

John Markey's brilliant reflection, *Moses in Pharaoh's House*, makes an enormous contribution to the existing literature on the preferential option for the poor and reminds us of the universal call to liberation. . . . Markey identifies the walls that confine the human spirit and breaks down the dualisms between "us" and "them." . . . As he reminds us that we cannot understand the mystery of our lives independently of the mystery of God, he also helps us see that we cannot understand who we are independently of our connection to one another, especially our neighbor in need.

—Daniel G. Groody, CSC
University of Notre Dame

[In *Moses in Pharaoh's House*, John Markey] has created a work of compelling power and intellectual depth that asks us to experience the world in a radically different way. If we are to imitate Christ, then we . . . must make choices in keeping with God's love for those at the economic and political margins of our world. Only then do we begin a dismantling of the walls of pharaoh's house.

—Nancy Pineda-Madrid
Associate Professor of Theology, Boston College

In *Moses in Pharaoh's House*, John Markey provides us a deft pathway out of Pharaoh's house—moving toward a more authentic and engaged spirituality . . . that addresses both the oppressive elements of our culture and the consequences those elements have for other people around the world. . . . A must-read for those who seek liberation from what ails us and who want to create greater global solidarity.

—Robert Schreier
Catholic Theological Union

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MOSES IN PHARAOH'S HOUSE

A LIBERATION SPIRITUALITY FOR NORTH AMERICA

JOHN J. MARKEY



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To Donald L. Gelpi SJ (1934–2011)

Mentor, Colleague, Friend

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The Example of Moses

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

— EXODUS 2:11–12

MOSES' CONVERSION

Just about everyone who has ever attended church or synagogue on a regular basis is familiar with the story of Moses: A Hebrew baby hidden in the bulrushes because of pharaoh's decree to kill all the boys born to the people enslaved in Egypt, he was discovered by pharaoh's daughter and raised as a member of the royal household. At some point (the scriptures don't say how or when), he realized that he was Hebrew, not Egyptian. Over time he came to understand the brutality inflicted on his people; he killed an Egyptian overseer for beating a Hebrew slave and, consequently, abandoned his privileged position, fled for his life to the desert, and took on the mantle of his true heritage. After some time, despite profound reluctance, he returned to Egypt as God's messenger, demanding that pharaoh release the Hebrews and leading his people on a long journey to the Promised Land.

There is more to his story of conversion than this—his conversion and subsequent attempt to fulfill the will of God is full of complications and even contradictions. At the beginning of the story Moses is unsure of himself. When he sees the Egyptian striking his Hebrew kinsman, he first looks to make sure that no one is around

(Ex 2:12). After he kills the Egyptian, he tries to hide him and then goes home hoping that his act will not be discovered. The next day when he comes upon two Hebrew slaves fighting with each other he becomes angry with them. Rather than embrace Moses for his act of solidarity the men denounce him. Filled with fear of pharaoh and the consequences of his action, Moses flees from Egypt and goes into hiding (Ex 2:15). His actions were not bold, brave, and decisive, neither did they affect any real or structural change in the life of his kinspeople. It was only through a long and complex process of transformation that Moses is able to lead his people to liberation.

Many lessons can be drawn from the story of Moses, but one of the foremost is an understanding of the process of conversion. In the United States, *conversion* is most often associated with *being born again* into believing in Christ, but *conversion* in its broadest sense encompasses the decisive abandonment of one-belief system in order to fully embrace another, whether the belief system is political, social, religious, or even scientific. As the tale of Moses unfolds, the reader observes that his first conversion is not religious at all: he converts from understanding himself as a royal Egyptian to knowing himself as an enslaved Hebrew, from identifying with the Egyptian overseers to becoming one with his fellow Hebrews. Only much later, after he has crossed the desert to Midian, does Moses experience what might be called a religious conversion: when the story says he approaches a “burning” bush and hears God speaking directly to him (Ex 2:23–4:17). In the biblical account, God’s self-revelation to Moses changes him profoundly for it sets him on a fundamentally new and unexpected path. God speaks to Moses to give him a mission, a difficult and dangerous task: leadership of and service to others who were so oppressed that they could not organize themselves nor speak on their own behalf, let alone assert their right to freedom. Moses at first hesitates to accept what God is asking of him and doubts his ability to fulfill the task that God sets before him. In time however, Moses accepts his experience of God and authenticates his religious conversion by accepting the mission God asks of him and trusting in the providential care of God to see to its fulfillment. This is the example that Moses has provided down through the millennia.

