Toward a Suburban Middle Class

Postcolonial Theology of Liberation

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How might the formation of Base Ecclesial Communities (communidades eclesiales de base or CEBs) in Latin America inform the work of the church in North America – specifically in the United States, and most particularly in middle class suburbs? Even where congregants and neighbors look alike, they represent a diversity of backgrounds, experiences, world views and theologies. Liberation Theology, particularly as reflected in the experience of those living in CEBs, and then viewed through a Postcolonial lens, can offer us some insights for our path forward. By reflecting on their shared life together, bridging their own experiences of difference through community, we can gain a clearer picture of their faith practices, and how a faith lived in community matures and develops to the point where local laypeople are able to articulate their own theology of their own and the world’s liberation. Might we then find a way forward to a suburban middle class postcolonial theology of liberation?

Latin American Liberation Theology (LALT) grows out of a proclamation of “God’s preferential option for the poor.” Yet “poor” must mean more than just economically disadvantaged. Poverty in the biblical sense is multifaceted and includes economic poverty, social poverty, relational poverty, religious poverty, spiritual poverty, emotional poverty, and poverty of self. God’s preferential option is for all of these – with the caveat that only those who recognize their poverty can respond to God’s gift of salvation from it. Part of what has always interested me in LALT is the notion of a theology rising from among the people – particularly in base communities. The Gospel in Solentename illustrates the genuine articulation of faith by people in a base community. Classically trained pastor theologians, some from Europe, came and entered into Christian community among the indigenous peoples. These cultures were already in a process of hybridization – the commingling of blood and sweat, of culture and language and identity that had long been taking place.
Postcolonial thought – both postcolonial theory generally and postcolonial theology in particular, will serve as a corrective to some of the insights drawn from the above exploration. These theories consider the ways that language and identity are constructed in colonial and postcolonial contexts, particularly moving beyond binary dualisms toward an understanding of what creates those distinctions, what lies in the spaces between them, and what hybridities are created when these various factors intermingle. Immediately we note that all this wonderful work of liberation theology was done in the colonial and postcolonial context, in a conversation that included representatives of colonial and imperial power and representatives of the colonized. Through this postcolonial analysis we can discover how subversion of colonial interests came about – specifically through the formation of spiritual community.

Finally, some tentative suggestions will be made for how these insights might be applied to a middle class suburban community in Texas. One of the important insights drawn from both LALT and from Postcolonial Theology is the importance of concretization and specificity. One critique offered of Homi Bhabah is that his approach to postcolonial thought remains too broad, as though there were one common shared experience of colonialism. Not all colonial experiences or histories are the same or even similar. Reflection on them must recognize these differences; so must the theology of each community. As Joerg Rieger puts it, “The problem with approaches that are born in moments of resistance elsewhere, however, is that they do not readily translate into sufficient challenges to the status quo at home.” Indeed, I have found it difficult to offer much more than a cultural study when presenting liberation theology in a middle class congregation – it seems foreign, because it is. Do parishioners care about the poor? Certainly, because they are good, compassionate people and because Jesus tells them to care. Do parishioners see the connections between third-world poverty and their own nation’s policies?
Yes, but they feel confused and torn between the binary, or overwhelmed by the system and powerless. Do parishioners make connections between all this and their understanding of God? Probably not, at least not in the recognition that their theology may be part of the problem. Will simply pointing this out to them help much? No, for as Rieger notes, these ideas “do not readily translate.”

**HEARING THE VOICE OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

“This insight [that ‘the conversionist agenda of the churches was often seen by colonial administrators as subversive of colonial hierarchical relations’] might direct us to the studies on missionary practice in colonialism as mixing blatant reinforcement of colonized peoples’ subjugation with penchants for subverting that subjugation.”

