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Spaces Engaged and Transfigured: Alejandro García-Rivera's Journey from Little Stories to Cosmic Reconciliation

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It is an honor and privilege to provide these comments on the life and work of a truly remarkable theologian, Alejandro García-Rivera. He produced so many insights into such a range of areas within a period of time that was all too short. He was a doctoral student of mine, but more importantly, a valued colleague and a dear friend. The breadth of his theological vision was nothing short of astounding. Its depth was truly awesome. It will take us some years to be able to appreciate fully and to digest all he offered us over the nearly two decades of his career. While it would be difficult to give an overall assessment, what we can do here is explore some of the many facets of his thought, and seek out connections among them that came to intrigue him over the years. Perhaps too we might be able to thread together in some tentative fashion some of those ideas, so as to make a first sketch of what his legacy is for us.

The theme I have chosen is his fascination with spaces of different kinds—how he engaged them, and how in so doing he changed how we have come to think about them. In speaking of “space” in his theological work, I will be using that concept in all its variety, as I believe he did: physical space, interior space, social space, and cosmic space. Alex’s thought about space changed and developed through the course of time; by looking at those changes we can see how other theological concerns that occur time and again in his writings interacted with and illuminated those concepts of space. There is an almost harmonic quality to those reflections, like the change-ringing of church bells. I think exploring these harmonics will give us insight into important aspects of his thought.

There is another reason I wish to take up his understanding of space. In the last year or so of his life, he was much taken with the work on space and place by the Chinese-American human geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan. Although Alex had written extensively on space (and place) in his book, *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology* (2009),¹ Tuan’s work had opened new vistas for him. In the last six months of Alex’s life, he had initiated a conversation with me about our writing a book together (he said “a paper or a book,” but he had too

many ideas for a single paper). Although building a suitable anthropology to inhabit his cosmological vision was at the center of his ideas (he spoke of it as an “anthropodicy of beauty”), our conversations centered around concepts of space and place. It was, I believe, the next step after—or more deeply into—*The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology*. This is a conversation we were not able to complete. What I hope to do here is trace a trajectory of his thought up to those last months, and perhaps suggest where it may have further gone.

I will now examine four kinds of space which Alex explored, three in his published works, and the fourth that he was perhaps envisioning: the semiotic place of the subaltern, the interior space of the wound, the space and place of the garden, and the cosmic space of the final reconciliation.

THE SEMIOTIC SPACE OF THE SUBALTERN: THE “LITTLE STORIES”

Alex utilized the study of semiotics in his doctoral dissertation to explore the subaltern spaces created by the victims of the violent and unequal Encounter in the Americas, documented in history texts as the *Conquista*. Semiotics is a method that looks at the interactions of signs and meaning, and the various relationships they generate. Its roots lie in continental European linguistics of the first half of the twentieth century and the structuralism introduced by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. These interactions and network of relationships create a meaning-laden world, called by the Russian semiotician, Juri Lotman, a “semiosphere.”²

Alex saw in semiotics a way of entering the underside of the world that the *Conquista* created in the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Those who were conquered conjured up a subversive world under the noses of their Spanish conquerors. This underworld created unmasked ironies, asymmetries and absurdities that the conquerors thought reaffirmed their order and made their hegemony look like harmony. These were embodied in the Dominican lay brother³, Martín de Porres, who in his very being was a semiosphere of the

Conquista: born of an *hidalgo* father and an African mother who was a slave. Because of his mixed ancestry, he was consigned to the bottom of the social hierarchy. Although confined and constricted to the narrow space of the underside, he exhibited extraordinary powers of healing and communication. He was sought out by the *arriviste* aristocracy—even the Bishop of México—because of his healing powers, thereby subverting the hegemonic hierarchy of the Conquista. Martín de Porres even breached the barrier between the human and the animal world in his capacity to communicate with the animals. All the while, he was disregarded by the powerful in the Dominican Order and in the wider society. Even his canonization within the Catholic Church was delayed by nearly four hundred years, while his near-contemporary, Rose of Lima, attained the status of sainthood within fifty years of her death.

