

Birds, People, Then Religion—An Eco-Liberation Theological and Pedagogical Approach to Interreligious Rituals

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In this article, the author wrestles with a possible common ground for interreligious theological dialogue and engagement as they relate to educational processes and ritual practices. Rituals and theories must be brought together to help us put thought and practice together. In order to do this, we need to start where it hurts, in our own suffering, which is the ground zero for many religions. This article narrates a group of students who create a ritual that engages the “colonial wound.” The article suggests that we must listen to the birds so we can listen to the wounds of the earth, our common ground.

Keywords: colonial wound, suffering, common ground, interreligious rituals, solidarity

Introduction

What does it mean for us to do interreligious theological dialogue and engagement after the election of Donald Trump, whose rhetoric has at best validated and at worst increased xenophobia and the colonial economic powers and the global movement towards hatred of the poor? Our challenges get bigger and more complex and difficult by the day. The world is burning through religious and cultural-identities' fights. Our situation is so confusing that even the IMF and the World Bank are concerned with the unequal distribution of the wealth in the world! Fear and anger are the world's most present feelings right now, thereby adding to the humiliation of the majority of the people in our planet who simply cannot make it. All brought by the Spirit of development in the neoliberal system that is *crushing* entire populations, taking not only our money but poisoning our souls and breaking our spirits. The earth is excruciatingly exploited, making poor people of all colors, religions, and places inhabit the same impoverished, squalid, sordid, neglected spaces.

Moreover, working in institutions that are heirs of colonial powers, we must deal with the shattering of the white liberal myth of the USA as a land of democracy and rights and care for all. Education has become a business and schools mirror for-profit agencies; unless we can gain results with clear outcomes, education cannot support and be part of the system. In the classroom, as well as in society, there is hardly any possibility to engage in any sort of political cultural conversation across the divides, much less attend to religious conversations about diversity. Moreover, the same system is telling us that all we have is our own property: identities in body politics. I fight for mine; you fight for yours; and we fight with each other. Meanwhile the financial powers laugh at our very educated, proficient, and very highly complex understanding of political identities and religious exclusivisms.

If we are to think about these dynamics in our educational systems and our classrooms, I wonder—how can we engage in interreligious conversations? Since our classrooms are also mirrors of our communities, how do we think and do with communities who live in the margins? Is there any correlation between classrooms and our world at large?

I write as a Christian liberation theologian. My sense of God comes from my upbringing in poverty and from being a shoe-shining boy at eight years old in Brazil. In that sense, I am writing in ways in which I try to reach the same children and their families growing up in poverty. My (very dangerous) common denominator is the economic exclusion of people across the globe, in whatever religion they might or might not belong. The hope is to find a sense of a “body” where we work with, from, and to, trying to find ways to transform these situations. In these attempts, there are many dangers, among which is the possible flattening of the concept of poverty and its given normative claims. Nonetheless, this is an attempt to find a location, that is, economic poverty, within diverse social, contextual, cultural, and religious locations, one in which we can perform interreligious engagements.

Setting the ground

When the radical Brazilian Catholic Archbishop Dom Helder Câmara, known in Brazil as “the communist priest” for being on the side of the poor, received the Niwano Peace Prize in Kyoto, in 1970, he also participated in the World Conference of Religion and Peace. In that meeting, he said that religions were able to share the following:

- A conviction of the unity of the human family and equality of all human beings;
- A sense of sacred in every individual and its conscience;
- A sense of value in the human community;
- The comprehension that strength is not reason, that human power is not self-sufficient and absolute;
- The belief that love, compassion, detachment and interior strength of truth have a spirit that is stronger than hatred, enmity and egotism;
- A sense of obligation to be on the side of the poor and the oppressed, against the rich and the oppressor;
- A profound hope that goodwill will triumph.¹

