

**SUFFERING AS MYSTERIUM INIQUITATIS
AND MYSTERIUM SALUTIS
JON SOBRINO AND JEAN-MARC ÉLA ON
SUFFERING AND LIBERATION**

PAULUS BAMBANG IRAWAN*

Abstract: Jon Sobrino and Jean-Marc Éla provide unique contributions for theological ethics in reflecting suffering as mystery of evil (*mysterium iniquitatis*) and suffering as the driving force for liberation (*mysterium salutis*). As a proponent of liberation theology, Sobrino focuses on structural problem of evil. In this regard, Éla gives his unique voice by analyzing suffering from its socio-cultural perspectives. Putting Sobrino and Éla in dialog shows the need for interdisciplinary approach in doing theological ethics. This interdisciplinary reflection on suffering on the one hand will bring a more holistic view on the complexity of the problem of suffering. On the other hand, it brings a more contextual understanding on the meaning of discipleship in a violent world.

Keywords: Suffering, evil, liberation, resocialization, structural & socio-cultural approach, discipleship.

Abstrak: Jon Sobrino dan Jean-Marc Éla memberikan sumbangan yang khas bagi refleksi teologis etis tentang kompleksitas problem penderitaan sebagai misteri kejahatan (*mysterium iniquitatis*) namun sekaligus menawarkan daya dorong bagi kesetiaan menapaki jalan pembebasan (*mysterium salutis*). Sobrino yang menekankan analisa struktural atas kejahatan membutuhkan analisa sosio-kultural dari Éla sehingga aneka upaya “memberi nama” dan melawan problem kejahatan mendapatkan pijakannya pada praktik-praktik kultural dalam komunitas lokal. Dialog Sobrino dan Éla juga menunjukkan bahwa teologi mesti membuka diri pada kajian interdisipliner dengan ilmu lain sehingga, di satu sisi, misteri penderitaan dapat didekati secara lebih utuh dan, di sisi lain, jalan

* *Paulus Bambang Irawan, Fakultas Teologi, Universitas Sanata Dharma, Jl. Kaliurang KM 7, Yogyakarta 55011. Email: bambs@usd.ac.id*

kemuridan yang muncul karena tanggapan atasnya menjadi lebih kontekstual.

Kata-kata kunci: Penderitaan, kejahatan, pembebasan, resosialisasi, pendekatan struktural, pendekatan sosio-kultural, kemuridan.

PROLOGUE

In his interpretation to Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, Walter Benjamin wrote:

"A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."¹

Even though we are humans, not angels, the contradiction of progress as desperately portrayed by Walter Benjamin deeply captivates our imagination. With the development of science and the spread of democracy, catastrophes keep "piling wreckage upon wreckage." Every time we want to "awaken the dead" or rebuild the world that "has been smashed down," the storm of progress forces us back to the unknown future, makes us watch the rising pile of debris left behind. Walter Benjamin's lament about the suffering of humanity urges us to halt the arrogant movement of progress and let ourselves be affected with the "wretchedness of the earth."

1 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, cited in Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), pp. 118-119.

But, there is one thing that Walter Benjamin misses when he sees the wretchedness of the earth: suffering is never a one-dimensional experience. Suffering is always multi-dimensional. For that very reason, Christianity contributes her unique voice. It is in the human courage to face the reality of suffering that a Christian can draw moral and spiritual insight. Suffering can be a new *locus* of Christian reflection. On this point, Robert Gascoigne argues that “it is through the encounter with suffering that theological ethics is drawn into an ever-deeper response to the mystery of Christ’s redeeming love manifested in human experience.”² Gascoigne then shows the dynamics within human response to suffering. First, the experience of suffering intimidates and strikes dumb our being as humans. Second, suffering reveals the inherent fallacy in our inability to respond to the cause of suffering and lead to conversion. Third, suffering incarnates our faith in the redeeming suffering of Christ so that we can find the resource of courage and understanding to shed light on the experience of suffering.

In relation to Gascoigne, Josiah Royce underlines that suffering is not only a personal experience but also a social experience. He argues that “all experience must be at least individual experience; but unless it is also social experience, and unless the whole religious community which is in question unites to share it, this experience is but as sounding brass, and as a tinkling cymbal.”³ When suffering is perceived in its societal context, the role of community emerges. Community becomes a place to process the pain of a shared event, nourish it as social imagination and initiate all possible resources to resist the root cause of suffering. Since suffering is understood in this context, the role of Catholic theological ethics is to find sources in Catholic tradition for liberation from the cause of suffering and resocialization to the one who mourn in the community.

2 Robert Gascoigne, “Suffering and Theological Ethics: Intimidation and Hope” in *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*, James Keenan (ed), (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 163.

3 Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, cited in Nancy Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juarez* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), p. 133.

In the multi-dimension faces of suffering, this article wants to ask: *how do the specific contexts of suffering shape the language and practices of liberation in a given situation? How do the practices of liberation relate with Christian faith?* In order to answer those questions, I will look closely to the works of two theologians from the developing world: Jon Sobrino and Jean-Marc Éla.

