

9

Theology and the Power of the Margins in a Postmodern World

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Modern theology has broadened the horizons of theological reflection. It has opened its doors wider and admitted a larger group of people, thus making the task of theology more democratic in many ways. Rather than leaving matters of reflection about God to the clergy and a small number of authorized specialists, modern theologians found that everybody shares in an awareness of God. But modern theologians also felt that people share in this awareness of God to varying degrees. The ones who were seen as closest to God—and thus most competent in thinking about God—were the members of the middle class: particularly intellectuals and others at the peaks of modern civilization, usually male and always of white skin color, Europeans and Euro-Americans like myself. These people are, interestingly enough, still the main target for most of our mainline churches in the United States even today and make up the majority of the leadership.¹

In recent times, the horizons of theology have been broadened once again. Many of the principles of modern theology are challenged, for instance, by the broad cultural and economic shifts associated with what we now call postmodernity. One of the basic elements of postmodernity is a growing awareness of the limits of the self—not the human self in general, but the modern, middle-class self. This self, as the postmoderns claim, is no longer master in its own house. At least, it is no longer the sole master and has to share its power to a certain degree with others. There is a basic sense now that we do not exist in isolation. The modern self can no longer simply colonize, missionize, or exclude others without second thoughts.

The postmodern and postcolonialist self now finds it necessary to realize the existence of other people and (at least) to signal its benevolence where it reaches out to others. This new awareness of other people often includes a rudimentary appreciation for their difference and otherness. Here theological reflection broadens once again: the value of other people is beginning to rise, including the value of women and people of other cultures and races that often were not even on the map before. Pluralism and multiculturalism are now seen as positive values by many theologians. Others, among them evangelicals and post-liberals, make use of the broadening moves of the postmodern by reclaiming various parts of the Christian tradition. The voices of Christianity throughout the ages, many of them pushed aside by modern theology, tend to add different flavors as well to the theological enterprise.²

But there is another perspective whose distinctiveness is often overlooked at the end of modernity. The horizons are broadened not just from a post-modern perspective, but also from the experience of people on the margins of the postmodern world. Liberation theologians, for instance, have challenged modern thought not primarily because there is no room for ideals like multicultural difference and other forms of diversity, but because it neglects the lives of people at the margins and on the underside. The liberation perspective goes beyond the pluralism of postmodern thought, claiming not merely respect for people who are different but a special concern for those who are marginalized and oppressed. In the words of Latin American liberation theologians—words that are mirrored also in some official documents of the church—there needs to be a preferential option for the poor.³ This preferential option has been understood as rooted in God's own option for people on the margins, recorded in both the Old and the New Testaments. God's justice introduces new images of justice that go beyond our commonsense notions of justice. God's justice is based on the covenant relationship established by God which does not let go of the "least of these," those who are usually overlooked by universal notions of justice.⁴

Here theological reflection is broadened once again: people from the margins are entering the field and—this is the new insight that goes beyond pluralism and multiculturalism—*all* of theology needs to take their perspectives seriously. Liberation theologies are not the special interest theologies of people on the margins. In the words of the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 12:26), "If one member suffers, all suffer together." This has implications even for those of us who belong to the mainline, and it broadens our horizons. As a middle-class person I need to learn to think about God in relation to the lower classes; as a man I need to learn to think about God in relation to women; as a Euro-American I need to learn to think about God in relation to African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans; as a North American I need to learn to think about God in relation to people in South

America and other continents. This broadening move is crucial. We may never understand God without the perspective of those who are different, including in a special way the perspectives of those on the margins. The point of view from the position of the repressed throws new light on reality as a whole.⁵

What all this means is that we have now at least two critiques of modernity which help broaden our horizons. They raise different yet at times related questions. In this essay I will investigate what happens when these two critiques of modernity meet in situations of pressure that push toward liberation. What can postmodernity learn from the preferential option for the poor and from liberation theologies? And, what elements of postmodern thought might become an ally in the struggle for liberation?

Critique of Identity

One of the major insights of postmodern thought in its various forms is that the modern self's sense of identity is an illusion. We are not who we think we are. That is a scary thought—especially for those of us who tend to think that our success in life is self-made. Those of us in positions of power and authority tend to assume that our identity is secure because we have produced it ourselves: who we are is due to our own personal effort and merit. Postmodern thinkers destroy precisely this illusion when they remind us that our identity is never self-made. Who we are is always a product of various other factors. Poststructuralism, for instance, one of the most well-known forms of post-modern thought, emphasizes language: our language is never self-made; rather, it is inherited from others. Moreover, poststructuralists have argued that no one can control language, since language itself is a free-floating phenomenon that does not immediately provide access to hard-and-fast reality. Others emphasize culture: we are born into certain cultural settings which shape us to a large extent. Both language and culture are, of course, tied to issues of power.⁶ Yet others emphasize political and economic factors: we must not forget that political and economic forces also shape who we are, reaching all the way into our deepest desires and feelings. After all, is it not the declared goal of the advertising industry to shape desire?

The point is the same: who we are is to a considerable degree shaped by outside factors. If this is true, our middle-class North American belief in individualism needs to be seen for what it really is: an illusion. There has never been a "self-made man." It is common sense, of course, that our identity is the product of many different factors, including our families, education, and nationality. But postmodern thinkers have made us aware of a broader range of factors—many of them more hidden—that shape who we are. This critique of identity offers a major challenge to those in power. We are not the self-made

people that we think we are. We are not masters in our own house but are driven by various other forces that control us. Our success is produced on the basis of many factors.

