

We write on behalf of New York Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) to declare our grave religious and ethical concerns regarding the recent decisions by grand juries in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City not to bring criminal charges against the police officers involved in the violent deaths of unarmed African American men in those cities.

The grand jury system was originally intended to protect individuals from zealous prosecution by the state by insuring that the evidence was sufficient for a trial. In these two cities, the system has been turned on its head: the state is protecting its own in the face of evidence ample enough to at least justify a trial.

These failures to indict have led to a groundswell of protests across the country. We stand in unity with those who refuse to be silent and accept the status quo, who through non-violent protest attempt to speak out against injustice and to bring change to a broken system.

God leads us to believe that violence will never take us to a path of justice and healing. Furthermore, we believe that those who do violence to others also do violence to themselves. We decry both the state-sponsored violence of excessive use of lethal force by police and the individual acts of destruction during civil unrest. But we understand righteous anger and the need to challenge injustice, and we recognize that civil authority does not always align with how God would have us live in this world. In the face of this misalignment, we choose to work for a civil society that affirms the presence of God within each and all of us without exception.

Black lives matter. We know this truth through the practice of our faith, in which we experience the spark of the Divine present in each of us. We know all persons to be equally worthy of love, respect, and justice. Tragically, fifty years after they were spoken, the words of famed civil rights organizer Ella Baker still apply: "Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a white mother's sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens." When we do not live out this truth, all of us are harmed, all of us are damaged.

All lives matter. But our civil society is constructed in a way that black and brown lives matter less than white lives. This condition extends beyond the matters of policing into education, the media, the system of mass incarceration, housing patterns, employment, and virtually every aspect of life in the United States, including its faith communities.

Therefore, we call for both recognition and remedy of this condition. We call upon civil authorities to take leadership in bringing about this recognition and remedy. We call upon all people of faith, ourselves included, to understand how we may be complicit in a system that extends privileges to people racialized as white while denying the same to those racialized as people of color.

It is clearly in the interest of our shared humanity and our common spiritual condition to change these circumstances. It is in our material, economic, and social interests to do so as well. This is not easy work. But we pray the burden of this work may be easier to bear than the moral burden of settling back, once the furor subsides, into complacent acceptance of a system and a society that fail to affirm our most fundamental relationship to God and to one another.

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