

## God First Loved Us: Reflections on the Theological Ground of Liberation

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“Our task is to find the words with which to talk about God in the midst of the starvation of millions, the humiliation of races regarded as inferior, discrimination against women, especially women who are poor, systematic social injustice, a persistent high rate of infant mortality, those who simply ‘disappear’ or are deprived of their freedom, the sufferings of peoples who are struggling for their right to live. . . .”<sup>1</sup> With those words, Gustavo Gutiérrez, describes the task of the Christian theologian.

In the wake of the bloodiest century in history, and given the fact that much of that blood is found on the hands of self-proclaimed “Christians,” the victims of history are today the theologian’s principal interlocutors. And, thus, God’s relationship to the victims (or apparent lack thereof) is an inescapable challenge—the inescapable challenge—for Christian theology at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Today, one cannot do Christian theology, or even think theologically, without confronting the claims implicit in the preferential option for the poor.

The option for the poor, therefore, makes not only an ethical but also a theological claim. The preferential option for the poor is not only a privileged criterion of Christian

orthopraxis (correct practice); it is, more fundamentally, a privileged criterion of orthodoxy itself (correct worship, or doxa), calling us to believe in and worship a God revealed on the cross, among the crucified peoples of history. Unless we place ourselves alongside the poor, unless we look at reality through their eyes, we are unable to see, recognize, or worship the God who walks with the poor. Conversely, if we lack such a practical solidarity with the poor, the “god” in whom we believe and whom we worship will necessarily be a false god, an idol of our own making. Ultimately, then, the option for the poor is an option for the faith of the poor.

It is from within the context of the Latin American and U.S. Latino Catholic communities, specifically, that I would like to argue for the theological significance of liberation and, specifically, the theological ground of the preferential option for the poor as liberating praxis. As articulated especially by Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino, human liberation involves a participation in, or a con-forming to God’s own liberating activity made manifest in the person of the Crucified and Risen Christ. I will suggest, secondly, that such an understanding of liberation is rooted precisely in the lived faith of the poor, or “popular Catholicism.” Thirdly, I will argue that Latin American and U.S. Latino popular Catholicism reflects a worldview that is fundamentally at odds with modern and postmodern theologies; specifically, this worldview reflects the medieval and baroque roots of Latin American Catholicism. Finally, I will suggest that the theological aesthetics and, more specifically, the theological dramatics of Hans Urs von Balthasar are fundamentally open to liberating praxis, or the option for the poor, thus

understood—whatever Balthasar’s own explicit resistance to liberation theology may have been.

## I. GOD FIRST LOVED US

Throughout his many writings, Gustavo Gutiérrez repeatedly reminds us that the warrants for a preferential option for the poor are, above all, theocentric: “the ultimate basis for the privileged position of the poor is not in the poor themselves but in God, in the gratuitousness and universality of God’s agapeic love.”<sup>2</sup> “ ‘God first loved us’ (1 John 4:19),” writes Gutiérrez, “[e]verything starts from there. The gift of God’s love is the source of our being and puts its impress on our lives. . . . The other is our way for reaching God, but our relationship with God is a precondition for encounter and true communion with the other.”<sup>3</sup> Before we can “opt for” God or others, God has already opted for us; we can opt for the poor in a preferential way because God has already opted for the poor preferentially. “The ultimate basis of God’s preference for the poor,” avers Gutiérrez, “is to be found in God’s own goodness and not in any analysis of society or in human compassion, however pertinent these reasons may be.”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the Peruvian theologian warns against such distorted interpretations of the option for the poor: “A hasty and simplistic interpretation of the liberationist perspective has led some to affirm that its dominant, if not exclusive, themes are commitment, the social dimension of faith, the denunciation of injustices, and others of a similar nature. It

is said that the liberationist impulse leaves little room for grasping the necessity of personal conversion as a condition for Christian life . . . Such an interpretation and criticism are simply caricatures. One need only have contact with the Christians in question to appreciate the complexity of their approach and the depth of their spiritual experience.”<sup>5</sup> The “depth of the spiritual experience” of the Latin American poor is what precludes any reductively political interpretation of the option for the poor. What defines and makes Christian faith possible is not praxis as such but praxis as encountered by God’s Word. And it is precisely a supreme trust in God’s gratuitous love for us, as that love is revealed in our lives and in God’s Word, that above all characterizes the faith of the poor themselves.

Gutiérrez’s understanding of the preferential option for the poor presents us with an epistemological paradox: the more profoundly we accompany the poor, the more profoundly we identify with the Christian praxis of the poor and reflect critically on that praxis in the light of God’s Word, the more we are confronted with a lived faith that takes as its starting point the gratuitous Word of God, Jesus Christ himself as the foundation of our liberating praxis. The more we direct our gaze to the poor, the more they remind us of what God has done and continues to do for the poor in history: “the gratuitousness of God’s love is the framework within which the requirement of practicing justice is to be located.”<sup>6</sup> The poor understand, argues Gutiérrez, that, before we can choose God or others, God has already chosen us. Hence, insofar as theology is Christian theology, it can never be simply a “critical reflection on praxis” per se; rather, as Gutierrez avers in his

now-classic definition, Christian theology must be a “critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word.”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, for a Christian, there is no such thing as human praxis “per se.” An authentically human praxis is always, by definition, a participation in a theopraxis, God’s own trinitarian praxis. Our ability to act as historical agents, our freedom, our very identity are themselves given us by the God who loved us first, the God who is fully revealed in the wounded body of the Crucified and Risen Christ. Echoing Gutiérrez’s words, Jon Sobrino observes:

