Princeton Theological Seminary and the Birth of Liberation Theology[1]

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RESUMO

Há quase cinquenta anos, Rubem Alves apresentou sua tese de doutoramento "Towards a Theology of Liberation: An Exploration of the Encounter Between the Languages of Humanistic Messianism and Messianic Humanism" no Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS). Publicada como **A Theology of Human Hope** (1969), sua obra foi a primeira a utilizar o termo "Teologia da Libertação", e teve grande influência no florescimento da teologia latino-americana na última parte do século XX. A tese não é apenas parte de uma longa ligação histórica do PTS com a Teologia da Libertação. À luz da contribuição inovadora da obra de Alves, este ensaio apresenta primeiro o papel do Princeton Theological Seminary como um dos lugares do nascimento da Teologia da Libertação; segundo, investiga o conteúdo e significado da teologia de Rubem Alves.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Rubem Alves. Princeton Theological Seminary. Teologia da Libertação.

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ABSTRACT

Almost fifty years ago, Rubem Alves presented his doctoral dissertation "Towards a Theology of Liberation: An Exploration of the Encounter Between the Languages of Humanistic Messianism and Messianic Humanism" at Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS). Later published as *A Theology of Human Hope*, Alves' work was the first to use the term "Theology of Liberation" and provided some basic impetus for the late 20th century flourishing of Latin American theology. Alves' dissertation, however, is only a single part of a nearly century-long story linking PTS to the birth of Liberation Theology. It is, however, a greatly misunderstood story. In light of Alves' innovative contribution, this essay attempts two things: first, I will tell the story of PTS' role as one of the birth places of Liberation Theology in the United States, and second, I will investigate the content and meaning of Alves' theology.

KEYWORDS

Rubem Alves. Princeton Theological Seminary. Liberation Theology.

Almost fifty years ago, Rubem Alves presented his doctoral dissertation "Towards a Theology of Liberation: An Exploration of the Encounter Between the Languages of Humanistic Messianism and Messianic Humanism" at Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS)[3]. Later published as *A Theology of Human Hope*[4], Alves' work was the first to use the term "Theology of Liberation"[5] and provided some basic impetus for the late

[3] ALVES, Rubem. 'Towards a Theology of Liberation: An Exploration of the Encounter Between the Languages of Humanistic Messianism and Messianic Humanism' (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1968).

[4] ALVES, Rubem. *A Theology of Human Hope* (Washington: Corpus, 1969). Its Portuguese translation, *Da esperança* (Campinas: Papirus, 1987) was published eighteen years after the English original due to self-censorship because of political problems during the time of the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1985).

[5] At roughly the same time, Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino was working on a similar project, which was first published in Peru as *Teología de la liberación: perspectivas* (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1971). The book derived from a conference given at Chimbote, Peru, in 1968 entitled *Hacia una teología de la liberación* and from a "prophetic commission" on the part of the writer José María Arguedas.

20th century flourishing of Latin American theology. Alves' dissertation, however, is only a single part of a nearly century-long story linking PTS to the birth of Liberation Theology. It is, however, a greatly misunderstood story. In light of Alves' innovative contribution, this essay attempts two things: first, I will tell the story of PTS' role as one of the birth places of Liberation Theology in the United States[6], and second, I will investigate the content and meaning of Alves' theology.

1. Princeton Theological Seminary's Role

Alves' contribution to the emergence of Liberation Theology has its origin in the year 1915, when John Alexander Mackay graduated from PTS and then traveled to Spain to study with Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo[7]. The trip to Spain marked the beginning of Mackay's life-long interest in Ibero -American culture, and it prompted him to travel to South America, particularly to Peru, as a missionary and educator. It also prompted him later in his life to return to PTS as Professor of Ecumenics. He created this chair, which was the first position of its kind in American territory. He eventually left this position to become President of PTS from 1936 to 1959.

In 1933, Mackay published *The Other Spanish Christ: A Study in the Spiritual History of Spain and South America*[8], which was "a book of seminal significance in the history of Protestant thought and mission in Latin America"[9]. This book, as Luis Rivera Pagán points out, has been

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In this article the terms Liberation Theology and Theology of Liberation are used indistinctively, although in Portuguese and Spanish there is a semantic difference. Liberation Theology, related to *Teologia libertadora*, can be a characteristic of any theology, while Theology of Liberation, related to *Teologia da libertação/Teologia de la liberación*, is a school of theological thought.

6 Union Theological Seminary, NY, could also be considered a birth place.

7 Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo was known as a Kierkegaardian existencialist. 'Memorial Minute: John Alexander Mackay 1889-1983', *Theology Today* 40:4 (January, 1984), p. 453.

8 John A. Mackay, *The Other Spanish Christ: A Study in the Spiritual History of Spain and South America* (New York: MacMillan, 1933).