JON SOBRINO: BEARING THE BURDEN OF REALITY OF THE CRUCIFIED PEOPLE

Jon Sobrino—a Basque Jesuit—came to El Salvador as a Jesuit novice in 1957. His vision as a Jesuit novice was very traditional, “I would help the Salvadorans replace their popular ‘superstitious’ religiosity with a more sophisticated kind, and I would help the Latin American branches of the church (the European church) to grow.”⁴ As part of his Jesuit formation, he continued to study philosophy (St. Louis) and theology (Frankfurt). He acknowledged at that time that the world continued to be the first world and theology remained to be a European theology. Utopia for him at that time meant, “In some way the countries of the South would become like North.”⁵

When he returned to El Salvador in 1974, he began to be awakened from what he called as “the sleep of humanity.” He learned about the gigantic number of innocent Salvadorans who died because of the civil war. The civil war had increased the already massive poverty. Deeply impressed by his colleagues Ignacio Ellacuria and Archbishop Oscar Romero, he started to realize that “it was absurd to go about trying to Rahnerize or Moltmannize the people of El Salvador...if at all possible, we needed to Salvadorize Rahner and Moltmann.”⁶

4 Jon Sobrino, *Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), p. 2.

5 *Principle of Mercy*, p. 3.

6 *Principle of Mercy*, p. 3.

This awakening was possible because he was face to face with suffering, the poor and the victims. They are *the crucified people*, a concept Sobrino took from Ellacuria. The crucified people are “nothing more or less than the existence of a large part of humanity, literally and historically crucified by the oppression of nature and above all by historical and personal oppression.”⁷ The crucified people are the massive number of people living in inhuman poverty, victims of wars and repression. They are vulnerable in every human situation: physically (living in bad quality condition/housing), psychologically (unbearable level of stress and despair that make suicide and homicide rates very high), socio-culturally (subject to be blamed in macabre way for the wrong doing of others). Because of their poverty, they are segregated from the banquet of human society; even though they are the *ochlos*, the great majority. The effect is, as Gustavo Gutierrez noted, that they are always treated as “insignificant” in human society. They are crucified in a shameful way, even if they don’t deserve the cause. They die slowly from the institutionalized violence and injustice.

Even in a natural calamity like an earthquake, it is the poor who suffer the most. “The earthquake has destroyed houses, especially the ones build of mud and sticks or of adobe, which is where the poor live because they can’t afford cement and iron.”⁸ Of course the rich also suffered from the earthquake, but in general, they have a lot of resources to rebuild and return to normal life. Even some of them can continue living their luxurious life “as if nothing had happened.”⁹

That is the reality of El Salvador. For the next decades, Sobrino always emphasized the importance of reality, “to be faithful with reality,” “to be affected by the reality,” “taking on the burden of reality” and “taking responsibility for reality” in the process of liberation.¹⁰ Return to

7 Jon Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), p. 51.

8 *Where is God*, p. 3.

9 *Where is God*, p. 3.

10 Stephen J. Pope, “On Not ‘Abandoning the Historical World to Its Wretchedness’” in

reality becomes very fundamental because it is easy to denigrate and to cover up reality. The Gospel of John masterfully explains the order of this dynamic by saying that the devil is a murderer and liar, in that order (John 8:44). That order of sins explains why every dictator is also a liar, so that their wrongdoing of killing millions of innocent people will not be acknowledged. Return to reality means to be embraced by the truth, and again in John's gospel, the truth shall make us free (John 8:32). To hear the truth we must let the reality speak because reality always wants to "to cry out." For Sobrino, listening to the cry of reality is a necessary way of realizing our humanity. Listening to reality is a primordial ethical demand, so that we can be affected by reality and not turn away or even try to soften it.

This experience of immense suffering posits a question to theology: where is the place of theology? Sobrino answers that the "...fundamental place [of theology] must be that historical reality in which we can find a maximum of truth and the Absolute and that contains both the greatest demands to act within history and the greatest promise of salvation."¹¹ The task of theology is "to clarify its origin...or its meaning; or to find some kind of meaningful-coexistence with suffering...or to discover some kind of theological justification for suffering."¹² Nevertheless the most important task of theology is to stand within the suffering, with the crucified people. Then, theology becomes an *intellectus amoris et justitiae*.

In order to be an *intellectus amoris et justitiae*, the stumbling block is "not wanting to see" the reality of suffering. It is manifest in what Sobrino calls *ecclesial docetism* and *gnosticism*. Docetism is an ancient Christological heresy that denies the reality of the humanity of Christ, the real flesh and blood (*sarx*) of Christ. In Sobrino's view, ecclesial docetism happens when the church "distances it self from 'real' reality and chooses the sphere of reality in which it wants to be Church: the religious, the

Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino's Challenge to Christian Theology, Stephen J. Pope (ed) (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), p. 57.

¹¹ *Principle of Mercy*, p. 31.