People on the margins add a decisive point to this postmodern awareness, especially where they remind us that our success is often built on the back of others—on their labor and efforts and, at times, even on their misfortune and suffering. The amazing success of Europe and the United States, for instance, cannot truly be understood without the histories of conquest, colonialism, and slavery that provided both inexpensive raw materials and the labor forces necessary to build empires. In this context, even the North American stories of the Western frontier are not simply stories about people who knew how to take things into their own hands; despite the amazing achievements of individuals, these stories are also about people who built their identity on the back of others whose land they expropriated. The same is true, of course, for modern-day business executives; here success is tied to “lean production” and the creation of the largest short-term profit margins possible on the backs of workers both at home and abroad.

But how does the postmodern critique of identity relate to those without power, to nonpersons? Isn't it ironic that the notion of identity is called into question precisely at a time when people at the margins, like ethnic minorities, the poor, and women, are finally gaining some degree of self-worth and self-identity? African American writer bell hooks reminds us that the critique of identity can be problematic for those who are still fighting for their own identity. But, she adds, this critique can also be useful if it leads to a better understanding of the multifaceted nature of the identity of people at the margins. The critique of identity goes against the old racist myths of essential blackness, for instance, a myth that claims that African American people can be understood in terms of one factor only.⁷ The critique of identity reminds us that African American people cannot be understood simply in terms of the factor of “blackness” and helps us understand the problem: such universal categories are invariably determined by those in power. In this case, repression operates on the basis of universalizations and generalizations which do not necessarily have to take a negative form. Positive stereotypes of identity can serve a similar repressive purpose.

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has made a similar point about the situation of women in patriarchal systems—the powers that be tend to control others not just by sheer force but also by defining their identity. Women—and the same is true of ethnic minorities, poor people, and others at the margins—are often either romanticized or demonized: the two sides of the same coin. Men, for instance, tend to draw up idealistic images of women, a process that looks like a rather harmless thing at first sight. Isn't it a nice gesture to put others on a pedestal, especially those who are frequently overlooked by the powers that be? But in idealizing and romanticizing women, men reassert

control: they are the ones who determine what women are to be like. They are the ones who know what women in general are all about. Women, in turn, liberate themselves not by buying into the romantic illusions and enjoying them, but by breaking out. They begin to liberate themselves when they understand with Lacan that “*the woman does not exist*”—the woman as an ideal created by the male fantasy. The same is true for other oppressed groups: “*The poor do not exist*,” as one of the first epigraphs of my book *Remember the Poor* states, means that the universal category is false. That is not to say that women and poor people are not real—just the opposite: they are so real that they cannot and must not be defined in terms of the fantasies of those in power, whether they are men or the wealthy.

In this way, the postmodern critique of identity can help theology as a whole connect with the everyday lives of marginalized people and the important contributions that they can make. When we interrupt the processes not only of demonizing others but also of idealizing and romanticizing them, the “power of the poor in history”—the title of an important book by Gustavo Gutiérrez—appears in new light. The critique of identity becomes an important tool in deconstructing the stereotypes of the powerful who seek to define people on the margins in terms of a unified identity and a common essence in order to pull them back into the system. The challenge is geared to the process of universalization in which such identities are misused by those in charge—and which covers up the fact that the dominant system needs the margins.⁸ Only in a second step will we need to examine this in terms of the struggle for identity of people at the margins.

Part of the power of the margins lies in a flexible identity that can never be quite grasped in terms of the status quo. Marcella Althaus-Reid, an Argentinean theologian teaching in Scotland, points out that indigenous women know a few things about postmodernism and the end of the grand narratives of the Western world since they are themselves subjects of fragmentation, and due to the fact that they have long lost their own narratives. These lessons do not derive from any awareness of the technicalities of postmodern discourse but from their life experiences.⁹ Nelly Richard, one of the most prominent theorists of the postmodern in Latin America, also acknowledges a certain space that is produced for “cultural peripheries” once the Eurocentric models of modernity are challenged.¹⁰ Here, a fundamental distrust of Western ways of thinking manifests itself, and the monopoly of the universal categories of those in power can no longer be maintained, whether they manifest themselves in theological, historical, sociological, anthropological, or other discourses. In this context indigenous traditions and other cultural manifestations affected by repressions can play liberating roles where they expose the overarching system in power, be it modernist or postmodernist. At this point, there is no longer any need to construct yet another universalizing and totalizing system.

The so-called subaltern study groups have explored similar issues. These

groups study phenomena of subordination and oppression along different lines, including class, age, gender, caste, and social position.¹¹ In its founding statement, the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group argues that analysis must go beyond the study of a “unitary, class-based subject and its concomitant assumption of the identity of theoretical-literary texts produced by elite intellectuals.”¹² Here, the postmodern critique of identity is deepened by a closer look at the actual situation of the people. The group points out that “the subaltern is not one thing”; in other words, it is not an easily defined reality such as *the poor* or *the people*. The subaltern is rather a “mutating, migrating subject.”¹³ In the words of John Beverley, “Subalternity is a relational rather than an ontological identity—that is, a contingent, and overdetermined identity (or identities).”¹⁴ Feminist theorists have made a similar point: once we realize that identities on the margins are complex, we need to go beyond universal categories such as “woman” and “feminine gender identity.”¹⁵ This notion of the subaltern adds a whole new dimension to the ambiguous postmodern concerns for otherness and difference that are often not much more than adaptations to the postmodern market, as I will argue below. Here, new and stronger forms of otherness emerge that deal with the broadest possible range of those who might be considered the “least of these”: the plight of the workers, as well as of the unemployed, the homeless, the peasants, and even children who endure various forms of oppression. Thus the preferential option for the poor becomes much broader than before, a move which requires not only greater awareness of who is sucked into the position of the other in today’s world, but also a whole new set of encounters with people beyond one’s own horizon of class, gender, race, and social location.¹⁶ Here, the theological world broadens, not only through a wider horizon but also through the challenges posed by a whole new group of theologians emerging out of nowhere, as it were—from the margins.

