

Decolonizing Religion: Congregational Projects

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The larger project that I am exploring is “Decolonization of Religion.” I am defining “decolonization” as the transformation of the institutions and the deconstruction of the thought patterns imposed by the conquest of the world by Europe and the imposition of colonialism. In the larger project, I argue that religious institutions were involved in the rationalizing and justifying colonialism under the banner of spreading Christian civilization. That betrayal necessarily meant rationalizing and justifying wars to defend and expand their Empire. These actions required them to rationalize and justify racist and elitist ideation, and that these rationalizations and justifications became indistinguishable from their theological and ethical teachings.

As a result of their defense and identification with the Empire project they themselves became colonized. That is their ideas, institutions and practices were compromised. While their expressed intention was to build the Kingdom of God, or in more recent times to realize Beloved Community and “Stand on the Side of Love” their long romance of the Empire compromised those intentions. Therefore “Decolonization of Religion” is the systematic transformation of religious institutions which are presently under the sway of the domination system (they are colonized). This is based on the premise that original intent of these religious institutions was to witness to more loving, egalitarian, empowering community so that the intended inclusive love can be witnessed and realized.

We are told that books called the New Testament constitute the foundation documents of the Church. In these books we read the contrast between “the powers and principalities of the present age” to a reign of God that was posited to “be among us, within us and yet not realized.” I read these narratives and letters as witnessing to transforming and inclusive Love that contrasted with the prevailing purity code with its rules and taboos which reinforced systems of privilege and power. I join Walter Wink in suggesting that the central character in these Testaments, the spirit filled man Jesus witnessed to an alternative to the “overarching network of Powers . . . we are calling the Domination System. It is characterized by unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all.”

Wink is wise to argue that for the most part institutions came into being to serve a good purpose (at least in the eyes of that institutions founders) but no institution fully realizes its intended purpose. Institutions are the means that societies create to distribute and manage “resources” and nurture human relations so that both present and coming generations may thrive. We are reminded that institution comes from the Latin “to stand.” That implies that the mission of the institution is operative even when the leading individuals who participate in the institution are resting, distracted or otherwise unavailable.

Wink situates the rise of the domination system in the rise of the Empires of Western Asia. I will discuss implications of Wink’s insight more thoroughly in my forthcoming project, but for the purpose of this essay, suffice it to say that the movement that arose around Jesus witnessed a way of challenging the domination system. However, over the centuries the institutions of the Church (that community gathered to witness that message) have themselves come under the sway of the domination system. Thus decolonizing the Church is to liberate what was and can be again a “more wholesome way.”

Unitarian Universalist institutions for most of their history have claimed that their practice was “religion of Jesus” as contrasted to their orthodox co-religionists whose stance was “religion about Jesus.” For Unitarian Universalist ethical stances, institutions and values were formed in this period. Many Unitarian Universalists now claim that they are now somehow “post-Christian.” That strikes this Indian as a conceit, something like the United States claiming it is “post-colonial” and “post-racial.”

Institutions (which for the purposes of this essay include governments, religious communities, educational, medical, educational and economic organizations such as corporations etc.) are ways human beings organize their relationships, and/but institutions exercise influence, and ration resources, and thereby become powers of and in this world. For Wink, these institutions are created for some good purpose, even if they function in ways that are oppressive and destructive. In this essay I will follow Wink’s understanding that the New Testament argues for the transformation of the Powers under the threefold rubric.!

- The Powers are Created Good.
- The Powers are Fallen
- The Powers must be Redeemed.!

I read this to mean that institutions can be transformed to serve their created purpose, or if we wish their intended purpose. The Church, including the Unitarian Universalists are intended to stand on the side of love and their colonization by Empire is retarding this intention. Therefore the Church must be “redeemed.”

Such an analysis does not argue that any particular institution functions for a good purpose. While we can see that the idea of government is a good idea, a particular government may be acting in an evil way, and Wink is not shy to label such acts demonic. The family is a good creation, but some particular families are destructive and should be dissolved. The call to redeem the powers, or in other words to transform the institutions, is a restoration to their good and creative purpose, which may mean in some cases replacement of particular institutions.

I find this approach congruent with approach advocated by Ivan Petrella in his *The Future of Liberation Theology*. I will return to the idea of institutional transformation below.

