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The Marginalized in the Pandemic Crisis

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The spread of COVID-19 in late 2019 and 2020 has led to rapid public health, human, socio-economic, and political changes around the globe. I shall reflect on the political, socio-economic, and spatial descriptors known as 'center' and 'periphery,' which are frequently used by liberation theologians as they attempt to dislodge us from our complacent and oblivious location at the 'center.' Even in the intra- and post-pandemic worlds we risk remaining trapped within the central discourses of pandemic and missing the cues that invite us to return to peripheral spaces and learn from those who bear the full brunt of this global crisis.

Center and Periphery in Liberation Theology

The conceptualization of political, physical, and theological space as either 'central' or 'peripheral/peripheral' has been a staple of liberation theology since its genesis in the second half of the 20th Century. In *The Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutiérrez describes the creation of the center and the periphery and their relation to underdevelopment, global socio-economic disparity, and political tensions:

The underdevelopment of the poor countries, as an overall social fact, appears in its true light: as the historical by-product of the development of other countries. The dynamics of the capitalist economy lead to the establishment of a center and a periphery, simultaneously generating progress and growing wealth for the few and social imbalances, political tensions and poverty for the many. (1985:84)

Center and periphery are also physical and theological locations. This is elucidated in a short passage on the genesis of Latin American liberation theology by Mario I. Aguilar who notes that religious communities and their expatriate missionaries 'expressed their own search for a closer follow-up of the Gospel within a movement from their convents and their religious houses to the periphery, to the shanty towns and to places where they were most needed' (2010a:210). This was a movement towards both the physically peripheral location of the shanty towns, and the peripheral political, economic, and social contexts of those spaces.

Pedro Casaldáliga and José María Vigil give a Christological warrant for this physical aspect of marginality: 'He did not come into the world in general... but into the world of outcasts. He chose that social level: on the margins, among the oppressed, with the poor' (1994:86-7). Tied to this movement towards the periphery, the point of departure for liberation theologians becomes: 'the present life of the shanty towns and land struggles, the lack of basic amenities, the carelessness about the welfare of human persons, the death squads and the shattered lives of refugees' (Rowland 2007:2).

In recent decades, some of these theologians have criticized the selective focus of their predecessors on certain peripheries over others. According to Marcella Althaus-Reid (1952-2009), for example, 'Liberation Theology is a rural theology and the context provided by peasant communities has been privileged sometimes at the expense of the life of the urban poor' (2000:4-5). Althaus-Reid not only criticized the rural-centric nature of liberation theology, but also its exclusion of those who exist on the periphery due to their sexual orientations and/or gender. This suggests that 'Latin American theologians did not look for the new locations of God, of the poor, and of theology itself, but remained closely allied with a theology of strict human justice rather than the possibility of human diversity' (Aguilar 2010b:220-1).

Althaus-Reid challenged liberation theologians to recommit themselves to theologizing at the periphery, to physically walk in the barrios of Buenos Aires amongst the women lemon vendors and the indecent, and to theologize from those peripheral urban spaces with women and those who subvert sexual and gender codes (2000:2-6; 2004a:18-19). She not only asked theologians to relocate their theology, but also 'relocated' God. For example, in *The Queer God*, she described finding God in dark alleys, in the gay bar, and in the brothel (2003:4, 33-6, 75, 94-7). Aguilar has taken up this approach, asking about the place of God in the urban and transient space of the bus (Aguilar 2010b:219-27). These writers theorize an expanded and multiplicitous peripheral space (or spaces), which should inform the location and content of liberation theologies today.

The context of pandemic offers a chance to re-evaluate the categories of 'center' and 'periphery' and these categories simultaneously provide a framework to better understand the context of pandemic. Gutiérrez writes of a

periphery 'characterised by the premature and unjust death of many people' (2007:19). In a sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted everyone to a seemingly similar peripheral position, in which we too risk premature and, according to the efforts or lack thereof made by our political leaders, potentially unjust death.

The Entrenched Center in Pandemic Discourse

Although there are similarities between the context of the periphery of poverty and the context of pandemic, they are not necessarily congruent. The wealthy around the globe and the many of those living in the West (North America, Europe, Australasia, and parts of East Asia) may find themselves living within the context of pandemic, but spatially, geopolitically, and socio-economically their context is not peripheral. They experience only a dull mimicking of life at the margins; they are exposed to the possibility of untimely death, but only from a single source. On the other hand, the poor, and especially those who live in poverty in non-Western spaces, must contend with the possibility of the untimely death of themselves or their loved ones at any given time through the combinatory effects of poverty, the presence of multiple diseases and epidemics, and lack of food and water security.

