



The Covid-19 Pandemic in the Age of Necropolitics: Challenges for Liberation Theologies

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Abstract

The pandemic Covid19 is not only a medical emergency but also a major economic and political crisis, including the existence of a neoliberal transformation called necropolitics namely the determination of who should die. This article aims to offer liberation theology in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research results show liberation and contextual theologies will be critical in future battles against necropolitical policies. The Covid-19 pandemic is not creating a new reality, but rather exposing and radicalizing existing realities - necropolitical realities - all over the world. Liberation and contextual theologies will be critical in future battles against necropolitical policies. The church must listen to what marginalized communities have to say, and liberation and contextual theologies must listen to what other theologies have to say. A liberation narrative must be declared, in which all liberative narratives can find a space of openness. While hegemonic narratives are imposed, the Gospel of Life, Justice, Joy, and Liberation has the potential to open previously closed horizons. Even under necropolitical regimes, there is good news.

Keywords: Contextual theology; Covid-19; liberation theology; pandemic.

Abstrak

Pandemi Covid19 bukan hanya darurat medis tetapi juga krisis ekonomi dan politik besar, termasuk adanya transformasi neoliberal yang disebut nekropolitik yaitu penentuan siapa yang harus mati. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menawarkan teologi pembebasan dalam konteks pandemi COVID-19. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan pembebasan dan teologi kontekstual akan menjadi kritis dalam pertempuran masa depan melawan kebijakan nekropolitik. Pandemi Covid-19 tidak menciptakan realitas baru, melainkan mengekspos dan meradikalisasi realitas yang ada - realitas nekropolitik - di seluruh dunia. Pembebasan dan teologi kontekstual akan sangat penting dalam pertempuran masa depan melawan kebijakan nekropolitik. Gereja harus mendengarkan apa yang dikatakan oleh komunitas yang terpinggirkan, dan teologi pembebasan dan kontekstual harus mendengarkan apa yang dikatakan oleh teologi lain. Narasi pembebasan harus dideklarasikan, di mana semua narasi liberatif dapat menemukan ruang keterbukaan. Sementara narasi hegemonik dipaksakan, Injil Kehidupan, Keadilan, Kegembiraan, dan Pembebasan berpotensi membuka cakrawala yang sebelumnya tertutup. Bahkan di bawah rezim nekropolitik, ada kabar baik.

Kata Kunci: Teologi kontekstual; Covid19; teologi pembebasan; pandemi.

INTRODUCTION

While finishing this essay, the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic are striking Mexico, just as in other parts of the world. Even when the virus is still present but with lower death rates than in the pandemic's first waves, the consequences in individual, communitarian, and national finances are worst, stressed by the uncertain international context. After the worst pandemic scenarios, the story of almost every crisis is repeated: the powerful and richer enjoy numerous benefits while the poorest and marginalized are even more vulnerable.

Without trustful statistics of health, economic, and social damages, or reliable counts of the pandemic's victims, the situation of the marginalized around the world is being invisibilized by the main narratives of what is happening in different international scenarios. While global problems are really a

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Received: September 06, 2022; Revised: December 24, 2022; Accepted: December 26, 2022

challenge (the war in Ukraine, the oil crisis, the threat of an economic recession, and others), local problems are ignored by the hegemonic narrative of what is happening in the world. Every crisis is also a crisis of narratives. In the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences, the crisis of narratives invisibilizes the already invisible for the hegemonic narratives, whether they are persons, communities, entire countries or ecosystems.

The pandemic is not only a health emergency but primarily an economic and political crisis (Beilstein et al., 2021; Fukuyama, 2020; Ozili, 2021; Williamson, Eynon, & Potter, 2020) induced by the voracity of neoliberalism (Dias & Deluchey, 2020). This reality did not appear suddenly: it is the consequence of an extensive series of transformations of the hegemonical political and economic system. Crowded hospitals, lack of doctors and medicines, ignorance, and fanaticism were supposed to happen only “far away” in invisible places and “uncivilized” regions of the world. Now, death and precarity are everywhere, and every society has the possibility of being collapsed by this crisis.