For Archbishop Helder Câmara, the commitment with the poor, to enter into a pilgrimage with the poor, was the very notion that would create utopias on the horizon of our thinking and our practice. For him, to be with the poor was the fundamental ground, path, motion, and notion that sustained our forms of actions, beliefs, and utopias. It is from this place that I want to speak, from the margins. Coming from my theological education in liberation theologies in Latin America, I firmly believe that the Christian God is a God of liberation! Jesus, as God Emmanuel, God with us, chose to live with us in the form of a boy who right at birth was a refugee, with his parents having to run away from his own “country.” This Jesus lived his life amidst the poor and the outcast and at the end was killed by the Roman empire. For Jesus, the final judgment of our own lives will not be what we believed but what we did for those cast aside of our societies: “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”²

¹ Dom Helder Câmara, *Utopias Peregrinas*, (Pernambuco: Editora UFPE, 2014), 107. Translation mine.

² Matthew 25: 35–36, *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version.

In Jesus, God makes clear options for being on the side of the poor. A God who doesn't make choices is a God of the powerful. A God of all is a God of nobody. A God who loves all is like saying all lives matter. A God who makes choices, who chooses the poor, is like saying Black Lives Matter. Clearly this preferential option does not mean to avoid others but does mean to be on the side of those who are in the underside of history, in whatever religion or no religion those might belong. It is from this place that I want to pursue interreligious theological dialogue and study interreligious engagement through rituals. This is necessarily not an exclusive Christian place and definitely not an attempt to find Karl Rahner's notion of "anonymous Christians"³ in other religions. As we will see later, the concern and deep care for the poor are present in many religions. This broad religious care for the poor can entail interreligious engagements and commitments that can create many forms of religious liberation,⁴ decolonial thinking, pedagogies of insurrection, healing ceremonies, theologies of liberation, and rituals of deliverance that deal with the wounded knees and souls of our people and that pay attention fundamentally to the suffering of the people. In order to do that we must not pledge our allegiance to any flag, a single form of knowledge, some unmovable syllabi format, *a priori* learning outcomes, repeated pedagogies, and so on. Our allegiances must be with the poor and our collective liberation in whatever material-spiritual, local-global, contextual-universal, immanent-transcendent form.

What would this mean ritually? How can we think about interreligious rituals and engagement from the perspective of the poor? The reference to our work from the perspective of the poor means engaging the life of the poor by being with the poor, with other sources of the academic thinking, like an organic liturgist-theologian, something akin to the Gramscian notion of the organic intellectual. How can our encounter with rituals of justice in one another's religion help us seek clarity within our own primary traditions? Is this an impossible theological/ritual task? Our very task as ritual doers and theorists is to combat a form of anti-intellectualism that is a contemporary plague in our academy that divides praxis and theory, keeping both as separate entities or even antagonistic to each other. The fact that very few scholars engage in ritual or any other practice that is deeply related to their thinking shows how a certain form of thinking has detached itself from forms of praxis that are considered counter-productive to theoretical work and even "fluffy stuff" when related to proper forms of knowledge. That dichotomy has found its place in cultural forms through secular rituals that are often totally foreign to the very religious theories that ground, through absentia, these rituals. Forms of life, experiences of resistance, and communitarian practices not carefully reflected not only make us lose the universal sense of our life but also make us run the risk of losing points of connection and contextual grounding situations that speak to specificities, localized potentialities, and lived antagonisms. In any doing, we need some theory. In any theory, we need some doing. In this way, present, past, and future; the sensual and the ideal; the sense of awe and beauty; the classroom and the streets; our life and the lives of our communities can only be organized and lived if theory and practice go hand in hand. There, at that juncture, we find our theoretical-theological contradictions, our ritual paradoxes, and our lives cross in between these impossibilities.

Thus, the starting point must be the lives of the poor, the economically poor—their honor and dignity above all else. Religion must come after, as a way to help us expand and challenge our

³ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 14, translated by David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 283.

