

Christopher Tirres: *The Aesthetics and Ethics of Faith: A Dialogue between Liberationist and Pragmatic Thought*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 240, hardcover \$58.58. ISBN: 978-0199352531

by Raúl Zegarra

Christopher Tirres has written an excellent piece of scholarship developing powerful and creative connections between liberationist thought and Pragmatism that were not explored before the publication of *The Aesthetics and Ethics of Faith*.

Tirres's book accomplishes much. His reconstruction of Latin American liberation theology in dialogue with its critics is remarkably clear and well done (44-50). Furthermore, his account of Latino/a theology's "aesthetic turn" (51-74) is right on point and displays a very careful reading of the major authors in this tradition. Particularly good is his close reading of the writings of Roberto Goizueta (58-75), through which he shows some inconsistencies in the work of the Cuban theologian regarding the concepts of praxis and human action.

His in-depth study of Pragmatism and Dewey's *oeuvre* is also worth noting. Tirres clearly reconstructs the Pragmatist understanding of experience stressing how religious experience is a mode of experience instead of a completely different type. Thus, the "religious" represents a qualitative dimension of experience which allows Pragmatists to overcome both transcendentalist and positivistic approaches by appealing to a non-reductive empiricism for the study of religion (90). This is quite well noted in the discussion of Dewey's notions of "natural faith" and "moral faith" (92ff.) where Tirres points out how the constitution of religious experience depends on both pre-reflective and reflective modes of knowing. Indeed, as he argues, "[e]xperience, for the pragmatist, is both actual and *ideal*" (93). The experience is informed by both its immediacy (aesthetic, pre-reflective dimension) and its ideal character (moral, reflective frameworks through which we interpret and therefore shape the experience). All this, Tirres argues, only benefits liberationist thinking by helping to decolonize the notion of religion. First, because, by focusing on experience itself, pragmatism avoids impositions (usually institutional) regarding what religion ought to be. Second, because this holistic approach to experience allows a better dialogue with the indigenous cosmologies devastated by the dualistic cosmologies of the colonizing enterprise (97). Furthermore, pragmatist thought can be enriched by liberationist approaches given the importance of the social and communal elements of faith for the latter and its absence in the former (98). I cannot but agree with Tirres.

His appeal to Ivone Gebara's work seeking for an integration of the aesthetic and the liberationist dimensions in religious experience is also compelling. In my view, Latin American feminist theology—as nobody else in the Latin American tradition, has found, in most of its representatives, the right balance between both dimensions by focusing on the experience of women and their everyday struggles. I take Tirres as agreeing with this general assessment, despite his correct critique of some ambiguities in Gebara's project. In order to supplement Gebara's approach, Tirres critically turns to Dewey. He criticizes his biased approach to religion in *A Common Faith* and argues, using Dewey creatively against himself, that a richer conception of experience (like Dewey's elsewhere!) could incorporate responsible notions of democratic authority and religious institutions (136). For this, Tirres uses Dewey's notion of "reconstructive education" which Dewey understands as allowing for the reorganization of experience, adding meaning to it, and increasing the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience (148). There, ritual and habit, guided by intelligence, have a place (185-186).

In my view, despite these many notable elements, Tirres's book does not accomplish the task it sets forth. If I understand Tirres correctly, the main goal of the book is to use Pragmatism as the foil that will allow a better integration of Latin American liberation theology and Latino/a theology. Such integration is needed, Tirres argues and I fully agree, because of the shortcomings of both traditions of thought. On the one hand, Latin American liberation theology had trouble dealing with popular religion and rarely provides a good account of its role in the struggle for liberation. On the other, Latino/a theology, focusing perhaps too much on the aesthetic dimension of faith manifested in popular religion, overlooked the importance of the liberationist cause applied to structural issues like systemic poverty and oppression (7, 42-43).[1] Pragmatism would then become a way out of this problem by providing a more integrated perspective, in which aesthetics and ethics could more organically coexist and together pursue "integral liberation" (6).