9 RIVERA PAGÁN, Luis N. 'Theology and Literature in Latin America: John A. Mackay and *The Other Spanish Christ*', *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 7:4 (May 2000), 7. This article is a modified version of the John Alexander Mackay

criticized for "conflating too easily and without necessary caveats Spanish and Latin American cultures and spirituality," for presenting a "rather naïve understanding of the Spanish and Latin American political situations," for being "unable to decipher the hidden strength of popular Catholicism," and for not making clear "how the Protestant understanding and conception of the Christian gospel might be enriched and transformed by its incarnation in the Latin American spiritual milieu with its fascinating intertwine of autochthonous, Iberian and African cultures"[10]. Yet, as Rivera Pagán explains, the same book was the first to signal "a new era in which Protestantism was understood to be a legitimate part of the Latin American religious landscape"[11]. Specifically, it pointed to "a liberation from the straitjacket of an official state church [Roman Catholic] that allowed only one way of relating to the transcendent and the sacred" while also reclaiming "strong undercurrents of spiritual vitality" in Spanish and Latin American cultures[12]. Furthermore, in the ninth and tenth chapters of his book, Mackay focuses on new spiritual currents in South America and the quest of a "new way." This "new way" is represented not only by religious movements but also by religious thinkers and writers who express their views through literature and literary language. Even though Mackay himself did not move in this direction in this work, this book planted seeds that bore fruit three decades later. That is to say, after Mackay, Latin American literature drew more and more international acclaim. This was especially true of the "Magic Realism" which developed side by side with Liberation Theology in the late 1960s.

In the early 1950s, Reformed theological education in Brazil still copied the North American Puritan model brought to the country by American missionaries influenced by Charles Hodge and Augustus Strong. It was into this context that Richard Shaull, the scholar who would become

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Visiting Professor in World Christianity Conference lecture delivered at PTS in February 2000 and published as 'Myth, Utopia, and Faith: Theology and Culture in Latin America', *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 21:2 (2000), 142-160. Here I am using the version published in the *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology.*

[10] RIVERA PAGÁN, 'Theology and Literature in Latin America', p. 8-9.

[11] RIVERA PAGÁN, 'Theology and Literature in Latin America', p. 9.

[12] RIVERA PAGÁN, 'Theology and Literature in Latin America', p. 10-12.

Alves' dissertation advisor at PTS, arrived in Brazil in 1952 to teach theology at the Presbyterian Seminary in Campinas. According to Leopoldo Cervantes-Ortiz, Shaull wanted to reclaim and renew theological thinking[13] by stressing the works of John Calvin, Martin Luther, Karl Barth, and particularly Dietrich Bonhoeffer[14]. By prompting a fresh look at these more traditional Western resources, Shaull helped stimulate the thinking of a new generation of Presbyterian thinkers in Brazil, and it provided new insights for his students as they engaged with the world around them and constructed their own approach to contemporary theology.

A decade later, this new generation had had to cope with the consequences of the Cold War and major conflicts in Asia, and many of them turned to what was known as a "counter-culture" movement[15]. Although Alves was not active in this movement, he reflected its spirit and was attentive to the signs of his own time – a time that included dictatorships, political and ecclesial persecution, and gross differences of social classes. Indeed, he confesses to being part of a "frustrated generation," and he says that "it is out of this experience that [he] thinks and speaks"[16]. This frustration was combined with reflection upon the

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[13] CERVANTES-ORTIZ, Leopoldo. *Series de Sueños: La teología ludo-erótico-poética de Rubem Alves* (Quito: Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias, 2003), p. 46-48.

[14] MELANO, Beatriz. 'The Influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Lehmann, and Richard Shaull in Latin America', *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 22:1 (2001), p. 64-84. This article presents a detailed account of how Paul Lehmann was influenced by Bonhoeffer during their time at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Later, Lehmann influenced Richard Shaull, who in turn taught the principles of Contextualized Theology and Ethics in Brazil.

[15] Glen B. Peterson describes this movement: "Counter-culture refused to accept reality; instead it sought utopia. The counter-culture somehow remained hopeful for the necessary length of time." See "Paradigms of Hope: A Comparison of Ernst Bloch and Rubem Alves" (M. A. thesis, McGill University, 1974), p. 2.

[16] ALVES, Rubem. *Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 182. Later in the text he explains that the frustration is a consequence of unfulfilled dreams of peace and prosperity that followed the end of World War II. "The cold war, the insanity of the arms race, political and economic imperialism, the growing gap between rich and poor nations, the realities of hunger, exploitation, and oppression – all proclaimed the sickness of our civilization. It became obvious that the world needed a radical transformation. Out of this vision revolutionary hopes and movements were born. Christians discovered a new meaning of faith. Again hopes were followed by frustration. Voices from the

thought of various figures, including Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ernst Bloch, Émile Durkheim and Karl Mannheim. These thinkers provided fuel for Alves' reflection upon his context and how best to approach it. Using these resources as his stimulus, he proposed a paradigm of home that was, with some adjustment, relevant to almost any political context in the world. The influence of Shaull, the spirit of the counter-culture, his philosophical-sociological readings, and his intense concern for the suffering of people, all combined to prompt the development of a paradigm of hope that would become a life-long project for Alves. This paradigm took different forms throughout his life. At first, his project centered on the question of *hope* within a Theology of Liberation, but later, the project moved beyond politics into theopoetics, a method in which Alves employed personal experience and societal myths to address the topic of hope. Both approaches, however, promote the freedom of humankind by means of encouraging utopian dreams.

2. Alves' Development

It will be helpful at this point to provide a more specific background to Rubem Azevedo Alves' life and work. He was born on September 15, 1933 in a small mountain village in Brazil named "(Nossa Senhora das) Dores da Boa Esperança, which translates literally as "(Our Lady of the) Pains of the Good Hope." Even though Alves claims no direct relationship between the name of his birthplace and his theology, hope has functioned as perhaps the most important theme of his work during his career[17]:

> Hope is a beautiful thing, one that I love. But hope lives in subjectivity, it is something internal. And this was not enough for me. I did not want to keep on only having hope. I wanted to be able to

past had already warned us that there was something wrong in the naïve identification of revolution with liberation." See p. 183-184.

[17] As explained in an informal interview to me held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on June 15, 2006.

