

# The Meaning of Freedom and the Kingdom of God: A Struggle against the Fetishization of Our Present World

JOSEPH DREXLER-DREIS

*Xavier University of Louisiana*

*In their respective contexts of Roman empire and global neoliberal capitalism, the Jesus movement and the Zapatistas announce that another world is possible and that this world has irrupted in the struggle for that other possible world. This article argues that the practical and theoretical work of the Zapatistas offers to theologians a way to articulate the meaning of the kingdom of God as a world of hope and struggle that is actualized in and informed by struggles to resist fetishization.*

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THE author of the Gospel of Mark describes the beginning of Jesus's mission by situating it in the context of persecution and hope in an alternative: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mk 1:14-15).<sup>1</sup> The claim of "good news" that begins the Gospel of Mark, the announcement in the context of the Roman Empire that John the baptizer is in prison and the kingdom of God has irrupted into history, resounds in the Zapatistas' claim in the context of the present neoliberal order that "another world is possible."

What is the meaning of the "good news" that the gospels describe? What is the content of the kingdom of God that Mark's gospel claims to be "near"? How can theology, as an academic discipline that serves praxes of living,

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*Joseph Drexler-Dreis is an Assistant Professor of Theology at Xavier University of Louisiana. He is the author of Decolonial Love: Salvation in Colonial Modernity (Fordham University Press, 2019) and Decolonial Theology in the North Atlantic World (Brill, 2020), and co-editor of Beyond the Doctrine of Man: Decolonial Visions of the Human (Fordham University Press, 2020).*

acting, and thinking oriented toward this “good news,” clarify the meaning of the struggle for the kingdom that shapes the praxis of Jesus of Nazareth and the movements that organize around him? This article contributes to the project of expressing the meaning of the kingdom of God by drawing on the practical and theoretical work of the Zapatistas as a theological mediation.<sup>2</sup> It draws on the Zapatistas, a diverse assemblage of grassroots communities who “seek radical social change and reject the restrictions of the institutions and conventional forms of ‘doing politics’” in order to better understand the meaning of the kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup> It particularly focuses on the meaning of freedom embedded within the discourse and action of the Zapatistas as a heuristic to understand the meaning of freedom within the Christian claim that the kingdom of God is an ultimate reality that is indeed near.<sup>4</sup>

While the brief armed struggle phase of the Zapatista movement burst into international consciousness during the first two weeks of 1994, the Zapatista movement as part of a long tradition of, as Bruno Baronnet, Mariana Mora Bayo, and Richard Stahler-Sholk put it, the “daily struggle of civil actors that have wagered on the autonomy and self-determination of peoples, including non-Zapatista communities” has been less influential in the mainstream consciousness of the West.<sup>5</sup> In March 1994, the former Zapatista Subcommander Marcos articulated the hope of the Zapatista movement by writing the following to “the Mexican people” and to “the people and governments of the world”: “In our dreams we have seen another world, an honest world, a world decidedly more fair than the one in which we now live.... This

<sup>2</sup> Jon Sobrino describes three ways of understanding the content of the kingdom of God. The “notional way” thinks from the notion Jesus had of the kingdom of God. The “way of the practice of Jesus” understands the kingdom through Jesus’ words and actions. The infrequently used “way of the addressee” recognizes that, because the kingdom is good news for the poor, its recipients (that is, the contemporary poor, or communities excluded from and victimized by the present world order) can help to clarify its content. This article primarily operates within this third way of understanding the kingdom of God. See Jon Sobrino, “Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 350–88.

<sup>3</sup> Bruno Baronnet, Mariana Mora Bayo, and Richard Stahler-Sholk, “Introducción,” in *Luchas “muy otras”: Zapatismo y autonomía en las comunidades indígenas de Chiapas*, ed. Bruno Baronnet, Mariana Mora Bayo, and Richard Stahler-Sholk (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2011), 20.

<sup>4</sup> The kingdom has, as Jon Sobrino puts it, a “final reality” for Jesus. See Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 68.

<sup>5</sup> Baronnet, Mora Bayo, and Stahler-Sholk, “Introducción,” 23.

world was not a dream from the past, it was not something that came to us from our ancestors. It came from ahead, from the next step we were going to take.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in 2012, almost two decades after the initial Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Marcos asked rhetorically, “Did you hear? It is the sound of your world collapsing. It is that of ours resurfacing. The day that was the day, it was night. And night will be the day that will be the day.”<sup>7</sup> The Zapatistas locate the possibility of another world in the praxis of resistance, a commitment that Sylvia Marcos describes as including the capacities “to endure” and “to build up.”<sup>8</sup> Hope for another world is expressed in the negative critique of the present world of neoliberal capitalism. The Zapatistas often describe this positive content of another world in terms of freedom and autonomy. In a 2019 letter to “women in struggle everywhere in the world,” Zapatista women describe their struggle in terms of

<sup>6</sup> Subcomandante Marcos, “In Our Dreams We Have Seen Another World,” March 1994, in *Our Word Is Our Weapon: Selected Writings of Subcomandante Marcos*, ed. Juana Ponce de León (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2001), 18. In March 1996, Marcos wrote to “Latin America, in the pain-filled South of the American continent, Planet Earth,” the following: “Suppose it isn’t true that there’s no alternative.... Suppose that some madmen and romantics believe that another world, another life, is possible. Suppose the worst, that these madmen believe there are others, more madmen who think like them. Suppose the inadmissible, that all these madmen want to get together. Suppose they suppose that from this meeting of the madmen, some measure of reason will emerge. Wouldn’t you like to attend such a mad meeting of suppositions?” “A Call to Latin America,” March 10, 1996, in *Our Word Is Our Weapon*, 178.

