institutions, the work of theologians and religious studies scholars offers a much-needed illumination by attending both to the religious roots of these disfunctions and to religious sources of alternative possibilities. This article argues especially for the importance of religion in providing hope, inspiring unity, warning of perennial human temptations, and encouraging the practices of introspection essential to independent thought. The story of Fr. Félix Varela, Cuban scholar, patriot, and pastor to immigrant Irish in nineteenth-century New York, provides an example of someone whose deep religious faith enabled him to resist common polarizations and to illuminate his time by envisioning and working for a world more just and humane than that imagined by the official Catholicism (or by most of society) in his day.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, mutually critical correlation, Félix Varela, hope

As I considered how best to describe our situation today in the United States and in the world, I found the phrase “dark times” seemed especially apt to me, as it has seemed to others.¹ Taken from a Bertold

¹ See for example, Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism*, trans. Bernard Moser (New York: Random House, 2008); Camilla Stivers, *Governance in Dark Times: Practical Philosophy or Public Service* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008); Charles T. Mathewes, *The Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010); and Teju Cole, *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). This article is an expanded version of the presidential address to the College Theology Society given on June 5, 2021, at the sixty-seventh annual convention of the College Theology Society. Due to the limitations of the virtual format of this convention,

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Brecht poem, this phrase is probably best known due to its use by Hannah Arendt in the title of her well-known collection of essays, “Men in Dark Times.”² (It should be noted that the “men” Arendt discusses include the remarkable women Rosa Luxemburg and Isak Dinesen.) Of course, every period has its darkness, its worries and problems, as well as its joys and hopes. Nevertheless, ours certainly has reason to be proclaimed a particularly “dark” time. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken and continues to take too many precious human lives—more than 4.2 million worldwide, at this writing—while inflicting considerable suffering and loss on many, many others. More than 198 million people have thus far been confirmed as infected by this novel coronavirus and, as so often happens, those most marginalized suffer disproportionately, with higher rates of infection, hospitalization, and death.³ Moreover, the lockdown that has prevented even more infection and death has also disrupted schooling, inflicted real economic hardship (again, especially on those with the least resources), and interrupted the normal human interactions that sustain us as the fundamentally social creatures we humans are, even those of us who are introverted academics.

But this pandemic is only one of the major crises we face. The ongoing global climate emergency is costing lives, affecting health, destroying communities, accelerating species extinction, and undermining the conditions that sustain all life on this planet.⁴ Virulent and even deadly racism against those construed as “not white” has been publicly deployed in aggressive defense of the status quo of white privilege, particularly in the United States and in Europe.⁵ Economic inequality leaves many in the world destitute amid the superabundance enjoyed by others, and the lack of economic

the presidential address was delivered in a shorter form and without the discussion of Fr. Félix Varela included here.

² Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1968).

³ See “Cumulative Confirmed COVID-19 Cases and Deaths,” *Our World in Data*, August 1, 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/cumulative-deaths-and-cases-covid-19>; and “Risk for COVID-19 Infection, Hospitalization, and Death by Race/Ethnicity,” *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*, July 16, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>.

⁴ See especially World Meteorological Organization, *State of the Global Climate 2021*, WMO-No. 1264, https://library.wmo.int/doc_num.php?explnum_id=10618; and Michael Greshko and National Geographic Staff, “What Are Mass Extinctions and What Causes Them?” *National Geographic*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/mass-extinction>.

⁵ See for example the discussions in “Racism Against Black People in EU ‘Widespread and Entrenched,’” *BBC News*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46369046>; and in Kenya Evelyn, “Hateful Incidents Against Americans of Color

opportunity in many places in the United States is surely a contributing factor in the current epidemic of “deaths of despair” from suicide, alcoholism, and other drug addictions.⁶ Political polarization is setting people against one another, so that it is increasingly difficult to work together to solve our serious local and global challenges. In the United States, confidence that our democratic political processes can be sustained is stretched to the breaking point.⁷ These are indeed good reasons to consider this a dark time!

