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Daniel Castillo, An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Ecology -Review

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Daniel P. Castillo. *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Ecology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019. 227 pp. \$40.00 Paper. ISBN 9781626983212.

In proposing an ecological theology of liberation, Castillo begins with the question: “What is the relationship between salvation, liberation, and the care for creation?” (38). In posing this question, he takes the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez as a guide for his argument, which draws into dialogue theology, biblical exegesis, political ecology, economics, and history. He seeks to promote an understanding of God that centers the preferential options for both the earth and the poor and encourages ecologically liberative praxis.

This award-winning book (receiving kudos from the College Theology Society and Catholic Press Association) is impressively researched, well written, and carefully structured. Castillo draws deftly from a range of disciplines to articulate a theological vision that is comprehensive and scripturally grounded.

The book is divided into three parts: “Structuring Eco-Liberationist Discourse,” an exposition of Castillo’s aims and methodological commitments with grounding in the integralist tradition of Catholic theology as articulated by Gutiérrez and Pope Francis; “Interpreting the Word of God,” an eco-liberationist interpretation of salvation history that develops the symbol of the gardener to represent Christian discipleship; and “Christian Praxis in a Globalizing World,” an analysis of the relationship between globalization and the planetary emergency, and, in response, a proposal for Christian eco-liberationist praxis.

While there is so much to commend Castillo’s work, I struggle with what I perceive as a tension between his form and his message. In a footnote, Castillo describes his own exegetical work as a “grand narrative” (110). In a sense, this is fitting: Castillo proposes a tripartite

communion with God, humanity, and the earth as an imperative for all Christians, and his review of scripture grounds this claim in the biblical texts.

At the heart of the liberation theology tradition, however, is a profound concern for context. Is it possible to articulate *an* ecological theology of liberation to encompass the entire planet? Castillo, it seems, would say, yes, the tripartite obligations of right relations are universal. I am not so sure. By proposing a grand narrative, Castillo is obligated to reject or omit those things that threaten the internal consistency of the narrative.

Castillo's biblical reading is strong, creative, and often inspiring, but I missed an acknowledgment of the fact that communities bring particular concerns to the scriptures. After a brief mention of the contextual nature of theological discourse in the introduction, it is in the concluding chapter on praxis that Castillo returns to the importance of context and foregrounds the needs of the community as central to shaping an ecologically liberative praxis. In this chapter, he advocates openness and flexibility as he rightly notes that the messiness of "biotic existence does not allow for an unambiguous praxis" (192). Later, he suggests that the cultivation of humility de-absolutizes any single path (206). These insights on praxis might helpfully be brought to his exegetical work.

To choose an example, in his detailed analysis of the Joseph story in Genesis, Castillo sees Joseph as a righteous figure throughout. While noting that other interpreters are troubled by Joseph's treatment of the Egyptians during the famine (demanding their livestock, land, and bodies in servitude in exchange for food), Castillo explains that these scholars have simply missed the mark (124). While Castillo provides a reading that is cogent and helpful in the broader exegesis he is elaborating, his move to dismiss any alternative readings seems troubling.

I am unwilling to accept any one interpretive strategy—however skillful it may be—as correct, definitive, or most appropriate for the purpose of ecological liberation.

Similarly, Castillo recognizes the value of the important critiques offered by Delores Williams in the discussion of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, and by Tink Tinker with respect to the destruction of the Canaanites (89, 110). He acknowledges that these perspectives disrupt modes of Christian exegesis that historically and presently cause great harm to vulnerable populations. Going further, he recognizes that they ought to call his own exegetical efforts into question, but he stops there, relegating these scholars to the footnotes rather than risking complexity and messiness. For the sake of his narrative, Castillo sacrifices these “outliers” at precisely the moment when their insight is most needed, leaving his ecological theology of liberation without their wisdom.

Although Castillo carefully connects the technocratic paradigm, market society, ecological debt, and racism, the problem of sexism is conspicuously absent. (In fact, the word “sexism” never appears in this text.) In the concluding chapter, Castillo belatedly adds misogyny into the list of social ills that are part of the 500-year colonial and neo-colonial project, but it does not receive sustained attention. Given the depth of Castillo’s economic analysis, his emphasis on the growing gap between the hyper-wealthy global elite and the rest of humanity, and his incisive critique of the obfuscating buzzwords and phrases—including *sustainable development*—favored by the United Nations and the World Bank, I was surprised that the feminization of poverty was never addressed despite its close connection to ecological harms suffered by vulnerable communities.

Despite these criticisms, I find Castillo’s impressively well-researched book to be an important contribution to the field. While the book is crafted for a Catholic audience, Castillo’s

deep engagement with sources across a wide range of disciplines make it a valuable tool for any specialist interested in eco-theology. I look forward to continuing to engage with this text and reading more from Castillo in the future.

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