

11-9-1997

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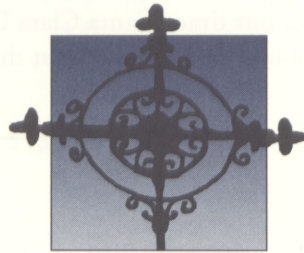
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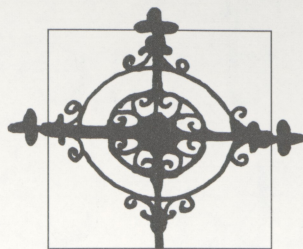
Memory, Emancipation, and Hope: Political Theology in the 'Land of the Free'

M. Shawn Copeland

Associate Professor of Theology
Marquette University

Public Lecture
Santa Clara University
November 9, 1997

Vol. 4 No. 1



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Memory, Emancipation, and Hope: Political Theology in the 'Land of the Free'

M. Shawn Copeland

Throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, many European intellectuals intensely scrutinized their religious, moral, and philosophical resources in light of the Second World War. The silence and collusion which had countenanced the horrors of Nazism—the decreation of millions of European Jews, homosexuals, physically deformed Germans, the Romany, Communists, and Catholics—gave way to deep shame. Theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann, Dorothee Soelle, and Johann Baptist Metz in Germany; Alistair Kee and Margaret Kane in the United Kingdom; and François Houtart and Louis-Joseph Lebret in France began to probe the relation of the Christian faith to civil power, to engage and remember and understand the past in the light of the suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and to clarify the praxial grounds of hope for an authentic Christian and human future. It is in this context that political theology reemerged in the 20th century.¹ However, political theology's biting challenge was eclipsed in the United States by the irruption of theologies of liberation, particularly those theologies from Latin America and South Africa.

Theologies of liberation appeared in the latter half of the 1960s and, as Theo Witvliet reminds us, their first contours could be seen at roughly the same time in various parts of the world.² The vibrant hopes and expectations that theologies of liberation carried were related to concrete cultural and social (i.e., political, economic, and technological) struggles for justice, for self-determination, for control of national or regional economic and technological resources, for human equality, for the flourishing of the human spirit. The prophetic range and provocative character of these armed and negotiated struggles are incarnated in men and women like Franz Fanon, Che Guevara, Patrice Lumumba, Mahatma Gandhi, Bernadette Devlin, Betty Friedan, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Russell Means, Dennis Banks, and Cesar Chavez. By placing the interests of the poor, campesinos, the racialized 'other' in South Africa, blacks in the United States, and women at the interpretative center of biblical exegesis, theologies of liberation offered new readings of the bible and new understandings of their social conditions in light of God's revelatory word. By utilizing Marxist analytical tools, these theologies exposed the vicious social (and later cultural) order and values promoted through 'first world' (read United States) capitalism and democracy. By drawing out quite explicitly the integral connection between spiritual, social, and psychic liberation, theologies of liberation pointed to the mysterious power and work of God in history.³

To say that these theologies eclipsed or overshadowed the reception of European political theology in the United States is *not* to say that the-

ologies of liberation enjoyed wide, thoughtful, and appreciative readership in this country. Certainly, in the early 1970s, *they did not*. Outside the white North American religious left—a handful of theologians, pastoral workers, social theorists, and activists—theologies of liberation were not well known at all. The remediation of this situation was a chief task of Theology in the Americas (TIA), an ecumenical organization and process for theological reflection, directed by exiled Chilean priest Sergio Torres and Filipino Maryknoll Sister Virginia Fabella.

In August 1975, in Detroit, Michigan, TIA facilitated an international conference to initiate a dialogue between theologians from Latin America, North America, and Africa. Since the white North Americans were most eager to engage the Latin Americans, most of the conference discussions focused on Marxist analysis, the structural underdevelopment and dependency of the 'third world,' and the role of Christian faith and discipleship in social praxis. In and of itself, this focus was worthy and necessary, but it provided the white North American participants with an excuse to sidestep any structural critique of the condition of millions of marginalized indigenous, black, Chicano, and Latino peoples within the United States.

In response, Indian, black, Chicano and Latino participants formed a caucus and protested the program and process that had ignored the religious, cultural, and social condition of their communities, and that had failed to make unequivocal links between the oppressive suffering of their communities and the oppressive suffering of the poor of the 'third world.' These women and men, as a caucus, showed themselves to be intellectually independent and creative, self-critical and morally courageous, committed to a deeper level of collaborative action and theological praxis. Black participants reprovved the conference's lack of analysis of the religious, historical, cultural, and social hegemony of white racist supremacy. They also underscored the lack of attention to culture for which Marxist analysis (except for the work of Antonio Gramsci) was so notorious. At the same time, the Chicanos challenged the division of the United States too simplistically into 'white' (oppressor) and 'black' (oppressed). Moreover, Chicano and Latino participants repudiated any attempt by those from outside their situations, especially Latin American theologians, to speak for them. The Indians, the indigenous peoples of the continent, called attention to the defilement and degradation of the earth in the name of progress. And, the Indians called into question the very meaning of the notion of liberation for indigenous peoples who have endured more than four hundred years of genocide, broken treaties, and political manipulation.