¹² *Principle of Mercy*, p. 29.

doctrinal, the liturgical, the canonical.”¹³ Docetism prevents us from seeing the suffering of *ochlos*, takes side with the established power, and impedes the option for the poor. Gnosticism is “seeking salvation in esoteric, in sophisticated technology, in cultures that have become industries and commodities (music, sports, politics, even religion and spirituality).”¹⁴ Gnosticism appears in the message that the Western world with its abundance is the ultimate criterion for being truly human. For the person who holds the view that capitalism is the end of history, living in the scarcity is then considered as “un-real.”

In this “institutionalized concealment, distortion and lies,” the crucified people will bring the light. Again Sobrino uses Ellacuria’s symbol of “coproanalysis” in medical examination. To know one’s status of health the doctor must examine the feces, the last product of humanity. In the coproanalysis of civilization, the crucified people—the last product of humanity— demonstrate the grave injustice that produces them. From this point of view, poverty then can be interpreted as the product of sin, the negativity of history. Different from personal sin, this “structural sin” should not only be forgiven but “it should be pulled up by its roots in history.”¹⁵ Conversion means fighting sin not only from the outside—by overcoming alienation and toppling its structure— but also from the inside by shouldering its weight and being willing to be crushed by it. The song of Yahwe’s servant is its most vivid example. “This crucified people is the historical continuation of Yahwe’s servant, whom the sin of the world continues to deprive of any human decency, and from whom the powerful of this world continue to rob everything, taking everything, even life, especially life.”¹⁶ But through this crucified

13 *Where is God*, p. 100.

14 *Where is God*, p. xxviii.

15 Jon Sobrino, “Ignacio Ellacuria, the Human Being and the Christian: ‘Taking the Crucified People Down from the Cross,’” in *Love That Produces Hope: The Thought of Ignacio Ellacuria*, Kevin F. Burke & Robert Lasalle-Klein (eds) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), p. 33.

16 *Principle of Mercy*, p. 51.

people, God makes himself present in history. The servant is not only the victim but also points to the saving power of God through his fidelity in enduring the suffering until the end.

The crucified people were chosen by God to bring salvation. They offer values that the civilization of wealth is lacking: "community against individualism, co-operation against selfishness, simplicity against opulence, openness to transcendence against blatant positivism, so prevalent in the civilization of the Western world."¹⁷ As the opposite of the civilization of the wealth, the civilization of the poor leads to the primacy of love. "To bear the burden of reality expresses the mystery of love as a response to the enigma of iniquity. In traditional language, the *mysterium salutis* (love) is the other, mysterious face of the *mysterium iniquitatis* (evil)."¹⁸ *Mysterium salutis* from the point of view of the crucified people expresses itself in forgiveness, gratuity and solidarity.

First, if suffering is the result of social injustice, then we can say that it is human sinfulness that creates suffering. In the modern world, the concept of "sin" no longer plays an important role. Sin tends to be personalized, merely a psychological phenomena. Because of it, modernity is not quite aware of the direct destructive effect of sin. This is different from the experience in Latin America, where sin manifests itself more in social phenomenon. In this "structural sin," the sin of killing innocent people, making the poor live in miserable conditions has horrendous and vivid effects. But, the tradition also shows that where there is sin, there is also forgiveness. Sobrino argues that even living in an unjust situation, the crucified people are always ready to forgive the violator of their dignity. Forgiveness is already there for them, not because of the saintliness of the poor, but because God already forgives them, and because God forgives them, God accompanies them on the way for conversion. The song of the suffering servant shows this dynamic of God's abundant forgiveness.

¹⁷ *Principle of Mercy*, p. 55.

¹⁸ *Where is God*, p. xxxi.

Second, the abundance of forgiving love from the crucified then refers to the second experience of *mysterium salutis*, namely gratuitousness. Love is an experience of gratuitousness because love is “given unexpectedly, freely and without having to earn it.”¹⁹ Gratuity is an experience of pure gift, something that is missing in the civilization of wealth. Because the first world already controls everything, “giving” is a pattern in human sociability, but not receiving. In the face of the crucified people, they gave nothing, but they will receive something. The logic of “merely receiving” will not work in the developing world. So, gratuitousness as an experience of pure gift will liberate the first world. Then Sobrino writes “what is clear is the absolute loving initiative of God, which is neither forced nor can be forced—this being both unnecessary and impossible—by human actions. Clear too is that this gratuitous love of God’s is what generates the need and the possibility of a loving human response. When a sinner is converted, it is God’s goodness and mercy that move the sinner to change.”²⁰

Third, the experience of gratuitousness of love will generate solidarity. Solidarity happens when “human being mutually supporting one another, in this way and that, open to one another, giving and receiving one another’s best.”²¹ There are two important points about solidarity. First, the first movement of solidarity always comes from the crucified people. It is their cries that resonate and call the other people to respond. Second, as a process of giving and receiving, solidarity is a two-way communication. In the context of giving aid, for example, it is not only the benefactor who gives to the crucified people. The benefactor also—and most importantly—receives from the crucified people. They become aware of the “burden of reality,” and because of it, they will be saved.

When *mysterium iniquitatis* is paired with *mysterium salutis*, then we can better understand the meaning of the kingdom of God. The kingdom

19 *Principle of Mercy*, p. 56.

