

Sin and grace in public discourse

“We’ve lost the capacity to talk about the universality of brokenness—and belovedness.”

[David Heim](#) interviews [Serene Jones](#)

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Serene Jones. Photo by Filip Wolak / Union Theological Seminary.

Serene Jones became president of Union Theological Seminary in New York in 2008. Before arriving at Union, she taught at Yale Divinity School, where she also chaired the university’s program in women, gender and sexuality studies. She has been a contributor to HuffPost as well as many scholarly books and journals. Jones is the author of Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety, Feminist Theory and Christian Theology, and Trauma and Grace. Earlier this year she published Call It Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World.

You suggest in the beginning of your book *Call It Grace* that theology begins by looking at one's own life and asking, So what's it all about at the deepest level? What drew you toward this explicit foray into autobiographical writing?

I set out to write a book that would cover what major theologians said about sin and grace because I thought they were important ideas for this moment in American history when we have such sharp partisan divides and people are demonizing one another. This classical notion that we sin, that we're all broken, and that in grace we're all equal and loved—these ideas are very important politically.

But when I began writing, what came pouring out of me was a set of stories about my own life. I found that I couldn't write about sin and grace without writing about how sin and grace were actually lived in my experience. I didn't expect it to be a memoir, but that's how it came out.

It seems you are trying to find fresh language for Christian faith, rooted in experience. For example, in the book you recall your grandmother's vivid memory of touching a cool water jug on a blistering hot day. That was the presence of God for her and, in a way, it is that for you.

That was the most powerful image that I grew up with, hearing about it all the time on the homestead in Oklahoma which is so central to my family. I think that our experiences of grace are always very concrete. Grace is not an abstraction, it's a lived reality and always comes to us through everyday life.

Does the language of sin and grace still work in our time?

Well, it definitely works for me. I don't think we have the moral equivalent in our public discourse. As a nation we've lost the capacity to talk about the universality of human brokenness and how that manifests itself not just in individual actions but in broken systems. And we seem to have lost a universal sense of fundamental human equality and belovedness. Those concepts undergird the Constitution, they are there in the Declaration of Independence, they are the foundation of democracy. But we've lost the capacity in a public way to use them.

The book includes a section on your experience as president of Union Theological Seminary at a time of financial crisis. The school had to make hard decisions, including the decision to sell air rights for a new

commercial building in order to secure the funds needed to renovate the seminary's buildings. That decision was controversial. How do you understand that part of your life in light of your vocation as a theologian?

I wanted to write about the moral and personal complexity of the issue because I think it concerns not just Union's situation but that of churches and seminaries across the country. They are having to make hard decisions, and the script for making those decisions has not been written. There's no handbook on how to fix your crumbling building when there's no way you can raise the money to do so. There's no handbook on how a congregation should deal responsibly with its physical plant. Reflection on institutions and their physical presence has not been the subject of theological thought.

I wanted to say look, this is a theological issue, not just a financial one. For me, it came down to a decision about whether we would be able to renovate our building and continue teaching in New York City for another 100 years. We live in the gray spaces of moral decision making. It would be a problem if I treated that decision as if it were obvious and not morally complex.

Has the experience made you think any differently about what leadership of an institution entails?

When I started as president at Union in 2008, I had no idea I would spend so much time thinking about plumbing, electricity, and the real estate world of New York. Now I realize that diving into those areas was an essential part of leadership. Making decisions along with my board of trustees and faculty that were very hard and not popular but necessary has been crucial. I have seen the not-so-glorious side of leadership and how decisions that need to be made for the good of the whole are not necessarily celebrated by the whole.

Administration is thoroughly theological work. In every decision I make, I have also to decide whether it will be a decision made by myself or by a collaborative effort. Will I have conversations with people about the moral consequences of the decision? These questions apply to everything from setting faculty salaries to hiring someone in the development department to how we're going to take care of our courtyard.

This experience seems to have given you a new appreciation of Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote a lot about moral ambiguity.

Absolutely. I read that guy all the time. I read him in college and then really did not come back to him until coming to Union. Although I'd have to say all the theologians that I use in the book—Calvin, Kierkegaard, Barth—are brilliant when it comes to this question of moral ambiguity.

