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“I WANT TO LIVE”: THE SPIRIT OF THE INCARNATION AND THEOLOGIES LIBERATING REFUGEE WOMEN

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“I WANT TO LIVE”:
THE SPIRIT OF THE INCARNATION AND
THEOLOGIES LIBERATING REFUGEE WOMEN

An Essay Submitted to
The Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
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for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Eilis Ann McCulloh, HM
2018

The essay of Eilis Ann McCulloh, HM is hereby accepted:

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“I want to live,” a 12-year old Somali Bantu girl told me when I asked her to define her goals for the future. She had recently arrived in the United States from a Dadaab, a sprawling refugee camp in Somalia. Her immediate hope was not for toys or clothes, but for a chance at life. The only life she had known in the refugee camp was one of oppression: economic oppression, gender-based oppression, and cultural oppression. Yet, she knew of the hope for liberation that this new life gifted her.

Like the generations of refugee women before her, this child understood that, in her culture, her life was not her own. Rather, it was expected that her life would soon belong to a husband, and that she would be relegated to the roles of child-bearer and wife. This is the life that her mother and her mother’s mother were given. Too often, these women are forbidden to work outside the home or pursue their own interests due to cultural and religious rules and traditions.

Despite its effort to empower the poor and change the status quo, Catholic liberation theology has yet to be inclusive of refugee women. Traditional liberation theology might cast aside their cultural and religious practices as oppressive because they encourage women to wear a hijab, pray separately from men, and force heterosexual marriage and traditional gender roles. Yet, as I will explore in this paper, these religious and cultural practices also provide hope, strength, safety, and a sense of belonging. Therefore, a liberation theology that “promotes the full humanity of (refugee) women,”¹

¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 18-19; quoted in Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 30.

must be both respectful and inclusive of the importance of religious and cultural traditions.

INTRODUCTION

In the Catholic sphere, Liberation Theology is one practice that theologians and the faithful have used to promote the dignity and humanity of all people. Liberation Theology involves a praxis to overturn the *status quo* and bring abundant life to the *Anawim*.² In today's world of on-going war and an increased economic divide between first- and third-world countries, refugee women can be considered modern-day *Anawim*. They are, indeed, the closest to Jesus Christ, who stands with them in their struggle for life and gives them strength to continue. Traditionally, liberation theology has provided a theological framework to discuss social change and Jesus' prophetic ministry alongside the marginalized. From the *campesinos* in El Salvador to the revolution in Nicaragua, liberation theology raised up the "poor and lowly."³ The poor, emboldened by the Spirit, claimed the full power of their human rights and sought to create a more just and equal society.

However, liberation theology, has failed to fully recognize the need for liberation among refugee women who do not necessarily share a common religion or culture. This paper, therefore, explores how liberation theology can be expanded to understand and empower refugee women from all countries and religious backgrounds. These women deserve to have their story told with dignity and respect. They long for their own

² Joan L. Roccasalvo defines "*anawim*" as "the poor of every sort: the vulnerable, the marginalized, and socio-economically oppressed, those of lowly status without earthly power. In fact, they depended totally on God for whatever they owned." Quoted in "The *Anawim*: Who Are They?" (December 05, 2012); <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column/the-anawim-who-are-they-2386>.

³ Cf. Luke 4.

liberation so that they can one day live the lives they were born to live—whether that be as a Somali woman raising children, a Congolese mama with many children and dreams of her own, or a young woman identifying as both LGBTQ and Muslim. It is my hope that this study will lay the groundwork to include their narratives in contemporary theological discourse.

METHODOLOGY

What existing theological resources can assist in creating a liberation theology that is inclusive of refugee women from all cultural and religious backgrounds? M. Shawn Copeland’s designation of a new theological subject—that of the “exploited, despised, poor women of color”—provides a useful guiding framework for this dialogue.⁴ While Copeland specifically refers to the lives of black women in the United States in her book *Enfleshing Freedom*, much of her language and argument to also gives voice to refugee women. Using her argument, I want to challenge our lax commitment to liberation and solidarity by asking: (a) Who needs liberating? (b) What does this liberation look like? And (c) How does liberation intersect between differing theological practices, cultural norms, and sexual preference? In answering these questions, I focus on the importance of identity, the influence of incarnation, and the power of human dignity as we witness each woman claim herself by name. Furthermore, I echo Copeland’s understanding that “inasmuch as solidarity involves an attitude or disposition, it entails recognition of the humanity of the ‘other’ as human, along with regard for the ‘other’ in

⁴ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

her (and his) own otherness.”⁵ Simply stated, the liberation theology that I engage in this paper does not negate the refugee women’s culture or tradition as it is integral to her identity and world-view. My attempt is to stand with and move towards an active praxis of solidarity with refugee women that recognizes and honors our differences while still seeking ways in which theology can liberate all from unjust structures.

The first section of this paper recognizes the need to understand the process of liberation theology as first described by Gustavo Gutiérrez and intimated in the Second Vatican Council, which opened the Catholic Church to the world. Gutiérrez’s process of liberation is “intended as a theology of salvation”⁶ that is rooted “deep in scripture, tradition, and the magisterium.”⁷ Shifting its theological starting point from “revelation and tradition,” liberation theology begins “with facts and questions derived from the world and from history” to “fulfill its critical function vis-à-vis ecclesial praxis without narrowness.”⁸ Most importantly, “to speak about a theology of liberation is to seek an answer to the following question: what relation is there between salvation and the historical process of human liberation?”⁹ Therefore, liberation theology examines the

⁵ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 94.

⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1973), xxxix.

⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xlv.

⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 10.

⁹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 29.

relationship between humanity and faith with an emphasis on “overcoming every obstacle to the creation of authentic peace.”¹⁰

Gutiérrez’s understanding of liberation theology is rooted in his understanding of salvation, which he defines as “the communion of human beings with God and among themselves, which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ.”¹¹ As important as this understanding is to liberation, I recognize that it is not an appropriate starting point when talking about refugee women who, as a result of cultural and religious beliefs and traditions, might not even recognize that God lives in them. For this reason, I believe that liberation theology must first empower these women to first understand that Jesus Christ lives in them even though they have long been cast aside as “exploited, despised, poor women of color.”¹² Furthermore, as members of the majority, we must recognize that, “working class women and women of colour have been doubly marginalized by race and class and by gender [and] poor women of colour are the bottom of such social system, experiencing the full weight of poverty, racism, and gender exploitation.”¹³ From my experience working with refugee women, they are frequently outcast because of their gender, social class, and country of origin. LGBTQ refugees struggle even more because they are frequently ousted from their own communities and

¹⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 31.

¹¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 85.

¹² Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 94.

¹³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Prophetic Tradition and the Liberation of Women: Promise and Betrayal,” *Feminist Theology* 2, no. 5 (January 1994): 68.

religions and must bear the brunt of hatred and violence. Consequently, their liberation must begin at the level of the Incarnation. These women must believe that, in their struggle to live, Jesus Christ (or Allah) lives in them and loves them.

In the second section, I share stories about three women I have met through my work in refugee resettlement. Their stories are not from interviews, but, rather, from my own recollection of their story. Unfortunately, many refugee women share similar stories of trauma, ostracism, and struggle. However, they possess a resilient spirit and strength that has carried them to new life. In sharing their stories, I hope to show concretely the multi-faceted need for a new praxis of liberation theology.

Finally, borrowing from M. Shawn Copeland, I will begin to lay a framework for a refugee woman's liberation theology that recognizes their search for an "integral liberation." Integral liberation "involves more than the rescue from economic poverty: liberation includes the rescue of people from the dehumanizing effects of the dominant culture and from the obstacles of sin and suffering that keep them away from God."¹⁴

As part of this framework, I will develop our need for an active solidarity with refugee women that empowers us to work towards an integral liberation that is appropriate and respectful of their cultural heritage. The refugee women described in this paper do not need movements of solidarity that unite their sufferings with those in the first-world. Rather, they need a liberation theology in which "poor women of color grasp themselves as human subjects, to grapple with the meaning of liberation and freedom" in

¹⁴ Baum, Gregory. *Amazing Church: A Catholic Theologian Remembers a Half-Century of Change*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 57.

order to “understand and articulate authentic meanings of human flourishing and liberation, progress and salvation.”¹⁵ Their liberation is not yet at an economic or societal level; it is a liberation for basic human dignity and the right to call themselves daughters of a loving God.

