



The University of Texas at Austin  
Texas Education Review  
College of Education

Journal Homepage: [Texas Education Review](#)

Published online: January 2023

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## *The Rebellion of the Victims and the Slow Invention of the Secular State*

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**To cite this article:** Padilla Rosas, E. J. (2023). The Rebellion of the Victims and the Slow Invention of the Secular State. *Texas Education Review*, 11(1), 23-28.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/43970>

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## The Rebellion of the Victims and the Slow Invention of the Secular State

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*Indeed, it is an arduous question, so that we can define ourselves as Latin Americans, that of knowing the starting point of our own culture. There are many who say that we were "born" in 1809-1825, as if our homeland appeared there and came out of nowhere (ex nihilo). And there are, specifically, many political parties or thinkers that originate our culture there. From there all our culture would start. It is impossible. There are others that go back to the 16th century. They are Hispanists who argue that everything starts from there, but it can't be either. Even the conqueror who came to America had a vision of the world, attitudes, etc. So we have to go back further. As long as we do not know how to place Latin America well in universal history, we will be like water that falls from the sky without knowing its origin. And what I say about culture, obviously we are going to say about the church; they are parts of the same bipolar phenomenon.*

-Enrique Dussel, *Desintegración de la Cristiandad colonial y liberación*

### Introduction

To better understand section four in the first chapter of *Política de la liberación: Historia mundial y crítica*, entitled “The rebellion of the victims and the slow invention of the secular State”, we must note that, for Enrique Dussel (2007), history is a constructive, progressive movement, which can be categorized into four stages: 1) The Egyptian-Mesopotamian (from the IV millennium BC), 2) the Indo-European (from the II millennium BC), 3) the Asian-Afro-Mediterranean (from the IV century AD) and 4) the world-system (from 1492 AD). In this section of the first chapter, Dussel (2007) introduces us to the third stage, which is made up of a) the regions of Persia and of the Turán-Tarim, and later the Muslim world (from the 7th century AD), as the center of commercial connections; b) India, as a productive center; c) China, as the extreme east; d) Bantu Africa, as the extreme southwest; e) the Byzantine-Russian world, as the Occidental extreme and f) Western Europe, as the western extreme (Dussel, 1998, p. 21). For the purposes of this presentation, I want to pay particular attention to how the third stage differs from the second; thus, the transformations that occur in stage III will denote, not only the limits of stage II, but will also demonstrate the constructive-progressive movement of history.

Among the transformations that distinguish the third stage from the second are the emergence of a) a political subjectivity capable of creating a notion of freedom and personal singularity that implies the ontological, ethical and historical horizon that will make modern politics possible (Dussel, 2007, p. 82-83); b) a world view that redefines corporeality and assumes historicity and c) an intersubjectivity that assumes responsibility for the life of slaves, or those marginalized or exploited in social strata (Dussel, 1998, p. 32). In this way, stage III constitutes a new evolutionary moment of great complexity that made possible: 1) the manifestation of the political subject with subjective freedom and self-referential responsibility, 2) the discovery of a new and unknown experience of communal life in solidarity on the part of public and private intersubjectivity, 3) the secularization of political structures, and 4) an aperture to exteriority, the future, the messianic kingdom (Dussel, 2007, p. 71). The latter constitutes solidarity with the Other—the oppressed, the victims, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the excluded from the demos or the forum, the hungry, thirsty, naked and disabled carnality (Dussel, 2007, p. 72). The victims of the state that did not appear as interpellants in the horizon of political subjectivity of stage II (Dussel, 1998, p. 32), now present the ontological and ethical-political conditions for modern politics to become possible.

For the purposes of this presentation, I wish to dwell especially on two views of the world characteristic of stage III: 1) the political subjectivity of the Semitic world and personal singular freedom, and 2) the secularization of political structures and the difference between Christianity and Christendom.

### **The political subjectivity of the Semitic world and personal singular freedom**

According to Dussel (2007), political philosophy has ignored the deep ethical-political component of the messianic kingdom of Christianity and its founder, Jeshúa of Nazareth. This is largely due to two fundamental causes: 1) the failure to distinguish between “interpreting” the mythical-religious narratives or stories and carrying out a hermeneutic of said narratives and 2) the confusion between Christianity and Christendom. Although political philosophy has attempted to detach itself from a confessional claim of religious narratives, it has nevertheless lost the richness of a philosophical hermeneutic of mythical-religious narratives, which can be explained with a rational claim to truth (Dussel, 2007, p. 72). For this reason, Dussel (2007) pauses to see how the religious texts that present the figure of Jeshúa can shed light on the vision of the Christian world, and how this, in its essence, is laden with the Semitic tradition—central to the creation of a notion of freedom and personal political uniqueness.

