

Feminist Liberation Theology Network
What does liberation mean?
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Let me begin with the easiest elements of my positionality in relation to liberation theologies. I have engaged Latin American versions of liberation theology more than any other and often do not even realize how much the Latin American contributions shape my view of liberation in general. In other words, I enter this conversation informed mainly by Latin American discussions of liberation. But I should also say that I am Puerto Rican and thus part of the US economic and (to some extent) political system. I mean this simply as a clarification, only because I am aware that I am naturally be assumed to be Latin American, not because I think that liberation theology belongs to any particular context.

Having said that, I won't try to answer the question "what is liberation", or what I think it should be, but rather delve a little into its connotations.

I would like to propose, as a kind of theoretical experiment, that there might be two distinct modes of liberation discourse at work in theological circles: which I will call CAPITAL L liberation and SMALL-L-LIBERATION.

My description will be caricatures, because I want to highlight the differences. I hope you can identify the trends in more subtle ways.

By CAPITAL L liberation I mean those theologies and programs seek large-scale, visible socio-political and economic changes, as means to achieve lasting justice for everyone. This mode would often be suspicious of the small stuff, in as much as they work within flawed socio-political structures. It tends to focus on the denunciation of the collusion of theological and mainly institutional structures with systems of oppression. Globalization, capitalism, and imperialism are some of the predominant themes. It intersects with some modes of decolonial and postcolonial discourses as well as with political theology. In most academic theology circles I participate in, scholars associate the term liberation with this mode of CAPITAL-L-LIBERATION.

By SMALL-L-LIBERATION I mean those theologies that attend to the small-scale struggles and dreams of people, even where broad structural change seems elusive or impossible. It considers significant and engages themes that seem not encompassing enough for CAPITAL-L-LIBERATION: sex, family, health, bodies, food, etc. It works with scraps of things we may not be willing to accept as a whole: pieces of scripture and theological texts, symbols of cultures which we also denounce, art and

literary texts, and other such artifacts--from cultural flea markets, if you will. Thus it tends to be messier and its claims more localized in time as well as in space. Liberation is not necessarily lasting, but it is crucial. Vision to find a way where there is none, communal support, and unexpected joy are part of it. As examples, I think of Marcela Athaus-Reid's and Ivonne Gebara's allusions to the theological relevance of things like a car ride on a long, rainy day, a cup of coffee, or garbage pick up. And yet these are not the theologies that are commonly associated with the label liberation.

The divide is not strictly between feminist and non-feminist approaches, but it is often works that way. It is more likely that SMALL-L-LIBERATION would be called feminist than liberation, thus reproducing a gender division identified ever since feminism argued that the personal is political. I am not saying anything new. But the tension still affects my own work and my use of the term liberation.

I use "liberation theology" to refer to a body of work that has been crucial for making us think about the effects of theology in socio-political practices. There is still much to do in that area. I tend *not* to use it in my work because it is so often associated with CAPITAL-L-LIBERATION. Even though there it is crucial to engage in broad scale analysis and theorization, I think it can only be *just* if it also attends to SMALL-L-

LIBERATION: the common practices of ordinary life. I am not saying that they are mutually exclusive, but rather that it is important to recognize the assumptions that affect the use of the term.

A similar set of assumptions seem to be at work in the relationship between liberation and aesthetics or theopoetics. I will illustrate it using an example from my own work. (Let me summarize it very quickly.) I was addressing the scriptural concept of glory in relation to the philosophical idea of wonder. Glory has been evoked by liberation and feminist theologians inspired by Irenaeus of Lyon's statement: "The glory of God is the human being fully alive." I became interested in this concept of glory as a way to name the divine excess found not only in the human flourishing, but also in the ordinary things like wind or fire. Glory appears anywhere, as a luring and awesome quality that incites wonder and yet remains beyond our direct access or grasp. It reminds us that we cannot appropriate these things. But glory can be ignored. Only those who open themselves in wonder are able to recognize it, to behold a transfiguration of the ordinary. Thus, I want to argue for a theological attitude of wonder as an openness and response to the divine glory in creation and in other human beings.

Of course both "glory" and "wonder" have been abused: Glory has been identified with self-aggrandizement and the term wonder mistaken for

mere voyeuristic curiosity. This is evidently not what I meant by the words, and the definitions need further clarification. But what I want to explore with you is not the misuses of the terms, but rather the deep suspicions of wonder among liberation thinkers, who fear that a celebration of pleasure and beauty might lead us astray. For instance, definitions of a decolonial stance explicitly reject philosophies of wonder. The argument is made that the starting point of a liberation or decolonial stance is not *wonder* at the marvels of the world but the *horrors* at its injustices. Horror is seen as the antithesis of wonder. How could we celebrate wonder when even a cursory look at the histories of oppression reveals that some lives are not valued, when allusions to glory have been appropriated for destruction and death? Is a focus on glory and wonder an obstacle for critical engagement of the realities of pain and injustice?

I cannot ignore these concerns. Yet I think the very passion for liberation, the refusal to accept the oppressive elements of the world, emerges from recognizing the divine in creation, however dimly; it arises from an openness to perceive something that cannot be fully contained in human structures. It was liberation theology that emphasized the affirmation that the glory of God manifests itself among those who are considered the least of these. In other words, the celebration of beauty in the ordinary and

the indignation with systems of oppression are not mutually exclusive, but different expressions of the claim that God is in and among us. Indeed, to assume that experiences of glory and wonder are absent from the lives of those under the severe socio-economic conditions might lead us to lose sight of the astonishing nature of resistance, of the uncommon insight, persistence, and visions that give impulse to the very possibilities of liberation thinking and practice: liberation in the small things, as well as in the bigger ones.

The term liberation in theological studies invokes an orientation towards the world. Althaus-Reid called it “the search for the materiality of transcendence”. This we cannot let go of. In the process of defining the effort in broader terms, including not only poverty, but all material practices—big and small—occurring in unexpected places, I wonder if the term itself has changed. Can it carry the burden of attending to the socio-economic structure as well as to our small joys and pains of daily living, to be moved by horror as well as by passion and wonder? I look forward to our conversations around this.