SOCIAL LOCATION

As I write this essay, I am aware of two things: I am not a refugee; and I occupy the space of privilege given to me solely due to being a white, educated woman. I cannot claim to know what it is like to awaken in the middle the night in sheer terror as the militia guns down people in neighboring huts; nor to be driven from my village and forced to walk for days upon days to reach a safer destination while experiencing death, starvation, and sexual violence. I have been blessed with opportunities to leave the city where my entire family lives to attend college, serve in ministry, and now, to live and work. Furthermore, both the support of my religious community and my religious vows free me to respond to the “needs of the times” and serve alongside the most marginalized people.¹⁶

My experience of liberation and solidarity with refugee communities comes with a decade of working in refugee resettlement and immigration work. The space from which I write is one greatly influenced by the lives of refugee women from a number of countries around the world. I have journeyed alongside and learned from Somali mothers and children in Minnesota, Bhutanese and Karen (Burma) families in Akron, and

¹⁵ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 88.

¹⁶ I am a temporary professed member of the Sisters of the Humility of Mary.

refugees from Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan now living in Cleveland. They have all taught me how to love more deeply and wholly. They have also taught me that the ways I may consider myself in the minority of a social group pale in comparison to the ways some of them are claiming their human dignity in the face of oppressive traditional cultures. Finally, they have shown me that there is a great need for a liberation praxis that incorporates their unique life stories into our theological framework.

It is important to understand that, while all of these people have experienced some traumatic events in their lives, many would not identify themselves as oppressed or victims. Yet, they are all survivors. I am not writing to claim that they need to liberate themselves from oppressive or hierarchical structures. Rather, I am arguing that our theological studies of liberation theology must include their stories. These women fall between the cracks of traditional liberation theology, migration theology, womanist theology, and Black liberation theology.¹⁷ Their lives are examples of profound belief in a God who gives life and strength and hope. This paper is dedicated to them.

I also write from the memory of a middle-school aged Somali girl. On her second day in the United States, a middle-school aged girl from Somalia told me that her only

¹⁷ Migration Theology, popularized by Daniel Groody, CSC, focuses on the plight of Central, Latin, and South American migrants who, like refugees, are forced to flee their ancestral lands due to violence, famine, and economic disparity. Black liberation theology, as defined by James Cone, focuses primarily on the plight of black Americans who were forced to endure decades of slavery. Womanist theology also gives voice primarily to black women in the United States. Refugee women do not fit neatly into any of the above theological categories: they are from other countries, practice different religions, and live within drastically different cultural norms.

dream was this: “I want to live.”¹⁸ Her declaration powerfully changed my life and the ways in which I understood the refugee experience, forced migration, and culture. In the years following, it also has changed the ways I understand theology and practice my own faith. Did Jesus not come to give others abundant life?¹⁹ Now, as a Sister of the Humility of Mary, do I not believe that our mission is to “bring more abundant life to God’s people, especially the poor”?²⁰

If we understand “God’s people” to mean all people of the world, then we must also believe that God’s compassion and hope for abundant life is not restricted to Christians. Therefore, if we truly believe that Jesus Christ is incarnate in the world, our belief system must profess that all men, women, and children, regardless of their gender, sexual, or racial identity are created in the image and likeness of God. No human-designed oppression or violence has the power to negate that claim. This is to see Christ in the marginalized people of our society and remember that Christ has always poured himself out into the souls of those who suffer most. It also forces us to acknowledge that oppression is often at the hands of people who proclaim themselves followers of this same all-loving Christ figure. It is humans who, in attempts to seek absolute control and

¹⁸ From 2010–2011, I served in St. Cloud, Minnesota, as a refugee resettlement case manager with Lutheran Social Services. Our clients were primarily single-mother families from Somalia who had spent over twenty years living in the Dadaab and Kakuma Refugee Camps in Kenya.

¹⁹ *Cf.* John 10:10.

²⁰ Humility of Mary Mission Statement, <http://www.humilityofmary.org/who-we-are/our-spirituality/mission-statement>.

power over the world, erect boundaries around Jesus Christ's transcendental love as though they can keep it from those they deem unworthy.

In the Catholic circles, liberation theology has been used as the foundational argument to recognize all people as God's beloved children. It argues that Jesus Christ lives with them in their experiences of suffering and victimization and leads them to fullness of life. Although Gustavo Gutiérrez's model of liberation theology and Blessed Oscar Romero's praxis of it in the social revolution in El Salvador "raised up the lowly," many women still remained entrenched in generations of servitude that reflect the hierarchical structures of culture and Church that continue to form our worlds. Yet, for Gutiérrez's theology to truly liberate *all* people, we must remove our own parameters on liberation theology to include the refugee woman who has borne twelve children, the mother and her young children sneaking across the border in search for the fullness of life, the young Somali woman whose courageous coming-out story honors the divine in herself, and all other women who struggle each day to claim their bodies as created in the image and likeness of God who is only love.

Key terms that will be used throughout this essay include refugee, migrant, UNHCR, and liberation theology.²¹ My understanding and use of the terms refugee and immigrant are taken from the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). The UNHCR "is a global organisation dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights and

²¹ Liberation Theology will be explained in depth in the next section of this paper.

building a better future for refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people.”²² Their definition of a refugee is as follows:

Someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.²³

Conversely, a migrant “may leave his or her country for many reasons that are not related to persecution, such as for the purposes of employment, family reunification or study” and “continues to enjoy the protection of his or her own government, even when abroad.”²⁴ These terms are not to be used interchangeably. In this paper, I will use the term “refugee” exclusively to describe people who have relocated to the United States with refugee status.

²² UNHCR, “About Us”; <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/about-us.html>.

²³ UNHCR, “Who is a refugee?”; <http://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>.

²⁴ UNHCR, “The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Its 1967 Protocol”; accessed 7 Jan 2018 <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/about-us/background/4ec262df9/1951-convention-relating-status-refugees-its-1967-protocol.html>.

I. A SYNOPSIS OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

In my understanding, Liberation Theology seeks to obliterate structures that are designed to separate Catholics from the world, men from women, and rich from poor. This challenges us to move beyond the *status quo* of religious thought and practice and respond to the “needs of the times.” It also calls us to unite the spiritual and temporal spheres in order to seek new ways that allow faith to inform social action.

The prophet Micah reminds us that we are required to “only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8). Frequently used to promote social action by living out God’s life-giving mission and creating just societies in which all people are treated equally, this scripture passage also lends itself to the liberation theology movement which asks that our faith move us from private prayer to praxis. Our own personal encounter with Jesus Christ must move us towards action and into relationship with others.

Born out of the struggle for social justice in Latin America during the middle of the twentieth century, Liberation Theology is a response to the “deafening cry pour[ed] from the throats of millions of men, asking their pastors for a liberation that reaches them from nowhere else.”²⁵ Answering Vatican II’s call to “respond to the needs of the times,” Gustavo Gutiérrez saw a need to move beyond the “narrow ecclesial limits” because “the

²⁵ Latin American Bishops, “Medellín Document: Poverty of the Church” (6 September 1968); Located at Theology Library at Spring Hill College 1:2; accessed 7 Jan 2018, <http://theolibrary.shc.edu/resources/medpov.htm>.

signs of the times are not only a call to intellectual analysis. They are above all a call to pastoral activity, to commitment, and to service.”²⁶

This shifting of theological and spiritual praxis is rooted in the invitation of Pope John XXIII for the church to dramatically open itself to the world (*aggiornamento*) and return to its founding. During the groundbreaking Second Vatican Council, statements on biblical interpretation (*Dei Verbum*), the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), interreligious dialogue (*Nostra Aetate*), and others changed the way in which Catholics were to interact with the world. Catholics were no longer kept away from the “heathen” world and “for the first time in human history, whole peoples are convinced that the benefits of culture really can and should extend to everyone.”²⁷

Gaudium et Spes recognized the “equal dignity of persons” which demanded “access to more human and equal conditions of life” and thus required that “[h]uman institutions, whether they be private or public, should aim to serve the dignity and the goal of human beings, opposing any social or political slavery and safeguarding the basic rights of all under every form of government.”²⁸ This called for a new understanding of our interdependence, the universal common good, and the dignity of all persons. It also

²⁶ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 7.

