

The Liberation Tradition and OT Prophets *Adapted from a reflection by Richard Rohr*

I would like to assert that the theme of liberation is the largest frame in which to understand spirituality. The term liberation theology has a negative connotation for some people. It sounds like something heretical, leftist, or Marxist, and certainly not biblical. In real fact however, it is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition and marks the tradition's very beginning. It is amazing that much of Christianity has been able to avoid the obvious for so long, probably because many of us read history from the top down and seldom from the bottom up, which is the recurring perspective of both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures.

We see the beginnings of the liberation theme with the enslavement and exodus of the Jewish people. Something divine happened that allowed an oppressed group of Semitic people in Egypt to experience many levels of gradual liberation. This story became the basic template and metaphor for the entire Bible. The Exodus was both an inner journey and an outer journey. If our inner journey does not match and lead to an outer journey, we have no true freedom or "salvation." That is what liberation theology is honest enough to point out.

Moses is the historical character at the heart of the Exodus event and of the spirituality that grew from that experience (Exodus 3:1-15). Perhaps we forget that he is a murderer on the run; lonely and fearful, he experiences God through "a bush that burns but is not consumed." Notice that this theophany has nothing to do with formal religion or moral or ritual requirements. His nature-based experience follows upon failure and suffering (necessary disillusionment), which major religious experiences so often do. The voice Moses hears from the burning bush immediately calls him to confront the pharaoh and tell him to let his people go! The voice does not tell Moses to build a temple or to go to one.

Here we see a primary inner experience that immediately has social, economic, and political implications! Liberation theology shows that spirituality and action are connected from the very beginning and can never be separated. Some people set out to act first, and their inner experience is given to them on the journey itself. Others have an inner experience that then leads them into action. It does not matter on which side one begins, but eventually action and spirituality must meet and feed one another. When prayer is authentic, it will always lead to actions of mercy; when actions of mercy are attempted at any depth, they will always drive us to prayer.

Very early in the Judeo-Christian tradition there is a split between the Exodus tradition—which I believe is the mainline and original tradition of full liberation—and the priestly tradition that develops in Leviticus and Numbers. The priestly mentality invariably tries to organize, control, and perpetuate the initial experience—always around their personally conducted rituals. Leaders and organized religion takes over and leaves far too many people without the foundational experience. This is common second-hand religion.

About eight centuries before Jesus, we finally begin to meet the spiritual geniuses—the Jewish prophets—who desperately tried to again bring together the inner God-experience and outer work for justice and truth. This connection is desperately needed and yet resented and avoided to this day. In most of history, the priestly tradition has been in control and has defined religion. It is precisely the ritualism and priest craft of Leviticus and Numbers that the prophets rail against (see Isaiah 1:10ff, Amos 5:21ff). We always and forever need the prophets or else most religion worships itself instead of God. The pattern is persistent.

Reference:

Adapted from Richard Rohr, [Yes, And . . . : Daily Meditations](#) (Franciscan Media: 2013), 34-36.

Wolf in the Henhouse

By Richard Rohr

As I read this during the week its message reminded me of some the themes of the OT prophets and also of Jesus in his attitude to the religious authorities of his day. How does it speak to you? Do see the same kind of prophetic spirit at work here? (No need to answer this formally, it's just for your own use).

The word catholic comes from the Greek kata (meaning “through” or “throughout”) and holos (meaning “whole”). This word was originally used by Ignatius of Antioch as early as the year 100 to precisely include all Christians, and it is a shame that it later was used to create boundaries rather than to be inclusive. Catholicity and oneness were two of the essential “marks of the church,” those quietly discernible elements, which like “the yeast hidden in the dough” (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:21), expand and raise the message, enabling it to include more and more.

Catholicity is the unitive “whole-making instinct” within Christianity. Yeast doesn’t operate in an extrinsic way; rather, it expands dough from the inside out by “becoming one-with, part-of, and mutually benefiting from and contributing to the life of bread,” as Daniel Horan writes. [1] What a shame that any Christian group wanted to be the whole loaf instead of a yeast hidden inside the loaf—the organic Body of Christ. (The words “Roman” and “catholic” put together are actually an oxymoron; the word “oxymoron” comes from the Greek for sharp and foolish.)

Unfortunately, the bottom-up, inside-out, whole-making instinct did not last. Starting in AD 313, Christianity gradually became the imperial religion of the Roman Empire. It was mostly top-down and hierarchical for the next 1700 years. As the “imperial mind” took over, religion had less to do with Jesus’ teachings on nonviolence, inclusivity, forgiveness, and simplicity, and instead became fully complicit in the world of domination, power, war, and greed itself. The wolf started living right inside the hen house, and the common pattern of low-level religion was repeated.

Brian McLaren is not afraid to say directly that it is time for us to “face the dark sides of our Christian past”:

A lineage of evil . . . stretches from Constantine [in 313] to Pope Nicholas [V] to Columbus to contemporary American and European politics: the tradition of racial and religious privilege and supremacy—specifically white and Christian privilege and supremacy. . . . About forty years before 1492, Pope Nicholas V issued an official document called *Romanus Pontifex* . . . which serves as the basis for what is commonly called the Doctrine of Discovery, the teaching that whatever

Christians “discover,” they can take and use as they wish. . . . Christian global mission is defined as to “invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue” non-Christians around the world, and to steal “all movable and immovable goods” and to “reduce their persons to perpetual slavery”—and not only them, but their descendants. And notice the stunning use of the word convert: “to convert them to his and their use and profit.” [2]

I am sorry to have to share this with you, but the impact of the Church’s collusion with empire must be confessed or we will never be free from it. It also helps us understand why so many have given up on Christianity and often, unfortunately, thrown out the baby with the bathwater.

And yet, we cannot be too glib, condemning, or angry either. It is not as if Christianity oppressed an existing egalitarian, democratic, pluralistic mind that already was in charge somewhere on earth. The Gospel values did not exist in any broad way until the last couple of hundred years. Liberal critics and atheists must be honest about this. Ironically, the undoing of slavery, misogyny, oppression, and massive injustice proceeded from cultures that were influenced by the Gospel. God is both very humble and very patient, and it seems God’s best followers imitate the Divine in this regard. [3]

References:

[1] Daniel P. Horan, “‘Catholic’ Doesn’t Mean What You Think It Does,” *Huffington Post*, October 12, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-p-horan-ofm/catholic-doesnt-mean-what-you-think-it-means_b_1978768.html.

[2] Brian McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World’s Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (Convergent: 2016), 76-77.

[3] See Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Baker Academic: 2016). This study of church history is also spirituality at its best.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, an unpublished talk, *Canossian Spirituality Center*, Albuquerque, New Mexico, December 3, 2016.