

From the Editor

The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and the insurrectionist riot at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, shocked some Americans to their core, while for other Americans the brutal death-dealing tactics of a police officer and the mob that stormed the Capitol were tragic but all too familiar events in a long history of American racism and white nationalism. And yet people still dare to question the truth about the connection between our words and our actions that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel so eloquently wrote in his impassioned letter to Cardinal Augustin Bea on May 22, 1962, during preparations for the Second Vatican Council. Though I have quoted Heschel's letter in these pages previously (*Horizons* 44, no. 2, in the wake of the Charlottesville, Virginia, white supremacist march in 2017), his haunting words bear repeating in the wake of the attack on the Capitol. Speech by citizens and political leaders alike demonstrated no regard for truth—the truth about fellow citizens or the truth about lawful elections, to name just two. Such speech has incited all manner of violence against the nation's most vulnerable populations, an attack on the Michigan statehouse, and, most spectacularly, the attack on the US Capitol building. Written in the shadow of the Holocaust, Heschel's words demonstrate why constant vigilance is necessary for a free and democratic society:

It is such a situation that we face today when the survival of mankind, including its sacred legacy, is in balance. One wave of hatred, prejudice or contempt may begin in its wake the destruction of all mankind. It is therefore of extreme importance that the sinfulness of thoughts of suspicion and hatred and particularly the sinfulness of any contemptuous utterance, however flippantly it is meant, be made clear to all mankind. *This applies in particular to such thoughts and utterances about individuals or groups of other religions, races and nations. Speech has power and few men realize that words do not fade. What starts out as a sound ends in a deed.*¹

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations: A Memorandum to His Eminence Agostino Cardinal Bea, President, The Secretariat for Christian Unity," May 22, 1962, <http://ajcarchives.org/ajcarchive/DigitalArchive.aspx?panes=2> (my emphasis). In a different vein, see Kurt Braddock, "Impeachment Trial: Research Spanning Decades Shows Language Can Incite Violence," *The Conversation* (February 5, 2021), <https://theconversation.com/impeachment-trial-research-spanning-decades-shows-language-can-incite-violence-154615>.

On January 6, 2021, I watched the insurrection develop in real time, anchored to my television by equal parts disbelief that the violence I had feared was unfolding, rage at the rioters, and anger that the appropriate authorities did not predict and prepare for such attack on the peaceful transfer of the presidency. “Thoughts and utterances” against “other religions, races and nations” and political persuasions erupted into a murderous attack. Speech had in fact ended in the deed of violent insurrection. Who needs white hoods when nooses and gallows were brazenly erected on land where slaves were persecuted? When shirts on chests mocked and denied the deaths of millions of Jews in the Holocaust? To maintain any sense of reality, I channeled my rage and fear into writing that day, as many readers of *Horizons* likely did as well. The word that came to mind was idolatry.

Idolatry and Insurrection

The cathedral of American democracy has been desecrated. The US Capitol has been breached by rioters and insurrectionists calling themselves patriots and Christians. My father proudly fought for democracy in World War II, and I am glad he did not live to see the insurrection within the US Capitol today. Today, he would not have recognized democracy or Christianity in action as rioters breached the Capitol under the flags of white Christian nationalism.

One rioter’s sign said “Jesus Saves” and another said, “Jesus 2020.” Yet another called Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi “Satan.”

These banners co-opt Jesus and his message on behalf of the idolatrous claims of insurrectionists. They have nothing to do with Christianity and salvation.

It is an article of faith for Christians that Jesus saves. It is, however, absolute idolatry for the rioters who stormed the Capitol to try to undermine the democratic process under the banners of “Jesus Saves” and “Jesus 2020,” as if Jesus had run for president rather than Donald Trump. Or maybe, in the minds of some, the two have become conflated. Nothing about the assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, and its disruption of the process of certifying the 2020 presidential election results spoke of salvation, only idolatry.