I would also like to note that this is something of a dark time for the study of religion in the United States. Many of our beloved Catholic colleges and universities have recently closed. Those that remain open face financial struggles, even with tuition raised beyond what many Catholic families can afford.⁸ Furthermore, Catholic higher learning is facing a crisis of mission, with considerable pressure to define its role as providing either an ossified Catholic authoritarianism or a secular careerism focused on only the education directly correlated with increasing wages and advancing careers.⁹

With so many Catholic colleges and universities closing, embracing an uncritical dogmatism, or mirroring the careerism of secular society, I cannot help wondering where the Catholic Church will find the institutional space to do its thinking in the coming years. I worry even more about where the young of today will learn that religions, including Catholic Christianity, are nuanced and developing traditions in ongoing dialogue with both past wisdom and new insights. When a liberal arts education is evaluated in terms of a purely monetary cost-benefit analysis, there is little room for the critical study of religion. Yet if students are never taught how to think critically with and about religion, but instead assume that religions are unchanging systems that must either be totally accepted or completely rejected, how can religion have a viable public presence?

Surge Amid Pandemic,” *The Guardian*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/29/hate-crimes-americans-of-color-pandemic>.

⁶ See especially the in-depth exploration of these trends in Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope* (New York: Vintage, 2020).

⁷ Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, “America Is Exceptional in the Nature of Its Political Divide,” *Pew Research Center*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide>.

⁸ Rick Seltzer, “Days of Reckoning,” *Inside Higher Ed*, November 13, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/11/13/spate-recent-college-closures-has-some-seeing-long-predicted-consolidation-taking>.

⁹ See the excellent assessment in Massimo Faggioli, “Identity Crisis: We Can’t Lose the ‘Catholic’ University,” *Commonweal*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/identity-crisis-2>; as well as the alternative perspective presented in Andrew J. Peach, “How Catholic Schools Lose Their Identity,” *Crisis Magazine*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2016/catholic-schools-lose-identity>.

Further reflection on our current dark times will, I believe, benefit from paying attention to the specific meaning that Arendt gave to the phrase “dark times.” In her usage, the phrase described something even more problematic than a society in crisis, which is the commonsensical way I have thus far used the phrase. For Arendt, times were dark not merely because of the significance of a society’s problems or the extent of its breakdown, though both of these were surely true in the dark times that preoccupied Arendt in the twentieth century. Instead (or in addition), Arendt considered a time to be truly dark when the society’s real disfunctions are unperceived and the thinking that could illuminate the situation is not occurring.¹⁰ This raises another disturbing possibility: Could ours be a truly dark time because there are unrecognized root causes, even deeper problems, underlying the nearly overwhelming issues of which we are so painfully aware?

It is, of course, the profession of scholars of religion to study—and to teach others how to study—the implicit as well as explicit values and orienting concepts that enable people to make sense of the world and of their place in it. In other words, the study of religion is concerned with the foundations that anchor individual lives and societies, so in studying religion we engage the root causes of societal dysfunction. Why else would so many scholars of religion have worked so hard, even during the COVID lockdown, to teach effectively despite the many obstacles, while also continuing to research and publish? Why have so many members of the College Theology Society redoubled their volunteer efforts to make a virtual convention possible for two years in a row, when many other academic societies (even those with paid staff!) canceled their annual meetings? Some might suggest that this is all a distraction, perhaps a way of seeking comfort by making life seem as normal as possible. Having had the privilege of working with the College Theology Society members so closely during this time, I am persuaded that the main reason all have worked so diligently as teachers and scholars is our common commitment to illuminating these dark times by bringing a deeper understanding as well as a viable hope to bear on the critical issues facing humanity today.