The last transformation of neoliberalism is necropolitics, the governmental technic that decides which populations must die (Gebhardt, 2020; Gržinić, 2017). Now, with the Covid-19 pandemic and the generalized state of violence, and economic and climate crisis, necropolitics has accelerated its imposition in the world, and even the most prosperous cities and countries can be changed into worlds of death in which the necropolitical powers must decide who lives and who dies.

The perspectives offered by liberation theologies are urgent. By living and interpreting the contexts, liberation theologies are rooted in the reality of communities without ignoring the planetary condition. By being partial to the marginalized, liberation theologies are allies with the most affected by today’s crisis, in times where the marginalized are invisible and left to die.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE SAME STORY OF PAST YEARS

The Covid-19 pandemic shows something that already existed before (Morens et al., 2020; Wilder-Smith, Chiew, & Lee, 2020). There has been a deep economic and humanitarian crisis in many places due to violence, poverty, and environmental destruction. Even in large cities of Europe and North America, poverty and violence are daily realities that, sometimes, remain invisible. Violence, unemployment, poverty, and health crises are common worldwide. As Paul Preciado affirms, the virus is not a strange alien if we are careful to see it (Preciado, 2020). The virus SARS-CoV-2 is very similar to us. It acts as our likeness: it replies, materializes, intensifies, and extends to every population the forms of domination of necropolitics. The coronavirus acts as a necropolitical power, creating spaces where the state of exception is becoming the new normality (Biehl, Prates, & Amon, 2021; Sandset, 2021).

Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe defines necropolitics as the last expression of sovereignty based on the power and capacity to decide who can live and who must die (Mbembe, 2013). The main objective of necropolitics is to regulate populations by producing disposable subjects that can be sacrificed when they are no longer useful to the system. These subjects can be individuals or large populations under control, expelled, or disappear when they are considered enemies of some project promoted by those who exercise power, legally or *de facto*.

In necropolitics, social relationships are based on physical and sadistic violence (as seen in Mexico with the narco cartels) or discursive violence (as seen in many latitudes in the campaigns against migrants). Violence leads to authoritarian regimes that create “worlds of death,” spaces in a constant state of exception. The forces of necropolitics arise in many forms, from solid political leaderships that claim to be over the law to “war machines” that create parallel states and chaos in their controlled spaces.

The main question in necropolitics is this: Which populations and subjects can be left to die? Mbembe explains that usually, this question, as well as the worlds of death, is part of distant latitudes that are considered in-human and uncivilized places, exemplified in the colonies. The inhabitants of the colonies were labeled as “less” humans: indigenous, African populations, for example. However, these inhuman conditions now have been expanded to the metropolis, the Global North, and “civilized places.” The result is societies of enmity: relations based on war, seen as economic rivalry, persecution of migrants and minorities, and the reappearance of exclusion policies.

During the pandemic, governments have been asking the same necropolitical questions: who must die in case of a shortage of medical supplies? Who must suffer the worst consequences of the economic crisis? Is domestic violence an essential issue during the “stay home” campaigns? Which populations will be sacrificed for the well-being of others? Which are the benefits of the pandemic, and who will reclaim them? Are vaccines, even health care, a human right or not? Which are the political advantages brought by the pandemic?

As Naomi Klein states, the “shock doctrine” shows how the power benefits from disasters. Every crisis, even a global one like the pandemic, is an opportunity to gain political and economic profits (Klein, 2014). In different parts of the world, the pandemic already showed at least four forms of profit: (1) political and electoral profits with discourses of fear or discredit of scientific information that aims to please the electoral bases of politicians; (2) the economic conflicts between countries that try to obtain an advantage in negotiations; (3) the different powers that are gaining advantages for achieving other objectives amid the global distraction with the pandemic; (4) the rapid implementation of Big Data technologies that can surveil individuals and populations, measuring their location, actions, and even their health conditions. The shock doctrine is not only taking place in faraway places but in many countries of the world, even in those that claim to be leaders of the “civilized world.”

The pandemic is not showing something radically new about the world and the hegemonical systems, but it is the expansion of the worlds of death created in the peripheries. Shortage of medical supplies, governmental corruption, unemployment, fanaticism, mental health crisis, fear, profits from the crisis, decisions about who should be left to die, hunger, implementation of the state of exception in different countries, and many other similar things, are faces of the peripheries, of uncivilized places: worlds of death now globally extended.