Liberation Begins at Church

A good question to ask a pastoral minister who finds theologies of liberation compelling is how to apply these ideas to the actual work of actual congregations. After all, of the hundreds of thousands of local religious gatherings in the United States, most of work turns out to be caring for their own, celebrating and passing on their ‘traditions,’ and perpetuating the institution. Perpetuating the institution means budgeting based on an income stream that will be based on voluntary contributions, earnings from investments in real estate or financial instruments, or subsidies from “denominational” bureaucracies.

Given such an income stream, the institutional managers (including ordained ministers) are likely to budget to prioritize staff, building maintenance and programs that serve that congregation’s immediate needs. Given the nature of these income sources, there are limits placed on the congregation’s ministries. It is commonly believed that this “institutional restraint” (limits imposed on the use of the money) retrains the institutional managers, and this they believe retards their ability to change the way the institution works.

I use understand these institutional managers, since I have spent decades being one. It is easier to think “theologies of liberation are fine,” as long as they don’t challenge the way we do church.

Still I believe making liberating theological practices central to congregational vision and mission not only necessary to the “redemption of the congregation” but liberation practices transform congregational culture in positive ways. Making social justice, witness for peace, and mission to the serve and empower the poor primary is empowering. On the other hand, when institutional maintenance becomes primary, the members of the congregation become less invested and motivated to serve and contribute resources.

For me, the emphasis on institutional survival is a symptom of the colonization of the congregation or, in Wink’s understanding, part of the “fallen” nature of the Church. It is not surprising that such a lack of focus on the created focus of the congregation would cause demoralization. Congregants experience their congregation as not “walking the talk.” Given that most congregational leaders believe that they are constrained by “institutional necessity” does not mean that they have no options? The Indigenous understanding is that we live and move and have our being in an abundant creation. More often than not it is our culture that informs our understanding of what is practical and necessary. I am not the first to suggest that our perception of scarcity results from the social construction of money and markets. The minister who suggests to her Board of Trustees that “we are called to empower the poor in our midst” will be told “that money does not grow on trees” and that she is being impractical and not accepting limits. Perhaps the minister will be informed that “charity begins at home” The domination culture orders our priorities. Given prevailing assumptions, too often it is taken for granted that institutional maintenance comes first and mission to the wider community is secondary.

Antonio Gramsci was wise in pointing out that what was assumed to be “Common Sense” was more often than not ideological, and on examination may not be “Good Sense.” As I have suggested when a congregation’s leadership prioritizes institutional maintenance, the congregation loses its sense of vision and mission, and the result is a loss of morale. The most important resource for the congregation is its morale, its spirit of doing the work that it is called to do. Its morale or spirit is fostered by living out its mission, responding to its sense of purpose. The domination culture focuses our attention on “scarcity,” “limits,” and “institutional necessity.” The notion is fostered that the congregation must take care of the “institution necessities,” and then later we can live out the purpose that the Church is called to perform. But in practice our attention is riveted on the demands of the institution, and we lose focus on the vision and defer living into the mission. “Conforming” to this world is precisely the opposite of transforming our hearts and lives, but to chose transformation we must become convinced that this limited focus is also profoundly “impractical.” Vital churches are “counter cultural” in that they are guided by a vision of beloved community, and a mission to live love into the world. We will examine this more below.

What is the Church called to do?

There are three interrelated functions in what the Church is called to do in the world.

1. Preaching its good news, for me that mean’s that God’s life-affirming love is embodied in intentional communities of people, whose love will redeem the world, and that through

them life living love will triumph over the oppressive (life-opposing) forces of the world. (Kerygma)

2. Service, the practices that the church takes in defiance of the culture's attempt to marginalize and impoverish "the poor" or "the least among us." (Diakonia)
3. Creating community, because the Church has conceived itself as community called to witness love, sustaining people in caring and formative relationship is central to its calling. The domination system works to isolate people so that they can be manipulated and ruled by the powers. In the community of the Church, individuals, families and neighborhoods can nourish life giving values and the courage to persist in the face of domination. (Koinonia)

I think the reader can appreciate that these three functions reinforce each other, the community raises up members who witness the good and liberating news with others, and sharing the vision of the church made concrete in its service. The morale of the community is enhanced by its sense of accomplishment arising out of its service to the poor and to the community, as well as seeing its vision shared with the world. A congregation that fails to sustain a loving community will not be able to sustain ministries of service or proclamation. They are all essential and they are interconnected, like systems of a living body. (The image of the Church as the body of Christ-in-the-world continues to be rich in metaphor and suggestive theologically.)