As the work of the College Theology Society demonstrates, the study of religion is no mere diversion or esoteric pastime, of relevance only to those who happen to like that sort of thing. To the contrary, we do our work as teachers and scholars because we know that the study of religion is essential to any adequate understanding of the fundamental distortions in contemporary thought, imagination, and action, that is, those corruptions that diminish

¹⁰ See especially the thoughtful discussion of the meaning of thinking for Arendt in Roger Berkowitz, ed., *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 3–14.

all of our lives, collectively and personally. We continue to find ways to engage in the conversations through which we strive for more adequate understandings, think more deeply together, and inspire and support one another in the search for the insights that will enable us to address our societal, economic, political, and personal crises *radically*, that is, at their roots. In Arendt's terminology, we are dedicated to seeking illumination to overcome the darkness of our time.

Fortunately, the public dimension of the study of religion is well recognized among theologians and other religious studies scholars today. As the themes of recent College Theology Society conferences, presentations, and publications demonstrate, the study of religion engages with the most pressing issues of life.¹¹ Members of this society are doing important critical work in clarifying the ways religious beliefs and practices have been interpreted to justify injustice and oppression, including antisemitism, systemic racism, and the United States' racial caste system, misogyny, heteronormativity, inequality of all kinds, and the abuse of the nonhuman natural world. Work in theology and religious studies also reveals the interconnectedness of many of these social injustices, as for example in the analysis of the hierarchical binary thinking that sets God over world, humans over the nonhuman, male over female, and white over nonwhite peoples, identified by Rosemary Radford Ruether nearly fifty years ago.¹² Important religious scholarship further investigates the fundamental concepts that shape the public imagination in the United States, such as the myth of innocence that structures common narratives of American origins or the concept of power as dominance that informs much of our politics.¹³ The work of scholars of religion in identifying these and other ways that religious beliefs and practices normalize oppression is vital work in these dark times.

¹¹ The sixty-seventh annual convention theme of being human in a dehumanizing world and the upcoming sixty-eighth annual convention theme of racism and the church are excellent examples of the College Theology Society's engagement with the public implications of theology and religious studies. Further examples can be found in the list of past convention themes and annual volume titles available at <http://www.college-theology.org/Past-Conventions>.

¹² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury, 1975). The critique of hierarchical binary thinking has been further developed by subsequent feminist scholars and theologians. For a particularly cogent presentation, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Woman, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1993).

¹³ For an astute analysis of the myth of innocence and of the religious roots of dominance, see especially Michael S. Hogue, *American Immanence: Democracy for an Uncertain World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

Nevertheless, the important work of scholars of religion is not limited to criticizing the corruptions and distortions rooted in religion. Even while religious teachings have too often been invoked to justify an unjust status quo, religious ideals have also functioned time and again to interrupt the status quo in the name of alternative possibilities, providing hope for social transformation and demanding that we live by different values. We study and teach about religion not only to criticize religiously endorsed injustice, as crucial as that is, but also because the great world religions are sources of time-tested wisdom calling into question the limitations and distortions of present ideals and assumptions.

Although I cannot do justice here to all the ways that studying and teaching the world's religions might help to illuminate our dark times, I would like briefly to mention four religious contributions that I contend are especially crucial today: first, religious sources of hope; second, religious emphases on unity; third, religious accounts of perennial human temptations and limitations; and fourth, religious attention to the importance of solitude and introspection.

First, religious sources of hope are particularly valuable in times like these, when the problems are overwhelming and successful resistance seems unlikely. Of course, our crises will not be resolved without appropriate scientific developments, sound economic policies, and effective plans for political reform; much gratitude is due to those who are working in these areas. Nevertheless, new technologies and theoretical policies do not transform anything unless they are implemented, and so it is critical that there be enough people motivated to do the difficult work of bringing about the necessary changes. Too often the greatest obstacle is not the lack of an adequate solution but rather the lack of willingness to enact that solution, especially when doing so requires much personal sacrifice.¹⁴ Sacrifice at the level required for the changes we need today is not likely to be sustained without a deep commitment to something valued much more than personal comfort or social esteem. Moreover, as Reinhold Niebuhr noted nearly a hundred years ago, the fight against established power requires more belief in the justice and eventual triumph of one's cause than an impartial assessment of the odds of success will support.¹⁵ The sense that one is acting in accord with ultimate

¹⁴ Pope Francis develops this point especially in his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*. See Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Si')*, May 24, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

¹⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: C. Scribner's, 1932), xv.

reality, or the Holy Spirit, can be a powerful source of such hope, inspiring struggle against the odds and amid the inevitable setbacks and failures.