⁴ Miguel A. De La Torre, ed., *The Hope of Liberation in World Religions* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008).

thinking and theory; to make us more aware of why we do this; to empower our practice; to remind us to relate to sources of life; to ground us on earth; to help organize ourselves; to help us deal with and keep our diversities, specificities, distinctions, and pluralities, all while embracing the oneness of a body that struggles and fights for common causes. In that way, our interreligious dialogue and engagement should pay attention to suffering as its ground zero of belief and action. James Cone writes:

It is this common experience among black people in America that Black Theology elevates as the supreme test of truth. To put it simply, Black Theology knows no authority more binding than the experience of oppression itself. This alone must be the ultimate authority in religious matters.⁵

Linda E. Thomas works from this grounding and expands it in regard to rituals:

For African American male and womanist theologians, neither scholastic tradition nor scripture could be claimed as the primary/dominant sources for discerning the nature of God or God’s will for creation. Rather, the experience of oppression forced upon black persons and communities became the primary arbiter of theological authority.⁶

But this is not only a Christian form of thinking. The Four Noble Truths of Buddha are grounded in the elimination of *dukkha*, suffering. Buddha sees people suffering from being sick, old age, and death, and the way they related to these issues makes him realize that their minds are attempting to grasp permanence and stability in a world where life is impermanent and unstable. The mind grasping itself and making everything permanent is the source of suffering. At the heart of Buddhism is *dukkha*, the self-clinging aggregation of the mind to form sensation, perception, and karmic formation and consciousness.

As academic thinkers working theoretically with sources of suffering and liberation, as teachers, we also must work with our students in order to provide forms of thinking and of practicing liberation. We must create pedagogies that demand ethical imperatives before any form of religion is possible. Peter McLaren states that in the “field of critical pedagogy today, there is a disproportionate focus on the critique of identity formation at the expense of examining and finding alternatives to existing spheres of social determination that include institutions, social relations of production, ideologies, subjective formation and the cultural imaginary—all of which are harnessed to value production.”⁷

Caring for the poor interreligiously

Jewish liberation theologian Marc Ellis proposes that “[t]here shouldn’t be any religious ritual until there is justice.” His claim points to the easiness in which religious people do their rituals without fully considering the suffering of the oppressed people, or rather despite the suffering of

⁵ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 120.

⁶ Linda E. Thomas, “The Social Sciences and Rituals of Resilience in African and African American Communities,” in Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 46.

⁷ Peter McLaren, *Pedagogy of Insurrection: From Resurrection to Revolution* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 13.

the people. In his words: “On Passover, once my favorite holiday. My passion for Passover left years ago. How to celebrate my/our liberation when we are permanently oppressing another people? Can’t be done. No way. My attempt last year? Passover for Palestine.”⁸

What if we take Ellis’s challenge seriously for a moment? What if we were not allowed to do our rituals until oppressed people have the possibility to live their lives fully? How can we make interreligious rituals and engagements infused with justice in a way that we become concerned with oppressed people as they challenge us to see and organize ourselves in the world? More than a rhetorical plea, Ellis’s question challenges us to see our thinking and teaching in light of our praxis, ways of living, ritual production, pedagogical praxis, and so on. Following this challenge, I think we can indeed create interreligious ritual practices that come out of our commitment with the poor and the work of justice.

There is enough justice seeking and caring for the poor in so many religious traditions and this is the common ground we are searching. Jewish prophets criticize worship when detached from works of justice. The Prophet Hosea says: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”⁹

When Muslims are fasting, they hear these words from the Qur’ān:

Be maintainers,
as witnesses for the sake of Allah,
of justice,
and ill feeling for a people should never lead you
to be unfair.
Be fair; that is nearer to Godwariness,
and be wary of Allah.
Allah is indeed well aware of what you do.¹⁰

From Christianity, Jesus gives two main commandments that deeply relate worship and daily life: “‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”¹¹

One of the most chanted *Mettā Sutta* of the Buddhist tradition says:

May all beings be happy,
May they be joyous and live in safety,
All living beings, whether weak or strong,
In high or middle or low realms of existence

⁸ Marc Ellis, *Facebook posts*, April 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/marc.ellis.1291>.