Alex made developments in semiotics itself, something that would become a hallmark of his work. He seemed unable to pick up a methodological tool without making significant improvements on it. For example, his image of the “mosaic” emerges from a description of a semiosphere. More importantly, however, he also showed its utility for exploring popular religion, the asymmetries of power, and the capacity of the subaltern to engage not only in resistance (still perhaps the leading category of power in subaltern theory), but also the subaltern’s capacity to generate a larger space in which a more comprehensive, generous sense of the human could unfold. Put simply, he showed not only how the “little stories” of the subaltern can challenge and subvert the “big stories” of the powerful, but also how those little stories create spaces where a deeper sense of humanity can be revealed. The theological anthropology that Alex would continue to develop over the ensuing years was also closely allied to a theology of sacrament, especially the Eucharist. Sacraments are, of course, themselves signs. The Eucharist, as a sign, points to the redeemed community moving into ever more intimate union with God, at the initiative of the suffering, yet risen, Christ.

The semiotic spaces that Alex opened in the “little stories” of San Martín would lead him to explore other spaces.

THE INTERIOR SPACE OF THE WOUND: THE PURSUIT OF BEAUTY

The quest for the space where the humanness of the human dwells led Alex to other kinds of space. It led

him in a special way to interiority. And a prime point of entry into that interiority was the wound. This he explored especially in *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (2003).⁴ There his explorations of aesthetics and the restoration of aesthetics to its proper place in theology met his unfolding anthropology. I do not intend to explore in detail either his aesthetics or his anthropology at this point, but rather the space he found to examine their connections.

Wounds are signs of disruption, of pain, of suffering, of woeful memory. Alex’s own experience as a Cuban exile, the discrimination he faced in his boyhood in Miami, the crisis in his career as a nuclear physicist that turned him to religion and eventually to theology, are all part of the story of his own woundedness. His entry into theology as a Latino theologian, embracing and exploring the marginality of the peoples called “Hispanic” or “Latino/as”—especially the popular religion that gave voice to their faith and their humanity—became the larger field out of which his subsequent insights would flow. But it was the wound, I believe, that for him provided a way into that space of interiority that gave him insight into the gift of a wounded people to the rest of humanity.

Wounds connote defeat, disfigurement, even ugliness. Yet the wound can be the portal to an even deeper ontology of the human. They can point to redemption, transfiguration, and beauty. They teach us about the twin concepts of intimacy and distance that can stake out the dimensions of our relations with others. They can also evoke compassion and sympathy that form what Alex called the “twin suspension lines of a religious aesthetic bridge that connects the human and the sacred.”⁵

It was to be a wounded innocence that came to intrigue him. It was inside the space of the wound, seen at first to be destructive, something to be shunned or erased, that innocence could emerge. Innocence was for him not primarily a naiveté, an immaturity, or ignorance, but rather an “openness to becoming more.” A wound then could be that portal into a deeper interiority, a deeper intuition of the human. Here Caravaggio’s “The Incredulity of St. Thomas” would become iconic. Christ’s guiding the finger of Thomas into the wound in Christ’s side is an invitation for Thomas to realize that, through wounds, genuine truth and authentic beauty can be revealed. For Alex, this image was more than illustrative of the truth of wounds and the beauty they could reveal. In a message in June of last year, he wrote how Caravaggio’s image was

helping him face the terror of his own contingency: that acknowledging and entering the wound of Christ could be a source of reconciliation for him of what his death would be.

The interiority of the wound led him also into the realms of solitude. His long relation with the Camaldolese Community in Big Sur opened him at once to solitude, but also the supreme connectedness of Creation that perhaps only solitude can reveal.

THE SPACE AND PLACE OF THE GARDEN: THEOLOGICAL COSMOLOGY

The third space in his thought I want to explore is the one he presented in his last book, *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology*. It is an extraordinary book in so many ways. It brings together his interests in religion and science, it constitutes a kind of rehabilitation of the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and it is a synthesis of many themes that preoccupied Alex over nearly twenty years. We spoke about what the book meant for him, a kind of coming together of his thought up to that point in time. The book is indeed a cosmology, in the sense that it tries to account for Creation as well as bring together so many theological themes. I recall pointing out to him that, like Teilhard, his cosmic vision downplayed the significance of evil. He acknowledged that to some extent, but no doubt it was his overpowering concept of beauty that made it impossible for him to push further on the concept of evil.

