

New creation and liberating Grace in Jesus Christ. Christological and ecclesiological challenges from Latin American Wesleyan theology. Pablo G. Oviedo

Introduction

The global crisis of our current era - which is spiritual and ethical - is marked by neoliberal globalization and its effects have disastrous human and ecological dimensions. In this essay, I propose a theological reflection that contributes to the debate on how we can renew and decolonize ourselves as ecclesial communities of grace in our Latin American contexts.

As Rubem Alves affirmed, “[the] historian is someone who recovers forgotten memories and disseminates them as a sacrament to those who have lost their memory. . . . The historian is not an archeologist of memories . . . [but] a sower of visions and of hopes.”¹ The vision and hopes that I want to sow in this essay relate to the missionary relevance of various key themes in Wesleyan theology.

I want to do so from a hermeneutic that positions itself on the margins and from the bottom-up, which I believe has been one of the great contributions of Latin American liberation theology, a tradition that has deepened Wesleyan theology in Latin America and the Caribbean for almost forty years.

First, I propose a brief historical and theological recovery of key ideas from the itinerary of Wesleyan theology in Latin America and the Caribbean. I will argue that there was an interaction between the Methodist movements on the continent and Latin American liberation theologies. And that this process has produced a new theological and missionary synthesis. Some themes of this synthesis: Christology focused on grace, justice and tenderness and the theme of new creation focused on the abundant life that Jesus proclaimed.

Considering that the roots of our global crisis are spiritual and ethical, one of the key themes of this synthesis is liberating *Christology*. Furthermore, we will need to focus our *Christology on grace and tenderness that work toward justice*. Renewing our image of God and rejecting idolatrous images is key at this time. The figure of Jesus, historically used to oppress, condemn and maintain the status quo through an escapist apocalyptic paradigm, must be presented in Latin America from a critical Christology as a model of humanity that opposes violent systems. In the words and work of Jesus we find the keys to God's justice. The empire has often controlled the Church, but it has failed to control Jesus.

Another of the themes of this synthesis in which I want to make a contribution is that of the *new creation*, very important in our Wesleyan tradition: *I want to contribute to the growth of an incipient*

¹ Alves, “Las ideas teológicas,” 363

theology in my context: a decolonial ecological theology and spirituality. Centered on the abundant life of Jesus from his gospel of grace and justice.

I articulate some dimensions of a Wesleyan theology of grace and liberation and a decolonial ecclesiology of intersubjectivity, from the margins. In these times of oppression by what I should call the Mammon system, I underscore the need to recover indigenous peoples' visions of good living and creation, a spirituality of tenderness and hope against increasing violence, and Jesus-style hospitality, who walks with the people.

Finally, and derived from the previous proposal, I mention an example of popular pastoral care in Argentina, related to the means of grace of works of mercy or solidarity. The issue of rising food prices after the pandemic, and the worsening of poverty due to job and wage precariousness, becomes a priority and urgency for the people and for God's mission. In the final considerations, I propose some central challenges of missionary and theological decolonization, for this crucial hour of our peoples.

An Itinerary of Latin American Wesleyan theology

To address this, is it necessary to remember some assumptions. First of all, Latin American liberation theologies are considered by most of its authors as an ecumenical interpretation of the Christian faith that has its point of departure in the suffering, struggles, and hopes of the poor.² It is also considered a critique of society, systemic injustices, and the ideologies that sustain them. Moreover, it is a critical exercise born from the praxis of faith and of the activity of the church and of Christians, always from the point of view of the poor. Second, Wesleyan theology in the Latin American context has been treated as a “practical theology” of divine grace, in the sense that it is not a “theology that applies the data of the dogma to lived reality, but is rather a theology that discovers in that reality the action of God and the call of God to whom the dogma refers.”³ And finally, let us not forget that Wesleyan and Methodist traditions of Latin America made significant contributions to the formation of liberation theology. The influence has been a two-way street.⁴

² I understand that there is not a single liberation theology, for this reason it should be named Latin American liberation theologies. In this essay, when I say Latin America, I refer to South America, Central America and the Caribbean, as well as those who produce Spanish-Portuguese speaking theology living in North America. Some correctly use the indigenous name, Abya Yala, to refer to the region. I opted for the more traditional nomenclature for the sake of understanding.

³ Justo González, *Juan Wesley, Desafíos para nuestro siglo*, (Buenos Aires, Aurora, 2004), p.45.

⁴ The influence of the Latin American liberation theologies (LALT) and the emerging ecumenical movement towards the middle of the 20th century in Latin American Wesleyan theology, as we will see, was very clear. Similarly, the contribution of Methodist theologians to LALT and to the ecumenical movement has been highly valued in Latin America. Theologians and ecumenical leaders such as José Míguez Bonino, Julio de Santa Ana, Elsa Tamez, José Duque, Emilio Castro, Mortimer Arias, among others, contributed a particular theological vision that enriched the Latin American theological construction. For more details on this, see my essay Pablo G. Oviedo, “Teología de la Liberación y Teología Wesleyana en América Latina: Una visión histórica teológica,” *Teología y cultura*, año 17, vol. 22 (octubre 2020), pp. 59-77. <https://teologiaycultura.ucel.edu.ar/teologia-de-la-liberacion-y-teologia-wesleyana/>

Taking these assumptions into consideration, my working hypothesis can be formulated in the following manner: there is a reciprocal influence between liberation theology and Wesleyan theology in Latin America and theologians in the Wesleyan tradition were not only influenced by liberation theology but also contributed to its development. This encounter was due to significant theological affinities both in method (theology as reflection-praxis of God's action in history) and in theological themes. Latin American Wesleyan theology contributed considerably in the development of themes like sanctification and liberation, divine grace, and Christian and human unity. I will argue that there is a mutual influence, specially through the presence and contributions of many Methodist theologians of the Wesleyan tradition throughout the Americas. I will be suggesting that this fruitful dialogue between Wesleyan and liberation theologies offered a decolonizing impetus for Christian communities in Latin America.