The philosophical hermeneutics of Dussel (2007) pauses at the ethical-political effects of the teachings of Jeshúa since Dussel knows that these produced a critical intersubjectivity impossible to understand for the Indo-European peoples of stage II. Jeshúa of Nazareth began his historical legacy within the eastern region of the Roman Empire. However, the entirety of the Roman Empire did not prevent the founder of Christianity from emerging as an Other, stemming from a Semitic tradition. In *Desintegración de la Cristiandad colonial y liberación*, Dussel (1978) expounds how the values of the Semitic people are radically different from those of the deeply Hellenic, Indo-European people:

- 1) While for the Indo-European people the human being is a participation of the corruptible (the body) and the eternal (the soul); for the Semitic people, the human being is a unitary entity of *basar* (the flesh) and *nefesh* (life). In this way, there is no corporal/spiritual duality.
- 2) For the Indo-European people the personal act is not free, but merely imitative of divine archetypes. For example, if a marriage is to be contracted, it is not a personal act, but rather an imitative act of a god who married a qualified goddess (Dussel, 1978, p. 39). Furthermore, since the personal act is not free, the evil in the world is caused by a god. On the other hand, for the Semitic people the human being is autonomous since he has free will. In this way, evil does not come from some god, but its first cause is the freedom of the human being.<sup>1</sup>
- 3) While for the Indo-European people the human being must escape from the body and in contemplation achieve perfection, for the Semitic people the human being must live intersubjectivity as a commitment to the Other. It is there, in taking responsibility for the Other, where the human being can achieve perfection. In the words of Dussel (1978):

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<sup>1</sup> As Dussel (1978) expresses, for the Semitic world “freedom is not of the body or of the soul, but of the human in its totality, as an autonomous being. The Adamic myth wants to explain the mystery of the origin of evil. The Semites—unlike the Indo-Europeans who attribute evil to a god or to the body—write this account of the origin of evil to show that this evil is neither made by God nor is it a god, but has its cause in the freedom of the human being, that of Adam. It does not present a tragically chained Adam, but a dramatically tempted Adam, tempted in his freedom. For the Semite the body is not the origin of evil but freedom” (Dussel, p. 42).

The perfection of the Greeks is that of the sage, or, ultimately, of the contemplator; while the perfection of the Semite is that of a man who, in the community, commits himself to history, and that is the prophet. The perfection of the Semite is not that of the sage but that of the prophet. What does the prophet do? He gives his life for the liberation of the community of the poor, of the oppressed. [...] Perfection is now for the Semite, that committing himself to the liberation of the community, that giving of his life until death for that community of the poor; he is the “servant of Yahweh.” (p. 10)

- 4) The Indo-European people devalued the historical, because everything concrete is corruptible, that is, it cannot be reduced to a universal and eternal formula. On the other hand, the Semitic people discover and assume the value of history, since it is in a historical, concrete moment in which the human being can recognize and commit to the Other.

To confront what is representative of the Semitic people with the vision of the world of the Indo-European people not only facilitates understanding the clear differences between them, but also enables us to formulate a critical-political interpretation of Christianity.

Within the Roman Empire, Christianity appears as a political exteriority that assumed a preferential option for the poor and most disadvantaged of the system. It is interesting to note that Jeshúa was politically accused for having been critical of the current order. But even more interesting is to see that he was persecuted for having introduced a vision of the world where human beings and life were placed above both religious and imperial law. In Jeshúa, the Semitic intersubjectivity not only positions itself in favor of the people of the poor and oppressed, but also questions the political, economic and religious order that produces victims, and classifies it as perverse. In Christianity, therefore, the ethical-political sense of stage II is subverted. And, although the preferential option for the poor, the widow, the foreigner can be originally identified in a tradition that goes back to even the ancient Mesopotamian legal codes of stage I, for Dussel (2007), the deep ethical-political component of the messianic kingdom develops and inaugurates, in the universal historical plane, interregional stage III.