In their collaboration, no matter how tenuous or fractious, Indians, blacks, and Chicanos and Latinos faced up to their peculiar dilemma as a 'marginalized colored majority' suppressed by white racist supremacy. Together, even for a brief time, they overcame the suspicion, mistrust,

and hostility that continually has plagued relations between their groups in the United States. The efforts of these Indian, black, and Latino theologians and church workers, vowed religious sisters and priests, activists and theorists forced TIA to enlarge its priorities and to sharpen its analysis with the inclusion of the categories of race, gender, and ecology.⁴

Although Frederick Herzog, Peter Hodgson, John Langan, Marie Augusta Neale, Matthew Lamb, and John A. Coleman are conspicuous exceptions, most white U. S. theologians, well into the 1980s, continued their academicized absorption with theologies of liberation, rather than enter into the programmatic theological and social self-criticism so implicit in those theologies.⁵ One way to interpret this deflection of scholarly attention is to advert to confessional alignments. Contemporary U. S. Protestant theologians could have found support for such analysis in the legacy of Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, and Shailer Matthews.⁶ But, perhaps, unreflected upon concern for the separation of church and state intruded on the possibility of their elucidation of 'an American political theology.' By contrast, Roman Catholic theologians, still laboring under the weight of ecclesial insularity and anti-Catholic bigotry, allowed European priorities to set their theological agenda. Since most European Catholic theologians were reluctant to turn theology to the political, so were they. Yet this meant that U. S. Catholic theologians had to overlook the work of social thinkers like John A. Ryan and John Courtney Murray.⁷ Another way to interpret this deflection of scholarly attention is more straightforward and more polemical: perhaps Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians found feminist, black, Latino, and Native American theologizing far too unsettling, far too close to the bone. However, when taken together, the more recent work of Frederick G. Lawrence, Dennis P. McCann and Charles R. Strain, Kathryn Tanner, Mark Taylor, J. Deotis Roberts, Cornel West, Henry Young, George Tinker, and Robert Allen Warrior undertakes sustained, comprehensive critical analysis of the relations between our religious and cultural and social practices.

This lecture, "Memory, Emancipation, and Hope: Political Theology in the 'Land of the Free,'" aims to make a contribution to that analysis. With the term 'political theology,' I mean to advert to critical analysis and reflection on that horizon of human life in which women and men comport themselves as historical beings.⁸ Political theology foregrounds the relation between religion and the cultural and the social (i.e., the political, the economic, the technological) expressions of a culture's meanings and values. At the same time, political theology explicates the relation between the natural and supernatural ends of human living. It promotes and reinforces the concrete possibility of intelligent and reasonable solutions to human problems while at once unfolding the higher viewpoint of the transcendent solution and valuation. Because political theology apprehends praxis as a way of life, as a way of being an authentic human person, it stands as a critical correc-

tive to any privatizing and individualizing tendencies.

Political theology makes explicit the "distinction between the political as the employment of legitimate power" and the political as the unmindful, predatory acquisitive manipulation of power in society.⁹ Thus, political theology exposes and protests both manifestations of societal or structural violence and those unquestioned assumptions and norms which undergird that violence and the vicious as well as banal habits, patterns, and practices which develop from it.

Finally, political theology ought not to be confused with mere criticism of society or with utopian aims and schemes; at the same time, neither is it to be misconstrued as a reckless or romantic embrace of activism. Political theology must provide a heuristic for the analysis of society and of history that both accounts for and evaluates progress and decline. This is crucial, since market values have shaped substantively the social meanings and expressions of freedom almost from the beginning of the nation's life. Here, Bernard Lonergan's structure of the human good can be helpful. The structure of the human good is a field theory or an implicit definition of society that is correlative to history. It is a set of terms and relations by which to understand and name what is going forward (progress or decline) in the ongoing conduct of human relations which constitute and order a society. The structure of the human good brings out the many dimensions of human responsibility, insofar as it makes evident how human institutions, cooperations, operations, and developments are results of human understanding, reasonableness, and responsibility. Thus, progress may be differentiated not only from decline, but from false meanings as well.¹⁰ As a Christian theology that seeks authenticity, political theology stands as an "integrating wisdom capable of being practiced cooperatively in reversing dehumanizing injustices."¹¹ As a Christian theology, political theology orients itself before the cross and in its shadow seeks the reign of God.