Second, in their different ways, religions raise the question of the inherent unity, or interrelatedness, of reality, demanding that we consider what it means to live in right relations with all else. Consider the many crises of today: What are these if not crises of relationality? Our relationships with the natural world, with one another, with ourselves, and with the ultimate source of all have become deeply disordered, at times even dysfunctional.¹⁶ For far too long in the West and especially in the United States, we have cultivated an individualism that disregards the social bonds that sustain us, and we have treated creation as a resource to use and to use up as we see fit. More recently, as noted by David Albertson and Jason Blakely, neoliberalism pits people in competition against one another to the point that better economic and political policies alone will not suffice to heal the fractured body politic. To restore a sense of community, society needs the practices of mutual care that religions—at their best—foster.¹⁷ Not to put too fine a point on it, having divided ourselves into groups that define one another as enemies, the discipline of learning to love one's enemy and to be neighbor to all the vulnerable and suffering is essential for the mending of our rent social fabric and of our depleted and abused world.

Third, religions provide accounts of the temptations and limitations that plague the human condition, corruptions that humanity faces in all ages and that contribute to our most serious social as well as personal problems. When contemporary society tells us that greed, egoism, and voracious desires are good and healthy paths to happiness and economic prosperity, we need to hear again the religious wisdom that teaches that greed is a deadly sin, that selfishness is an obstacle to human flourishing, and that disordered desires cause much suffering to oneself and to others. Religions further warn that self-interest distorts our human judgment so that we easily mistake the temporary pleasures of consumption for true happiness and convince ourselves that whatever we want is right and good. In studying the world's religions, one encounters not only the insistence that human

¹⁶ This point is made throughout the writings of Pope Francis. In addition to *Laudato Si'*, see Francis' earlier apostolic exhortation *On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (Evangelii Gaudium)*, November 24, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html; and his more recent encyclical *On Fraternity and Social Friendship (Fratelli Tutti)*, October 3, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

¹⁷ David Albertson and Jason Blakely, "From Here to Utopia: What Religion Can Teach the Left," *Commonweal*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/here-utopia>.

perspectives are incapable of comprehending the full truth of the ultimate reality, but also the awareness that even the limited truths we are able to perceive are liable to corruption by our selfish interests.¹⁸ To quote Reinhold Niebuhr again, “Civilization depends on the vigorous pursuit of the highest values by people who are intelligent enough to know that their values are qualified by their interests and corrupted by their prejudices.”¹⁹

Finally, I believe that religious disciplines involving periods of solitude, such as personal prayer, meditation, and what some Christians have called “examination of conscience,” could assist in the recovery of the ability to *think* that Hannah Arendt argued is necessary for resisting the evil trends of any age. What Hannah Arendt meant by “thinking” was not mere reasoning, which often takes the form of rationalizing, something there is seldom any shortage of. Whereas such “reasoning” invokes the assumptions of one’s time to justify popular or personally beneficial positions, true “thinking” for Arendt is the process of challenging those common assumptions and socially supported conclusions, especially when they are embedded in one’s own judgments. Arendt was concerned with cultivating the internal dialogue through which one interrogates one’s self-justifications and especially any uncritical adoption of the dominant perspectives of the time. It is this internal dialogue that Arendt believed makes it possible for some people to illuminate their dark times by maintaining an independent point of view, rejecting indefensible shared ideas, and thus identifying the unnoticed dysfunctions plaguing their societies.²⁰

At a time when we have so little quiet and so many distractions, when we are surrounded with a multitude of media amplifying the rationalizations and justifications for “our” position against “theirs,” Arendt’s demand that we make space for the internal dialogue of self-critical thinking strikes me as especially astute. With all the current obstacles to thinking, including the constant busyness of our days, perhaps now more than ever we need religious disciplines of solitude, meditation, and examination of conscience to foster the deep internal thinking that might enable us to cut through entrenched assumptions in order to illuminate more fully our dark times.