Working toward a postcolonial theology of liberation in conversation with the community voices of Latin American Liberation Theology requires an understanding of the impact of colonialism on those communities and voices. In what ways did the experience of being colonized shape the engagement of indigenous peoples with the message brought by the Dominicans and others? And how have those communities changed in the years since the end of the Colonial Era? The priests who formed CEBs in the 20th century were generations removed from the experience of colonization, so we need to look not only to the work of Romero, Boff, Gutierrez and others, but also to the legacy upon which they built, notably the work of Bartolomé de las Casas. We see in the text by Gutierrez, *LAS CASAS: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*, that at least some Christian leaders wrestled deeply with the tension between the colonial impulse and the needs of the indigenous populations. He describes that, in 1510, Dominican Friar Anton Montesino preached a series of scathing sermons which pronounced judgment on the Spanish colonial ruling class for their unchristian and inhuman treatment of the Indians – which in the eyes of the Dominicans amounted to a total rejection of Christ and the salvation he offers. The immediate response was a backlash by the establishment who understood that their power
was in jeopardy. Though Liberation Theology as a school did not develop until the second half of the 20th century, its legacy draws on centuries of struggle by theologians concerned to be able to proclaim the Good News of God’s salvific reign for all people – European immigrants and the natives of this ‘new land.’ This witness was brought by the very clergy charged by the crown with converting and Christianizing the Indians. Las Casas was convinced that peaceful tactics were both more effective and more in line with the Gospel, and he outlined such in De Unico Vocationis Modo Omnium Gentium ad Veram Religionem. In Guatemala, las Casas formed a community he named tierra de vera paz, where he practiced his peaceful method of witness. Though most of his ministry was at court or in other places removed from the community of the local parish, he never gave up his concern and advocacy for the liberation of the Amerindians, perhaps serving as a model for future academics and others who minister beyond the local congregation.

Michelle Gonzalez quotes Roberto S. Goizueta in positing a “theological anthropology that ‘understands the human person as constituted by relationships, not only relationship to the human community which precedes and forms the person, but especially by relationship to the primordial, triune Community whose life is life.’” The truth of this would help explain the alienation felt by those living in middle class suburbia in the U.S. where identity is defined more by interaction with objects, vocations and avocations than in relationships. And thus we might find a way back from this alienation by the way of community, which will be the way of the cross as we release self-serving impulses in consideration for the needs of those around us. This results in our needs also being met in that community. Karen Baker-Fletcher invites us into a theologically nuanced dance exploring these ideas of relationship and cross-bearing as central to the salvific journey on our way back into God’s kingdom. Again, we can see this in las Casas
and Mendosino, along with the religious leaders of the CEBs. There seems to be an experience of relationship which transforms the perspective of those leaders toward the indigenous peoples, their ‘parishioners,’ and an appreciation of the latter as co-humans who are also in and worthy of relationship with the triune God. The church will benefit from a deeper reflection on both the process and the content of this theology.

**TURNING TO POSTCOLONIAL THEOLOGIES**

“Liberation theology can be said to have pursued a tri-focal critique (1) of the oppressive powers of state, economy and culture; (2) of how the church has absorbed, justified and benefited from these powers; and (3) also of the ways the people, the poor, the oppressed (often but not always considered as Christians) have themselves internalized oppressive patterns, requiring hence a process of conscientization, a ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’. Postcolonial theory will further our understanding of this three-way circulation. It will help in the analysis of the troubling ways that Christianity, born as a movement of a colonized people, could also come to mimic the empire.”

R.S. Sugirtharajah asks, “[At this] time…what is the task of contextual theologies which have invested so much in locations, roots, indigenous resources and soil?” He offers three options – (1) to ignore the cosmopolitan and become immersed in the vernacular; (2) to become an unrooted citizen of the world, with no ties to any particular vernacular; or (3) to “blend creatively cosmopolitan and vernacular cultures.” He goes on to say, “Vernacular Cosmopolitanism is about an appropriation and transformation which resist any simplified binary understanding.” In other words, he suggests the formation of communities, of ways of being that move beyond and overcome the either/or, us/Them, rich/poor, colony/colonized, white/other male/female, Jew/Greek, slave/free categorizations. Might doing so within the community of a local congregation lead also to a theological vernacular cosmopolitanism – a theology that is at once connected to context yet engaged with the global, specific but not rigid or superior? He goes on… “It is in this multi-directional swirl of cultural ideas that I foresee the emergence of postcolonial theology.” One of the criticisms of much liberation theology is that in its leaning
toward Marxism it divides the world into poor and rich, oppressed and oppressor, good and evil. More recent work has sought to clarify and rectify that error. Sugirtharajah’s nuanced work seeks to bring us beyond the binary through honoring difference.