I follow Henry Gales in translating Subcomandante Marcos rather than leaving it in Spanish. His justification is the following: “*Subcomandante* and *subcommander* mean exactly the same thing; neither in English nor in Spanish is it a common military rank.... As far as the Zapatistas are concerned, it refers to the fact that Marcos is subordinate to the Zapatistas’ indigenous commanders, who he sometimes refers to as ‘bosses.’... Extensive use of unusual words creates a culture of exclusivity and barriers to understanding, or at the very least makes the text harder to read and unappealing for those who are not diehard Zapatista supporters.... The practice of using copious amounts of Spanglish is no different than using unnecessary amounts of academic jargon, it is nothing more than another sleight of hand that intentionally or unintentionally keeps people out of the club.” “Translator’s Forward” in *The Zapatistas’ Dignified Rage: Final Public Speeches of Subcommander Marcos*, ed. Nick Henck (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2018), 35–36.

<sup>7</sup> Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, “Comunicado del Comité Clandestina Revolucionario Indígena—Comandancia General del Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, December 21, 2012, <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2012/12/21/comunicado-del-comite-clandestino-revolucionario-indigena-comandancia-general-del-ejercito-zapatista-de-liberacion-nacional-del-21-de-diciembre-del-2012/>.

<sup>8</sup> Sylvia Marcos, “La realidad no cabe en la teoría,” in *El pensamiento crítico frente a la hidra capitalista III*, 15.

“freedom,” which exists in struggle: “What we want is freedom, a freedom nobody can give us because we have to win it ourselves through struggle, with our own blood.”<sup>9</sup> The Zapatistas, however, use “freedom” in a way that opposes the typical rhetoric of freedom within neoliberalism rooted in market relations: in the writings of the Zapatistas that I will consider, freedom manifests in resistance, on multiple levels, to the very structure of meaning and order that a neoliberal version of freedom suggests.<sup>10</sup>

Clarifying the meaning of the kingdom remains an important task for the most basic reason that it often stands at the center of theological reflection. Jon Sobrino celebrates the “rediscovery” of the kingdom of God as the ultimate and eschatological principle in many theologies over the past one hundred years but laments that European theologies have often failed to account for the historical specificity, partiality, and thus combativeness of the kingdom.<sup>11</sup> The practical and theoretical work of the Zapatistas offers to theologians a way to reclaim a more substantial meaning of freedom that can help to articulate the meaning of the kingdom of God as a combative irruption of hope and struggle for freedom.

I specify this freedom as a structure of relations actualized in and informed by struggles to resist fetishization, or processes that break off concepts and identities from the particular historical struggles that produced the concepts and identities.<sup>12</sup> Like movements within Christian tradition to destabilize the reifications of the Roman state, the Zapatistas give content and meaning to freedom through a struggle against processes of fetishization. When understood as occurring within social, political, and theoretical processes of resisting fetishization, the idea of freedom can help theologians to articulate the meaning of the kingdom of God in ways that serve the task of clarifying what M. Shawn Copeland refers to as a praxis of solidarity oriented toward the “countersign” of the kingdom.<sup>13</sup> I argue that struggles against structures of meaning in the modern world-system contest fetishization and participate

<sup>9</sup> Zapatista Army for National Liberation, “Letter from the Zapatista Women to Women in Struggle around the World,” <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2019/02/13/letter-from-the-zapatista-women-to-women-in-struggle-around-the-world/>.

<sup>10</sup> On understandings of freedom within neoliberalism, see especially David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> See Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 115–28.

<sup>12</sup> My understanding of fetishization here is consistent with John Holloway’s. See John Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power* (New York: Pluto Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> See M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 127.

in a reality that transcends fetishization and that this conflict and participation is the context of freedom. This context of freedom opens pathways to understand the meaning of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God.

This argument proceeds in three parts. First, the article argues that freedom is one possible heuristic to understand the meaning of the kingdom of God within biblical and Christian traditions. Second, it argues that the political and theoretical work of the Zapatistas presents a meaning of freedom as actualizing in struggles against fetishization that is particularly suited to inform how Christian theologians, within a context of neoliberal systems of economy and meaning, might reclaim a substantive meaning of freedom that can shed important light on the meaning of the kingdom of God within Christian faith. Third, the article draws on the work of the Zapatistas to mediate an understanding of the content of the kingdom of God. Using the work of the Zapatistas as a theological mediation shows that a praxis of critiquing fetishization is basic to theological reflection.