As mentioned previously, it is imperative for society, and essential to true thinking, that scholars of religion continue the work of identifying and critiquing those religious concepts and practices that make the injustices of our time

¹⁸ This point is made especially cogently in the discussion of Christianity developed in Orlando O. Espín, *Idol and Grace: On Traditioning and Subversive Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014).

¹⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 127.

²⁰ Berkowitz, *Thinking in Dark Times*, 3–14.

seem normal and even good. Yet, as I have sought to show with this brief discussion of the potentially positive contributions of religion, it is no less important to allow religious traditions to confront us with a wisdom that may reveal a deeper truth about ourselves and our world. As scholars and teachers of religion, we ought then to engage religion from both sides of the mutually critical correlation, particularly in the nuanced form defended by David Tracy.²¹ We must criticize the distortions of the religious traditions we study, even while we subject ourselves to the criticisms these traditions would make of us. Only by attending to both sides, challenging and being challenged, will we illuminate our dark times with the distinct contributions that we as scholars, teachers, and students of religion can make. And because no one person can do all of this all the time, we need a community of scholars to question, to contest, and to complete one another's work, which is why I remain so deeply grateful for the honest, open, and invigorating conversations of the College Theology Society and the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, and for our shared commitment to studying and to teaching others to study religion in these dark times.

Before closing, I would like to follow Arendt's example and identify someone who exhibited the independence of thought and action necessary to illuminate a dark time. In my judgment, the Venerable Fr. Félix Varela y Morales (1788–1853) deserves to be more widely remembered than he currently is, especially in the United States. Sustained by his devout religious faith, Varela's work and witness of some two hundred years ago remain in many respects a worthy model for our own period.

Certainly, much of the life of Fr. Félix Varela would count as a "dark time," at least for him personally, as he lived in exile from his beloved Cuba, under threat of death from Spain, and in poor health in New York in the early nineteenth century, when anti-Catholic sentiment was widespread and sometimes violent. His proposal for ending slavery in Cuba had been blocked from coming before the Spanish governing body, the *Cortes*, and his dream of Cuban independence was not realized until long after his death. Instead, Cuba lost the political representation it had achieved when the absolute authority of King Ferdinand VII was reestablished in 1823, and Varela, who had been elected to represent Cuba in the *Cortes*, was forced to escape to a much colder and very foreign New York City.²²

²¹ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

²² For a concise biography of Fr. Varela in English, see Joseph McCadden and Helen M. McCadden, *Félix Varela: Torch Bearer from Cuba*, 2nd ed. (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ramallo Bros., 1984).

As a devoted Catholic priest who, before his exile, taught students in Cuba about the scientific and philosophical advances of the Enlightenment, Varela exemplified a mutually critical correlation emphasizing the value of both faith and reason. Instead of rejecting either modernity or Catholicism, Varela searched for the truth to be found in (if often obscured by) both camps.²³ Perhaps most notably, Varela argued for the end of slavery decades before official Catholic teaching opposed this horrific institution, and he defended self-governance and religious freedom more than one hundred years before the Catholic Church officially affirmed these as human rights (rather than as errors to be condemned!).²⁴ Varela seems never to have doubted that church teaching could and should develop, or that the truths known through faith and those known through reason cannot ultimately conflict, though each side must be scrutinized. He also resisted the privatization of religion, criticized the limits and failures of American religious freedom, and defended Catholicism against Protestant prejudice in New York.²⁵

I find Varela's defense of religious freedom especially significant not only because he was ahead of most Catholic thinkers on this issue but also because he clearly avoided the (unfortunately still common) false dichotomy that insists society must either privatize or legislate religious beliefs. Varela was committed to the public significance of religion freely debated and was as adamant in rejecting the then common limits to religious freedom in the United States as he was in refusing the idea that religion should be a solely private matter.²⁶ Indeed, reading today his 1835 warning of the problems that would beset a society without religion is a bit disconcerting as it so aptly describes much of our contemporary reality.²⁷

²³ McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, esp. 20–23.