For church workers to overcome the pull of institutional necessity will require that we struggle with the domination culture's insistence that we live in a world of scarcity. We have been taught that there is only limited love, and if someone else is loved, there is less love for us. We have been taught that there is only so much creativity and that it is possible to get a corner on creativity. For church leaders the scarcity mentality presents itself in the notion that there are limited resources and that religious education workers must compete with the social justice worker and the budget is a compromise with necessity.

Again the indigenous understanding is that the Creator has provided "enough" for all good and loving activities, yet the Creator has given us the responsibility to both sustain the Creation and to realize its abundance. This vision challenges the domination culture's vision of scarcity with a vision of abundance. Love generates more love, joy gives birth to joy and creativity properly understood is the mother of even more creativity. The Hebrew scriptures witness to a good creation, and call upon a faithful people to generosity, and being in right relationship with the poor among us and the "stranger."

A world view based on scarcity, on the other hand, assumes that resources are limited and that "hard choices" are built into the natural order. Thus "leadership" consists of rationing, setting limits. A congregation that affirms the goodness of creation, by contrast, seeks live into this affirmation embracing an abundance world view, a transformation of the way we have been taught to see the world.

The method of abundance is to build on those resources that Creation provides without limits. What "resources" are abundant? Each congregation must make its own inventory, but we might suggest that for most human communities, the "talents" of its members are geometrically more numerous than the "talents" that are being deployed given the culture of institutional maintenance. What would it mean to empower all of the members given their unique gifts for

ministry? What would it mean for the congregation to unleash its witness of love? I am not alone in observing that there is untapped power for transformation in congregations and that an emphasis on “keeping the lights on” does not unleash those creative energies.

It is not simply in relation to institutional maintenance that the domination culture teaches people that its cultural norms “are the way things are.” The church is constrained from proclaiming and witnessing a “new and more wholesome way” when its practice is shaped by ideas that are hostile to creation. Such ideas assert that creation must be dominated controlled and conquered. Leader emerged in these ideas come to the conclusion that leadership is exercising domination and control over the congregation, rather engaging the community to realize own self awareness and their relational “power with” each other.

“Democracy” is not simply a question of procedures, it is a way of empowering people. In the words of Leonardo Boff; “[m]ore than a social form, democracy supposes an attitude that must be lived in all sphere's of life, in our intersubjectivity and society itself. Democratic ideals are profoundly revolutionary; they subvert all forms of domination. Democracy is also one of the West's most ancient aspirations. It possesses a utopian dimension that illuminates every dimension of life and cannot be exhausted in any particular historical form.”

The church leader striving to release the abundant energy, creativity and love inherent in the congregation in the service of its mission to witness love in world will discover resources that were not apparent when the framework is scarcity and institutional maintenance.

So let's do Church: Vision, Mission and Ministry.

In his *The Future of Liberation Theology*, Ivan Petrella argues that what distinguished Liberation Theology from various theologies with a prophetic stance (i.e. German political theology) was an emphasis on practice, not just any well meaning practice, but rather intentional practice based on joining with the upheavals of the poor. The context in which these struggles was unfolding in the 1960s through the 1980s were the struggles of “developing and dependent nations” against the centers of international finance and the military and diplomatic hegemony centered in the United States. Given this context it was facile to suppose an undifferentiated “Capitalism” against which the liberation hopes would be framed, while at the same time liberation could be consummated in an undifferentiated “Socialism.”

Liberation Theology foresaw the Church transformed by love for the poor participating in mass movements, such as brought Salvador Allende’s broad based movement to governmental leadership in Chile and similar mass based coalitions in other countries. The projects of “base Christian communities” and “missional congregations” were joined with literacy campaigns that empowered people to engage in projects of self empowerment in their localities (for example water and irrigation projects, school and community center projects.) The “liberation” that the faithful sought was informed by Biblical stories and ancient liturgies, but also was compatible with the dreams of good schools, women’s empowerment, and land reform that shaped the dreams that motivated the militants of the worker’s parties. The liberation theologians shared the vision of socialism, a vision given both concreteness and possibility by the existence of state socialism in one third of the planet.