While a narrative affirms global solidarity, the reality confirms the expansion of necropolitical power. The pandemic showed the clash of narratives: the world is not reigned by democracy, solidarity, mutual caring or openness of hearts and frontiers. Xenophobia, classism, racism, and unjust relations are still the rule. Even more, violence is a daily experience in many parts of the world and, in some latitudes, gore violence is normal.

LIBERATION TOWARDS LIFE: A THEOLOGY FACING THE RADICAL IMPLEMENTATION OF NECROPOLITICS

Since their emergence, liberation theologies had their goal of transforming the world in terms of God’s kingdom. They have articulated their discourses responding to the biopolitical forms of discipline and its forms of sovereignty, expressed in the oppression of the body and the unjust economic and political systems promoted by capitalism. Now, the heirs of these theologies must confront the arising of the radical and global implementation of necropolitics. In order to confront necropolitical systems, liberation theologies must recover their common basis and be creative enough in the midst of a changeable reality. Nevertheless, even in the uncertainty and the crisis of narratives, liberation theologies can be aware of

their historical project, as they announce and work for the materialization of God's kingdom in this time and its contexts. As Ivan Petrella explains, "Yet the development of historical projects must remain central to liberation theology for at least two reasons. First and most important, historical projects are needed because it is through them that liberation is most truly pursued. Liberation for liberation theology was never abstract; it was, and remains, social and material" (Petrella, 2005, p. 149).

The heart of liberation theologies relies on three main principles. First is the commitment to the poor. As Gustavo Gutiérrez states, theology must come after the service and commitment to the poor because theology is the reflection that arises from the pastoral accompaniment of the church (Gustavo Gutiérrez, 2004, p. 68). In doing this, liberation theologies are critical to the hegemonic epistemologies that start far from the people, especially the victims.

The preferential option for the poor is the option for justice, and the option for justice is the option for all victims. Liberation theologies affirm that poverty is not a fate or something unchangeable but a temporal reality provoked by injustice. Material, social or cultural poverty is neither a spiritual state but the result of marginalization, so they cannot be idealized or underestimated. Therefore, poverty provoked by oppression and unjust systems must be denounced, rejected, and eliminated.

Second, liberation theologies are about being committed to a project that goes beyond institutions. The project to which they are engaged is the project of Christ: the new heavens and earth of God's kingdom. These theologies cannot be loyal to any ideology or institution but must remain faithful to Christ and, consequently, critical to every ideology and institution. Nothing can be plenty (no institution, program, or system), even if it seems to be plenty because nothing is the kingdom of God. Sometimes an institution or system can show traces of the kingdom of God, but it is not.

Ignacio Ellacuría insists on this dimension of liberation theology's methodology. Liberation theologies are a historical enterprise (Ellacuría, 2000). They emerge from a concrete situation and are oriented to changing that situation. Beyond a solely abstract theological reflection, liberation theologies are as alive and dynamic as their contexts. Therefore, they serve the alive contexts in which they emerge. They are not at the service of an institution, even the church, but at the service of God's people, the ecosystems, and the entire cosmos. Even when they are connected with church traditions and have a theoretical dimension, the moment of realization is in salvation, understood as the praxis of liberation. If liberation theologies were submitted to an economic, political, religious, or cultural project, they would live by other principles different from the gospel's proclamation. On the contrary, the fundamental principle of interpretation, explains Ellacuría, is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Their proclamation interprets Christ's gospel in the alive context where they emerge.

Third, liberation theologies realize that the secular world is not just secular but idolatrous. The pride of economic and political systems, and their representatives, make gods from institutions. Neoliberalism in its claim of being the end of history; necropolitics in its blasphemous pride of deciding who must die; Western democracy in its presumption of being the only valid system of social organization are also metaphysical realities that impose a specific model of subject that every person must assume in order to be considered a human being. Mimicking Genesis, these systems - as many others in every age - want to make humanity in their likeness. Therefore, liberation theologies are committed to their contexts, where these and other systems try to impose their idolatrous ways of (des)organizing the world and trying to capture the lives of human beings.