To reference land and location is to reiterate the obvious: the United States of America is a geographic place and space; it is, as well, religious, cultural, social, and psychological space. To reference land is to remember the suffering and anguish of land-loving peoples kidnapped from, duped, dispossessed, and driven off their lands; to remember the profound religious, cultural, and psychological disorientation which the Indian, African, and mestizo peoples underwent. For the Indian peoples, their connection to their lands was "a symbol of their connection to the spirit of life itself. The loss of such a foundational symbol . . . led to a tremendous loss of Indian meaning and identity."¹² To reference geographic and religious location is to remember the grief and torment of the Africans, chained in the filthy holds of ships. Their crossing the Atlantic meant not only a passage from life into death, but also a loss of the land of their ancestors who had guarded and had guided them. To reference positional and psychological location is to remember the sorrow and agony of the Latino peoples, the offspring of sadistic erotic violence. These women and men are forever

forced to incarnate the double rejection of the *mestizaje*, of displacement and periphery.¹³

To locate the memories, emancipatory praxis, and hope of marginalized and suppressed Indians, Africans, and mestizos in the 'land of the free' is to signify on the so-called 'American experience.' For this location is a land of freedom, but only for some; moreover, that freedom is established on the oppression of others. Thus, to interrogate this location is to uncover those 'master narratives' concealed behind tropes of immigration and exile, discovery and conquest, destiny and progress. To locate the memories, emancipatory praxis, and hope of marginalized and suppressed peoples in the 'land of the free' is to insinuate dispossession and wandering, rupture and alienation, force and loss, slavery and social death.

In what remains I should like to propose and discuss five theses for a political theology in the United States. There are, however, some presuppositions which may not be immediately obvious and should be stated:

(1) that there is a common human good which is a rich, serious, and pressing problematic to be realized in and through concrete, self-correcting human living; (2) that we need to shift our understanding of the meaning of the cultural and the political in order to grasp the differentiated experiences and histories of the peoples of the United States; (3) that the present existential situation in which we live, unhappily, can be defined as a cycle of decline—i.e., a distorted situation that is the result of our religious, moral, and intellectual deformation; (4) that reversal of this cycle entails not only the recognition that moral development has been ignored in the cultural and social orders, but that new ethical and moral thinking is necessary for new behaviors, actions, and habits; and (5) that religious faith is integral to the realization of a common human good, and grace is God's invitation to growth and conversion in history and in society.

The motivation for this thought-experiment is my encounter with the image or icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In her study of *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, Jeannette Rodriguez reports the findings by several ophthalmologists who have analyzed the eyes of the Guadalupe. Using infrared photography, computer amplification, and digitalization, these scientists have discovered reflected images of people in the eyes of the Guadalupe. "It is almost as if when Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared she took a picture of the people who were before her."¹⁴ Originally, it had been thought that only the image of Juan Diego was present, but with the aid of sophisticated technology other images have been detected. One image is that of a "crossed-legged, bare-chested Indian holding his hands in prayer The unusually high forehead of the profiled face was typical of the Aztec priests who shaved their foreheads as a badge of rank." A second image is believed to be "the face of Spanish Bishop Juan de Zumárraga, with a white beard, high cheek bones, and an aquiline nose." And, the other image is "the indistinct form of a black woman." We all—brown, black, red, and white—meet in the eye of the Guadalupe. To propose to do

political theology under her gaze is to recognize ourselves and each other in our stories, our memories, our hopes; to grapple with our collective, intersecting pasts; to struggle creatively for freedom; to work, celebrate, worship, and hope together.

Five Theses for Political Theology in the United States

Thesis One: Theology as political in the United States will grow out of the critical recovery of the memories of the oppressed and marginalized Indians, Africans, and mestizos. If "memory is one of the means by which people acquire a sense of identity," then the recovery of memory is of crucial importance to the development of political theology in the United States. As long as memories are controlled, distorted, or suppressed, then history can be only propaganda. As long as history is propaganda, then truth is without land, without place, without a home.

In America, in the United States, the Indians, Africans, and mestizos are those who will not and can not forget; the whites are those who do not, and seem not to, want to remember. The earliest white peoples to arrive in what is now the United States have been described as "adventurer[s] . . . in the fullest sense of the word, men [and women] seeking the main chance for [themselves] in that part of the new world which at the moment seemed to offer for [them] the best chance." These men and women lived for this new landed adventure, this new social and psychological space in which they were emancipated from the burdens and demands of 'old world' class and station. Here they could shed the centuries-old weight of custom and mores to live free in a land "where only the vividness of the present and the promise of the future really mattered."

We people of the United States are ahistorical, even, anti-historical; at the same time, we are, as Ralph Ellison has remarked, "notoriously selective in the exercise of historical memory." Soon after their arrival, European Americans adopted a stance toward future history in which they placed and interpreted themselves, their desires, their choices, their actions as *the* central subjects in the creation and destiny of a new nation. The indigenous and enslaved peoples were but foils or antagonists in their story of wresting civilization from a so-called savage land. Selective memory hides the domination, the brutality, the violence and presents us a picture of 'white innocence' before 'red, black, and brown evil.'

