Listening and engaging the voices from the margins

On January 3, 2013, the bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America met on the Caribbean Island of Puerto Rico for their annual bishops’ academy. For the occasion they invited Luis Rivera Pagán, a prominent church historian, missiologist, and postcolonial theorist, to lecture on the topic “Listening and Engaging the Voices from the Margins: Postcolonial Observations from the Caribbean.” He took the invitation to heart and shared with the bishops not just the letter but also the spirit of postcolonial theology. Sharing with the bishops the irony latent in their request, he told them:

If we are going to converse seriously about postcolonial perspectives for theology and the church in the public square, let us first be aware of the delightful irony that 1, a colonized subject, have been invited to talk about “religion, politics, and empire, from the margins” to citizens of the empire that rules over my people! Maybe this is another occasion to reiterate Gayatri Spivak’s famous query, “can the subaltern speak?” A question that Edward Said dared to answer affirmatively: “Indeed, the subaltern can speak, as the history of liberation movements in the twentieth century eloquently attests.”

After two lectures on the minutiae of postcolonial and liberation theologies, Rivera Pagán concluded his decolonial intervention with the bishops by mirroring back to them the profound words written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer from his prison cell. Rivera Pagán said:

The essential imperative might be to remember and radicalize the prophetic words written by the imprisoned Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a note surreptitiously preserved by his friend Eberhard Bethge: “We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer.”

Listening and engaging the voices from the margins is not just a fad of contemporary theology but rather an evangelical imperative.

The Journal of Lutheran Ethics

The Journal of Lutheran Ethics (JLE) is an online monthly journal of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It focuses on issues of theological ethics, however, from a purposefully broad perspective. By design it inhabits the interstice between the academy (or seminary) and the local congregation, as well as other sites where intentional ministry takes place. The JLE website describes the way in which the journal fits into the larger ministry of the church: JLE is published by the Theological Discernment Team in the Office of the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Church in America.


Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), part of the stud-
ies function of their work. It operates out of the ELCA's
confessional commitments and seeks to enhance this
church's life and mission in society by offering a forum to
clarify, deepen, and enliven Lutheran ethics. It contributes
to the ELCA by promoting reasonable and constructive
dialogue between faithful people, aspiring to speak in
love while seeking understanding.3

The JLE is then ideally situated to be that place where the
listening and engaging the margins can take place. The guiding
question leading the type of ethical reflection done in the journal
has been summarized by its previous editor, James Echols, in the
motto: “How, then, shall we live?” Being saved by grace through
faith and finding ourselves in the midst of a world marked by
brokenness, suffering, and evil, how then shall we live the reality
of the gospel? But how can we even begin to answer that question
without seriously engaging in conversation with “the outcast, the
suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the re-
viled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer,”4 those
whom Bonhoeffer discovered in his own journey to the margins
of Nazi Germany?

Those voices are marginalized and oppressed but are not
stupid or dumb. They can speak and often do so eloquently and
powerfully, even if they often remain unheard and unheeded by
those in the center. Their voices can be like gusts of transforma-
tion and renewal for the “church’s life and mission in society.”
That was the case with the bishops’ engagement with a powerful
voice from the (colonial) margins, and that has been the case in
Lutheran theology by its engagement with voices from the global
south. This can be seen especially in the way the missiology un-
dergirding the global ministries of the ELCA has shifted toward
a model of accompaniment, born out of theological and pastoral
engagement with Latin American liberation theologies. Many
seminaries and divinity schools in the United States and abroad
also have made admirable efforts in inviting and developing voices
from the margins. The voice behind this essay is a living testimony
of that. However, there remains the need to have forums where
those voices can actually engage in serious theological and ethical
reflection in conversation with other voices, including those from
the center. The JLE can be one such forum.

From soliloquy to conversation

The dawn of the twenty-first century has been marked by the
twilight of the theologian as a lonely genius chiseling volume after
volume of enigmatic conundrums generously sprinkled with Latin,
German, and French formulations, and the occasional Greek and
Hebrew. As much as we have learned and benefited from those

5.  See: Gabriela Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Nieman,
Carmen González, and Angela P. Harris, eds., Presumed Incompetent:
The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia (Boulder:

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efforts, it is now clear that the works thus produced are incurably
one-sided and suffer from a sort of intellectual myopia that mis-
takes the deep (and valid) insights of one’s particular community
for those of the entire human community.5 Hence the pervasive
and blatant disregard in much of modern Western philosophy and
theology to the contributions that were being made all along by
the voices in the margins.6 A dizzying but welcomed feature of
contemporary theological and ethical reflection is that soliloquy is
slowly being replaced by polyphony. Now we need to move from
a cacophonous polyphony to a rich conversation.

Conversation is a way of doing theology and ethics that
takes the other seriously and not just as a complement to one’s
own (normative) thinking or as a source for an exotic quotation
to intrigue one’s readers. A recent attempt that comes close to a
conversational approach to theology is the book Transformative
Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives.8
The book is an intellectually delicious smorgasbord of theological
insights that includes many voices from the various margins that
coalesce in the lived realities of the women of the church. The
genius of the book is that it was born out of actual conversations
among the authors. Unfortunately, the format of a book means
that the conversations have come to a close by the time they enter
the world of the reader. The advent of online journals, such as the

6.  See: Otto Maduro, An(other) Invitation to Epistemological
Humility: Notes Toward a Self-Critical Approach to Counter-Knowl-
edges,” in Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, Decolonizing
Epistemologies: Latinx/o Theology and Philosophy (New York: Fordham
7.  For incisive analyses of this malady and masterful efforts to
uncover and recover marginalized voices from different margins, see
Enrique Dussel, Ética de la liberación en la Edad de la globalización y
de la exclusión, 6th edition (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2009); Rosemary
Radford Ruether, (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); James
H. Cone, The Cross and the Lynching Tree (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2012);
and Marcela Althaus-Reid, Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions
in Sex, Gender and Politics (New York: Routledge, 2000).
8.  Mary J. Streufert, ed., Transformative Lutheran Theologies:
Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives (Minneapolis: Fortress,
2010).
JLE means at least potentiality that the conversations can continue beyond the printed page without loosing their theological depth and intellectual acuity.

My hope for the JLE is that it can serve as a place where actual conversations with theological depth and intellectual acuity can take place in our church, a place where the voices from the margins cannot just be heard and engaged but also nurtured, nourished, and heeded. It is a desire for the margins to come to the center, neither to reward marginal voices (as a kind of ecclesial affirmative action) nor to entertain mainline listeners, but rather to deconstruct the center-margin dichotomy and re-invent (or reform!) the church as a pentecostal polyphony of mutually enriching voices and perspectives, resonating with the power and love of the Spirit.

Furthermore, my hope would be to see a process designed for carefully mediated conversations, where a plurality of voices from the center and the margins (and those in between) can engage each other in theological and ethical conversation on specific topics or issues directly relevant to the life and mission of the church on its different levels (grassroots, synods, churchwide, global). These conversations have to be curated to ensure that they remain conversations and do not become either echo chambers for a singular viewpoint or a scholarly screaming match. Perhaps this might seem unrealistic. In my current position as Interim Editor, in a way I am here creating an agenda for someone else to carry out. Because the promise of Lutheran diversity in theology and ethics is great, the JLE can be a place where we can discern together “how, then, shall we live” into the future that God is calling us to become as the church of Jesus Christ.