Postcolonial Christian Theology seeks, in part, to set Christianity within its historic context, i.e. that of globalization. Rieger asks: “How do [the previously described] various embodiments of globalization measure up to how we understand the divine as embodied in core Judeo-Christian traditions and in the person and work of Jesus Christ? More specifically, what kind of power is at work here, and how is it related to how different theologies envision divine power?” Part of the work of the church is to understand how power functions in communities of all sizes – familial, congregational, municipal, regional, national and global – and what God has to do with it. In what ways do our uses and experiences of power in our relationships reveal our view of God? For instance, does a view of God as omnipotent and exercising power through domination correlate strongly to communities where someone has to be in charge – a hierarchical understanding of power in community? And in what ways does our view of the Trinity specifically impact our use and abuse of power?

One of the advantages of postcolonial thought is that it helps to critique liberation theologies, which themselves are critiques of the contemporary theologies of their (and our) days. Rooted first in cultural analysis, applied early on to the academic study of literature, postcolonialism helps us understand how and why certain ideas, ideologies, and forms of expression emerged in the context of colonial and postcolonial/empirical power. This corrective function of theology was emphasized by Barth. Reflecting back on las Casas, we can see how power played a significant role for the colonists, the colonized, and for Bartolomé himself caught in the middle. It was akin to the quote of one pastor of an affluent congregation who said,
essentially, “They need Jesus too, and I can do more for the poor from this position of power.” It is not an articulation of the choice everyone should make, but an example of making difficult decisions in the particular. Also I am reminded of the earlier critique of Bhabha’s thought as being overly universal and flattening the contours of the conversation, with the correction brought by Sugirtharajah’s call toward a vernacular cosmopolitanism, which incorporates the universal while respecting the particular. This notion will be taken up again in the last section as we look at how liberation theology and postcolonial thought might influence the work of ministry in suburban middle class congregations in the US.

**TOWARD THE RE-FORMATION OF FAITH COMMUNITIES**

*When the postcolonial ethos of ‘differentiated liberating struggle’ is discernible in religious communities, we can speak of those communities as manifesting postcolonial spirit. These historical communities of spirit constitute necessary conditions for achieving a postcolonial theology.*

People in my particular context often seem to feel powerless against invisible forces that are controlling their lives – in particular corporations and government – and as a result seek both a scapegoat to blame, and a ‘firm foundation’ of certainty against the vagaries of life. Rieger suggests that this experience is broadly felt, and in part results from globalization.

Diana Butler-Bass and others have written extensively on the decline of Christendom, and the struggles of congregations and denominations. It used to be that these symptoms were visible only among mainline churches, and so it became easy for others to blame liberalism, thus laying a foundation for the rise of evangelicalism as seen in denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention and in the non-denominational ‘bible church’ movements. Bass points out that in the last several years the symptoms have spread even to the SBC which has seen its growth halt and now begin to reverse. Enter the “Emergent/Missional Church Movement” with a brand of grace-filled, open evangelicalism. This movement has a lot of heart, but not much
theological articulation as yet. Will theologians come forward to articulate the renewed faith(s)
of this movement? Again postcolonialism offers us insight, for as Rieger notes: “Globalization
from below ultimately demands nothing less than the tearing down of top-down power
differentials and reconstructing society and the church from below.”27 The vernacular
cosmopolitanism will result in a re-formation of structures within the church, requiring that we
reconsider how we construct communities, and how our communities relate in covenant with one
another through denominational, ecumenical and interfaith networks. This work will require
sophisticated theological reflection that is rooted in local contexts – an incarnational expression
of this new vision, not only God on high, but God from on high here among us, Emmanuel. This
will be good news indeed.