A decolonizing outlook and the critique to western modernity were important commitments in Latin American liberation theology from the beginning⁵. Furthermore, these are also key themes for Wesleyan theology in the global south and for the missionary ministry of Methodist churches in South America.⁶

In a time filled with disputes over the meaning of the Wesleyan tradition at a global level, I believe that a central part of Wesleyan identity, inspired by the theology and practice of John Wesley, is the focus on God's grace as manifested and embodied in situations where life is put under pressure, where profound changes and social displacement are present, and oppression is experienced.⁷ This commitment to pursuing divine grace in times and sites of oppression connects Methodism to liberation theology in Latin America.

I would like to express a general theological assessment of this itinerary of Latin American Wesleyan theology. If we observe the themes and content of the four Latin American meetings of Wesleyan studies, we perceive a shift from an emphasis on sanctification in the earlier gatherings to the theme of grace, which is more central to the two more recent meetings. This does not mean that sanctification

⁵ For the pioneer work in the philosophy of liberation, see: Enrique Dussel, *Globalización*, 91–92, 96–98. In this regard, Dussel declares that modernity is “the 500-year system” that entered the twentieth century in deep crisis and that this crisis is not exclusive of Europe but a worldwide phenomenon. See, Dussel, *Invention of the Americas*. Walter Mignolo is another author who most recently articulated the links between modernity and coloniality: Mignolo, *Local Histories*, 3

⁶ Even though most of the founders of Latin American liberation theology studied in the European or North American contexts, their approaches to theology were evidently against the primacy of western thought and they could therefore be understood as offering a decolonizing effort in theology. For more perspectives from Protestant theologians, see Míguez Bonino, *Faces of Latin American Protestantism*, and Westhelle, *Voces de protesta en América Latina*. Westhelle argues that Bartolomé de las Casas was a pioneer in this task of recognizing otherness in Latin American theology in the sixteenth century in the midst of the harshness of Spanish colonialism. A more recent engagement, which includes two Methodist authors (Míguez and Rieger), can also be found in Míguez, Rieger, and Sung, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire*.

⁷ Rieger, *Grace Under Pressure*.

has been abandoned, but that it has been resignified from the perspective of grace. In the first two meetings (Costa Rica in 1983 and Piracicaba in 1984), conversations were centered on the distorting mediations of the Wesleyan legacy in Latin America, themes that then trigger the reflection about holiness and the association between sanctification and the liberation of the poor. The dialogue presupposes an ecumenical commitment as a criterion for Latin American Wesleyan theology and is clearly staged in fruitful dialogue with liberation theologies.⁸

Decades later, and already entering the twenty-first century, the other two gatherings (São Paulo in 2003 and Buenos Aires in 2009) emphasized pastoral and missionary themes. On a theological level, the dialogue moves towards grace, justification, and salvation.⁹ The central theme of the fourth meeting was “Grace and Salvation: Wesleyan Themes in a Latin American Perspective,” and the category of grace is present in the theological, ecclesiological, missionary, and pastoral reflections shared at the gathering.

I hope to have shown how this theological and pastoral interaction between liberation and Wesleyan theologies in Latin America emerges in large part thanks to the ecumenical movement. As I suggested, the rediscovery and resignification of Latin American Wesleyan theology led to a new theological and missionary synthesis in the beginning of the twentyfirst century. The affinities between liberation theology and Wesleyan theology are well captured in Míguez Bonino when he stressed the dynamic character of the Methodist identity, thirty years ago: “If there is a Methodist heritage . . . such heritage demands the pursuit of local and universal forms of visibility that best express the missional and communal call of the people of God in our post-confessional, divided and conflictive world.”¹⁰

This was derived from the certainty that the heart of Wesley’s ecclesiology is the linking of the emphasis on the koinonia of believers and the emphasis on the missionary character of their vocation. There appears the importance of the unity of the church, liberation and mission in Latin American Wesleyan theology.¹¹

This itinerary that Latin American liberation theology and Wesleyan theology is relevant because large sectors of Latin American Methodism, starting in the second half of the twentieth century, were able

⁸ Roman Catholic theologian Hugo Assmann observes that the ecumenical ethos characterizes Methodism in Latin America and praises the tradition for its theological flexibility in addition to the emphasis on sanctification, its ecumenical openness and absence of sectarianism, its human warmth, its social holiness. See Míguez Bonino et al, *Luta pela vida*, 191.

⁹ See book index in Oliveira et al, *Teologia e prática*.

¹⁰ Míguez Bonino, “¿Conservar el metodismo?,” in Duque, *La tradición protestante*, 338.

