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Liberative Inculturation: Making Christianity Relevant in Urban Contexts

The Rev. Jacqueline J. Lewis, Ph.D.

Introduction

As a womanist theologian, I rarely write without locating myself in context. I'm a Universalist Christian, a baby boomer born in 1959, an African-American clergy who is the senior minister in charge of a revolutionary congregation in the East Village of Manhattan. We are Black, White, Asian, and Latinx. We are Christians who believe God loves all people, and calls us to work together to build the reign of God on earth. We are straight, bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, and intersex. We are infants and toddlers, teens and young adults, boomers and senior citizens in their late 80s.

On our corner of the universe, we use the arts in worship as an active prayer to help us dream God's dream. We are hippies and struggling artists; attorneys and teachers; bankers and bodega clerks. We live in SROs and high-rise apartments. Our rent is stabilized, or skyrocketing; we own small condos or houses on Long Island. We stand for racial justice, because we know that when Black Lives Matter, all lives really matter. We mourn for the children and families in cages on our southern border, and we mourn for the men, women, and children languishing in American jails. We work for gun control, for a living wage, for voting rights, and for women to make the same pay as men. We are turning our face toward our Mama Earth, because we know she needs us. We are confident that none of us is free, none of us is liberated, until all of us are liberated. We find our identity as people of faith bound by that truth. We are linked together, inextricably connected together, Dr. King wrote, in a web of humanity. I can't be who I am until you are fully who you are.

This is how we describe our vision:

Middle Collegiate Church is a multicultural, multiethnic, intergenerational movement of Spirit and justice, powered by Revolutionary Love, with room for all. Following in the Way of Jesus' radical love, and inspired by the prophets, Middle Church is called by God to do a bold new thing on the earth. We aim to heal the soul and the world by dismantling racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic systems of oppression. Because our God is still speaking in many languages, we work in inter-religious partnerships to uproot injustice, eradicate poverty, care for the brokenhearted, and build the Reign of God on earth. This activism is fueled by our faith; our faith is expressed in art; our art is an active prayer connecting us with the Holy Spirit. Founded prior to this nation, Middle Church affirms the transformative power of moral imagination, reclaiming and reframing Christianity inside our walls, on the street, and in virtual spaces around the globe.

This is what we think it means to be relevant and Christian today in the city of New York. This is what we think faith praxis is in the 21st century. This is what we think it means to live out God's dream in contemporary contexts. This is who we are. We are the body of God, the hands and heartbeat of God. We are the ones we've been waiting for to heal our souls and the world. We are incarnational; we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. And we are anointed, as was the Christ, to preach good news to the poor, and liberty to the captives. We are Word living as flesh.

As a psychologist of religion and clergy, my praxis of faith and my theology are hewn inside my faith community, alongside religious leaders of many faiths, on the streets of New York, in the halls of power in Washington, DC, and in the national public square. I am convinced the only way to be Christian today is to understand our faith as liberative, and our theology (God-story) as identity shaping, inculturating us as God's hands, feet, and heartbeat to heal our souls and the world. My role as pastor and resident theologian in my context is to help my congregation find our story and identity inside the God-story. We are intentional to help each person who walks in the door to feel seen, known, and loved; to find their own call to be ambassadors of revolutionary love; and to see their lives in service of bringing the reign of God on earth. Stories shape us, and we believe the God-story can claim us with such boldness as to liberate both us and those to whom we turn our love. My team and I practice liberative inculturation in our congregation through imaginative worship and the arts, programming that tends to the soul and stretches the mind; and by offering opportunities for agency and activism to redeem broken systems and structures.

Liberative Inculturation

We know that *liberative* means serving to release or to free. This is the work of the Christ, who begins his public ministry reading from the scroll of Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free, (Luke 4:18)

I propose that Christianity is only Christianity if it is liberative. If it is only about a pathway out of our lives on the earth, and a rocketship to heaven; if it is only an insurance policy that assures the rapture, our faith is not Christianity. The faith of Jesus, the Jewish Rabbi, is captured in this reading from Luke's gospel.

