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John Bartholomew
Denison University

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Sowing with Faith: Immanence and Eternality in the Liberation of Nature

John Bartholomew

Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child: for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith the Lord.

Isaiah 54:1

In blackened seas and in crumbling hillsides, in razed forests and in the dull gaze of starving children, it is clear that humanity is in the process of salting the earth. As the climate changes and as ecosystems are irrevocably altered or destroyed, as the derailed train of first-world consumption continues steaming into the wilderness, and as short-sighted global economic policy continues to ignore issues of sustainability, we are supposedly refashioning the world in the name of our vision, and that vision appears to be unwittingly barren. In remaking the world without adequately caring for it, and in failing to fully address human and natural degradation, we oppress not only the environment but also ourselves. As a part and participating member of the dominant economic order, I accept culpability. I know the guilt and powerlessness associated with feeling impotent to operate outside the current system and I acknowledge my participation in an economy that is almost certainly depriving others in the present and the future. However, my burgeoning faith has provided the means to name oppression, the strength to work to renounce it, and the tradition and grace to accept radical responsibility. For me, to live to abolish oppression is to live for God, and in doing so living for and with the oppressed, whether it be a starving Ugandan, a desperate middle-class American looking for a way out, or a dying ecosystem. It means advocating the acknowledgement of my radical connection to and dependence in others across temporal bonds. In order to construct a valid theology of liberation, I must embrace all of humanity and reality as God embraces all of creation through
salvation. I thus initiate the infinite movement towards an affirmation of the goodness of the entirety of existence.

Oppression can be construed as a negation of this goodness of existence. Paulo Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, states that dehumanization and oppression are the “distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human” (Freire 44). Actions, words and systems that dehumanize and devalue persons, such as violence, rape, racial or sexual discrimination, and the deprivation of opportunity that follows gross economic inequality, all constitute oppression against humanity. Similarly, one can extend this definition of oppression to the entirety of God’s creation, manifested in nature. Violence and despoilment of nature, gross misuses of resources that breach limits of sustainability and damage ecosystems, and the failure to recognize the intrinsic good of all of nature can be used as a framework of examples that embody the oppression of nature. To oppress and to thus deny freedom and the good of creation is to deny not only the goodness of reality but to therefore also deny the goodness of God’s creation. The answer to violence against humanity and nature, and thus against the creative work of God, is liberation.

The creation of freedom in the context of a theology of liberation is the synthesis of action and words that fulfills duty to and faith in God, and thus satisfies the ontological vocation of becoming more fully human in and with God. Gustavo Gutierrez, in *Theology of Liberation*, declares liberation to be the fulfilled “aspirations of the oppressed peoples and social classes” (Gutierrez 24), the full humanization of “persons who make themselves throughout their life and throughout history” (Gutierrez 24) as well as the ability to live in communion with and through Christ, which is “the basis for all human fellowship” (Gutierrez 25). In including nature in this dialogue of liberation, I attest to the fact that nature is the context in which humanization takes place, and that communion through Christ can and does include communion through nature. To be a Christian and to confess faith in a beneficial and good reality, a historical God that acts for freedom and for humanization, and in the salvific work and body of Christ that symbolizes God nodding in affirmation at the goodness of humanity and creation, necessitates working for liberation in order to live the spoken faith. In recognizing the awesomely transcendent and intimately indwelling God one must also recognize the need for freedom in not only all persons, but in all creation. To act against or to oppress creation, or nature, is to practice unfaith. Accepting the enormous historical task of liberation is surely rigorous and demanding; it also answers what Albert Camus considers
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The essential question of life: “Judging whether life is or is not worth living” (Camus 3). The answer to this plea in the context of faith in a liberating God is a clear yes: to work for freedom, humanization, and the liberation of nature through and in God is to accept the end that reality is good.