To be encountered by the Lord is the experience of the love of God. Indeed it is the experience of the fact that love is the reality that discloses to us, and makes us able to be, what we are. It is God’s coming to meet us, simply because God loves us, that renders us capable of defining our very selves as who we are, in order, in our turn, to go forth to meet others. . . . Without a true encounter with God, there can be no true encounter with the poor. . . . To have genuine love for our sisters and brothers, we must have an experience of the God who first loved us.<sup>8</sup>

The ground of human liberation, the ground of any true solidarity with the poor is ultimately theological. In their insistence on this point, both Gutierrez and Sobrino reflect an understanding of Christian theology as rooted in what Hans Urs von Balthasar calls theo-drama, or “God’s ‘praxy’”:

Ultimately orthopraxy penetrates to the inner core of orthodoxy, yet in such a way that the work in view has God, not for its object, but for its subject. As for man’s faith—his decisive “achievement”—it comes about when the believer acknowledges the divine “work” in himself and allows it to take effect (Jn 6: 28f.). Thus orthodoxy is God’s orthopraxy, making the believer’s “doxy” the affirmation of and participation in God’s “praxy,” praxis.<sup>9</sup>

Orthodoxy is the consequence of our participation in God’s “praxy,” our participation in theopraxis. And this participation in “the divine work” is fundamentally an act of grateful worship, prayer, contemplation--an act, in other words, of reception and

response to God's transforming love. . . "Bonhoeffer was right," observes Gutierrez, "when he said that the only credible God is the God of the mystics. . . . If it is true . . . that one must go through others to reach God, it is equally certain that the 'passing through' to the gratuitous God strips me, leaves me naked, universalizes my love for others, and makes it gratuitous. Both movements need each other dialectically and move toward a synthesis. This synthesis is found in Christ. . . ." <sup>10</sup>

As liberation theologians and other Third World theologians have attempted to articulate the principle of liberation, therefore, they have increasingly called attention to the central place of popular religion, or the "faith of the people," within the liberation struggle and, therefore, within the preferential option for the poor. Popular religion is at once theocentric and sociopolitical: it is theocentric in that its foundation is the day-to-day encounter with a God who accompanies us in our struggles, and it is sociopolitical in that that solidarity is encountered first on the margins of society, among the outcasts and victims of sociopolitical and economic power.

At the very heart of what Gutiérrez has called the "culture of the poor" one finds the religious practices, symbols, and narratives which embody a lived faith: "From gratuitousness also comes the language of symbols. . . . In their religious celebrations, whether at especially important moments or in the circumstances of everyday life, the poor turn to the Lord with the trustfulness and spontaneity of a child who speaks to its father and tells him of its suffering and hopes."<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the option for the poor necessarily implies an option for the lived faith of the poor, an option for the spirituality of the poor. To opt for the poor is necessarily to pray as the poor pray, and to pray to the God

to whom the poor pray. In the absence of such a practical spirituality, lived as response to God's love for us, any putative option for the poor cannot engender the solidarity or empathy necessary if that option is to define not only an ethics but also a theology. "It is not possible to do theology in Latin America," writes Gutiérrez, "without taking into account the situation of the most downtrodden of history; this means in turn that at some point the theologian must cry out, as Jesus did, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"<sup>12</sup>

## II. SYMBOLIC REALISM

However, such an understanding of the preferential option for the poor, or liberating praxis—as an act of response to God's loving action in history—will be incomprehensible, literally inconceivable to many contemporary First World Christians. Modern Western notions of human agency emphasize the character of human praxis as autonomous agency, which itself is understood instrumentally. (I have elsewhere argued that even the postmodern deconstruction of the agent-subject presupposes what it claims to reject.)<sup>13</sup> Such an understanding of praxis, however, fails to locate human praxis within the broader ambit of God's own praxis in history. Unlike the poor in our Latin American and Latino communities, the modern Western Christian does instinctively distinguish between Christian praxis and praxis "per se."

The affirmation of the unimpeachable reality of God's universal love as foundational points to a further obstacle which the option for the poor must confront in

contemporary Western societies. The postmodern deconstruction of the subject and the rejection of all so-called metanarratives call into question the very possibility of making normative claims. Quite simply, the question of truth is often reduced to a question of either meaning or usefulness: Is faith meaningful or useful for me? Is the faith of the poor meaningful or useful for them? Does it work for them? Does it liberate?

However, if Christian faith presupposes a preferential option for the poor—as the privileged criterion of that faith's credibility—then the possibility of affirming normative, universal truths is itself essential to, and a presupposition for the cause of liberation. Otherwise, we are ultimately incapable of distinguishing between oppression and liberation. Any notion of pluralism or diversity that precludes, a priori, such a possibility can only contribute to the marginalization of the poor.

Implicit in the notion of the preferential option for the poor, therefore, is the assertion that “tolerance” of diversity or difference without preference can never be the foundation of freedom and justice. The appeal to tolerance as sufficient for ensuring inclusiveness and diversity effectively neutralizes the voices of the poor.