One question arising from the re-formation of faith communities is, “What are the
sources of our faith and theology?” Various historical examples are well known, including the
papal claim to infallibility and the protestant reaction of sola scriptura. The familiar Wesleyan
quadrilateral includes scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Wesley’s own insight that
religion must flow from the bottom up28 suggests that we might want to look again at scripture
for its internal articulations of source. Given that the Source is God, how does this come to us in
the human community? A formerly enslaved herding people are called to be a light to the
nations. The incarnation comes not in the palace in Jerusalem but to a poor couple from the
country. And Jesus himself is quoted as saying, “unless you become as little children…,”29 and
“Thank you father that you have hidden these things from the wise and revealed them to
infants….”30 Part of the prophetic vision of God’s future for the earth is that, “The wolf shall live
with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling
together, and a little child shall lead them.”31
All of this together suggests that we as church may need to rethink power in the congregation and in the Church, with a view toward seeing the vulnerable – poor, widows, orphans, hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, strangers, and of course children – as a primary source for and voice of theology. I think most people are inclined to take the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to mean primarily “my experience,” rather than human experience. Scripture, reason and tradition, as found in the insights of liberation and postcolonial thought, become guides for us in knowing which experiences should carry theological weight. A challenge for us in middle class suburban churches then becomes how to hear these voices in a way that honors their subjectivity. We might begin by finding the most vulnerable within our own congregations and setting ourselves at their feet. The church receives the revelatory communion with God through these sources – they become voices or channels through which the Holy Spirit speaks to the church.

As the identities of the postcolonialized and postcolonizers are being constructed, the strict binary categories of the colonial era are revealed as inadequate. Who then are we, and who am I as a self, in relation, as a resident and citizen of the one remaining superpower? The United States has participated in the colonial and imperial exercise, and it has done so from its own identity as a former colony, though one which has superseded the authority and influence of its colonizers. With independence from Great Brittan did not come a return to a precolonial reality. There was no sloughing off of empire, for the resident population was so overwhelmingly of European decent as to create a new reality here in the northern two thirds of North America (Canada and the United States).

“There is a psychological phenomenon that consists in believing that the world will open up as borders are broken down. The black Antillean, prisoner on his island, lost in an atmosphere
without the slightest prospect, feels the call of Europe like a breath of fresh air.”34 This correlates to the experience of unfulfilled hopes in the Tricontinental World as colonial powers formally left without the resulting expansion of economic and social prosperity for the masses. Perhaps part of the frustration and animosity felt in other parts of the world toward the West, and toward the U.S. in particular, results from this disappointment – the opportunities promised do not materialize as others might have hoped. We in the U.S. no longer mean what Lady Liberty sings to the world – she no longer speaks for us, it would seem. Much of the political conversation is isolationist and protectionist, giving no more voice to that welcome of generations past, nor of the “Great King” of Matthew 25 who calls us to care for precisely those tired, poor, huddled masses, “naked…hungry…thirsty…sick…in prison…stranger.”