⁹ Hosea 6:6, *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version.

¹⁰ Qur’an 5:8, ‘Ali Quli Qara’i, *The Qu’ran, with a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation* (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies Press, 2004), available at <https://zawaar786.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/phrase-by-phrase-quran-with-english-translation-by-ali-quli-qarai.pdf>.

¹¹ Matthew 22:36–40, *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version.

Small or great, visible or invisible, near or far,
Born or to be born, May all beings be happy.¹²

As we continue these ancient traditions in our days, we can see Christian, Jewish, and Muslim liberation theologies claiming God’s liberation for the poor. Socially engaged Buddhism is also deeply entrenched in social liberation. The Indian Buddhist thinker Ambedkar said: “Religion is for men and not men for religion.” It is the experience of oppression that should guide us in our theological thinking, our interreligious thinking, and our forms of ritual engagement. In that way, I can see how possible it is that this interreligious task can be done! We could also mention the Muslim Reform Movement; its members define themselves in their declaration in this way: “Ideas do not have rights. Human beings have rights.”¹³ There is also the Jews of Conscience, a group of Jews that works on behalf of the Palestinians for justice and liberation. Christian liberation theologians have emphasized that God has a preference for the poor. In all these traditions, there is a clear option for the human being, living in justice. These forms of tradition engage the praise, the “doxa,” the glory of God in more concrete, material ways.

Trying to follow what Marc Ellis says, we will keep Ellis’s words hovering over our practices haunting us like a prophetic ghost. Our rituals are marked by notions of power, control, authority, and wealth. There must be a shift from these places, breaking the top-down structures of our religions and attending to what people are actually doing. Ellis is pointing to this place, to the people, marking our places of privilege and detachment from the people.

We must be aware of rituals that emerge within communities of marginalized people, for these can reflect what can happen in our classrooms.

Interreligious rituals—in classroom and in chapel

The field of interreligious ritual and dialogue is trying to find ways to think about and take seriously the theologies and/or religious thinking of religions along with the performative/ritualized forms of their beliefs. Marianne Moyaert states that, in this field, there are two forms of ritual: *outer-facing* and *inner-facing*. She writes: “Generally speaking, however, one may distinguish between two types: on the one hand, ritual sharing that is *responsive* and *outer-facing* and on the other hand ritual participation that is *inner-facing* and follows the pattern of *extending* or *receiving hospitality*.”¹⁴ In this process, we try to look at history and see how interreligious rituals have happened and have developed and also, how we today can try new things, ritualizing new forms of interreligious engagements, dialogues, and needs.

¹² Venerable Dr. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Mahanayaka Thera Abhidhaja Maharathaguru Aggamaha Pandita, Dlit, D Litt, Jayasili, “The Discourse on Loving Kindness (Mettâ Sutta, Sutta Pitaka),” in *Introducing Buddhism*, translated by H. J. Russell-Williams and The Buddhist Group of Kendai (Theravâda) (London: The Buddhist Society, 2003), 26.

¹³ “Our Declaration,” website of the Muslim Reform Movement: A Global Coalition of Muslim Reformers, <https://muslimreformmovement.org/first-page-posts/personal-marketer/>.

¹⁴ Marianne Moyaert, “Introduction: Exploring The Phenomenon Of Interreligious Ritual Participation,” in Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof, eds., *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 1. Emphasis in original.

This new ritualizing or ritualization can happen in many places: worship places, streets, street gatherings, conferences, and so on. Here I want to show how it can happen in classrooms. My question is: How do we connect the theoretical forms of justice purported by our religions in pedagogical and ritual ways so students can create/recreate forms of resistance and justice for their own communities?