### **Freedom as a Heuristic for Understanding the Meaning of the Kingdom of God**

In the context of Roman Empire, the gospels narrate how the hope and struggle for the kingdom of God catalyzes a multi-tiered movement. In reference to this movement, Richard A. Horsley describes the gospels as "intra-community articulations of a no-longer-so-hidden mobilization of Galilean and other peasants into a village-based movement."<sup>14</sup> The renewal of Israel occurs within this mobilization that draws on Israelite culture and covenantal tradition to condemn imperial relations and restore autonomy. In the context of this mobilization and pushing it further, Jesus announces and acts out a politics centered around what he called the kingdom of God: a family- and village-based movement organized around Jesus to counteract social disintegration and "reinforce family and social solidarity" in line with covenantal tradition.<sup>15</sup> In this "concrete political situation," the people of Israel discover God.<sup>16</sup>

Although the fact of political struggle in Israel's history, and specifically Jesus' life and death, isn't controversial, explaining the specific nature of Jesus' political claims and their relation to the transcendent reality of the

<sup>14</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 71.

<sup>15</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, *Freedom Made Flesh: The Mission of Christ and His Church*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 15.

kingdom of God carries far more ambiguity. The concept of freedom offers one possible heuristic to specify the meaning of the village-based movement that organized around Jesus' claim of the nearness of the kingdom of God—and, as such, a way for theologians to discern the claim of the kingdom of God as another possible world. Sobrino describes the freedom entailed in the kingdom of God as standing “in *combative relation* to the anti-Kingdom. They are not merely mutually exclusive, but fight against one another.”<sup>17</sup> Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God and the freedom that characterizes this project takes on meaning precisely as an alternative to the Roman Empire. As is well attested, at the starting point of his ministry in Luke's gospel, Jesus offers a sort of “mission statement” that summarizes his praxis in relation to the kingdom of God when he reads a message from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (4:18-19).<sup>18</sup> This raises the question of the meaning of the “freedom” to which Jesus refers as shaping his praxis. Sobrino describes this freedom as a historically specific praxis of love.<sup>19</sup> Freedom refers to that which binds a person and community to history—the thinking, politics, activity, and work that emerge in community. And, more concretely within a Christian theological perspective, freedom is a praxis of love motivated by hope in the promise of the resurrection that there will be justice for victims.<sup>20</sup> To love—and thus to live in freedom—is to live “now like risen beings,” or in a praxis that resembles faith in this promise.<sup>21</sup> Living as “risen beings” has a specific content: to take on the hope of the crucified, the hope of the victims, and to put this hope in the center of historical praxis against structures that victimize.<sup>22</sup> Using an abstract notion of “love” or “freedom” to express this hope distorts Jesus' actual struggle in relation to the kingdom and avoids the conflict embedded in this struggle.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 126.

<sup>18</sup> Luke incorporates Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6 here. Michael Barram argues that “this text contains what we might call Jesus's own mission statement.” See Michael Barram, *Missional Economics: Biblical Justice and Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 39.

<sup>19</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2001), 76.

<sup>20</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 76–78.

<sup>21</sup> Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 76–78.

<sup>22</sup> See Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> See Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 116–17.

Ignacio Ellacuría, whose thought motivates much of Sobrino's subsequent work, particularly focuses on this conflict embedded in Jesus' praxis:

Of course Jesus did not actually kill. But there can be no doubt about his violent attitudes and his incessant combat against those who held power in his day. What is more, it is not historically accurate to say that he offered himself up as a victim for the sin of injustice and for the lack of love among human beings—except in the sense that he was the victim of injustice and the lack of love among human beings. He fought against this sin, and he was punished as a result.<sup>24</sup>

The meaning of freedom that emerges in relation to the kingdom does not include freedom from conflict; it is precisely a freedom to be in “incessant combat” with all that opposes the specific and partial kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. Abstracting the concrete meaning of freedom within the gospels ends up obscuring how gospel writers use the idea of freedom to express a conflict and struggle.

The specifically Christian contribution to the meaning of freedom exists in relation to “sin,” a general concept to describe a break from God that can only be expressed historically: “Sin appears ... as the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation. It cannot be encountered in itself, but only in concrete instances, in particular alienations.... Sin demands a radical liberation, which in turn necessarily implies a political liberation.”<sup>25</sup> The struggle for liberation for which Gustavo Gutiérrez calls and that he connects to salvation is a transformation of “a human, social, and historical reality which originates in a socially and historically situated freedom.”<sup>26</sup> Historical or political liberation includes the growth of the kingdom but does not eclipse all that the kingdom is: “The growth of the Kingdom is a process which occurs historically *in* liberation, insofar as liberation means a greater human fulfillment. Liberation is a precondition for the new society, but this is not all it is.”<sup>27</sup> Gutiérrez, Ellacuría, and Sobrino emphasize that theologians cannot abandon the specificity of the village-based movements around Jesus for abstractions. Humans encounter divinity in history, and freedom can be a heuristic to understand the content of the kingdom Jesus announced when theologians understand sin and freedom with respect to Jesus of Nazareth and our concrete present-day context.

<sup>24</sup> Ellacuría, *Freedom Made Flesh*, 120.

<sup>25</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed., trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 103.

<sup>26</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 101.

<sup>27</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 104.

