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# From Monologues to Conversations: Reflections on the Future of the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*

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## 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 I, 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."<sup>1</sup>

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

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1. Luis Rivera Pagán, "Listening and Engaging the Voices from the Margins: Postcolonial Observations from the Caribbean," in Luis Rivera Pagán, *Essays from the Margins* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014), 47.

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the perspective of those who suffer."<sup>2</sup>

Listening and engaging the voices from the margins is not just a fad of contemporary theology but rather an evangelical imperative. We must pay attention to the margins because we are compelled by the demands of love and by the explicit command of Christ (Matt 25:31–46). However, listening and engaging the voices from the margins does not just satisfy the needs of those on the margins; it also satisfies a need of those in the center. Without the voices from the margins the theological and ethical reflection of the church is incomplete. The voices and perspectives from the margins can be a powerful corrective against the subtle distortions of theology by ideologies of nation, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. To listen and engage the voices from the margins should then be an intrinsic part of theological and ethical methodology. The contention of this article is that the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* can be a privileged locus where such engagement can take place.

## 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  
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2. Luis Rivera Pagán, "God the Liberator," in *ibid.*, 83; The quote is from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Eberhard Bethge, ed. (London: Folio Society, 2000), 16.

Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), part of the studies 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer,"<sup>4</sup> those whom Bonhoeffer discovered in his own journey to the margins of Nazi Germany?

Those voices are marginalized and oppressed but are not stupid<sup>5</sup> 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 transformation 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 undergirding 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

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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 mistakes the deep (and valid) insights of one's particular community for those of the entire human community.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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*.<sup>8</sup> 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-Knowledges," in Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latino Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 87–103.

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).

3. <http://www.elca.org/JLE/Pages/About>, October 17, 2015.

4. Rivera Pagán, "God the Liberator," 83.

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: University Press of Colorado, 2012).

*JLE* means at least potentiality that the conversations can continue beyond the printed page without losing 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

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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.