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We Need a Theology That Afflicts the Comfortable

By Jesse Sullivan

o what shall I give my life?" If we do not take out time to step back from the busyness of our lives and answer this question for ourselves, then we let the culture around us shape our dreams and our lives for us. For most, a narrow "American Dream" tells us the value of our lives. While potentially good, it can also morph into a competitive individualism and materialistic climb up the social ladder. The pursuit of happiness will never end as one struggles for ever more fame, security, success, and money. College has become a means to attaining these ends, which alone are not enough. A theology and philosophy core is viewed as an irrelevant remnant of a traditional system; a roadblock to a streamlined degree.

When I decided to major in theology, because faith was the most important thing in my life, I naïvely thought I would leave college with answers about God, Jesus, salvation etc. Little did I know that all of my previous notions of these things would be challenged and destructed rather than reinforced and constructed. The God I came to experience these last four years was much too large to fit in the small box I had previously constructed.

Meeting devout Muslims and Hindus, and feeling God's presence in a mosque and synagogue, made me sure of a more inclusive salvation. Studying at the Casa de la Solidaridad in El Salvador gave me a whole new insight into theology. The kneelers in the churches had no cushions and because they were so hard, one could not remain praying there for long. Jesus was not in the church hanging from the

crucifix; Jesus was manifested in the suffering, Salvadoran people. God shifted from a set of doctrines lodged in my head to a living reality in the world around me. This called me out of a way of thinking and into a way of living; to know God was to experience God in the world. I began to place less emphasis on orthodoxy and more on orthopraxy.

In a neo-liberal world that places primary importance on efficiency and productivity, it has become increasingly rare and therefore even more important to question the self-interested individualism that strives for more and more without a concern for the majority of the world. A majority that struggles to merely survive. As U.S. citizens who sit atop the global economic and political structures, we have the potential, and as people of faith we have the responsibility, to ensure global structures and policies that promote the human dignity of those in developing countries. We need a theology that afflicts the comfortable. We need a theology that calls into question a solely self-interested foreign policy. We need to begin teaching a theology that challenges the status quo. Why is it that those Jesuit priests in El Salvador, and so many others throughout history have been killed for their beliefs, yet we are in no danger? It is because our theology is not a threat to any power structures. We must begin to risk more.

The stakes are substantial as 34,000 people a day die of preventable hunger-related illnesses, genocide is ignored in Sudan, and we contemplate another war in the Middle East with Iran. Current and practical applications of the gospels should be inspiring



revolutions, yet we are falling asleep in the church and the classroom! I am proud that the Jesuits have been at the forefront of promoting social justice, and I hope that students at every Jesuit university are receiving the same critical and progressive education that I received from the theology and philosophy departments here at SLU. My most effective teachers did not provide me with all the right answers, but instead raised all the right questions.

The Gospels reveal a God who enters into the human experience; Jesus came to us in solidarity. Likewise, we as Christians should humble ourselves to live in solidarity with and for those in need. To do so requires a break with a culture proclaiming a narrow self-interested individualism. Theology is not about accessing God through our minds, but about imagining a God that lives among us and requires us to respond with our lives. This is the only theology that is capable of transforming ourselves and the world around us.

Jesse Sullivan is a senior pre-med/theology/international studies major at Saint Louis University. Next, he will pursue an MSc in global governance at The University of Oxford.