

Under the Feet of the Proletariat?

An Examination of the Theology of *Under the Feet of Jesus* by Helena Maria Viramontes

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The Problem of Religious Imagery and Concepts

Helena Maria Viramontes' novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* is laden with religious imagery and concepts. What makes the interpretation of these images and concepts difficult is their contextual placement which renders two conflicting interpretations equally feasible. The first interpretation would identify the religious elements of the novel as ethnically specific symbols, having more socio-political significance than spiritual significance. This interpretation, in turn, reveals the book's affinities with liberation theology. The second interpretation would identify the religious elements of the novel as belonging to traditional theology and, furthermore, as central to the text. In this interpretation, the socio-political consequences of one's adherence to, or rejection of, religion are supervenient phenomena and, therefore, evince only a lateral significance.

This essay contends that *Under the Feet of Jesus*, while lending itself to liberation theology, underscores the primacy of traditional theology. Socio-political concerns, rather than being central to the text, are lateral concerns that function semiotically, pointing the reader to the looming questions with which traditional theology is concerned. The existence and attributes of God, for instance, are touched upon rather explicitly in the text. These two traditional-theological concerns, moreover, imply answers to the question of God's interaction with humanity. The person and work of Jesus Christ, as well as the person and work of the Holy Spirit, are likewise explicitly mentioned in the text, further strengthening the thesis here being articulated.

This essay will begin with a brief definition of liberation theology, then proceed to define traditional theology. Reflection on the tension between these two forms of theology, and their treatment of socio-political concerns, in Viramontes' novel will follow. Finally, the essay will conclude with an attempt at synthesizing concerns raised by liberation theology and traditional theology alike, as

engagement in such a synthesis is what the book's central focus, i.e. traditional theology, seems to suggest is the reader's moral responsibility.

What is Liberation Theology?

“Liberation theology,” writes J. David Turner, “is a religious movement that seeks to eliminate human oppression by implementing the ideals of the kingdom of God on earth.”¹ Proponents of this ideology believe that this entails “liberating . . . social, economic, and religious structures that are perceived to be oppressive.”² Rather than beginning with a well-formed body of doctrine, the liberation theologians begin with the marginalized subject and proceed to theologize in accordance with the needs and conflicts marginalizing those groups. What is important, then, is not catechesis and one's determination to live as his beliefs say he ought, but the conformation of theology to the perceived temporal exigencies of marginalized social groups.

D.D. Webster notes that “Liberation theologians,” being uniquely situated in Latin America, “contend that their continent has been victimized by colonialism, imperialism, and multinational corporations.”³ Consequently, capitalism is often identified as the ungodly source of the victimization to which liberation theologians refer, and “Christ is likened to a guerrilla warrior fighting for the liberation of

¹ *An Introduction to Liberation Theology* (Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1994), 1.

² *ibid.*

³ *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., Walter A. Elwell (Michigan: Baker Book House Company, 2001), s.v. “Liberation Theology”.

his people”⁴ therefrom. “Liberation theologians,” according to Williams (2000), “attempt to read the Bible with the eyes of the poor to help them interpret the Christian faith in a new way.”⁵ This entails the belief that “Christians must engage in revolutionary struggle against the capitalist economic system.”⁶

A Brief Definition of Traditional Theology

Liberation theology, it must be noted, is built upon the assumption that “traditional theology with its abstract concepts [has] subverted the original spirit of the Gospel message and [is] irrelevant to the condition of the Third World masses.”⁷ Therefore, a brief definition of traditional theology is requisite to laying a foundation upon which Viramontes’ novel may be analyzed.

Broadly speaking, traditional theology is the study of the being and attributes of God as He is in Himself and as He relates to His creation. Contrary to liberation theology’s anthropocentric first principles of interpretation, therefore, for traditional theology “the interpretation of Scripture is the very

⁴ Williams, Elisabeth Erin, 2000. “Liberation Theology and It’s Role in Latin America” in *The Monitor: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 7, issue 1 (Fall):

<http://web.wm.edu/so/monitor/issues/07-1/6-williams.htm>, accessed on April 24, 2014.

⁵ *Liberation Theology and It’s Role in Latin America*

⁶ Morgan, Paul, Edd Noell, 1990. *Capitalism and Liberation Theology in Latin America*,

(December): http://www.gordon.edu/ace/pdf/morgannoell_capandlibertheollat.pdf, accessed on April 24, 2014.