Inculturation is the gradual acquisition of the characteristics and norms of a culture or group by a person, another culture, etc. As applied to Christianity, and to Catholicism in particular, the term *inculturation*

denotes the presentation and re-expression of the Gospel in forms and terms proper to a culture. It results in the creative reinterpretation of both, without being unfaithful to either...Cultures are empirically diverse; therefore, evangelization leads to culturally diverse ways of living the Gospel. Inculturation, opposed to uniformity, demands the legitimization of diversity.¹

Liberative inculturation, then, is the process of making ourselves and our communities into the living body of the Christ. It means acknowledging that we are anointed, as he was, to liberate people, systems and structures from bondage to poverty, oppression. It means opening blind eyes to see that unless we are disrupting

¹ "Inculturation, Theology of." *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Retrieved June 28, 2018 from Encyclopedia.com: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/inculturation-theology>

racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic systems of oppression, we are complicit. It means individual salvation is reductive; we must work for the healing and wellness of our faith communities, our nation, and the world. We are not liberated until we liberate all of us. We are not saved until everyone is saved. It means using our whole selves to bring about the reign of God on earth, as it is in heaven. And it means creating a movement for love and justice is larger than our Christianity, one that acknowledges, celebrates and partners with allies of other faiths toward the healing of the world. Christianity that is relevant for urban contexts must see itself and shifting not only individual hearts, but shifting the culture itself. It must see itself as answering the identity questions, “Who am I?” and “Who are we?” It must story for people and community, “I am part of a ‘we,’ and we are the living and liberating body of God.” As Saint Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) prayed,

Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things pass. God does not change. Patience achieves everything. Whoever has God lacks nothing. God alone suffices.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ must look out on the world. Yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which He is to bless His people.

A relevant Christianity stories a people called by God to boldly heal the world.

Storying Identity: Gardner and Lewis

How do we become a human being? One way to think about this is that our identities are formed by stories in our culture. We hear them from our families, our peers, and our history. These stories about race, gender, religion, generational differences, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class work consciously and unconsciously to form our identity. By stories I mean the narrative telling, the practical enactment or the embodiment of events, historical and non-historical (mythical), which capture and provide meaning for a person, group, or culture. In other words, stories are “accounts in any symbol system,” linguistic or nonlinguistic, ranging from “the overt or propositional account communicated directly by the [storyteller]” to “the vision of life that is embodied in the actions and the life of the [storyteller].”²

Howard Gardner, professor of cognition and education at Harvard, may be best known for his theory of multiple intelligences, a critique of the notion of a single intelligence that can be measured by standard psychometric instruments.

In a study of eleven leaders in his book *Leading Minds* (1995), Gardner argues that the “ultimate impact of the leader depends most significantly on the particular story that he or she relates or embodies and the receptions to that story on the part of audiences (or collaborators or followers).”³ Gardner says further that the stories told are not headlines or snapshots, but “an unfolding drama in which they—leader and followers—are the principle characters or heroes.”⁴

² Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds* 1995, p. 42.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Leaders tell stories that effectively wrestle with the stories already existing in the minds of others, and the most compelling stories are the ones that have to do with personal and group identity. Effective leaders succeed in conveying a new version of a group's story that "makes sense ... at a particular historical moment, in terms of where they have been and where they would like to go."⁵

In terms of stories, Gardner means accounts in any symbol system, the delivery of which can be sufficiently polyphonic (I refer to this as multivocal) so as to be pleasing to a diversity of individuals. Gardner delineates stories in three large categories: stories about the self, stories about the group, and stories about values and meaning. In other words, all stories answer the ongoing existential questions of meaning about one's self and the world that each of us faces as we seek to find our identity in the larger community.⁶ The content of stories, he argues, originates in childhood experiences, and the issues stories address continue to endure throughout one's conscious existence. These issues relate to self-identity, group membership, concerns about the past and the future, and the meaning of good and evil.⁷

In terms of identity formation, it is my thesis that we are *storied selves*, formed by multiple, overlapping, interweaving, competing, and, sometimes, conflicting stories that we receive from our culture via our parents, other adults, our peers, the media, cultural histories, and many other sources. One of the ongoing narratives that shape our identity is the God-story. Identity development, then, is the process of finding one's own narrative voice amidst the speech of, and in dialog with, others. One finds one's narrative voice in particular cultural *holding environments* or containers. In our context, the container itself is the blending of American cultures.