> perceive the signs of its possible fulfillment, in the lives of individuals and of peoples[18].

Religion was a constant in his life as a child. When he was eleven years old, Alves' family moved to Rio de Janeiro to find employment. As a country boy living in a large city, it was religion that provided him the strength to cope with the impact of the change and his loss of identity. Indeed, as Alves explains, his religious life provided a refuge for him and gave his life meaning. "I became a fundamentalist," he explains, "a pious fundamentalist. Fundamentalism is a mental attitude that attributes a permanent character to its own beliefs. The really important aspect is not *what* the fundamentalist says, but *how* he says[19].

It was as a fundamentalist that he studied at the Seminário Presbiteriano do Sul, in Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil. According to Cervantes -Ortiz, this period should be seen as the "first-phase" of his work, one that ranges from 1956 to 1963[20]. This "first-phase" most often is used to describe the period of Alves' theological formation, and only a few texts were produced this time. These texts are characterized by careful theological affirmations that reveal a negative approach to the unjust colonial societal order. They also demonstrate Alves' anguish at the fact that Latin American Protestants remained at the margins of the most important social and political questions of the time because of their tendency to see these questions merely as "worldly" problems. Alves argues in these early texts for the necessity of a radical yet provisional renewal of social structures through the action of God, and he believes that this renewal should be engendered both through spiritual and concrete means.

Richard Shaull influenced Alves at the Seminário Presbiteriano do Sul by introducing him both to the ideas of the Social Gospel and to the

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[18] Rubem Alves, 'Sobre deuses e caquis'*, Comunicações do ISER* 7.32 (1988), 29. This article was also published as the preface of the Portuguese edition of *A Theology of Human Hope* but never appeared in English.

[19] ALVES, Rubem. 'Dal paradiso al deserto: riflessioni autobiografiche', in Rosino Gibellini, ed., *La nuova frontiera della teologia en America Latina,* 2nd. ed. (Brescia: Queriniana, 1991), p. 415. Italics in the original.

[20] CERVANTES-ORTIZ, *Series de sueños*, p. 34-38. The chronology is presented here with slight year changes for clarity in relation to the purpose of this article.

writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is here that the seeds of the Theology of Liberation were planted. Alves says:

> The new vision of our space, of our time and of our existence, revealed a Bible that had been until now hidden to our eyes. From the beginning to the end, the Bible is a constant celebration of life and goodness. It is good to be alive, it is good to be flesh and blood, it is good to be in the world. Suddenly, the Calvinist obsession with the glory of God seemed to us deeply inhuman and anti-biblical. Couldn't happiness of human beings be the only concern of God? Isn't this His final wish? Couldn't God be a humanist, in the sense that humanity is God's sole object of love?[21]

After graduating from the seminary, Alves worked for six years as a parish minister of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil in Lavras, Minas Gerais. Following this ministry, the second phase of his work began, taking place between the years 1963 and 1971. These years are connected to his three visits in America: first, as a candidate for the degree of Master in Sacred Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York (1963-64); second, as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Theology at PTS (1964-68); and finally as a visiting lecturer at Union Theological Seminary in New York (1971). The main characteristics of this second period are his work to develop a *prise de conscience* about the political situation in Brazil and the world and his suggestions about what theology can offer to help promote change in these regions.

During this period, he wrote his Master of Sacred Theology thesis, "A Theological Interpretation of the Meaning of the Revolution in Brazil"[22], and it revealed the regional concerns that would be amplified later on in his doctoral dissertation. As he completed this master's degree, however, a military *coup d'état* deposed the president of Brazil and established a military dictatorship – one that would last until 1985. This change prompted a shift in Alves' perspective. That is, while Alves' first stay in the United States was purely that of a student, his second stay

[21] ALVES, 'Dal paradiso', p. 418.

[22] ALVES, Rubem. 'A Theological Interpretation of the Meaning of the Revolution in Brazil' (S. T. M. Thesis, Union Theological Seminary, NY, 1964).

was that of an *exiled* student. He explains that he had already completed his master's thesis and had been hoping to return to Brazil before the *coup* occurred. While the events gave him pause, he decided to return home anyway. Upon arrival, however, he was warned by friends that the Supreme Council of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil had released a document to the Police denouncing six pastors, including Alves, for preaching Marxist theology. Alves knew that this action meant in practice a *carte blanche* for political persecution against him. Considering both his and his family's safety, Alves accepted an offer arranged through friends from the United Presbyterian Church – USA[23], and from President James McCord of PTS, to return to safe American soil and pursue a doctorate[24]. Through this action, PTS once again became the nurturer of the nascent Liberation Theology.

Alves' dissertation published as *A Theology of Human Hope*[25] one year after the defense at PTS in the spring of 1968, enjoyed wide acclaim. The same cannot be said, however, about the dissertation itself, which barely received a passing grade[26]. Even though it had support from the Dissertation Committee (Richard Shaull, Diogenes Allen, and Charles West), his defense was tense, encountering difficulties among the faculty. The reception of the book, however, demonstrates that Alves' work was in tune within the context in Latin America at the time[27].

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[23] This is a predecessor to what today is the Presbyterian Church (USA).

[24] ALVES, 'Sobre deuses e caquis', p. 18-23; and ARAÚJO, João Dias de. *Inquisição sem fogueiras: Vinte anos de História da Igreja Presbiteriana do Brasil:* 1954-1974 (São Paulo: Instituto Superior de Estudos da Religião, 1976), p. 63-73. This work reveals how the Presbyterian Church of Brazil supported the political persecution enforced by the military government.