²⁷ Vatican Council II, “The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* on the Church in the Modern World” (December 7, 1965), I. §9; English translation taken from Norman Tanner, ed., *Vatican II: The Essential Texts* (New York: Image Books, 2012), 191. All translations from the Vatican II documents will be drawn from this edition.

²⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, II. §29; Tanner edition, 221.

encouraged Catholics to engage in social action—recognizing that our faith inspires us to call out injustices on every level.

The perpetuation of unjust and hostile living situations, therefore, is not of God. Yet, what is needed to create a just and equal world where all, from the woman who must prostitute herself for money to the homeless man begging on the street corner to the refugee and to the little kid growing up in the barrio, are recognized as being created in the image and likeness of God? In praxis, this calls us to see Christ in each person we encounter. It forces us to break down barriers between socio-economic classes, genders, races, and geographic regions. It should also, in turn, create a lived theology that recognizes the inherent human dignity in every person. However, from our study of history and our own lived experiences, we know that this is not the case. Religion, gender, sexuality, race, and economic status have long been used to divide the “haves” from the “have nots” and have determined who is worthy of God’s love and dignity.

Gaudium et Spes, therefore, reminds us that there is:

a pressing obligation on us to be a neighbor to every single individual and to take steps to serve each individual whom we encounter, whether she or he be old and abandoned, or a foreign worker unjustly despised, or an exile, or an illegitimate child innocently suffering for the sin of others, or a hungry person appealing to our conscience with the Lord’s words: “as you did it to one of the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40).²⁹

Liberation Theology takes this theological concept into action. It demands an active faith that recognizes that, in order “to be a Christian is to accept and to live—in solidarity, in faith, hope and charity—the meaning that the World of the Lord and our

²⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, II. §27; Tanner edition, 219.

encounter with that Word give to the historical becoming of humankind on the way toward total community.”³⁰ Not only does it require us how we understand the commandment to “love our neighbor as our self,” it also has the potential to reframe our understanding of discipleship by defining our relation with God to include our relationship with others. Gutiérrez explains:

To regard the unique and absolute relationship with God as the horizon of every human action is to place oneself, from the outset, in a wider and more profound context. It is likewise more demanding. We are faced in our day with the bare, central theologico-pastoral question: *What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be Church in the unknown circumstances of the future?* In that last instance, we must search the Gospel message for the answer to what according to Camus constitutes the most important question facing all persons: “To decide whether life deserves to be lived or not.”³¹

We cannot ignore the fact that each life is intertwined with the next. Our neighbor becomes a living person and not an abstract concept who receives the weekly tithe or food donation. The life of a poor, peasant farmer is no less worthy of God’s love and dignity than that of the most powerful person in the world. Vatican II reminded us that our world and church are inter-connected. Liberation theology takes this one step further and actively seeks to reimage a “good” Christian into one who lives in solidarity with the world’s poor and is moved to action by his or her faith. Therefore, Gustavo Gutiérrez’s theology argues that the practice of Christianity must go beyond praying, reception of the sacraments of the Church, and attendance at liturgy. It now champions a faith that does justice—or integrates solidarity and prayer into an active praxis bringing the kingdom of

³⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 32.

³¹ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 32.

God to all on Earth. It must lead to systemic change that brings about equality among all people—regardless of class, gender, sexuality, or country of origin. This requires the Catholic-Christian sphere, which traditionally emphasized the private life and cultivation of private values while relegating the common good to a lower plane, must transform³² to include a political dimension that is informed by an “authentic and fruitful faithfulness to the Lord.”³³

Therefore, liberation theology advocates a return to the prophetic lifestyle and ministry of Jesus Christ that proclaims liberty to captives, releases prisoners, and brings glad tidings to the poor (*cf.* Luke 4:18). Such a prophetic ministry is not relegated to any social sphere, but instead moves to tear down boundaries and reach the people most marginalized in society. A preferential option for the poor is a “prophetic action that has its roots in the unmerited love of God and is demanded by this love.”³⁴ The love of God, as explained in the context of Liberation Theology, is not stagnant. It calls us to live in the presence of the Incarnate Christ who loved the poor, marginalized, and forgotten people of the world.

As such, the incarnation greatly influences the praxis of liberation theology and our own understanding of discipleship. If “the Word of God became flesh and made its dwelling place among us” (John 1:14), then Jesus Christ lives among all people regardless of socio-economic status, gender, sexuality, race, creed, or location. If God’s

³² Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 32.

³³ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 32.

³⁴ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, xxvii.

love is a concrete action of both the “a universalization of the presence of God: from being localized and linked to a particular people, it gradually extends to all the peoples of the earth,” then it must become “an internalization, or rather, an integration of this presence: from dwelling in places of worship, this presence is transferred to the heart of human history; it is a presence which embraces the whole person.”³⁵ In theory, the incarnation should challenge us to live out of an Incarnation Spirit, recognizing the presence of God in our own lives and in the lives of all those we encounter.

A renewed understanding of the incarnation also encourages us to build relationships with all people. This will also influence our definition of “neighbor.” In a conversation between Gustavo Gutiérrez and Paul Farmer, this shift is explained:

Theology must take seriously the challenge of reflection about suffering, and it must dwell upon the ways to help these people. One needs physical hands certainly, but friendship too, as you mentioned. If we lack friendship with the poor, we cannot perform an option for the poor. The option for the poor is not an option for a certain social class, gender, or culture. It’s an option for the completeness of the person.³⁶

If we lack a relationship with the other person, we will only know them by their outward labels: woman, refugee, migrant, Muslim, lesbian, and so forth. We will never know the whole person—and will run the risk of creating new barriers and levels of belonging that may alienate more people from an inclusive God. We must enter into

³⁵ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 109.

³⁶ M. Griffin and J. Weiss Block, eds., *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013), 166.

relationship with our neighbor so that we recognize, encounter, and raise up the Holy One who lives in each of us and in each of our neighbors.

With Gutiérrez's spirituality of liberation, we see God in our neighbors. We meet "God in our encounter with others" because everyone is the "living temple of God."³⁷ Therefore, by loving the neighbor, we are doing two things. First, we are recognizing Christ incarnate in each person and, second; we are loving God as God-self. This leads us to recognize Christ in concrete actions such as feeding the hungry, setting the prisoner free, dealing out justice to the oppressed, and restoring sight.³⁸ Only through such actions are we fully united with God and able to share in the love God has for all people. Furthermore, we are building relationships that will challenge our own beliefs and help us see the interconnectedness of all people.

In order to maintain a preferential option for the poor, we must remain in a continual stance of openness to conversion. Conversion, in this sense, involves both a conversion to the God and to our neighbor. Gutiérrez explains this conversion as "a radical transformation of ourselves" that "means thinking, feeling, and living as Christ—present in exploited and alienated persons."³⁹ Through this continual conversion to the neighbor, one recognizes that, in order to live as Christ, one must enter into a mutual relationship with all people, including the marginalized people within our own communities. This requires us to remain open to change and any movement that calls us

³⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 110.

³⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 111.

³⁹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 118.

beyond a black-and-white theology to a transformative experience of faith rooted in God as neighbor. I challenge us to apply this understanding to the lives of refugee women.

The movement towards encountering the Incarnate Christ among all peoples, as described within the context of liberation theology, represents a return to the prophetic voice of the Church. Because liberation theology calls us to listen to the voices of the oppressed and let social revolution come from the peripheries, the prophetic voice must come from all sectors of society. Gutiérrez emphasizes that all members of the Church—lay, priests, religious, and bishops—have a responsibility to “fulfill a role of *prophetic denunciation* of these grave injustices rampant in Latin America.⁴⁰ These grave injustices continue to occur around the world in communities of color, among women, in the LGBTQ community, and in our own neighborhoods. Likewise, in the decades since Gutiérrez first wrote *A Theology of Liberation*, liberation theology has been used as a foundation for minority groups and their supporters who seek a social and religious revolution that will overturn the *status quo* within society by recognizing that all people are (a) created in the image and likeness of God and (b) worthy of a fulfilling life as the daughter or son of God. It requires that we continually—as individuals, community, and church—read and respond to the signs of the time in order that we find a way to interpret and live out the Gospel within the social reality of the world. A Christian faith, therefore, cannot continue to support unjust structures; rather, it must lead to the rising up of more voices representative of the people we have placed on the margins of our society. We must remember, as Lilla Watson said, “If you have come to help me, you are wasting

⁴⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 68.

your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”⁴¹ Today, our Christian-centric understanding of Liberation Theology must be expanded to include the life experiences of people from different faiths and creeds. No matter our place in the world, we must act upon our “duty of solidarity with the poor, to which charity leads us.”⁴²

⁴¹ Lilla Watson, quoted on Lilla: International Women’s Network; accessed 11 Feb 2018; <https://lillanetwork.wordpress.com/about/>.