The implications of this statement have been and will continue to be revelatory and radical. To name a faith of liberation is to affirm and humanize others, and in doing so confess a living faith in God, in the context of history. To do this, one must confirm the whole of God and Her work, and to declare the radically relational and contextual manner in which one exists. Therefore one must construct a personal theology that is what Gutierrez says is an “understanding of the faith” (Gutierrez 3) and that is, as Sallie McFague states in Life Abundant, “necessarily metaphorical” (McFague 30). This implies that there is a desperate grasping for reason and truth in the act of affirmation of faith in God and the goodness of reality, yet also an acknowledgment this movement towards faith is relational, individually contextual, and invariably bound by the limits of language. The limits and failings of human perception demand some subjectivity in professing objective truth. To speak an individually true theology is to recognize that “subjectivity and objectivity [are] in constant dialectical relationship” (Freire 50), bound by a constant movement towards the objective truth of God but also by human frailty and failings. Theology becomes a semblance of a conversation between the Truth and the constant straining human attempt to speak and live it.

The first feeble assertion I make is that God is not “merely” transcendent but also radically immanent in all of reality. To profess otherwise is to assert that there is reality outside of God, thereby limiting His necessary infiniteness. This immanence means God is the source of “all love, all good in and with and for everything, at all times and places...This God is never absent. If this God were absent, nothing else could be present: everything would collapse and disappear, for God is being-itself” (McFague 149). The transcendence of God, the existence of God above and outside of the material universe, is what forges the existence of all reality as relational to God. For humanity, the term “nature,” including our historical, societal, and environmental contexts, can be substituted for all of reality. Nature thus envelops not only gleaming oceans and skies, but also the individual experience and self, the community, the structures wrought and constructed by societies, the dusty and obscured past of humanity, and the cloudy future. Nature defined in this way becomes far more inclusive and representative of the infinite scope of God’s creation. An imma-
nent and relational God has radical implications for our every interaction with nature. When we oppress, dehumanize, or negate the value or freedom of another human being, when we engage in an environmentally destructive activity that causes the detriment of others, and when we deny the intrinsic value of the environment, it is, in a very real way, speaking against the indwelling God. We cannot live faithfully to a God of love if we express in our actions nothing but hatred for a large part of nature.

This radical interconnectedness mirrors our own dependent reality. The self we each profess cannot be conceived of outside of our relationships, our interactions with the world, the community we relate in, the structures we live within, the entirety of our ever-growing history, and overarching nature. This shifting mesh of relationships means we can understand “that reality is really a process, undergoing constant transformation” (Freire 75). It also necessitates that we think of ourselves in relational terms, as Paul King and David Woodyard do in Liberating Nature when they claim that “The reality is that ‘nothing exists outside of relationships’” (King & Woodyard 35). In order to affirm ourselves and affirm our relation to God, we must also act in such a manner as to exalt God in others; past, present, and future. Each individual becomes a beacon of creation, with limitless filaments of relationships flowing out and connecting to the rest of nature and time. This interconnectedness demands that our conditions are intimately bound together. Gustavo Gutierrez draws upon Dietrich Bonhoeffer in affirming the entwined nature of the human condition. He quotes, “‘freedom is not something a man has for himself but something he has for others…It is not a possession, a presence, an object….but a relationship and nothing else. In truth, freedom is a relationship between two persons. Being free means ‘being free for the other,’ because the other has bound me to him. Only in relationship with the other am I free’” (Gutierrez 24). Without the context of nature and history and humanity embedded within nature, there is simply nothing to be free from and nothing to be free for.

Therefore, the humanizing process of becoming free or enabling freedom “cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity” (Freire 85). This holds especially true with nature. Freedom cannot be conceived of outside of nature; not only are we nature, but our entire context consists of nature. Gutierrez asserts, “Our conversion to the Lord implies [a] conversion to the neighbor” (Gutierrez 118). Given the delicate entanglement of the human condition in the fabric of nature, this conversion to the neighbor entails a conversion to nature as well. We cannot reach the neighbor
and act in love if we despoil the medium we are connecting with them through. This conversion also necessitates crossing temporal bonds, and in doing so recognizing God’s eternality.