***Call It Grace* is a very intimate and personal book, which involves telling some family secrets. Why was that important?**

I wouldn't say that any of the stories I tell are family secrets. My mother kept a terrible secret that she eventually yielded—but we talk about it openly in my family. I'm trying to write about the secrets all families hold, particularly white families when it comes to racism. That's why I write about discovering my own family's close connection to the lynching of African Americans in Oklahoma in 1911.

"I found I couldn't write about sin and grace without writing about my experience of them."

How would you define the challenges of theological education in this era? And are there any insights gained from writing this book that are relevant to those challenges?

One challenge is to make theology accessible. In writing the book I had to grapple with how my own language may have become inaccessible to the broader public after several decades of teaching theology. Using stories and descriptions of the relationship between doctrinal claims and life is a good way to make theology accessible. Some of the most powerful writings in Christian tradition are completely accessible because they were written to the common public.

It's important for people to see that Christian claims don't just take the form of propositions; they have to do with the shape of our imagination and how we look at the world.

Since you've mentioned the propositional approach to faith: you were interviewed recently by the *New York Times*, and the opening theological question you were asked was quite propositional: "Do you believe in the flesh-and-blood resurrection of Jesus?" In that case, isn't it hard not to respond in propositional terms?

My response to that question on resurrection was read by some as a propositional one, but I never said that I don't believe in the bodily resurrection. I simply pointed out that in the Gospel of Mark there is no bodily resurrection and that the tradition has a variety of ways of thinking about resurrection. I've gotten responses from people who think that I'm no longer Christian because of some of the things I said. My aim was to show there is space within Christianity for myriad interpretations and existential engagements with biblical texts.

Going back to the topic of seminaries, what are the other main challenges you see in theological education?

Another large challenge is to form people in faith. For the past 30 years we've had more and more students in seminary who do not come from church communities or don't come from church communities that had well-developed theological education. A lot of students, including conservative ones, have never really wrestled with the whole of scripture. Wrestling with the whole of scripture is itself an act of formation, because it is forming your imagination of what it means to live in the context of the biblical story.

Formation also has to do with how you comport yourself in the world and how you understand your own ultimate destiny. Those questions have to do with the deep ways you think about things, which means they engage the unconscious mind, the body, and the emotions as well as the mind.

A third crucial challenge for seminaries is to address racism, patriarchy, and religious pluralism. If we don't do that, then we have nothing to say to the world. In writing this book, I had to wrestle directly as a white person with my realization that my own family was most likely involved in the brutal lynching of black people. These were all God-fearing, churchgoing people who did this. This story didn't get passed down to me, and yet it's a story that's in the bones of my family.

"I'm trying to write about the secrets all families hold, particularly white families."

You mention religious pluralism. How has that become a central concern for you as an educator?

I've had to grow enormously in this area by responding to life at a seminary in New York City, which is itself so radically plural. And we live in an interreligiously entangled world. Ministers will be called upon to work with the mosques and temples

in their neighborhoods. If ministers know nothing about Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, it will limit their capacity to be fully engaged neighbors. It's incumbent upon us to equip students to engage that world with knowledge and compassion. It's also important to note how Christians are starting to incorporate Buddhist practices, such as meditation, into their faith. That's often happening without an understanding of where these practices come from and the cosmology behind them.

How does your exploration of sin and grace apply to the life of congregations today?

I've told the story of racism in my family to lots of congregations. I'm astonished at the level of shame and fear there is in predominantly white congregations about talking about racism. Some people distance themselves from my story, saying things like, "I'm sorry that that happened in your family."

But in other congregations I find a real desire to dig into the history of their own church and their own family and to talk about the legacy of racism. In some cases I've heard stories pour out of people who have detailed knowledge of how their families were complicit in the slave trade and in Jim Crow segregation. This is crucial work for congregations to do.

A classic form of Christian memoir is "I once was lost, but now am found." Does your story translate into any version of that?

I once was a happy but confused Christian child, and now I am a wiser, still fundamentally happy yet humbled Christian leader—humbled by life and by my own understanding of the complexities, horrors, and gifts of the Christian faith.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Sin and grace in public life."