Absent dialogue with and understanding from the margins, the current debates in the U.S. between political and economic conservatives, moderates, and liberals will accomplish little.35 These debates might be compared to the work of Kohlberg who presumed to describe moral development among all children by only studying boys. Carol Gilligan in her work that was first collaborative and later corrective, sought to offer a view ‘from the margins’, i.e. from the experience of girls. Surprising to many, though not to her or other women, Gilligan’s findings differed starkly from Kohlberg’s – boys and girls, she summarized, experience the world very differently. This conversation has continued, with various theorists seeking to bridge or at least understand the distance between the two.36 The broader implication, returning to Rieger, is that we cannot understand the whole when we have seen and heard only part. We cannot understand our social, economic and political (not to say religious or theological) realities without hearing the voices of the silent, without seeing the invisible.
How will we undertake this project? One option may be to bring in a group of spokespersons for the marginalized to address those of the dominant culture. I have seen this lived out through the work of Reverend Irie Session and the group New Friends New Life. Reverend Session leads these women who, in a liberative community of the oppressed, are finding empowerment and grace as they make their way out of the violent objectification of sex trafficking and ‘adult entertainment’. A part of their work is to speak to groups about their experience in a panel format, one that often includes a male who has personally struggled with sexual addiction or otherwise participated in the oppression of women at the margins as these women were/are. Through this experience, these women move toward subjectivity while they also educate others and shed light on an area of society intentionally kept in the shadows. This work is made possible because, together with Rev. Session, these women have arrived at a place of sufficient confidence and security that they have the courage to stand and name their brokenness, to be the face of the victimized, and to call, in community, for something more for the whole human family, beginning here in this particular locality.\(^{37}\) We see the project initiated from the margin with support of someone who serves as a bridge builder, someone who has found or made a way to recognize and be recognized in both communities – in the center and at the margins.\(^{38}\)

This may actually be a beneficial starting place for a much broader awakening. It is difficult to envision that a Christian congregation in this region would argue in support of the sexual objectification, exploitation or abuse of others regardless of race, class or gender. It is fairly easy to see what is wrong with that system. What is hidden is our own complicity – and yet it can be revealed fairly easily if painfully. One might engage the high incidence of pornography use and the science relating it to neurological, attitudinal and behavioral changes.\(^{39}\) Within a
local congregation this dialogue can then open the way for other notions of hidden objectification and the ways that many are unknowingly complicit.

These stories are about the Good News as God’s power for redemption – and thus they are the Gospel, and their sharing is evangelism. Elaine Heath (The Mystic Way of Evangelism) has taken up William Abraham’s definition of evangelism as “primary initiation into the kingdom of God,” which she expands: “evangelism as an initiatory process is complete only when individuals are fully incorporated into the church.” Given the insights above, we can understand that this process of incorporation is one of mutuality, wherein we are incorporated into each other, or together into some new hybridity that does not yet exist. The sources of truth must include the voice of the other, particularly the vulnerable. Christian truth must include the understanding that God’s Good News, the Gospel of Jesus, must be good news for all people, not just me and my group. Thus those “being incorporated” need to have the freedom to say, “What I am hearing and experiencing is not good news to me,” at which point we realize that either: they have misunderstood us, we have misspoken, we have misunderstood the Gospel to begin with, or perhaps a combination of these.

Heath observes that on the margins we will find our prophetic voice “to speak to the dominant culture” in ways that subvert the status quo and move us toward God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. She proceeds to apply mystical spirituality concepts (apophatic, kataphatic, kenosis) to the experience of faith communities, particularly those that are experiencing their present life as one of struggle through what feels like a dark night of the (congregational) soul. “Christians are yearning for a simpler, unfettered relationship with God in community, for a new day for the church.” This longing sought be met in and through the liberative journey of the Suburban Base Community and the encounter with “the least of these,”
who are Christ to us when we serve them and when we refuse – they are Christ to us in relationship. We encounter God anew when we encounter them, and if we refuse, then we will not encounter God in grace, but in judgment.

The economic and governmental systems of the U.S. purport to provide opportunity for all who want it, though they primarily provide exponentially greater opportunity for a privileged few. This reality traces its roots back to our own colonial history and the imperial ideations of manifest destiny. We need to study colonialism and the responsive development of various forms of theological resistance, including liberation theology and postcolonial theologies that are focused largely on the experiences in other places. This can give us some distance and perspective by which to appreciate those struggles, and from which to return to study our own history and understand our own present. This reflection will be difficult because we benefit in substantial visible ways in the immediate and short term, the system promises long term rewards, and we participate happily and defend it vigorously.

The middle class is much closer to the economic reality of the working poor than that of the wealthy who we aspire to emulate. Here in Collin County I am involved in the local response to homelessness, and we see the fracturing of tenuous middle class lifestyles common in our seemingly affluent communities. While this paper does not permit room for an in depth economic analysis, and I’m not an economist, I do want to argue that our relationship with spending on consumer products, services and recreation poses threats not only to our economic stability, but to our moral and spiritual health.

