

Why Love so Thoroughly Crushed by Evil is Not Fully Extinguished¹

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I am flattered to be asked to respond to my colleague Matt Lundberg's excellent essay entitled "The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of Life." It is a masterful analysis and presentation of the development of Latin American liberation theology into a theology of martyrdom that raises several key challenges for theological construction in the North American context. Given the time constraints of our forum format, I will briefly state my three biggest concerns with Jon Sobrino's *martyrology* as presented in Matt's paper without discussing any single concern in great detail in the hopes of stimulating further conversation.

First, I am concerned about the risk of bifurcating theology from ethics when defining martyrdom for the present age. Sobrino distinguishes between *Jesuanic Martyrs*—those who willingly embrace a life of solidarity with the poor and oppressed in a struggle to overcome the forces of death (and in the process often losing their life)—and the *crucified people*—the great masses who are the anonymous victims of greed and repression, and who "do not actively give up their lives in the defense of the faith" (Sobrino 2003:132). Matt refines this typology further by distinguishing Sobrino's contemporary forms of martyrdom (which he calls *martyrdom of solidarity*) from the type of martyrdom prevalent in the early Church (which he classifies as *martyrdom of confession*): "It is for confessing Christ or for believing some piece of orthodox doctrine regarding Christ that a martyr of confession is killed." He then discusses three modern martyrs—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, and Oscar Romero—and concludes "these martyrs died not

¹Apologies to Cornel West for borrowing this beautiful phrase describing the tenacity of Christian faith in the face of great suffering and persecution as the title of my response.

simply on account of their confession of Christian faith or some aspect of doctrine. Rather, their deaths were the result of their solidarity with the oppressed and the decisions they made as a result.” I contend that the political acts of solidarity made by these three great men of the twentieth century were the direct result of their doctrinal commitments. Furthermore, I argue that in order to understand liberation as a properly theological concept—and not just a socio-political possibility—we must view liberation as the will of God. This means that the biblical narratives (as well as the church teachings derived from them) are suffused with the themes of liberation and God’s preferential option for the poor. To argue otherwise is to suggest that liberation is an extra-scriptural concept (perhaps derived from Marxism) and therefore not necessary for a proper understanding of the Christian faith. I explore this theme at great length in my dissertation, where I consider the emancipatory potential of doctrine over against the modern suspicion of tradition and doctrine. At the moment, however, I simply want to draw attention to the danger of using descriptive categories that isolate acts of solidarity from the act of confession: a concern voiced by Matt in the first part of his article but which I feel bears repeating.

Second, I share the concerns of some feminist and Womanist theologians that Jon Sobrino’s emphasis on redemptive suffering may actually impede historical liberation. The danger is that so strong an emphasis on martyrdom can lead to fetishism, making death and self-sacrifice objects of devotion separate from the acts of solidarity and confession that give the martyrs’ suffering its salvific meaning. Lundberg recognizes the ambiguity of redemptive suffering by citing the example of the early Church as a time when it became “increasingly difficult to differentiate between suicide and martyrdom.” Jon Sobrino is also aware of this possibility but insists that we must not interpret the recent emphasis on martyrdom as a change of direction in liberation theology. Instead, he argues that liberation has always implied the possibility of martyrdom and, more importantly, martyrdom cannot be understood apart from the liberation process.

It is not a matter of abandoning liberation in favor of martyrdom, nor yet of simply juxtaposing them. It is rather about complementarity and mutual clarification, because liberation is weakened if it is separated from the reality of martyrdom, and the reverse is also true. More concretely—and as a matter of principle—martyrdom has to be understood in its essential relation to liberation, both as the negative consequence of a liberation praxis,

and because it endows that praxis with the positive power of light and energy (Sobrino 2003:103).

Still, when Sobrino proclaims the theme of the “crucified people” he is asserting that the crucified people not only bear witness to Christ’s redemptive suffering but also *bring* salvation through their own suffering. This problematic assertion remains under-explored in Matt’s paper, and it warrants much discussion, but for the moment it is enough to draw our attention to it. Matt states that Sobrino’s two types of martyrdom of solidarity (Jesuanic martyrdom and the crucified people) must be understood analogically not univocally, but I remain unconvinced that Sobrino, given his words on the subject, understands contemporary forms of martyrdom this way: “This is the marrow of liberation theology. And what we want to stress now is that the crucified peoples themselves are bearers of salvation” (Sobrino 2003:160).