### **The secularization of political structures and the difference between Christianity and Christendom**

Due to the subversive nature of Christianity, the followers of Jeshua, persecuted by the Roman Empire, formed communities and lived among “the displaced, immigrants, foreigners, victims of Hellenistic-Roman domination” (Dussel, 2007, p. 77). The project of these communities was not to constitute a political state, but an ethical community critical of the Empire. In this way, the slaves and victims were presented within a horizon of hope, from the exteriority of the established order. It is worth recognizing the impact of these Christian communities since, even though they were victims of the Empire, they were able generate a necessary political transformation.

The Christian community was not only autonomous within the Roman Empire, but, by opposing the gods, the divine—an important legitimator of the Empire—they were persecuted and sentenced to death, as was its founder. While the deeply religious Empire commanded the emperor to be worshiped as a god, the Christians not only showed themselves to be “atheists” of the system, but also delegitimized the unity of the Empire. Not worshipping the emperor was a political crime that members of the Christian community assumed thanks to its deep intersubjective value. Despite the

martyrdom, however, the Christian community managed to deconstruct for three centuries the religious legitimating foundations of the Empire (Dussel, 2007, p.80). The first Christian community, following the teachings of Jeshúa, demanded that the State not determine their religious life; in other words, it secularized the State, which deprived it of religious legitimacy.

Although primitive Christian communities were managers of the secularization of political structures, as stated by Dussel (2007), this result gradually ceased with the arrival of Constantine in 324 CE. The majority presence of Christians in the East, in Greece, in Coptic and Alexandrian Egypt, in Anatolia (the most populous region of the Empire) and Seleucid Antioch, would no longer be under threat of persecution. Possibly for political reasons, Constantine inaugurated the Christian state (Christendom) and freed the church to cloak, under an alleged Christian culture, a new sacred legitimacy of the state. Over time, Christianity became a political force, and the state used Christendom as its absolute foundation. However, the political strength of the Christian communities was largely due to having betrayed their original inspiration, collaborating with the monarchies or states in this legitimizing process. From having been a critical community, the Christian communities not only contradictorily transformed themselves into the new foundation of the State, but also legitimized the oppression of the new victims of the Christian Empire. In this way, Christianity ceased to be a mass presence, was institutionalized ecclesiastically under the hegemony of the State and betrayed the ethical-political foundation of the messianic kingdom of its founder.

However, Christianity did not completely succumb to the inauguration of Christendom. A community of Christians called the “Coptic-Byzantine Christian monasticism” opposed established Christendom and criticized the legitimacy of the state. The interesting thing is that this community, not properly belonging to the Judeo-Christian tradition, managed to maintain a critical-prophetic gaze in the midst of the Christian State and continued a preferential option for the poor of the Empire. At the same time, the message of Jeshua of Nazareth continued to be shared and assumed, causing the conversion of many members of the churches. Thus, in the midst Christendom, a critical current of collaborationism between the ecclesial institution and the Empire emerged.

### **Final reflection**

After having noted, briefly, that the Semitic tradition marked a milestone in the inauguration of the values of freedom and personal singularity that made the emergence of stage III possible, it would be worth reflecting on the validity of these values in stage IV from which we read the past. And it is that if we want to place Latin America in universal history, we must not only recognize the constructive-progressive movement of history, but we must identify some starting points that are not necessarily evident in the immediate world in which we exist. It is as if Dussel (2007) invited us to complement our personal experience of the Americas with a universal history that takes place in a successive diachronic line. However, although our political-personal history is at times confronted with universal history, the survival of the oppressed does not depend on a mere theoretical knowledge of the Semitic and Christian tradition. Although it is true that recognizing the Semitic-Christian values of life and of political and personal intersubjectivity can and should be assumed in the midst of our Latin American reality, I understand that it is essential to understand that human beings tend towards communal life, which is the first reason that has allowed it to survive over time. So, detecting the Semitic-Christian values in the midst of our reality can serve as motivation to continue a traditional-historical legacy of recognition of the Other. Now, continuing to recognize that the critical responsibility for the Other comes from a historical legacy and a natural tendency

towards survival, shows us that we can a) know history in order to be critical of the system. and b) maintain a worldview open to the exteriority of the Other that will allow us, in turn, to evaluate our role in the midst of the system.

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