Yet, other memories roam the 'new world.'

The Sioux summon to memory the priest Waterdrinker, who is said to have dreamed "that outlandish creatures were weaving a huge spider web around his people. [And upon awaking] said to his people, 'When this happens, you shall live in square gray houses, in a barren land, and beside those square gray houses you shall starve.'"²⁰

African Americans remember the story of Ibo Landing: that place in the Atlantic ocean where captive and shackled Ibo people from West

Africa disembarked from a slave ship. As soon as the Ibos were brought on shore, they took a good long look around, not saying much of anything, just studying the place. Those 'pure-bred' Africans had the power to see: they could look backward to tell of things that had happened long ago before they were born and they could look forward to tell of things that would come to pass long after they were dead. The Ibos saw unspeakable horrors, suffering, slavery; war, emancipation, and everything after that right up to the present. Then, they turned and the Ibos—every last man, woman, and child—stepped out on the water like it was solid ground. They sang as they walked back home to Africa.²¹

The mestizos, the daughters and sons of Malinche, remember the priest-jaguar of Yucatán . . . Chilam Balam, he who was the mouth of the gods, remembered what had not yet happened: "Scattered through the world shall be the women who sing and the men who sing and all who sing . . . No one will escape, no one will be saved . . . There will be much misery in the years of the rule of greed. Men will turn into slaves. Sad will be the face of the sun . . . The world will be depopulated, it will become small and humiliated."²²

These memories, these stories and stories like these were preserved, cherished, and handed down to the children of the Indians, Africans, and mestizos. These memories mediated and nurtured religious, cultural, and social meanings, values, and practices as well as cognitive orientation. Moreover, the vanquished and marginalized Indians, Africans, and mestizo peoples drew on these memories in the formation of independent, critical, yet subjugated knowledge of their religious, cultural, and social subordination. They utilized this knowledge—this critical reflection on their religious, cultural, and social experience—to ground their resistance, their struggle for religious, cultural, and social emancipation and transformation. Through this knowledge, the Indians, Africans, and mestizos claimed their subjectivity, exercised their human agency. And because subjugated knowledge emerges only in community, the Indians, Africans, and mestizos were afforded a standpoint at once critical and self-critical. As my ancestors mused: "A heap see, a few know." "Every shut eye ain't sleep, every good-bye ain't gone."

These knowledges may have been subjugated, but they were neither naive, nor incapable of universals, although they were made to appear so by the colonists, the planter class, the conquistadors, the conquerors and their descendants. Rather, these subjugated knowledges were discursive efforts to plumb the consequences of their forced resettlements and involuntary location in this newly 'discovered' land. Unless political theology apprentices itself in a non-appropriative and non-dominative way to the knowledge and cultures of the Indian, African, and mestizo peoples, it risks being one more self-indulgent, ideologically suspicious, patronizing assertion.

Thesis Two: The very human flourishing of marginalized Indians, Africans, and mestizos constitutes the formal conditions for the concrete realization of freedom in the United States. Of course, the first condition of such flourishing is that the Indians, Africans, and mestizos *be* human and, for some time, this was a question complicated by slavery and baptism.

The philosophy of Greek antiquity accommodated slavery and freedom on the grounds that it was natural for some to be held in bondage or in slavery and others to be free or to be masters. David Brion Davis argues that Plato "supplied the elements for a theory of intellectual inferiority as the natural basis for slavery." Plato maintained that "a slave might hold a true belief but could never know the truth of his belief, since he was inherently deficient in reason."²³ Frank Tannenbaum in the classic *Slave and Citizen* sketches out some of the notions regarding human equality in the arguments of the Roman philosophers Cicero and Seneca, which insist that the slave is a thinking, rational, feeling human being. "Virtue is immune to misfortune. . . . [And] slavery is the result of misfortune, and hateful to all But . . . slavery affects only the body, which may belong to the master; the mind cannot be given to slavery. The soul of the slave remains free."²⁴

In the United States, the English colonists regarded Indians and Africans as barbarous and savage, heathens in need of the saving waters of baptism. But this was not a simple matter. Roy Pearce in *Savagism and Civilization* probes the way in which the early English colonists counterposed themselves as *civilized* to the Indians as *savage*. The white peoples believed in the divinely-ordained superiority of their religion, their government, their education, their styles of living. They maintained "that in the savage and his destiny was manifest all that they had long grown away from and yet still had to overcome." Thus, the Indians presented an obstacle to the white colonists' sense of "order and reason and civilization." Their new God-given task in this land, which God had given to them, was to bring the "savages to civilization . . . by bringing them to the Christianity that was its heart."²⁵ The more the Indians resisted any trespassing of their religions and lands, their cultures and mores, the more the English tried to force Christianity upon them. Thus, in 1625, the Reverend Samuel Purchas writes that the Indians are

so bad people, having little Humanitie but shape, ignorant of Civillite, of Arts, of Religion; more brutish then the beasts they hunt, more wild and unmanly then that unmanned wild Countrey, which they range rather than inhabite; captivated also to Satans tyranny in foolish pieties, mad impieties, wicked idlenesse, busie and bloody wickedness; hence have wee fit objects of zeale and pitie²⁶

As perpetual servitude or hereditary slavery began to supplant indentured servitude, the colonists grew reluctant to baptize the Africans; it was unthinkable to enslave another Christian. Yet, when baptism eventually was made available to the enslaved people, it brought no corresponding change in their brutalized social condition. Rather, now Christian baptism was presented as helpful in making the slaves docile, acquiescent, and more obedient.