We are surrounded by temples to gods of every shape and name – much like Paul when he arrived in Athens. One can pick out, perhaps, an obscure temple to a seemingly ‘unknown god,’ but it isn’t easy. To quote Walt Kelly’s famous Pogo comic strip, “We have met the
enemy, and he is us.”46 We have built these temples and we worship at them with our currency on which is written, “In God We Trust.” The situation of the middle class parallels that articulated by Míguez et.al. in their explanation of the Pax Romana: “the colonized elites found that it was convenient for their own existence and power to conform to this power as a means of survival;”47 indeed! Heath recommends spiritual practices for the church as we move out of our current situation into God’s future – the last of which is to actively resist the consumer culture that teaches and reinforces (forces) us to objectify others, self and God and subjectify things.48

Exciting and promising work can be done in this direction by drawing on the ideas presented in this paper, work that would bring together insights from Latin American Liberation Theology, the concrete experience of Base Ecclesial Communities (CEBs) and Postcolonial Theologies and apply them to the formation of a vernacular cosmopolitan theology of the “Liberation of Suburbia,” what I like to think of as Frappuccinist Theology (I find the ubiquitous experience of paying $5 for a gourmet frozen coffee from Seattle to be symbolic of our middle class consumer culture). I believe that this proposal, taking into account all that is said above, can avoid the pitfall of a middle class misappropriation of liberation theology,49 particularly through the concern to start with the voices of the vulnerable and powerless within the congregation itself, and in relational conversation with our neighbors so that we might hear and know them and be known by them. We can work toward that which has been identified as “a different way of conceiving power and human life.”50

In this time of hybridity and liminality, in our in-between-ness of ceasing to be and moving toward becoming, we will engage the “discourses of difference” and the “discourses of liberation,”51 thereby “setting aside what is behind...and pressing on toward the goal of the higher calling in Christ Jesus, our Lord.”52 We are called, as people of Christian Faith, to live in
the already/not-yet of the Kingdom of God which is within, at hand, and yet to come. The old is passing away; all things are made new.\textsuperscript{53} The Suburban Vernacular Cosmopolitan Middle Class Base Community can be a way for particular communities to live into God’s vision for all creation. The essence of the Christian faith is rooted in a community that participates in the liberative work of God to move beyond all systems, structures, and experiences of captivity and oppression and onto a journey toward a land of promise.
ENDNOTES


7 Gonzalez. p64.


9 Gutierrez. las Casas. p33.


11 Lippy et.al. p85.

12 Gonzalez. p74.


15 Keller. p37.


17 Sugirtharajah. p38.

18 Sugirtharajah. p38.

19 Rieger. Postcolonial Theologies.


21 Ibid. Loc 106-108.

22 Again, Baker-Fletcher’s insights on the communal nature of the trinity are valuable here. In particular, I think there is some opportunity to explore how power functions in dance among partners, and how that may relate to our understanding of power in community vis-à-vis the trinity. Dancing with God.


24 Taylor, p47.


29 Matthew 18:3.


32 Míguez, et.al. p20.
37 Baker-Fletcher builds her work on similar redemption narratives where survivors have had the courage to press through their own suffering and make of their courage an offering to God’s kingdom work.
38 For more information on Rev. Session and New Friends New Life, see: www.newfriendsnewlife.org ;
41 Heath, Elaine A. *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008. p13. While she seems to have in mind a clergy and faculty audience, the book would be a good primary source for congregations on their journey toward becoming, particularly with the aid of a small group discussion guide that included prayer and retreat experiences.
43 Heath. p36.
45 Acts 17:15-34.
46 Kelly, Walt. *We have met the enemy, and he is us*. NY, NY: Simon & Schuster. 1972.
48 Heath. p171.
49 Míguez, et.al. p32.
50 Míguez, et.al. p2.
51 Taylor. p45.
52 Philippians 3:13-14.