Excluding those who live on the margins of our own societies, the majority of people in the West are free to respond to pandemic not as humans at the periphery, but wholly as humans positioned at the center. They can isolate themselves, systems are in place so that they can take time off work oftentimes with pay, they may have options to work from home, and they have sufficient access to food, water, medicine and medical care. These are luxuries that those at the periphery do not have. Those at the margins must continue to work, must forgo the possibility of isolation, and face the prospect and occurrence of death from numerous sources, since to do otherwise would make premature death an inevitability. While the context of pandemic allows those in the West to encounter some facets of human existence commonly experienced by those at the periphery (such as the prospect of untimely death), and despite anticipated economic hardships resulting from the pandemic, we more or less retain our political and socio-economic positions vis-à-vis our pre-pandemic centers and peripheries. Those of us who found ourselves at the margins prior to pandemic continue to be at the margins, just as those of us who were at the center continue to exist there.

Althaus-Reid asserts that the 'Margins are not margins except for colonial mentality' (2004b:106). In other words, the margins are 'peripheral illusory locations constructed to exhibit the power of the center... they are places to sequester the sexual, class, and economic casualties of center/edge ideologies' (Sprinkle 2009:79). It could be asserted that the periphery exists only in so far as the colonial and neo-colonial narratives of the center and the creators of these narratives will it into being.

Sprinkle notes that narratives of inclusion are often incorporated into the neo-colonial discourses of the center. Nevertheless, in the context of pandemic, as the old center seemingly repositions itself as a peripheral space through the political discourses of pandemic and associated media coverage that focus solely on spaces, sufferings, and deaths, that are entirely Western and 'Us,' even neo-colonial discourses of peripheral inclusion are absent. During the spring of 2020, if you placed your hand on a newspaper, turned on the televised news, listened to the most recent political broadcast, you would have found that the traditional, pre-pandemic narratives of peripheral inclusion and even the token stories of life in peripheral settings were absent. This changed to some extent following the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, when the media appeared to shift its focus onto the Black Lives Matter movement and simultaneously cleared the pages and the airwaves to focus on stories not related to COVID-19.

For a time at least, the periphery, although oft overlooked in the pre-pandemic world, became completely forgotten within the context of the early intra-pandemic world. Since the periphery is only ever defined vis-à-vis the center as a component of colonial and neo-colonial discourse, its absence in this discourse meant that it completely ceased to be. This non-periphery, the non-space where millions suffered and died in silence and continue to do so, constitutes the 'true' periphery of the intra- and post-pandemic worlds. Such a periphery is defined not as a part of colonial and neo-colonial discourse, but through its absence from these discourses, the absence of discourse, and the erasing of the existence of old peripheral spaces by those at the center. The center/periphery has not evaporated, but has been defined anew. There is a 'new' center grounded in the old. The new center is the pandemic, its context, the discourses that surround it, and our responses to it.

Finding the True Periphery

The discourses that surround COVID-19 are neo-colonial, multiplicitous, and duplicitous in nature. They provide the opportunity and means to scapegoat, Other, and discriminate against not only East Asians who are being blamed across the globe for the spread and outbreak of COVID-19, but also our international neighbors and immigrant populations within the borders of our own countries. Whilst this 'new' Yellow, Brown, Black, and dependent on context sometimes White Peril prevails, we will, according to the United Nations and its Secretary-General, António Guterres, 'come through this together' (2020).

Guterres asserts that we are at war, a sentiment echoed by world leaders such as Donald Trump (Cathey 2020) and Queen Elizabeth II (Holden 2020). As with any war, the wartime discourses become dominant, perhaps even all-encompassing, and voices of dissent and disunity, although not absent, are redacted from the official narrative. From March until the aforementioned

murder of George Floyd in May, media and political discourses related all to the pandemic. Explorations of poverty focused only on how the poor were made poorer by the pandemic (see for instance; Sumner et al. 2020). There was no coverage of race discrimination other than that which was produced by the pandemic. There was very little coverage of deaths with non-pandemic causes. In other words, the human experiences of suffering, discrimination, and death ceased to exist outside of the context of pandemic and its discourses. This subsuming of suffering and discrimination into the discourses of pandemic forces us to overlook and even perpetuate poverty, premature and unjust death, suffering, and discrimination at the 'true' periphery, since it inspires and strengthens collective action vis-à-vis ourselves, and collective inaction vis-à-vis the Other.

Althaus-Reid writes that discourses of the 'center' seek to hegemonically organize 'people's lifestyles with promises of salvation which exclude, for instance, economic salvation' (2001:32). Similarly, the discourse of pandemic offers potential routes to and promises of salvation from COVID-19, but not from other medical, economic, social, and political problems. Salvation is offered both through the potential development of medicines and vaccines by the scientific community, but also through our united action. Guterres writes that 'the spread of the virus will peak. Our economies will recover. Until then, we must act together to slow the spread of the virus and look after each other' (2020). Guterres's words indicate that the salvific goal is 'recovery' or in more direct language a return to the pre-pandemic status quo. The contradiction of the discourse of pandemic is thereby laid bare; we will reach salvation (we will recover) through our collective action, but such salvation (recovery) is limited only to the economic and socio-political institutions and systems adversely affected by the pandemic.