In the New Testament writings, there is no formal opposition to slavery. Paul writes that in the sight of God “there is neither slave nor free” [Gal. 3:28]. “For freedom,” the apostle writes, “Christ has set us free” [Gal. 5:1]. But none of this involves “a repudiation of slavery, rather an assertion that spiritually [master and slave] are equal.”²⁷ Again, from the writer of Ephesians: “Slaves be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ” [6:5].

These and other texts leave us with several difficulties. *First*, slavery, the *very* opposite of freedom and emancipation, was used as a spiritual and theological metaphor to provide slaveholding Christians with “a model of dependence and self-surrender.”²⁸ But enslavement—certainly, enslavement in the Americas—was never the consequence of self-surrender, but rather seizure and capture. These texts encourage a false notion that slavery was good or, if not good, certainly necessary. *Second*, the metaphorical suggestion that sin *is* slavery implied that those who were enslaved were sinful, thus bolstering the necessity of the institution of slavery as an agent of control. *Third*, such metaphorical usage shifted attention away from the real condition of social nonhuman being, of social death that the enslaved peoples endured. We know from the accounts of slave revolts and rebellions that the reality and experience of enslavement stirred the desire for social freedom. But, if slavery is spiritualized, then the desire for freedom can be subverted, pried loose from social moorings. Moreover, such spiritualization allowed slaveholding Christians and those complicit in and profiting from the slave trade to indulge in detachment and indifference toward the real putrid conditions the enslaved peoples endured.

The Spaniards considered the Indians “coarse, childlike, immature, needy of patient evangelization.”²⁹ Because the Aztecs and the Incas did not “yet use Scriptures or know the philosophers,” the Spanish missionaries, Enrique Dussel tells us, considered them to be an “inferior grade of barbarians.” The Spaniards typed the indigenous peoples in this way: “The third-class savages resemble wild animals. . . . For all those who are scarcely human or only half-human, it is fitting to teach them to be human and to instruct them as children. . . . One must also contain them by force . . . and even force them against their will so that they might enter the kingdom of heaven.”³⁰

As a tool of colonization and conquest, dogmatic or doctrinal theology severely compromised the Christian doctrine of the human person or Christian theological anthropology. Despite the morally courageous work of men like Bartholomé las Casas, it allowed the social (dis)order to dictate the very terms by which *being human* was to be understood. This ‘empirically based’ and biased definition drove the Indians, Africans, mestizos and their descendants to the very periphery of humanity. Without a critical analysis of culture, society, race, and gender, political theology risks proposing an exclusivist and amoral notion of person.

Thesis Three: Theology as political in the United States will grow out of a notion of the Christian church as a repentant community that thinks, moves, acts, serves, and lives in memory of the life and ministry, suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity is so very deeply implicated in the conquest and colonization of the peoples of the Americas. Pressed into the service of kingdoms of this world, Christianity became an agent of empire. It posed as a transcultural religion and, thereby, transgressed geographic, metaphysical, cosmological, cultural, personal, and social boundaries.³¹ Ideally, these ‘transgressions’ should have been crossings—opportunities to proclaim and witness ‘the good news’ of salvation in Jesus of Nazareth. But, more often than not, these boundary crossings were forcible invasions: the transmission of the gospel cloaked in the steel conquest. These assaults directed and controlled the protracted psychic and social disruption and deformation of generations of human persons. This spiritual conquest, this “coercive or hopeless religious domination, subjecting the oppressed to the religion of the oppressor,” presents theology’s turn to the political with grave contemporary challenges.³² What sort of church are we? What sort of church must we become? We cannot live authentically—that is, attentively, intelligently, reasonably, responsibly—under the aegis of the reign of God and sleep through the distortion and deformation of the whole people of God.

In rethinking ways of being Christian or ways of being church, we must begin by taking up a place before the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. It is here that we grasp the enormity of the human suffering and oppression of the Indians, Africans, and mestizos. It is here that we grasp the meaning of a triumphal church’s collusion (intentional or not) in that suffering and oppression. Our repentance is an empty and routine gesture, unless we confess and repent of our racism, sexism, cultural imperialism, and marginalization of others; if we do not beg forgiveness from those whom we have offended; if we do not make a firm purpose of amendment; if we do not move to healing and creative Christian praxis. The memory of the suffering of Jesus, the memory of the suffering of the Indians, Africans, and mestizos must orient that work to which the biological and economic children of the conquistadors, colonists, slave traders, planters, and slaveholders must

commit themselves in order to emancipate themselves from their complicity in this history, in this distortion of 'the way' that Jesus taught.