My understanding of Petrella’s argument involves two guiding ideas. First, with the set back experienced by the European state socialist countries the prospects of socialism in the Western Hemisphere is diminished, and therefore the “historical project” of liberation as it was conceived in the 1970s is no longer compelling. We must conceptualize new historical projects.

(God is still speaking, and what God is calling us to do now is always in relationship to the present time and situation.)

Second, and more interesting, the fact that “Socialism” does not present itself as a unified world system allows us to rethink the binary assumption that capitalism is oppression, socialism is liberation and there is no liberation without replacing capitalism. “Capitalism” and capitalist forms of social organization that were previously conceived as unified systems. Stepping away from seeing capitalism/ socialism as a binaries and freeing liberation theology from the logic imposed that analysis will allow liberation theologians to consider the possibility of transformation of institutions within a capitalist economy.

For example, procedural democracy was the form of democracy under capitalism, therefore it followed that participatory democracy could not be fully realized until the society was “Socialist.” Such thinking inhibits imagination. The liberating question is how can our democratic practices be more participatory? To refrain from reimagining governance until all of society is transformed may in itself contribute to lack of social transformation. What if fundamental social transformation consists of a series of institutional transformations, and instead of trying to achieve total social transformation the democratic movements should focus on those institutional achievements that are possible given social movements.

Petrella suggests that the future Theologies of Liberation may be discerned in the practices of the Brazilian Left, especially informing ourselves of the analysis of the social thinker Roberto Mangabeira Unger. Based on this thinking, Petrella asserts the need to implement a Left agenda with “revolutionary reforms” rather than assuming that radical forms of democratic control cannot be implemented until the society is fully democratic (socially, economically and politically.) Church workers seeking liberation should learn the process known that Unger called. “institutional imagination.”

Institutional imagination means thinking about how institutions can better serve democracy and economic justice rather waiting “for the revolution.” From the point of view of participatory democracy raised previously, how can the present concrete systems of “representation” be more participatory and more inclusive of the poor and other excluded populations? Or to take another example, how can “education” be more about problem solving praxis and raising awareness, rather than simply transferring the presumptions of the dominant culture and training people in skills needed by the economic overlords.

The Brazilian Left has a well deserved reputation for a non dogmatic approach to popular empowerment and economic development, and this notion of flexibility and institutional imagination has already had influence on Latin American social movements. For example, in a recent interview with Charlie Rose, Ecuadorian President Correa said that being a modern Latin American socialist means to “look for social justice.” He also asserted that “My political thinking has been influenced by the social doctrine of the Catholic Church and also Liberation Theology.”

Demonstrating the approach of institutional imagination, he made clear that; “We believe in societies with markets, but not in societies [ruled] by markets – that's the difference... One of the [biggest] problems in the present time is that markets are controlling everything. We believe in society with markets, but society must govern the markets... Markets [are] a very good servant, but a terrible master.” President Correa said the goal of his government is, “to eliminate poverty...this is the moral imperative of our government, I think for Ecuador, and the entire world. To have a country with justice, dignity, prosperity, and solidarity.”

This approach to social change may be new to theologies of Liberation, but they been part of the conversation among social change activists for several decades. Roberto Mangabeira Unger has been a major theorist in the critical legal theory movement (which has influenced critical race theory, critical gender theory, etc.), and he has had a major influence on economic development thinking. Unger's notion of "institutional imagination" has had an influence on projects to democratize institutions and help them become more responsive in a time of rapid social change.

I think there are implications for North Americans who seek more missional and responsive congregations and who see the demoralizing power of domination culture on their congregations. How can a congregation imagine new responses to "violence against women" in the community, how can these new responses focus on young women who find their homes intolerable and become "homeless?" How can these imagined new responses be organized? Who can the congregation work with to give this "imagination" institutional form? Being "radical" once meant to go back to basics, and if the basics are participatory democracy, empowerment of individuals and overcoming the structures of poverty and marginalization, then institutional imagination promises a way to engage congregations in ministries that "liberate."

