

Religious Responses to Ferguson

Panel Discussion on February 5, 2015 featuring Reverend Traci Blackmon, Father Arthur Cavitt, Rabbi Susan Talve, Mr. Elhadj Wann

Laurie Maffly-Kipp

I think we're ready to begin now, I'd like to welcome everyone to this afternoon's panel discussion sponsored by the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. I'm Laurie Maffly-Kipp, a faculty member at the Center, and director of our fellows program. I encourage you to take information on your way out this evening about the Center's broader enterprise, including our other upcoming public events. I also invite you to join our email list, to contact us with any questions or feedback, and to follow our online journal on religion and politics. As I hope most of you know by now, the Center serves as a non-partisan, research-oriented, public-minded venue for fostering rigorous scholarship, and informing both academic and broader community audiences about the intersections of religion and U.S. politics. The Center strives to promote sustained engagement with the religious and political debates shaping American life now and in the past. Nothing seems more pressing to us now than reflecting on our local context. And so today, we focus attention on religious involvement in Ferguson and surrounding communities in the wake of events of the past six months. A wide variety of religious communities in our region have been intimately involved in charting a way forward. The goal of religion is, if we take it seriously, the origins of that term, to bind, or to obligate. Whatever our political convictions, we are all part of this broader community, and in order to seek a common way forward, it is useful to look for religion as a binding force. We are here to discuss the ways various religious communities understand and enact those obligations in our current time of unrest and deep division.

Our program today also highlights one of the signal features of the mission of the Danforth Center: our fellows program. The Center sponsors two programs for visiting early-career scholars. One, for doctoral candidates in their final year of research and writing, and the other, for post-doctoral scholars in the early stages of their careers. It is through these residential programs that we enrich the variety of approaches we bring to our research and teaching, by gathering and supporting outstanding younger scholars. Both of our moderators today have been members of this program, and I feel very fortunate to work closely with them both. So, I'll introduce them one at a time.

Stephanie Wolfe, closest to me, is our current dissertation fellow, and it is her research that provided the creative impetus for today's program. She is also a doctoral candidate in the Department of Religious Studies at Northwestern University, where she specializes in the field of American religion. Her dissertation, entitled "Urban Renewal: The Evangelical Encounter with Race, Poverty, and Inequality in Chicago," utilizes ethnographic and historical methods to examine evangelical conception of urban America, social justice, and racial identity throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Wolfe's broader interests include American religious history, particularly American evangelicalism, urban studies, and the intersection among religion, politics, race, and capitalism in American public life.

Professor Lerone Martin, at the other end of the table, is a former post-doctoral fellow here, who we were lucky enough to keep with us in a permanent position at the Center. Professor Martin

joined the faculty of the John C. Danforth Center as an Assistant Professor last July after a one year post-doctoral fellowship. He earned his BA from Anderson University in Anderson, Indiana, and his Master of Divinity Degree from Princeton Theological Seminary before completing his PhD at Emory University in 2011. From 2010-2013, Lerone was the assistant professor of American religious history and culture at Eden Theological Seminary, where he taught courses in African and African American religious history. His first book project is called *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* and it was just released this past fall. It charts the role of the phonograph in the shaping of African American religion, culture, and politics during the first half of the twentieth century.

And now, finally, before I turn things over to Stephanie, two final reminders: please turn off, or otherwise silence your cell phones before we get started, and second, please join us after our conversation for a reception outside the doors where we can continue our discussions, thank you. Stephanie.

Stephanie Wolfe

Thank you, Laurie. Before I begin, I'd like to thank the faculty and the staff here at the Danforth Center. All of you have made me feel so welcome this year, and thank you again for helping me to organize this event. In particular, special thanks to Professor Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Professor Leigh Schmidt, who is the acting director of the Center, and Doctor Rachel Lindsey, the Center's Associate Director. And I also want to thank Lerone Martin, my co-moderator, who is Assistant Professor of Religion and Politics here at Wash U. And finally, special thanks to Sheri Peña and Debra Kennard, both of whom, we're so thankful for all of the wonderful work that you put together for this event today.