⁷ Freitas, Donna. *Introduction to Liberation Theology*,

[http://academics.smcvt.edu/relstudies_courses/RS130/Introduction%20to%20Liberation%20Theology.](http://academics.smcvt.edu/relstudies_courses/RS130/Introduction%20to%20Liberation%20Theology.htm)

[htm](http://academics.smcvt.edu/relstudies_courses/RS130/Introduction%20to%20Liberation%20Theology.htm), accessed on April 24, 2014.

first work of the theologian.”⁸ In other words, as W.G.T. Shedd goes on to explain, “when a man constructs a system of philosophy, he must look into his own mind for the data; but when he constructs the Christian system he must look in the Bible for them.”⁹

Thus, a proper understanding of the being and attributes of God as He in Himself and as He relates to His creation is logically, and biblically, antecedent to a proper understanding of man as he relates to God, himself, other persons, and the remainder of creation. Traditional theology rests upon the belief that its biblically deduced doctrinal framework provides a comprehensive world-and-life-view through which all things, including socio-political concerns such as those which are addressed by liberation theology, can be properly understood. Hence, it places primary importance upon catechesis.

God and Proletarian Problemata

The importance of religion in the lives of the characters in *Under the Feet of Jesus* is a recurring theme. Not only is Petra an apparently devout Roman Catholic, but so are others within her family. “The only book [Estrella] had ever owned,” the narrator informs the reader, “was a catechism chapbook that her godmother had given her.”¹⁰ This book, moreover, was one that she would “read and reread.”¹¹ Yet Viramontes’ juxtapositioning of the catechism to Maxine’s comic books, which remind Estrella of advertisements that she would “read over and over,”¹² suggests that the catechism,

⁸ *Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. I, 11.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ p.30-31, Kindle Edition.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

with its non-concrete (i.e. abstract) teaching about God, is at bottom not very much different from the false representations of life found in comics and advertisements.

As Estrella experiences more socio-economic and personal hardship, the belief that “[God] the Holy Spirit came . . . to show His love”¹³ is seemingly abandoned. Despite her conflicted desire to *not* doubt the goodness of God, she nevertheless thinks that Alejo’s suffering indicates that “God is mean and did not care and she was alone to fend for herself.”¹⁴ Likewise, although she had been taught by traditional theology that God is omnipotent, as Alejo struggles against death Estrella wonders: “If only God could help.”¹⁵ The abstractions of traditional theology, consequently, are of no help to her family’s survival in general, nor to Alejo’s survival in particular.

A similar attitude is expressed by Perfecto, who scoffs at the idea that “one never knows what obstacles God puts before us as a test.”¹⁶ Rather than believing that God is all-knowing, Perfecto characterizes God as being blind to his moral obedience or disobedience. As the narrator explains, “. . . [Perfecto] awoke next to a young woman and it thrilled him because this was the woman who he had loved boldly in the canyon *right under the cataract eyes of God. Without the church’s legal signature, he had pushed his trousers down . . .*”¹⁷ In light of this, the reader comes to understand why it is that Perfecto, rather than instructing Estrella in the catechism “taught her the names that went with

¹³ Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 31.

¹⁴ *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 139.

¹⁵ *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 147.

¹⁶ *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 97.

¹⁷ *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 78. (emphasis added)

[his] tools.”¹⁸ It is important to also note that Petra’s faith throughout the novel does not remain unshaken, as is evident from “the wave of anger swelling in her chest” she feels when her “statue of Jesucristo” breaks. “Her reflexes were no longer fast enough to catch a falling statue,”¹⁹ the narrator explains, subtly suggesting that the statue is merely a dead abstraction at best, or an ideological delusion at worst.

What leads the characters to doubt the traditional theology successively disseminated via catechetical instruction are their socio-economic and personal hardships stemming from their status as marginalized subjects. Yet while the head of “Jesucristo” - i.e. the source and symbol of knowledge, immaterial abstractions, etc - breaks off from its body - i.e. the source and symbol of empirical reality and experience - it is the feet of the statue that are central to the novel, indicating that there is at least some hope of socio-economic redemption through Christianity. The significance of Christ’s feet crushing not only a serpent, but beneath the serpent the “birth certificates”²⁰ belonging to Estrella, directly associates the ills of capitalism with the serpent, i.e. Satan, who Christ will crush at the end of history. Thus, when the narrator reports that “the termite-softened shakes crunched beneath [Estrella’s] feet *like the serpent under the feet of Jesus*,”²¹ this further demonstrate the story’s affinities with liberation theology. Christ will save the poor by overthrowing the oppressive kingdoms of this world, but He will be accompanied by the revolutionary actions of the proletariat who seek to overthrow capitalism and the socio-political evils to which it seems to invariably lead.