America's story is shaped by the stories of many peoples: some born here, some who were forced here, some who chose to come here in search of land, and a place to thrive. Most of America's peoples, it might be said, yearn for the story that has been called the American Dream. That story promises equality to a broad diversity of races and ethnicities, and accommodates differences in physical and mental ability, gender and sexual orientations, religions and beliefs. That story promises the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That story promises freedom to live, work, learn, play and grow where one chooses. That story promises that each of us can worship the God of our choice, in the way that we choose, or to choose not to believe in God at all.

America's history details the tensions between the dream-story and reality. In short, the experiment that is cultural diversity in American life is riddled with difficulties. Whether one thinks of America as a melting pot, a salad, a mosaic, or a stew, many communities are still quite racially and economically segregated. Discrimination rears its ugly head in the form of hiring practices and hate-crimes. Tolerance for the faith practices of others is sometimes strained at best, and when

⁵ Ibid, p. 14

⁶ Ibid, p. 49

⁷ Ibid, p. 50

pushed too far, intolerance erupts in defaced synagogues, hate crimes against Muslims and Sikhs, and burned-down churches.

Our country's increasing diversity adds more complexity to the cultural stories. As Diana Eck points out, today the percentage of foreign-born Americans is greater than ever before, even during the peak of immigration a century ago. By most United States census projections, sometime between 2030 and 2050, visible racial/ethnic minority groups will surpass the population of whites in America, due to immigration patterns and differential birthrates. In the last decade of the 20th century, the Hispanic population grew 38.8% and has surpassed the African American population. In the same time period, the Asian population grew 43%.⁸ In terms of religious diversity, research from Eck's *Pluralism Project* reveals that in America today, there are about six million Muslim Americans, equal to the number of Jews, but greater than the number of either Episcopalians or Presbyterians. The browning of America, the shrinking of the distance between America and the rest of the world, and ever increasing tensions between Muslim and Christian worldviews strain race, ethnic, and faith group relations in our country. Those strained relations affect all of our identity stories.

America's history and present story offer evidence of both failure and moderate success in living with difference. Schools, neighborhoods, and faith communities work hard at this issue. Yet there are tremendous tensions. Recently, it is reported that a liberal private school in New York City has been separating grammar school students according to their race for their homeroom time; news reports on this situation forced the school to end the policy, a practice that had been going on for years.⁹ The 2008 election of a biracial African-American man, Barack Hussein Obama, fulfilled the dreams of so many, and, at the same time, sent many white Americans into a tailspin. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 seems to be a pendulum swing to the right; the gains of the Southern Freedom Movement and human rights in the main are threatened by Trump's policies and decisions made by the Supreme Court on voters' rights, religious freedom, and affirmative action. The state-sanctioned murders of Black and Brown men, women, and children; zero tolerance policies on our southern border, and bans against Muslims entering our country speak to rampant racism and xenophobia eroding the pillars of our democracy.

Of course, because congregational life happens inside American culture, our worshipping communities are still more segregated than I would hope. Many denominational leaders argue that Sunday morning might best be a safe place for restoration and recovery from the stresses of a multicultural week, especially for visible racial/ethnic groups and for recent emigrants who experience oppression in our culture. Still others argue that monocultural churches are important in order to

⁸ Diana Eck, The Pluralism Project. <http://www.pluralism.org/>

⁹ <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Private-School-That-Separated-Students-into-Homerooms-By-Race-Ending-Policy-487061081.html>

maintain the “root” culture of the so-called White Church and the so-called Black Church¹⁰

Despite these arguments, even if one assumes that many congregations feel called to be diverse, statistics bear witness to the incredible challenge they face. Of the 7.5 % of the congregations that are multiracial/multicultural, about half of those are in transition due to shifting demographics. Catholic congregations are more multicultural than Protestant and non-Christian congregations are more multiracial/multicultural than Christian ones.