[25] In an interview, Alves explained that the change in the title was proposed by the Roman Catholic editor in order to make the book more marketable. Not only is there an obvious allusion to Jürgen Moltmann's work *Theologie der Hoffnung: Untersuchungen zur Begründung und zu den Konsequenzen einer christlichen Eschatologie*, first published in 1964, but also the term "liberation" was considered to be too Marxist at that time.

[26] ALVES, 'Sobre deuses e caquis', p. 41. This story was verbally confirmed in an interview.

[27] The year 1968 was a rich one for controversial and revolutionary movements, among which one might include the Cold War, the Prague Spring, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Act, and the French movement during the month of May.

After his graduation from PTS, and in spite of persistently dangerous political circumstances, Alves returned to Brazil. Soon after his return, he was invited to lecture at Union Theological Seminary on a permanent basis in Reinhold Niebuhr's chair, but he decided to accept only a year -long position as visiting lecturer instead. It was during this year that he wrote his second book, *Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture.* The content of this book follows the path set forth in *Theology of Hope,* but it also reveals Alves' attempt to find a new way of expressing his ideas. His message comes through in a more free and poetic style than in his earlier work, and it reveals the characteristics that would flourish more prominently a decade later.

In 1970, in Piriápolis, Uruguay, Alves participated in one of the first ecumenical conferences on Liberation Theology, but he did not participate in the encounters that took place in August 1970 and June 1971 in Buenos Aires. The 1971 conference was the origin of a book that contained one of the first discussions about Liberation Theology[28]. Instead, Alves was publishing independently, with the movement ISAL – *Iglesia y Sociedad en América Latina*[29]. Alves' distance from the other Liberation

[28] ASSMANN, Hugo *et alii*, *Pueblo Oprimido, Señor de la Historia* (Montevideo: Tierra Nueva, 1972).

[29] ALVES, Rubem. 'God's People and Man's Liberation', *ISAL Abstracts*, 3:26, [1970], p. 7-12. I mention this article because in it, Alves clearly summarizes his project at the time. He explains: "Man needs a model so that his world may be meaningful not only in the sphere of civilization, of discovery, of the structure of his physical universe, but in that of culture, that is to say in the building of a significative order. We come here to the central point of the crisis which we are actually living through. While the operative theoretical models within the sphere of civilization become more precise and efficient, in the field of culture there occurs exactly the opposite: the models that were used in the past with a dogmatic assurance are today in collapse. And therefore man is lacking the theoretical resources which may guide his activity." Then, after explaining why he sees the organicist model of social dynamics inspired by Aristotelism and supported by Christian theology in collapse, and the revolutionary model as but an incomplete assessment of the faulty functional structures of society, he proposes a model based on the idea of approaching God's Kingdom as a utopia of community. ISAL functioned from 1961 to 1972 as a forum of theological reflection seeking the reformation of society, first within the framework of liberal idealism and later within a language of revolution, particularly in the crossroads between Marxism and readings of the Exodus: humankind was perceived as collaborating actively in what God is supposed to be doing in the world.

Theologians of the time reveals the first sign of his disagreement with other streams of Latin American Christianity, especially those associated with Roman Catholicism, that were discussing some of the same issues. Specifically, he was uncomfortable with the "solemnity" of the expression that characterized much of this new Liberation Theology, and he worried that it was written in the style of traditional theological language[30].

As a result of these disagreements, Alves blazed his own theological path in the years 1972 through 1975, and though faithful to his previous ideals, he began to express them with a poetic flourish and creative freedom that had not been seen before. Cervantes-Ortiz explains that this shift marks,

> … the emergence of a new theology, even though it is not classified as such anymore. It is a new way to experiment with God, the world, faith, humanity, society. Liberating theology? Certainly, but with a wider approach, more eclectic, more inclusive, *more playful* than the liberation theologies, almost all solemn[31].

This period of Alves' work is also marked by his increasing disillusionment with both the church and the political establishment, and it also is marked by Alves' continuing attempts to find new forms to express his theological ideas. During this period, Alves began to distance himself more and more from traditional theological language, and he replaced it with a new, often surprising, poetic language. This shift in form does not mean that his content changed, however, as the transformation of society remained his driving concern. Indeed, it was this content that put him on a collision course with the most prominent thinkers in Latin American Protestantism. While Protestantism as a whole had provided some benefit in Latin America by encouraging literacy and engaging in some forms of subversion of the established cultural order, its theology

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[30] The dominance of Roman Catholic theologians in the Liberation movement is not surprising, since the changes prompted by the Second Vatican Council meant that these new ideas found a more fertile soil than could be found in Protestant theology. Indeed, many Latin American Protestant thinkers were more engaged in maintaining the social and political order than in changing it.

[31] CERVANTES-ORTIZ. *Series de Sueños,* p. 37. Original italics.

failed to promote an active social change in society. That is, Protestant theology tended to emphasize individual salvation at the expense of real and physical political change[32]. Alves, for his part, wanted theology to assist in the production of concrete changes for the people of his nation and culture. As a result, while he did not abandon the discipline of theology altogether, Alves started to explore other areas of inquiry, including the role of science and education in cultural formation and the usage of symbolic and poetic elements. A few works from the period after 1975 provide evidence of Alves' transformation during this period. For example, the book *Protestantismo e Repressão* (1979)[33] reveals that Alves' concern has shifted from the liberation of the poor as a class to a more personal liberation, and this is a change that leads him to focus on aesthetics rather than social ethics. Further shifts are revealed in his focus on the "theology of the body" in his 1982 publication, *Creio na ressureição do corpo*[34]. This shift became more pronounced with the publication of the article "Sobre deuses e caquis" in 1987, a piece that provides an overview of his intellectual development up to that point. It is at this point that the third phase of his career truly began.

