Prophetic voice and human liberation
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"Someone, me kneeling: I tore my clothes
And I filled my head with ashes.
I cry for that homeland that I have never had,
The homeland that builds anguish in the desert."
Rosario Castellanos "Wailing Wall"
From the sterile vigil (1950) [1]

Challenges

They are diverse and complex, the ethical and theological challenges confronting Latin American, Caribbean, Hispanic and American Christian communities in its unwavering vocation to be prophetic voices in their specific historical contexts. Perhaps it is correct to affirm that we are in times when the "deprivatization" of religion prevails, [2] times of critical reinsertion of religious institutions in the public debates on political and legal norms that rule human coexistence.

There are important recent instances that serve as examples and sometimes paradigms: the declarations of the American Catholic bishops on nuclear weapons; interventions of communities and Brazilian catholic hierarchy, during the military dictatorship, in favor of the respect for human rights; the role of the Catholic Church as a companion to solidarity in the Polish crisis of the 1980s and its subsequent attempts to hegemonize the national conscience; the declarations of various churches on the impoverishment of multiple communities marginalized by neoliberal globalization; the document Kairós (1985) of the Christian communities opposed to Apartheid in South Africa; public claims by certain churches about the legalization of female reproductive rights or alternate family structures; the defense of immigrants at a time when xenophobia abounds in certain political powers; the various ecclesiastical censures of racial discrimination, among many others.

Churches and religious groups are important social institutions and therefore have every right to participate in public debates about political, legal and ethical issues that rule human coexistence. However, there are potential risks in such participation when the “battle flag” is shown as divine
will manifested in the biblical writings, many times considered sacred and unquestionable, of universal and perennial validity.

The first risk has to do with the dialogic, plural and consensual nature of democratic modern societies. It requires the exchange, sometimes immensely conflictive, between very different perspectives and political, ethical and ideological visions. This dialogue/discussion may become infringed when one of the parties claims to represent unquestionably the inviolable divine will. Such unilateral attribution of compulsory sacredness in legislation seriously threatens the climate of respectful dialogue that must prevail in a democratic and plural society.

The second risk has to do with the claim of certain ecclesiastical hierarchies and some guardians of dogmatic orthodoxy to silence prophetic or dissenting voices within Christian communities, as has happened many instances in not too distant times, from Alfred Loisy and Teilhard of Chardin to Hans Küng, Leonardo Boff, Jacques Dupuis, Roger Haight, Tissa Balasuriya, Anthony de Mello and, more recently, Ivone Gebara, Jon Sobrino, José Antonio Pagola, José María Vigil, Juan José Tamayo Acosta and Andrés Torres Queiruga, among others. It is not just that modern secular society is irreversibly plural; religious groups are also. We are communities of dialogue, debate, questioning and criticism. No one has the right to claim a monopoly on the exclusive representation of theological thought. By divine grace, a rich and diverse polyphony reigns in Christian communities, stubbornly overcoming any attempt to impose dogmatic uniformity.

The third potential risk associated with the intolerant attitude that sometimes prevails in some church spokesmen is the serious damage it causes to the dignity of many human beings. When certain biblical verses were quoted to legitimize slavery (Leviticus 25:44-46 or Ephesians 6:5), countless human beings were condemned to a tragic and deplorable oppression. When other scriptural passages have been raised to inhibit civil or political female rights (I Timothy 2:11-15 or Eph 5:22-23), the dignity of women has been seriously lacerated. By preventing the full recognition of civil and ecclesiastical rights to people of different sexual orientations, quoting
various biblical texts (Leviticus 20:13 or I Corinthians 6:9), it causes them deep suffering and undermines their ethical and spiritual integrity.

The fourth risk is strictly theological. Invoking God to fight the abolition of slavery, equality ontological and social status of women, or the moral and legal validity of various sexual orientations, is attributing to the divinity essential responsibility for the social repressions. God is credited with being the transcendental source of our discussions. He is condemned to the sad role of Grand Inquisitor. He is transformed from a generous creative, sustaining and redeeming spirit, into a prince of darkness who seeks to keep human beings under despotic and repressive domination. The irony is that this grave injury to God is committed by those who proclaim themselves as his most faithful and devoted believers.

**Prophetic voice and liberation theologies**

What about the much-discussed liberation theologies? I find the premature and generally interested predictions of its dissolution wrong. Rather, what happens is a diversification of themes and perspectives that do not abdicate liberationist theological hermeneutics. Certainly, the key intuition of “option for the poor” has been fragmented, in the heat of the valuation of the particular identities and subjectivities, but the result has been the critical strengthening of the liberationist perspective, not its elimination. Furthermore, the original parent sources of liberation theology are currently undergoing a process of reinforcement for the following reasons:

First, the tenacious persistence of poverty and socioeconomic asymmetries, increased by neoliberal globalization and the planetary hegemony of the capitalist market system that seeks to transmute, in the manner of a greedy King Midas, everything that touches to profit. His most devoted parishioners have predicted the end of history, enigmatic phrase whose hidden semantics advocates the permanence of an economic system that values the calculation of profits over equitable human promotion and that does not hesitate to use different forms of imperial
violence to guarantee its dominance.\[9\] We live in a historical period where social inequalities are increased thanks to the power, with all-embracing pretenses, of financial capitalism, hegemonic in our postmodern era. It is a new configuration of global power that requires, therefore, novel critical theoretical reflections.\[10\]