⁴² Latin American Bishops, “Medellín Document: Poverty of the Church,” 68.

II. LEFT BEHIND BY LIBERATION

THEOLOGY

In the forty plus years since Gustavo Gutiérrez first published *A Theology of Liberation* and the Catholic world became aware of the liberation movements in El Salvador with Monseñor Oscar Romero and the peasant people, many theological scholars have asked “Who is missing?” Even Gutiérrez himself recognized that his groundbreaking work was just beginning to touch the surface. For example, in his 1973 introduction to *A Liberation of Theology*, Gutiérrez explains that, in Latin America “we are only now beginning to wake up to the unacceptable and inhuman character of [women’s] situation. One thing that makes it very difficult to grasp is its true character of hiddenness, for it has become something habitual, part of everyday life and cultural tradition.”⁴³ Indeed, even as liberation theology sought to free the oppressed from unjust political and economic situations, it remained generally limited to men. Women often remained in “traditional” housekeeping and maternal roles because cultural traditions and a hierarchical church prevented women from achieving an active and authentic liberation. Theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Johnson, and others were at the forefront of the feminist liberation movement and challenged liberation theology’s exclusion of women and other minorities. Ada María Isasi-Díaz gave voice to *mujerista* theology and James Cone, M. Shawn Copeland, and others to Black (and womanist) liberation theology.

⁴³ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxii.

Ruether challenged liberation theologians to include the role of women in their discussions. She explained that, even though “the prophet and the liberation theologian speak a judgmental word of God against the sins of the community in order to call it back to faithfulness to the radical foundations of the faith of the covenant, contextualized in the contemporary situation,” women are still “told to be obedient to God by obeying their social superiors.”⁴⁴ Many mechanisms are put in place to keep women in traditional roles and their voices silent. Despite women’s inclusion in “prophecy, women have been betrayed by male-led prophetic movements again and again” as the “revolutionary men have had no intention of including the overthrow of male domination in their revolution.”⁴⁵ Therefore, feminist and womanist theologies continually challenge an engrained male-dominated church and culture.

M. Shawn Copeland also challenged liberation theology to integrate women of color more fully. In a 2012 issue of *U.S. Catholic*, she wrote, “We need to become more open to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is never selective about race. We are. The Holy Spirit is never selective about gender. We are. The Holy Spirit is never selective about sexual orientation. We are. These are our limitations, not God’s limitations.”⁴⁶ If liberation theology, as described by Gustavo Gutiérrez, involves a refusal to maintain the *status quo* and an awakening of the socio-political dimensions of the Church, then it must

⁴⁴ Ruether, “Prophetic Tradition and the Liberation of Women,” 58.

⁴⁵ Ruether, “Prophetic Tradition and the Liberation of Women,” 60–61.

⁴⁶ M. Shawn Copeland, “Dream On,” *U.S. Catholic* 74, no. 5 (2012): 18.

become more inclusive in addressing women and other minorities on the margins of society—who also are excluded by the church.

With this quotation from M. Shawn Copeland in mind, I would like to challenge us to expand liberation theology once again to include refugee women who come from various ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds and reestablish their lives in the United States. The stories I present, based on the histories of refugee women I have known through my work in Minnesota and Ohio, should help us understand the many factors contributing to their unique situations. I want you to meet strong women who capable leaders. They have kept their families together through years of fleeing war, decades in refugee camps, and finally, life in new countries. They yearn to be free and, yet, are continually reminded that “the emancipation of women is defined as an expression of the corrupting influence of the West, while traditional patriarchy is claimed as an integral part of the indigenous culture.”⁴⁷ Many of the women I have come to know would be the first to say that they do not want to “throw away” many of their cultural traditions (including the emphasis on community, respect for elders, religious beliefs and practices); but they do want the power to go to school, work to support their families, and live the life they were born to lead. A 2016 study involving Somali refugees living in Minnesota concluded that “choosing to embrace women’s newfound freedom and increased power may be to disregard aspects of one’s Muslim and/or cultural identity or alliance. For refugee women, despite possible disadvantages in regards to employment and less discrimination, maintaining traditional roles can assist in maintaining

⁴⁷ Copeland, “Dream On,” 66.

community.”⁴⁸ In my experience, this statement can be applied to any refugee woman: their ties to culture, community, and religion are often the things that kept them alive during years of flight and displacement. Yet, for some women, these very same factors prevent them living authentic lives once their flight has ended.

I tell each of the following stories to introduce you to a refugee woman who, in beginning her new life, must grapple with her own, personal struggle for liberation. For each woman, this struggle looks different. In my work, I have witnessed their fight for freedom and liberation duplicated in many women across many different cultures and religious traditions. Too often, their push for liberation is silenced by culture, tradition, and the overwhelming need to hold onto the comfort of their home countries as they begin new lives in the United States.

This first story introduces us to a Somali mother and her middle-school-aged daughter who arrived in the United States knowing no one else. First isolated in Dadaab refugee camp because they were from a minority clan (Bantu), they were again isolated in their new city. The more established Somali community did not welcome them in the same way that they would have welcomed someone from another clan. In the camp and, now in the United States, their world had been forcibly limited to the small world of other ethnic minorities in the camp without hope for the future. Yet, here they were—two of the lucky people to make it out of the refugee camps and into a third country for permanent resettlement. How can they claim their own dignity as strong, Bantu women?

⁴⁸ Jennifer Jo Connor, “From Somalia to U.S.: Shifts in Gender Dynamics from the Perspective of Female Somali Refugees,” *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 28 (2016): 20.

Initially I was inclined to be angry at the culture and religion that, for generations, had relegated this mother and daughter to the bottom of the social ladder. For reasons I was as yet unable to understand, they were still devoted to their Bantu culture, Muslim faith, and native country. At that time, I believed that the only way for them to “achieve fullness of life” was to become educated, liberated from the *hijab* and stifling Muslim belief system, and adopt a “western” mindset. However, the more I came to know and learn from them, I saw that I was wrong. Their Somali culture and Muslim faith helped them identify as beloved children of Allah. It had given them strength and a reason for living, and it had brought them to the United States. Liberation for them was not throwing off their *hijabs*; rather, liberation entailed the option to learn, the option to work, and the option for life. These opportunities were, indeed, their preferential options, which cause upheaval to the *status quo*.

In the initial months I spent working with them, it felt like we were taking baby steps: the most basic ESL class was too advanced, the bus system was still a maze, and doctor appointments were confusing. But, the mother-daughter pair held on to great hope that life would improve. However, one day, I brought them with me to the hospital to pick up another client. When I returned to the waiting room, the mother was missing. I caught sight of her in the pharmacy where she was communicating with the pharmacist. She was picking up her own prescription without the help of a caseworker or interpreter!

Beaming, she said, “Alhamdulillah [praise God]!” Her strength had come from Allah, who had given her the courage to step forward on her own—like in the healing of Jairus’ daughter, who to was given the healing power of Jesus to arise (Mark 5:41). This

mother, like Jairus' daughter, had arisen by the power of God. In that moment, I witnessed her liberation from oppression and frailty. Her social status did not stop her from knowing and calling upon Allah for strength and healing. And, although she was not healed physically, she was "once again part of the community"⁴⁹ and was able to harness her inner power and take a step forward. Her strength and determination will be her greatest legacy to her daughter, who will grow up knowing her worth as a Somali Bantu woman.

This second story is also about the courage of a young Somali woman facing ostracism from her community. Raised by a single mother in Nakivale Refugee Camp in Uganda, she travelled alone to the United States with the hope that her mother would soon follow. Early on, this woman took the reins of her own story and enrolled in high school, obtained a part-time job, and found the support of three single, Somali women with whom she lived. One day, about six months after she arrived in the United States, she called me to her apartment for help with a problem. Her housemates were at work and she was home alone. Worried, I asked her if she was sick. (She was not). I asked her if something happened to her mother in Uganda. (No). By now, she was sobbing. Covering her face with the extra material of her *hijab*, she whispered, "I am not normal."