Unfortunately, Tirres does not explain how the aesthetic dimension of the *vía crucis* (20-25), the ecumenical prayer service (25-27), the *siete palabras* (27-28), or the *pésame* (28-31) incorporate the liberationist dimension. To be sure, Tirres compellingly shows that one can read these rituals as truly therapeutic (169ff.) and able to fulfill many of Dewey's criteria for rituals that are "a meaningful and integrative form of human expression" (187). However, what he never makes clear is how the therapeutic dimension of these rituals, and the "new life" (19) they provide, helps to overcome the limitations of Latino/a theology that Tirres himself pointed out from the start.

Now, there is no doubt that the suffering people of San Antonio or elsewhere can find healing in these rituals and that healing and consolation in themselves are experiences that liberate the human being. However, if I understand Tirres correctly, his book was looking for something else than that. His concern with the shortcomings of Latino/a theology is its lack of focus on the structural (political, economic, etc.) dimensions of liberationist thought. Pragmatism is supposed to offer a corrective by

integrating the aesthetic and the ethical. I honestly do not see this happening in the book.

Now, one imagines where Tirres could go. If we retrieve Dewey's conception of education (and Freire's too) and see in it both the aesthetic and the ethical (liberationist), one could argue that the aesthetic dimension of the *Viernes Santo* celebrations have liberationist *potential* as well. Such liberationist potential would not be only therapeutic, but also structural, and would imply a change of mind that could actually achieve structural transformation.[2] In my view, however, that would need more Freire and less Dewey or, at least, a more straight-forward emphasis on structural issues through Dewey's ideas than the one offered by Tirres.[3]

Let me put it differently. What Tirres does not address, and what is key for Freire's thought, is that *conscientization* requires the undoing of the damage done by the oppressor to the oppressed.[4] Sometimes, that requires a respectful but critical attitude towards some of the cultural expressions of the oppressed. Liberation always requires some direction, some "minimal teleology"(125), as Tirres himself argues in another context. For instance, one could argue that Tirres is a bit uncritical of the whole *via crucis* drama. Does it not overemphasize suffering as a key element of redemption? Does the *pésame* only offer therapeutic consolation or does it deepen stereotypes about Mary and mothers in general (passivity, suffering, etc.)? Tirres does not deal with these issues.

Not much is said about the catechesis behind these rituals either.[5] Of course suffering is a part of the mystery of salvation for the Christian believer. Therefore, I am not advocating for the removal of the concept and experience of suffering from ritual and teaching. The question, however, is *how* suffering is explained and its role in the mystery of salvation and human experience. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, with some limitations, have done an excellent job explaining how suffering has to be understood as the consequence of Jesus's commitments and values. He was killed because his words and deeds challenged a whole system of oppression. Accordingly, it is not suffering that is sought but a form of love so radical that it can lead to suffering, even to death.

In my view, without a reflection of this kind, rituals that focus so much on suffering face the risk of just generating the sense of a God who suffers like us, but not eliciting the strength people need to address the causes of suffering and, when possible, fight against them. All these considerations are missing in Tirres's book and such a lack undermines the general argument of an otherwise excellent volume. María Pilar Aquino's advice seems appropriate here: popular religiosity is *both* a source of liberation and of tendencies "that are not helpful for solidarity, conscious organization, and the achievement of human integrity." [6] For that reason, one must examine them critically in order to avoid the risk of naive idealization.[7] Now, I am not charging Tirres with naive idealization. What I am saying is that he does not explain how aesthetics and liberationist ethics integrate in the *Viernes Santo* celebrations he examines.

Interestingly, Tirres makes a similar critique of Goizueta's *Caminemos con Jesús*. He writes, "I find [Goizueta's] starting question to be a profound one: 'What is liberating in popular religion?' [...] Ultimately, however, I do not find Goizueta's answer to this question entirely satisfactory. As I read him, he is not able to achieve the goal to which he aspires, which is to show how the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of popular religion 'mediate' one another" (59). My own assessment is that this critique applies to *The Aesthetics and Ethics of Faith* as well.[8] I dare to add that that *might* be the consequence of the lack of a greater critical eye for popular religiosity.

