

A RESPONSE TO MARÍA PILAR AQUINO

I am most grateful to Maria Pilar for her presentation, with which I resonate and agree on just about every point. I appreciate her extensive literary survey, especially of the context of the Latino-Latina community since my direct experience with that context is relatively slender. I applaud the way in which she weaves in the justice theme, in both societal and ecclesial contexts, and I agree that the Catholic Church, regrettably, has not yet taken effective means to assist the development of a *Teología India*. I do note that she has cited some contemporary works by aboriginal thinkers doing Christian theology.¹ For my brief comments today, I focus on her earlier book, *Our Cry for Life*,² and her description of theology as a “second act,” emerging from but also returning to practice and contemplation. These two acts are so important, especially in relation to indigenous peoples.

Having no significant disagreements, I can only try to supplement Professor Aquino’s ideas. So, I wish simply to offer a very brief commentary on ways in which our traditional “western” theology might allow representatives of indigenous cultures some kind of level playing field for dialogue, and for developing their own theologies.

My remarks will be threefold: first, I describe the problem for Christian mission whenever it encounters aboriginal religious experience, and the religious-social problem that still exists today as a result: I mean the problem of power. Second, I suggest a possible spiritual-theological foundation for such dialogue. Third, I propose a method that has developed in my own history, generally, “just growing” like Topsy, by which aboriginal religion can dialogue with traditional western theology, and serve both as corrective and enrichment.

I see this exercise as one that respects “power,” as I think Michel Foucault understood it, as a set of relations, and ideally of relations between equals, each of

¹See Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley and George E. “Tink” Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2001); George E. Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). A native Catholic thinker who has done work in theology is Marie Therese Archambault, *A Retreat with Black Elk: Living in the Sacred Hoop* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1998); idem, with Mark G. Thiel and Christopher Vecsey, eds., *The Crossing of the Two Roads: Being Catholic and Native in the United States* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

²Maria Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1993) 10ff.

whom has something to offer to the dialogue.³ I would add, though, that I think “power” is much more than that in aboriginal spirituality! But that discussion is for another time and place.

First, then, I propose a fundamental problem in the relationship between Christian theology and aboriginal traditions—a problem often observed by critics—that Christianity has effectively “secularized” indigenous spirituality and religion. There is no time to expound on that problem here, except to describe it very succinctly through Max Weber’s famous category “disenchantment,” (*Entzauberung*) by which all the “magic” goes out of experience. The most graphic statement of the problem comes from the always perceptive anthropologist Victor Turner:

If you wish to spay or geld religion, first remove its rituals, its generative and regenerative processes. For religion is not a cognitive system, a set of dogmas alone, it is meaningful experience and experienced meaning. In ritual one *lives through* events, or through the alchemy of its framings and symbolings, relives semiogenetic events, the deeds and words of prophets and saints, or if these are absent, myths and sacred epics.⁴

The process of “demythologizing” local religions has been noted throughout Judeo-Christian history, and, properly understood, there is value in this process. However, to demythologize is not the same as to nullify all primordial experience (even if that were possible), and this has been the constant failing of Christian mission theology, given a few exceptions. This flaw has lent further credibility to the charge that Christianity is hand in glove with colonization, which in turn has generated the phenomenon described in Paulo Freire’s famous phrase, “cultural invasion.”⁵ The destruction of a local religion through the agency of an imported religion amounts to the destruction of the culture itself. If I have to cite any single testimony from native leaders over my years of field ministry, it comes down to this: Does Christianity have to attack our traditional spirituality and religion?

That question brings me to my second point, which is to ask how Christian theology, without capitulating any of its essential values, might acquire a suitable asceticism for dialogue with these many local “troubled” (*betroffen*) cultures. Not long ago, I came across a very brief article—really more a homily than an article—in which the late great Paul Ricoeur proposes such an asceticism. His approach is dramatically reminiscent of Jürgen Moltmann’s theology in *The Crucified God*, but for the sake of brevity, I remain only with Ricoeur here. His little essay is entitled

³See, e.g., Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, esp. 96–109.

⁴Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982) 86.

⁵Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seabury, 1968) 150–52.

“Whoever Loses Their Life for My Sake Will Find It.”⁶ Ricoeur, of course, is quoting the passage from Matthew 16:25, in which Jesus foretells his passion and the consequences of discipleship. However, in this essay he proposes the pericope as a form of wisdom literature, directed especially at intellectuals. All humans are subject to the temptation to control: “We need to admit that the dream of hegemony is the secret dream of every one of us, which we only lack the strength to carry out.”⁷ Ricoeur mentions the two conventional temptations, the will to possessions and power (I infer here that Ricoeur means economic and political power), but he then redirects his message. He says, “I have in mind a third form of the will to power, one that concerns those of us not so devoted to possessions or power as to knowledge.”⁸ Moreover, it is not only our profane knowledge that is in question, but also our religious knowledge. Why? “The height of the mastery of knowledge may well be this will to include God in our enterprise of intellectual domination, by demanding of God that God guarantee our obstinate search for a guarantee.”⁹ There is thus a way of “gaining the whole world” by obtaining a mastery through knowledge and scholarly techniques, expecting that in this way God assures us of absolute security. For the Christian intellectual who adopts Anselm’s *fides quaerens intellectum*, taking up one’s cross is to renounce the representation of God as the locus of absolute knowledge. “To take up the cross of Jesus for me, a member of the university, means not to overvalue my knowledge, caught up as it is in questions of proof and guarantees, before this necessity—higher than any logical necessity: ‘It was necessary that the Son of Man should suffer and be crucified.’”¹⁰ I believe that these remarks are appropriate for the theological function of the Church itself.