- To christen any US president as a national messiah is idolatry.
- To christen a political movement as salvific Christian doctrine is idolatry.
- To christen an economic theory as salvific Christian doctrine is idolatry.
- To christen white nationalism as salvific Christian doctrine is idolatry.
- To christen white supremacy as salvific Christian doctrine is idolatry.
- To christen white racism as salvific Christian doctrine is idolatry.

But Jesus taught solidarity, not idolatry. Take, for example, what Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) and in more detail in Matthew 25. How would his teaching play out today?

For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. Jesus saves through the grassroots workers who at great risk to themselves have fed the ballooning numbers of food-insecure brothers and sisters forced into poverty in a nation in which no one should go hungry. *Blessed are those who hunger, for they will be filled.*

I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Jesus saves through the volunteers finding homes, jobs, and provisions to help stranded refugees and immigrants relocate. *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

I was naked and you clothed me. Jesus saves through all those who work with the homeless, build affordable and dignified housing, and advocate for fair housing legislation. *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

I was ill and you cared for me. Jesus saves through the EMTs, nurses, psychologists, and doctors accompanying the hundreds of thousands of intubated people dying alone in a pandemic. *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

I was in prison and you visited me. Jesus saves through all the teachers, social workers, and volunteers who help those in prison find hope and train for a new life. *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

Jesus saves through those who labor for social equity and racial justice. *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Yes, Christians believe that Jesus saves. Free will is also a fundamental tenet of Christian faith. Insurrectionists freely chose to storm the Capitol, break windows, stop the work of Congress, and murder those in their way. To do so under the banner of “Jesus saves” is pure idolatry. Those who care for the least among us, the suffering, and the disenfranchised freely choose to be in solidarity with our brothers and sisters on the margins. Jesus saves, and Christians are asked to follow his teaching by walking in solidarity with the suffering and oppressed.

In the weeks since the attack, the connections between words and deeds continue to be questioned. Some falsely espouse that purity of doctrine is all that is needed, another form of idolatry, and ignore the harm that a literalist and ahistorical application of doctrine can wreak.² In previous semesters, my students have read Heschel’s words and immediately provided examples of

² Katherine Stewart, “The Roots of Josh Hawley’s Rage: Why Do So Many Republicans Appear to Be at War with Both Truth and Democracy?” *New York Times*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/opinion/josh-hawley-religion-democracy.html>.

speech that led to constructive actions. I find the students' reactions to be a sign of hope.

Similarly, the authors in this issue give us hope and steer us away from idolatrous interpretations of the Christian tradition. They challenge us with a complex and not idolatrous approach to scriptural interpretation that supports the "emerging spirituality of the contemporary believer" (Christopher McMahon) as well as fosters the potential for a dialogue between theology and science that can "nourish reflection on gender and sexuality in the church," honoring the flourishing of human dignity for all persons in their uniqueness (Paul J. Schutz). Jos Moons, SJ, guides us in consideration of the importance of the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives through a detailed consideration of the epicleses in the eucharistic prayers. Ethical explorations help us avoid idolatry as we consider how to live in our freedom in order to live out justice and compassion. Nathan Wood-House wrestles with Luther's doctrine of justification and "the holy work of transforming our sinful world" while Marc Tumeinski advocates for a more complete incarnation of God's gift of peace in our Christian communities by the full inclusion of Christians with impairments into parish life. Finally, Joseph Flipper and Christopher Pramuk provide us with a pedagogical roundtable that forces us to confront the idolatry in our own house. Can universities be a place to teach antiracism or are they simply foundation stones in the edifice of systemic racism? How can professors of theology and religious studies teach antiracism?

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With this issue, terms of some members of the editorial board have ended. I thank Professors Celia Deane-Drummond, Michelle Gonzalez Maldonado, Karen Kilby, Angela Kim Harkins, Paulinus Odozor, Cyril Orji, Jonathan Tan, and Sandra Yocum for their service to *Horizons*. As always, I thank our authors for sharing their scholarship with our readers, and I thank all of the members of the *Horizons* editorial team for their inspiring creativity, diligent work, and unwavering commitment to excellent scholarship.

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