The preferential option for the poor presupposes that the good of the whole, the common good, cannot be achieved unless and until preference is given to a particular good, namely, the good of the marginalized. Far from promoting conflict or divisiveness, such a preference is a precondition for an authentic, pluralistic community which affirms the dignity of all peoples. The possibility—indeed, the necessity—of affirming a normative, universal truth is presupposed in the preferential option for the poor, even though this can never be a merely abstract, conceptual “truth.”



In my own work in the Latino community over the years, I have been reminded over and over again that, for the poor, the fundamental question is, quite simply, “Is it true?”—not in an abstract, propositional sense, but in the sense of a reality that makes ultimate claims on our lives, a reality that defines us, gives us our identity and mission. When we are encountered by Christ, contends Gutiérrez, “we discover where the Lord lives and what the mission is that has been entrusted to us.”<sup>14</sup> (Like Balthasar, Gutiérrez stresses the connection between mission and identity; our mission, i.e., praxis, is what defines our identity, and our mission is received from the Lord.) Thus, for the poor, liberation depends precisely on the truth, the reality, the activity of the body of Christ in the world. And, to the extent that postmodern culture absolutizes difference, otherness, and the particular, such normative, universal claims are difficult if not impossible to make.

Far from denying the unbiased universality of God’s love, the preferential option for the poor is the guarantee of that universality; it is the guarantee of faith in a God who loves all people gratuitously and equally. To say that God’s love is universal is not to say that it is neutral; indeed, universality and neutrality are mutually contradictory terms. An authentically Christian notion of universality is not opposed to particular preference, rather God’s universal love is mediated in and through the particular person, Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified. Both modernity and postmodernity presuppose an inherent dichotomy between the universal and the particular, between normative truth and personal meaning; Christianity, on the other hand, claims that the universal and normative is made present in and through the particular and personal form of the Crucified and Risen Christ. If that claim is true, if Jesus Christ was crucified and raised from the dead, then we can dare to

hope in the future and to work for liberation. On the other hand, if that claim is merely one among other equally valid claims (e.g., that the God of the Scriptures is apolitical, or politically neutral), then we will remain paralyzed in the face of that future.

“Be the problems of the ‘truth’ of Christ what they may,” writes Jon Sobrino, “his credibility is assured as far as the poor are concerned, for he maintained his nearness to them to the end. In this sense the cross of Jesus is seen as the paramount symbol of Jesus’ approach to the poor, and hence the guarantee of his indisputable credibility.”<sup>15</sup> Because Jesus accompanies us, he is real, and because he is real, he liberates. And the Cross is the guarantee that he does, in fact, remain with us, that he does, in fact, walk with us even today:

A vague, undifferentiated faith in God is not enough to generate hope. Not even the admission that God is mighty, or that God has made promises, will do this. Something else besides the generic or abstract attributes of the divinity is necessary in order to generate hope. This distinct element—which, furthermore, is the fundamental characteristic of the Christian God—is something the poor have discovered viscerally, and in reality itself: the nearness of God. God instills hope because God is credible, and God is credible because God is close to the poor. . . . Therefore when the poor hear and understand that God delivers up the Son, and that God is crucified—something that to the mind of the nonpoor will always be either a scandal or a pure anthropomorphism—then, paradoxically, their hope becomes real. The poor have no problems with God. The classic question of theodicy—the “problem of God”, the atheism of protest—so reasonably posed by the nonpoor, is no problem at all for the poor (who in good logic ought of course to be the ones to pose it).<sup>16</sup>

The Cross, which for the non-poor is a sign of God’s absence, is, for the poor, the assurance of God’s presence—not just any god, not just a “vague” or “generic” god, but the God of Jesus Christ, the God who accompanies us today. “Now the final word,”

writes Balthasar, “is not revelation and precept but participation, communio. And that in turn, beyond word and deed, implies suffering.”<sup>17</sup>

This is a faith that does not take the autonomous, self-constituting human subject as its starting point but rather affirms, at great personal cost, a transcendent reality to which the human subject responds and in which he/she participates in the act of faith, or praxis of faith. “To profess ‘this Jesus,’ to acknowledge ‘Jesus the Christ,’” argues Gutiérrez, “is to express a conviction. It is not simply putting a name and a title together; it is an authentic confession of faith. It is the assertion of an identity: the Jesus of history, the son of Mary, the carpenter of Nazareth, the preacher of Galilee, the crucified, is the Only Begotten of God, the Christ, the Son of God.”<sup>18</sup> “If we believe in Jesus as the Son,” avers Sobrino, “it is because in him the truth and love of the mystery of God have been shown in an unrepeatable form, and been shown in a way that is totally convincing to a crucified people who have no problem in accepting Jesus’ unrepeatable relationship with God so that they can confess him to be in truth the Son of God.”<sup>19</sup>

What Sobrino and Gutiérrez describe as the lived faith of the poor reflects a distinctly pre-modern (for lack of a better term) understanding of human praxis as fundamentally reception and response (hence, relational by definition), and, therefore, that faith’s pre-modern understanding of the normative character of the form of revelation (that to which, or to whom we respond). I would argue, in other words, that Latino popular Catholicism, “the faith of the people” expressed in popular devotions, rituals, narratives, and symbols, is fundamentally a praxis of “seeing the Form”—to use Balthasar’s phrase. “The content . . . ,” contends Balthasar, “does not lie behind the form (Gestalt), but within

it. Whoever is not capable of seeing and ‘reading’ the form will, by the same token, fail to perceive the content. Whoever is not illumined by the form will see no light in the content either.”<sup>20</sup> The Cuban-American theologian Alejandro García-Rivera explains the act of “seeing the form” as follows:

“Seeing” the form, like the act of hearing, is not a selective or controlling act, but an act of surrender to that which is “seen”. . . . what is being received is the form of that which is other. The reception of that which is other makes unique demands. To receive that which is other means that the other must be received wholly. That which is other can only be experienced in its fullness. Any diminishment of its “otherness”, any reduction of detail, any attempt at selectivity is to lose the experience altogether. For it is in the experience of otherness that the inbreaking of God’s glory becomes possible. . . . “Seeing” the form, then, amounts to the capacity to receive the whole of a unique difference. That capacity depends on our willingness to be “formed” by the requirements of that which is other. . . . “Seeing” is, paradoxically, an act of receptivity to that which is other.<sup>21</sup>

In the act of “seeing the form” of revelation, our praxis and reflection are con-formed to that revelation, for what is revealed “is not revelation and precept, but participation, communio.”<sup>22</sup>

In Gutiérrez’s terms, theological reflection on praxis must be undertaken “in the light of the Word,” in the light of the divine praxis that already incorporates our own praxis as an act of reception and response. The kerygma, or content of revelation, is not externally or accidentally related to its particular sociohistorical embodiment in the Word, in the body of Christ. From within, the Word of God itself illumines us; to perceive the content we must be able to perceive its form. “If we allow ourselves to be contemplated by God, and permit God to operate within us,” writes Sobrino, “we shall be able to contemplate God and the world in a unified way, and shall be able to love God and the

world in a unified way.”<sup>23</sup> It is not we who contemplate God, but God who first contemplates us.

Yet it is precisely “the form,” or “the Word” that is relativized in the modern turn to the subject and deconstructed in the postmodern erasure of the subject. Under the sway of a contemporary, Kantian gnosticism in which form becomes merely a pointer to the content that lies “behind” the form, First World theologians have become increasingly incapable of seeing the Supra-form, Christ himself as inseparable from the content of faith, who Christ is as inseparable from what he teaches. Uncomfortable with the necessarily physical, bodily, and therefore particular character of revelation—in the Crucified and Risen body of Christ, in the corpus verum and corpus mysticum, in the communio sanctorum, in the corpus pauperum—modern and postmodern theologies have too readily relativized that body in favor of some presumably more universalizable content that, since it is not intrinsically related to the form, could just as easily be expressed in other forms, could just as easily appear in different clothing. Christ is thus severed from the particular form of his wounded body as it hangs from the Cross, as it appears to the disciples after the Resurrection, and as it is given historically in the Eucharist, the ecclesial community, and the Church (itself, of course, a social body).

We are uncomfortable, especially, with the bloody wounds on the body of Christ. Scandalized by the all-too-visible wounds on the corpus mysticum, we reject the corpus verum in favor of a presumably “purer” community, a “purer” faith. Thus the form becomes essentially irrelevant, as long as its content is affirmed, a content that is necessarily abstract inasmuch as “it” exists outside any determinate form; indeed, we often

presume that, in order to salvage the content, we must excise it from any particular form. In order to salvage Jesus Christ, we must excise his message, what he “represents,” from his wounded concrete, historical body; in order to salvage Christianity, we must excise “it” (whatever “it” is) from its wounded concrete, historical body.

The meaning of the kerygma is thus divorced from the wounded historical body in which that kerygma becomes really present in history, even if always also eschatologically. For if God is love, and if God is fully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, then, as Balthasar avows, “Jesus Christ is what he expresses.” Or, in the words of Jon Sobrino, “the genuine Jesus appears both as the bearer of good news and that good news itself.”<sup>24</sup> The content of the revelation is fully accessible only in and through the form in which it is expressed. This, indeed, is the scandal of the cross, namely, that “the ideal is only to be found in the real, not behind it.”<sup>25</sup> It is, likewise, the scandal of the lived faith of the poor, those persons whom the world has deemed irredeemably de-formed. It is the scandal of the Cross: that which the world rejects as de-formed or decrepit (i.e., broken) is revealed as the unrepeatable form of God’s salvific love. “He had neither form nor beauty that we should look at him. And his form was without honor.” Indeed, it is precisely this gap between the divine aesthetics and a human aesthetics that defines the difference between a liberating theological aesthetics and an apolitical aesthetic theology.

Balthasar affirms the value of popular religion and unmask the elitism underlying the inability to see the Form, including the elitism of those of us who desire and claim to be in solidarity with the poor:

in relation to the central phenomenon of revelation we can by no means speak of “signs” which, according to their nature, point beyond themselves to something

“signified”. Jesus the Man, in his visibleness, is not a sign pointing beyond himself to an invisible “Christ of faith”. . . . Not only everything sacramental and institutional about the Church, but Christ’s whole humanity thus becomes all too clearly something for those “simple” Christians who need material crutches, while the advanced and the perfect can dispense with the symbol, whose spiritual core they have been able to reach.<sup>26</sup>

What is revealed to “simple Christians” is thus hidden from the wise and learned, who are scandalized by the corpus hanging from the Cross.