I'm going to provide just a few comments on the format today. Our four panelists will have fifteen minutes each to speak about their work in and around Ferguson, Missouri, and on the ways that their faith has informed that work. Then, we're going to have a short moderated discussion, and hopefully that will leave us about 30 minutes for questions and answers from the audience.

And I've reserved my final thank-you's for our esteemed panelists, who have taken the time out of their busy schedules to come here and share their knowledge and their experiences with us. So, we're going to begin with Reverend Traci Blackmon. Reverend Blackmon is pastor of Christ the King, United Church of Christ in Florissant, Missouri. She was ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, where she served for nine years before being installed as the first woman pastor in Christ the King's 159 year history. Reverend Blackmon is a licensed registered nurse, with over 35 years' experience in health care. She is the coordinator of Healthy Mind, Body, Spirit, a faith-based outreach program designed to impact health incomes in zip codes with large health disparities. She has also developed programs to reach the un- and under-insured. Reverend Blackmon was the lead organizer of Souls to the Polls, an ecumenical program that provided transportation to the polls during the recent Presidential election. And most recently, she was appointed to the Ferguson Commission, a group commissioned by the governor of Missouri to examine the social and economic conditions that influence the unrest following the death of Michael Brown. In addition to her community work, Reverend Blackmon has organized symposia for women on the topic of spirituality and sexuality, and she has worked with numerous civic and religious organizations on issues ranging from racism, sexism,

heterosexism, classism, inter-faith dialogue, and congregational and community grief. She is the recipient of numerous national and local awards, including, but not limited to, the President's Volunteer Service Award from the White House, and the NAACP St. Louis County Rosa Parks Award. Reverend Blackmon earned her Bachelor's Degree in nursing from Birmingham Southern College, and a Masters of Divinity Degree from Eden Theological Seminary.

Then, we'll move on to Rabbi Susan Talve. Rabbi Talve is the founding Rabbi of Central Reform Congregation, the only Jewish Congregation located within the city limits of St. Louis, where she performs life cycle rituals, leads worship, and teaches classes for over 750 Jewish households. Rabbi Talve has led her congregation in developing ongoing relationships with the African American and Muslim community, and by fostering civil liberties for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities. Today, Central Reform Congregation serves as a home to generations of LGBTQ families, and to many Jews of color of all ages. Rabbi Talve has been engaged in community issues ranging from violent crime to workers' rights, immigration reform, gun control, and access to healthcare. In 2007, Rabbi Talve became a founding member and the president of Missouri Healthcare for All, a statewide, grassroots advocacy organization working to bring healthcare access to all Missourians. She also founded and led a support group for families of children with congenital heart disease, and continues to support families living with chronic illness. Rabbi Talve was ordained by Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1981, where she earned a Masters Degree in Hebrew Letters, and a Doctor of Divinity. She was the first non-Christian to receive an honorary doctorate from Eden Theological Seminary in 2011, in recognition of her career supporting interfaith relations in the St. Louis community.

Next, we'll hear from Mr. Elhadj Wann, Mr. Wann is a lecturer at the West Florissant Masjid, located in Jennings, Missouri, and the Public Relations Executive of the African Diaspora Council, an organization offering educational, financial, and social advocacy services for African communities in the United States. He served as the Director of Education at Better Family Life, a St. Louis community development corporation, as a lecturer and counselor in the New York Department of Correction, and also as a teacher, administrator, and outreach consultant for the Immigration Assistance Program at the New York Diagnostic Center. More recently, he has been involved in efforts to raise media awareness about the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. Mr. Wann holds a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration from the University of Conakry, in Guinea, and a Master's Degree in International Affairs from Washington University in St. Louis. He's fluent in French, English, and Fulani, and reads and writes Arabic. Finally, Mr. Wann is the author of two books, both published in French, *Mission MP 901: 13 Years in Haram*, and second, *Insecurity: A Threat to All Nations*. Both draw on Muslim spiritual teachings to encourage tolerance and mutual understanding among people of diverse cultures.