The challenge that necropolitics brings, and even more after the Covid-19 pandemic, relies on thinking/feeling (because liberation theologies are not only an intellectual exercise but a holistic way of

doing theology) about how these principles can be transformed in order to confront a system that has death in its basis, and that is expanding globally in new forms of exclusion and invisibilization.

First, it is necessary a reformulation about who the poor are. As the Spanish philosopher Adela Cortina studies, poverty is not only a concept that describes economic scarcity but also the loss of freedom to achieve the life project that a subject considers essential (Cortina, 2020). The poor are the powerless. The powerless, in a system that privileges strongness and rivalry, are the invisible ones: people and populations that are destined by necropolitics to die, directly by the “strong” or by the slow motion of precarity.

In the context of the pandemic, the poor/powerless are those who are suffering unemployment, shortage of medical supplies, and limitations of health systems, both because of the low investment of governments in public health care or even the dismantling of public health systems. The poor/powerless are those who are obliged to go to non-essential activities without any consideration for the well-being of workers or the essential workers who are not provided with protection material. The poor/powerless are the invisible women and children that suffer domestic violence by staying at home with their aggressors, the mentally ill and disabled people that suffer by staying at home, and the people with chronic diseases that cannot be treated in hospitals. The poor/powerless are also the depressed, stressed and psychologically afflicted due to the repeated and prolonged quarantine. The poor/powerless are also the populations that will experiment with new forms of surveillance and oppression derived from the Big Data technologies of control implemented by governments.

The pandemic and other crises, like the oil crisis or the instability of international relationships, provoke a dramatic increase in poverty, but this is often only analyzed in terms of economic possibilities. As we have mentioned, liberation and contextual theologies must consider a broad concept of poverty. The theological reflections and empathies must start here, not from abstract considerations but from the pain of poverty/powerlessness. By doing this, the church will see the invisible ones. While the necropolitical systems are blind to the poor/powerless subjects and are cruel in their practices of marginalizing and disappearing the poor, the liberative church can see what necropolitics wants to remain invisible. While the world is focused on the pandemic and its consequences, usually based on the data (fake or veracious) presented in traditional and digital media, the liberative church must be engaged with those who are invisible to fake news and hegemonic discourses; with those who are suffering the shortage and failures of health care systems, increased violence, and uncertainty.

By seeing the invisible ones, the church can be committed ethically to them. Engaging with the cause of the poor is not only about recognition but also practical actions of solidarity with those who have been marginalized. Germán Gutiérrez explains that “liberation means either a practical (not simply epistemological) option for the poor, or it means nothing” (Germán Gutiérrez, 2005, p. 90). The goal of theology and church is God's kingdom, so the task is to be the presence of Christ in the world in order to point to the horizon of the kingdom. This cannot be limited by institutional or ideological restraints but needs to be free to be liberating. The ethical commitment to the poor - the powerless and invisibilized - requires a critical judgment of the practices of the powers of this time, institutions, systems, and even the church institution. Ethical commitment is prophetic: its goal is, first, to imagine the kingdom of God; then to be critical to the world based in God's kingdom; and, third, to be practical in the way of being with the invisibilized.

During the pandemic (and in the crisis during the pandemic), ideologies and institutions claim for loyalty. Politicians, political parties, institutions, enterprises, and other voices claim for support. Politics and politicians affirm that their decisions are the correct ones, so people must support them with loyalty;

enterprises demand the maximum effort of their workers in home office activities and the sacrifice of the lives of those who need to go to non-essential jobs¹ with the risk of getting the virus, also as a sign of loyalty. However, the church cannot be loyal to any institution, political, social, or economic project: she is faithful to Christ, his people, and no one else. To be faithful means to be aware that no ideology, movement, or power is the kingdom of God on earth. Some institutions or movements can point their ideas and actions to the justice, peace, and joy of the kingdom of God, but no one is full of it. To be faithful to God's kingdom is also to be practical: the church must be with those to whom the kingdom belongs: the poor, the marginalized, the invisible ones. Moreover, the church and liberation theologies must involve the poor in their making of theology and practice because the input and participation of the poor and the victims are fundamental for a church and theology full of life (Sobrino, 2007, p. 61).