To "decolonize" religion is not simply to criticize the domination culture's ideas and the practices of religious institutions in the United States. It involves a deeply religious practice of liberation, beginning with religious institutions so that they can contribute to the liberation of institutions in society.

In words attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson: "A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming." Decolonization involves the transformation of a culture that worships control, power over and violence. What we are worshipping, we are becoming. The transformation sought envisions communities growing in love. Love is what we do in the world, it is expressed as activity. This essay suggests the institutions that serve and enhance our lives together - are on the one hand, the means by which the domination system perpetuates itself, but are also, on the other hand, the means to realize a more just and democratic society. For institutions to be redeemed, or to use language more familiar to Unitarian Universalists to be transformed requires a change in practice. The historical projects of the liberation theology today become concrete work to redeem institutions, so that they contribute to a liberated and empowered people. In the following section, I will begin to adopt the notion of historical projects to congregational work, a project that embodies liberation leading to a transformation and increased consciousness of domination and liberation.

Congregational Liberation Projects

What would such projects look like at the congregational level? In my larger project I will develop these examples of what Petrella calls "historical projects." I will assign them the more modest designation of congregations based liberation projects. Petrella is adopting Unger's examples of radical reforms initiated by the Brazilian Left. In the United States at this point in our effort to decolonize religious practices, building examples at the congregational level allows us the best measures of success.

One example is project of a San Diego country congregation. Members of this congregation noticed that the people of Tijuana, the Mexican city immediately to their south had many people who had no access to work, and no homes. These members also noticed that middle class homeowners in San Diego country were often renovating their homes, and in the process discarding cabinets, doors, and lumber. They also noticed that middle class residents were often replacing tools and appliances including gas grills, sewing machines, and other items that could be recycled.

They began to collect these items and truck them to Tijuana, where working with grass roots organizations initiated by Roman Catholic parish churches (base communities) and Pentecostal congregations they began to build houses, day care centers, dig wells, install generators, and organize sewing collectives.

A non-profit corporation sponsored by that Unitarian Universalist congregation was organized so that the campaign to collect building materials could have shared by the wider community and not seen as exclusively Unitarian Universalist. Nevertheless, the project is sustained effort to concretely stand on the side of love with an impoverished community, the project involved the San Diego residents in genuine relations with the people of Tijuana, and it has made and continues to make a difference by both providing material aid but enabling a Tijuana to build a skilled construction labor force, a childcare collaborative, a sewing cooperative that produced school uniforms that allowed children to attend school. The electrical generators and wells made a neighborhood of Tijuana livable, and now the San Diego non-profit has intimated work with another neighborhood.

This project was not a patronizing charity, it was and continues to be transformative for the San Diego congregation and the wider community of volunteers who participated. They have learned deeply about the lives of the people of Tijuana and have deepened their understanding of not only of colonialism, but of resistance and solidarity. This project was deeply liberating for both the San Diego participants and the Tijuana neighborhoods. On both sides of the border it was church communities that sustained the work.

Other examples of congregations that are working to with nearby indigenous communities and have joined with these communities to in the nation wide effort to overthrow the legal basis of the colonizers Indian Law as it embodied in the so called Doctrine of Discovery. The Unitarian Universalist congregation in Bellingham, Washington has a several years work with an indigenous community and this has greatly expanded their understanding of colonialism and racism. Other congregations from Hawaii to Maine have also initiated such work in more recent years. At the same time this work contributes to the liberation that indigenous community and by urging their denominations to join in an international movement of indigenous peoples from Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Pacific Islands and in all parts of the Western Hemisphere it strengthens the world wide decolonization effort.

The New Sanctuary Movement is working with congregations to develop solidarity with “strangers in the land.” Undocumented workers are gaining allies in churches whose solidarity has the effect of “humanizing” the “other” and “themselves.” Sanctuary points toward the radical re-consideration of the dominate culture presumption of nation state.

I believe the fact that such efforts initiated by trans-denominational networks of congregations have joined rank and file members of churches (and synagogues) demonstrates the potential of liberating projects of the type that Ivan Petrella advocates. I will develop this more in my larger project.