20 Roberto S. Goizueta, “The Christology of Jon Sobrino” in *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino’s Challenge to Christian Theology*, p. 95.

of God is already present in the experience of love, forgiveness and gratuitousness. But these seeds of the kingdom that God already sowed have not yet been fully realized in humanity because we can still see the powerful presence of *iniquitas*: greed, injustice. Again as Ellacuria said, the conflict between *mysterium iniquitatis* and *mysterium salutis* shows the primacy of utopia. "The new heaven and earth" will come as promised, but that promise should be explicated in our struggle to be with the victims and in building a more just world.

The life of Jesus Christ is the incarnation of that promise. Sobrino criticizes Christology for forgetting the historicity of Jesus: His compassion toward the poor and victims, His challenges to the dominance and the hypocrisy of the elites. Humanity violently rejects Jesus strong message by bringing Him to the cross. God's response to this human sinfulness is Jesus' resurrection. The dialectic between cross and resurrection shows the unlimited nearness of God in human history. In the cross, humanity sees "God-with-us" until the end. "Without that nearness, God's power in the resurrection would remain pure otherness and therefore ambiguous, and for the crucified, historically threatening. But with that nearness, the crucified can really believe that God's power is good news, for it is love."²²

In this unlimited nearness of God to humanity, we can have genuine love for our sisters and brothers. Human solidarity is only possible because God has already loved us first. If God already initiated this gratuitous love in our heart, then it is our calling to spread this abundant love toward others, especially the crucified people.

JEAN-MARC ÉLA: SUFFERING FROM GRAND NARRATIVES OF SALVATION

If Sobrino brings his formation as a Jesuit to shaping his theological approach, Jean-Marc Éla, brings his formation as a Cameroonian

21 *Principle of Mercy*, p. 56.

22 Jon Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, cited in Roberto S. Goizueta, "The Christology of Jon Sobrino," p. 100.

diocesan priest and his long experience working with the mountain communities of the Kirdi people in Northwestern Cameroon.²³ He opens his book *African Cry* by depicting African dependence on the West, even in the most private of matters, religious expression. Eucharist is supposed to be the celebration of universal love, but to make the celebration of Eucharist possible, the African church must depend on foreign aid. The cost for priestly formation is so high and unaffordable to the local church, that in many places the local church could not celebrate the Eucharist. Instead of finding a solution by giving a broader role to the laity, the African church still wants to stick with the hierarchical structure. The other problem is the material for the Eucharist itself. The universal church requires a specific kind of wheat and grapes as the *materia sacramenti* in a place where no local farmer in North Cameroon can cultivate it in their mountain land. Then, how could the African church dare to pray “fruit of the earth and the work of human hands” when they know exactly that those do not come from their earth and hands? Éla concludes, “Through the Eucharistic matter, the church is imposing Western culture and its symbolic structure on us.”²⁴

But this Eucharistic dispute is just the tip of iceberg in the African church. There is a long history of colonization in the name of mission. In Éla’s reading of the history of mission in Africa, mission is not only proclaiming the good news but also transporting Western ideology to the African continent. It was the Eastern Church that started the first mission to Africa, but it didn’t successfully spread out to the rest of Africa beyond Egypt. Then the calamity began when the European explorers came to Africa and transformed this continent into a marketplace of slaves. The spirit of profit also brought a growing interest to explore the inner part of Africa beyond the coastline. This exploration resulted in the politics of knowledge about the “mystery” of the mainland, and produced the fantasies about their archaic tradition. In many reports,

23 Emmanuel Katangole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 102-104.

24 Jean-Marc Éla, *African Cry* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), p. 5.

the explorers depicted them as barbaric and retarded. When the West had to deal with the Reformation, the continent was also divided based on the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*. Then the French came in the 19th Century. Even though French government was anticlerical, in Africa it made a more open gesture toward mission. During the French colonization, mission appeared as a work of compassion for the “poor black,” the pitiable victim of slavery and barbarity. Éla does not deny that French missions also brought education to Africa, sometimes tried to limit the destructive effect of colonial conquest, and fostered a genuine African development. But, the missionaries were unable to avoid the historical ambiguities of their situation, and the result of this mission was the little black children who vigorously said “Viva, Viva the French.”

Does the story of colonization end after independence from the French? Sadly not; the worse thing happens, the colonization of black by black, the slavery of a brother by another brother, a killing of Abel by Cain. The regime tortures sadistically and kills any political suspect. The new elite economy rises and they do not pay attention to the millions who still suffer. In the context of Cameroon, the privileged class (two percent of the population) earns 40 times more than the majority of workers (98%). This new elite collaborates with the regime in securing their mutual interest by silencing any opposition to the exploitation of the worker. Corruption is the next form of this co-operation with evil. In Cameroon where 22% of the young children suffer from chronic malnutrition, corrupt public officers smuggle and speculate on the price of agricultural products.²⁵ In this context, Éla claims that we cannot talk about “development of Africa” after independence but only “regression of Africa.” The international community also plays a part in this regression by keeping silent, sometimes even supporting the corruptive regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa as is shown in the illegal gun market that perpetuates violence.²⁶

25 Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), p. 70.