Divine eternality and the desire for justice are both represented in the historical intervention of God, and the hope for the future gained through Christ. The act of doing justice not only avows His intervention in the liberating process in the past and present, but also declares that the process of liberation entails a concern for the future. Gutierrez rightfully claims that, “The Biblical God is close to human beings, a God of communion with and commitment to human beings. The active presence of God in the midst of the people is a part of the oldest and most enduring Biblical promises” (Gutierrez 106). In Her covenant with the Jewish people, exemplified by the Exodus, in His insistent clarion call for justice to the poor, and in Her full incarnation and immersion in human reality in the being of Christ, God has been historically present as an agent for change and liberation. In the sacrifice of Christ, liberating all of creation from the wages of sin, the demand for freedom “extends to all peoples of the earth...it is a presence which embraces the whole person” (Gutierrez 109). The Cross is a ripple across and beyond time, extending to all peoples, places, and creations, and transcending our meager boundaries. At the same time the redemption and ultimate selflessness the Cross demonstrates permeates our reality. To acknowledge, as Cynthia Moe-Lobeda does in Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God, that in Christ “The finite bears the infinite” (Moe-Lobeda 83) is to acknowledge the radical commitment of God in history and to nature. King and Woodyard affirm this when they write, “When Jesus takes on our reality, both nature and history are invaded. That he becomes one of us means he becomes one with the natural order simultaneously” (King & Woodyard 102). The universal intentions of salvation further affirm God’s relation with all of nature and our need to be faithful to an ever-present God.

It is clear from the staggering mountain of evidence, manifested in corrosive acid rain, coal factories belching mercury into the atmosphere, razed forests and devastated ecosystems, and a massive underclass beset by constant hunger and violence, that the current order is not faithful to God. Globalization itself is neither a good or bad thing; however, its current form, loaded with valuations that deny interconnectedness and an immanent God, is clearly a vehicle for oppression. Globalization as constructed is founded on the ideals of neo-classical economics. The definition of being human in a neo-classical
model entails that society is built from “each individual knowing his or her own self-interest and acting individually in such a fashion as to best attain that self-interest” (Weaver & Jameson 7). Moe-Lobeda asserts that this means “human beings are essentially autonomous rational subjects rather than beings-in-community, competitive rather than cooperative, and consumeristic rather than spiritual” (Moe-Lobeda 59). This ideology denies radical interdependence and thus denies the relational aspect between God and person. Good is defined in strictly material terms, and the individual is exalted above rather than connected in love with the community. Herman Daly, in Beyond Growth, adds to this that what has been ignored in the neo-classical model is “any serious concern for distribution, and any recognition whatsoever of biophysical constraints on economic growth” (Daly 159). This economic ideology is so prevalent and pervasive that there are nearly no critiques left, and, for many people, no other visible available options. Because of the dominance of the neo-classical model of globalization, “Transgressive choice [has become] impossible, either perceived of as impossible or actually impossible” (Moe-Lobeda 67). An individualist ethic has become embedded in our social reality, and our constructed economic systems are now often seen as self-extant as opposed to dependent upon us. Humanity thus exists in a paradigm in which “to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor” (Freire 48). This lack of choice represents a lack of freedom, and given the dominant economic systems and consumptive ethic, this lack of freedom delineates a lack of humanity. The negative effects of this acceptance of self-evident individualism, disconnectedness, and an economic system that generates inequality and environmental degradation, affect more of the world than ever before because of their globalized nature. By their oppressing effects they deny freedom to a larger and larger portion of God’s creation. Instead of rejoicing in the connection of peoples, places, and cultures, we have been blindly advancing an ethos of consumerist isolation, hypocritically ignoring the global means which have enabled increased consumption and failing to proclaim an ideology that promotes better quality, not quantity of life. To proclaim one’s individuality while allowing others to wallow in poverty and destitution, and to annunciate the value of self while destroying the encompassing nature that defines the self, is to engage in sin and self-negation. The sin of failing to recognize oneself as an individual-in-community and acting in accordance, of failing to love others as one loves God, is to practice “unfaith—failing to trust God for all and to attribute all to God” (Moe-Lobeda 79). The ideological underpinnings of our current economic
system are in conflict with the act of liberation and the expansive, infinite love of God.