²⁴ See especially McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, 41–47; and Félix Varela, "Religious Tolerance," in *Félix Varela: Letters to Elpido*, ed. Felipe J. Estévez (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 254–82. See also the extensive discussion of magisterial teachings on slavery in John T. Noonan, Jr., *A Church that Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); the discussion of magisterial teaching on religious freedom in Herminio Rico, *John Paul II and the Legacy of Dignitatis Humanae* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002); and the discussion of magisterial teaching on democracy in Paul E. Sigmund, "The Catholic Tradition and Modern Democracy," in *The Review of Politics* 49, no. 4 (Autumn 1987): 530–48.

²⁵ McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, esp. 83–90, 97, 106–10.

²⁶ In addition to McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, 72–123, and Varela, "Religious Tolerance," see also Félix Varela, "Irreligiosity Destroys Hope and Leads to Despotism," in Estévez, *Félix Varela: Letters to Elpido*, 40–72.

²⁷ Varela's description of nonreligious rulers who increase their power and support by pretending to fight irreligion on behalf of the religious while also appearing to the irreligious

A closer analysis reveals that Varela exemplifies the four contributions of religion to public life discussed above. The first contribution I identified, religious faith as a source of hope, is evident in Varela's persistent dedication to his work despite failure, ill health, and violent threats. He did not live to see Cuban independence, nor did he see the end of slavery or the full acceptance of Catholicism in America. Yet he continued in his American exile to found and edit Spanish language journals of political and philosophical thought that were smuggled into Cuba, while also defending Catholicism against its detractors in New York.²⁸ He worked to build up the Catholic diocese of New York, serving as Vicar General and even personally securing the funds to buy a church building that was badly needed for Catholics in New York City; when that building was condemned, he worked to obtain the funds for another church building in walking distance for the poor.²⁹ After having given his own financial reserves as well as his health in ministry to Catholics in New York and to his efforts for Cuba, he died in a simple room in St. Augustine, Florida, dependent on the charity of the pastor he assisted there, yet much loved by the people who had known him in Havana, in New York, and in St. Augustine.³⁰

It is perhaps the second contribution of religion, the concern for unity, that is most strikingly apparent in Varela's life. At a time of ethnic churches in the United States, Varela built a multi-ethnic parish and was deeply committed to serving the Irish Catholic immigrants who were then flowing into New York, where they encountered the fear of their faith, their culture, and their poverty that many immigrants still face today.³¹ In fact, Fr. Varela was so beloved that a memorial has been erected at the Church of the Transfiguration in New York City in tribute to this hardworking and generous priest who dedicated his significant pastoral energies, spent his own family inheritance, and solicited funds from other well-established Hispanic Catholics to provide ministry to Irish Catholic immigrants.³² (Perhaps if the role of Hispanic Catholics in funding the churches of Irish Catholic immigrants in these early years of American Catholicism were more widely known, the US

to be on their side is, in this reader's judgment, an apt analysis of the manipulative contradictions of much contemporary US politics. See Estévez, *Félix Varela: Letters to Elpidio*, 48–52.

²⁸ McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, esp. 54–65, 69–71, 108–12.

²⁹ McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, 77–78, 100.

³⁰ McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, 78, 103, 128–38.

³¹ McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, 101, 178.

³² A description and image of the memorial to Fr. Varela at the Church of the Transfiguration in New York can be found at <https://www.transfigurationnyc.org/p/about-us/our-history/14-our-history/74-father-varela-memorial>.