During the next couple of hours, I listened to her story. She explained that her classmates had begun calling her "*basha*" (literally, woman-lover). It was true, she confided in me, "*waan jeclahay iyada*" (I love her). She lived in fear that her housemates

⁴⁹ Matouš Holeka, "Reading the Bible in Various Streams of Liberation Theology: Latin American Theology, South African Black Theology, and Indian Dalit Theology," *Communio Viatorum* 56, no. 2 (January 1, 2014): 169–96.

would find out, or worse yet, the entire community. “I cannot be Somali. I cannot be Muslim,” she cried.

In my limited understanding of Islam and the Somali culture, I knew that she was correct. While this woman’s mother accepted her, Somali culture believed that LGBTQ people are “people that have the curse from Allah (God) and the person is doing something that Allah is not happy with.”⁵⁰ As Astur, a Somali woman living in Minnesota, explained to interviewers:

Oh, wow. It’s definitely a bad thing in our community, in our religion, and if they were to know there was someone who is of that group or those groups, they would definitely be ostracised. They would be kicked out of the community. They would be just stayed away from as if they had a deadly disease and they would never, ever be looked at the same way before and their family, their mothers, their parents, they would be kicked out of the community as well. It would just be a nightmare.⁵¹

This confirms that my client’s suspicions were correct. Would it even be possible for this woman to remain in her community while accepting her own identity? Furthermore, how could an expanded understanding of liberation theology, help bring her story to our conscience.

Her identity as a queer woman was completely at odds with her Somali Muslim culture. Her Somali culture (which promoted conformity) was the strongest unifier with her people, but she knew that she was outside of it. As I sat with her, I recognized that, as

⁵⁰ Shanda L. Hunt, Jennifer J. Connor, Amanda Ciesinski, Cawo Abdi & Beatrice ‘Bean’ E. Robinson, “Somali American female refugees discuss their attitudes toward homosexuality and the gay and lesbian community,” *Culture, Health, & Sexuality* 20, no. 5 (2018): 591–605 (2017): 6.

⁵¹ Hunt, et al., “Somali American female refugees discuss their attitudes toward homosexuality and the gay and lesbian community,” 8.

a Muslim woman, she may never fully fit into the LGBTQ community and, as a member of the LGBTQ community, she will never fit in the Somali Muslim community. How can liberation theology include her story when it traverses the boundaries between queer, womanist, and Muslim liberation theology?

This woman's story challenges both the monolithic traditional Somali culture and religious beliefs. One Somali explained that "everyone had the same religion, and the culture we shared, there was commonality."⁵² Here is a woman who says that, as a Somali people, we are not all the same. Her story emphasizes the need to expand traditional liberation theology in three ways. First, as a Somali woman, she seeks liberation from patriarchal and hierarchal societies that promote heterosexual marriage and child-bearing. Second, as a Muslim, she must navigate her own faith within the context of a religion that all too often segregates men from women. And, finally, as a Muslim member of the LGBTQ community, she must teach others about the life-giving aspects of the Somali Muslim culture.

A third and final story to illustrate the need for a comprehensive understanding of liberation theology concerns a 35-year-old mother of eight from the Democratic Republic of Congo. I came to know this woman and her children about a year ago, when they needed assistance from my office. At the time, she was pregnant with her eighth child. Her seven children, ranging in ages from one to thirteen, consumed her every minute. She was, in many ways, on house arrest. Her husband forbade her go to the grocery store on

⁵² C. McMichael, "'Everywhere is Allah's Place': Islam and the Everyday Life of Somali Women in Melbourne, Australia," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2002, 15(2):171-188), 179.

her own or visit friends. She did not drive; could not read English (or Swahili); and did not know how to navigate public transportation. She did not have a phone of her own.

Yet, in the rare moments when she was able to let her guard down, I witnessed the transforming Spirit of God moving through her. She would turn on Congolese Gospel music videos and her living room would transform into a sanctuary in which God spoke directly to her. I often sat with her two youngest children and watched her transform as she began to pray along with the music. Her usually tense body, tired from caring for her children and husband, began to relax and she became free to worship the God who loved her into being.

In time, she joined our testimonial therapy program at my office and shared her story with us. Like many people from the Democratic Republic of Congo, her story began with a peaceful life in a village where her family farmed their own land until the rebel Mai-Mai soldiers came in the early 1990s. Also, like most Congolese women from her clan, she was unable to go to school; instead, she stayed home with her mother to learn how to take care of the house. She said that this was her first great anguish as she longed to go to school with her brothers.

The Mai-Mai, she explained, tortured all the people in her village. They killed her father and two brothers. Her mother escaped with her surviving children. She spoke about the strength of her mother, shepherding her family to relative safety in a Tanzanian refugee camp. “My mother,” she explained, “was like God sent to us. She gathered us and all the people of our village and we set out together, hiding in the bush at night, swimming through the rivers, and running fast. She went without eating so we could live.

I want to be as strong as my mother. God saved us, and I must teach my children that God loved us first so that we could survive.”

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free. (Luke 4:18)

The transformation of this woman during the process of testimonial therapy was truly a miracle of God. In telling her story, she came to know the strength and power she possessed as a woman, as a mother, as a daughter, and as a beloved child of God. She has tapped into the strength of her mother to stand up to her husband and carve her own path in the United States. A few months ago, she gave birth to a baby girl and declared that she will one day rule the world. She will guide her daughters (and sons) to create a new world—one that still values many of the traditions of the Congolese community while advocating for equality, education, and freedom for women and girls.

In each of these three stories, “women have not been able to bring their own experience into the public formulation of the tradition.”⁵³ The strength and courage of their mothers to lead them to safety, to protect them, and to call them children of God is not part of the normative story of their respective cultures. They live out of cultures in which:

⁵³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Feminist Interpretation: A Correlation,” 111–24 in Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 113.

not only have women been excluded from shaping and interpreting the tradition from their own experience, but the tradition has been shaped and interpreted against them. The tradition has been shaped to justify their exclusion. The traces of their presence have been suppressed and lost from the public memory of the community. The androcentric bias of the male interpreters of the tradition, who regard maleness as normative humanity, not only erases women's presence in the past history of the community but silences even the questions about their absence. One is not even able to remark upon or notice women's absence, since women's silence and absence is the norm.

The interpretations of faith and tradition in these women's cultures largely have relegated them to the home where they are expected to raise the children, take care of their husbands, and keep their households running properly. Yet, if we look at many stories of migration, these cultural norms break down. Instead, we see women who keep their families together and create spaces of safety in foreign lands. When asked, they often cite their faith as their source of strength and determination, which kept them alive and dreaming of a future for themselves and their children.

Liberation theology, therefore, must be expanded to become more inclusive of the religious and cultural traditions of refugee women while also empowering them to reach their own fullness of life and call themselves beloved children of God. This new understanding of liberation theology cannot be limited to a single religious tradition or geographic region.

III. COPELAND AND THE INCARNATE

CHRIST

The stories told in section II provide challenging reminders that our belief system must profess that all people—men, women, and children, regardless of their gender, sexual, or racial identity—are created in the image and likeness of God. No human-designed oppression or violence has the power to negate that claim. To see Christ in the marginalized people of our society is to remember that Christ has always poured himself out into the souls of those who suffer most. It also forces us to examine times that we might have been the “oppressor” while still preaching the universal love of Jesus Christ. It is humans who, in attempts to seek absolute control and power over the world, erect boundaries around God’s transcendental love—as though they can keep it from those they deem unworthy. Their suffering and victimization is made visible through Christ who brings them to fullness of new life.

I will take M. Shawn Copeland’s understanding of liberation theology, developed within the context of Black and womanist liberation traditions, and expand her paradigm to include refugee woman who have also suffered (and survived) unimaginable torture. We must bring them into the ritual remembering of Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection as representation of a refugee’s flight. As we pray, “do this in memory of me,” Copeland challenges us to also remember the sins, markings, and violence of slavery against Black bodies. According to Copeland, this dangerous remembering is only possible if we follow the Incarnate Christ into the world’s darkest oppression and adopt a stance of solidarity that both affirms our differences and unites us as children

created in the image and likeness of the same God. From this point, we must construct a more inclusive liberation theology that empowers today's marginalized people and brings all to the Eucharistic table.

