Truth Be Told: Leveraging Mujerista and Womanist Theologies for Ministry Among Victims and Survivors of Sex Trafficking

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At the intersection of socioeconomics, ethnicity, and gender lurks one of the most insidious forms of violence against girls and women: sex trafficking. What theological insights should inform Christian ministry to victims and survivors of sex trafficking? Female theologians who are well-acquainted with histories of multiple forms of oppression should inform Christian practice. Therefore, mujerista (Spanish for “womanist”) and womanist scholars ought to be at the top of the list. Unfortunately, many evangelicals and other Christians whose praxis has primarily been informed by white, Western, male theological perspectives, are hesitant to consider theologies by and for women of color. This is a mistake. Whether or not a person fully embraces all the theological points of womanist and mujerista theologies, these contextualized liberation theologies contain powerful and poignant biblical truths that are particularly relevant to today’s victims and survivors of sex trafficking. This paper will first highlight relevant definitions and themes in mujerista and womanist theologies, then examine the implications for ministry among today’s sex trafficking victims and survivors.

Mujerista Theology: A Relational Missiology Within Latino/a Liberation Theology

Mujerista theology is a constructed, contextualized liberation theology by Latinas. Mujeristas assert that “theology is a praxis—that is, reflection-action that in a spiraling motion integrates the faith of Latina women with the struggle for liberation-fullness of life.” Mujeristas contend that their social location as both women and Latinas in the United States places them among the most marginalized. Latinas of all economic classes in the United States lag behind in education, health access and economic well-being, relative to other women, with the exception of African American and Native American women who share these lower echelons of societal status, putting them at a higher risk for sexual exploitation. Mujerista theology is grounded in an integrated understanding of salvation and liberation. Salvation is defined and experienced within the framework of relationship. Salvation means having a relationship with God, a relationship that does not exist without love of neighbor; the two concepts are inseparable in mujerista theology. Sin is viewed as that which hurts relationship. While sin is personal and harmful to one’s relationship with God, it is not private because it negatively impacts the entire community.

Relationship with God is possible and meaningful because of Jesus. Not only did he secure salvation (relationship with God) in the spiritual sense, but he ministered liberation and freedom (relationship with neighbor) in the earthly sense by meeting the needs of the oppressed and marginalized of his day. Similarly, many Latinas believe that Christ partners with them to meet the needs of their own communities. Because of God’s spiritual, justifying actions in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ on earth, Christians are called to spiritual works of justice and love on this earth, as well. Alicia Vargas, Lutheran mujerista and associate professor of multicultural and contextual studies at Pacific Lutheran Seminary, summarizes salvation and its implications by stating:

Before God, Christians are free from the sin that Jesus redeemed us from on the cross, and we participate in the gifts of eternal life through Christ’s resurrection. Simultaneously, as we live in the temporal realm in this world that is also God’s, the Christian, if s/he were to behave as a one hundred percent justified Christian, would behave with other people according to the bounty of the blessing of God’s grace.

Similarly, Catholic theologian and founder of the mujerista theological perspective, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, says:

Understanding salvation and liberation as two aspects of the same process is grounded in the belief that there is but one human history that has at its very heart the history of salvation. By ‘history of salvation’ I refer to what we believe are divine actions—creation, incarnation, redemption—as well as our human responses to them.

Vargas and Isasi-Diaz share the understanding that God’s salvific action in Jesus Christ and everyday human action for liberation are simultaneous. Consequently, the mujerista discussion of salvation immediately invades the realm of social action. Salvation, liberation, and the coming of the kin-dom of God occur with one another, resulting in active engagement in the public sphere in order to address the realities of Latinas’ lived experiences in the United States. Vargas says:

For mujerista theologians, the secular and the spiritual lives of Latinas are one. Christ’s redemption from the sin that separates us from our whole relationship with our Creator . . . empowers Latinas in our claim for abundant life for ourselves, our families, and our communities within the oppression and marginalization that defines Latinas’ life in the U.S.