### Freedom as a Heuristic to Understand Contemporary Struggle

Drawing on the work of the Zapatistas can push theologians toward a concrete understanding of freedom in the present-day context of neoliberal capitalism in ways that can shed light on the “good news” of the freedom that grounds the kingdom of God. In their respective contexts of Roman Empire and global neoliberal capitalism, the Jesus movement and the Zapatistas announce that another world is possible and that this world has irrupted in the struggle for that other possible world. These announcements locate hope in struggles against fetishization. That is, announcing and actualizing another possible world contests the separation of concepts, definitions, and structures from the activity and thinking that constructs those concepts, definitions, and structures. This contest grounds the hope for freedom.

The Jesus movement and the Zapatistas articulate historically particular struggles for freedom that carry meaning beyond their respective contexts, yet meaning that fades away when we disconnect their claims about the meaning of freedom from their particular historical struggles. When theologians abstract concrete historical expressions such as freedom or the kingdom of God, we rip how communities have made sense of reality apart from their function within particular historical situations. Detached from their use-value, ideas developed within historical struggle become exchange-values within the academic marketplace—that is, they become fetishized. For example, Marcella Althaus-Reid argues that discourses of liberation come from concrete, rebellious people. Yet the textualization of this liberative force that becomes “valuable in a theological market” often loses this materialist force.<sup>28</sup> Disconnected from struggle, an idea such as freedom appears as a formal and abstract concept, valuable in itself and capable of being easily and uncritically transferred across contexts until it carries little meaning. Struggling against fetishization would require relinking the meaning of freedom to the political praxes of early communities gathered around the memory of Jesus that sought local autonomy from the state.<sup>29</sup> The work of the Zapatistas can help theologians to better understand the content and praxis of these early commitments to freedom.

Drawing on the theoretical work of the Zapatistas to make sense of the meaning of freedom isn’t merely interesting and an opportunity for novelty; rather, it is essential to more faithfully understanding what Christian solidarity

<sup>28</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 21.

<sup>29</sup> Steven Battin’s 2019 presentation at the Catholic Theological Society of America, “Exit Strategies: Grassroots Postcapitalist Alternatives for Another Possible World” (June 2019, Pittsburgh, PA), develops this further.



organized around the hope for freedom entails and what it means to critically reflect on society and church in light of a faith shaped by Jesus' orientation toward the kingdom of God. The abstracted freedom of the "free market" and individual rights has become the main mode of freedom operative in the present world-system, and academic theology never exists apart from this world-system. Dissociation from the struggles of communities actively implementing another possible world, however nascent these projects of counter-fetishization may be, even seeps into liberation theology.<sup>30</sup> Turning to and learning from communities of struggle who have articulated their own understanding of freedom, distanced—again, however inchoately—from the fetishization endemic to neoliberalism, is a methodological necessity.

The Zapatistas articulate freedom as resistance to the capitalism of Western modernity: this contest specifies the meaning of freedom in a non-abstract way. In the "Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona," the Zapatistas liken capitalism to war: "a war of conquest of the entire world, a world war."<sup>31</sup> The Zapatistas are not only suspicious of how Western modernity has been elevated to a set of ideals that have to be defended at all costs; they have named this constellation of ideas, policies, and tactics "war." From a decolonial theoretical perspective, Nelson Maldonado-Torres locates this "war" within the history of European modernity and its underside of colonialism and slavery. Maldonado-Torres refers to "a paradigm of war" that is an "episteme and social order" that has its origin in 1492.<sup>32</sup> The year 1492 is a significant point in the history of the paradigm of war insofar as the European encounter with and concept of the Americas established and legitimized a method of violent force in the formation of ways of being and knowing within what came to be called "modernity."<sup>33</sup> The origins of modernity in colonialism and slave-trading establish the modern understanding of freedom: "In modernity, the racialized others take the place of enemies in a perpetual war out of which modern ideals of freedom and autonomy get

<sup>30</sup> For critiques of liberation theology in this vein, see Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity, and God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 124–42; Ivan Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); and Michelle A. Gonzalez, *A Critical Introduction to Religion in the Americas: Bridging the Liberation Theology and Religious Studies Divide* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Zapatista Army of National Liberation, "Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona," June 2005, <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/sdsl-en/>.

<sup>32</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), xi.

<sup>33</sup> See Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*, 238.

their proper sense. This is the foundation of modernity as a paradigm of war and the source of many of its pathologies, crises, and evils.”<sup>34</sup> Western modernity sustains what Maldonado-Torres calls the “sub-ontological difference,” or signifying what is below being, and uses race to legitimize this claim alongside abstract claims of freedom and rights.<sup>35</sup> The context of the war capitalism wages within Western modernity catalyzes the political project of dismantling Western modernity, which has “naturalized” a situation of war and “a peculiar death ethic that renders massacre and different forms of genocide as natural.”<sup>36</sup> The Zapatista struggle for an alternative within or to Western modernity contributes toward a possibility of freedom outside the naturalization of war.