The theology during the pandemic and in necropolitics must deny the "shock doctrine" of capitalism. Crisis - now in the form of a pandemic, war, economic recession, and climate change - is not an opportunity for political and economic forces, nor for the churches, to gain power or expand their influences. The pandemic is being used by many religious movements to spread fear and impulse their agendas, just like politicians and enterprises worldwide. God does not use the shock doctrine to make things happen, and the church must proclaim the difference: the gospel of a God that walks, suffers, and mourns with those who are being invisibilized, those who are being fired from their jobs, those who are mourning the loss of their beloved ones. This gospel – good news in the middle of crisis - is the basis of the faithfulness of the church.

The gospel - the good news in the midst of death and suffering - is spoken and ethical proclamation. Ethical proclamation in the age of necropolitics and pandemic is to speak and act for the truth (against fake news), against returning to "normality" (proposing and exemplifying new forms of relationships), for life (against the policies of death), for standing with the invisible ones (against invisibilization of subjects and populations), against corruption and opacity (supporting transparency in economics and politics), for freedom with justice (against surveillance, discrimination, violence, and freedom as a class privilege).

The idols of necropolitics are spread globally and make alliances of many kinds. Even when borders have been closed during the Covid-19 pandemic and nationalistic discourses have been present in different countries, the strategies of necropolitics are shared globally. Even when borders, walls, and social gaps seem to be bigger, necropolitics forms a dystopian ecumene. We must be aware that, beyond nationalistic discourses and stronger border policies, necropolitics is spreading around the globe using the same or similar techniques of social control and eliminating subjects and populations.

"The biggest challenge for a liberation theology of the future is how to build international movements of solidarity," as Joerg Rieger states (Rieger, 2013, p. 25). Ecumenical solidarity is transcendental to resist necropolitics, even more during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The task of theology and the church in necropolitics, for being really liberative, is to promote ecumenism and make ecumenical alliances not only locally but in the spaces where necropolitics is being spread. Nevertheless, ecumenical dialogue, relationships, and alliances are not enough in the complexity of necropolitics. Theology and the church must build international solidarity movements that include interreligious dialogue, relationships, and projects.

Even ecumenical and interreligious alliances are not enough for the challenges that are explicit now with the Covid-19 pandemic and the crises to come. Theology and the church must be engaged in interdisciplinary dialogue, not only with Western or Global North epistemologies but also hearing the

¹ Even it is necessary to analyze how the governments classified essential and non-essential activities.

knowledge and ethics of invisibilized cultures. Also, dialogue with science and support of scientific data is essential to avoid fundamentalism's irresponsibility that puts in danger human lives.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic is not creating a new reality but exposing and radicalizing the realities - necropolitical realities - that already were present around the globe. Therefore, theology and the church must recover their imagination and be engaged in proclamation, practical solidarity, and ethical commitment based on the kingdom of God revealed in the practice of Jesus Christ.

Liberation and contextual theologies are fundamental in future struggles with necropolitical policies. The church in many latitudes must hear what marginalized communities have to say, and liberation and contextual theologies must hear what other theologies share. Without a firm commitment and love alliances between churches, theologies, epistemologies, and subversive practices, there is no possibility of being part of the transformation of the world, and the voice of the church will not resound in the world, and the people - especially the invisibilized ones - will not hear that a world full of hope is possible even amid the Covid-19 pandemic, that the present systems are not eternal and almighty gods, but temporal and fragile idols, and that life in plenty is possible for all.

A liberation narrative – in which all liberative narratives can find a space of openness – must be proclaimed. While hegemonic narratives are being imposed, the Gospel of Life, justice, joy and liberation can open the closed horizons. There are good news even under necropolitical regimns.

The crisis to come, even when it is already present, is climate change with its grave consequences around the planet. The Covid-19 pandemic is just a “dress rehearsal” for the climate crisis (Latour, 2021). Liberation theologies must be closer to the marginalized communities to share an actual liberative proclamation that denounces and announces what the gospel might say about the crisis to come. Even before the dark horizon, liberation is possible and must be announced. However, liberation must be for all creation, starting with those who are made invisible now.

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