For all our U.S. culture’s obsession with “the body,” we are repulsed by any body that is wounded, which is to say, we are repulsed by any real body, any real form, whether the physical human body or the social body that is the Church. Referring to the Pauline notion of the body of Christ, Gutiérrez observes: “Readers often regard this theology of the church as simply a beautiful metaphor. However, we must, shocking though this idea may be, see through to the realism that characterizes the Pauline approach. He is speaking of the real body of Christ, which he looks upon as an extension of the incarnation.”<sup>27</sup> “Many contemporary Christians,” observes William Cavanaugh, “have shied away from the image of the church as the body of Christ, for naming the church as Christ’s very body rings of the ecclesiastical triumphalism of past eras. . . . The danger does not lie, however, in the identification of the church with the body of Christ, but rather in the complete identification of the earthly body with the heavenly. . . . the unfaithfulness of the church in the present age is based to some extent precisely on its failure to take itself seriously as the continuation of Christ’s body in the world and to conform itself, body and soul, not to the world but to Christ (Rom. 12:2).”<sup>28</sup>

Our Western preoccupation with “the body” as an abstract ideal masks an underlying depreciation of real, wounded bodies: the wounded, if glorified, body of Christ as well as the wounded bodies of the poor. Gutiérrez notes that:

some Christian milieus, usually in affluent countries, have promoted a reevaluation and “celebration” of the human body in cultural expressions—for example, some modern dances and other bodily forms of expression that are used in eucharistic celebrations. . . . Whatever the merits of this claim, I want to note here that the concern for the corporeal in Latin American spiritual experiences has come about in quite a different way. . . . It is not “my body,” but the “body of the poor person”—the weak and languishing body of the poor—that has made the material a part of a spiritual outlook.<sup>29</sup>

Again, it is precisely the difference between the beauty of my well-fed, well-dressed body and the beauty of the ragged, scarred body of the poor person that marks the irreducible difference between an aesthetic theology and a theological aesthetics, in Balthasar’s terms, between mere beauty and the glory of the Lord.

The failure to see the form, to see the body of Christ as it is, ultimately prevents us from truly appreciating, truly taking seriously the lived religion of the poor, which is neither gnostic nor agnostic but expresses a profound confidence and trust in the loving presence of a Christ who accompanies us on our own Via Dolorosa. The faith of the Latin American poor thus represents a “way of being Christian” or “way of being Catholic” that remains in many ways alien to contemporary North American Christians assimilated into the dominant U.S. culture.

### III. THE HISTORICAL ROOTS

These differences between the faith of the Latin American poor, their “way of being Christian,” and the faith of North American Christians can be traced to the beginning



of the European conquest and evangelization of the “New World”: Latin America was conquered and colonized by medieval Iberian Christians, whereas the English colonies were colonized by post-Reformation Christians. In terms of the Catholic Church, the difference is that between medieval and baroque Christianity, on the one hand, and Tridentine Roman Catholicism on the other.

Latin American and Latino popular religion, specifically popular Catholicism, embodies an understanding of religious faith rooted in the medieval and baroque popular Catholicism first brought to the “New World” by the Spanish and Portuguese in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Such an understanding differs from the modern notion of religious faith that has influenced Christianity since the late Middle Ages and became normative in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent, the Catholic Reformation, and the neo-scholastic theologies that reached their apex in the nineteenth century. More specifically, these different notions of faith are rooted in fundamentally different notions of symbol.

One of the basic differences between medieval and modern Catholicism is found in their understanding of religious symbols. Louis Dupré has observed that the roots of this key difference can be traced back to the rise of nominalism in the late Middle Ages. Medieval Christianity had a unified, profoundly sacramental view of the cosmos; creation everywhere revealed the abiding presence of its Creator, a living presence that infused all creation with meaning. In turn, “the kosmos included humans as an integral though unique part of itself.”<sup>30</sup> As the place where one encountered the living, transcendent God, all creation was intrinsically symbolic; that is, creation re-presented God, made the

transcendent God present in time and space for us, here and now. That God had not made the world only to withdraw from it, leaving it to its own devices; rather, the Creator remained intimately united to creation. All creation was thus assumed to be intrinsically meaningful and intelligible by virtue of the fact that creation was graced from the beginning. The Sacred would therefore be encountered, not “above” or “outside” creation, but in and through creation.

Most systematically articulated in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, this organic, sacramental worldview was reflected, above all, in the religious practices of medieval Christians. To them, matter mattered. Religious life was sensually rich; the believer encountered God in the physical environment, through the five senses. The Christian faith of the Middle Ages was firmly anchored in the body: the body of the cosmos, the body of the person, the Body of Christ. Contrary to the modern stereotype of the medieval Christian as having a dualistic worldview antithetical to the human body, the Christian of the Middle Ages, writes Caroline Bynum, “assumed the flesh to be the instrument of salvation” and “the cultivation of bodily experience as a place for encounter with meaning, a locus of redemption.”<sup>31</sup> Though, of course, as in every age, the view of the body was also profoundly ambiguous and conflicted.<sup>32</sup>

This organic, intrinsically symbolic worldview also implied a particular understanding of the relationship between the individual person and the cosmos: the person was integrally related to the rest of creation and its Creator. Knowledge of reality thus implied relationship; it is through interpersonal interaction that we could come to know God, ourselves, other persons, and creation.