This freedom outside the naturalization of war resides in struggle. The premise that no sphere of struggle against this war has priority, but rather the breadth of struggle forges another possible world, grounds the Sixth Declaration. In response to the legacy of the Sixth Declaration, Marcos describes an attachment to life shaped by tradition that forces struggle: “What had made [indigenous communities] resist—our compañeros and compañeras initially, and today our bosses—had been an attachment to life that had a lot to do with a cultural burden. Language, dialect, the way of relating to nature presented an alternative not only for life, but for struggle.”<sup>37</sup> Five hundred years of struggle by communities that begin to call themselves Zapatistas and that articulate the meaning of this struggle in public forums establishes a way to understand the meaning of freedom. Marcos locates this struggle within the “neo-zapatismo” of the Sixth Declaration. Under the leadership of indigenous communities, the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) has struggled for change in a way that “meant not organizing ourselves, not organizing other people to go vote, nor to go to a march, nor to shout, but to survive and turn resistance into a school.”<sup>38</sup> Resistance, as a way of living and thinking, is itself freedom.

The Zapatistas’ First International Gathering of Politics, Art, Sport, and Culture for Women in Struggle in 2018 reinforced this commitment to survive and to resist, as well as the understanding of the world that struggle creates. At the closing ceremony, Zapatista women put an agreement,

<sup>34</sup> Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*, 238.

<sup>35</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (March/May 2007): 256.

<sup>36</sup> Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*, xi.

<sup>37</sup> Subcommander Marcos, “National and International Caravan for Observation and Solidarity with Zapatista Communities,” August 2, 2008, in *The Zapatistas’ Dignified Rage*, 114.

<sup>38</sup> Marcos, “National and International Caravan for Observation and Solidarity with Zapatista Communities,” 117.

emblematic of the Sixth Declaration, in the following terms: “We propose an agreement to stay alive and continue struggling, each of us according to our ways, our times and our worlds.”<sup>39</sup> A group sent by the El Kilombo collective from Durham, North Carolina, reported on the gathering by noting a basic difference between workshops led by non-Zapatista attendees. Whereas non-Zapatista workshops focused on freedom as a matter of self-care, delinking individuals from structures, and “self-expression and the body,” Zapatista-led workshops focused on structural transformation:

It seems to us, and the Zapatistas themselves have pointed out, that it is only through this possibility of building a collective—and building a collective analysis—that one can gain a sense of self and therefore orientation on a path of struggle. But in the current system we are offered only weak substitutes for that sense of self. We have been sold many forms of “freeing” ourselves from oppressive conditions that necessarily pass through the process of becoming *somebody*—of achieving recognition or a place in the limelight... We think the Zapatistas are showing us a process of becoming, all together, *nobody*, of creating a largely invisible and mostly anonymous social power from below with a far more profound response to exploitation, dispossession, repression, and humiliation than the symbolic and select somebodies permitted by capitalist structures.<sup>40</sup>

A sense of orientation on the path of struggle opposes initiatives for identification and inclusion. Cultivating a collective praxis of resistance evokes freedom to be a part of a collective that lacks recognition and promotion within neoliberal capitalism.<sup>41</sup> Herein lies the possibility of another world.

The Zapatista struggle for another possible world turns on the struggle against fetishization within the modern world-system. Inspired by the Zapatistas, John Holloway describes struggle in the modern world-system as a response to methods of enforcing capitalist relations. Thinking from

<sup>39</sup> “Words of the Zapatista Women at the Closing Ceremony of the First International Gathering of Politics, Art, Sport, and Culture for Women in Struggle in the Zapatista Caracol of the Tzotz Choj Zone,” March 10, 2018, <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2018/03/26/words-of-the-zapatista-women-at-the-closing-ceremony-of-the-first-international-gathering-of-politics-art-sport-and-culture-for-women-in-struggle-in-the-zapatista-caracol-of-the-tzotz-choj-zone/>.

<sup>40</sup> The Kilombo Women’s Delegation, “What Does It Mean to Live? Notes from the Zapatistas’ First International Gathering of Politics, Art, Sport, and Culture for Women in Struggle,” June 7, 2018, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2018/06/07/what-does-it-mean-to-live-notes-from-the-zapatistas-first-international-gathering-of-politics-art-sport-and-culture-for-women-in-struggle/>.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés, “Economía política I: Una mirada desde las comunidades Zapatistas,” in *El Pensamiento crítico frente a la hidra capitalista I*, 101.

the perspective of struggle unsettles the reification of relationships and forms of identification that shape bourgeois thought. This perspective contests fetishization by keeping concepts connected to the struggles that produced them.<sup>42</sup> Holloway describes two understandings of fetishism, each of which has different theoretical and political implications. One way to understand fetishism is as an established part of capitalist society. In this understanding, fetishism is a historical point of origin that has already taken place.<sup>43</sup> This perspective obscures sites from which possibilities of anti-fetishism might come. Such possibilities would, seemingly, emerge only outside of the ordinary: for example, from academics in privileged positions or particular revolutionary forms.<sup>44</sup> A second perspective understands fetishism as an ongoing process of fetishization. In this perspective, conceptual categories are perpetually open: rather than expressions of “objectified social relations,” conceptual categories express the struggle to objectify social relations.<sup>45</sup> In 2015, Marcos described a commitment to struggle that suggests this second perspective of fetishization as a historical process: “Our destiny is not happiness. Our destiny is to fight always, at all times, in all places. It does not matter that the wind is not favorable.”<sup>46</sup> The perpetual and everyday struggle to establish social relations outside forms of identification enforced by capitalism grounds engagement with the world. This struggle to become “nobody,” as the Kilombo collective noticed in the Zapatista method of struggle, is the struggle against the separation of concepts, institutions, and definitions and the struggle to create.