As a white, educated woman, it is easy for me to say that, without exception, Christ is incarnate in each person, while meanwhile ignoring the ways slavery and genocide have changed the story of incarnation. However, each day I meet women who, because of their traumatic history, gender, sexual orientation, race, and social location, question whether or not they are created in the image of God. I also know that the Church, within which I profess my belief in a universal God, frequently sides with the powerful and, thus, implicitly has supported oppression. Thus, I must also recognize the times when I have sided with the oppressor—the times when I allowed my privileged position to inform how I treated others. Copeland's argument in *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, forces us to understand how Christianity is connected to slavery and domination. I argue that this understanding can also be extending to forced migration and the refugee crisis. In the United States, slave-owners and slave-traders manipulated scripture to justify imprisoning Black people, affirming the master-slave dynamic and stripping away Black people's right to image themselves as God's children. Slave-holders' control was threatened by Christ's redemptive and freeing spirit, given in the context of baptism. Likewise, tribal and clan leaders have manipulated scripture (in Islam and Christianity both) to give themselves power over other groups. They claim that "their" religion is the only true understanding even though it desecrates all other people. Yet, Christ's redemptive and freeing spirit still lives among refugees.

Similarly, refugee women have experienced their ethnicity, class, and gender being used to abuse and cast them aside as unwanted children. Powerful men and members of the ruling class feared these women's self-worth and the potential power they held to change the world. Because of this fear, "many ministers advocated a Christianity that sought to unmake the God-image in Africans [or any 'Other'] to render them servile, docile, and acquiescent to a divine ordination of their subjugation to whites."⁵⁴ In addition to this racial suppression, the Congolese mother is told she must answer to her husband, who acts as an intermediary between herself and God; while she, a strong woman able to birth and raise many children, is rendered docile around her husband. Slavery and other forms of fear-based domination ignore the freedom and unity of all people proclaimed by Jesus Christ.⁵⁵ Instead, those in power perpetuate a Christianity that advocates hatred, violence against the "other," and segregation, while defaming the basic principle that all people are created in the image and likeness of God. Such dynamics refuse to recognize that the Spirit of God continues to blow where She will, penetrating barriers and loving without exclusion.

Liberation theology must respond to the slavery, oppression, and genocide endured by generations of women by acknowledging the moral, physical, and emotional injuries it caused. Furthermore, it must undo centuries of continual oppression against black and queer bodies, especially against black women, by calling to mind their lived reality in both the past and the here-and-now. It must also engage our dangerous memory

⁵⁴ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 28.

⁵⁵ See Galatians 3:28.

and act as a healing agent seeing to restore broken bodies to their wholeness as *imago Dei*.

Oppressed peoples' longing for freedom and liberation is a "sign of the active presence of the Spirit."⁵⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez's development of liberation theology "looked for God in history" which "meant a 'rediscovery of the indissoluble unity of [the human] and God.'"⁵⁷ This acknowledgment of God's presence and unity with all of humanity boldly proclaims that all people are created in the *imago Dei*.

Within this world-view and theological understanding, liberation theology calls us to observe the world from the perspective of the *Anawim*, who are the marginalized people of the world. Traditionally, poor peasants and *campesinos* in Latin America have been represented as the *anawim* of today's world.⁵⁸ From their perspective, we see the destructive nature of the white man who, secure in his power, tried to take the place of God. Yet, the social construct of God still remains a white, straight, wealthy male ruler who is a member of the elite class or tribe. It ignores the Incarnation, during which Jesus Christ become one of us. The *anawim* of today's world are refugee women who have been forced to bear many children or who are forced to hide their sexuality. We cannot

⁵⁶ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxviii.

⁵⁷ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 87; quoting Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, page.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Antus, TRS 430 Lecture at John Carroll University, Cleveland, OH, March 17, 2016.

forget that “God’s movement in love to humanity makes possible humanity’s movement to God.”⁵⁹

Both Gutiérrez’s and Copeland’s iterations of liberation theology focus on “the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth” to explain the “divine compassion” of Christ’s life and ministry that calls us to “take sides with the poor and oppressed in the struggle for life—no matter the cost.”⁶⁰ Liberation theology, therefore, calls us into solidarity with the marginalized as a way in which the poor are lifted up in a preferential option that emphasizes their position with Christ.

Calling to mind centuries of abuse and slavery, Copeland challenges traditional liberation theology in regard to its inclusion of women, and especially women of color, in the suffering poor. She argues that the traditional praxis of liberation theology glossed over the experience of Black women—and, I would add, that of refugee and LGBTQ women as well. Even though the liberation theology of the 1970s “exposed master narratives,” it had not:

placed self-criticism in the forefront, alongside collaborative praxis, taken into account the humanity and realities of poor red, brown, yellow, white, and black women, or grappled with the deep psychic wounds of despised, marginalized poor human beings who had internalized oppression, self-abuse, violence, nihilism, and self-contempt.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Daniel G. Groody, “Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees,” *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 649.

⁶⁰ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 87.

⁶¹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 88.

Therefore, Copeland argues for a black, womanist liberation theology that moves beyond the traditional praxis of liberation theology to emphasize the specific pain that slavery, and its connection to religion, has caused black women who, to this day, continue to “grapple with the meaning of liberation and freedom.”⁶² The same holds true for the refugee women with whom I work each day. An effective and inclusive theology of liberation must be rooted in a new understanding of a humanity empowered by the Incarnation and by *anamnesis* of past oppression combined with movements of active solidarity and healing. It also must be centered around the belief that God’s movement “in love” towards humanity makes possible humanity’s movement towards God.⁶³

Copeland situates her theological understanding in the historical struggle of black people and the reality of Christ made present in the world. She argues for a liberation theology that begins with *anamnesis*—a memory of slavery coupled with a dangerous memory of the Church’s implicit role in oppression. Indeed, “when we forget, immigrants (and the ‘Other’) are quickly typecast as a threat to the common good.”⁶⁴ We must “interrupt our banal resignation to a vague past, our smug democratic dispensation, our not so benign neglect.”⁶⁵ As Christians, we cannot forget the words and actions of

⁶² Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 88.

⁶³ Groody, “Crossing the Divide,” 649.

⁶⁴ Daniel G. Groody, “Fruit of the Vine and Work of Human Hands: Immigration and the Eucharist,” 299–315 in Daniel G. Groody and Giacchino Campese, eds., *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 302.

⁶⁵ Groody, “Fruit of the Vine,” 3.

other Christians who preach that a black, female body is not created in the image of God, or that a queer Muslim woman is a creature of witchcraft. Because of their gender and sexuality, these women are labeled as “Other” and their humanity negated; this is just like earlier times when such women were bought and sold as objects. Similar to slaves whose owners denied their “purpose of existence within the context of divine revelation,”⁶⁶ these women today are told that they are inferior beings not worthy of the rights given to all human beings through the grace of God. As such, slavery, genocide, and homophobia deny Christ’s incarnation by dictating who is (and who is not) worthy of representing Christ. As Copeland explains, these atrocities “sought to displace God, and thus, [their perpetrators] blasphemed.”⁶⁷ Slavery, genocide, and homophobia cannot prevent Christ’s self-sacrificial love made visible through the incarnation.

A dangerous memory invokes a more nuanced understanding of the incarnation. It helps us remember Christ’s presence with and suffering alongside refugee women, so we can, in turn, see Christ as he is—one with all people. Jesus did not separate himself from people who looked different or practiced different religions than he. Instead, he was Incarnate with them; “he put his body where they were as he handled, touched, and embraced their marked bodies.”⁶⁸ He was present among all people even “taking the form of a slave” (Phil 2:7). In solidarity with them, he shouldered their pain, endured their trauma, and moved to heal them.

⁶⁶ Groody, “Fruit of the Vine,” 23.

⁶⁷ Groody, “Fruit of the Vine,” 24.

⁶⁸ Groody, “Fruit of the Vine,” 60.

Our ignorance of Christ-embodied-as-refugee women forgets the Christian teaching “that the eternal Word, the *Logos*, became flesh—became the bodily, concrete, marked, historical being, Jesus of Nazareth” and, therefore, “promotes the value and significance of the body, which is never to be disregarded or treated with contempt.”⁶⁹ Christ, in the Incarnation, became human and lived among all people. In doing so, Christ took on bodily characteristics of all people. I would challenge our understanding of incarnation if we fail to connect Christ’s marked body with the marked bodies of slave women; this would “dismiss his body and seek the discreation of human bodies.”⁷⁰

The Incarnate Christ gives refugee women the hope to dream for fullness of life and the strength to envision something beyond their current circumstances. Many of the refugee women hope for a good education and “safe” life in which their children will not have to endure the trauma and hardships their mothers did. These women recognize that they may not be able to improve their immediate circumstances, but their children’s future is ahead of them. This gives refugee women the determination to survive trauma, life in the refugee camps, and their early years in the United States. Similarly, in *Enfleshing Freedom*, Copeland relates stories about slave women who were unable to imagine freedom for themselves, but still prayed to God for their children’s freedom.

