

Exorcising the Mind: Practicing Justice in a Disordered World

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Abstract

In this deeply unjust world, the empire has colonized our desires, our mind, our very being. The most common response to injustice is charity which is essential in emergency situations. Nevertheless, in the longer term charity simply ameliorates rather than changes the situation. To practice justice we need to proclaim the everlasting presence of God in the face of the brutal yet ephemeral empire, we have to decolonize our mind through expressive acts of exorcism, and be willing to express our pain, that is, tears of hope and compassion.

Keywords

World Disorder, Practice of Justice, Decolonizing the Mind.

Introduction

This essay on the “practices of justice” is presented in the following way.¹ First, I will clarify my starting points. I believe we are living in a time in which injustice is not just a problem of particular people or situations but is at the very heart of the “new economic order.” Second, this “new economic order” is a new empire that has colonized our subjectivity. Then, I will consider the possibilities of local churches and see how we can move from charity toward real practices of justice. My whole point is that today a real practice of justice cannot avoid the task of “decolonization” of ourselves from this captivity.

The New World Disorder

First, I consider that we are living in a deeply unjust world. In the World Council of Churches’ document named *Agape*, we find this shaming data:

“In 2003. 7.7 million persons owned wealth worth US\$ one million or more. The sum of their wealth reached US\$ 28.9 trillion, or almost three times the United States national product that same year. In the meantime, 840 million people worldwide are undernourished and 1.5 billion – the majority of whom are women, children, and Indigenous Peoples- live on less than one dollar a day.

¹ The original essay was presented at the American Waldensian Society Centennial Anniversary and has been reedited for the BISAM 2009 – 2011 project “Bible, Nation, Empire: the use of the bible by scholars and by local congregations”.

The world's richest 20 percent account for 86 percent of global consumption of goods and services. The annual income of the richest 1% is equal to that of the poorest 57%, and at least 24,000 people die each day from poverty and malnutrition." (World Council of Churches, 2005:.9)

These are the statistics of this unjust world. The unjust situations that lie behinds these data are not a matter of particular people being unable to function in this world. Rather, we are facing a structural problem, a structural evil. The "New World Order" system survives by sucking the life out of humanity and God's creation.

Second, some people consider that we are living in a time of empire. Meaning "...the coherence of economic, cultural, political and military powers that constitute a global system of domination directed by powerful nations and organizations." (World Council of Churches, 2005:.9). The novelty of this empire is that it works from within ourselves. Professor Néstor Miguez from ISEDET points out:

"The empires of antiquity imposed their dominion through physical enslavement (slave system). Modern imperialism used economic mechanisms to dominate (industrial capitalism). But the "postmodern" Empire works through the colonization of desire. It works, as never before, through the colonization of subjectivity." (Néstor Miguez, 6)

What he is suggesting is that the establishment of empire through cultural mechanisms has been able to introduce itself inside us. If the motor of the economic is to consume, I become a compulsive consumer. (Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernidad Líquida* 2003: 82)² If the market works better with competence, I become individualistic and competitive. If society mixes up public with private affairs, I go to *talk shows* to chat about the problems that I have with my wife...

However, the colonization goes even deeper. Our desires are the desires created and manipulated by the market's needs. We see and feel only through the eyes and the sympathies of the empire.

² Zygmunt Bauman (p. 82) suggests that "the postmodern society considers its members basically in their quality of consumers, not as producers".

The colonization is so strong that we give the name “New World **order**” to this unjust disorder. We justify war in the name of peace. We accept as a patriotic act the fact that someone is listening in on my telephone conversations. We accept the torture of others to defend ourselves from terrorism. We become terrorists to fight against terrorism.

Finally, the empire pretends to be the only possible way. Every Empire, from Egypt, through Assyria, Babylonia, Rome and the present, pretends to be eternal. Francis Fukuyama honestly expresses his dream (and the dream of the empire): This is “the end of history.” There is nothing else, nothing new to be expected anywhere, at any time.