26 Jean-Marc Éla, *Thinking about God and Living the Christian Faith in Our Global Village: Questions and Challenges from Africa*, <http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/ela/> (accessed 21 Feb 2018).

In the face of these problems, Éla then asks:

“How is the church to be the church of Christ in those countries where bloody tyrants celebrate countless murders, exterminating harmless, voiceless populations? How is the church to enter into solidarity with the lowliest, the most disinherited, following in the footsteps of Christ himself, who died on the cross to testify to his love for human beings, his sisters and brothers? In a situation in which any citizen can be thrown in jail at any moment and tortured for a casual reflection or opinion, how can the Church avoid being confused with those who are accomplices in the injustice afflicting the unarmed masses of the rural regions and urban slums of Africa?”²⁷

In order to answer that question, the African Church should first redefine its concepts of faith and salvation. Missionaries brought the idea of salvation as merely going to heaven. For the illiterate African, it was concretized in an excessive thirst for the rituals that imply providentialism. What happens then is an alienation of human beings from the historical struggle, forcing them into a mentality of resignation to the reality of mass injustice, hoping for final liberation in the next life. But this escapism is far from the heart of Christian liberation. African Christians should understand faith not in an abstract way but as a living faith by putting forward the praxis of Christian the struggle in African situation. Living faith means “to understand ourselves in the light of a living revelation, to understand the profound series of the situation and events that we experience, to read the word of God in the world.”²⁸ God for Africans is not a metaphysical God, “a God who is stranger to the times, indifferent to political, social, economic and cultural occurrences.”²⁹

As long as Africans embrace this false concept of God, they will fail to understand the meaning of revelation. For Éla, “revelation is not mainly a doctrine, but a promise which remains to be verified in its realization

27 *African Cry*, p. 7.

28 *African Cry*, p. 29.

29 *African Cry*, p. 30.

in the future of the world.”³⁰ Understanding revelation as promise leads to two fundamental points. *First*, it will invite the African to make history the locus of the progressive fulfillment of the promise. At this point, Éla wants to answer Marx’s critique of alienation by religion. Religion as manifested in ritual providentialism tends to justify oppression and makes an ideal compensation outside history. Éla argues that cultic providentialism in Africa as an effect of colonization and is far from the biblical concept of faith and salvation. Liberation as depicted in *Exodus* indeed refers to fulfillment in the future, but it is grounded in a present historical reality. Salvation means “to be delivered now, to be liberated already from the force of alienation than enslave persons.”³¹ Colonization affects the African concept of faith that fails to enunciate the socio-historical dimension of salvation. *Second*, a promise also brings a radical novelty. Novelty comes when Africans dare to stand up and speak, to protest the present situation in order to actualize the promised future. Promise leads to praxis. In reading the Bible in Africa, one must take adequate account of the local reality and bring it to dialogue with the biblical message of liberation. Then the praxis of faith will “cement all of the movements that reject injustice and oppression through concrete acts of commitment to self-reappropriations, to a reasserting of proprietorship over oneself.”³² It is always in *praxis* of liberation that religion finds its credibility. In this context, religion can be the source to challenge the injustice, to protest the regime, to reorganize the society as a whole, and to incarnate communal resistance to the power of oppression. Belief means responding “to the call to be horrified at one intolerant of the suffering of this life, of injustice and torture, of institutionalized violence, of mystifying ideology of fear, of fatalism and resignation.”³³ Faith supposes a movement of being engaged in a collective project within society.

30 *African Cry*, p. 33.

31 *African Cry*, p. 30.

32 *African Cry*, p. 53.

33 *African Cry*, p. 98.

If Africans should stand up to the ongoing colonization —from the West and also from fellow Africans— what is the way to achieve that goal? On this point, Éla disagrees with Frantz Fanon. In Fanon’s view, decolonization is “a radical reestablishment of the universe in which the colonized struggle to realize an emergence of the human being *in se*.”³⁴ In pursuing that goal all means are permitted, even violence. For Fanon, violence can be used as a legitimate —frequently indispensable— instrument of decolonization. In this context, violence then becomes “purifying violence.”

Éla then asked Fanon: when in Africa does violence become “purifying violence” and not a camouflage to perpetuate injustice? Sadistic regimes used also the very same language of “purifying violence” in persecuting their opposition. Éla’s own experience of being exiled from Cameroon affirms that no such practices in Africa confirm Fanon’s theory. But Éla strongly supports that Africans have to make a radical break from ongoing colonization, must aim for a radical situational change, a total breach, not only in socio-economic areas but especially in the African mentality.

In pursuing a total breach, Éla also criticizes the new romanticism of some African scholars by turning back to African culture in the pre-colonial era. This movement in Éla’s view is “a movement of the *petit bourgeoisie*, a movement for intellectuals straddling the fence between European culture and African tradition.”³⁵ They fail to recognize that even in the African ancestral past, there were many internal tensions, conflicts, violence and injustice. Therefore, lack of criticism for the emerging concept of “blackness” or “authenticity” only “promotes the values of the past, thus espousing a dead view of society, creating a mystique of vain expectation, and doing its best to check the revolt of the starving masses by feeding them soporifics.”³⁶ These Black

34 *African Cry*, p. 56.