The postmodern critique of identity is aimed at the definitions of identity that move from the top down and that pretend to be universal.¹⁷ There is no identity that exists apart from relationships and structures of power and that can be determined once and for all. The search for identity by those who are only now developing a sense of their own worth is not the problem, since subaltern identities are acutely aware of relationships and structures of power which crush them and include an awareness of their fragile natures. The problem has to do with the process of universalization in which such identities become oppressive once more.

The strategies of what has been called “identity politics” become less important at this point. Resisting the powers that be by affirming the identity of one’s own group can even be counterproductive. Not only can this lead to a minority group unconsciously adopting the dominant images and prejudices, for instance, of femininity or blackness. Such hard-and-fast identities also often lead to a fragmentation of interests among people on the margins and thus to

the dissolution of resistance in postmodern pluralism where each group seems to be fighting only for itself. Legendary writer and activist Angela Davis talks about the position of black women not in terms of hard-and-fast identities but as a “provisional identity that allows the move beyond identity politics.”¹⁸ In this way, new coalitions between interests of race, class, and gender might emerge. While all of us need to begin with our provisional identity—with who we are at first sight—we must not stop there. As an African-American woman, Davis finds those projects most interesting “that consider ‘women of color’ a point of departure rather than a level of organizing.”¹⁹ She argues for the formation of coalitions that are “unpredictable or unlikely.” Those coalitions are grounded not in identity but in political projects where people resist domination and oppression and tie together not only the usual groups that might be seen as resisting, such as prisoners, immigrant workers, and labor unions, but also others such as prisoners and students.²⁰ This makes sense also for theological reflection from the margins: moving beyond narrowly conceived identity politics, broad new collaborative projects become possible.

Resisting Oppression

Liberation theologies have been rooted not first of all in the minds of theologians but in actual resistance to specific forms of oppression. This is why there has never been a generic type of liberation theology—a fact that has often escaped the theological establishment. Latin American liberation theology, for instance, understood that the poverty of millions of people was not self-caused and, therefore, not due to a lack of personal effort or to being at a somehow less “developed” stage in history. Poverty is closely related to oppressive economic systems. At the same time in the North, African American liberation theologians realized that even though slavery had been abolished and racism had been challenged in the civil rights movement, their people were still not free. Feminist theologians became increasingly aware of the fact that, despite some gains for women such as the right to vote, half of humanity was still not taken seriously in both society and the church. Those are only a few examples. Today others have joined the resistance; in the United States women of African American, Hispanic, and Asian descent have contributed their own visions.

But how is oppression to be resisted? There is always the danger that certain forms of resistance lead to a mere reversal of power structures. Revolutions that do not move from the bottom up appear to be particularly problematic in this sense. The modern middle-class revolutions of the eighteenth century in France and North America, for instance, might need to be rethought in this light. The driving forces in those revolutions were not necessarily those who suffered the most—the impoverished masses. While power did shift hands and the power base broadened, it was soon pulled into another cycle of

self-centeredness. Power was now funneled into the hands of another strata of society which, while having a somewhat broader basis, still did not include those who suffered the most. In the newly founded United States, for instance, democracy meant that only men with a certain amount of property and social standing were allowed to vote. While the end of rule by the British monarchy led to power being shared by a larger group, most people, including women, men without property, and slaves, remained at the margins. Their marginalization was not a mere accident but was in many ways necessary for the development of the new nation: the economy of the antebellum South was heavily based on slave labor, and the overall economic and geographic expansion of the United States is linked with the various pressures imposed on other marginalized groups (e.g., Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans). Ultimately, one master was exchanged for another, and the middle class took over more or less where the monarchy had been forced to leave off. Without trying to give overly simplistic explanations of complex processes, the peculiar nature of this situation needs to be recognized. There is a latent danger that resistance ends in reversals of power if the deeper repressions of a system are not taken into account.

In sum, it seems that in these middle-class revolutions the problems are merely pushed around. The recent phenomenon of the so-called culture wars is only the latest example of a situation where problems are pushed around with little real change. The culture wars resemble earlier middle-class struggles in that the reality of people on the margins does not play a role and is of no interest to the participants, except in a top-down way. The existence of the margins surfaces in the culture wars, for instance, in the debates about what constitutes the literary canon (should one admit "nontraditional" texts?) or about welfare. But the margins are addressed in terms of the center. Nowhere is this clearer than in the welfare debates, where the disagreement is about method (do we need welfare programs or character training?) while the basic assumptions are the same in both camps: both assume that the task is to find ways in which we can integrate the marginalized back into the system. In short, the margins are objectified in the center's struggle to define itself.

The fact that resistance has at times led to such reversals of power is often used to discourage resistance in general. Does resistance necessarily have to lead to the kinds of reversals where the self-centeredness of one group in power is simply replaced by the self-centeredness of another, even though perhaps more broad-based, group? Some of the major themes of modernity may—despite their liberating intent—have taken the topic of self-centeredness one step further. The winner takes all—this attitude is justified frequently on ground of the doctrines of social Darwinism. And humanistic and democratic ideals have been fueled by images of humanity that were not universal—as modernity claimed—but rooted in certain images of humanity that were defined by the white, male, intellectual, and entrepreneurial members of the

middle class. It is not surprising, for instance, that the Declaration of Human Rights, developed during the French Revolution and at the basis of our modern understanding of freedom and liberation, does not include the right of equal access to property. But there are other forms of resistance.