The struggle against reified identities most immediately appears in the Zapatistas’ act of covering their faces, and their written documents also explain this commitment. Marcos articulates a process by which the Zapatistas, in becoming a collective “nobody,” embody a collective antipower. Their identity emerges in everyday struggles to dissolve relations of power over others. Those without identification—the “nobody” that makes up the majority of the planet and that emerges as a collective within struggle—create another possible world.<sup>47</sup> Marcos pushes this further:

<sup>42</sup> Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 53.

<sup>43</sup> Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 78.

<sup>44</sup> Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 88.

<sup>45</sup> Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 98.

<sup>46</sup> SupGaleano, “El Muro y la grieta: Primer apunte sobre el método Zapatista,” in *El pensamiento crítico frente a la hidra capitalista I*, 194.

<sup>47</sup> See Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, “Otra geografía,” <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2003/03/01/otra-geografia/>.

If somebody asks to whom the Zapatistas owe their existence, their resistance, their rebellion, their freedom, that person who answers “TO NOBODY” will answer truthfully. Because this is how the collective nullifies the individuality that supplants and imposes, simulating that it represents and guides.... NOBODY is who makes the wheel of history go. It is NOBODY who works the land, who operates the machines, who builds, who works, who fights.<sup>48</sup>

When employing the “fetishization-as-process” perspective, individuals and communities cannot opt out of struggle, as the content of each category, each attempt at identification, is itself struggle. Identity emerges, as Subcommander Moisés put it, in collective work.<sup>49</sup> The conflict between, on the one hand, definition, identification, or the imposition of limits, and on the other hand, creation or the transcendence of limits, unifies historically specific conflicts in the modern world-system.<sup>50</sup> The Zapatistas bring this general struggle against fetishization to bear on the historically particular situation of Mexico amid neoliberal capitalism that continuously works to reify market relations. In taking up this struggle against fetishization, the Zapatistas concretize freedom as a reality encountered in particular forms of struggle.

The Zapatistas clarify in the “Second Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle” that they “aren’t proposing a new world, but something preceding a new world.” The “antechamber” they seek to create forces space for political struggle.<sup>51</sup> Ongoing struggle against fetishization and settled meanings in identifications and abstractions, taken up in the act of negation—of as Marcos says, “recording past pains and rage”—establishes the possibility of another world. Negation allows for the possibility of “drawing in the notebook the maps, calendars, and geographies that have been forgotten above.”<sup>52</sup> In contesting the conceptions of history and the delegations of meaning within the modern world-system, the Zapatistas inform a practice of living in relation to and participating in another possible world. They demonstrate the practice of “widening” the “crack” in the “wall” of history that presents itself as the only possible world: “the Zapatistas have learned that if you stop clawing at the crack, it closes.”<sup>53</sup> The hope of the other side of the wall, or faith, grounds this praxis of negation, or the political strategy of enlarging the crack. If the Zapatista would be asked what is on the other

<sup>48</sup> SupGaleano, “El Muro y la grieta,” 194–95.

<sup>49</sup> Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés, “Economía política I: Una mirada desde las comunidades zapatistas,” in *El Pensamiento crítico frente a la hidra capitalista I*, 101.

<sup>50</sup> See Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 147.

<sup>51</sup> “Second Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle,” in *Our Word Is Our Weapon*, 46.

<sup>52</sup> SupGaleano, “El Muro y la grieta,” 196.

<sup>53</sup> SupGaleano, “El Muro y la grieta,” 198.

side of the wall, Marcos writes, “They would respond, ‘*nothing*,’ but they would smile as if they had said ‘*everything*.’”<sup>54</sup> The possibility of another world—“a world in which many worlds fit”<sup>55</sup>—lies in struggle itself. The simultaneous claim of “nothing” and “everything” to describe that which exists beyond the wall describes a meaning of another possible world: it already exists in the struggle to live in and create other worlds that always remains more than, but never detached from, our creative action. Another possible world lies in “a struggle against that which encloses us.”<sup>56</sup> The struggle to transform the modern world-system from our various positions within it is both the conflict with the process of fetishization and the participation in a reality beyond the process of fetishization. This struggle against fetishization, which is simultaneous with a struggle for freedom, can inform the notion of freedom—itself often fetishized—that underlies the kingdom of God by reattaching it to struggle.

### **The Meaning of Freedom within the Zapatista Movement as a Theological Mediation**

While the theoretical and political praxis of the Zapatistas can inform a meaning of freedom to guide theological reflection, it can also shape a particular orientation of theology. Understanding the work of the Zapatistas as a mediation for theology counters apologetic versions of theology that perceive Christian ideas or identity as themselves worthy of defense. Similarly, using the work of the Zapatistas as a mediation for theology resists simply translating ways of thinking, being, and hoping outside Christian dogmatic formulas into Christian rhetoric. The commitment to opposing fetishization precludes what Dianne Stewart has called the “hermeneutical gymnastics” that theologians go through to convince themselves and others of the real or true liberating aspect of Christian claims.<sup>57</sup> Avoiding such theological approaches is not a new insight; what is new about an orientation of theology shaped by

<sup>54</sup> SupGaleano, “El Muro y la grieta,” 199. The unity of the struggle for “another possible world” that situates the Zapatista uprising within five hundred years of struggle is not the positivity of the affirmation of an identity; rather, the negative struggle against the modern world-system and global capitalism unites the movement (see Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 164).