The space of the garden—a space that is cultivated, connected, and cosmographic—allowed him the room he needed to explore his further developments of anthropology, redemption, and cosmic reconciliation. The prototypical garden is of course the primeval Garden of Eden of the Book of Genesis. It is a place of cultivation: it is ordered. It is a place of connection: everything has its place. It is also cosmographic in the sense that it bespeaks a patterned quality of the entire universe.

I want to explore two concepts of space that play themselves out in *The Garden of God*: place and abundant life. In the book, he makes a deliberate move away from speaking of space, to speaking of place. Space for him was a neutral, abstract, even devised concept. Place, on the other hand, speaks of space that is indwelt, marked by a density of relationship, by beauty, and by truth. Place must be large enough to encompass the visible and the invisible, indeed the whole cosmos. It is a space in which

humanity and indeed all of creation is to dwell and to flourish. Place, he says at one point, engenders love and recognition of beauty, while place is “home,” where one can dwell with memory, with hope.

“Abundant life” became for Alex his working definition of salvation. Here again, the Garden is emblematic of a place where all can dwell in harmony and in the fullness of life. Here the experiences of marginalization and oppression are indeed overcome, not by configuring those marginalized and oppressed to the benefits of the powerful, but rather transfigured by the wondrous, luminous quality of their own particularity. They are transfigured, rather than configured.

Space, then, gives way to place in *The Garden of God*. But it is not so much a rejection of the concept of space, but a transfiguration of the idea. Place is where space becomes a dwelling place for beauty, and with it, truth and justice. It is the site of reconciliation.

THE COSMIC SPACE OF RECONCILIATION

The Garden of God represented a kind of *summa* of Alex's thought, presented not so much in an analytic as in an imaginative way. Alex could have walked the analytic trail, but the imaginative, aesthetic one allowed him to incorporate more of his many interests and insights.

In our final conversations and correspondence, Alex continued to explore themes that had engaged him through the years, especially beauty, salvation, and anthropology. One of the things that he proposed we work on together was what he was calling “anthropodicy”. He was focusing especially the relation of beauty, suffering, and the human, as *imago Dei* and *capax Dei*. It was the compelling question of seeing beauty in suffering—not as some form of masochism or some apology for or legitimation of innocent suffering, but whether we can see beauty in the agonized face of the suffering Christ and, concomitantly, in human suffering. What does suffering reveal of our *imago Dei* and our being *capax Dei*?

The two items I want to explore here, however, relate to the question of space in the final stage of his thinking. The first was his discovery of the human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's book, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (2001).⁶ What Tuan helped Alex see was that his juxtaposition of space and place was too dichotomizing: space and place were deeply interrelated. For Tuan, place is inhabited space, a space imbued with value, with meaning, with memory. Tuan gave him a new concept

about space: topophilia, or love of place. Tuan was not just interested in how people survive and adapt in a given place, but how it gives “sources of assurance and pleasure, objects of profound attachment and love.”⁷

This topophilia Alex saw as corresponding to his concept of Abundant Life and the importance of “living-with,” a quality he found in Hispanic/Latino/a popular religiosity. He linked this also to the segments of Walter Brueggemann’s *The Land* (1997),⁸ which he had cited in *The Garden of God*. Topophilia, I believe, was not so much replacing the “place” of the Garden as providing him a point of entry to explore its inner dynamics more thoughtfully. In a way, the categories that Tuan offered⁹ Alex are reminiscent of what the semiotics of space had done for him in studying the subaltern world of the Conquista. Where this would have eventually led him is hard to say.