The heart of Christian community is the Eucharist. Participation in the Body and Blood of Christ is a communion with the whole Christ: the crucified, exalted, and risen Lord and the body of believers. Eating the bread and drinking the cup involves something much deeper and more extensive than the ritual act of consuming the species. That something more is not created by those of us sharing in the bread and cup, but it must be done by us nonetheless. We women and men must do what we are being made: thus, there are social as well as sacramental consequences to the Eucharist.

To be one in Christ Jesus is to reject and repent of our bureaucratic and existential complicity in those decisions and systems that have authorized the humiliation and exploitation of Indian, African, and mestizo women and men, that have pressed them into despondency and gross poverty, that have subverted their struggle for self-determination. Political theology in the United States will promote a critical and authentic solidarity rooted in the memory of the suffering of the 'marginalized colored majority' of the Americas as gathered up in the suffering of Jesus. As Metz observes, the "faith of Christians is [to be] a praxis in history and society that is to be understood as hope in solidarity in the God of Jesus as the God of the living and the dead who calls all people to be subjects in the divine presence. . . ." ³³

Thesis Four: Insofar as Christianity was an agent of empire, theology was a crucial tool. The history of Christianity in the Americas renders the mediating function of theology even more difficult. Critical theologies from the perspectives of Indians, blacks, and mestizos will recover, critique, and engage cultural meanings and values that have been suppressed or co-opted under white supremacist rule. In their efforts to retrieve, interpret, inculturate, and transmit Christian faith, Indian, black, and mestizo theologies may be understood as irruptions of the Spirit. These theologies stand as forms of prophetic judgment on Christian witness and praxis of the past, the present, and the future. At the same time, Indian, black, and mestizo theologians must be humbly and self-critically attuned to their own cognitive, religious, and moral praxis, lest unconsciously they appropriate the attitudes, spirit, sensibility, and tools of domination. ³⁴

Any theological mediation between faith and culture must assume critical modes of discourse that meet not only exigencies of the social order, but that critique the ideologization of Christianity in the core beliefs of the dominating culture. Moreover, in its turn to the political, one of the questions theology cannot fail to ask regards a genealogy of both the structures of domination and Christianity's involvement with those structures. Two sets of further questions that political theology cannot ignore pertain to the destructive experience of being dominated and

the incriminating experience of being one who dominates or of being one who is complicit in and benefits from the domination of others. Two final and basic sets of inquiry for political theology engage human understanding or knowing and the moral relation between knowing and doing.

Thesis Five: Theology as political in the United States must be an exercise in eschatological hope, while rejecting and interrupting all tendencies toward any utopian or romantic scheme.

In *A Black Political Theology*, J. Deotis Roberts alludes to Sherwood Eddy's hypothesis that there are three dominant frameworks for understanding and organizing political life in American history. The first of these frameworks understands and organizes political life as the building of a new world in America under the spiritual ideal of the Kingdom of God. The second framework apprehends and sets up political life and institutions around the secular ideals of democracy—liberty, justice, security, common humanity—and is rooted in the Declaration of Independence. Later, this framework came to be called the 'American Dream.' The third framework grasps and constructs political life in economic terms. U.S. history, Roberts states, has been forged by the "interplay of these three forces." ³⁵

The *first* framework, which represents the essence of the Puritan social ideal, is captured in a 17th-century sermon by Governor John Winthrop. Winthrop laid out the ecclesial and social meanings of the covenant for which these travelers risked the waters of the Atlantic. He admonished his Puritan companions to live in justice and mercy, charity and peace with one another. And, above all, Winthrop exhorted them to remain in steadfast conformity to the covenant which they had entered into with God. If they would uphold God's laws and commandments, if they would remain faithful to the ordinances and articles that govern their living out their new work (in America), then "the Lord will be [their] God and delight to dwell among [them], as His own people, and will command a blessing upon [them] in all [their] ways. . . ." Moreover, these women and men were urged to consider themselves as exemplars, "as a city upon a hill." However, Winthrop warned, should they "deal falsely" with God and "so cause Him to withdraw His present help," they shall "be made a story and by-word through the world," they shall be shamed and cursed, until they "be consumed out of the good land whither [they] are going." ³⁶ Winthrop concluded his sermon by quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy:

There is now set before us life and good, death and evil, in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His ordinance and His laws and the articles of our covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied,

and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it³⁷

For the Puritans the divine plan was clear, the Bible was their guide in all things, and Indian land was theirs by “divine right” to improve, to cultivate, to tame.³⁸ Since these early English colonists understood themselves as God’s *chosen*, their responsibilities were evident. The Indians were to be *made* into Christians or, better, into Puritans so that they might be saved. And, if they saved the Indians, they would be saving Satan’s victims; if they destroyed the Indians, they would be destroying Satan’s followers. “Wherever the Indian opposed the Puritan, there Satan opposed God.”³⁹