¹¹ Míguez Bonino, “Fue el metodismo un movimiento liberador?” in Duque, *La tradición protestante*, 73. Also, see Míguez Bonino, “Methodism and Latin American Liberation Movements” in Rieger and Vincent, *Methodist and Radical*. In the essay, Míguez Bonino clarifies how Methodism in Latin America was opening to the consciousness of liberation in the second half of the twentieth century. An earlier essay by Míguez Bonino makes a similar point, “Wesley in Latin America.” Also, see the excellent book from De La Torre and Floyd-Thomas, *Beyond the Pale*, especially the article from Harold Recinos, “John Wesley.” Finally, see Recinos “Barrio Christianity and American Methodism,” in Rieger and Vincent, *Methodist and Radical*.

to enculturate and incarnate themselves in the struggles of the Latin American people. I believe that this process is a witness to the decolonization of Methodism in the continent. As I indicate in the next section, through its enculturation and incarnation in the reality of the Latin American peoples, Methodism was able to incorporate new ways of knowing and establish the initial contours of a deep dialogue between Wesleyan theology and the spiritual and ethical traditions that are indigenous to our region. This is an unfinished process but its emerging possibilities are exciting. Also from this itinerary and from that missionary theological synthesis mentioned emerges the theme of the new creation in Christ and how Latin American Wesleyan Christology must be renewed.

New Creation and Liberating Grace: Renewing Christology and Subjectivities from the Margins

For all this, we propose that today we must connect this theme of grace with the theological theme of the New Creation, very present in John Wesley, and taking the latter as the hermeneutical key to understand Wesleyan theology in Latin America.¹² Moreover, following Joerg Rieger, I suggest a component of Wesleyan identity is to claim that God's grace is manifested and embodied more clearly in situations where life is put under pressure. In this sense, it is interesting to note that in the current social context of Latin America, poverty and the exclusion have worsened due to the current advance of neoliberal politics. I believe that this context must be kept in mind when we consider how Latin American Wesleyan theology went from emphasizing the theme of sanctification to the theme of grace in the earlier part of the twenty-first century. The pressures imposed by neoliberal globalization forces Wesleyan thought to connect the theology of grace to the theme of the New Creation.

Seen in this way, Wesleyan theology is a path of grace as an active commitment of faith in different life situations, where the grace of God manifests itself there where the power of God operates from "bottom-up," where God's grace acts in ways that are distinct from the top-down approach of neoliberalism.¹³ This is where we experience the new creation in Christ, in hope and in action. And

¹² Ultimately, a Wesleyan ethic-theological proposal in America Latina must seek a "new creation" because, as Runyon asks: "If God's objective is a new creation, can ours be something less?" Runyon, Theodore, *A Nova Criação, op.cit.* p. 267. That is to say, according to Wesley, the final salvation would not be outside of human history. It would be the transformation of this story. Final salvation concludes in his sermon 64, on The New Creation, will be: "a state of total holiness and happiness, far superior to that enjoyed by Adam in paradise (...) a deep, intimate and permanent union with God (...) and of all creatures." Wesley, J., Sermón 64, "La Nueva Creación," en González, J.L. (ed.), *Obras de J. Wesley*, (Tomo IV, Franklin, Tennessee, Providence House Publishers, 1996), p. 29.

¹³ Joerg Rieger, *Gracia bajo presión*, (Buenos Aires, Aurora, 2015) p. 49. In English it is, "What do margins and center have to do with each other? The future of Methodist traditions and theology?", in Rieger and J. Vincent(eds) *Methodist and Radical: J.Rejuvenating a Tradition*. (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2003), or "Between God and the poor: rethinking the means of grace in the wesleyan tradition," en R. Heitzenrater (ed): *The poor and the people called Methodist* (Nashville,

more in this time of the COVID-19 post pandemic where it has highlighted the other pandemics including the structural-global injustice of the capitalist system and the gap between rich and poor and all its implications, which has added violence in the dimensions of race, gender and ecology, along with the growing hatred of the marginalized of history. This has theological implications and ecclesiological and missionary challenges for Christian churches today.

In search for ways alternative modes of subjectivity centered on the grace of God from the encounter with other sufferers, I find support in the theological proposal of the book *Beyond the Spirit of Empire*. The three authors, Nestor Míguez, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung—the first two, Methodist scholars—argue that in the face of the challenge between growing individualism and community, we must see how this process is manifested in the margins. They argue that we have to pay attention to what is really happening on the ground, as this gives us a clearer understanding of the fact that the oppressed retain a kind of subjectivity and agency, even in the conditions of post-modern or post-colonial Empire.¹⁴

How does this affect our theological understanding and our Christian mission? If we start from the renewing experience of grace in the Holy Spirit and not from the spirit of Empire, life and mission should be carried out from the margins. An anthropology and subjectivity of grace is present from a Christology from below and from the margins. God's design for the world is not to create another world but to recreate what God has already created in love and wisdom. Jesus began his ministry by affirming that being filled with the Spirit is to liberate the oppressed, restore sight to the blind, and announce the coming of the reign of God (Luke 4: 16-18). He undertook the fulfillment of his mission by opting for those who were on the margins of society because their situations gave testimony to the sin of the world, and his longing for life was combined with the designs of God.

A renewed grace-centered Wesleyan Christology from the margins would be an interesting task ahead, I think, for Latin American Wesleyan theologians. The figure of Jesus in Latin America is perhaps the theological issue that needs to be the most reviewed and liberated. There is an important contribution

TN: Kingwood Books, 2003). There he mentions the term orthopathy coined by the Methodist theologian T. Runyon, a subject that we will work on in another piece.