Some might criticize mujerista theology for placing so much emphasis on the lived experiences of Latinas, asserting that this is too subjective and creates a theological base line that is not normative. However, mujieristas point out that theologies tend to spring up from the understandings of particular groups of men, based on their experiences. ‘Theology is not “a formal, disciplinary discourse in which adequacy is defined by certain intellectual criteria as they are understood by those who control the cultural and academic apparatus,” but an endeavor that desperately needs a deconstruction of the dominant normative perspectives that have not sufficiently addressed the needs of all populations, including Latinas.

One way this deconstruction occurs is in the public sphere through the processes of denunciation and annunciation. Mujeristas denounce the systems and structures that are oppressive,
and announce a different and better way of living—one in which the gospel is appropriated into Latina/o communities. In order to denounce a system, it is necessary first to understand it and name it. How can mujeristas engage in la lucha ("the struggle") against oppressive structures if it is not publically made known what those structures are and how they adversely impact the Latina community? Denunciation, therefore, requires an analysis of the multifaceted root causes of oppression: ethnic prejudice, sexism, and economic oppression, all of which are intrinsic elements of patriarchal and hierarchical structures.

While denunciation is grounded in Latinas' lived historical realities, announcement is declaring and working toward a future reality, one in which Latinas and their communities can appropriate the abundant life of the gospel. By definition, announcement is liberative and practical (experienced through an improved and freer life). For Latinas, the struggle for announcement includes creating space for self-determination, i.e., to be agents of their own liberation rather than having those in power bestow it upon them in a top-down fashion. Annunciation reflects back to the community a theological voice that empowers its speakers to be subjects of their own lives and agents of their own history. This empowerment finds its source in Christ. While Jesus's crucifixion connotes God's identification with those who struggle, Jesus's powerful resurrection serves as Latinas' empowerment for that struggle. In other words, the new reality that Latinas announce can only be realized relationally through the empowerment of the resurrected Christ in them (vertical relationship) and through them (horizontal relationships).

A new and improved reality includes three inseparable aspects of liberation: libertad ("freedom"), comunidad de fe ("faith community"), and justicia ("justice"). Freedom is first psychological, liberating Latinas in the United States from two obstacles that have historically held them back: apathy and fear. Apathy is experienced as a sense that the struggle is beyond accomplishing. Apathy looks around at communities that have been struggling for decades and concludes that the task is impossible. Culturally speaking, apathy is having an extreme external locus of control. Fear includes the fear of failing, particularly in light of the false-narrative that anyone who comes to the United States can accomplish what s/he wants if the individual is willing to work hard and sacrifice. Latinas can be afraid that their failure to achieve the status quo will be perceived as their own lack of effort, resulting in a negative self-image.

Second, therefore, freedom is social, i.e., Latinas must work together to counteract fear and apathy. They must think together, devise strategies together, articulate the vision for their future together, and develop programs and plans together.

In addition to the aspect of libertad ("freedom"), liberation includes the comunidad de fe ("faith community"). The foundation of the faith community is based on the way many Latinas consider their intimate relationship with God as a pattern for relating to all of their loved ones. They cannot conceive of believing in God without relating to him on a daily basis, just like they do with their human relationships. As a result, sin is seen primarily as that which negatively affects the relational community. For example, sin is not a matter of disobedience, as in not going to church, but sin is a matter of not being there for others, as in not taking care of the children of the community. Sin that impoverishes or oppresses the community, whether it is in the community itself, or present within the structures of church and society, must be addressed by establishing praxis-oriented communities aimed at personal support and community action.

One reason the community of faith is considered essential to liberation is the fundamental role family plays in Hispanic culture. "It is in the midst of familia and because of familia that at a very young age we are introduced to the ethical world of responsibilities and obligations, a world where one is because one is in relationship with others." Family is not limited to blood relatives or immediate family, but includes people with whom the group relates. In this sense, la comunidad de fe, la familia de Dios ("the family of God"), and the kin-dom of God are virtual synonyms. Mujerista theology envisions and works toward a community in which harmonious relationship with God (a relationship inherently free from oppression) is experienced in a harmonious, liberated community, i.e., having one's loved ones appropriate the gospel, resulting in a community existence free from sin (oppressive and harmful structures, practices, and relationships).