Practice of Justice in Local Churches

If the problems are global and huge, but our strength is not, what do we do? Many local churches ask themselves this question and, in response, leave aside the “macro” problems in order to focus on specific, particular situations. This is good. It is better to do something for someone than do nothing for all of humanity. After all, many people are able to survive because of the shelter we offer, the “chicken soup” we serve, and the houses we repair for wintertime. Some of these persons even discover a new meaning for their lives in these spaces. These activities of charity are good and necessary for people living in extreme situations. Without such charity, many more people would die. However, Slavoj Žizek, a Slovenian philosopher, in reference to the “new capitalistic ethic” points out:

“Charity is, today, part of the game, as a humanitarian mask hiding the underlying economic oppression. It is a blackmail to the superego of gigantic dimensions. The developed countries are “helping” constantly to the undeveloped ones with assistance, credits, etc., avoiding in this way the key problem, meaning, their complicity and co-responsibility in the miserable situation of them.” (Slavoj Žizek 2004: 105)

Žizek is talking about governments, corporations and so on. However, I think that there is an element of truth in his comments that also is applicable to our own situation. We should ask ourselves if our charity tends to change, even at a tiny level, the key problems or if it just tends to support the unjust situation. How can we reconcile the shelter for the homeless, the “chicken soup,” the home repairs with the big and real problem? This is for me the key question in our practice of justice today.

First, if we take a look around us we will realize that we are not alone. We cannot enclose ourselves. We should be able to see beyond our own yard and be in contact with other churches, religious groups, social organizations, thinkers and particular people and seek to cooperate with them. There are many people trying to practice justice but they, like us, sometimes feel lonely, powerless and tired. We need one another and we need to be together.

Second, what is the specific contribution that we as Christians may bring to enrich the practice of justice? Our specific contribution is at the very heart of our existence and mission as Christian churches.

1. When there is an empire that pretends to be eternal, we should proclaim the ephemeral existence of any human endeavor and the everlasting presence of God.
2. If the empire has colonized our minds, we should “decolonize” ourselves, practicing symbolic acts of exorcism.
3. When the present is too overwhelming, we need to nurture our preaching and practices, relying upon and even crying out to our merciful God.

The Everlasting Presence of God

Every Empire pretends to be eternal. Yet we know that this is not true. From Genesis 3 to Revelation 21, we know that eternity is reserved for God. Every human and every creation of his/her hands is ephemeral. This empire, like the others before it, will pass away. There is a future. There are alternatives, because the empire does not have the last word. The myth of expulsion from the garden in Genesis 3 ends saying:

“He drove out the man; and at the east of the Garden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:24, NRSV).

Humanity and its creations are condemned to pass away. This is what the prophet is invited to tell the captives of the Babylonian empire:

All people are grass,

their constancy is like the
 flower of the field.
 The grass withers, the flower
 fades,
 when the breath of the Lord
 blows upon it;
 surely the people are grass
 The grass withers, the flower
 fades,
 but the word of our God will
 stand forever.” (Isaiah 40:6b-8, NRSV. See also Ezekiel 28:1-10)

Similarly, it is the word revealed to John under the Roman Empire. He saw the sealed book and he saw the falling of the Roman Empire, an empire that persecuted and killed John’s communities:

Alas, alas, the great city,
 where all who had ships at sea
 grew rich by her wealth!
 For in one hour she has been
 laid waste.
 Rejoice over her, O heaven,
 your saints and apostles and
 prophets!
 For God has given judgment for
 you against her.” (Revelation 18:20-21, NRSV)

The Empire declares that there is nothing else beyond it, yet we know that this is not true. If the Empire is not the end, we have a future. There is cause for hope. There is something else to come, a new world to dream about and a new society to build.

Decolonizing

The innovation of the present empire is that its power is not limited to a specific place. It is nowhere and everywhere, even inside us. We need to be exorcised and to transform all our practice of justice into an exorcism.