¹⁸ Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 25.

¹⁹ *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 167.

²⁰ *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 62-63.

²¹ *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 175. (emphasis added)

A Return to Traditional Theology?

Ironically, the emphasis laid upon the nature of God, the nature of humanity, and the nature of the relationship between God and His creation, does not allow the reader to conclude that Viramontes is explicitly advocating a form of liberation theology. Rather, the considerations given to whether or not God is all-good, all-knowing, all-wise,²² all-loving, and a Savior from concrete, as well as “abstract,” evils bring traditional theology back into central focus. How one proceeds, in other words, is dependent not upon one’s experiences, as liberation theology would have it, but upon one’s beliefs. This does not render the novel decidable, however, seeing as it seems to oscillate between, on the one hand, the belief that socio-economic realities are more important than the abstractions of traditional theology and yet, on the other hand, that the abstractions of traditional theology are equally, if not more, important than the perceived temporal material exigencies of marginalized groups.

Traditional theology gives primacy to abstract concepts, but it does so through material-social means, viz. catechesis and collective worship (including physical symbols, e.g. bread, wine, water). Belief is, in other words, nothing if not embodied by subjects and their interactions with God, themselves, one another, and the remainder of creation.²³ In traditional theology, for instance, God’s justice against those who would oppress the poor is displayed in his judgment of the Egyptians, who enslaved and subjugated the Israelites, as well as in his commands concerning the poor and the hungry

²² See Perfecto’s comments on the nature of instinct and desire in relation to bodily capabilities and divine ordinances on p.160-161.

²³ See James 2:14-26.

foreigners who pass through Israel.²⁴ It would be a mistake to drive a wedge between the concerns of liberation theologians and traditional theologians, as it would be a mistake to conflate the two.

An Attempt at Synthesis

In Viramontes' novel, mis-representation and, therefore, reification, commodification, alienation from the products of one's labor, and marginalization are what, in the most immediate sense, God faces from his creatures (i.e. the family). Christ is not fully human and fully divine; he is reduced to a plaster statue that is neither human nor divine. God is not credited with the good which the family receives - e.g. food, water, life, love, family - but is spoken against harshly for what the family perceives to be his "failures" or evidences of his weakness and/or apathy. Estrella reflects on the mistreatment she receives from a nurse, concluding that "the nurse owed *them* [i.e. migrant workers/the marginalized in society] as much as they owed her [i.e. middle class, white collar Americans]."²⁵ Yet the work of God is not repaid with thanks, despite that he is owed perfect obedience by all humans and is himself indebted to no one. Similarly, Estrella can grasp how the destruction of false representations of reality can lead the nurse to consciousness of her unloving behavior toward Estrella,²⁶ but only Alejo shortly entertains the notion that *perhaps* his sin of thievery has brought about the suffering he faces.²⁷

Under the Feet of Jesus, while not giving the reader a clear cut answer to the proletarian problemata it presents, does cause the reader to reflect on questions concerning the being and attributes of God as He is in Himself and as He is in relation to His creation, and, therefore, places a greater

²⁴ See Deut 10:17-18.

²⁵ Viramontes, 148.

²⁶ See *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 151.

²⁷ See *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 76-77.

emphasis upon traditional theology. The socio-political and personal troubles facing the characters function as signs pointing the reader to the enduring questions of traditional theology. Is God good? Is God loving? Is God all powerful? Are pain and suffering punishments for sin? Are they not punishments for sin? Does God care? How one answers these questions will determine how he responds to the socio-political problems mentioned in Viramontes' book and, therefore, renders the reader's interpretation a moral activity with moral consequences for which the reader can rightly be held accountable.

Thus, while the concerns of liberation theology and traditional theology should not be conflated, a synthesis between the two is possible. Liberation theology and traditional theology understand the significance of theology proper²⁸ in the functioning of individual persons and their relation to the socius. Both theologies agree that the mistreatment of marginalized persons and groups is sinful and should be eradicated from society. Both theologies, lastly, emphasize the value of producers enjoying the products of their labors. The polyphony of Viramontes' novel, it can be argued, provides the reader with a prototype of what such a synthesis would consist of, seeing as socio-political concerns point the reader to greater theological concerns which, in their turn, point the reader back to socio-political concerns once more.

²⁸ That is, the discipline of theology apart from the various sub-disciplines with which it deals.