The postmodern critiques of identity and of the modern middle-class self, as well as a sustained concern for otherness and difference, may be useful in developing new and more effective strategies of resistance. Replacing the modern self in its imagined self-sufficiency and power with yet another self with a similar configuration will not make much of a difference. We need a different model. Those of us who resist oppression need to understand first of all that we are not God—a basic theological insight that has at times been repressed in modernity. We are not in positions of absolute control. Furthermore, we are not the individualistic monads or the self-made people of the American dream—another basic theological insight. We need to realize that our identity is built in relation to others (our parents, teachers, friends) and often also on the back of others (low-wage laborers across the globe and at home, women, minorities). This insight is especially important for those of us who stand in solidarity with the oppressed, yet who do not suffer much direct oppression ourselves. While it seems to me that oppressed people themselves are usually quite aware of their limits, of their webs of relationships and dependencies, and of the fact that they are not God, these are lessons that those of us who join in their struggles need to learn time and again. When people thus stop playing God, there is a good chance that we might become aware more clearly of God's own role in resisting and transforming the powers that be! Here the problem is perhaps not first of all the oft-lamented dualisms of the modern scientific worldview (even though the mentality of control is embodied in these theories as well), but the more organic and relational vision of a social Darwinism according to which only the fittest survive and natural selection weeds out the weak.

In this context, the mushrooming critiques of individualism and the exhortations to establish community are no longer helpful in resisting the powers that be. Not only do they tend to cover up the parasitic nature of our identity, they also help reproduce this attitude of control in a form of group egoism. If efforts to build community do not take into account that what distorts community is not individualism but oppressive relationships, they will end up perpetuating the status quo (exemplified, for instance, by the so-called gated communities and the segregation found in the large majority of our church communities). When this is clear, a simple reversal of power might be avoided. We need to shape new ways of living together and new ways of building community. From a Native American perspective, Robert Allen Warrior has argued that even the oppressed must learn to participate in the struggle for liberation "without making their story the whole story. Otherwise the sins of the past will be visited upon us again."²¹ Warrior exemplifies this in terms of the Exodus

story and the conquest of the Promised Land: Do the Israelites engage in simple reversals of power? What happens to those who are not on the side of the people of Israel? The biblical accounts themselves present different undercurrents, according to which Israel either took over the Promised Land or developed in processes of assimilation with the inhabitants of the land.²²

In sum, we can now clarify a few common misunderstandings. First, liberation theology and the option for the poor has nothing to do with a type of revolution that simply turns things upside down and puts absolute control in the hands of yet another group. This misunderstanding is rooted in our own middle-class history, coming out of the modern revolutions in the West. Simple reversals of power are not inevitable.

Second—and this misunderstanding represents the ever more popular opposite extreme—liberation theology is not about helping the poor or about trying to solve the problems of people under pressure and in need. This misunderstanding is related to contemporary attitudes toward social change and reinforces both the role of those in power and those who are repressed. Whether the models are based on images of development, economic and social progress, or so-called compassionate conservatism, nothing will ever change when those in power try to take things into their own hands. This will simply turn other people into our own image.

A third misunderstanding poses itself in relation to a postmodern mindset. Here liberation seems to be accomplished through pluralism, multiculturalism, and what is now called “diversity management.” But does this postmodern revolution ever reach the margins?²³ Or is it pulled into the logic of the market that—in its diverse manifestations that reach even into the church—realizes that in order to stay in business we need to increase the reach of our products?²⁴ Such approaches to diversity broaden the horizons somewhat, but do not lead to a fundamental challenge of the powers that be.

Liberation theologies will be able to put up any significant resistance to oppression only where they maintain sufficiently strong forms of solidarity with the oppressed. Solidarity transforms both oppressor and oppressed, leading to new and constructive avenues of resistance and new ways of living. The only thing that will keep our resistance honest, therefore, is a renewed option for the poor—an ever closer connection with the margins.

Challenging Postmodernity from the Margins

The perspectives from the margins invite a critique of modernity broader than that advanced by postmodernism, thus expanding and challenging the postmodern perspective itself. Standard definitions of both modernity and postmodernity usually forget their confinement to a First World perspective. Yet modernity has deeper roots than the European Enlightenment and the Indus-

trial Revolution. As Latin American philosopher and theologian Enrique Dussel has argued, modernity needs to be seen in relation to Columbus’s arrival in the New World in 1492.²⁵ Modernity does not begin with René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and the ideas of other famous philosophers, but with Christopher Columbus, Hernando Cortés, and—we might add from a North American perspective—continues with the founding fathers of the United States of America. Columbus’s “I conquer” precedes the Cartesian “I think therefore I am” by almost one hundred years—and both attitudes reverberate in the affirmation of the United States’s Manifest Destiny in the new continent. In all of these models, other people are subordinated to the expanding powers of the modern self. The ability of the modern European and North American self to define itself as self-in-control is fueled by oppressive relations to the natives in both Americas, as well as by oppressive relations to the slaves taken from Africa and all those others who labored in the mines, in the manufactures, in the fields, and in the homes. We can understand neither modernity nor postmodernity from within, without a look at its margins, without an encounter with those who are repressed.²⁶ The postmodern critique of modernity makes sense only if it manages to give more thought to what these encounters with repression mean for us today.