<sup>55</sup> Subcomandante Marcos, “Fourth Declaration of the Lacondon Jungle,” in *Our Word Is Our Weapon*, 80.

<sup>56</sup> See Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 165–66.

<sup>57</sup> Dianne M. Stewart, “Womanist Theology in the Caribbean Context: Critiquing Culture, Rethinking Doctrine, and Expanding Boundaries,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 80.

the Zapatistas is the overlap between struggle and freedom, which becomes clear when we read the Zapatistas' resistance within larger political struggles contesting the process of fetishization.

The understanding of freedom developed within the Zapatista movement can clarify the meaning of freedom that underlies the kingdom of God and can also clarify how some theologians have taken on an understanding of freedom against fetishization. Gutiérrez describes Job's friends as talking about God in a way that endlessly repeats established claims about the God in which they believe. This repetition that assumes a formal procedure to be correct and true in itself substitutes for a struggle to encounter and bear witness to that God in history. Gutiérrez describes such arguments that are committed to an idea of God articulated out of a limited framework as "like a wheel spinning in air: they do not go anywhere." The theology of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar resembles "the wasted energy of intellectuals who get excited but do not actually do anything; they are incapable of taking a forward step, because the impulse that makes them string arguments together is purely verbal."<sup>58</sup> Drawing on the work of the Zapatistas as a theological mediation confirms the "wasted energy" of theological reflections that continue in the style of Job's friends, who "believe in their theology rather than in the God of their theology."<sup>59</sup> Although admittedly difficult to see a claim about method as radical, the work of the Zapatistas forces precisely such a method to the fore: the primacy of conflict, and specifically of conflict with fetishization, itself opens a substantial meaning of freedom underneath its fetishized versions.

Various theologians clarify that, because Christian faith posits the incarnation of divinity in Jesus of Nazareth, God-talk has to come forth from history. Taking the work of the Zapatistas as a theological mediation both affirms this orientation of Christology and suggests a stronger claim: a critical theology—in its academic form but also in its lived and everyday form<sup>60</sup>—is a site of freedom. The basic Christian claim of how humans encounter divinity privileges history over nature.<sup>61</sup> As the book of Job suggests, we encounter divinity

<sup>58</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 29.

<sup>59</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 29.

<sup>60</sup> Gutiérrez starts his classic, *A Theology of Liberation*, with the following claim: "There is present in *all believers*—and more so in every Christian community—a rough outline of a theology. There is present an effort to understand the faith, something like a pre-understanding of that faith which is manifested in life, action, and concrete attitude. It is on this foundation, and only because of it, that the edifice of theology—in the precise and technical sense of the term—can be erected" (3).

<sup>61</sup> See Ellacuría, *Freedom Made Flesh*, 3.

outside what Subcommander Marcos describes as the “antireality hygiene” of theoretical work in a “sterile laboratory.”<sup>62</sup> Reality grounds discourse about God; texts and traditions are a part of the discourse insofar as they are part of the human attempt to respond to and express reality, but they can never eclipse reality as the center. The “sterile laboratory” approach to theology retreats into Eurocentric thought patterns in order to preserve its coherence. But it is not just that—the “sterile laboratory” approach also retreats from the human encounter with divinity in history.

When describing who he would like to be, Sobrino says he “would like to be a person who is ‘honest about reality.’... I would like to be a human being and a believer who is affected by reality, and, professionally, one who theologizes about realities.”<sup>63</sup> Thinking theologically requires a substantial connection to reality and an intellectual approach that can adequately make sense of reality. A break with reality doesn’t merely result in bad theology; it is not theology at all. Theological discourse irresponsible to reality is only idolatry. It lives in reference to fetishizations rather than to a deeper structure of meaning that prompts conflict with fetishization. The Zapatistas indicate that the social, political, and intellectual activity of conflict coincides with this deeper structure of meaning. If theology begins with spirituality, with the human encounter with and response to divinity, then reality has to be the ground. Precisely because of the character of historical reality as dynamic and open and as the site of the encounter with divine mystery,<sup>64</sup> theology is not possible in what Marcos calls the sterile laboratory.

In light of the theological importance of getting out of the sterile laboratory—an importance rooted in responsiveness to divinity—Sobrino claims that the most important task for Catholic theology in the present context is

<sup>62</sup> Subcommander Marcos, “Neither the Center Nor the Periphery,” December 13–16, 2007, in *The Zapatistas’ Dignified Rage*, 43.

<sup>63</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Spiritual Writings*, ed. Robert Lassalle-Klein (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 29. Sobrino’s understanding of “reality” is shaped by how Xavier Zubiri and Ignacio Ellacuría have developed the concept of “historical reality.” Ellacuría uses this concept to describe a transcendental openness of history: “Historical reality is the open and innovative reality par excellence. If there is a living openness to transcendence it is that of history. Intramundane metaphysics cannot close on itself precisely because history is open, because reality is in itself dynamic and open.” Ignacio Ellacuría, *Filosofía de la realidad histórica* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1990), 600.