3. Liberation: The Dissertation and Beyond

With the context and development of his thought in view, we can now turn to an analysis of Alves' work. Put simply, the central question of Alves' dissertation is, "What does it take to make and to keep human life human in the world?"[35] Alves seeks an answer by exploring various theological and sociological schools of thought and testing whether they can provide a reasonable response. Alves asserts that his main objective is "to humanize the newly awakened consciousness of political

[32] CERVANTES-ORTIZ, *Series de Sueños,* p. 36.

[33] ALVES, Rubem. *Protestantismo e repressão* (São Paulo: Ática, 1979).

[34] ALVES, Rubem. *Creio na ressurreição do corpo: meditações*. Rio de Janeiro: CEDI, 1982.

[35] This framing question evinces the influence of Paul Lehmann, who was teaching at Union Seminary when Alves was studying there in 1963/4. Cf. LEHMAN, Paul. *Ethics in a Christian Context*. New York: Harper and Row, 1963.

humanism"[36]. This consciousness, in turn, finds expression with a new language that stands in accord with a new experience and self-understanding, one that provides a different approach to human community. This new community is called "world proletariat," and it is a community that disregards traditional national, economic, social, or racial boundaries[37]. Instead, this community is united by a common understanding of its historical experience, one marked by poverty and an awareness of colonialism, and it seeks its own voice and language as it works to create its own history.

The term "Theology of Liberation," used later mainly in the plural, referring, for instance, to Black, Feminist or Queer theologies, stresses that all ideas, practices, and praxis are judged according to whether or not they promote liberation or transformation of society on behalf of the oppressed. The term "oppressed" refers to a person who is in the position neither to choose nor to master one's own future. This person, in other words, lacks the power to critique, intervene in, or sometimes even to understand the historical processes in which he or she is inserted. This person is often unable to express his or her suffering and, for this reason, Alves engages in a discussion about language and its purpose.

Alves rejects the language of technologism, which he describes as "a form of consciousness that regards technology as the way to the future, and which cites the wonders of technology as proof of its conviction"[38], because he views it as a language of political humanism. Among the reasons for his rejection of this kind of language is his argument that a shift often occurs in this kind of language, such that, instead of humankind using technology, technology incorporates and molds humankind according to its own system. As a consequence, humankind loses its capacity to think and act critically, and the result is a new form of colonialism. On this point, Glen Peterson explains that for Alves "the totalitarian technological system and the messianic pretensions of its language stand in direct opposition to the liberation and humanization sought by the man who refuses to give up the creation of history for the consumption of

[36] PETERSON, "Paradigms of Hope," p. 31.
[37] ALVES, *Theology of Human Hope*, p. 6.
[38] ALVES, *Theology of Human Hope*, p. 17.

goods."[39] For his part, Alves is careful to point out that "political humanism does not want to destroy technology but rather humanize it; [that] means that it must remain as a tool at the service of free subjects"[40].

He also rejects theological language as a language of political humanism. He explains: "the man who is the object of history, the being that fits in, that adapts to the given facts, is the man who loses his transcendence. He is submerged into the world and therefore loses his power to criticize and to re-create it"[41]. For Alves, theological language refers to transcendence as something "up" and "out," and therefore, it "does not understand transcendence as a reality in the midst of life"[42]. It separates the present time from eternity, and as a result, it "becomes a truth higher than, above, and beyond history"[43]. Consequently, God becomes an entity that limits human freedom, and as such, God becomes anti-human and causes suffering. This was the God who was seen as compensatory entity for humankind's suffering by Feuerbach and whose death was welcomed by Nietzsche. Alves explains, however, that for both thinkers, "the result is the same, since God does not allow man to overcome his misery, either because he causes it or because he reconciles man with it, by giving him the hope of a transcendent, meta-historical liberation"[44].

The third kind of language that Alves rejects is the existentialism of Søren Kierkegaard and Rudolf Bultmann. Alves gives three reasons for this rejection. First, existentialism negates the world as home, leaving humanity in a Kafka-like prison; second, it reduces hope to a dimension of subjectivity without a hope for concrete transformation of the world; and third, "it divides the world of freedom from the world of time and space making man's action powerless to create a new tomorrow"[45]. Alves' rejection rests both on the assumption that political humanism negates the present, and in particular the dehumanizing present, in favor of a better tomorrow and on the notion that human beings can act and make history.

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[39] PETERSON, "Paradigms of Hope," p. 33.
[40] ALVES, *Theology of Human Hope*, p. 27.
[41] ALVES, *Theology of Human Hope*, p. 28.
[42] ALVES, *Theology of Human Hope*, p. 29.
[43] ALVES, *Theology of Human Hope*, p. 29.
[44] ALEVES, *Theology of Human Hope*, p. 32.
[45] PETERSON, "Paradigms of Hope," p. 34.

Alves ends his exploration of theological language with an examination of the work of Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann, both of whom he also rejects as paradigms for the language of humanization. Among the many arguments Alves presents about Barth, the most important is his contention that Barth's view of transcendence leaves no room for the creation of a new tomorrow by humankind, and thus, no room for a historical future[46]. It is, Alves contends, as if Barth makes the future the past and real time not historical but metaphysical. As for Moltmann, Alves believes that he leaves no room for transcendence in the presence. He argues that in Moltmann's analysis of the biblical community of faith, the Church alone mediates the fact of the resurrection through its preaching, and thus it is the one that creates the only true history. Alves rejects this view, claiming that the Church is not some sort of midwife that gives light to the future. He also argues that it is not true that whenever the Word is not preached, there is no history; on the contrary, he argues, history exists in spite of the lack of the Word preached[47].