And finally, we'll hear from Reverend Arthur Cavitt. Reverend Cavitt is a Catholic Priest and the Executive Director of the St. Charles Lwanga Center. Located in North St. Louis City, the Lwanga Center is an archdiocesan site for spiritual formation and leadership development, serving both youth and adults, particularly in African American communities. In recent years, Reverend Cavitt served on the administrative team at Cardinal Ritter College Preparatory High School. Additionally, he had tenure as Pastoral Minister at the Catholic Student Center right here at Washington University. Reverend Cavitt is a former resident of the District of Columbia, where he was an educator at the elementary, high school, and college levels. He's been a faculty member at Cardinal Ritter Prep, an adjunct faculty member at the Aquinas Institute of Theology, and a guest lecturer at St. Louis University. From the summer of 2012

through October 2014, Reverend Cavitt was in residence at Blessed Theresa of Calcutta Parish in Ferguson, Missouri. Father Art is currently a pastor of St. Louis Church in downtown St. Louis, and he sees his ministry extending to a variety of settings: churches, schools, hospitals, nursing homes, jails, soup kitchens, and in the media.

So, without adieu, Reverend Blackmon, I'd like to invite you to begin.

Reverend Traci Blackmon

I knew she'd do that to me [laughter]. Good afternoon, everyone. I'm appreciative of the opportunity to be here today, very grateful to the host who has invited us to come. Ferguson is an issue that impacts all of us, one way or another, and I refer to it as a communal crisis. I spend a lot of my days dealing with health care crisis, but Ferguson, what happened on August 9th, with Michael Brown Jr., was the culmination of a lot of things that had been going on for a lot of time that perhaps we had not been paying attention to. And then on August 9th, with the killing of an 18-year old, a young man, who was unarmed at the time, there set off a cataclysmic reaction that has shaken this nation, not just Ferguson, but certainly all of St. Louis, all of this region, and all of this nation. It has become what happened here, that we've continued to see the outbreaks and the uprisings in New York, and in Ohio, and in Florida, and all the way to Geneva, to the United Nations. So, I consider it a communal crisis, because it is complex in its nature. Simple things don't enter into crisis, they either live or they die, but what happened in Ferguson brought together a lot of issues that we have not faced adequately, we've faced poorly, or we haven't faced at all, that are plaguing this region, and not just this region, but this nation. It brought us face-to-face with some of the issues around poverty, some of the issues around racism, some of the issues around sexism, some of the issues around the ill distribution of power in our region, and the hopelessness that some communities feel. It also brought us into conversation and dialogue about the ways that we have intergenerational disconnections going on, just disconnections within the race, and disconnections across races and across faiths.

I serve a church, Christ the King United Church of Christ, that is not in Ferguson, it's in Florissant, but we're about three miles away from Ferguson, right across 270 is Christ the King. I have several members who do live in Ferguson, at one point, I lived in Ferguson myself, and I became involved in this particular moment, not because I'm a member, and not because I knew my ground, but because we have become a Church that is known as a place that provides funerals and provides respite for families that are in crisis. I've done quite a few funerals at Christ the King of people who I do not know, but people who are either victims of violence, predominantly gun violence, and find themselves without any type of church affiliation, and wanting to have a church funeral for the family. I have a motto that I use, that as a pastor, I feel that I am called to marry you and bury you, and I'll do both of those, one time, for free. So, we've become a church where lots of people call for funerals, and at one of those funerals, of a young girl who had been killed in a drive-by, a year before Mike Brown, there was a woman who was there at the funeral, who, unbeknownst to me, took a liking to me, because of that, and she lived in Canfield. So when Michael Brown was killed, she was coming home from something with her family, she was trying to drive home, but when she got there, she couldn't get in because of all of the police and all of the gathering of people. So, she parked on West Florissant, and she walked (16:50)