¹⁴ J. Rieger, N. Míguez, J.M. Sung, *Mas allá del espíritu imperial .Nuevas perspectivas en política y religión*, (Ed La Aurora, BsAs, 2016), p.227. In English, *Beyond the Spirit of the Empire* (SCMPress, 2009). The authors refer to Rieger's book, *Christ and Empire*, Chapter 7, where he introduces the term "postcolonial empire," which at first glance appears to be a paradox. In this book *Cristo y el Imperio*, a new Christology is worked from below, where the author seeks to reclaim Paul's notion of the lordship of Christ, the insistence of the complete divinity of Christ and humanity developed in the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, Anselm's notion of the human God, the notion of Bartolomé de Las Casas of the Way of Christ, the appropriation of Christ by Schleiermacher as prophet, priest and king, Christus Victor de Aulén, and the Cosmic Christ of Mateo Fox. Another excellent work is that of Michael Nausner, "Homeland as Borderland. Territories of Christian Subjectivity," in: Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, Mayra Rivera (eds.). *Postcolonial Theologies. Divinity and Empire*. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004).

from Latin American liberation theology that serves as a basis for the urgent transformation of today's Christology.¹⁵ Much of the criticism around Latin American Christology has to do with the intention not to justify the suffering of the majority from pain and despair, or into the trap of triumphalism and abuse by the powerful.

The need for a Spirit-centered Christology in an updated and pertinent Trinitarian hermeneutical key has already been mentioned by several theologians in America.¹⁶ For our Wesleyan theology, this is important. Míguez Bonino warns us that renewal and mission are inseparable, which is why it is necessary to rethink the totality of the church in light of the incarnation of the Son since we will clash with Wesley's spiritualism and individualism that were common in his time. Míguez Bonino comments that "the Wesleyan Christ sometimes seems only concerned in souls little connected with his concrete reality, due to his weak doctrine of the humiliation of the Christ and his earthly life."¹⁷

Voices of Wesleyan Christologies in Latin America

Fortunately, several authors from the Wesleyan tradition have contributed in recent decades to an incarnated Latin American Wesleyan Christology. One of them is Néstor Míguez who in his book *Jesús del Pueblo*, for a narrative Christology, offers a look from narrative methodology and liberation theology. In it, and narratively commenting on the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fish, it is stated: "they prayed a prayer, which Jesus taught them because everyone repeated it the same way. He began by saying Our Father...give us today our daily bread." So they blessed the bread and began to distribute. Those who had some also added it. Then they brought some salted fish. We all began to receive part.Everything became a party. A day like few we have had in our lives: learning from Jesus, being happy by his word, recovering hope when he said that God does not forget the poor, that he has the Spirit of God to heal those who suffer, that he announces freedom to the captives."¹⁸

¹⁵ To mention the primary ones, Boff, Leonardo. *Jesucristo el liberador*. (Buenos Aires: L.L.1978). Bonino, J. Míguez. *La fe en busca de eficacia*. (Sigueme, Salamanca 1977) or *Jesús: ni vencido ni monarca celestial*. Buenos Aires: (Bs.As, Tierra Nueva, 1983). Sobrino, Jon. *Cristología desde América Latina (Esbozo a partir del seguimiento del Jesús histórico)*. (México: Ed. C. R. Teológica. 1977).

¹⁶ Evangelical Christological reductionism has made broad sectors of Latin American Protestantism an "individualistic, Christological-soteriological space in a basically subjective key with an emphasis on sanctification." Dice J. Míguez Bonino, *Rostros del protestantismo latinoamericano*, (BsAs.: NC, 1995), p.46. Recinos Harold, John Wesley, In M. De La Torre-Sm. Floyd Thomas (Eds), *Beyond The Pale, Reading Theology From The Margins*, (Louisville, Wjk, 2011), p. 95-103. Also Recinos, Harold, "Barrio Christianity And American Methodism," In Rieger And J. Vincent (Eds) *Methodist And Radical: J. Rejuvenating A Tradition*. (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2003), p.77ss. También Meeks D.ed., *Trinity, Community and Power*, Nashville, KBooks, 1995. And a book of Christology from the Hispanic context: Magallanes H. y Recinos H., Eds. *Jesus in hispanic community, images of Crist in popular religión*, (A Press, 2010, Texas).

¹⁷ Míguez Bonino, *Hacia una eclesiología evangelizadora*, (S. Pablo: Editeo, 2003), p.72. He takes this idea from John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960), 2.

¹⁸ *Jesús del pueblo, para una cristología narrativa*, (Buenos Aires: Ed. La Aurora, 2015), 89.

He is the Jesus of the people who reveals the loving grace of God and a new time of hope. He multiplied bread, fish, solidarity and hope among his people. He formed communities and organized “the sheep without a shepherd.” He announced that God's grace frees us from all condemnation, transforms us and calls us to announce his truth and his justice to build a dignified society, with equity, that reflects the image of God, in all of his creation.

The Brazilian Methodist theologian Jose Carlos de Souza in his work “Naked to follow the Naked Christ”, makes a study on the phrase “Naked to follow the Naked Christ”, which appears in Latin in Wesley's Journal on March 7, 1736, when begins his minister from Savannah, Georgia. He makes an excellent Christological contribution with the aim of strengthening an ecclesiology based on the imitation of Christ and solidarity. He affirms:

“ the phrase “Naked to follow the Naked Christ” is thus an imperative to the church itself...Churches need to present themselves naked, without false security, to serve the people , not themselves . Anyway, when institutional survival seems to be the great motive moving all ecclesiastical structures, it may sound absurd to affirm that the church must seek self-emptying, or that kenosis is the mark of ecclesial living with solidarity.”