Of course, Ricoeur is not advocating a lapse into anti-intellectualism or mental laziness or a deluge of pious nostrums. In fact, he is making an appeal for even greater intellectual rigor and imaginative vigor. And that leads me to my third point. The theologian does not abandon his or her heritage of learning, but rather embraces a readiness to suspend all the arguments and apologetics hitherto acquired in order to enter into the thought world of indigenous peoples. This requires, not only readiness to devote much time and energy to “field work,” but also the study of secular disciplines, especially the anthropological and linguistic disciplines. If one studies the huge collection known as *The Jesuit Relations*, one finds there some early efforts to enter into that thought world: although my Jesuit forbears had not yet transcended the adversarial debate mode for a more dialogical one, they learned the languages and engaged the thinking of the native peoples. And their debates, unlike European scholastic disputations, did not have foregone conclusions! The native people do have a strong voice in the Relations. In recent years, I have

⁶Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 284-88.

⁷Ibid., 285.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., 188.

become fascinated with the work of Joseph Lafitau, one of those Jesuits who came onto the scene in the early eighteenth century. In only about six years of residence in Canada before being called back to France, Lafitau mastered the Iroquois and Huron languages and entered into a profound study of their traditions. Because his classical studies showed him so many analogies between the native peoples and ancient Europeans, he eventually composed a book that even today leads scholars to call him “the father of modern ethnology.”¹¹ It was not only his painstaking and thorough descriptive study of native culture that made him famous; it was also his advocacy of a fresh theological approach to comparative religion, by way of the study of symbols. Lafitau even called this the “symbolic theology” of aboriginal peoples,¹² by which he hoped to establish the common origins of all of humanity and our common destiny. Today, some of his theology is outdated, but his deep conviction that the study of symbolism would bring all humans closer together, and on a level of greater equality, still makes him a formidable intellectual figure. While Lafitau was not in a position to call into question biblical literalism and its dogmatic supports, his exploration of common symbols and “figures” showed him to be an implicit practitioner of Ricoeur’s crucified theology. He was ready to listen to another vastly different thought world—one which functions through an exegesis and interpretation of symbols.

I close with a brief example. One of my many mentors among tribal elders was a brilliant man by the name of John C’Hair. John was very much the same kind of person (anthropologists call them *bricoleurs*) as the more famous Nicholas Black Elk, (though lacking a poet laureate like John Neihardt to memorialize him). He was a practitioner of his tribal religion, even as he was a faithful Catholic, and he saw no basic conflict, although he often took pains to instruct his own people, as well as missionaries, in processes of interpretation. One of John’s main concerns was to understand in the light of modern thought his people’s deep veneration of the Sacred Flat Pipe, which they had carried with them during their nomad days, and still today retain in a sacred place of veneration. He had heard that one anthropologist referred to the pipe as the tribal “fetish.” Knowing well enough what a fetish is, John one day told me, as we sat on his porch, “You know, that Sacred Pipe is not a fetish. You know what it is? [And his eyes lit up.] It’s our Ark of the Covenant!” How’s that for an explosive insight? These words are indelible in my memory, because they opened up an entire “symbolic field” for me, recalling the presence of the Creator in the tribe’s earlier prairie life but also during the years of brutal displacement to the Babylonian exile of the reservation in the late nineteenth

¹¹This book is the famous *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, 2 vols., trans. William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974). My own book on this is *Common Testimony: Ethnology and Theology in the Customs of Joseph Lafitau* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2002).

¹²See Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times* 1:38.

century. I also remember that moment because John's weak heart was to give out only a few days later, and those were among his last words to me. John's remark would have deeply touched Joseph Lafitau, who so strongly believed that humankind would find its common origins through its study of figures and symbols, and thus create a richer and deeper theology. I submit that western theologians (and the official Church) need this, not to annul their theological methods, but to relativize them, in order to give other cultures the opportunity to enter the dialogue as equals.

I must close on a less than optimistic note, at least within the Catholic context. The power of symbol in aboriginal cultures relies heavily on the concrete descriptive quality of their languages. This fact lay behind the insight of another Arapaho elder (Ernest Sun Rhodes) involved in our conversations some twenty-five to thirty years ago: "You know, our language *is* our theology!" Quite so, and it is part of the frontier tragedy that the generation following him has lost Arapaho as its first language, as have many other tribes, at least north of the Rio Grande. But we cannot dwell on this; cultural-linguistic retrieval projects are taking place among some tribal communities, and that is where we must look for a nascent theology. One other elder (Joe Duran) once said to me early in our conversations, probably sensing in me a bit of romanticist antiquarianism, "Remember, Father, we can't go backward; we have to move on!" I replied to him, but can't you make use of what you still remember to build for the future?" "Oh yes," he said, "We have to do that." The men and women of that generation have all gone to The Good Place now, but my prayers are with their descendents.

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