35 *African Cry*, p. 123.

36 *African Cry*, p. 125.

romanticists will take the new generation to “a mystifying theory” without a critical examination of the conflict inherent within such a tradition, and it results in the failure to respond to the urgent call for radical structural and institutional transformation within such a tradition.

Éla’s critique of Fanon and the indigenous movement among Black scholars brings him to a very specific understanding of mission. As a priest, Éla believes that the Catholic Church has great resources to contextualize the promise of liberation. The voice of the Church in many parts of Africa is “the last hope of the hopeless... Under regimes that every moment threaten so many human beings with the violation of their basic human rights, if the church cannot speak up, who can?”³⁷ In order to be able to speak up, the church must first redefine its mission so that its energy is not drained up by addressing inner ecclesial concerns, but rather turn its eyes toward the suffering of millions of African. A total break with colonization also means that mission should be performed to achieve a genuine emancipation and not “clerical imperialism that has so long kept the Christian communities in a colonial state of infantilism and irresponsibility.”³⁸ Mission should assume the condition—as Fanon said— of “the wretchedness of the earth.” The purpose of mission in Africa is clear for Éla: to allow the human being to be reborn to a life of freedom and communion.

When mission is interpreted as a commitment of liberation, theology also should redefine itself. Éla uses the expression “theology under the tree.” Éla writes “I dream of a ‘theology under the tree’ which would be worked out as brothers and sisters sit side by side where Christians share the lot of peasant people who seek to take responsibility for their own future and for transforming their living conditions.”³⁹ Theology under the tree refers to the communitarian element of African villagers, where

37 *African Cry*, pp. 79-80.

38 *African Cry*, p. 24.

39 *My Faith as an African*, p. 180.

they gather for protection from the heat of the sun. Under the tree, they sit “side by side” and share their joys and griefs as God’s children. Under the tree, theology urges them to discern between light and dark, between death and life, between good news and situation from which they need to be liberated.

Theology under the tree also shows the urgency of inculturation. Even though Éla is cautious with the idea of indigenization, he argues that to dismantle the inherent Western domination, we should start by respecting the contribution of Africa to Christianity. African Churches should be able to “rediscover the resources of our African oral tradition in order to tell of the love of God who gathers together and liberates.”⁴⁰ Éla exemplifies the urgency of inculturation by the case of *pra* in Cameroon. In Cameroon or Africa, *pra* (meaning: the cult of the ancestors) has a unique place in the tradition. *Pra* symbolizes the bond between the dead and the living, the participation of the ancestors’ invisible power in shaping the life of community. *Pra* also shapes the cohesion among different communities, because belonging to the same *pra* means that the different clans are related as a big family. When the European missionaries came to Cameroon, they saw *pra* only as animistic celebration contrary to the Christian message and replaced *pra* with the “proper” Christian celebration of death, the Feast of All Saint and All Souls. As a result, Cameroonians celebrate *pra* and the Feast of All Souls as separate event. This differentiation exemplifies the failure of merely transporting “European Christianity” into the diverse context of African Christianity. Church documents have talked a lot about the importance of inculturation, but they fail in giving space to be different in the global Church. The African Church is not merely an “administrative province of Rome.”⁴¹ Éla writes “In the churches of Africa, as Baba Simon, the barefoot missionary from Cameroon put it: ‘The time has come to reinvent Christianity, so as to live it with our African soul.’”⁴² Inculturation is a

40 *My Faith as an African*, p. 10.

41 *African Cry*, p. 111.

42 *African Cry*, p. 120.

quest to make Christianity a part of the everydayness of Africa, as a part of “our soul” and not alien from it. Inculturation in the light of theology under the tree is a journey to build local churches that “deal with down-to-earth questions, and get back to ground level where the Kingdom of God is built day by day.”⁴³

DUAL FACES OF SUFFERING: MYSTERIUM INIQUITATIS AND MYSTERIUM SALUTIS, A SYNTHESIS

SUFFERING AND REALITY

It is remarkable to place both theologians side by side and to see how they bring the same messages even with different backgrounds and by different routes. If Sobrino operates more in fundamental theology and Christology, Éla focuses more on the history of culture-mission and socio-economic development. Sobrino is concerned about the suffering of the poor and Éla gives voice to decolonization. Sobrino always invites us back to “reality,” so that we can be affected by the reality, and then take the burden of reality. Éla will say “the reality” itself has a long history due to colonization. So to be affected by “the reality,” we must dismantle the inherent preconception about “reality.” Sobrino uses the binary opposition between “the poor” and “the empire;” Éla use the same opposition, but adds another: black on black. If Sobrino shows the likeness between “the crucified people” and “the crucified God,” Éla shows the unlikeness of “the crucified people” and “the crucified God” because after the crucified people step down from the cross of colonization, they start to “crucify” their own brothers and sisters, the Hutus start to kill the Tutsis.