After dismissing these various types of theological language, Alves moves in a more positive and constructive direction. He offers two possible alternatives to the rejected views: the language of Humanistic Messianism or the language of Messianic Humanism. In Humanistic Messianism, humanization is a task of humankind. That is, this view places all its hope for creating a new future in the hands of humanity itself. Alves, utilizing the thought of Karl Marx, explains that "mankind always sets itself only such problems as it can solve; for when we look closer we will always find that the problem itself only arises when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the process of coming to being"[48]. Following this idea, humankind's openness to the future acts as an indicator that the future, in turn, is open to humankind: "the emergence of the 'ought' coincides with the subjective and objective possibility of the 'can'"[49]. Alves points out that this language

[46] ALVES, *Theology of Human Hope*, p. 54-55.
[47] ALVES, *Theology of Human Hope*, p. 67-68.
[48] MARX, Karl. 'Preface to a Contribution to the Karl Marx Critique of Political Economy,' in Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1961), p. 218.
[49] ALVES, *Theology of Human Hope*, p. 86.

has questionable abilities to be both historical and optimistic, because it easily falls prey to either becoming overly optimistic romanticism or becoming overly faithful to history. As a consequence, he concludes, optimism may lose hope and give rise to frustration.

In Messianic Humanism on the other hand, "the politics for a new tomorrow cannot be assessed by a simple statistical or quantitative evaluation of the human resources and of the power of resistance of the existing structures of domination"[50]. Instead, it is based upon historical experience, meaning that this view "places its hope for deliverance in a power occurring in history from beyond history which refuses to abandon history"[51]. History, in short, is the medium through which God and humankind cooperate to create a future. Alves suggests that imbedded in the term "humankind," there is to be found what he calls the "People of God." This term cannot be confined to Christians alone, but rather, it includes those who lost freedom at the hands of ruling power elites. These members of the "People of God" not only have the loss of freedom in common, but they also share a love for the Kingdom and for the neighbor. Using the Exodus and Gospel accounts as his basis, Alves concludes that the language of Messianic Humanism is the appropriate path, and ethics is what fuels motion in this path. He cautions, however, that "the Bible cannot be used to form a theology of revolution. It only points toward an eschatology. For now, not revolution, but the establishment of positive communities expressive of the utopia of the kingdom must be the goal"[52].

Many of Alves' ideas in his dissertation have their origins in Marxism, although he does not adopt these ideas uncritically. Indeed, he argues that Marxists are so focused on the future that they are disconnected with the present reality. To develop this point, he uses an interesting image that would be constant in subsequent works when he claims that Marxist revolutionaries refuse the *apéritif,* thinking only about the *pièce de résistance.* Alves explains further:

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[50] ALVES, *Theology of Human Hope*, p. 87.
[51] PETERSON, "Paradigms of Hope," p. 81.
[52] PETERSON, "Paradigms of Hope," p. 39.

> In the context of the God's messianic politics of liberation the erotic sense of life exists only as it keeps man open for a new future. Life is there, to be eaten, but man is to eat it with bitter herbs, with his loins girt, his sandals on his feet, and he shall eat it in haste (Exodus 12:8-11). The bitter taste of suffering can never be eliminated from the *apéritif,* so that man will never settle for it[53].

The dialectic thus is not between a total negation of the present and a totally positive vision of the future. It is the good of the present *apéritif,* one that allows the human to a taste for life and a longing for a new tomorrow of liberation, exemplified in the *pièce de résistence* and, why not, in a *dessert*. Alves concludes by saying that Messianic Humanism is

> committed to the liberation of the body. It starts with the body; in the name of the body it negates whatever makes the body suffer, whatever means violence or repression, whatever causes hunger or death. It is for the sake of the body that it hopes for a new tomorrow in which repression will be brought to an end. And it is through the body that it plans to liberate man for the world and the world for man[54].

Alves expands upon this critique in his second work, *Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture,* where he claims that imagination also suffers domestication by technocrats, alienation by dreamers and visionaries, and superfluousness by revolutionaries. Such suffering, he argues, has drastic consequences. The language of a community of faith and its ethics is based on imagination, and by controlling the imagination, the paradigm that projects the future in the present is also controlled. He presents three ways that imagination is controlled: first, "the creation of so many objects of desire that the mind will be kept moving from one to another, without ever being able to move beyond them"[55], second, the elimination of any free pleasure[56]; and third, the idea of the inevitability of humankind's alienation[57]. Within

[53] ALVES, *Theology of Human Hope*, 155. Original italics.
[54] ALVES, *Theology of Human Hope*, p. 152.
[55] ALVES, *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 26.
[56] ALVES, *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 31.
[57] ALVES, *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 34.

the framework of these controls, creativity becomes nearly impossible. As a consequence, people become convinced that the present reality is the only possible approach to life. That is, since imagination belongs to the category of illusion, it needs to be rejected out of hand[58]. This type of thinking, Alves argues, was born with the Enlightenment and developed by Auguste Comte in his *Philosophie Positive,* where religiosity and imagination belong to earlier stages of human development[59].