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Also in an article entitled “Jesús was born in Guatemala,” Methodist theologian Edgardo Colón-Emeric proposes a hermeneutical approach to the Christological issue from a Wesleyan perspective. He argues that in order to avoid the recurring temptation of theology of projecting our ideologies or moral visions onto the figure of Jesus, he states, citing Míguez Bonino, that the solution to this enigma is “a hermeneutics that respects not only the original historicity of the text but also the singularity of the readers locus.”²⁰ He affirms:

“A Latinx Wesleyan Christology starts from the mystery of the conception and birth of Jesus but does not stop there. A Christology centered on the mystery of the incarnation to the exclusion of the transfiguration underappreciates the possibility of the status quo being swept up by the Holy Spirit into the history of salvation. All cultures, historical ages, and peoples bear the marks of sin. We can profess faith with Gonzalez in the “God made flesh in one culture for all cultures,” only if we read the “for” missiologically. Latinx Wesleyan theologians would benefit from engaging the theological vision of Saint Oscar Romero whose Christological thought centers on the transfigured Christ who transfigures the people of God and the land of El Salvador”.²¹

¹⁹ *No religion but social religion: Liberating Wesleyan Theology*, by Joerg Rieger With Contributions by Paulo Ayres Mattos, Helmut Renders, and José Carlos de Souza. (USA: GBHIM, 2018), 99-10.

²⁰ Colón Emeric, “Jesús was born in Guatemala: Towards a Latinx Wesleyan Christology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (54.2, 2019), p. 116.

²¹ Colón Emeric, *Ibid.* , p 115

We need to renew our vision of Jesus the Christ, especially of the Christ who is present in everyday life today, transforming the lives of so many and revealing himself in those who are on the periphery, on the margins of our peoples.

The voice and wisdom of indigenous or native peoples represent the historical and current margins of Latin American societies. What I believe is that in this time we must transform Christology from two fundamental hermeneutical keys (which challenge us from the margins of Latin America): one from the struggle for equality in all its forms (especially gender embodied by feminist theology²²) and another from the cultural contributions of native peoples.

Methodist theologian Nestor Míguez affirms that from “the concept of ‘good living’ (*sumak kausai* in Quechua) and the question of care (of ‘mother earth,’ or Pachamama) as a paradigm, one of the axes of the contemporary Latin American theology must shift.”²³

I believe with Míguez that some of the theologies of indigenous peoples are making an important eruption in Christian theology. The concept of “good living” and the question of caring for “mother earth” that formed central and dynamic elements of various ancestral religions, especially in the Andean region, have become a true epistemological axis taken up by various Latin American theologies.²⁴ As Míguez maintains, the concept of “good living” is assimilated to that of a full life in the Gospel of John, and is distinguished from the consumerist idea of a good life as an accumulation of goods of the market utopia. Jesus with his promise to “come so that they may have life and life in abundance” (John 10:10) can be redefined from this cultural axis.

As part of a decolonization process, which does not wish to return to an impossible past prior to the conquest, seeks the integration of the plurality and diversity that Latin America is today as the construction of liberated and mutually committed peoples. Míguez writes about the concept of *suma qamaña*, often translated as the “good life” as “living well together.” Capitalist hedonism interprets “living better” as a matter of accumulation and comfort (“the best things in life are not things”). *Suma qamaña* naturally touches upon the “totality of living conditions,” but it is fundamentally about “freedom and collective dignity, family life and spiritual well-being..., equality and integrity.” Míguez

²² For this topic of the fight for gender equality and a feminist theology see my essay: “Between the Encounter with Others and the Other, The Renewing Experience of Divine Grace and Its Problems”, in *Methodist Revolutions Evangelical Engagements of Church and world*, Joerg Rieger and Upolu Lumā Vaai Editors, (Nashville, Wesley’s Foundry Books, 2021), p. 71-96.

²³ See Nestor Míguez, *Teología en América Latina*, p. 14. artículo de libre acceso en pag. web: <https://nestormiguez.com/wp-content/uploads/articulos/Teologia-en-America-Latina.pdf>

²⁴ See Míguez, op. Cit. P. 15. A Pioneer has been Boff, Leonardo, *Ecología: Grito de la Tierra, grito de los pobres*, BsAs, Lumen, 1996. And *La dignidad de la tierra. Ecología, Mundialización, Espiritualidad, La emergencia de un nuevo paradigma*, (Madrid, Trotta, 2000). In these books we can observe and affirm that L. Boff made an important turn in his theological proposal that is currently based on the paradigm of ecology; and in a spiritual proposal derived from it, which although it maintains traits of yesteryear -the poor as an epiphanic and revelatory place of the divine- changes are noticed - for example: its new pneumatological vision and the eco-spirituality derived from it-, so important today.

then concludes: “this concept of *suma qamaña* allows recovering most of the affirmations of the Latin American Liberation Theology as they were formulated in its beginnings.”²⁵ The concept emphasizes community, balance and harmony with the ecosystem, which is sought with our common home on earth and not separated from it. Because we are relational beings, the main value that should guide relationships is mutual care and not competition.²⁶

These worldviews have provided a true epistemological turn taken up by various Latin American theologies. They share an affinity with the Hebrew and biblical worldview of *Shalom* and the year of jubilee in the prophetic tradition, which Jesus makes his own (see, for example, Luke 4:16-21). The current capitalist development model, focused on productivity and individual consumption leaves no room for solidarity, to share goods in fairness and respect for life.