Finally, I am concerned about the inadequacy of the crucified people as theodicy. In many ways liberation theology is the stepchild of post-Holocaust political theology, as exemplified by the work of Johannes Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, and characterized by the question, “Whether and how it is possible to do theology after Auschwitz?” I agree with Cornel West when he describes Christianity as “first and foremost a theodicy, a triumphant account of good over evil” (West 2002: 35), a claim that resonates with Jon Sobrino’s constant reminder that theology address the overwhelming historical reality of innocent suffering in the present age. However, I find Sobrino’s attempt to give “meaning” to the death of the crucified people problematic because it suggests that, from the perspective of the doctrine of divine providence, God intends for these deaths to happen. This is most evident when he cites Ignacio Ellacuría’s definition of the crucified peoples as the “historical continuation of Yahweh’s servant” (Sobrino 2003:157). Ellacuría embraced the crucified people as the most urgent theological concept for our age because of what it tells us about God’s creation...namely, “creation has turned out badly for God” (Sobrino 2003:155). By this he means that whether or not one views the world from a Christian perspective it cannot be denied that the world is a place of great innocent suffering. Accordingly, Christian theology must reconcile the apparent contradiction between belief in a benevolent and all-powerful God and the existential reality of innocent suffering on such a grand scale. The appeal of liberation theology is that it takes seriously the suffering of the innocent by doing theology from the perspective of the crucified people, it rejects any attempt to understand

this suffering as the will of God, and it makes sense of this suffering by claiming that God makes a preferential option for the innocent victims in order to overturn the historical forces that perpetuate oppression, poverty, and death. The danger of emphasizing the passive martyrdom of the innocent masses over against the active martyrdom of the Jesuanic martyrs is that theology might lose its ethical imperative.

Friedrich Nietzsche, one of Christianity's most ardent critics, showed great insight when he described Christianity as a religion especially fitted to the oppressed. Yet, Nietzsche's caricature of the origin of Christianity as a slave revolt for which Paul and other "priests" provided a metaphysical foundation and superstructure, does not adequately account for the power of hope at the foot of the cross. While acknowledging the legitimacy of Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Christianity as an ideology of *ressentiment*, we cannot reduce the appeal of Christianity among the world's anonymous poor to this one cause. Christian faith has sustained hope against hope for two millennia. The central Christian mystery is how and why—in the words of Cornel West—"love so thoroughly crushed by evil forces is not fully extinguished" (West 2002:6). Sobrino's response is that contemporary martyrs—killed as a result of their work for liberation—are essential for understanding the cross of Jesus because their struggle reminds us that theology cannot make sense of Jesus' death without reference to his life's work and the content of his preaching. Ironically, Nietzsche illumines what Jon Sobrino means by a theology of liberation and martyrdom:

I go back, I tell the *genuine* history of Christianity. The very word "Christianity" is a misunderstanding: in truth, there was only *one* Christian, and he died on the cross...It is false to the point of nonsense to find the mark of the Christian in a "faith," for instance, in the faith in redemption through Christ: only Christian *practice*, a life such as he *lived* who died on the cross, is Christian (Nietzsche 1954:612).

Here I find an accurate description of Christian martyrdom but remain unconvinced that the concept of the crucified people—especially when applied to those who are not engaged in the work of liberation but are merely the victims of repression—is truly analogous to the martyrdom of Christ or of the Jesuanic martyrs primarily because it lacks moral agency. Yes, the suffering of the crucified people is the awful reality that a prophetic Christianity seeks to expose and positively transform, but this is a far cry from claiming

that their suffering is itself salvific or liberating. It is horrible. It is unspeakable. But it is not the continuation of God's ongoing work of salvation.

CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

In my opinion, the 2003 Fall Forum stimulated some great conversation and challenged all participants to re-think their views on the implications of taking up the cross and following Christ (Matthew 10:37-39). Personally, Matt Lundberg renewed my appreciation for Jon Sobrino's work, especially the need to adapt his views on martyrdom for the North American context. Sobrino challenges the church to recognize God's action in the world *wherever* we find the work of liberation. The church, while a flawed human institution always in need of reformation and renewal, is nonetheless the kingdom of God in our midst, or more accurately, an alternative community that stands in contrast to the world in order to model a new way of being community grounded in relationships of inclusion, mutuality, and reconciliation. However, traditional understandings of the nature and mission of the church—even when grounded in Biblical images of servanthood—have rarely done justice to the radical call of the Gospel. An ecclesiology informed by Jon Sobrino's martyrology is characterized by increased solidarity with our "neighbors," defined as the poor and marginalized (Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 10:25-37). After all, if Christ is present among the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the imprisoned (Matthew 25:31-46), the church must also be present among the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the imprisoned. Amen.

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