In an interesting comparison, Alves makes two other legacies of the Enlightenment, Marxism and psychoanalytic theory, into partners. On the one hand, Freudian analysis legitimizes the system by making resistance abnormal; on the other hand, Marxism concludes that since imagination may be an illusion, it is, in fact, an illusion. He argues that since it is not imagination but science that moves history, both the psychoanalyst and the Marxist theories, in their search for that which is realistically functional, discard the dysfunctional by considering it to be negative. Alves concludes that "the system is the measure of everything. The system judges everything, but nothing is qualified to judge it. If a thing [or a person, a thought] has a function it is good, or at least essential. Man is thus a function of the social structure"[60]. He warns that in such an idea, one thing is forgotten: "what is called reality was created by man"[61] *through* his imagination.

In a twist that would be fully developed only years later, Alves introduces the idea of magic as a way to transfer hope into a new reality – a suggestion that stands in opposition to realism, which seeks to cause one to accept fate[62]. Alves is aware that magic in itself does not have power to make a wish real. Magic, however, fuels consciousness, and attaining consciousness means a realization of both the need for freedom and the

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[58] ALVES, *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 43.

[59] A detailed and condensed explanation of his Positive Philosophy, in which religious and theological studies are included under the historical studies of Social Physics, is found in: Auguste Comte, *La Philosophie Positive, tome* II*, résumé Jules Rig* (Paris: J. B. Baillière & Fils, 1881), 176-606. Comte's ideas and method have been strongly criticized by Karl Popper. See his *Logik der Forschung: zur Erkenntnistheorie der modernen Naturwissenschaft* (Wien: Springer, 1935).

[60] ALVES, *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 71.

[61] ALVES, *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 71.

[62] ALVES, *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 74.

need to change into a new being. Alves, inspired by the New Testament, calls this process *metanoia,* which he understands as death of an old being and the resurrection of a new one. This is a process that can occur both in persons and institutions. Peterson, explaining Alves' concept of *metanoia*, says that "it is closely linked with play and imagination" and that it shifts "consciousness from the logic of production and consumption to the consciousness of liberation"[63].

Imagination fuels pleasure by allowing play even with a subversion of established rules[64] and as a result, new solutions for situations in life can be found. Imagination also forms a utopian image of the future. It is in the forming of the idea of a future transformed by hope that possible changes may be attempted[65]. Humankind can then "be liberated from determinism of material forces, which create the compulsion of avoidance behavior, and say no to any solution of the problem of suffering"[66]. For this reason, magic rituals, play, and utopian dreams should not considered symptoms of sickness as much as they might be seen as values that are not seen as functional, pragmatic, or real by Western civilization[67]. Alves prefers life be judged not by the way it fits into the social system or as a function of the structures of social organization; rather, he seeks to follow the example of Jesus, who was "a master in the art of subverting the rules of sanity and insanity"[68]. He seeks, in other words, to imagine the birth of a new culture. Since the world is not yet complete because God is still exercising creative powers, the present time of captivity is not a time of birth but a time of the conception of a community of faith.

It is important to bear in mind that when Alves refers to the concept of "play" he does not mean "mere diversion," because, as Gordon Graham argues, "activity without a purpose need not be pointless"[69]. Play can be serious in the sense that it demands, "solely for its own purposes,

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63 PETERSON, "Paradigms of Hope," p. 44.
64 ALVES, *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 85-87.
65 ALVES, *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 101-103.
66 ALVES, *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 115.
67 ALVES, *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 121.
68 ALVES, *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 131.
69 GRAHAM, Gordon. *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics,* 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 24.

the best temperaments and the finest skills of which human beings are capable"[70]. Following an argument for explaining art proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer[71], Graham explains that "art is a kind of play in which artist and audience join"[72] in the challenge to propose and discern meaning behind a work, a meaning conceptualized or explicated in symbolic language. He concludes by saying that the challenge is to realize fully in our own imagination the symbolic constructs of the artist's imagination and, I add, how these symbolic constructs affect each person particularly. The artist's task thus "is to engage the audience in a creative free play of images whereby symbolic representation is realized"[73]. Furthermore, this realization of the symbol is a communal activity, one which requires cooperative activity in which all and any may engage. Literature and theology, because they both deal with symbolic constructions, can certainly be seen from the perspective of play and as symbolic constructions of a possible new perspective.

4. A Critical Dialogue

We cannot provide an extensive critique of Alves' work here. Even so, it will be helpful to mention the main points of a dialogue between Rubem Alves and Thomas Sanders that occurred in the second phase of Alves' work. As summarized by Peterson[74]. Sanders offers a twofold critique of the Theology of Liberation of the type that Alves proposed. First, he argues that Christians, although liberated from sin, remain sinners. As such, they remain "individuals who claim to be liberated [but who] are not as liberated in their practical actions as they may assume"[75]. As a consequence, he argues, history is not "a progressive unfolding of moral

[70] GRAHAM, *Philosophy of the Arts,* p. 25.
[71] GADAMER, Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Die Aktualität des Schönen: Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest', in *Gesammelte Werke* 8: *Ästhetik und Poetik* I (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1993 [1974]), p. 94-142.
[72] GRAHAM, *Philosophy of the Arts,* p. 25.
[73] GRAHAM, *Philosophy of the Arts,* p. 25.
[74] PETERSON, "Paradigms of Hope," p. 48.
[75] PETERSON, "Paradigms of Hope," p. 48.

aspirations but a permanent dialectic between the hopes of mankind and the contradictions that undermine them." Second, Sanders contends that "utopianism gives insufficient consideration to the moral ambiguity that characterizes all forms of social existence"[76]. It is, he says, balanced power rather than goodwill that results in movement toward freedom and justice[77]. Sanders concludes that "some supporters of liberation may become disillusioned over a period of time when they realize that the ongoing problems and limited options open to given nations have not brought them closer to liberation or the Kingdom of God"[78].