Libertad ("freedom") and comunidad de fe ("faith community") are the first and second aspects of liberation. Justicia ("justice") is the closely-related third and final aspect. Justice is not merely a virtue or attitude, but a tangible way of acting and being, involving personal conduct and the organization and operation of social institutions. According to mujerista thinking, neither a person nor an institution or community can legitimately be Christian without struggling for justice. Justice means that people will have their basic needs met; people will be able to realize potential and live a happy and fulfilled life; people will have rights and be able to participate in all areas of life. People must include the poor. The poor and marginalized must be the standard by which justice is measured. If the poor do not have their needs met, are not reaching their potential, do not have rights, or are not able to participate in all areas of life, then there is still justice for which Christians must work. For mujeristas, there is no separating the Good News into spiritual versus physical, or sacred versus secular. The gospel is Good News for the entirety of one's existence.

**Womanist Theology**

Womanist theology, like mujerista theology, is a constructed, contextualized theology by and for a particular group of marginalized women in the United States. While mujerista theology is Latina (female), womanist theology is African American and female. They both seek to understand Christ in their own contexts, resulting in theologies aimed at caring for the community, addressing justice through praxis, and prioritizing the needs for healing and wholeness among their women. In this discussion of womanist theology, first I will describe and characterize womanist theology, establishing the context in which it has emerged. Second, I will highlight major theological themes.

**Context of Womanist Theology**

Womanist theology begins with recognizing the context of African American women because “No theology emerges in a social, historical or cultural vacuum, and neither does any
particular interpretation of scripture.”28 For African American women, this context includes the tridimensional oppression of ethnicity (being black in a white-dominated society), class/economics (history of slave status), and gender (being female in a male dominated society and church). Black women are not the only humans to suffer, of course, nor are they the only women to experience abuse and violence, but “African American women have had a legacy of abuse and violence perpetrated against their bodies that has been justified through sexualized stereotypes and mythologies that denied the presence of God in them. It denied that they were created in the image of God.”29

Womanist theologians recognize that within society and the church, interlocking structures of domination support white patriarchal privilege and result in the dehumanizing of others.30 For example, to be both white and male affords one the highest level of political, social, economic, and ecclesiastical privilege and dominance; to be white and female eliminates male privilege but retains white privilege; to be black and male retains male privilege but eliminates white privilege; “to be black and female is to have virtually no claim to the privileges accorded in a white patriarchal society and/or Church. The black female reality is a marginalized reality.”31 Consequently, womanist scholars exegete scripture with an overarching hermeneutic of liberty and justice for the oppressed and marginalized. Womanists re-read the Bible from the perspective of the marginalized, de-centering dominant readings of the text (white, Western, male), and offering insights that they are uniquely positioned to see.32 For example, in the OT, white male scholars might emphasize God’s interactions with David as king; black male scholars might emphasize God’s relationship with Moses for liberating a slave people; womanist scholars might emphasize God’s interactions with, provisions for, and blessing of Hagar, a trafficked and sexually-exploited African slave woman. In fact, womanist theologians assert that their existence on the margins of society and the church actually lends them an epistemological advantage enabling them to accurately see the injustices and demystify the structure of domination.33

While womanist theologians function prophetically in helping the church demystify structures of domination, they do so primarily for African American women. As such, womanist theologians bring three assumptions to their theological pursuit. First, they are committed to the survival of a whole people (community), including men, women, and children. Second, the primary audience is the African American community, but non-blacks are invited into the dialog. Third, womanist theologians search for the African American community’s understanding of black womanhood and God’s relation to it.34