Despite their unique reflections, Sobrino and Éla take the same position that suffering is the product of human sinfulness: greed, injustice, and colonization. Understanding suffering in the societal context shifts the question to the theology of suffering. Theology of suffering in traditional theology is a part of theodicy by questioning “where is God

43 *My Faith as an African*, p. 146.

in suffering?" The experiences of Latin America and Africa do not neglect that question but pose a more urgent question with "where is the humanity in suffering?" Suffering caused by poverty and colonization is contrary to God's will, but it is a real outcome of human action.

Sadly, as Sobrino says, we are not able to see the reality of suffering. Worse, we do not want to see it. In this context, suffering also refers to "un-truth," to the lies of humanity and how the Empire has deployed a massive campaign to cover up truth and advertise lies and the new language which softens the harshness of suffering. It is the suffering of the victim that makes us able to see reality. It is their calling that makes us aware about "the wretchedness of the earth" as the very result of our own hand. This awareness urges us not to abandon that reality but to be affected by it so that our conversion can be initiated.

As the eight commandment says "Do not lie." Letting reality speak is the very foundation of any moral reflection in the face of massive human suffering. Éla and Sobrino show the importance of social sciences as mediation for theological reflection to uncover the lie of reality.⁴⁴ Social sciences (philosophy for Sobrino and sociology and cultural studies for Éla) help theology in its quest for "naming the reality of suffering." In African tradition, naming/giving a name is the first action in removing the powerful spell from the dark spirit. By giving a name, the true face of the dark spirit and how it operates in the world will be revealed. Suffering does not *just happen*. It has a systemic cause and root. Marxism proves to be helpful in naming theological blind spot that makes religion take refuge in the false comfort of the next life and forget the hard task of bearing the harshness of reality. The Greek philosophical concept of *praxis*, revived by the Frankfurt School, helps theology to underline the liberating *praxis* of Galilean Jesus and embody it for the current praxis of liberation performed by any one who wants to uproot the structural root of suffering. Cultural studies is helpful in naming the spell of ongoing

44 Agnes Brazal, "Use of Mediations in Liberation Theologies: A Filipino Perspective" in *Mediations in Theology: George De Schrijver's Wager and Liberation Theologies*, Jacques Haers, SJ et al. (eds), (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), p. 76.

dominance in newly post-colonial society and in naming possible resources to resist this dominance in any cultural symbol, oral tradition, of popular wisdom; so that the hope of Christianity will not be alien to the indigenous people who mourn.

If theological reflection is willing to be more open with social sciences as a mediation to uncover the reality of suffering, then the projects of liberation can always be expanded in relation to the dynamic within social sciences, like feminism, queer studies, etc. Women theologians then give their unique reflection on dismantling the culture of patriarchy, "the reality of sexist domination" to which Sobrino and Éla as male priests do not give enough attention. The broader we make the space of mediation, the more sensitive we are to any form of suffering and the richer our reflection is on that given situation.

SUFFERING AND RESOCIALIZATION

When suffering is perceived as a product of social sin, then the community is challenged: does the community give space to mourn and stand up to challenge the roots of suffering? Éla and Sobrino lament the Church's failure to take the option to stand with reality. Instead of giving an adequate space to mourn, the Church in many occasions becomes part of or even perpetuates the system of injustice. But Éla and Sobrino strongly believe that the Church has the capacity to give voice to criticize and support resistance to the unjust situation. In order to do so, the Church should place "the option with the victims" as its pretext in interpreting the signs of the times.

In this situation, the church should be able to resocialize the victims back to the community.⁴⁵ To be the victims of economical, political, cultural, sexual and racial injustice means to be treated as insignificant others. Because the victims are insignificant, they do not exist in the community, they are outcasts. The role of the Church, as shown by Éla

45 Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Kingdom and Cross: Christian Moral Community and the Problem of Suffering" *Interpretation*, April 1996/50, pp.156-168.

and Sobrino, is to bring them back into the community, provide them space and be with them in their mourning. Sobrino uses the concept of *mysterium salutis* as the opposing power of *mysterium iniquitatis*. Élas use the expression “theology under the tree” as the utopian African community, when every sojourner could find the place to rest from the heat of suppression and suffering, talk informally with fellow wayfarers about life and the possibility to make a more just society. In every suffering is manifest the power of love, gratuitousness and solidarity.⁴⁶ Resocialization in the light of a theology of suffering could be understood as a form of promise that everyone can have a place in the community. The role of community in supporting its members, especially the outcast, is to resist the power that excludes the poor, and to support their project in reclaiming their rights in the community. Liberation can be interpreted as to re-form the lives of broken communion.