Alves responded to Sanders' critique by arguing that Christian utopianism does not seek a perfect society; it presents, rather, an alternative to an imperfect society. As such, he argues, this view "does not claim that it is possible to abolish sin, but it affirms that there is no reason to accept the rule of the sinful structures that control society"[79]. Reality is a human construction, he insists, and therefore, it is liable to change. He warns that "whenever we call a provisional social game built by man reality, we are involved in idolatry [by] giving ultimacy – demonic or divine – to something that is simply human and not destined to eternity"[80]. Finally, he argues that the terms "utopian" and "impossibility" as employed by Sanders are categories used pejoratively and in absolute terms to reflect the system they serve. In actuality, these terms are relative to the systems they seek to transcend by pointing to the limitations of a given society[81]. He explains that Christian utopianism "is based on the vision that all social systems are under God's historical judgment [and that] sooner or later they will die"[82]. For this reason, it is a mistake to take a given social system as the ultimate criterion for what is possible or impossible in history. Indeed, just as biblical stories are full of social surprises and

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[76] PETERSON, "Paradigms of Hope," p. 48.
[77] SANDERS, Thomas G. "The Theology of Liberation: Christian Utopianism," *Christianity and Crisis* 33:15 (September 1973), p. 170.
[78] SANDERS, "The Theology of Liberation," p. 171.
[79] SANDERS, "The Theology of Liberation," p. 171.
[80] SANDERS, "The Theology of Liberation," p. 171.
[81] ALVES, Rubem. "Christian Realism: Ideology of the Establishment," *Christianity and Crisis* 33:15 (September 1973), p. 175.
[82] ALVES, "Christian Realism," p. 175.

transformations, so is the history of humankind. He concludes that "[r]ealism's revolt against utopias is a sign that it participates in the revolt against transcendence that characterizes Western civilization," and that "[u]topianism, on the contrary, believes that somehow, somewhere, God is doing His thing, overthrowing the existing order"[83].

The debate between Alves and Sanders developed further, with Sanders criticizing Latin American theologians for simply working out a particular theology to justify their particular views. To this argument Alves responded that North American theologians have always claimed universality for their theologies and tend to dismiss any other worldview as not having "any bearing on our traditional, scholarly, and detached ways of thinking about the world"[84]. This kind of view, Alves contends, is cultural imperialism at its worst. In addition, he argues that to operate within this framework of North American realism and pragmatism at all, one must abandon morality in much the same way as the North American State has done. Realism and pragmatism are, in short, ideologies that work to maintain the *status quo* of a failing imperial power.

In a somewhat syllogistic line of thought from *Theopoetics: Longing for Liberation*,[85] Alves relates his ideas to the spiritual re-enactment of the Eucharist:

> Communion is a child of love.
> It seems that love shuns too much light.
> Therefore communion, it seems, shuns too much light[86].

As much as an explanation can be attempted, the Eucharist remains a mystery to be enjoyed rather than explained. With this thought, Alves moves "from the classroom [academic language, seeking full explanation of any given issue], where there is light, to the kitchen, [where] the alchemic transformations of the raw are prepared for the delight of the

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[83] ALVES, "Christian Realism," p. 175.
[84] ALVES, "Christian Realism," p. 175.
[85] ALVES, Rubem. "Theopoetics: Longing for Liberation". In: *Struggles for Solidarity: Liberation Theologies in Tension*. Lorine M. Getz, and Ruy O. Costa (eds.). Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992, p. 159-171.
[86] Syllogism built based on Alves' own sentences in ALVES, "Theopoetics," p. 159.

body of the other"[87]. He concludes: "this is the secret of communion: when my body, transformed in words, is given to the other, to be eaten"[88]. Alves adds that "when the other eats eucharistically a piece of my body, we become "companions," in the original sense of the word: those who eat the same bread, that is *cum panis.*"[89] It is this idea of companionship that Alves claims to have understood only with the wisdom of older age, different from younger age, when he preferred "the power of clear and distinct ideas."[90]

He concludes:

> To speak about my body is to speak about the stories that make up its soul. The secret of my flesh is a hidden, forgotten text, which is written in it. We are palimpsests. In bygone times, when writing was done on leather, old texts were scraped off and on top of the apparently clean surface, new ones were written, text upon text…But the marks of the old stories could never be erased. They remained invisible, inside…Today, thanks to science, it is possible to recover them. A good metaphor for what our bodies are…stories that are written, scraped off, forgotten, one after the other. But even the old ones we believe dead remain alive, and once in a while they puncture the smooth surface of our official stories, as dreams, art, as incomprehensible signs/sighs in the flesh, as madness.[91]

Whereas Alves encourages the readers to understand meaning through awe, he also encourages them to go beyond the awe and understand the meaning and consequences that a story of a person or institution has in relation to other persons or institutions. Navigating through the waters of discovery of a particular story can help a person in his or her quest for meaning in life.

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87 ALVES, "Theopoetics," p. 159.
88 ALVES, "Theopoetics," p. 159.
89 The Latin expression *cum panis* literally means "with bread." The expression gave origin to the term *compania* in Vulgar Latin, meaning a group of people that eat bread together, and later it came to refer to people that do something together.
90 ALVES, "Theopoetics," p. 159.
91 ALVES, "Theopoetics," p. 161.

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