Nowadays Christians typically think of conversion, if they think of it at all, in only two scenarios: the conversion of adherents of other

faiths to Christianity, and the conversion from lukewarm churchgoer to fervent believer in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Such ideas of conversion concern only the internal—that is, what a person experiences inside, in the soul or “heart”—as if that is all that matters. Conversion of the soul is certainly a profound event, but it is life-changing only if it leads to different ways of interacting with one’s family, friends, neighbors, strangers, and even enemies. Christian conversion means adopting better, more loving ways of relating to others. As the author of the Epistle of James wrote, “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (Jas 2:17). If a converted person shows no change in behavior, could any change of heart really have taken place?

That writer goes on to indicate what such works should encompass: clothe, feed, shelter, and honor the poor; show no partiality to the rich; and love everyone as much as oneself. In the Gospel account, Jesus, speaking about the last judgment, says that the primary criterion by which God would judge people would be their treatment of those in need. Jesus identifies God’s will directly with compassion and care for the hungry, the homeless, the imprisoned, the naked, the outcast: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). This is exactly what the privileged Moses did in his time, and it is incumbent upon the follower of Christ today to accept God’s choice for the poor and the oppressed as one’s own people. Embracing God’s view of reality, as understood by Christians, may entail profound questioning of the very social arrangements in which one was raised. As the story of Moses shows, such questioning can be dangerous, life altering, because to reject the order of things means that one must reject the many rewards and gratifications that come through the existing order. Such a course of action will likely bring one into conflict with those people who continue to benefit from things as they are.

The idea that God might desire a new and different living arrangement for all people comes as a joyful revelation for the oppressed.¹ Those profiting from the current order, on the other hand, may receive this “good” news with fear, shock, or disbelief. Only those such as Moses, who came to a sure trust in the final

1. See further Virgil Elizondo, *The God of Incredible Surprises* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2004).

and lasting triumph of God's vision of creation, can accept its consequences. Acceptance of this new vision of creation includes a willingness to limit or even forego temporary goods in this life in the sure knowledge that a greater life awaits those who are faithful to God. As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes, "By faith Moses . . . refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse . . . to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward" (Heb 11:24–26). Conversion elicits a change of loyalty, the immediate consequences of which may be difficult, painful, or bleak. In the biblical account, Moses transfers his loyalty from pharaoh and Egypt's ruling elite to the oppressed Hebrew people—his "true people"—even though legally and culturally he was entitled to benefit from his status as an heir to the Egyptian throne. The way the story unfolds suggests that Moses came to understand that he had to risk losing his position and his status and all its entitlements in order to bring about the justice that God desired. Only when Moses took this risk could he become one with his people and be truly open to what God was asking of him. Moses' true virtue lay not in his abstract belief in God, but in his concrete decision to see his fate as intrinsically tied to God's love of the downtrodden.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND CONVERSION

The story of Moses and the Exodus underscores an important biblical relationship: the relationship between conversion and liberation. In the biblical scheme of things, the liberation of the poor and oppressed is intrinsically tied to the personal and communal conversion of those who are the oppressors. Slavery enslaves not only slaves but also those in power. All people, whether privileged or not, need God's presence in their lives to move beyond the suffocating effects of social structures that enforce discrimination and inequality, that run counter to God's love for creation and the human relationships within it.²

2. For a further explanation of the sources of this interpretation of the biblical narrative, see Daniel G. Groody, *Globalization, Spirituality and Justice*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007) 31–57.

A theology of liberation underlies much of the biblical narrative and must be embraced to understand the depth of the biblical revelation. Modern-day liberation theology, however, emerged in the twentieth century first in Latin America and then spread to many other regions and groups of people that experienced oppression in their lives.³ Among economically poor and politically oppressed peoples, liberation theology arises from their despair and their faith that God hears their cries. Liberation theology offers hope to the oppressed and provides them with a way to interpret their struggles and their desire for new life in the midst of suffering and death. Liberation theology has come to represent all those who have ever found themselves in a scandalous condition—the victims of institutional oppression, violence, injustice, and inequity. Liberation theology finds its deepest yearnings and hope in the biblical story of a God who hears the cry of the enslaved Hebrew people and demands that they be set free (Ex 3–15).