The Declaration of Independence with its assertion of liberty, justice, security, and equality is the locus for the *second* framework for understanding and organizing U.S. political life. But despite the demands of the colonists for liberty, justice, and consent to government, David Brion Davis has suggested that “their rhetoric of freedom was functionally related to the existence and . . . continuation of Negro slavery.”⁴⁰ The economic and cultural prosperity that the colonists enjoyed came at the expense of the life and blood of the enslaved Africans. Freedom-loving Americans, it has been argued persuasively, “bought their independence with slave labor.”⁴¹

The structure of slavery in the United States excluded the enslaved Africans from participation in the body politic and denied them acceptance as human beings, thereby “deny[ing them] the moral competence” to become authentic, responsible human persons.⁴² Consider James Madison’s thesis: “Slaves are considered as property, not as persons . . . [T]he case of the slaves . . . is in truth a peculiar one. Let the compromising expedient of the constitution be mutually adopted which regards them as inhabitants, but as debased by servitude below the equal level of free inhabitants; which regards the slave as divested of two-fifths of the man.”⁴³ Only theoretically and ideally did the so-called ‘rights of man’ apply to the enslaved Africans. Even if the enslaved folk were considered human beings, “they were also property, and where the rights of man conflicted with the rights of property, property took precedence.”⁴⁴ Or ponder the now infamous declaration of U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger B. Taney regarding the Dred Scott Case (1857): the Negro “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” Thus, it would appear that in the United States, a perverse logic prevailed: barely human, not eligible for citizenship, the enslaved peoples, at once, served as instruments of labor and reproduction as well as capital. The enslaved African may have looked and walked, talked and wept, hoped and feared like a human, but only three-fifths of one.

If the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution effected no substantive moral and political change in the status of the enslaved Africans, neither did Emancipation. Tannenbaum writes: “The Emancipation may have legally freed the Negro, but it failed morally to free the white man, and by that failure it denied to the Negro the moral status requisite for effective legal freedom.”⁴⁵ So, the moral contradiction that slavery represented (i.e., the objectification and commodification of other human beings) coexisted with the emergence of the ‘characteristically American’ notions of political freedom, economic independence, personal autonomy, and individualism.

In the *third* framework, political life is understood and organized in economic terms. Selfish, acquisitive individualism, and gross materialism corrupted the ideals of liberty, justice, security, and equality. The American temptation was to surrender to “money standards of value inspired by sentiments and fictions of pre-established harmony, evolutionary optimism, automatic progress, and Manifest Destiny.”⁴⁶ The ‘American Dream’ in its economic deformation (i.e., the bigger and better house, car, etc.) is the contemporary manifestation of this framework. The seeds of its metamorphosis can be traced to the political theories of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and to the economic and moral accommodation of slavery in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Insofar as the individual was conceived “as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them . . . the individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as a part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself.” Ownership became a determinant of a person’s “actual freedom and actual prospect of realizing [one’s] full potential.”⁴⁷ Thus, the fullest expression of social relations is found in exchange—buying and selling; the protection and regulation of that exchange is calculus of politics. What a shift from the notion, albeit flawed, of society and politics in the thinking of Plato and Aristotle. What a vulgar, dangerous shift: freedom was to be associated with the market, with market values. What a vulgar, dangerous shift.

In 1838, to mark the bicentennial of New Haven, Connecticut, the minister of the First Church, the Reverend Leonard Bacon, wrote new words for the hymn, “O God, beneath thy guiding hand.”

O God, beneath thy guiding hand, / Our exiled fathers crossed
the sea; / And when they trod the wintry strand, / With prayer
and psalm they worshipped Thee /
Laws, freedom, truth, and faith in God / Came with those
exiles o’er the waves; / And where their pilgrim feet have trod,
/ The God they trusted guards their graves.

The beauty of these lyrics (and the lyrics of other similar hymns) is tainted by the calculated slaughter of thousands of Indian, African, and mestizo children, women, and men. 'White laws' reduced the Indians to gross dependency, the Africans to objects of property, and the mestizos to caricatures. 'White freedom' again and again pushed the Indians on to desiccated reservations, turned emancipation into immoral fiction, and circumscribed the aspirations of the mestizos. 'White truth' perverted treaties and assimilated Indian and Mexican lands and violated African bodies and self-identity. Indian, African, and mestizo peoples were mere obstacles to be moved about, subjugated, and eliminated, so that the white peoples might realize the kingdom of God.