You may remember the story of Jesus healing the Gerasene Demoniac (Mark 5:1-20). Do you remember the name of the unclean spirit? The possessed man answers Jesus: “My name is *Legion*; for we are many” (v.9, NRSV). *Legion* is the only Latin word used in the New Testament and it is not casual. The empire has possessed the demoniac: because of that, he has a self-destructive practice. This man embodies what is happening to his country. Like his country, he is possessed by the Roman *Legions*. When Jesus liberates this man from the *Legion*, Jesus not only heals this particular man, but also performs a symbolic act of liberation for the whole society. The people of the town understand the meaning and implications of the symbol, so they invite Jesus to leave. Nobody wants to have trouble with the Roman *Legions*. Jesus accepts and gets into the boat with his disciples. The healed man tries to go with Jesus, too. However, Jesus says to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you” (v.19, NRSV). This man becomes a symbol and a message of God’s liberation and mercy.³ Likewise, our practice of justice should be able to enter fully into the particularities of a situation and point beyond that situation. We should be able to exorcise ourselves and one another from the subjectivity of the empire.

It is possible to be freed from the imperial mind that “...exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator...” (Rom 1:25). God in God’s grace is able to transform us into makers of justice (Romans 3:26).

“Paul opposes the power of God to the power of the sin (*hamartia*) expressed in the concrete injustices (*adikia*) of history. The Gospel is a power where the justice of God is expressed. Because of that it is Gospel, meaning good news for those thirsty for this justice in a world full of injustice.”⁴

³ This interpretation of the text is supported for most of the scholars. See for example Joachim Gnilka, *El evangelio según San Marcos*, Vol I, Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme p. 1993, pp 231-242; John Dominic Crossan, *El Jesús Histórico. La vida de un campesino judío del mediterráneo*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Planeta, 1994, pp. 331-335. Originally published in English *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. Harper San Francisco, 1991.

⁴ Elsa Tamez, *Contra toda condena. La justificación por la fe desde los excluidos*. Costa Rica: DEI, 1993, p. 113

We should be capable to transform our daily activities into practices of justice and a process of decolonization. The lesson does not come from a manual of politics but from the Gospels, from the ministry of Jesus. You may remember the conflicts that Jesus had with the Pharisees and that the conflict was not only because of what Jesus said but also because of what he did. He cured on Saturday but he also ate with sinners and Publicans. In a daily event such as eating, Jesus was practicing justice. When Jesus sat with sinners and publicans, he was consciously breaking apart the whole structure of the society. The boundaries of cleanness and uncleanness were broken down. The supporters of the Jewish religion of that time were shaken. Again, regular people and everyday situations became the perfect medium through to challenge the whole system.

Eating was one of the most powerful activities of Jesus' ministry. Jesus used eating as a way to build a community of equals that stood in stark contrast to the hierarchical society of his time. When Jesus sent out his disciples without food, money or extra clothing he was trying to organize a movement in which "...an equality of spiritual and material resources are shared. [...] Eating together as a strategy to build or rebuild the peasant community on radically different principles than honor and shame, master and client. It was based on an equalitarian sharing of spiritual and material power on the basic level." (Crossan 1994: 358, 360-361). A daily and necessary activity became a symbol of a new world to come. Those who broke bread with Jesus were not only eating food. They are enjoying an appetizer of the coming Kingdom of God.

Let me give you another example of how the Gospel of Mark creates a strong contrast between the practices of the empire and the activity of Jesus. You surely remember the "Feeding the five thousand" story of Mark's Gospel. I am not so sure, however, that you remember the event before. John the Baptist is killed during a banquet offered by Herod for his courtiers and officers and the leaders of Galilee (Mark 6:14-29). Now Jesus is also offering a banquet for the people of Galilee, those who "were like sheep without a shepherd." Of course, their "shepherds" were banqueting with Herod. At one banquet are the leaders, and the word of God is silenced when the prophet is killed. At the other banquet, the people are present, the word of God is listening (v.34), and the blessed food satisfies everyone. If we are able to contrast our daily practice with the practice of the empire, we will be offering an alternative to humanity. We will be decolonizing our minds and liberating our subjectivities.⁵

