Response to Chris Huebner

Absent Peoples, Unaccounted Mothers, and Repressed Knowledges

Néstor Medina

Abstract

The author considers theological virtues from the underside of empire and colonization, where these alleged virtues found concrete expression, and offers three concurrent stories from the Americas to help us "think otherwise" about theological knowledge and virtue: Bartolomé de las Casa, *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1542), writings by the Incan Garcilaso de la Vega (1539-1616), and the *Popol Vuh*, stories of the Quiché Maya people (ca. 1500). These stories expose the epistemological underbelly of colonization. While theological knowledge and virtue were being reflected upon in Europe, an absence of virtue was being inflicted upon Indigenous peoples at the same time.

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this conversation.[1] I was taken by surprise by the invitation because my area of research is liberation theologies, cultural theory, and decolonial debates. After reading Professor Huebner's "Absent Fathers, Invisible Mothers, and the Theological Dance of Knowledge and Love," I realized that there are very few points of connection for cross-fertilization between his work and mine. Although I am familiar with and admire the Mennonite tradition, Huebner's paper deals with an area of study that is foreign to me. I do not have the scholarly familiarity with Shakespeare's works that would enable me to adequately engage some

[1] The author was invited to respond to a public lecture given by Chris Huebner at Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (March 24, 2021). The lecture is published as Chris K. Huebner, "Absent Fathers, Invisible Mothers, and the Theological Dance of Knowledge and Love," in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 39, no. 3 (2021): 192-213. https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review.

of the points he raises. That said, I feel compelled to respond even from a peripheral position because there are some things that I can talk about. Although they may seem to be unrelated, the issues and concerns raised by Huebner have great implications for the issues and concerns I engage in my research, particularly questions about the legacy of Empire.

Huebner invites us to consider his proposal for interpreting theological virtues as epistemological virtues. He uses Hrotsvit of Gandersheim's play *Sapientia*, Shakespeare's play *King Lear*, and Stanley Cavell's philosophical approach to Shakespeare's work to help us consider other ways of thinking about the connection between knowledge and virtue. As I read his proposal, the conspicuous lack of the presence of the mothers in the two plays becomes evident, as they do not play a significant role in the respective sagas. The mothers appear precisely because of their absence. The absence of the fathers is of course also relevant.

In the play *Sapientia [Wisdom]*, the mother is an important character, yet she only appears in a supporting role. We are told that women fell under the influence of Wisdom (the mother), but play focuses attention on the three daughters: Faith, Hope, and Love. The father is the one who remains invisible in this play. The opposite is true in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where the mother is only present by proxy, through the existence of her daughters. The father, however, is hard to miss in the plot. This dynamic of presence and absence helps us think through the *absence* of wisdom and theological virtues as signaling the presence of the kind of "knowledge" that can be acquired, manipulated, and commodified, as Huebner notes. My question is whether the opposite is also true: Does the presence of wisdom and theological virtues necessarily mean the absence of the kind of "knowledge" that can be purchased or acquired as property?

The question of the presence and absence of theological virtues and wisdom as other forms of knowledge is an intriguing one, particularly because theological virtues and wisdom also provide an interpretive frame for living. They are ethical in nature. I want to highlight two points here. First, the ethical component should not be neglected. As someone who works with liberation theology and decolonial debates, I must ask Huebner for the concrete expression of these theological virtues. What do they look like on the ground? How do we move beyond the world of ideas, speculations, and

abstraction?

Huebner anticipates these questions somewhat by engaging Cavell in detail, highlighting the role of emotions, shame, and skepticism as constitutive for interpreting theological virtues as epistemological virtues. However, concreteness does not come until his engagement with Soetgen van der Houte's 1560 letter to her children in which she, while under the yoke of "lovelessness," charges them to base all relationships on the perfect bond of love.

It is at this juncture that I hit a dead end with Huebner's treatment of love. The notion of love (and other virtues, for that matter) remains elusive for me because I do know what this "perfect bond of love" looks like. Huebner reminds us that Soetgen's letter reveals much more than a mere theological commitment to believer's baptism and the consequent violence that Mennonites experienced during the 16th and 17th centuries. But we are left wanting more. Instead, he leaves the question open, and there is obviously much more to think about in relation to the connection between martyrdom and virtue.

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As I reflected on the notion of presence and absence, I could not help but think about the other voices that often do not get accounted for in any way. Let me make some chronological connections between the experiences recounted in Anabaptist and Mennonite stories of suffering and the experiences of Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Three concurrent stories from different contexts invite us to "think otherwise" about the connection between knowledge and virtue. The first story relates to martyrdom: Bartolomé de las Casas's *Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies), which was published in 1542.[2] The book documents the atrocities committed against, and the martyrdom suffered by, the Indigenous peoples of the Americas at the hands of the Spanish post-1492, the year when Christopher Columbus stumbled on Abya Yala, Nepantla, Wisakedjak, and Turtle Island. The Dutch and the

[2] Bartolomé de Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, ed. and trans. Nigel Griffin, intro. by Anthony Padgen (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).