Second, the rebellion of the excluded and impoverished, who demand an alternative social order and forge new instances of resistance. Certainly, the claim postulates of the various social movements are varied. There are those who repudiate the misery to which they are trying to commit themselves, others demand the recognition of the full dignity of their race, sex, cultural identity, nationality or sexual orientation. These different trenches confer theoretical and practical complexity, but they also expand the borders of utopian imaginations that encourage social resistance.\[11\] From the sophisticated link Cornel West weaves between his reading of Marx, North American philosophical pragmatism, and the cultural traditions of African American churches\[12\] to the convergence that our beloved Jorge Pixley points of historical studies of the Bible, critical Latin-American theologies and Anglo–American philosophy of the process, inspired by the writings of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, liberation theologies refuse to accept the condemnations and anathemas that so many ecclesiastical hierarchies have uttered to it, in close consonance with very profane and secular powers.\[13\] Let us not forget the obscene and perverted liberationist challenges of the Argentine Marcella Althaus-Reid, her terms, in her provocative text - *Indecent Theology: Theological perversions in sex, gender and politics* \[14\]

Boaventura de Sousa Santos has well written: "The faces of domination and oppression are multiple... The faces of domination are multiple, the resistance and the agents that star in them are multiple..."\[15\] All this theological kaleidoscope provokes a radical transformation of the way of being church in history. It is not only a matter of advocating the “option for the poor”, but of reconfiguring ecclesial thought and praxis from the perspective of and solidarity with the diverse faces of the excluded and marginalized.\[16\]
Third, the recovery, by many Christians, of the challenging prophetic tessitura of Biblical traditions. No matter how much you try to tame the Christian faith, it is impossible to silence the rebellious memories that nest in its most intimate texts and traditions. The gospel, as the Spanish theologian José María Castillo has written, is “the dangerous memory of freedom that questions all our oppressions, our fears, our discouragements, our cowardices and also our securities. That is why the Gospel is a subversive memory that reveals unsuspected horizons of freedom and authenticity. Only in this way can we recover the meaning and practice of the Religion of Jesus.”[17] Liberation theologies, from very diverse origins and with multiple definitions, resignify and recontextualize these rebellious memories.[18] This is where his peculiar epistemic break is found. In spite of the imperial optimism of controlling the possible imagery of the peoples, even in Pentecostal circles, long oblivious to social and political unrest, there are signs of a liberating and prophetic reconfiguration of theology. [19]

Finally, the pressing awareness that God still matters resounds vigorously. In the midst of the social, political and economic conflicts that upset our lives, the “battle for God” vigorously curls, as Karen Armstrong so aptly catalogs it.[20] God, in this context, is rethought not as impassible and immutable transcendence, but, in the biblical way, as the One who listens with care and compassion to the cry of the oppressed and excluded. [21] When the social miseries that afflict community life become intolerable, the memory of the liberating God erupts dramatically. As the South African document Kairós categorically affirms: "Throughout the entire Bible, God appears as the liberator of the oppressed."[22] Beyond the endless disputes between recalcitrant secularism and religious fundamentalism, the paradigmatic text of social emancipation resonates vigorously again:

“But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So, the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm…” (Deuteronomy 26: 6-9).
The solidarity with the poor and excluded from the colonial feast is an inescapable hallmark of all prophetic and evangelical faith. That is why Jesus began his ministry with these seditious words which almost result in a premature martyrdom:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor ...  
To proclaim liberty to the captives ...  
To release the oppressed. ”
(Luke 4:18)

And he concluded his teachings with a fascinating account of an eschatological aspect (Matthew 25: 31-56) according to which the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven is obtained by those who have anonymously and mysteriously welcomed the sacramental presence of the crucified and risen Christ in intimate solidarity with the needy: the hungry, thirsty, outsiders, captives, naked and needy. Jesus outlines a christological and sacramental priority of the subaltern and marginalized communities of history.[23] The German philosopher Ernst Bloch has well written that “Jesus is judged by the Romans as a rebel, and for some reason the high priest of the Pharisees feared the man for whom all the priestly theocracy and the religion of the Law… belonged to the world that was ripe for destruction.”[24]

In this brief reflection I have perhaps emphasized more the challenges than the hopes. Perhaps because the challenges are more concrete and tangible than the utopian and eschatological hopes. The former carves deep and indelible scars on our bodies and souls; the latter, however, are those that nurture our most intimate vocation: to conceive and evoke a still unpublished world, where divine grace is the transcendental matrix of solidarity and reconciliation between human beings. That is the source of the redemption, historical and spiritual, of the human beings that we try to carve out, in the rush of social and historical uncertainties, a path of prophetic solidarity and liberating voice.
I finalize recalling some verses from the splendid collection of poems *Cantos de vida y esperanza*, by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío:

"I have uttered my cry, Swans, among you, 
that you have been faithful in disappointment ... 
Oh, lands of sun and harmony, 
Hope still keeps Pandora's box. "[25]

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[16] A significant and exemplary personal example: twice in 2011 I participated in academic theological symposia in Bethlehem of Palestine, the birthplace of Jesus, in which we analyzed texts such as Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation by Marc Ellis (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004), Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation by Naim Ateek (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989) and Islamic Liberation Theology by Hamid Dabashi (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).


[18] On the rebellious potentialities of repressed but not annihilated memories, the texts of Reyes Mate, The Inheritance of Oblivion, are valuable. Essays around compassionate reason (Madrid: Errata Naturae, 2008) and María Teresa de la Garza, Politics of memory: a look at the West from the margin (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2002).