⁵ Similarly, when Jesus said to his disciples: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you

I would like to add some examples of activities done in our local parishes. First, we organize children and youth camps. This activity is very well rooted in our communities and has a long history. Usually the camps are seven days long and it is a very good time to break certain patterns assumed as “natural”, and cultivate an alternative way of relationship. For example, cell phones and mp3 are not allowed, and there is no TV or radio. Naturally, during the first two or three days there is a longing for those artifacts that makes our daily lives more easy or enjoyable. However, after that, participants begin to realize that it is possible to enjoy other things like talking, walking in the forest, looking at the stars ... Somehow everyone is “pushed” to meet other people and to relate to each other in communal activities all day long such as helping to cook or clean the rooms (sometimes tents), or collect wood for the night fire. In addition, the daily life during the camp is based on basic needs so people realize how many things are actually superfluous to life. The food is different; there is no fast-food, nothing like that. Certainly during the first days the participants do not want even to try fresh vegetables yet after two or three days they are more open and learn to taste more delicate and non-saturated flavors.

I see children and youth camps as an example of “de-colonizing” because in this context we live with different values. Solidarity and acts of serving others are promoted and become not just plausible but as the way to follow Jesus. Of course, this is not enough; it is necessary to verbalize the situation, talk about that and keep working on this issue throughout the year.

Second, we celebrate the Lord’s Supper once a month, and at special times during the liturgical year. We dedicate precious time to it. This is one of the most powerful and contra-cultural symbol of Christianity. We celebrate and decide to follow Jesus, who finds his mission as one who gives himself and dies challenging the empire. Jesus does not accumulate people defeating and subjugating them and then goes to build a “triumph monument” as the Caesars did. These monuments create a perception of good and evil of triumph and defeat, and what is valuable and what is not. The Lord’s Supper also creates values. It is right there, we need just to take them and verbalize them.

must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:25-28, NRSV), he is creating a contrast between his movement and the empire’s tyranny.

Moreover, we should listen our people's lives and discover in them small or larger stories of a contra-cultural way of life. For that, we have space in our local bulletin where people are interviewed and they talk about their experiences of serving, solidarity and how it gives a fuller sense to their lives.

Finally, preaching and living under the paradigm of grace creates a conflict with the system's values. Because of that, it is important to cultivate relationships found in grace rather than in a commercial or "pay per get" system.

Scarecrows of Fear, Sowers of Compassion

This world needs our weeping, our laments, our complaints raised up to the one who is able to change our world. After all, Israel's slavery began to end when the people cried out:

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning..." (Exodus 2:23-24, NRSV)

This world, this mentality, does not want our cries. It shuts down our feelings of compassion. It needs indifference. It needs consumers ready to silence every uncomfortable feeling with shopping or with *Prozac*.

Walter Brueggeman in his book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, proposed, among other things, that we should "express openly these same fears and terrors that we have been denying and so deeply repressed for so long that we do not know that they are there." (Brueggeman 1986: 59).

When people rush to consume, they are not only looking for ephemeral satisfaction, but also running away from their own pain, frustration and fear. If we cannot change the world, let us run away from it.

However, weeping together makes us aware that it is not only my problem. Crying together is the first and primordial affirmation that the situation in which we find ourselves is not good. This is not heaven. Groaning together to God is to remember that this painful world is not God's will. Praying together for a new world is the first step toward starting to build that world.

This unjust world needs our practice of Justice. The whole creation is groaning in pain for it (Romans 8:22). Not only the creation is groaning, however, but us, too. Let us share our pains. Let us tell everyone that this world is not God's will. Let us go out to share the news that something new is coming. Let us begin to decolonize ourselves and introduce God's subjectivity into our lives. Let us be reborn from above because "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." (John 3:5, NRSV)

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