According to Dupré, this organic, holistic, integral, sacramental worldview began to break down during the late Middle Ages. Afraid that too intimate a connection with material creation would compromise God's absolute transcendence, nominalist theologians such as William of Ockham "effectively removed God from creation. Ineffable in being and inscrutable in his designs, God withdrew from the original synthesis altogether. The divine became relegated to a supernatural sphere separate from nature, with which it retained no more than a causal, external link. This removal of transcendence fundamentally affected the conveyance of meaning. Whereas previously meaning had been established in the very act of creation by a wise God, it now fell upon the human mind to interpret a cosmos, the person became its source of meaning."<sup>33</sup>

The nominalist coin had another side, however: such an understanding of God's autonomy and freedom implied the autonomy and freedom of creation itself. Paradoxically, then, the Christian attempt to safeguard God's transcendence from creation laid the groundwork for the emergence of modern rationalism and secularism. In order to protect God's immutability and transcendence, nominalism posited an absolutely inscrutable God and, as a corollary, an absolutely inscrutable creation. It was thus left up to the human subject alone to construct meaning.

Likewise, neo-scholastic theologians like Thomas Cajetan began to read Thomas Aquinas through a modern, dualistic lense. Their theology "detach[ed] the realms of nature and faith from each other."<sup>34</sup> The birth of modern Christianity is thus characterized by the splitting, or dichotomizing of reality: as God is severed from creation, the natural and spiritual realms are separated, and, in the end, the human person—now as an

autonomous “individual”—is severed from both God and nature: “modern culture . . . detached personhood from the other two constituents of the original ontological synthesis.”<sup>35</sup> Henceforth, the autonomous individual would stand outside God, who is far removed from everyday life, and outside nature; if God is autonomous vis-à-vis the individual, then it only stands to reason that the individual must be autonomous vis-à-vis God. If, eventually, secular humanists would preach a world without God, it was only because modern Christians had already been preaching a God without a world.

The breakdown of what Dupré calls the “medieval synthesis”—a worldview in which God, the cosmos, and the person were integrally related--also had important consequences for the Christian understanding of symbol. Medieval Christians had looked upon creation as intrinsically symbolic, making present its Creator in our midst. In the wake of nominalism and neo-scholasticism, however, the ultimate meaning of creation could no longer be encountered in creation, which could exist independently of its Creator; now meaning would have to be imputed to creation, or imposed on it from without. From without, the rational mind would impose a meaningful order on a world that itself lacked intrinsic meaning. Physical existence no longer “revealed” a God who lived in its very midst; now, physical existence “pointed to” a God who related to the world extrinsically. Creation-as-symbol became simply “an extrinsic intermediary, something really outside the reality [i.e., God] transmitted through it, so that strictly speaking the thing [i.e., God] could be attained even without the symbol.”<sup>36</sup> The symbol and the symbolized were no longer really united; they would now have to be “mentally” united (to use Karl Rahner’s

phrase). If there was a relationship between God and creation, it would have to be one forged and explained by the human intellect.

Today we are witnessing the consequences of this nominalist, rationalist evisceration of God's creation in the form of a spirituality far removed from the plight of the poor and ideally suited to Western consumerist society. Lacking a social body, it is the kind of spirituality most easily subsumed within the social body that we call the Market. Criticizing the failure of American Christian churches to promote a fully-embodied faith, political scientist Michael Budde describes the contemporary consequences of a dehistoricized Christian faith that abjures its intrinsic connection to particular histories, traditions, ways of life, religious practices, narratives, and, yes, institutions: "With little or no social or theological space of their own, without the capacity to develop Christian affections and practices, the Catholic and mainline Protestant churches have left people to cobble together their own 'spiritualities' from commercial culture, nationalist ideologies, and the fragments of Christian and other religious traditions. What emerges all too often is less than the sum of the parts, usually privileging the acquisitive, feel-good messages of the culture industries and bereft of critical capacities. This sort of do-it-yourself spirituality (called "Sheila-ism" by Bellah and his colleagues, 1985), I argue, is utterly incapable of radical practices aimed at peace, the option for the poor, or any demanding exercises in transcending self-interest. There is no Amos or Jeremiah, no 'Woe to you rich' in the canon of Sheila-ism."<sup>37</sup>

Consequently, a disembedded, disembodied, de-institutionalized spirituality becomes de facto the spirituality of the thoroughly embedded, embodied, and

institutionalized global market of late capitalism. As Harvard theologian Harvey Cox observed in the pages of The Atlantic Monthly, the established church in this country is the Market, with its temple on Wall Street and its vicar Allan Greenspan.

In the face of a consumerist culture that reduces everything to a marketable commodity, a socially-disembodied faith will be simply more grist for the Market's mill. Disembedded from their concrete, social, material forms, Christian symbols become fodder for advertisers and internet entrepreneurs, book publishers and screenwriters, self-help experts and diet gurus, those whom Budde calls "symbolic predators."<sup>38</sup>

Economic growth demands that the symbol that today represents "human fulfillment" or "social acceptance" will tomorrow be deemed passé, obsolete. The free market demands disembedded symbols. Today, "planned obsolescence" is a term applicable not so much to products as to symbols; what is marketed is no a product but a brand, an image. "Even economics," argues Thomas Frank, "is no longer concerned with the production of things but with the manufacture of imagery, . . . Notions of objective social reality have themselves become objects of easy retro derision . . ."<sup>39</sup>

The process of economic globalization represented, above all, by the internet demands precisely the decontextualization of all reality, including religion. "Globalization," writes Cuban-American theologian Orlando Espín, "has turned 'God' and religious experience into products to be marketed at a global level. . . ."<sup>40</sup> Insofar as a particular religious faith maintains any links to a particular history, a particular way of life, particular symbols and rituals, or a particular institution, that faith remains limited in its

marketability. Such a faith impedes the freedom of the Market. Therefore, such a faith will be ridiculed and scorned by those persons and groups who worship the Market.