But they do not have to be. The market economy affords many benefits; it affirms freedom of choice, frequently promotes responsive innovation, and aims “to serve allocative efficiency” (Daly 32). However, as currently modeled, it fails to address issues of fair distribution (and thus justice), scale, sustainability, and environmental effects of throughput, or waste. To create a market economy that is cohesive with faith in God, we must reorient our values and our systemic mechanisms to reflect a constant striving towards freedom for all. The market should thus not be seen as a system outside of human control and construction, nor should the desire for physical well-being that drives the market be determined by strictly individual agents and terms. Instead, the market should be viewed as a component inside of society, and one that aims to recognize radical dependency and fulfills the greatest good.

Theology can have much to say in regards to this. To affirm the existence of a God that is radically connected and in all of time and creation necessitates humanity cares for the future, as God does. The ontological vocation of humanity grows to include not only liberation from oppression and dehumanization in the present, but ensuring the continued freedom of future generations, including material and economic freedom. In addition, a properly scaled and sustainable economy also permits the acknowledgement of the value of nature outside of its potential for human utility. This means we must bring the economy to a level which “can develop, but cannot grow” (Daly 31). A sustainable economy demands valuing improvement in qualitative, not quantitative terms, and stresses addressing the issue of scale. To provide for future generations equal services of not only non-renewable raw materials but also ensuring the sustainable absorptive capacity of the biosphere and continued regenerative capacity of renewable resources means building regulatory institutions that ensure recognition of the costs of throughput and enable communal decisions regarding how to limit said throughput. The collective desire to limit excessive waste and consumption can be nurtured by a community of faith that values nature intrinsically as a part of God’s creation, and also recognizes humanity as an embedded part of nature.

The question of distribution must also be more addressed in a market economy that enables the fulfillment of justice. A distributive system that ensures subsistence and basic needs such as health care and education clearly enables a fuller sense of humanization in individuals, and recognizes the in-
Intrinsic worth of each person and of the community they exist in. In more pragmatic terms, “extreme inequality is seen as an injustice that fuels societal discord” (King & Woodyard 53), thus contributing to violence and oppression. To ensure liberation from violence and oppressive concentrations of power, a fair distributive system that contains some inequalities that recognize the value of individual contributions is needed. Perhaps the best way to enact this is to construct a fair progressive tax system that is discretely gradated. For those on the lowest economic rungs, credits for child and health care and augmentations to income gleaned from taxes on the more well-to-do would both ensure the fulfillment of basic needs and opportunity and provide incentive to work by not totally replacing labor income.

These limitations on throughput and inequality and injustice do not entirely change the basis of a market economy. Instead, they shift the focus. In this new economy, “If the society is trying to maximize overall sustainable well-being, then the individual will be trying to maximize personal sustainable well-being” (Daly 107). This still allows for freedom of choice, but also acknowledges interrelatedness.

The current economic order which refutes community and depresses the opportunity of those both in the present and in the future to fully enjoy the abundance of God's creation denies this essential interrelatedness. As such, in both its consequences, emblemized in environmental degradation and human poverty, and in its philosophical foundations of disconnected individualism, it clearly advances oppression. In order to introduce justice into systems so insidiously entwined within the fabric of society, overarching cultural change is necessary. This means enacting not only personal lifestyle change that refutes the selfish turning-in of sin, but also working actively towards systemic change to diminish and eliminate oppressive structures. Theology can be a source of this, developed in and through communities of faith seeking to love all of creation and therefore all of God. The construction of an economic order that is just to both the present and the future and that assumes the goodness of nature is paramount to the strengthening the sinews and aching bones of the oppressed body of creation. Acting to create a systemic web that affirms nature, and thus humanity within the context of a Liberation theology necessitates acknowledging radical dependence in reality and the goodness of the immanent and relational God. In an interconnected natural order beset by oppression, the effects of desolation resonate throughout, shaking the twine that binds us. Dismantling the mechanistic constructions of oppression and creating freedom in a
Christian context requires faith to and in a liberating God, exemplified in the salvation manifest in Christ. To cry out and verbalize a faith that refutes isolation, revels in love for all others, and proclaims the worthiness of all of God’s creation is to begin a path of praise and unification with the will of God, and to announce the righteousness of existence.

Works Cited