For this reason, postmodernist discourses need to be broadened in relation to what is now called postcolonial discourse.²⁷ Modernity is the time when both Europeans and North Americans are deeply involved in colonial enterprises. This throws new light on my own identity as a Euro-American as well. To a large degree the modern self has established itself in the subjugation of those who are other. More than 85% of the world have been colonized by Europe at one point or another, and “only parts of Arabia, Persia, Afghanistan, Mongolia, Tibet, China, Siam and Japan have never been under formal European government.”²⁸ While the modern colonial histories have by and large drawn to a close, this history of subjugation continues in different ways. The U.S. response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, for instance, has targeted the modern heirs of the first three of these uncolonized parts of the world (Arabia, Iran/Iraq, and Afghanistan), and the global-market economy has its own ways of putting pressure on places like China.

Postcolonial discourse reminds us, further, that both the modern and the postmodern realities are tied into economic issues in a complex sense. Postcolonial theorist Ania Loomba reminds us that “modern colonialism did more than extract tribute, goods, and wealth from the countries that it conquered”—these facts are common knowledge. What is less well known is the fact that colonizing nations also “restructured the economies of the latter, drawing them into a complex relationship with their own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonised and colonial countries.”²⁹ The genesis of modernity, capitalism, and colonialism is, therefore, related in much deeper ways than is often recognized; not only did the colonized countries

contribute the raw materials for capitalist production, they also provided the context for capitalism. Once we realize how modernity, capitalism, and colonialism have grown hand in hand, postmodernity appears in new light as well: we need to pay closer attention to its relation to contemporary forms of global and transnational capitalism, including new forms of economic "colonialism." Postcolonial discourse itself and the whole idea of a postcolonial world need to be seen in this light, too.

Given this expanded understanding of modernity and postmodernity, postmodern critiques of the modern need to be reevaluated in light of the encounter with the subjugated other. This leads us to a rereading of several key concepts of contemporary postmodernist discourse. From the perspective of the other, the postmodern critique of identity and the postmodern concerns for pluralism, difference, and otherness appear in a new light. Multiculturalism, while it gives more room to others, often feeds right back into the market. Multiculturalism is marketed as fun by diverse business enterprises such as media outlets like MTV, fashion designers, the restaurant industry, and many others. Such commodified forms of multiculturalism are no longer threatening, and it should not come as a surprise that the suburbs—still the safe havens of the middle class—have become the most racially diverse places in the country.³⁰ Postmodern pluralism thus tends to create a safety net that keeps people from plunging into the awareness of social conflict, the tensions between rich and poor and between those in power and those without power. Gutiérrez has observed that despite the postmodern appreciation for otherness, difference, and even a renewed interest in the stories of the people, there seems to be a certain amnesia when it comes to the plight of the poor.³¹ Postmodern minds are entertained by differences to such a degree that the challenges tend to fade from view: the fragmentation of our lives increases the fun-factor. We love the colorful traditions and artifacts of other cultures for instance—we even plan our vacations around them—as long as they don't challenge us. Mission trips to other parts of the world—sponsored by more and more churches in the United States—are easily sucked up into this mentality as well: the differences end up in slide shows and presentations that celebrate the generosity of the sending body rather than the challenge posed by the other.

It may seem paradoxical, but the so-called postmodern turn to the other is in danger of covering up the challenge of the other. Forms of this cover-up appear also in different reactions of contemporary theology as it engages the postmodern. The tensions of postmodernity (created precisely where the other is subdued) can be interpreted away as nothing more than a series of accidents that call for a calming response. Theologian Terrence Tilley suggests that one's terror in a postmodern world can be calmed by gathering and telling the stories of various communities.³² Postmodern tensions can also be interpreted as part of human existence in general, as in Mark C. Taylor's postmodern theological and philosophical adventures. Since the center is no longer as clearly visible

as in the days of high modernity, we all appear to be on the margins now.³³ Along those lines, difference and otherness are once more integrated as part of the status quo, the way things are. If the actual burden of those pressured by postmodernity to live in inhumane conditions is not considered, even popular traditions and cultures can be used to reconstruct safe havens for power and privilege once modernity's safe havens have been defeated. Obviously, such an approach does not challenge the powers that be.

Postmodern sensitivities are ambiguous. Postmodern theorists (whether they are aware of it or not) are not presenting us with abstract ideas, invented in the ivory towers, but with the logic of our age with all its distortions and problems. For this reason we cannot stop at the most common level of postmodern critique—merely unveiling the internal idiosyncrasies of modernity and of the modern self. We need to go one step further and take into account the deeper tensions of the present which are part of the postmodern condition and which may have indeed worsened in the transition from modernity, such as the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, the power of the global market, and the harsh character of life at its margins. Many numbers indicate that the gap between rich and poor is growing larger—even within the United States and even during the tremendous economic boom of the 1990s. Worldwide over thirty thousand children are dying every day from preventable causes.

Facile endorsements of postmodernity are shattered precisely when we get in touch with the reality of the other person, the marginalized.³⁴ Here a new challenge emerges—revealing the asymmetries of a pluralistic society in which the powerful are still powerful and the powerless are still powerless. Well-meaning references to difference, to otherness, and to relations to the other person reach their deepest moments of crisis when having to deal with the question of who and what put (and is holding) the other in its place.

The reality of the other, of people at the margins, is not a mere accident—a colorful addition to a "tossed salad" (a popular image among pluralists) and something that just happens to be there—but one of the creations of modernity in collaboration with the free market that has not disappeared in postmodernity. Difference and otherness are, therefore, not primarily philosophical principles but structures deeply ingrained in our societies. Postmodern theory can no longer afford to neglect this part of modern history.