Even as they survive torture or are outcast because of their sexuality or clan affiliation, these women know a God who lives with them and transcends all bonds of oppression. The Incarnate Christ lives in and through them. Copeland explains:

⁶⁹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 55–56.

⁷⁰ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 57.

Incarnate spirit refuses to be bound. Escaping to freedom, purchasing one's own freedom or that of a loved one, fighting for freedom, offering up one's own body for the life and freedom of another and dying for freedom were acts of redemption that aimed to restore black bodily and psychic integrity.⁷¹

This is a reminder that the incarnate spirit lives in the here-and-now, amidst and among any oppressive conditions. It gives all women the freedom to claim and live out of the power of the Incarnate Christ in their current reality. Christ lives in the refugee camps and among the bush as women hide from captors, recover from sexual traumas, and protect themselves and their families. It also means that women who feel unable to love in the way they are created still possess the incarnate Spirit of Christ in whose image she was created as a beloved daughter. Although their lives remain restricted by social, cultural, and religious traditions, Christ gives them the freedom to love themselves as God's beloved children.

This viewpoint honors each woman as a human being and encourages us all to love ourselves. As some women (including the LGBTQ teenager in Minnesota) must come to terms with their own sexuality in light of their religious beliefs, we encourage these women to love themselves as powerful daughters of a God who already loves them unconditionally. Toni Morrison's character of Baby Suggs also provides encouragement to these women saying, "Here in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass. Love it."⁷² Baby Suggs recognizes that the

⁷¹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 46.

⁷² Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 52; quoting Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Random House, 1987).

Incarnation enfleshes freedom and love in all despised people. She “speaks into new life God’s image in black flesh”⁷³ which embodies God in all of humanity. Indeed, Christ’s incarnation witnesses “to a divine destiny seeded in our very flesh”⁷⁴ that proclaims refugee women as created in the image and likeness of God.

A powerful example of liberation is an African refugee woman who was finally able to see her inherent dignity and self-worth as a daughter of God. After enduring years of emotional and physical abuse, she said, “I deserve better. As a woman, as an African woman, and as a mother, I deserve better.” To claim oneself as a child of God generates the power to stop other people “unmasking the God image”⁷⁵ in her. She is beginning to live out of a new freedom, which occurs when “through the dynamics of a questioning, supportive community, oppressed people awaken to their own dignity and worth and begin to exercise their own power.”⁷⁶ She has begun the healing process of loving herself and finding her own personal worth as a daughter of God.

SOLIDARITY

The Incarnation also disrupts the *status quo* of social thought. Copeland explains that it “makes the Infinite God present, disrupts every pleasure of hierarchy, economy, cultural domination, racial violence, gender oppression, and abuse of sexual others.”⁷⁷ It

⁷³ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 52.

⁷⁴ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 65.

⁷⁵ Johnson, need full citation, 254.

⁷⁶ Johnson, need title, 254.

⁷⁷ Johnson, which??. 65.

forces us to see God's love made visible through the presence of Christ in all places. As an example of God being-in-the-world, the Incarnation teaches us how to live radical solidarity with all oppressed people. We reflect God's infinite love when we allow Christ's incarnation to influence our praxis of solidarity.

As we turn to the praxis of solidarity, we must also return to our understanding of "neighbor." Do we see the Incarnate Christ in all people? And, if so, how does it change us? Groody explains:

In becoming neighbor to all in the incarnation, that is, to all who live in the sinful territory of a fallen humanity, God redefines the borders between neighbors and opens up the possibility for new relationships. The incarnation, as a border-crossing event, is a model of gratuitous self-giving through which God empties himself of everything but love, so that he can more fully identify with others, enter completely into their vulnerable condition, and accompany them in a profound act of divine-human solidarity.⁷⁸

Can I give of myself and shoulder the pain of a Congolese woman leaving her husband or a Somali mother reliving the horrors of sexual abuse at the hands of Al-Shabab? Do I see myself in the Somali teenager, hidden under the layers of a *niqab*, who is grappling with her sexuality and what that means in her traditional religion and culture? Can I live in those vulnerable places and touch Christ in them—and in me?

Our ability to represent the "expression of the mystical body of Christ"⁷⁹ and live in true solidarity with these women moves us forward in our understanding and praxis of liberation theology. We remember that solidarity, which Gutiérrez claims is the meaning

⁷⁸ Groody, "Crossing the Divide," 652.

⁷⁹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 5.

of being a Christian.⁸⁰ It requires that we respect our “otherness” without forcing the “other” to fit into the *status quo*. Therefore, we honor the faith tradition of the Somali woman or her style of dress, and we value the Congolese culture that emphasizes tightly knit communities. We do not try to change these things that form the core of these women’s identities. However, we do look at ways that these cultural and religious traditions oppress people they identify as “Others.” Such an act of solidarity is infused with understanding and moves us to embody another’s suffering and to mobilize an action-oriented response that addresses the root causes of that suffering. Copeland further explains that, “praxis of solidarity arises from apprehension and heartfelt response to accounts of historic and contemporary abuse and violence directed against black bodies.”⁸¹

This way of being in solidarity requires us to see, judge, and act⁸² in a radical praxis of solidarity that “sets the dynamics of love against the dynamics of domination” so that we can, together, “recreate and regeneration the world” as a “new way of being in relation to God, to others, to self.”⁸³ It is more than a gesture of *standing with* the oppressed. We can hear stories of abuse and oppression and, even ourselves be a victim of it, but we must not allow ourselves to wait for someone else to change the world. We must build relationships with the refugee women whose clothes, religion, and culture do

⁸⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 67.

⁸¹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 125.

⁸² Holeka, “Reading the Bible in Various Streams of Liberation Theology,” 181.

⁸³ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 126.

not match our own. Our reading of scripture and active practice of our faith must take the form of an identity-specific liberation in which we orientate ourselves to “the people [who] are discriminated against by exterior and interior violence.”⁸⁴ A true and authentic praxis of solidarity means we can no longer just *stand* in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, refugees, LGBTQ individuals, victims of violence, human trafficking victims, and others. Like Christ becoming human, our solidarity must embody their pain so that, together, we can identify the root causes of oppression and seek liberation. We must extend our sympathy to them, touch their pain, and ask uncover what is at the root of their oppression. Then, we must initiate a Spirit-led change that empowers and heals.

Furthermore, we must ask ourselves: why is this solidarity easier to write about but difficult to live out in our daily faith journey? Why do we not initiate this kind of solidarity? I would venture to guess that most times we are not comfortable with shouldering the responsibility of years of oppression to which we have indirectly contributed. We must ask ourselves: can I recognize the many times when I, as an educated, white woman, was able to use my status to make my voice heard? Have I been able to ignore the violence against my peers in Somalia or Congo because it did not affect me personally? Can I recognize my status as an oppressor? Can I, as Gustavo Gutiérrez asks, seek liberation from sin? If we cannot do this, we will never recognize the places where equality remains elusive.

If we yearn to live in true solidarity, we must be willing to critique “self, society, and church” while strengthening, enriching, and extending our “awareness and pity

⁸⁴ Holeka, “Reading the Bible in Various Streams of Liberation Theology,” 172.

through personal encounter, responsible intellectual preparation, and healing and creative action for change in society.”⁸⁵ Should solidarity not require us to look at slavery as an evil that continues to mark black bodies, we dangerously run the risk of believing that the effects of slavery have ended and all people are fully healed and respected as a member of humanity, that liberation has “done its job” and all people are recognized as children of God. Looking at current events in the United States, we know this is not the case. We live in a country polarized between races, genders, and nationalities. Some people cannot bear to acknowledge that Christ is incarnate in every person—even those whose lifestyle may contradict dogmatically held church teaching. It pains some people to accept that the Incarnate Christ does not label people as anything other than God’s beloved children who gather together “at the table Jesus prepares.”⁸⁶

In the Catholic context of liturgy, our dangerous memory stipulates a “solidarity” that “begins in an *anamnesis*, which intentionally remembers and invokes the black victims of history, martyrs for freedom.”⁸⁷ Copeland further explains:

Oppression is both a reality of the present and a fact of history. Solidarity mandates us to shoulder our responsibility to the past in the here-and-now in memory of the crucified Christ and all the victims of history. This shouldering of responsibility obliges us in the here-and-now to stand between the poor women of color and the powers of oppression in society, to do all that we can to end their marginalization, exploitation, abuse, and

⁸⁵ Holeka, “Reading the Bible in Various Streams of Liberation Theology,” 126.