According to Guterres waging war on the virus and the attainment of salvation is not only the responsibility of nations and international organizations, but also of the individual (ibid.). In the intra-pandemic context, the individual is key in the outcome of the war on COVID-19 and key to salvation. She must isolate, and since her individual isolation is insufficient, she must chastise those who do not or are not able to isolate, for they too are an enemy who must be coerced into accepting the discourse of pandemic and to stand united against the virus. Thus, new terms such as COVIDIdiot and Coronavillain enter general usage (Phipps 2020), the media begins to report on issues of social shaming (Eiraku 2020), and the creation and perpetuation of discrimination against those who cannot isolate themselves due to circumstance comes to the fore. Once victorious the individual is likely to be forgotten as the war's victory becomes collective, a result of our supposed successful engagement in united warfare.

The discourses of pandemic mirror and extremify the center's pre-pandemic discourses, and since they promise the attainment of a salvation that does not extend beyond recovery, they do not provide the key for real change in the post-pandemic age. Once a war has reached conclusion wartime

discourses are redacted into collective memory, but wars do not cease to be. The most egregious aspect of the pandemic and its discourses is that once we have collectively recovered, once the virus is cured, and the problems associated with the context of pandemic have been resolved, we will likely continue to perpetuate a situation of suffering and untimely death in other countries as we have done for centuries.

At present nothing seems to indicate that those at the center will not collectively leave the poor to deal with outbreak after outbreak of this and other diseases once they have ensured their own security. Indeed, this is the reality of the past century of human existence, which has seen the center ignore or fail to collectively act, as we are called to do now, on multiple epidemics of cholera, dengue fever, influenza, measles, malaria, plague, smallpox, yellow fever, and other illnesses at the periphery. Even in the midst of this pandemic the poor are left to deal with not only the presence of COVID-19, but numerous other diseases. This is likely because the discourses of pandemic and the center that perpetuates them are not particularly concerned with the prevention of human death. Words associated with death and loss of life have rarely featured in Guterres's statements on COVID-19, for instance. (In his thirty-one statements on COVID-19 made between 13 March and 7 July 2020, death or dying was directly mentioned only seven times). Instead, the focus is placed on stemming the spread of the virus so that the world can return to its pre-pandemic political and socio-economic status quo. Instead, the focus is placed on stemming the spread of the virus so that the world can return to its pre-pandemic political and socio-economic status quo. Indeed, developments in the summer of 2020 saw policies of lockdown, isolation, and restrictions on travel replaced with policies that encouraged people to leave their houses and spend money in order to aid economic recovery and prosperity. The governments of the world are bluntly informing us that economic recovery and prosperity are more important than people's lives. Given all this, it could be argued that the discourses of pandemic are idolatrous, since people are sacrificed in the pursuit of the salvific goal of recovery and the discourses come to 'take priority over human life' (Petrella 2002:207).

Repositioning Theology

There is a risk that theologians position themselves within the parameters of the discourses of pandemic identifying the context of pandemic as a new peripheral space. We must be wary of becoming theologically trapped in this seemingly all-encompassing discourse. Following the work of Althaus-Reid and others we may be able to find new peripheral spaces where we can theologize in the context of pandemic. We must ask: can I theologize from the old people's homes as those left there lonely and forgotten die in their multitude? Can I theologize from the park which despite the yellow and black

tape banning people from using the climbing frame is still the haunt of the single mother and her children living next to it? Can I theologize in the shopping aisle as those at the center strip it of its food, masks, and alcoholic rubs, and the lone factory worker seeks to salvage something from the barren shelves to feed himself and his family for dinner? Can I theologize with the drag queens who have lost their income due to the pandemic and are now confined to their homes living off the last tins of beans? These are not new peripheries, they predate the pandemic and only now come to light as they become included in the center's discourse.

The hope that people will use their intra-pandemic experiences to turn towards the periphery is in tension with the discourses of pandemic which seek to limit people's opportunities to participate in the attainment of any form of salvation that extends beyond a return to the status quo. There are other spaces to which we must increasingly turn that do not even warrant a place in the center's discourses, spaces in which abject poverty, death, war, oppression, and disease remain daily realities. Consider the statistics on cholera, a disease against which people can be immunized and in which 80% of patients can be treated with the administration of oral rehydration salts. Caused by poor sanitation and a lack of clean drinking water cholera produces 3-5 million cases and 100,000-130,000 deaths per year, and is just one of numerous vaccinable or treatable diseases responsible for millions of premature deaths each year (see (World Health Organization 2008:2-3; 2010:119-8; Leisinger et al. 2012:3). These deaths are overlooked by the center simply because they occur in a peripheral space. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we find the marginal God dying as an unknown victim of cholera. Another world is possible, in order to get there, we cannot reduce the world and humanity's problems to the human, political, and socio-economic damage caused by COVID-19. Instead, we need more than ever to theologize from the world's multiple peripheries amongst, with, for and as the marginalized.

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