In North American theology, feminist thinkers have been among the first to perceive the problem. Over a decade ago Sharon Welch, for instance, called attention to the fact that the marginalized are not recognized as part of the postmodern voice.³⁵ Welch points out that even the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, one of the postmodern founders, ends up coopting the world's different peoples and cultures "as the components of an ephemeral personal style" due to his failure to listen to the margins.³⁶ Yet Lyotard's critique of the grand narratives of modernity—the stories that the powerful tell about themselves—does not have to end up in the pluralism of micronarratives where everyone

can pick and choose at whim. Here the postcolonial perspective is helpful: the critique of the grand narratives of the colonialists is based on their oppressive and exclusive character rather than on some general claims that grand narratives are always a bad idea. The goal is, therefore, not to celebrate micronarratives in general and to increase the number of narratives, but to pay attention precisely to those micronarratives that have been excluded and repressed.³⁷

In order to develop a deeper understanding of the interaction of postmodernity and the margins, the notion of the symptom as developed by Jacques Lacan may be helpful. Lacan shows that that symptoms of suffering and conflict are not merely accidental and essentially insignificant deviations from an otherwise normal state, deviations that can, therefore, be cured away. This is usually the way the status quo, whether modern or postmodern, tends to interpret symptoms. Most of our welfare policies, for instance, whether the social programs of modern liberalism or the various proposals of postmodernity (from compassionate conservatism to more progressive strategies of urban renewal), are based on the idea that people on the margins need to be integrated into an otherwise well-functioning system. In these perspectives the lives of people on the margins are indeed seen as accidental and essentially insignificant deviations from an otherwise normal state (people who are down on their luck, people who for some reason lack the resources that "normal" people have). People on the margins, therefore, are classified as objects of welfare or charity; they are seen as a "job to be done"; in short, they are in need of being reintegrated into the system.

Lacan suggests a radically different point of view. He argues that symptoms are in fact the products of the prevailing system itself. Symptoms are the result of repressions produced by the system. They are the things that are pushed below the surface and that guarantee the smooth functioning of the system. Symptoms, created in repressions, are thus indicators of the true nature of the system. In simply trying to cure away the symptom without looking deeper, the truth of the system is constantly covered up.³⁸ The symptom is, thus, not just the product of a curious accident that can be cured away. For Lacan, it is in listening to the symptom in a process of analysis that one finds the key to an understanding of the mechanism of the powers of the dominant system of which one is a part.³⁹ Moreover the symptom, thus understood, is also at the source of new energy for resisting the powers that be. Here, Lacan reminds us, is where desire is shaped and reshaped. One might also argue that the pressures built up in the symptom create counterpressures.⁴⁰

This adds a crucial new element to the postmodern concern for difference. Difference is no longer just the free and accidental flow of difference where nobody gets hurt (one of the favorite notions of postmodern theorists is the linguistic concept of "metonymy," the free flow of difference on the level of the signifier). Fresh encounters with the margins remind us that difference now needs to be seen in light of mechanisms of repression, where the identity

of one person or group is established on the back of others (Lacan describes these mechanisms with the linguistic concept of "metaphor," calling attention to those signifiers which have been repressed from the happy flow of difference at the surface level).⁴¹ In this way, the postmodern turn to the other can no longer bypass the question "who put the other in its place?" The concern for the margins reminds us that people usually do not marginalize themselves and, ultimately, points to the truth about the system itself. In this sense, postmodern theology, even where it is interested in liberation theology, popular culture, difference, and the other, makes sense only where it begins to take a deeper look below the surface.

It is clearer now why the encounter with the margins is more crucial in postmodernity than ever before, especially in light of the postmodern concerns for difference and otherness. Current notions of otherness and difference—celebrating an end to the rigid identities of modernity and the free flow of difference—end up being smoke screens if they do not take into account those deeper ruptures of global society and the harsh character of its margins. The reality of the other, the marginalized, is not a given or a mere accident. The realities of life on the margins are in many ways the creation of modern market economy, industrialization, colonization, and efforts at civilization—processes which have changed form but have not necessarily ended in postmodern times. In this context, references to the other are not only politically and socially but also theologically useless if they do not at the same time raise the question who and what put (and is holding) this other in its place of repression even in the postmodern world.

If theology is serious about the turn to the other, it needs to pay more attention to people pushed to the margins in all walks of life, in order to learn what is holding them in place. Theologies that have often been designated "special-interest theologies," such as feminist theology, African American theology, Hispanic theology, *mujerista* theology, and womanist theology, now become common-interest theologies, since they hold an important key to understanding the truth about all of us.⁴²

Conclusion

From my perspective as a Euro-American male theologian it seems that even in postmodernity few things are more important than developing respect for the other person, especially for those whom we have pushed and continue to push to the margins and the underside of society. This includes a variety of people, including children, women, ethnic minorities, low-income workers and those who cannot be employed due to cutbacks and "lean production," people in other parts of the world whose resources we use, and those who challenge our lifestyles through different sexual, political, and other orientations. We

need to realize that in isolation we cannot be fully human—we never could, as the dehumanizing tendencies in both modernity and postmodernity have shown in their own ways. In isolation, we will never find out the truth about ourselves, who we really are, nor will we have the energy to change anything of substance. Ultimately, in isolation we cannot survive. In this situation, the postmodern concerns for the deconstruction of the modern self's autonomy, for difference and otherness, for popular culture, and for the margins point in the right direction and might yet help to create an opening for listening more closely to what we have repressed and to become acquainted with the plight of the other.