The Gospel Story: Jesus, Thurman, and Elizondo

If leaders tell compelling stories that change the story, then Jesus of Nazareth was such a storyteller. The Reign of God is like a place in which a widow loses a coin, and finding it, throws a party. Or a shepherd loses one of his 100 sheep and leaves all to find it. Or a son leaves home, taking with him his inheritance. Squandering it, and feeling ashamed, he makes his way home to a father who welcomes him with open arms. A mixed-race Samaritan models what love of neighbor looks like. And when we pray, we are to pray this revolutionary prayer:

⁹ “Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

Matthew 6:9–13, New Revised Standard Version

This text reminds us of the social location of the one who prayed it. A poor, one-time homeless baby, born to a Jewish family in Palestine, who become refugees in Egypt to save the baby’s life. The baby, Jesus, grows up to learn to be a handyman like his father, and is also an itinerant rabbi. His people are oppressed under the occupation of Rome; so-called peace is kept with violence and heavy taxation. The Jewish Jesus remembers the exodus, remembers that God is a liberator who will even provide enough bread for each day; a God of jubilee who pardons debt and calls each of us to do the same. Jesus prays for God’s kingdom/reign to come on earth, as it is in heaven. In the prophetic traditions of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah, Jesus saw a vision of heaven in which children were welcomed, in which those on the margins were centered, and in which everyone has enough. The good news is *that* is the climax of the story of God: restoration, redemption, and reconciliation.

Howard Thurman, theologian and pastor of one of the first truly multiracial congregations in the nation, argued that racial reconciliation is a moral and spiritual issue, one for which each Christian must take personal responsibility. Growing up in

¹⁰ C.P. DeYoung, et al. *United by faith: Multiracial congregations as a response to the racial divide*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Florida, living with racial discrimination and poverty were parts of Thurman's story that inform his theo-ethics. Living with division made Thurman write, "The walls that divide must be demolished. They must be cast down, destroyed, uprooted. This is beyond debate."¹¹

Thurman believed that the gospel demands an ethic of love, synonymous with reconciliation that manifested itself in socially redemptive encounters. These redemptive encounters have implications for our understanding of the ethics of these leaders and their congregations. As Thurman writes,

If being a Christian does not demand that all Christians love each other and thereby become deeply engaged in experiencing themselves as human beings, it would seem futile to expect that Christians as Christians would be concerned about the secular community in its gross practices of prejudice and discrimination.¹²

Howard Thurman understood racism to be a contradiction of life and inimical to the formation of identity and community. I believe racism impinges the development of a healed and whole self that can feel part of the God-story or the Reign of God. In other words, human beings cannot attain their full potential in a space in which racism and oppression choke out life. Systemic discrimination sabotages the function of a community as a place of nurture and growth; it puts individual and communal health in jeopardy.

Virgilio Elizondo, a Roman Catholic priest and professor of theology, passionately describes the ethics of life on the border of two cultures in his book, *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet*. Elizondo argues that *mestizaje*, the process through which peoples mix biologically and culturally, makes a new people, physically and socio-culturally. As Elizondo reminds us, Jesus' life in Nazareth of Galilee meant constant border crossing; this made Jesus, culturally and linguistically, a *Mestizo*, "assuming unto himself the great traditions that flourished in his home territory."¹³ All kinds of people passed through this border town occupied by Roman soldiers. Encountering other cultures shaped Jesus' identity, making Him, like Elizondo, a border person.

What can we learn about border living from Jesus, the one who, as a Galilean, was *Mestizo*, and a border-crosser? One implication for the church is that in His *Mestizo* existence Jesus breaks the barriers of separation, as does every *mestizo*, and already begins to live a new unity. ... We usher in a new life for the betterment of everyone when we freely and consciously assume the great traditions flowing through our veins and transcend them, not by denying either but by synthesizing them into something new ... The *Mestizo* affirms both the identities received while offering something new to both.¹⁴

The historical Jesus was a Galilean. As Elizondo reminds us, "a convenient crossroads, Galilee was neither a religious nor an intellectual center; it did not wield political power ... the natural *mestizaje* (mixed-ness) of Galilee was a sign of

¹¹ Howard Thurman, *The luminous darkness: A personal interpretation of the anatomy of segregation and the ground of hope*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) p. 91.