Theological Themes in Womanist Theology

The major themes of womanist theology can best be understood by examining the appropriation of two biblical concepts: on earth as it is in heaven and making a way out of no way. The former pertains to God’s liberative purposes for the here and now, not only the eschatological future. Womanist theologians affirm that the fully consummated kingdom of God (as it is in heaven) will be free from sin and structures that oppress, and therefore as agents of God’s kingdom come, they seek to live out these ethics on earth as it is in heaven. God’s vision includes an abundant life in which his children are free from unjust hierarchies of privilege and domination.35 Womanist theology empowers African American women as readers of the Bible, as agents and shapers of discourse by uncovering dominant cultural readings and assumptions so that communities can be transformed.36 In this sense, womanist theology fits squarely within liberation theology. Jesus is seen as relating to the oppressed as a co-sufferer and liberator. Because of his own persecution, suffering, and execution on the cross, Jesus is seen as God who identifies with black women in their shared experience of persecution and suffering.37 Similarly, just as Jesus’s resurrection signaled that there is life after the cross, it signals to African American women “that their tridimensional oppressive existence is not the end, but it merely represents the context in which a particular people struggle to experience hope and liberation.”38 Liberation and salvation are closely related in womanist theology. For example, if sin includes the tridimensional oppression of black women, then salvation is participating in the struggle for wholeness, i.e., liberation on earth as it is in heaven. Womanist theologians’ source of power for the struggle and for the realization of wholeness comes from the life and ministry of Jesus. They see him as including the marginalized and working toward the wholeness of his community.39 He healed, shared food, empathized, loved widows and orphans, forgave those whom society condemned, taught with wisdom, listened, wept, and conquered death.40

However, one of the founders of womanist theology, Delores Williams, asserts that God does not always liberate. Therefore, womanist scholars’ major theological contributions center on their understanding and experiencing the God who makes a way out of no way. This phrase is a common refrain in testimonials by African American women in the church, and it articulates black women’s relationship with God as they navigate their lives.41 It points to themes of wilderness, survival and quality of life. Wilderness, such as the one Hagar finds herself in in Gen 16 and 21, or the one referred to in Isa 43:19 (“I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland”), represents the oppressive context of African American women. Survival and quality of life represent God’s provision for and relationship with African American women within the context of slavery or oppression. In other words, even though freedom from oppression may not be a lived reality, God still intimately relates to African American women and gives them resources for survival and care.

Monica Coleman notes the phrase making a way out of no way emphasizes four important aspects of God’s relationship with African American women.42 First, it testifies to God’s presentation of unforeseen possibilities. For example, in Gen 21:19 God shows Hagar a well of water in the wilderness where she has not seen one before. Second, it testifies to human agency. For example, Hagar exercises decision-making skills throughout her time as a slave in Abraham and Sarah’s household, decisions that embrace God’s direction and have her and her child, Ishmael’s, best interests in mind. Third, making a way out of no way reveals the divine goals of justice, survival, and quality of life. For example, God hears Hagar’s and Ishmael’s cries in the
wilderness and acts on their behalf to ensure survival and care, even if it means going back to Abraham’s household. Finally, the phrase connotes a challenge to the existing order. For example, even though the covenant child (Isaac), the child of blessing, was to come from Sarah, God still liberates Hagar and gives her and Ishmael a parallel blessing in Gen 16:9—“I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.”

In sum, womanist theology includes the motifs of on earth as it is in heaven, or classic liberation theology principles that focus on a praxis of struggling for justice for entire communities, and making a way out of no way, or the themes of survival and quality of life. Like mujerista theology, womanist theology is by and for a particular community of women as they relate to God, and, as such, is a relational theology.

The underpinnings of relationality in womanist theology are best articulated by Karen Baker-Fletcher in her work entitled Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective. She calls her theology a “Christian integrative relational womanist theology” that begins with God, who is found in biblical and experiential revelation, which includes relationship within the body of Christ. First and foremost, this quotation reveals that God is the ontological starting point. In womanist theology God is conceptualized as social. Both in his relationship within himself, i.e., the God-self or Trinity, and in his relation to all of his creation, we can see God’s social or relational essence. Second, the aforementioned quotation reveals the relational thrust of womanist epistemological notions, i.e., knowledge of God is found in his revealed Word and within an intimate, experienced relationship between him and humans, his creatures. In fact, many womanist theologians give supremacy to their lived experiences in relationship with God over and above biblical passages that may seem, upon first read, to uphold any kind of system of oppression (e.g., Pauline household codes related to slavery). Therefore, epistemologically speaking, womanist theology places experiential knowledge (relationship with God) above biblical knowledge. Finally, Baker-Fletcher’s quotation reveals the communal or collective nature of God’s relationship with his people, his body. Womanists not only know through the Bible and through their own personal relationship with God, but they know through their relationships with God’s people and the stories of how God works among them as a community.