In what follows we see a somewhat blended outer and inner ritual done by my class on postcolonialism and liturgy at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. It was a blended ritual because it was done interreligiously but also using the inner sacred sources of our religions, namely Latinx and black forms of Christianity, Islam, and native religions (Americas and Samoa). The ritual was about addressing an issue in society but also about offering and receiving hospitality. Being aware of the distinctions and similarities of religions and diverse classrooms, we decided to start from below, our common place, what Walter Mignolo calls our “colonial wound.”¹⁵ This was a barely possible task. The major task was to keep some understandings of the Christian eucharist while opening it up for a much more expansive relation—the host becoming that which offers and receives the blessings, the transformations. The eucharist became a venue within and around which our people could talk. What grounded us was actually the “colonial wound,” the places of hurt in our communities. Yes, there was a strong presence of Christian theology in a Christian chapel, which was also challenged and somewhat undone by our movements and the singing of our communities’ voices.

My students included a queer black man with AIDS, a woman with European and Philippine belongings, a Muslim woman from Syria, a Central American queer man, an indigenous man from Samoa, and a man from Latin America. All of them with stories of violence, loss, despair, and sadness, with coloniality traversing their own people. They were the organic liturgist-theologians of their own people. They not only re-presented their people but wanted to create a ritual that they could themselves do in their own communities. We put this worship service together at James Chapel at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. It was communion day. This is how it went:

We were welcomed into the space with an accordion. In the center was the Eucharistic table. Around it were other tables.

Somebody speaks: Welcome! We are here to share the sufferings of our people. To give light to the shadows where they live. And to figure out how to love our God in connected and distinctive ways. One of the main themes of decolonial thought is the loss, the tragedy, the trauma of something that has happened in the land, to people, culture, languages, Spirit . . . the colonial wound, the fact that regions and people around the world have been classified as less humane, unreasonable, underdeveloped physically, economically and mentally, all of that has plagued us and our people, keeping us from living a just and dignified life. Colonial wounds that have historically dismissed our people and taken away their

¹⁵ “The de-colonial path has one thing in common: *the colonial wound*, the fact that regions and people around the world have been classified as underdeveloped economically and mentally.” In Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26:7–8 (2009): 1–23, 3. Italics mine. Available at <http://waltermignolo.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/epistemicdisobedience-2.pdf>.

strength and power to continue. Wounds that can be seen and heard in the feelings and songs of melancholia, of the African Banzo, the longing for that which was taken away from us. Due to that, many of our people live in distention, in emotional distress, stretched too thin and without rest . . . And yet, we all continue to go on singing: “I Don’t Feel No Ways Tired.” As we go, we think about our wounds, we tend our wounds, we feel our wounds, and re-discover forms of resistance, and stubborn ways to continue with our lives.

So now we are invited into a journey to different places and peoples. In each stop, we will hear about a wound and will receive food for the journey. We begin singing “God have mercy” from an indigenous community in Latin America and we will walk around singing the same song. We will finish here at this table, where the Eucharistic table will be deeply engaged, transformed, expanded and offered in many forms and ways to all of us. Let us walk. Let us go explore!

We walked around, we ate something different offered from each student/people, we heard stories, we sang. At the gathering tables, we heard about the brutal disasters of colonization over indigenous people and their land and culture in Samoa. We heard about the economic exploitation and death of the people in Central America. We heard about disasters of social climate change in the Philippines. We heard about black ancestors and old and new stories of slavery and liberation. We heard a cry of a woman holding her dead son in her arms after a bomb exploded in her house while singing Allah, Allah, Allah without stopping. Then we went back to the final gathering table.

Somebody says: Welcome back to this table after being in other tables with other foods and stories. T. S. Eliot says: “We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” Back to this table, we will know this place again and yet for the first time. We heard from Jesus that we are to eat and drink in his memory, a memory of a wounded body, killed by those who tried all they could to get him down. But they thought that cutting the tree would be enough. That everything would end. They forgot however that Jesus was a seed, a seed that was to be reborn in many other people. Along the history we saw many other seeds being reborn in other people and today we saw some of those seeds in the places and people we just visited.