English published De las Casas's accounts under the label *the Black Legend* to discredit the Spanish and to rally the Dutch, and thus reject the hold that the Spanish monarchy had on the Dutch.[3]

Among the atrocities that De las Casas documented is the incident of Hatuey, an indigenous Caribbean *cacique*, a chief who was tied to a post and burned alive for his refusal to accept becoming a subject of the Spanish Crown. The priest is called to give him the last rites and entreats him to convert to Christianity so that he can go to heaven and not hell. As we are told, in his simple words, not knowing Spanish well, Hatuey pointed to the Spanish soldiers and asked, "Are they also going to heaven?" The priest, surprised at the question, responded affirmatively, "They are Christian!" Hatuey replied, "I would rather go to hell then, I do not want to be in a place with people like them."[4]

The second story is that of the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539-1616), whose writings have remained silent or not very well known. Ironically, he was born before and died the same year as Shakespeare (1564-1616) and had a long literary trajectory comparable to Shakespeare's. As a descendant from the Incas and a Spanish noble, he dedicated his life to documenting the history of the Incas of Peru.[5] This daring act caused him to be exiled to Spain and prevented him from seeing his Inca family ever again. He died as an exile in Spain.[6] His writings were included in the Spanish Inquisition's Index Librorum Prohibitorum (list of prohibited books). These two stories illustrate the power of "knowledge otherwise," the power of those stories that expose the impolitic character of empire and colonization in silencing the voices of colonized peoples.

The last story is actually a book of stories—with a value much like the Bible—of the Quiché Maya people of Guatemala and Mexico. It was written

[3] Néstor Medina, "The Black Legend," in *The Encyclopedia of Hispanic American Religious Cultures*, ed. Miguel De La Torre (California: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2009).

[4] Cited in Luis N. Rivera-Pagán, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 260.

[5] Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, *Historia general del Perú: Segunda parte de los Comentarios Reales de los Incas*, vol. I, ed. Ángel Rosenblat (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Emecé Editores, S.A., 1944). See also volumes II and III, published the same year.

[6] Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, *Diario del Inca Garcilaso (1562–1616)*, ed. Francisco Carrillo Espejo (Lima, Perú: Editorial Horizonte, 1996).

around the beginning of the sixteenth century but remained hidden until 1701, when it was discovered in Chichicastenango, Guatemala. I refer to the *Popol Vuh*,[7] a volume deemed dangerous during the Spanish colonial societies because it chronicled the millennia-old story of creation of the Mayan people out of corn. With all its power and influence, the Catholic Christian church sought to eradicate this book and its stories from the memory of the Indigenous peoples and other societies. This eradication effort failed.

Why am I telling these stories? Because they are probably unfamiliar to many people. I want to suggest that this lack of familiarity is part of the larger complex of colonization of knowledges through which the Western European Anglo North Atlantic intellectual tradition arrogated to itself the center of the world, making all other forms of knowledge not worth knowing about. I also want to propose that these stories, as suppressed knowledges, can help us reorient the understanding of theological virtues as epistemological wisdom "otherwise." That is, these stories do not come from those who claim to know what virtues are or what it means to love unconditionally. Yet, they expose the epistemological underbelly of colonization and in so doing reveal the location of virtue elsewhere, outside the centers of colonial power.

On one hand, the incident of Hatuey helps us see that the theological knowledge of empire and colonization as inherited from the Western European colonial project cannot claim to be able to teach virtues of love, compassion, and empathy. Those very sentiments of betrayal, lack of love, murder, shame, and skepticism that Shakespeare illuminated *imaginatively* in his work were enacted *in reality* among the Indigenous and African peoples by European Christians, many who claimed to know the virtue of love. On the other hand, the suppression of the work of the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega's writings and of the sacred *Popol Vuh* reminds us that theological knowledge "otherwise" is found among the very people who were silenced or rendered non-existent in the annals of history.

As Huebner closes his discussion, he notes that the *Martyrs Mirror* may be about more than believers' baptism. Indeed, what happened in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries left a painful legacy with which we continue to wrestle. My point is simple. I want to claim that what happened

[7] *Popol Vuh: las historias del Quiché*, trans. Adrián Recinos (Guatemala: Piedra Santa, 1990).

in Europe during that same period is not unrelated to, and should not be considered separately from, what was going on in the Americas. As virtue and theological knowledge was being reflected upon in Europe, an utter absence of virtue was being inflicted upon the Indigenous peoples in the Americas—through a perversion of theology in a grossly unethical mode.

Understanding theological virtues from the vantage point of the Americas' experience of colonization and invasion requires accepting the fact that in finding epistemological virtues "otherwise"—outside the centers of colonial power—we can no longer see certain moments as separate from the other interconnected aspects that define those historical eras. What would it mean for us to talk about theological virtue from the underside of empire and colonization? Opportunities for cross-fertilization and intercultural conversations seem to emerge. But, then again, what would it mean for the church to speak of Hope, Faith, and Love if the experiences, voices, peoples, and knowledges of the racialized and minoritized continue to be absent from our theological conversations? However we answer these questions, they will determine the direction of our own theological journey.[8]

Néstor Medina is Assistant Professor of Religious Ethics and Culture at Emmanuel College, University of Toronto.

[8] This article is a response to Chris K. Huebner, "Absent Fathers, Invisible Mothers, and the Theological Dance of Knowledge and Love," in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 39, no. 3 (2021): 192-213. https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review.