The other item I want to note is how Alex was thinking about cosmic reconciliation, in other words, the fulfillment of cosmic space. As I have already noted, Caravaggio’s “The Incredulity of St. Thomas” was taking ever greater significance for him. In the painting it is as if Christ is forcing Thomas to touch Christ’s wounds. Alex had come to identify himself with St. Thomas in the painting. Here I can only quote Alex’s words:

This is me refusing to recognize my own contingency, even terrified by it. Yet little by little the image is conquering my terror. It recently has come to mean also an image of reconciliation, and I mean in a physical way. My body’s death will somehow be integrated into Christ’s cosmic body to be resurrected again. Thus resurrection has come to mean for me a kind of reconciliation with the cosmic Christ.¹⁰

He goes on to compare this insight to that of Karl Rahner’s on a theology of death, that at the death of those who have loved God, only the entire cosmos can be the *materia* for the *forma* of a soul that is so expanded by its union with God.¹¹ We assume, thus, a pan-cosmic body. Alex, at this point, found this idea of a pan-cosmic body inadequate. That to which we are conformed in death is not the cosmos, but the cosmic Christ “in whom all things are

held together.” So the final, cosmic space is not the cosmos itself, but the cosmic Christ. The cosmic liturgy, if you will, is thereby consummated.

He (and I) did not have an opportunity to develop this profound insight any further. But it remains for me the final image of Alex and his theology, dwelling in a space transfigured by the cosmic Christ.

CONCLUSION: SPACES ENGAGED AND TRANSFIGURED

As a theologian, Alex never saw his work and thought of it as conforming to a pre-organized plan that would be developed point by point. There is no simple linearity in his oeuvre. Yet in focusing on his use of space and place, one can detect a certain pattern, at some points more clear than at others. What might be most appropriate is to think of his work in terms of a poetic rather than an analytic project.

One might see such a pattern as this: In the first part of his career, Alex wanted to explore the constricted space of the subaltern, and found semiotics and its processes of signification creating symbolic spaces as a way to read the little stories of San Martín. In those stories, he found the spaces created by the subaltern, the subjugated, the colonized. These spaces were spaces of wounds: of harm and diminishment to human beings, but a harm that was responded to with a deep humanity of the victims. That discovery led him to aesthetics, the examination of the beauty being revealed through the portal of the wound. The space of that profound interiority pointed him in turn to the wide expanse of the beauty of the cosmos, symbolized and given space as “place” in the garden. And the prototypical Garden of Eden points to the cosmic dimension of all the space created by God. This is mediated for him especially through the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, himself both a scientist, a poet, and a mystic—not unlike Alex himself.

The central images that served as the points of semiotic density marking his journey—San Martín de Porres, the wound, the garden, the cosmos—reveal his search into the humanness of the human: “anthropodicy” as he came to call it. In the stories of San Martín, he searched out the world of the subaltern, the subjugated, the colonized. This was indeed a wound, one that he experienced in his own life and explored in the world of San Martín. But he saw wounds as more than ugliness or disfigurement. Wounds—especially the wounds of Christ—pointed from

disfigurement to transfiguration, where they explode into full cosmic display as the promise of abundant life.

In all of this, his sense of space—the disfigured space of trauma from wounds as well as the transfigured sites of redemption—followed a different path than much of the twentieth-century reflection on space by figures such as Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, or Henri Lefebvre. It is left to future scholars to see if connections can be made between his work and theirs. Where theirs may end in utopias, heterotopias, or constructions of everyday life, space as Alex came to see it is the site of a cosmic liturgy, where the paschal mystery of Christ is enacted so as to touch all of creation.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).
- 2 Juri Lotman, *Universe of Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).
- 3 *St. Martin de Porres: The Little Stories and the Semiotics of Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).
- 4 Alejandro García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegetown, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003).
- 5 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 6 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). I do not know to what extent Alex was utilizing the larger discussion of space that had been going on in Europe, and the literature it has created there. Much of it has to do with sacred space, and the spaces created by urbanization. For a recent overview of that literature, see Maaïke de Haardt, “De stad een heilige plaats? Theologische en religiewetenschappelijke overwegingen bij urbanisatie,” *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 51(2011), 352-370.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. xii. Quoted from an email message from Alex to me, June 5, 2010.
- 8 Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1997).
- 9 These categories included perception, attitude, value, and worldview.
- 10 Personal communication.
- 11 Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961).



Father Arthur Poulin, *Cypress by the Bay*, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 36", 2011