Catholic Church of today might respond better to the ecclesial challenges brought by current immigrants.)³³

Félix Varela's refusal to demonize his opponents or to respond to the virulent anti-Catholicism of his day with equal rancor is further testimony to the unifying force of his religious faith. As committed as Varela was to the public importance of religion, he resisted the pugnacious culture war stance adopted by his own bishop in New York, John Hughes. Varela was known instead for his gentle but firm arguments as he responded without acrimony to the slander and even violence of anti-Catholics. For this, he came to be admired by many Protestants as well as Catholics, arguably contributing more to smoothing the path for Catholics in then largely Protestant New York than all the trash talking popular then and today as "defense of the faith."³⁴

There can be no doubt that Varela was also deeply formed by religious teachings about the temptations and corruptions that beset the human condition, especially Christian warnings against greed, selfishness, and disordered desire. Varela's reputation for excessive generosity and self-denial were such that his housekeeper is said to have prevented Varela from going without warm clothing one winter by telling him that she needed money for an immigrant who lacked appropriate winter clothes. After Varela gave her all the money he had just received, she then used the funds to buy clothes for Varela himself, who was of course an immigrant without sufficient winter clothing.³⁵

That Varela fully appreciated Christian teaching about the corruption of self-interest is also evident in his resistance to offers from the United States and from Mexico to assist the cause of Cuban independence from Spain. Realizing that no other country could be trusted to act in Cuba's best interests, Varela argued that Cubans should avoid depending on (or hoping in) any outside agents for the liberty of their country.³⁶

The fourth contribution of religion outlined above, commitment to the solitude essential to the capacity truly to think, is abundantly apparent in Varela's life. His well-developed capacity for independent thought was manifest in his critique of slavery, in his defense of religious freedom, and in his refusal to accept that the advances of the Enlightenment and the wisdom of

³³ McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, esp. 72–73.

³⁴ McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, 87, 91, 109, 112. See also Varela's defense of responding to attacks on faith with "charity and gentleness, and at the same time, with firmness" in Estévez, *Félix Varela: Letters to Elpidio*, 91–93.

³⁵ McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, 103–04.

³⁶ McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, 56–57, 65–69.

Catholicism were inherently opposed, however much some leaders of each camp insisted that they were. In fact, Varela's efforts to teach his Cuban students to engage in critical dialogue with a variety of philosophies were so renowned that Varela has been celebrated as the one "who first taught us [Cubans] to think."³⁷ Even during his busy years as a pastor as well as Vicar General for the New York diocese, Varela made room for the introspection and solitude necessary for thinking, often writing into the night after the many demands of his long workday.³⁸

Varela illuminated his dark time with a selfless generosity, courage, kindness, and hope grounded in his Catholic faith. Despite setbacks and failures, he continued to strive for a truly independent Cuba, for full religious freedom, for education that critically engaged a variety of schools of thought, and for a multi-ethnic Catholicism responding to the needs of the poor and vulnerable in white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant-dominated New York City. The story of Varela's life and witness is an example of the power of religion at its best to sustain hope amid the political failures that fuel despair, to increase unity in resistance to the forces that divide, demonize, and polarize, and to inspire resistance to the false dichotomies and simplistic perspectives that too often substitute for political thinking. There is much we can learn from Varela, especially since there is no lack of despair, polarization, and shallow politics today.

Albert Camus aptly summarized the challenges of our time and perhaps of every time when he proclaimed that "we must mend what has been torn apart, make justice imaginable again in a world so obviously unjust, give happiness a meaning once more to people poisoned by the misery of the century."³⁹ Fr. Félix Varela was inspired by his faith to commit his life to this task as have so many others before and since. It is now our time to take up this charge, and I remain deeply grateful to the members and conversation partners of the College Theology Society and the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion for all they have done and are doing to mend what is torn apart, to imagine a more complete justice, and to provide antidotes for the poison of this century's misery.

³⁷ McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, 28, 132.

³⁸ McCadden and McCadden, *Félix Varela*, 94.

³⁹ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage, 1970), 107–08.