This book proposes a spirituality for those “living in pharaoh’s house,” those who find themselves “inside” of oppressive structures, particularly in the wealthier countries of the world. People of privilege generally do not identify themselves as oppressors, and they usually have no intention whatsoever of being oppressors. That, however, is the problem: too often people who benefit from “things the way they are” live confined and unreflective lives and take for granted the world they have inherited. Liberation theology confronts people with the “way things ought to be,” with a strong emphasis on an “option for the poor.” By demonstrating how things

3. For an explanation of the development of Latin American liberation theology, see further, Roberto Olivaro, “History of Liberation Theology,” in Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1993), 3–32; Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1987); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1988), 3–61; José Miguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). For an introduction to some other liberation theologies, see especially James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1990), Catherine LaCugna, ed., *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993); Peter Phan, *Christianity with An Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2003).

ought to be different, liberation theology begins to break down the cycle of oppression.

However, liberation theology can be a pure abstraction to those who benefit from institutional injustice, for they do not really feel the need for a theology of liberation; instead, they need a theology of conversion. In North America in particular, many need to be converted from the cultural belief that self-centered individualism is not only morally acceptable but also morally necessary for achieving the common good. Many need “new eyes” and “new ears” to see and hear and experience the world in a radically different way: the way that the majority of the world's population experiences it on a daily and routine basis. For that to happen, only a true conversion will suffice: a radical reorientation and reintegration of one's life and priorities.

As part of such a conversion, many need to be liberated from a fundamentally flawed value system. The following chapters of this book will examine this false value system and the ways in which it confuses the idea of “goodness” with human desires and habits that are unhealthy, dangerous, and destructive. This value system enmeshes people in a worldwide system that is often oppressive and even violent on their behalf, without them even realizing it. Several underlying and interconnected beliefs make up the “walls” of pharaoh's house, creating conditions of moral blindness that keep the privileged locked inside a place from which they are unable to engage the world ethically, because they simply do not know that world exists.

Embracing a new vision of reality entails not just individual conversion, but also conversion of societies and initial and ongoing conversions in all dimensions of their collective lives. Part of the process is to discern the inauthentic or distorted aspects of cultures that are in need of fundamental reorientation.

Most forms of liberation theology start by evaluating and identifying economic and cultural structures that by their very nature promote inequality or marginalization. This book proposes a somewhat different starting point: the need to identify and examine underlying cultural misinterpretations of the good. This examination will show that many people have developed an inverted value system and misdirected their desire to create a good life and will

yield insights about how people can reorient their values and achieve an ethically good social life.⁴

The initial goal of a cultural or societal conversion is to tear down the walls separating the insiders from the outsiders, the haves from the have-nots. The goal is not primarily to force a redistribution of wealth or power (although that might be a desirable outcome) but to facilitate a solidarity between people who have never known one another, let alone connected on some personal level. With personal connection comes familiarity and affinity, caring and sharing. When genuine solidarity among all members of a society—no matter which side of the wall they happen to be from—develops, it can lead to an understanding that every member has an obligation toward every other member, particularly the poor, weak, and vulnerable. When this reorientation happens, both “insiders” and “outsiders” are set free from enslaving structures.

If it is to happen, the process of critique, conversion, and collaboration will be lengthy and painful on both sides. It would be impossible to convert all of society in one fell swoop; but small communities that are in deep solidarity and communion with ever-widening bonds of universal solidarity can become the model for wider changes.

OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

The first part of the book, chapters 2–4, will examine the underlying foundations of “the walls of Pharaoh’s house”: three interrelated and interconnected false interpretations of reality that are set in place as preeminent cultural values. These are precisely the values that have so inverted and distorted the US cultural milieu. These three issues serve as the source and matrix of many other cultural

4. There are number of significant studies on culture and its relationship to theological formulation. See especially Bernhard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972); Louis Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Mayknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), especially pp. 133–373; Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between Global and Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1997), especially pp. 28–61; Steven B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1992); and for an overall discussion of culture, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997).

ills and a generally false and misguided social ethos. This first part of the book addresses three fundamental issues: (1) radical individualism and the palliative culture that it spawns, (2) the systematic elevation of envy as a virtue in free-market capitalism and the consumerism and materialism that this envy creates, and (3) the optimistic and “positive thinking” façade of a culture that masks that it is ultimately spiritually vacuous and hopeless about the future. Radical individualism and systematic envy lead to pervasive fear, nihilism, and hopelessness in the dominant culture. At the heart of this culture is a profound emptiness that yearns to be filled. A liberating theology must offer something more than the temporary therapeutic palliatives, materialistic distractions, and self-serving ideological rhetoric that American society now provides to its spiritually impoverished members.