In this sense, “Living well expresses a different relationship between human beings and their social and natural environment. Living well incorporates a human, ethical and holistic dimension to the relationship of human beings both with their own history and with their nature.”²⁷

This is the challenge of working towards an intercultural theology that affirms that dignifying and salvific presence of God in all cultures and that allows the confrontation of each religious and cultural tradition with its own limitations. This is also a way to take a critical look at the set of values that each culture sustains, rethinking the memory of Jesus and his ethical legacy as a path of justice and love that is shared by other ethical traditions in the history of humanity. Therefore, strengthening a decolonizing vision of faith and promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue is a path towards fraternity and sorority which in turn allow for the possibility of abundant, just and dignified life for peoples.²⁸

This brings us to yet another fundamental challenge. Facing the fact that Latin America has become a society of high aggressiveness and violence, we now face the challenge of formulating a paradigm of care and tenderness. A “theology of tenderness proposes non-violent resistance and a revolution that also includes the overcoming and dismantling of the structural components of the exploitation and imperial colonization, and the construction of a new relational mode.”²⁹ This new way of relating must

²⁵ Míguez, N. in VV.AA. *Juntos por la vida y la teología contemporánea latinoamericana*, en Kenneth R. Ross, Jooseop Keum, Kyriaki Avtzi, Roderick R. Hewitt y Néstor Míguez (eds.): *Nuevas concepciones de misión y los cambios de contexto Vol 3 –Perspectivas*, (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 2017), p.254-255.

²⁶ See collective ecclesial document “Algunas reflexiones del buen vivir”, *Temas de la gran parroquia*, Argentine Methodist Church, March 2021, pag. web <https://iglesiametodista.org.ar/el-buen-vivir-como-transversal-a-los-temas-de-la-gran-parroquia/> .07/13/2021

²⁷ Regazzoni, Quinto, “El anuncio del Reino y la “Vida Buena” (Sumak Kawsay)”, *Umbrales*. Revista de actualidad religiosa latinoamericana,(Montevideo, Sac. Corazón de Jesús, octubre, No. 202, 2009), p. 17

²⁸ See Oviedo pablo “ Teología latinoamericana : actualidad y desafíos”, en *El Estandarte Evangélico*, Revista nacional de la Iglesia Evangélica Metodista Argentina,(Bs-As. Anuario 2012-13, A.128) ,p.13-16.

²⁹ Miguez, op. Cit. p. 15.

be motivated by a spirituality of tenderness and empathy. As some Latin American theologians state in a recent book, it is from the transforming practice of “spirituality as an urgent resource for restoration, insurgency, and emancipation, and no longer only for the celebration of faith. Spirituality should be seen as a mechanism of transformation for all strata of society.”³⁰

The figure of Jesus, historically used to oppress, condemn, and maintain the status quo through an escapist apocalyptic paradigm, must be presented in Latin America from a critical Christology as a model of humanity that stands in opposition to violent systems to show us maternal, humane, compassionate, and empathetic care for vulnerable people and for all of creation.³¹ Likewise, mission from the margins invites the churches in Latin America to rethink mission as a vocation that the Spirit of God inspires, and to join the work of God (*missio Dei*) in this time of misfortune. This works for a world in which the fullness of life is possible for everyone, especially for those who suffer the most, and to do so in a cooperative way with other Christian churches, other faiths, movements, and social organizations.³² Nestor Míguez affirms in the edited volume that was inspired by last call of the World Council of Churches:

*“The mission of the Christian faith today in Latin America is fourfold: it includes caring for and enjoying the goods of creation, working to build a worthy city, with agreements and conflicts, and engaging in the search of social and economic justice in the continent that supports the most unequal distribution of wealth and thus proclaim and live in open dialogue—with the others—original peoples, women and their voices and many other excluded—a testimony of our hope in the life that we receive through the grace of God the Creator, Jesus Christ the Messiah and the vivifying breath of the Spirit, the community of the divine trinity that inspires the human community.”*³³

These actions, as I stated above, are key challenges of our Latin American Wesleyan identity: Christian and human unity for the mission of God. Two indisputable marks of Wesleyan theology: the *Grace of God* from Jesus the Christ and *the unity from and for the mission of God*, understood as the integral sanctification, *the new creation*, that God wants to do in all his creation.

And following in the footsteps of Jesus the Christ, share the Good News of salvation and integral liberation. That gospel that our churches must proclaim with words and actions, multiplying bread,

³⁰ See Ternura, *la revolución pendiente*. H. Segura y A. Grellert (eds). (Barcelona: Editorial CLIE, 2018). p. 350-351.

³¹ H. Segura y A. Grellert (eds). Op. cit., p.350. See too Oviedo Pablo, “Jesús liberador y amigo. Espiritualidad y liberación desde el margen: un diálogo entre los místicos (Teresa de Jesús) y la teología latinoamericana de la liberación,” in *Revista Apuntes, Theological Reflections from the Hispanic-Latino Context*, Ed. Southern Methodist University, (Dallas, Year 38, No. 1 Spring 2019, p.25-40.)

³² See VV.AA. *Juntos por la vida y la teología contemporánea latinoamericana*, en Kenneth R. Ross, Jooseop Keum, Kyriaki Avtzi, Roderick R. Hewitt y Néstor Míguez (eds.): *Nuevas concepciones de misión y los cambios de contexto Vol 3 –Perspectivas*, (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 2017), p. 266.

³³ See *Juntos por la Vida*....op.cit., p.266.

solidarity and hope in the new creation. Forming communities for good living, for the abundant life (John 10:10) that he promised and incarnated. Let us now look at a brief example of popular pastoral ministry in my country.

An example of popular pastoral care in Argentina: works of mercy that are a meeting of solidarity

There are many of us who believe that we must return today more than ever to the works of mercy, “so as not to lose grace” as Juan Wesley said. Not from paternalism, utilitarianism or the misunderstood routine of charity, but from true encounters with the Jesus who walks among us, among those excluded from that good life, from that full life that he promised.