The medieval Christian world had been pregnant with symbolic meaning, for the world of matter was recognized as the locus of God's self-revelation. From sometime in the sixteenth century on, the world-as-symbol could only point away from itself to a God who remained impassible and aloof. Creation would no longer be a privileged place of encounter with the Sacred but a mere sign pointing elsewhere, to the spiritual realm where God resided transcendent and impassible. And once the connection between the material and the spiritual, the symbol and the symbolized, is reduced to an externally imputed, conceptual connection, religious symbols will eventually lose their ability to resist manipulation in the service of political and economic power—the consequences of which manipulation we are witnessing today.

Yet even as modern philosophers and theologians were making God evermore distant and immaterial (in both senses of the word), the popular faith, the faith of the people continued to reflect a stubborn insistence on God's abiding, concrete nearness to us in every aspect of life. That nearness was embodied in the elaborate religious symbols and, especially, the explicitly dramatic character of communal religious life that flowered during the Baroque period, and it is embodied in the popular Catholicism of Latinos and Latinas today. Thomas O'Meara describes Baroque Catholicism as follows: "There was a universality in which Catholicism experienced God in a vastness, freedom, and goodness flowing through a world of diversity, movement, and order. Christ appeared in a more human way, filled with a personal love, redemptive and empowering. . . . The Baroque

world was also a theater . . . Liturgies, operas, frescos, or palatial receptions were theatrical, and Baroque Christianity was filled with visions and ecstasies, with martyrs, missionaries, and stigmatics. . . . The theater of the Christian life and the kingdom of God moved from the medieval cosmos and the arena of society to the interior of the Baroque church and the life of the soul. In the Baroque, light pours down through clear windows into the church and states that God is not distant nor utterly different from creatures. God is actively present in the church and in the Christian.”<sup>41</sup>

It is impossible for me as a Latino Catholic to read those descriptions, without hearing deep resonances to the ways in which the Catholic faith is lived in our own communities. Neither the Christian medieval synthesis nor the dramatic faith of the Baroque has, in fact, been completely destroyed—at least not yet. Their enduring influence can still be witnessed in, among other places, the lived faith of the Latin American and U.S. Latino Catholic communities.

The same deep faith in God’s nearness reappears in Latino popular Catholicism, where dramatic reenactments like the Via Crucis, the Posadas, or the Pastorela serve as constant expressions of God’s solidarity. It reappears in the polyphonic ambience of our churches, where angels and demons, saints and penitents, celestial stars and spring flowers are fully incorporated into our lives. Having been brought to Latin America by the Spanish, and having interacted with indigenous religions that often embodied similar beliefs in the nearness of the divine, Latino popular Catholicism is the embodied memory of the integral worldview, with Jesus Christ at its center, that is at the very heart of the



Catholic tradition and that evolved in the Iberian Catholicism of the Middle Ages and the Baroque.

Moreover, if the medieval Christian worldview posited an intrinsically symbolic cosmos, which makes present “God for us,” then that worldview posited an intrinsically relational cosmos insofar as the symbol makes the Other present for us. The same can be said about the worldview expressed in Latin American and U.S. Latino popular Catholicism. If our lives have meaning, it is not because we ourselves have constructed that meaning and imposed it on creation, but because we have been empowered to cultivate a meaning that we first received from others, ultimately from God, but that we help shape through our creative response to that gift. Before reality can be “constructed” it must first be received as gift, as it becomes present to us in creation. Indeed, the act of reception is the first truly free, constructive human act. (Thus I would concur with scholars such as David Morgan and Catherine Bell, who reject as artificial any dichotomy between symbol and ritual, between “seeing” a religious image or symbol and participating in a religious ritual or practice.)<sup>42</sup> It is in the very act of receiving what is given us in the world that we, in turn, make the gift “ours” thereby transforming what he have received and constructing “our” world. Precisely as symbolic practice, human agency involves both a receiving and a doing; the real is revealed in our interaction with symbols.<sup>43</sup> Symbolic truth is not merely empirical truth, not because the former is not “real” but precisely because it is real in the deepest sense. Jesus Christ is real because he accompanies us in our everyday struggles, not vice versa. It is this participation in theopraxis, or theo-drama (to use Balthasar’s terminology) that defines the faith of the Latin American poor.

If our praxis is liberating, it is so only because it affirms the liberating reality of Christ's own liberating praxis in our lives. As Sobrino insists: "The resurrection of the one who was crucified is true [emphasis in the original]. Let it be foolishness, as it was for the Corinthians. But without this foolishness, because it is true—or without this truth, because it is foolish—the resurrection of Jesus will only be one more symbol of hope in survival after death that human beings have designed in their religions or philosophies. It will not be the Christian symbol of hope."<sup>44</sup> For the poor, the triduum is not merely the assurance of life after death; it is, above all, the assurance of life before death.<sup>45</sup> Because Jesus was crucified and lives with us, we can dare to live. The Cross is not "merely" a symbol that expresses a divine nearness which would exist in any case; rather, as Balthasar writes, "it is the act of reconciliation itself," the divine praxis that draws us into itself.<sup>46</sup> On that truth depends the possibility and hope of liberation—as much for Sobrino and Gutierrez as for Balthasar. And, especially, for the millions of Latin American and Latino poor who on every Good Friday throng the streets of our barrios, walking alongside Jesus on his Way of the Cross.