The second part of the book, chapters 5–7, defines conversion and examines some of its implications for personal and communal living. To enable this, the text examines the pioneering work of Don Gelpi. Gelpi spent thirty years developing a systematic theology focused exclusively on enculturating the Roman Catholic theological tradition in terms of North American patterns of thought, culture, and social structures.⁵ Along these lines, he developed a theology and process of conversion as the centerpiece of his system. His theology of conversion, especially in terms of specifically North American habits of thinking and behaving, serves as a foundational tool for anyone who wants to think seriously about spirituality and the process of conversion. The text then argues that Gelpi's understanding of conversion serves well as part of an overall strategy for creating a liberating spirituality in the North American context.

As a critical aspect of conversion in the US context, the text will evaluate the unique “problem of God” that the American cultural milieu evokes. According to many studies, the United States is a very religious country.⁶ Most polls taken in the United States in the last fifty years indicate that more than 90 percent of respondents claim to

5. The term *North American* is used in this text to refer to a cultural milieu that is wider than the boundaries of the United States but that is dominated by the United States politically, economically, and socially.

6. See further “Global Index of Religion and Atheism,” (WIN-Gallup International, 2012); “American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights Into the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the US,” Baylor Religious Survey (Baylor University: Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, 2006).

believe in God or some “higher power.”⁷ In addition, nine out of ten Americans profess to pray at least once a week. In the United States, therefore (unlike in Europe), the problem of God is not really *if* God exists but rather *which* God exists. While the vast majority of Americans believe in God, it is not clear from their responses to polls or their own behaviors whether they share a common understanding of God or God’s relationship to human life and history. It is important to examine the unique genesis of American religiosity and determine the common strands and distinct visions that operate within the US understanding of God.

The text then argues that for Christians the notion of the “option for the poor” should serve as the primary measure for authenticating religious conversion. The option for the poor is the practical ethical consequence of belief in the coming of the reign of God. How one treats the poor and those that are outcasts—*anawim* (the Hebrew word for the marginated members of a community)—in any society is the practical test of the level of genuine holistic personal conversion one has undergone. Furthermore, how a society treats its poor, weak, vulnerable, and most despised members serves as a practical test of that society’s level of spiritual/moral/ethical well-being and health. Eventually, this practical test must extend beyond the society’s national boundaries.

The third part of this book, chapters 8–9, identifies some alternatives and resources within the culture including its intellectual and religious traditions that could counteract and challenge this matrix of overly privatized, materialistic, and superficial values. The result of authentic Christian conversion is mission. All the great Christian traditions of spirituality integrate personal conversion with a sense of mission: service to some segment of society that lives “outside the walls.” Articulating a uniquely American vision of the good life can motivate converted Christians to profound social and political engagement on behalf of the good and in service to the *anawim*. This vision must be practical, theologically grounded, rooted in experience, and mindful of the underlying tenets or expectations that most Americans share.

7. See “Global Index of Religion and Atheism” and “American Piety in the 21st Century.” See also Gallup News Service, *Values and Beliefs—Final Topline*, Gallup Poll Social Series (Timberline: 927914, G: 788, Princeton Job #: 11-05-009; Jeff Jones, Lydia Saad), May 5–8, 2011, and the website for the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life at www.pewforum.org.

It must also press beyond a narrow provincialism and connect the North American cultural milieu with the rest of the world in which it is completely enmeshed. Most of all, this spirituality must offer liberating hope to those who find themselves trapped inside the walls of power and privilege. It must also challenge to conversion those who do not yet know they are imprisoned. Finally, Christians united in their desire to imitate Christ, struggling together against injustice, poverty, war, and for the greater good of all, can help to fill the deep void at the heart of US culture.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What preconceptions come to mind when you hear the word *conversion*? Are these preconceptions positive or negative? Are you familiar with conversion as a religious concept? Explain.
2. Is there a prevailing understanding of what constitutes goodness in the United States? Do you agree with the chapter's premise that many people have an understanding of good that is rooted in an inadequate value system? Why or why not?
3. What unjust social, political, or economic conditions are present in your local community or your state? How do these unjust structures affect you? Do you benefit from any unjust social, political, or economic structures?
4. Identify the most valuable and most problematic aspects of US culture?
5. Identify any aspects of the North American cultural milieu that may have you "walled in" or "walled off" from seeing the world as it truly is.

FOR FURTHER READING

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