<sup>64</sup> Helpful summaries of Ellacuría’s understanding of historical reality are Georges De Schrijver, “The Distinctive Contribution of Ignacio Ellacuría to a Praxis of Liberation: ‘Shouldering the Burden of Reality,’” *Louvain Studies* 25 (2000): 312–35; and Michael E. Lee, “Liberation Theology’s Transcendent Moment: The Work of Xavier Zubiri and Ignacio Ellacuría as Noncontrastive Discourse,” *The Journal of Religion* 83, no. 2 (April 2003): 226–43.



overcoming Docetism. He prioritizes a struggle to live, think, and act in relation to fetishizations of reality rather than in reference to reality itself.<sup>65</sup> Sobrino offers an apt metaphor: when theology decides “in advance what comprises its sphere of reality,” it manifests as “a subtle form of gentrification.”<sup>66</sup> A theology like that of Job’s friends, or a theology that commits to a rhetoric or a tradition of thought rather than to divinity, pushes out theological reflection born from a historical encounter with divinity. The danger of a gentrified discipline of theology that relies on fetishized concepts—such as versions of love, freedom, development, liberation, or particular identities—is not the danger of an impoverished theology; it entails the danger of no theology at all or of “theology” referring to something other than a critical reflection spurred by a community’s historical encounter with divinity.

A gentrified theological field conceals and distorts God. Sobrino describes the precedence reality has over texts in his theological reflection:

Doing theology is to elevate reality to the level of a concept. And to elevate it correctly and Christianly, undoubtedly we must bear in mind the Magisterium of the Church, the Fathers of the Church, and the Scriptures. But to look at all these texts in themselves without the connection with reality, I do not think is doing theology.... For me, doing theology is to see if God is present in our reality and how he is present.... If we do not end up saying whether God is present in our reality, what does our theology mean?<sup>67</sup>

Concealing reality subverts the theological task. This concealment of reality “does not allow God to be seen in reality.”<sup>68</sup> This carries implications. Delinking Christian theology from its traditional mediation in European philosophy is essential for the very basis of the theological task, namely, asking how we encounter God in history, because this delinking allows for the interrogation of widely accepted meanings of concepts within European traditions that are not natural but rather the result of often violent historical processes. Freedom is but one example. Resisting the gentrification of theology also implies working to hold ideas in relation to struggle. In this respect, Ivan Petrella is right to argue that liberation theology ought to return to a commitment to a “historical project” that motivated its early generation of thinkers.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>65</sup> See Sobrino, *Spiritual Writings*, 43; and Jon Sobrino, *Where Is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope*, trans. Margaret Wilde (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 100–02.

<sup>66</sup> Sobrino, *Spiritual Writings*, 43.

<sup>67</sup> Sobrino, *Spiritual Writings*, 48.

<sup>68</sup> Sobrino, *Spiritual Writings*, 48.

<sup>69</sup> See Ivan Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto* (London: Routledge, 2016).

But we can be more specific: such a historical project ought to be critical—it should confront fetishization in order to serve as an “antechamber” that precedes a new world—and it ought to motivate all thinking that calls itself theology. The practical and theoretical work of the Zapatistas is one mediation that can help theologians to critically appraise the fetishization integral to the present world-system in light of hope and faith in an alternative.

### **Conclusion**

The claim that another world is possible is perhaps a less startling claim now than when the Zapatistas irrupted onto the stage of international politics in early 1994, not so long after Margaret Thatcher declared that “there is no alternative” to a market economy based on free trade and free markets. It seems fairly clear now that another world beyond deregulated global capitalism is not only possible but inevitable. Unless there is a drastic change toward more sustainable political, economic, social, and environmental practices, neoliberalism will destroy itself, and perhaps the world with it, in the relatively near future. A significant question is what the possibilities will be when this inevitability becomes historically manifest. A more specific question I considered in this article is how Christian theology, as a critical reflection in light of faith shaped substantially by the meaning of freedom embedded in the hope for the kingdom of God, can be part of the response to this inevitability.

The Zapatistas clarify that in the present world-system of neoliberal capitalism freedom entails a struggle to resist fetishization and to live in relation to reality unencumbered by the need to identify within the present world order. Though the Zapatistas neither confine themselves to religious institutions nor explicitly embrace normative credal commitments, their practical and theoretical work can offer to Christian theologians a way to clarify the meaning of freedom and the kingdom of God. The Zapatistas’ commitments to another possible world and to move beyond the intellectual processes of abstraction that are so useful to European modernity and neoliberalism open options for theological understandings of freedom and the kingdom of God. They clarify for theologians that the kingdom of God is encountered in struggle and, more precisely, in a particular form of struggle against processes of fetishization. Freedom entails a freedom from the confinement to being identified within the constraints of a market economy. Freedom exists in the act of negation: we encounter the kingdom of God in the process of “clawing at the crack,” in the struggle to keep open the possibility of another world.