Perhaps a way out of this problem is to examine our (religious) emotions through the lenses of our political commitments. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum, for instance, has developed a very compelling argument in her remarkable *Political Emotions* about how our emotions, particularly love, are critical in the sustainability of a society where justice, equality, inclusion, etc., are to remain the key values.[9] Nussbaum does not work directly on religious emotions in that book and, in fact, excludes them due to her commitment to Rawls's notion of political liberalism. Nevertheless, I see Nussbaum's project as a very promising way to help in the effort of integrating the ethical and the aesthetic in the way Goizueta, Tirres and others are trying to.

But none of these critiques can reduce the importance of Tirres's fundamental accomplishment for future scholarship, namely, showing the path forward. Tirres has identified key problems in both Latin American and Latino/a theology and has shown the relevance of Pragmatism in trying to fix them. Other elements of Pragmatism may prove powerful in that effort too, but I believe noting the value of Pragmatism for this task is already an accomplishment. The next steps are a task for all the rest working in this area of thought, but Tirres has made a great contribution in such direction.

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Notes

[1] I am aware of the rich meaning Tirres gives to the the word "aesthetic" (18), but even that does not get us beyond the problem of the insufficient presence of the liberationist dimension of faith.

[2] Something along these lines is suggested by Daniel Groody in his analysis of the *Encuentro Misionero* retreat sponsored by the Valley Missionary Program in the Coachella Valley, Southern California, see *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007 [2002]).

[3] On Dewey's (and the Pragmatists') position on the problem of injustice, see Gregory Pappas' excellent essay "The Pragmatists' Approach to Injustice", *The Pluralist*, Volume 11, Number 1 (Spring 2016): 58–77. There, Pappas makes clear that Dewey was somehow reluctant to speak about injustice because he always avoided preestablished notions of what justice ought to be. Instead, he would see just and unjust interactions as the product of the relationship between individuals and groups that are contingent upon different contexts (63). But this does not mean that we cannot identify injustice in particular situations. Moreover, it does not mean that Pragmatists do not recognize systemic injustice (64). It only means that they focus on particularity and want context-specific solutions instead of grand narratives of how to fix global injustice (69). Also, this approach shows some humility in regards to what we can really do to fix problems as big as injustice (73).

[4] By contrast, Tirres, citing Gebara, points out that conscientization has reductionistic forms that solely focus on the social, political, and religious projects with fixed objectives in mind (124). Gebara wants instead a more complex understanding of the self and human consciousness. Gebara surely has a point, but I agree with Tirres in that human action always needs some "minimal teleology" (125).

[5] Tirres does touch upon the issue of pastoral leadership, though (32ff.); but without really dealing with my question. He values Elizondo's *et al.* "guide without prodding"(34) and "hands-off" but "intentional and directive" (162) approach that allows for people's meaningful encounter with God in ritual, but does not focus on structural issues.

[6] María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (New York: Orbis, 1994 [1992]), 178.

[7] See Aquino, *Our Cry for Life*, 181.

[8] In fact, my impression is that Goizueta does a better job of the integration of the aesthetic and the ethical. For instance, in chapter 7 of *Caminemos Con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), the author develops his notion of *acompañamiento* which I take as an attempt at such integration. The interesting thing about this notion is that is based on the preferential option for the poor, with a clear sense of how *economic* marginalization mediates all other forms of it (190). In the case of US Hispanic theology, this implies a preferential option for the home and the cities, where most poor people are, and where their joys and sufferings take place. In Goizueta's view, however, this is an *aesthetic* option as well because it involves "empathic affective union" with concrete people who we love and make members of our own family. Moreover, without this love and friendship, social justice and the poor become mere concepts (195). But again *acompañamiento* requires equality and therefore an ethical-political option for the poor is needed for a true discipleship of equals (206). In sum, Goizueta argues, the preferential option for the poor has both socio-historical (ethico-political) and spiritual (aesthetic) dimensions and both are fundamental in our *acompañamiento* (209). In my view, Tirres overlooks this very important section of Goizueta's book.

[9] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).