⁸⁶ Holeka, “Reading the Bible in Various Streams of Liberation Theology,” 128.

⁸⁷ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 124.

murder. In memory of the cross of Jesus, we accept this obligation, even if it means we must endure rejection or loss.⁸⁸

Her argument clearly connects a practice of active solidarity with a dangerous memory of Christ on the cross. Without remembering Christ's suffering and death, we fail to recognize Christ's self poured into the suffering of refugee women. For us to stand in solidarity with them, we must place ourselves at the cross with Jesus Christ and in the context of slavery. We must feel the pain of their suffering and be moved to participate in the process of healing and liberation.

Copeland's liberation theology and praxis of solidarity is rooted in the Eucharist. At the Eucharistic table, we pray "Do this in remembrance of me," as we remember the Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. If, as I have previously argued, Christ reflects the marked bodies of refugee women who are stripped of their dignity, then the Eucharist must also be a remembrance of them. "Eucharistic solidarity," Copeland explains, "orients us to the Cross of the lynched Jesus of Nazareth, where we grasp the enormity of suffering, affliction, and oppression as well as apprehend our complicity in the suffering, affliction, and oppression of others."⁸⁹ By connecting the marks of lynching and other brutalities with the marks sustained by Jesus on the cross, Copeland uses a central tenet of Christianity to help others comprehend the terror of slavery and the absolute necessity to let such terror inform our theology. Therefore, to equate the markings of slavery, borne by so many women, with the markings of Jesus on the cross is to recognize Christ in all

⁸⁸ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 100–101.

⁸⁹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 128.

peoples. Additionally, this understanding implicitly argues that, like Christ, refugee women's bodies, are resurrected, redeemed, and freed.

In terms of a refugee woman who, for years, endured rape and violence at the hands of the Mai-Mai or Al-Shabab or other groups, we see Christ's scars in her visible and invisible scars. Too often, their marks have rendered them "impure" or labeled an "outcast" in their own communities. These women, who are despised by many, are still loved by Jesus Christ who "did not despise them"; rather, "he put his body where they were."⁹⁰ Maybe, what we need to do is allow these stories to remind us of the "universal experience of suffering" and let "these women become metaphors for the breadth of our human potential in its disfiguring and more noble forms."⁹¹ These women have become visible images of Christ's life poured out for others.

Furthermore, Eucharistic solidarity requires that we embody Christ in such a way that recognizes the "other," all sins/marks of the world, and healing as parts of *imago Dei*. The image of God should transform from our traditional image of a "white" man to one that represents the patchwork of all oppressed people. It should also remove labels (such as defiled, gender non-conforming, unclean, refugee, migrant, and so forth) that are used as "political, legal, and social" constructs to label people. Such constructs have the power to "generate asymmetrical relations" that leave people "vulnerable to control,

⁹⁰ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 60.

⁹¹ Olivia Ruiz Marrujo, "The Gender of Risk: Sexual Violence against Undocumented Women," 225–39 in Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese, eds., *A Promised Land, Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 236.

manipulation, and exploitation.”⁹² Using inclusive language and naming these women as who they are in the eyes of God—daughter, partner, sister, aunt, wife, mother, and friend—will powerfully stand in witness and solidarity with a unity that “opposes all intentionally divisive segregation of bodies on the specious grounds of preference for race or gender or sexual orientation or culture.”⁹³ It is only when we accept this challenge to see a God who transcends all barriers and vicious abuse that we are able to grasp the enormity of Jesus’ suffering and, in turn, the suffering of black women and the hands of the ruling power while bearing witness to the Incarnation as present in all people.

Knowing the histories of refugee women, how can we follow Copeland’s message and proclaim “black women’s absolute enfleshment of freedom, sown in the *there-and-then* and realized in the abiding presence of the resurrected body of Jesus?”⁹⁴ I believe that it requires a complete healing and reorientation of ourselves to the incarnational spirit of Jesus who unites all people in the hope of freedom.

⁹² Daniel G. Groody, *Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees* (Oxford, Eng.: Church Mission Society, 2010), 643.

⁹³ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 127.

⁹⁴ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 4.

CONCLUSION

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free. (Luke 4:18)*

What if, instead of the powerful proclaiming Luke's gospel, we hear the refugee women claiming it as their own? Can we hear them proclaiming:

*The Spirit of my God lives in me
because I am anointed
to bring life to the forgotten
Allah has sent me to proclaim freedom to my sisters
a future for those in the dark,
to unshackle the oppressed
and proclaim a year of belonging to each other.*

To witness these strong refugee women claim their own dignity and self-worth would change the discussion of liberation theology. It would remind the rest of us that we cannot create so-called opportunities of liberation for other people; every group must define their own integral liberation that professes a love that is "active and embodied."⁹⁵ Only when we shift our understanding to this ideal of active and embodied love do we realize that liberation does not simply mean throwing off the hijab. True liberation means claiming yourself as a beloved child of God.

Our praxis of solidarity, therefore, must stand with these women as they navigate the best way to embody all of their identities. We must support them as they navigate the

⁹⁵ Richard Rohr. "Black Bodies," *Center for Action and Contemplation* blog (April 12, 2008); <https://cac.org/black-bodies-2018-04-12/>.

world as a queer Somali Muslim or a Congolese woman who teaches her children to be proud of their culture. As members of the majority culture, it is not our place to define liberation in cultures that we do not know.

In returning to Gustavo Gutiérrez's liberation theology, which provided a theological understanding for all people to join together in solidarity and to bring about social and political change, we must remember that the Spirit of God cannot be contained within the Catholic Church. Rather, the Spirit of God moves freely among all religions and cultures; pausing only to change names and dress. She serves the same purpose, though, reminding all that they are "wonderfully made"⁹⁶ by a God who loved them into being. Therefore, by the Spirit of the incarnation, Christ became one with all of us. So, the refugee woman from Somalia who fearfully disclosed her sexual orientation and the Congolese mother of 8 both are created in the image and likeness of God—and, more importantly, are loved by the God who created them.

The work of liberation theology today is to extend God's love and liberation to those who remain mired in the hierarchical structures of patriarchy and gender. However, liberation theology has failed to fully include refugee women in its praxis. Our task, then, is to speak of a Christ who embodies the pain and suffering of refugee women in order to create a new understanding of liberation theology that focuses on an integral liberation.

We must move the suffering of refugee women to the forefront of our theology in order to "articulate authentic meanings of human flourishing and liberation, progress and

⁹⁶ Psalm 139:14 (NAB)

salvation.”⁹⁷ As we reformulate our liberation theologies, we must answer the following question: “What might it mean for poor women of color to grasp themselves as human subjects, to grapple with the meaning of liberation and freedom?”⁹⁸ Would it would mean a new world order in which refugee women’s liberation is finally realized? It would turn our attention to the need to challenge “contemporary stereotypes about black African women refugees—especially those intellectual, moral, and aesthetic labels that objectify, exploit, and deface God’s image in black womanhood.”⁹⁹ If we practice liberation theology in this light, we will recognize the “sacramentality of the body in the concrete as an expression of the freedom of the human subject.”¹⁰⁰ We will see God embodied in all people.

Our new theology must continue to place us in solidarity with all people as we continually return to the sources of oppression in order to truly follow the healing mission Christ the Liberator and free all people. Our hope, then, is that we will not try to transform the oppressed into our way of being, but will honor them as full of humanity, God’s beloved and chosen children who, like Christ, are marked with signs of violence and suffering. This way of being with represent a fully embodied liberation theology that speaks of the Incarnate Christ as inclusive and all-loving as God empowers refugee women to live their most authentic life.

⁹⁷ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 88.

⁹⁸ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 88.

⁹⁹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 25.

¹⁰⁰ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 130.

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