The preferential option for the poor forces us to confront the question of truth. To the mother of a starving child, the truth of Christ's claims about himself is much more than an academic issue, to be debated and deconstructed by exegetes and theologians. If I take her seriously, then, so too must I—as a Christian theologian--be willing to render a verdict on those claims. Am I willing to stake my own life on those truth-claims?

As Gutiérrez reminds us, Jesus asks his disciples and asks us: "Who do you say that I am? You; not the others. . . . what is asked refers to an objective reality, something

exterior to the disciples . . . The question pulls us out of our subjective world and, ‘turning us inside out,’ locates the point of reference of our faith, and of our life, beyond ourselves, in the person of Jesus.”<sup>47</sup> And the question, “Who do you say that I am?”, demands not a theoretical answer but a practical answer, a lived answer.<sup>48</sup>

Ultimately, then, the preferential option for the poor represents a call to conversion. To be in solidarity with the poor is to be transformed by the same God who accompanies the poor. If taken seriously, then, the preferential option for the faith of the poor overturns contemporary assumptions about the possibility of preferring one truth-claim, one option over others. In the words of Jon Sobrino, the faith of the people challenges us to ask:

Is there anything that is ultimate and incapable of being manipulated, anything that makes an ultimate demand on human beings in the form of promise and fulfillment? Is there anything that will prevent us from relativizing everything, reducing everything to a lowest common denominator in terms of value, although perhaps without our knowing why we should not make such a reduction? Is there anything that makes a total demand on us—anything to remind us that despite the ideals of a consumer society, despite the growing preoccupation with material security and a life of self-centeredness, as we find for example in many places in the First World, there is after all a “something else,” and a “someone else,” and not just as a factual datum, but as a “something” and a “someone” in terms of which we either succeed or fail in our own self-fulfillment.<sup>49</sup>

A genuine commitment to human liberation is thus a corollary and safeguard of God’s transcendence; because God is God, and not just a projection of our own self-interest or a human construct, God will be revealed there where we least expect to find God, among the disinherited and despised peoples of our world. The God of the poor is indeed the God who loved us first, the God of Jesus Christ. “He had neither form nor beauty that we should look at him. Despised and rejected, he has

borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. And by His stripes we are healed” (Is 53:2b-5).

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, Essential Writings, edited with an Introduction by James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 318. é

<sup>2</sup> Idem, On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), pp. 109-112.

<sup>4</sup> Gutiérrez, On Job, p. xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, We Drink from Our Own Wells, p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Gutiérrez, On Job, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Jon Sobrino, Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), pp. 56-58.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 110.

<sup>10</sup> Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, p. 206.

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- <sup>11</sup> Gutiérrez, We Drink from Our Own Wells, p. 111-112.
- <sup>12</sup> Idem, Las Casas, p. 101.
- <sup>13</sup> Roberto S. Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).
- <sup>14</sup> Gutiérrez, We Drink from Our Own Wells, p. 38.
- <sup>15</sup> Sobrino, Spirituality of Liberation, p. 171.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 166-167.
- <sup>17</sup> Balthasar, Truth is Symphonic, p. 38.
- <sup>18</sup> Gutiérrez, We Drink from Our Own Wells, p. 46.
- <sup>19</sup> Jon Sobrino, Jesus in Latin America (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 165.
- <sup>20</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Glory of the Lord, Vol. 1: Seeing the Form (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), p. 151.
- <sup>21</sup> Alejandro García-Rivera, The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), pp. 88-89.
- <sup>22</sup> Balthasar, Truth is Symphonic, p. 38.
- <sup>23</sup> Sobrino, Spirituality of Liberation, p. 69.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 170.
- <sup>25</sup> Balthasar, Truth is Symphonic, p. 76.
- <sup>26</sup> Idem, The Glory of the Lord, Vol. 1: Seeing the Form, pp. 437-438.
- <sup>27</sup> Gutiérrez, We Drink from Our Own Wells, p. 69.
- <sup>28</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 233.
- <sup>29</sup> Idem, We Drink from Our Own Wells, pp.102-103.
- <sup>30</sup> Louis Dupré, Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 94.

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<sup>31</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, "Why All the Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," in Victoria E. Bunnell and Lynn Avery Hunt, eds., Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 251-252.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Dupré, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Dupré, p. 179.

<sup>35</sup> Dupré, pp. 163-164.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," in Theological Investigations, Vol. 4 (New York: Crossroad Books, 1966), p. 244.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Budde, The (Magic) Kingdom of God, p. 87.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 90-94.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Frank, Commodify Your Dissent, p. 258.

<sup>40</sup> Espín, "La experiencia religiosa," Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology, p. 23. (my translation from the Spanish).

<sup>41</sup> Thomas F. O'Meara, Theology of Ministry (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), pp. 115-116.

<sup>42</sup> Cf., David Morgan, Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 59-73 and Catherine Bell, Ritual Thinking, Ritual Practice (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>43</sup> Morgan, pp. 50-58.

<sup>44</sup> Sobrino, p. 158.

<sup>45</sup> I am indebted to Professor Otto Maduro for this insight.

<sup>46</sup> Balthasar, Explorations in Theology, vol. 4, p. 415.

<sup>47</sup> Gutiérrez, We Drink from Our Own Wells, p. 48.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 105.