Any future we plan or project must begin before the cross of Jesus. His presence is to be recognized in the suffering of Indians, blacks, and mestizos and their descendants; our future is realized in healing that suffering. Thus, the cross of Jesus calls us to conversion, to radical transformation of life. That cross teaches us that radical renovation or transformation of life is not something about which we speak, merely; rather, it is, despite consequences, that for which we struggle daily to live. For lived conversion of heart, mind, and action is not what someone else must do, but *who we must become*. So it is in our social dis-order, not some other, that racism, sexism, economic exploitation, homophobia obtain; it is our consciousness that is permeated with these disgraces, not someone else's. The cross of Jesus evokes our integrity; calls us to responsibility for one another; calls us to entrust our lives and our futures to the dangerous Jesus.

Conclusion

To take oppression as a point of departure for doing theology, is to advert, once again, to paradigm shift in theology (what Eduard Schillebeeckx has termed "theology *after* a Christian history of domination and victors"⁴⁸). Theology in this paradigm risks encounter and engagement with the dynamic purifying powers of God in history "even before we are completely liberated."⁴⁹ Thus, the incarnation, that is to say, the concrete, powerful, paradoxical, even scandalous engagement of God in history, changes forever our perception and reception of one another. Jesus of Nazareth forever changes our perception and reception of the human other, of humanity. For humanity is his concern, neither merely, nor incidentally; rather, humanity is his concern comprehensively, fully. It is for the full and complete realization of humanity, for our full and complete realization, that he gave his life. A political theology of the United States must mediate an integration of the natural and supernatural ends of human living, bringing out and confessing the continuity, the contingencies of those ends and adverting explicitly to those experiences, practices, and meanings that disclose the gift of grace. Such a theology must stand

squarely before the cross of Jesus, that most mysterious meeting place of grace and freedom. There is no more concrete example of the cost of self-transcending love than his cross. It is before this graced-cross that the praxis of the Christian community must always be judged. Here our pretense to personal innocence is exposed, here our political and economic neutrality is unmasked. Here the flaws and the potential of all human efforts and solutions to meet the problem of evil are laid bare.

The history of the Americas is a compelling reminder of the struggle against sin and evil. The history of the Americas is a compelling reminder that a just society is contingent—contingent upon the women and men who constitute it. When these women and men live so that the truth, intelligibility, goodness, and beauty of the social order is attractive, then so is the society they constitute. When these women and men respond freely and joyously to the gift of divine life and love, the gift of grace, then they and their social arrangements contest the reign of sin, the power of evil. For it is only through the gift of grace realized in human lives and hearts that we can meet the effects of sin with healing and creative solidarity. It is only through the gift of grace that we conform ourselves to God's great love for us and that love's intention for our Beatitude.

Let me end by recalling the motivation for this reflection: We are all there—brown, black, red, and white—in the eye of Our Lady of Guadalupe. She sees us: we are in her eye. What does she see? What has she seen? What will she see?

Endnotes

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²Theo Witvliet, *The Way of the Black Messiah: The Hermeneutical Challenge of Black Theology as a Theology of Liberation* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer Stone Books, 1987).

³The literature of theologies of liberation is quite extensive. What follows is a very small representative sample by country of work prior to 1985. *Latin America*: Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (1971; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983); José Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). *South Africa*: Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence, A Socio-ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), Takatso Mofokeng, *The Crucified Among the Crossbearers: Towards a Black Christology* (Uitgeversmaatschappij: J.J. Kok, 1983), Simon Maimela, *God's Creativity Through Law* (Pretoria: UNISA, 1984); *The United States*: James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Co., 1970), idem, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975); J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia: Lippincott); Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982); Vine Deloria, Jr., *God Is Red* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1973); Letty Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974).

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⁵Frederick Herzog, "Liberation Theology Begins at Home," *Christianity and Crisis* 34/8 (1974): 94–98; Peter Hodgson, *Children of Freedom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), idem, *New Birth of Freedom: A Theology of Bondage and Liberation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976); John Langan, "Liberation Theology in a Northern Context," *America* 140, 3 (January 27, 1979), 46–49; Marie Augusta Neale, *A Socio-Theology of Letting Go* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977); Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity With Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1982); and John A. Coleman, *An American Strategic Theology* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1982).

⁶See Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907); H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper Books, 1959); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons); Shailer Matthews, *The Atonement and the Social Process* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930).

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- ²⁰Eduardo Galeano, *Genesis: Memory of Fire*, vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 41–42.
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- ²³David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 67.
- ²⁴Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen* (1946; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 46.
- ²⁵Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (1953; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), xvii, 6.
- ²⁶Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1625; Glasgow, 1906), cited in Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 8–9.
- ²⁷Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen*, 47.
- ²⁸Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 90.
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- ³⁴Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, 1984), 110–113.
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- ³⁶John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," 83, in *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), ed. Perry Miller.
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- ⁴⁷C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (1962; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3.
- ⁴⁸Eduard Schillebeeckx, "The Role of History in What Is Called the New Paradigm," *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future*, ed., Hans Küng and David Tracy (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 317 [emphasis mine].
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