If we believe in this Jesus the Messiah who walked alongside his people, who multiplied bread, fish, solidarity, justice and hope, forming communities of full life, we cannot have a different or opposite practice.

As a church in Argentina we always had a strong ministry of social service and defense of human rights. In the last ten years, economic and social difficulties have worsened, as a result of bad economic policies, the Covid 19 pandemic and the globalizing system based on mammon. Aggravated by the recent anarcho-capitalist government that in 6 months has increased poverty brutally. That is why in my district and in most districts - for 7 years - we have had to go out to respond to the hunger of hundreds of people who ask us for food and clothing, the minimum of the minimum. In one of the churches that I accompany as a pastor, week after week we open the temple to cook and share a hot meal with more than a hundred people. This does not inevitably bring quantitative growth to the communities, but it does bring qualitative growth: it has mobilized the churches of the District to strengthen our connection, collaborating with each other. Seeking donations, managing resources and being more supportive. And the local community that opens its doors has been awakened to follow the naked and hungry Christ, also being in need of everything – kenotic – to serve.

Also in other communities we have created vegetable gardens, sharing knowledge with people from the neighborhood and generating ecological and spiritual awareness, a bond of care for the land and mutual solidarity.

We are convinced that many of these people are blessed spiritually and materially and the church itself is evangelized, it is uncomfortable, it is challenged to follow this Jesus of the people, this naked and needy Jesus, this Jesus who lives and walks in our streets and neighborhoods. And we are trying to leave behind “the mission from above”, trying to do it “from below but with respect for the other”, knowing that the Lord reveals himself to us in that encounter of deep and epiphanic solidarity. And we

understand that it is the best testimony of Christian faith and solidarity that we can offer, making unjust poverty visible, being a prophetic denunciation before the State and those responsible for public policies, to transform the causes of injustice.

In that sense, I believe with con J. Rieger and P. Silva : “that future liberation theologies should discuss what the multiple victims of capitalism (always the majority of the population, never merely a minority) do in order to survive, related to the alternatives they create; discuss solidarity as the foundation that opposes social evil; and discuss the illusions of individualism that cover up both existing relationships of exploitation as well as solidarity.”³⁴

In that sense and driven by the program of the Methodist Church in Argentina called *communities for good living*³⁵, we are experiencing what we affirm about the new creation in Christ. We must live this new creation in moments where life is put under pressure and where the grace of God in his Spirit renews us, to fulfill the call of our Father who in his Son marked the path for us, to walk as He walked. (1 John 2:6)

Final considerations

The fruitful synthesis between Wesleyan theology in Latin America and Latin American liberation theologies marks the challenge of elaborating and promoting an embodied theology of divine grace and of unity from and for the mission from the margins and from below with a corresponding anthropology: an alternative subjectivity to empire and a sense of community that questions the power that oppresses and kills, which in turn experiences the new creation. This theological and missionary synthesis (which has at its center a pneumatological Christology of grace and tenderness) is emerging: between God’s renewing grace, the personal-social sanctification, and the macro-ecumenical vocation should mark the journey of the Christian communities in Latin America at this time.

Part of the visions and hopes that we want to sow at this time is to propose the importance and missionary relevance of key themes for Christian and Wesleyan theology, from a hermeneutic of the new creation, which is positioned on the margins and from below. In a time of misery, we offer the grace of God manifested in Jesus Christ. In a time of fragmentation and division of our peoples, we offer Christian and human unity. In a world marked by post-truth, fascism, xenophobia, hate the poor, racism, and patriarchal machismo, we offer the new creation as a key theological theme that sustains a vision for a new world and alternative subjectivity. This experience of grace and of the Spirit for an

³⁴ See Liberation Theologies and Their Future: Rethinking Categories and Popular Participation in Liberation, in *Religions*, Special Issue The Future of Liberation Theologies. Edited by P. Admirand and T. Cooper. p. 1. Religions 2023, 14, 925. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070925>

³⁵ <https://iglesiametodista.org.ar/el-buen-vivir-como-transversal-a-los-temas-de-la-gran-parroquia/>

alternative community should continue to promote ecclesial and ecumenical unity and in interreligious dialogue, in addition to the work for life and human rights with other actors of civil society. At the same time and always, respecting diversity.³⁶

As Joerg Rieger says, “Theology is a matter of life and death.”³⁷ Theology has historically functioned in death-dealing ways. A revision is necessary so that it can be life-giving. From this perspective, I would like to close this essay mentioning theological challenges that remain open and important for Latin American Wesleyan theology. I present these challenges under two categories that I conceive of as related: theological challenges and ecclesial challenges.

First, we will need to resignify our idea of God and our relationship with God as “other.” Equally important as the continual transformation of the church by grace acting in times of oppression, bringing liberation and equality, is the transformation of our image of God. I believe that for this change to occur, we will need to pay close attention to the trinitarian theology offered by Latin American liberation theologians and in the worldwide Wesleyan tradition. Moreover, we will need to center our Christology on grace and tenderness that functions in the direction of justice. Renewing our image of God and rejecting idolatrous images is key at this time.³⁸

The second theological challenge is to resignify our relationship with all creation and with others, in the direction of shaping an alternative mode of subjectivity that I believe will need to be conceptualized as intersubjectivity.³⁹ The ecclesial challenges that we face are threefold. First, Wesleyan and Methodist communities in Latin America will need to find ways of collaborating in the mission dei while remaining committed to the margins and in a ground-up manner.