Just as God cannot be separated from the rest of life because he is the source of life, womanist theology does not separate theology from any other domain, such as ethics, social concerns, or history. Womanist theology is inherently integrative, relational and interdisciplinary because of its ontological assumptions about God. God is seen as a divine community whose aim is for authentic community on earth as it is in heaven. As such, womanist relational missiology emphasizes the interrelatedness of mind, body, and spirit, and employs holistic approaches to further the healing and wholeness of entire communities.

Ministry Implications of Mujerista and Womanist Theologies

Because contextualized theologies, like mujerista and womanist, are by and for a particular group of people, the meaning may not transfer well or hold true in a fundamentally different context. However, on occasions where contexts are similar or shared, mujerista and womanist theologies can and should be leveraged for Christian mission to those groups of women. Victims of sex trafficking are one such group. There are a number of shared characteristics among mujeres, womanists, and sexually exploited women. The most obvious is that they are women, not just women, in general, but women whose very lived existence is on the margins of society. In other words, mujeristas, womanists, and sexually exploited women are all marginalized and oppressed, victims and survivors of relationships and systems that refuse to acknowledge their full personhood and inclusion into society and the church. There are two major contributions that mujerista and womanist theologies make that can be leveraged for ministry and mission to victims of sex trafficking: a hermeneutic of liberation and survival, and emphasis on the life and ministry of Jesus.

A Hermeneutic of Liberation and Survival

Mujerista and womanist theologies offer a biblical hermeneutic for women suffering under the control and oppression of a dominant group. Leveraging a hermeneutic of liberation, justice, kin-dom of God, survival, and quality of life is essential in Christian mission to victims of sex trafficking in the United States. Mujerista and womanist scholars rightly ask, “What does the Good News look like for us as marginalized and stigmatized women?” Any effort to reach sexually exploited women for Christ must also place this question at the center of mission strategy.

Consequently, the mujerista view of salvation and liberation as being two parts of the same process should be at the forefront of Christian work among sex trafficking victims. In order to understand and experience Christ’s salvation, victims of sex trafficking need salvation/liberation to be a physical, here-and-now reality, as well as a spiritual, heavenly-future reality. They often need a liberator or, perhaps even better, someone who supports them in their own liberative agency to exit or escape the life of sexual slavery. This literal liberator or one who supports them in their own exit or escape, ministers the reality of Christ to them. Through a this-earthly-existence ministry of a liberator, sex trafficking victims can understand and appropriate the deeper and equally real spiritual liberation that is theirs in Jesus.

Additionally, the mujerista understanding of the kin-dom of God, or la comunidad de fe or la familia de Dios as a relational and collective entity also finds relevancy among sex trafficking victims. On their journey to recovery, victims need a new sense of family and belonging to replace the broken one from which they came. For example, victims of sex trafficking often come from homes characterized by trauma or abuse, and therefore a trafficker manipulates, grooms, and exploits them by luring them away to a new “family” organized around a pimp or “daddy” who has other sexually exploited girls or women under his control. The victim’s existence vis-à-vis the pimp and his other women becomes an essential, yet especially broken and harmful, family unit. Upon their exit or rescue from trafficking, victims must learn a new sense of family and belonging. The mujerista concept of kin-dom of God can be leveraged to create this new reality in Christ-centered community. It is different
from a traditional understanding of “kingdom of God” because it replaces the male-oriented narrative of domination with a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding. For victims of sex trafficking who know all too well what it means to be dominated by men, the kin-dom of God concept is important.