If liberation is interpreted as a form of resocialization then the temptation of using violence in uprooting the causes of suffering can be eliminated. Some advocates of liberation theology see a possible legitimacy for the victims to use violence as a form of self-defense, if it is unavoidable and the last resort of action.⁴⁷ This debate actually continues the internal conversation within Catholic theology on the just war theory. But, for Éla and Sobrino, every process of liberation should be by non-violent movement. Éla’s experience with terror from his government and his critique of Frantz Fanon’s radical decolonization underlines this principle of non-violence as a response to colonization. In his eulogy of Ellacuria after the collapse of the Twin Towers and the Afghan war (2001), Sobrino strongly underlines the primacy of forgiveness and rejects violent revenge

46 James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Conscience* (New York: Continuum, 2010), p. 197.

47 Deane William Ferm, *Third World Liberation Theologies: An Introductory Survey*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), p. 116. Sobrino also showed the development in Ellacuria on the topic of “just war”. In his earlier writing, Ellacuria –as others Catholic theologians– supported the legitimacy of just war theory when he talked about “redeeming violence.” But, closer to his assassination, Ellacuria focused more on the willingness to shoulder the weight of unjust violence so that it will vent the force of violence until it is exhausted. Jon Sobrino, “Ignacio Ellacuria, the Human Being and the Christian,” pp. 34-37.

in the name of combating the terrorist.⁴⁸ Liberation must begin from internal purification from selfishness and anger so that we can show mercy from the beginning until the end, even if it will cost our own life as it did for Romero and Ellacuria. As in the Good Samaritan parable, mercy works not only for the wounded but also for the highway robbers. It is the enduring mercy that will lead to conversion, and martyrdom is a manifestation of the credibility of mercy.

SUFFERING AND DISCIPLESHIP

As noted by Robert Gascoigne, suffering can be a crucial occasion for moral and spiritual insight. "It is through the encounter with suffering that theological ethics is drawn into an ever-deeper response to the mystery of Christ's redeeming love manifested in human experience."⁴⁹ Reflecting the suffering and the historical struggle to combat the roots of injustice is a part of being a disciple of Christ. Sobrino, Éla and other liberation theologians are often criticized as downgrading the Gospel's message to a political or human rights agenda. Jesus then is portrayed as merely a Galilean activist. These critiques can be true if liberation theology tends to focus more on material dialectic and not the broader Christian anthropology that respects the material and also the spiritual in their interpenetrative relationship.

But, if we read closely Sobrino and Éla's writings, that criticism is far from the truth. Liberation is a Christian response to the same revelation and embedded in the same tradition as the Apostles. Since revelation is never passively received, human response to the revelation and its formulation into the doctrine will always be shaped by "the language of society, with its major questions, its specific needs and most important concerns, a certain sensitivity to the questions of a given time, and a mentality specific to a given people."⁵⁰ Fritz Tillman has said that the

48 Jon Sobrino, *Witness to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), pp. 222-223.

49 Robert Gascoigne, "Suffering and Theological Ethics: Intimidation and Hope," p. 163.

50 *My Faith as an African*, p. 165.

Apostles' responses to Jesus' command "Follow me" is not a mimicry, or merely a repetition of past actions. "Following" refers to "a thorough com-prehension of the model that we have come to know through understanding and love... 'following' always demands that the disciple re-create the model."⁵¹

In light of "re-creating the model," the historicity of Jesus and the language of the cross are eminently presents in Sobrino and Éla.⁵² In His profound experience of suffering, the crucified Jesus enlightens the destructive and real effect of human sinfulness that lead to His death, His obedience to Father's mission, and His abundant love and solidarity for humanity. If the God of Jesus Christ will not abandon humanity even in its highest degree of sinfulness, as the follower of Christ, we should do the same.⁵³ From the point of view of the cross, resurrection is no longer the theology of the victor-as criticized by Johann Baptist Metz - or moral suasion to the victims, but a theology of promise: to rediscover the future in the deep commitment to bear the burden of the present.⁵⁴

Discipleship is a historical continuation in bearing that promise. In his dissertation about the transcendence of God and human existence in Martin Luther, Éla argued that in order to avoid a rupture between God and humanity, justification should not be understood as "by faith alone" but "by faith incarnate." It is in incarnation that the universe becomes the temple, humanity becomes the sacrament of Jesus and human history becomes the medium of God's saving communication. Our praxis of liberation is not only a human affair, but a part of "transcendent horizon

51 Fritz Tillmann, *The Master Calls: A Handbook of Christian Living* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1960), pp. 4-5.

52 In the context of "re-creating the model", Lisa Cahill shows CDF's inconsistency by merely criticizing Sobrino but not Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth* with "overriding emphasis on the divinity of Christ to the extent the kingdom of God...The kingdom of God is nowhere associated with a Christian mandate to undertake political action on behalf of the poor". Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Christ and Kingdom: The Identity of Jesus and Christian Politics," in *Hope & Solidarity*, p. 245.

53 James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, p. 200.

54 *African Cry*, p. 35.

because of its relevance to 'our becoming, our genesis' and because it leads to full humanity which is part of God's design."⁵⁵

Our struggle to bear the burden of suffering and our commitment to liberation then become a *milieu de rencontre* with God.

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⁵⁵ Jean-Marc Éla, *Transcendance de Dieu et existence humaine selon Luther*, cited in Philip Gibbs, *The Word in the Third World: Divine Revelation in the Theology of Jean-Marc Éla, Aloysius Pieris and Gustavo Gutierrez*, (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1996), p. 148.

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