Secondly, our communities will need to consolidate themselves as “communities of a liberating grace.” That means they shall not be caves of darkness but homes of life where the new anti-imperial subjectivity is practiced. They shall be based on solidarity, they will be prophetic, inclusive, evangelizing, service-oriented, and renewed in the Spirit of grace of Jesus of Nazareth.

Thirdly, these communities will need to commit themselves to the new creation that God is forming in Latin America. These communities will need to become true ecological democracies.

Fourth, our Wesleyan communities will be committed to the unity and diversity in the face of interreligious and intercultural challenges. They shall work to resist fundamentalism, patriarchy, and

³⁶ Oviedo, “Zona de promesas . Un mundo globalizado y fragmentado es mi parroquia”.

³⁷ Rieger, *Grace Under Pressure*, 75.

³⁸ We see a beginning of this work in Rieger, Míguez, and Sung, *Beyond the Spirit*, and in the recent collection of essays by Zavala, *Abajo los muros*. On the subject of the image of God, see for example in this last-mentioned book: May, “Religiones y divinidades”; and Míguez, “La doctrina de la gracia o la ley del mercado.”

³⁹ In reality, Wesley’s works offer us solid theological and ethical clues to address the environmental crisis and place it at the center of our missionary concern. Some of the most obvious Wesleyan clues are: (1) the idea of integral salvation; (2) the concept of the human being as a steward of creation, never a conqueror; (3) the presupposition that creation has intrinsic value because it is the manifestation of divine work, and (4) the union between nature and human history

violence against women, xenophobia, racism, neofascism and its hatred of diversity. They shall favor the poor, the excluded, and the migrants—those to whom God has opted. As I suggested in a recent article about the multiple pandemics that have been made invisible by the COVID-19 pandemic, these hidden calamities are the real challenge for a decolonial ⁴⁰, relevant, and transformative Wesleyan theology:

“Our God, the God of Jesus Christ, is not a solitary God, but the God of life, of solidarity with the victims and those who suffer. . . . This is our hope. The last word is not death but Life, full and definitive. As Jesus affirms: “I have come so that they may have life and life in abundance” (John 10:10). This continues to be a challenge that must be re-signified as part of a process of decolonization that seeks the integration of the plurality and diversity that is America today, as a construction of liberated peoples in equality and at the same time mutually committed. This is a challenge that calls us to join in the work that God is doing in our midst—as John Wesley liked to say—we must advance the extension of his kingdom of grace and justice. What is at stake is human life and the life of creation. Our faith in the living God is at stake, acting in the midst of the pandemics.”⁴¹

I believe that once again the Christian communities are challenged to preach and bear witness to the gospel of Jesus’ grace to the people and peoples in Latin America in all their misfortunes, to connect interculturally with the new faces of the mission, the others that emerge in a new historical conjuncture marked by growing exclusion: women victims of patriarchy, children, young people, indigenous groups, and many others. But not from patronizing charity or using others as means to increase their membership. For this reason, I believe in the transforming and revolutionary power of the gospel that is present in our Wesleyan tradition. As theologians of the Wesleyan tradition affirm in a the recently-published edited volume, *Methodist Revolutions*: “If religion is indeed always social, as Wesley realized, its practitioners need to come to terms with the challenges of their times and places in order to become part of the transforming work of God. Just as there can be no nonrevolutionary Gospel, there can be no nonrevolutionary Methodism.”⁴²

The margins, which actually constitute the majority of our humanity today, are the source of our commitment. With power concentrated in less than one percent of humanity, and with the resources of creation being devastated to satisfy the luxury of the wealthiest ten percent, while almost half of humanity still suffers in poverty, it is necessary to ask where life is. The Gospel is always a questioning of the existing powers from the power of the life of the lowly ones. Let us remember that in our history of faith it was in the margins of Galilee, and in the crucified messiah among the marginalized where

⁴⁰ See recent book with excellent decolonizing contributions: Maia Filipe Ed., *Decolonizing Wesleyan Theology. Theological Engagements from the Underside of Methodism*, (Eugene-Oregon, Cascade Books, 2024),

⁴¹ Oviedo, “Introducción.” *Apuntes* 41.1 (Dallas: SMU, 2021) 1–5.

⁴² Rieger and Vaai, “Introduction”, in : *Revival, Reform, and Revolution*,” in *Methodist Revolutions*, 15.

the transcendence of those excluded from history is manifested. For this reason, we hope that our communities, rooted in the experience of the grace of Jesus the Christ, come out of the confinement of religious selfishness toward the encounter of others, who today reveal the face of Christ on the margins (according to the parable of the final judgment in Matthew 25), and to do it together with other churches and religions, indigenous peoples, and sectors of civil and political society.

For this, a *de-conversion*⁴³ to the current mammonic system is necessary, which functions as a religion and seeks to control all areas of our lives. In this time marked by the system of Mammon and its devastation of creation, of growing individualism that makes it difficult to create a community and people in solidarity, of colonization of mentalities and the domestication of emancipatory desire, the gospel is the power and grace of God that liberates, it is openness to new times and possibilities, to a new humanity, to a new creation.

⁴³ See on Youtube, IV Interdisciplinary Seminário Capitalismo como Religião, I parte, organized by Capitalismo como Religião (UMESP, Sao Paulo, Brazil, June 18, 2021), where Nestor Miguez and Filipe Maia make great contributions to this topic of *deconversion* to the capitalist system current. Watch at <https://www.youtube.com/live/LdOik2Y4ns8?si=L2p7Bgc82oTtu5K6>

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