¹² *Ibid*, 1965, p. 105

¹³ Virgilio Elizondo, *The future is mestizo: Life where cultures meet*. (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2000) p. 79.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 84

impurity and a cause for rejection.”¹⁵ Because of his location in a border town, Jesus grew up identifying with the most rejected of society; his love for the rejected ones was both a constraint and a signature of his ministry. Because of his identity as a Galilean, a *Mestizo* himself, “Jesus lives and offers to us the opportunity of breaking through the sin of the world—structures and boundaries of rejection—by accepting that we are all children of the same God-Abba¹⁶”

In terms of storying identity, I agree with Elizondo that *family of God* “offers a new group identity, characterized by revolutionary love and forgiveness. Being seen, known, and loved by God transforms us.”¹⁷ As Elizondo says, “The experience of being wanted *as one is*, of being needed and of being chosen, is a real and profound rebirth. ... In the *Kindom*.¹⁸

Elizondo and Thurman remind us of the hope of the gospel story, and the power it has to form us. The one shaped on the border, Jesus the Christ, is our model for developing faith in diverse contexts. Howard Thurman hoped that inclusive communities would lead to reconciliation and new identities. Virgilio Elizondo hoped in the mestizo nature of the Christ, and in the racial/cultural mixing of humans as disruptive of discrimination. I suggest that any Christianity that is relevant for urban contexts, any Christianity that is liberative inculturation must reject racism, discrimination, and oppression and must create racially and culturally diverse contexts for the thriving of humanity. Both of these theologians *story* by their own lives and in their writing this good news: our identities as family of God are best formed in relationships that are rich with difference. We grow empathy in these relationships. We grow trust in these relationships. We are changed in these relationships. We break down dividing walls in these relationships that lead to liberation, that call us to liberate one another.

If we are to follow in the footsteps of the Galilean, we need to develop our own reconciling, border capacities. For the praxis of liberative inculturation, leaders need

- The ability to bring critical analysis, faith tradition, and learned articulation to bear on the situations we see.
- Humility.
- Emotional Intelligence.
- The willingness to be wrong and take risks.
- The courage to speak the truth and to know when to be quiet and listen.
- The courage to deal with conflict, including the cognitive dissonance between what we think God and humanity should be and reality.
- To know how to navigate borders. Borders shift contextually and leaders have to discern where they are.
- To be self-reflexive, to be open and take in information.

¹⁵ Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean journey: The Mexican-American promise*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983) p. 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 63

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 94

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 100

- To have bold, visionary, prophetic spiritual willingness to act when action is not popular, knowing that deliverance is coming.
- To be able to live on the border in the midst of tension and death.
- Allies.

This Is Who We Are

On Pride Sunday, 2018, our congregation had its usual joy-filled, worship, celebrating who we are, in our diversity. We sang, we danced, we hugged it out. The scripture that day told the story of Jesus calming the storm. I love that story. Jesus is all chilled out in the boat, and the storm is raging and the disciples are tripping out. I see Jesus rubbing sleepy eyes, and saying, “What is all this fuss about?!?” Then he tells the storm to shut-up. And . . . it does. Those disciples wonder, who is this who can stop the storm?

There’s a storm raging. There’s a storm raging against anybody in this nation who isn’t white, straight, male, Evangelical Christian, and rich. There’s a storm raging for anyone on the margins who can’t pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and even though all of our leaders are immigrants, they want to close the borders to anyone who is Black and Brown. There is still a storm raging against women, and queer people.

In the midst of the storm, we are rising up. Women are rising up. Young people are rising up. Queer people are rising up. Poor people are rising up. Immigrants are rising up. Black people are rising up. Progressive white folks are rising up. Puerto Ricans are rising up. We are rising up, together. We are finding our voices, we are finding our calling. We are the living Body of God. We can stop these raging storms. We can do more than Jesus did, he tells us, if we believe. We are justice warriors, we are the revolutionary love army of God. This is our identity. This is our purpose.

This is Christian.

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