Top-down approaches will no longer work. Handouts or charity—understood as taking care of the needy—may make things worse if they only make people on the top feel better about themselves. Neither will things change through broad-based welfare programs that assume that all we need to do is integrate more people into the system. In either case, everything stays as it is. Top-down approaches in theology will no longer work, either. Telling people at the margins what and how to think about God always ends in creating them in our mirror image. We can no longer afford to think about God from the narrowness of one perspective alone—and the perspectives from the top seem to be the most narrow. At the same time, however, romanticizing people at the margins will no longer work either. In romanticizing others we simply reaffirm our own control—and the theological horizon will remain as narrow as before.⁴³ In all of these cases we miss what liberation theologians have called the “power of the poor.”

One of the things that might be learned from the initial responses to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, is that situations of high pressure and innocent suffering bring people together. In this tragedy, pressure and suffering became matters of common interest that cut to the core of our identity and split open the illusionary identities of control and security that we had constructed for ourselves. In this situation, not only a new sense of solidarity emerged but new questions were raised—if only for a short time. Before it could be suppressed, the incredulous question “why is this happening to us?” led to some deeper suspicions, perhaps best captured in the term *blowback*—a new word created by none other than the CIA in reference to the unintended consequences of the pressure tactics of U.S. foreign policy.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, critical sentiments were quickly filtered out. Structures for such filtering processes created prior to these events kicked in: not long before September 11, for instance, the FBI had provided U.S. teachers with lists that would help them identify students that were likely to commit acts of lethal violence. One characteristic that required screening, according to these lists, is students’ “resentment over real or perceived injustices.”⁴⁵

How can this attitude be changed? We need to recognize and develop more respect for the contributions of those in situations of pressure. This can happen, of course, only by daring to look outside of the ivory towers and gated communities, and it will include—this is the hardest part—the risk of being challenged by others. There is another aspect of learning to respect others that I want to mention in closing. This aspect undergirds my argument as a whole and grounds its theological impulse. I have seen many signs that in learning to respect other people, particularly those whom we often overlook, we can also learn again how to respect God, whom we likewise often overlook. Learning to respect people at the margins teaches us an important lesson about theology—and here the circle closes: In our time, no talk about respect for God—the genuine subject of theology—will make any difference whatsoever if it is not closely related to learning new respect for other people.⁴⁶ Where we fail to recognize the actual difference of others, the difference of the divine Other (the divine resistance to the way things are) cannot be fully appreciated either. If we miss the transforming power of others, we also miss the transforming power of God as Other.

NOTES

1. For the background of this argument see Joerg Rieger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), chap. 1.
2. In postmodern thought, there is a basic appreciation of otherness and difference. Meaning is produced no longer by establishing identity but by dealing with difference and different perspectives.
3. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter “*Sollicitudo rei socialis*” (On social concern; December 30, 1987), 42, talks about “the option or love of preference for the poor” as “an option, or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness.” The pope encourages the “embrace [of] the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future” (76–77), concluding that our daily lives and our decisions in the political and economic fields must be marked by these realities.
4. This is the point that has been most often misunderstood in interpretations of the various liberation theologies. There is a fundamental difference between the biblical notions of justice which allow for God’s election and special care within specific relationships and commonsense notions of justice based on distributive concepts according to which everybody ought to be treated exactly the same and which thus often overlook the fact that there are enormous differences between human beings and that some of the gaps continue to grow.
5. This is one of the basic points of my book *Remember the Poor: The Challenge to Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998).
6. See, for instance, the work of Michel Foucault, who in his own ways re-

minded us of the various levels of meaning of the fact that knowledge is power; *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

7. bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," *Postmodern Culture* 1.1 (Sept. 1990): 9–11.
8. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6ff., has shown how even the highly philosophical Enlightenment systems of Kant and Hegel need the "native informant."
9. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 3. She goes on to explain that "probably these women and children sitting in the streets with their merchandise do not remember that they are miraculous survivors of one of the greatest destructions of the Grand Narratives the world has ever seen" (4). The allusion is of course to Jean-François Lyotard's interpretation of postmodernity as the critique of metanarratives. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, *Theory and History of Literature* 10, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, foreword by Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
10. Nelly Richard, "Cultural Peripheries: Latin America and Postmodernist De-centering," in *The Postmodern Debate in Latin America*, ed. John Beverley, José Oviedo, and Michael Aronna (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 221. Richard suspects, however, that this is not going far enough and that even in postmodernity the periphery is not allowed to really speak for itself.
11. The subaltern, according to Ranajit Guha (cofounder of the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group), is "a name for the general attribute of subordination . . . whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way." Quoted in John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 26.
12. Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, "Founding Statement," *boundary 2* 20.3 (Fall 1993): 114. The document points out that identity was the theme of the sixties and seventies.
13. *Ibid.*, 121.
14. Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation*, 30.
15. Postmodern feminist pioneers Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 391, point out that "postmodern-feminist theory would dispense with the idea of a subject of history. It would replace unitary notions of 'woman' and 'feminine gender identity' with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation." More recently, efforts to relate issues of gender, colonialism, and religious discourse have carried this argument to the next step. See *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, ed. Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan (New York: Routledge, 2002).

16. Spivak has questioned whether the subaltern can speak for itself. But this issue cannot be resolved in general terms. Spivak's example is widow immolation in colonial India. The widow who is to be burnt together with her deceased husband has

indeed little room to express herself. See the discussion in Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 233ff. But there are other places where the subaltern does speak in various ways (in my book *Remember the Poor*, I argue that these forms of speaking are often produced in the very places of repression). The notion of the subaltern reminds us that even within the ranks of the colonized there are different groups. Loomba puts it like this: "In fact if we really believe that human subjects are constituted by several different discourses then we are obliged to consider these articulations. Thus, in order to listen for subaltern voices we need to uncover the multiplicity of narratives that were hidden by the grand narratives, but we still need to think about how the former are woven together" (241).