Now these seeds will continue to spread, will continue to be taken into different stories, meanings, and possibilities. From these seeds, we will now receive a drink that will serve to sustain you for the rest of our journey . . . until we meet again. From each cup, a blessing, a very different blessing, with different beginnings and ends, with different sources and beliefs, but blessings that will help us sing alleluias in the midst of the wounds of ourselves and our people. We are now invited to come to whatever cup you feel so moved to receive a blessing and then leave singing alleluia. Our hope is that you go out singing an alleluia to and from your own people. Whatever alleluia you might know, with other words or meanings. Let the seeds of this worship and of this week, the seeds of each people we visited today,

the seed of each blessing flourish in you and in your people. Come to drink! And go strengthened by the power of the seeds!

We left empowered by the stories of pain and sorrow of our people and our lands. That made me think that we are desperately in need of another vocabulary for our pedagogies and our rituals. Perhaps if we start instead with the wound of the earth, we might be able to find ourselves there—deeply interconnected. But for that we need a new idiom so we can engage well with it.

Concluding

In that ritual, communities were remembered by individual stories that showed a larger social, economic, cultural, and political context. More importantly, every colonial wound mentioned in those stories was related to the earth: stealing, economic exploitation, social climate, slavery, wars, everything fundamentally connected with the earth. That makes us think that the social, economic, cultural aspects of our analysis are not enough. We need to ground ourselves elsewhere. We all need to go elsewhere to begin this work. We need to literally touch the ground, feel the wind, give space to the ways we can connect to the earth. In that way, religious scholars need to go elsewhere and learn from the indigenous people. In order to start where we suffer, we must be attuned to the movements and sounds of nature. What are the rain, the birds, the trees, the rivers, the earth, the animals telling us about life and ourselves? They all hold forms of humanity and unless we are deeply connected we cannot pay attention to our collective suffering.¹⁶

The Zapoteca poet Natalia Toledo recited her work “The Reality” at a conference once, saying: “What it is to be indigenous? Here is my list: To have an idiom to talk to the birds who sing in the air, an idiom to speak with the earth, to talk with life. . . . To be indigenous is to have a universe and not to renounce it.”¹⁷

In order to have an idiom to talk to the birds and the earth, we need new sources, new practices, new thinking, new paradigms, new teachers, new classrooms, new pedagogies. The pedagogies we still have do not help us to sing, or to pay attention to the birds or the earth. Our pedagogies teach us to tackle productivity, to race after learning outcomes that demand clear forms of evaluation that show the budgetary demands, the control of the means of production and the goals of our consumerist desires, even before we get into the classroom. We are trapped in a pedagogical model that searches the earth for profit, that measures the birds by the number of bullets, that approves the variety and richness of our human life from dogmatic thinking, privileging minds over bodies and feelings, straight thoughts over zigzagging contradictory emotions of communities, European sources over native wisdom.

Now, at the beginning of every class, we have to be in silence to listen to the birds. If we can't listen to the birds, then our classes are very sad and unproductive. When we listen to the birds we feel alive! We can connect through that which is our common ground. We can hear each other's voices and suffering. We can hear the earth's wounds. Religion? Comes after, to mend the earth,

¹⁶ See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds*, translated by Martin Holbraad, David Rodgers, and Julia Sauma (Chicago: HAU Books, 2015).

¹⁷ Natalia Toledo, *La Realidad, Nación Zapoteca, México*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcKlFJQ-q6g>.

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to heal the wounds of the earth and each other. For the assurance of our being alive, the very possibility of our believing, and ritualizing our lives and beliefs, is the birds singing.

Thus, for interreligious ritual practices to happen, we first start with the wound of the earth. And for that, we need to learn how to listen, and to talk to the birds!

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