The womanist emphasis on God’s relationship with women in the midst of their enslavement and oppression is also essential for application among sex trafficking victims because it acknowledges that God has enabled them to survive, and that he can and will provide resources, step-by-step, to ensure their quality of life. Womanist theology offers hope for sex trafficking victims by testifying that God makes a way out of no way. The womanist theological appropriation of Hagar, who is also a sexually exploited woman unable to leave her owners’ household on her own, bears striking similarity to the lived realities of sex trafficking victims, today’s modern slaves. Womanist theology offers the victim hope by showing that God is present even in their oppression and exploitation. Rather than blaming God for allowing terrible atrocity, womanist theology rightly names sinful, exploitative systems and structures, and instead celebrates how God reaches through such circumstances to provide resources, care, and release for the oppressed. Womanist-informed Christian mission to sex trafficking victims provides holistic care for traumatized women, resources for the development of their minds, bodies, and spirits, and advocacy in public and ecclesiastical spheres for their full inclusion and participation in life.

**The Life and Ministry of Jesus**

Both mujerista and womanist theologies look to Jesus as a model for ministry because he properly recognizes and identifies with marginalized, stigmatized women. Embracing this as missiological praxis among sex trafficking victims has two implications. First, it implies that those who work with victims must, like Jesus, properly recognize them as human persons made in the image of God. This requires a rejection of the popular narrative about sexually exploited women that can be seen in language used to describe them: *dirty whore, worthless slut, hooker, ho,* and so on. In her book *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America,* Melissa V. Harris-Perry discusses the history of misrecognition of black women in America. She points out that black women have been stereotyped as “Jezebels,” connoting sexual promiscuity or deviance, and as “Mammy,” connecting their value to the degree to which they put white people’s needs above their own.50 Victims of sex trafficking are also misrecognized in a similar way. They are assumed to be sexually promiscuous, loose women who have chosen a life of prostitution. Men who traffic them or purchase them for sex assume that these women exist to put men’s sexual needs above their own welfare. Christian mission to sex trafficking victims must emulate Jesus by recognizing the dignity and worth of all persons.

In addition to following the way Jesus properly recognized women, those who minister to sex trafficking victims must also follow the way Jesus talked with, touched, healed, and affirmed marginalized women. Mujeristas and womanists assert that Jesus cut through misrecognition to properly see, value, and minister to marginalized women. Where sexually exploited women, including mujeristas and womanists, have been hurt in mind, body, and spirit because of misrecognition, Jesus brings healing through recognizing them as human persons made in the image of God, and ministers to them as such. He supplies their needs, speaks truth to them, extols their faith, and brings holistic healing. His lineage includes women of questionable reputation, and his ministry includes numerous women with sexual promiscuity attached to their social identity, such as the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, the adulterous woman in John 8, and the sinful woman who anointed Jesus in Luke 7. Any Christian individual, church, or parachurch organization engaged in mission to sexually exploited women must embrace the mujerista and womanist theology pertaining to Jesus’s ministry to marginalized women.

**Conclusion**

Womanist and mujerista theological perspectives are highly relevant for today’s victims and survivors of sex trafficking. The lived experiences of these groups of women show that they are well acquainted with multiple forms of oppression, including violence against women and sexual exploitation. The salvific and liberative purposes of God proclaimed by mujerista scholars, and the survival and quality of life themes proclaimed by womanist scholars, must be understood and leveraged for ministry among today’s victims and survivors of sex trafficking.

**Notes**

7. Isasi-Diaz does not use “kingdom” or “reign” because of their sexist and classist connotations. “Kin-dom” is preferred because it is inclusive and connotes a sense of community and shared responsibility for survival and welfare.
29. Delores Williams, quoted in Monica A. Coleman, Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 22.
30. Smith, I Found God in Me, 42.
35. Douglas, “Marginalized People,” 44.
36. Smith, I Found God in Me, 49.
37. Monica A. Coleman, 14.
38. Jacquelyn Grant, quoted by Monica A. Coleman, Making a Way Out of No Way, 15.
41. Coleman, Making a Way, 12.
42. Coleman, Making a Way, 33.
43. Karen Baker-Fletcher, Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective (St. Louis: Chalice, 2006).
44. Baker-Fletcher, Dancing with God, 16.
45. Baker-Fletcher, Dancing with God, ix.
46. Baker-Fletcher, Dancing with God, 1x.
47. Baker-Fletcher, Dancing with God, ix.
48. Baker-Fletcher, Dancing with God, x.

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