17. Regarding the reconstruction of the identity of the oppressed, Sharon Welch makes a helpful suggestion when, in response to Foucault's critique of authorship, she comments that "what is dead is not the author per se but the author who can assume the mantle of universality." Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 150.

18. Angela Davis, "Reflections on Race, Class, and Gender in the USA," *The Angela Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 313.

19. *Ibid.*, 320. She reminds us to avoid the "pitfalls of essentialism."

20. *Ibid.*, 324. The essays in a recent book on the question of class identity and postmodernity (*Re/presenting Class: Essays in Postmodern Marxism*, ed. J. K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen Resnick, and Richard Wolff [Durham: Duke University Press, 2001]) argue along similar lines: fluid and uncentered understandings of class identity counter an imagined capitalist totality and provide new and creative means of resistance. See, e.g., the introduction, 16–21.

21. Robert Allen Warrior, "A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the "Third World,"* ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 294.

22. See, for instance, the differences between Joshua and Judges.

23. At present, the problematic character of the postmodern concern for otherness and difference is perhaps realized most clearly by those who are closest to actual oppression and marginalization. From a Latin American perspective, Neil Larsen talks about the naïveté of postmodernism, tied to the belief that once difference is allowed to take over, the imperialistic power of modern universalisms is overcome. Neil Larsen, "Postmodernism and Imperialism: Theory and Politics in Latin America," in *The Postmodern Debate in Latin America*, ed. John Beverley, José Oviedo, and Michael Aronna (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 110–34. Larsen's article has played an important role in the Latin American debate of postmodernism. For other critiques of the postmodern from the periphery cf. the essays in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92.3 (Summer 1993) and in *Postmodernism Debate in Latin America*.

24. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 138, point out the parallels between the postmodern and the global market economy: "When we begin to consider the ideologies of corporate capital and the world market, it certainly appears that the postmodernist and postcolonialist theorists who advocate a politics of difference, fluidity, and hybridity have been outflanked by the strategies of power." The postmodern strategy of introducing difference and otherness is effective primarily where power is based on identity and binaries. But

where the power of the status quo itself appropriates otherness and difference, new ways of resistance need to be explored.

25. Enrique Dussel, *Von der Erfindung Amerikas zur Entdeckung des Anderen: Ein Projekt der Transmoderne*, *Theologie Interkulturell* 6 (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1993), 10.
26. Cf. also Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, ed. and trans. Eduardo Mendieta (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1996).
27. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 117, point out that the critique of the "the deconstruction of the centralised, logocentric master narratives of European culture, is very similar to the post-colonial project of dismantling the Centre/Margin binarism of imperial discourse." Some postcolonial texts, of course, precede the postmodern icons Derrida and Foucault: "The rejection of the Cartesian individual, the instability of signification, the location of the subject in language or discourse, the dynamic operation of power: all these familiar poststructuralist concepts emerge in post-colonial thought in different guises which nevertheless confirm the political agency of the colonised subject."
28. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, xiii.
29. *Ibid.*, 3.
30. "Suburbia, the New Melting Pot," *Dallas Morning News*, December 12, 2001, pp. 1A, 12A. In a well-to-do suburb of Dallas, Plano, shoppers for homes "do not seem interested in finding neighborhoods with a particular racial makeup. . . . They just look at whatever they can afford."
31. Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Liberation Theology and the Future of the Poor," in *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).
32. In a postmodern world of difference, the turn to localized communal practices and stories seem to provide a safe haven. Tilley thus ends by inviting theology to "gather together and tell stories of God to calm our terror and hold our hope on high." Terrence Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), 150.
33. Taylor is concerned about those "marginal people" who are "suspended between the loss of old certainties and the discovery of new beliefs." Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5.
34. Latin American thinkers continue to remind us of this. See Gutiérrez, "Liberation Theology and the Future of the Poor," and the work of Nelly Richard and George Yúdice.
35. Welch, *Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 145ff. Teresa L. Ebert, "The 'Difference' of Postmodern Feminism," *College English* 53.8 (December 1991): 899, has pointed out that "difference in postmodern thought displaces social contradictions." A feminist perspective, on the other hand, knows that differences are not free floating but are related to social contradictions. For this reason, the other inscribed within the system needs to be taken more seriously.
36. Welch, *Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 148.
37. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 249: "We need to move away from global narratives not because they necessarily always swallow up complexity, but be-

cause they historically have done so, and once we have focused on these submerged stories and perspectives, the entire structure appears transformed."

38. Cf. Jacques Lacan, "Seminar 22 R.S.I." (1974-75) in *Ornicar? 4* (1975): 106. For an interpretation and further reference, cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 23ff.
39. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 128, interprets this process in light of the situation of Jewish people in Nazi Germany.
40. See Rieger, *God and the Excluded*, chap. 5.
41. See Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud," in *écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 164. Metonymy stands for the notion of structural difference. Lacan defines it as the word-to-word connection. Metaphor is the substitution of one word by another.
42. Cf. Joerg Rieger, "Developing a Common Interest Theology from the Underside," in *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).
43. The point of my book *Remember the Poor* is to find new ways beyond this dichotomy.
44. See Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Holt, 2000).
45. Henry A. Giroux, "Mis/Education and Zero Tolerance: Disposable Youth and the Politics of Domestic Militarization," *boundary 2* 28.3 (2001): 87 n. 76.
46. See my book *God and the Excluded*.