AOSIS

A practical theology of liberation: Mimetic theory, liberation theology and practical theology

CrossMark
click for updates

Authors:
Joel D. Aguilar Ramírez[1]
Stephan de Beer[1]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Theology, Faculty of Practical Theology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Joel D. Aguilar Ramírez
joel.aguilarramirez@gmail.com

In this article, the authors bring two personal journeys together: one author's liberationist journey, sparked by a search for justice and liberation in the slums of Guatemala City, and the other's lifelong commitment to practical theology and spatial justice in South Africa. A practical theology of liberation is the result of life experiences in countries of the Global South amidst the search for justice and liberation. The worlds that come together in this article are René Girard's mimetic theory, liberation theology and practical theology. This article raises the question of the cross-contextuality of practical theology and the theological application of mimetic theory to develop innovative theological methodologies that respond to the collective woundedness of the urban context in the Global South.

Contribution: The main contribution of this article is the use of three seemingly different theological approaches in conjunction. This article opens the door to inform practical theology with René Girard's mimetic theory and liberation theology.

Keywords: Mimetic theory; Liberation theology; Practical theology; Scapegoating; Violence; Grassroots leaders.

Introduction

The reader may wonder why practical theology is such an important discovery for Aguilar Ramírez. Why did he need practical theology to expand his liberation theological praxis? The encounter with practical theology is significant because of Guatemalans' lack of understanding of that theological field. Guatemala, like the rest of Latin America, has had an influx of many theologies coming from the North Atlantic. More than that: people in the Global South have been culturally proselytised through these theologies. They were preached the superiority of the Euro-American way of life. Everything that comes from the North is better, including theology (Bevans 1992; Fanon 2004; Santos 2014). However, one of the theological disciplines that did not come to its full in Guatemala was practical theology. In Guatemala, practical theology is seen only as the corollary of pastoral ministry. For example, when Aguilar Ramírez was in seminary, exposure to practical theology was limited to the administering of functions, such as officiating at weddings, administering the Lord's Supper and facilitating special church activities (Adam 2019:279). He was never introduced to a practical theological methodology or helped to reflect critically or contextually on the faith practices that he was introduced to. The academic research that explores people's faith practices was never a part of their discussions (Osmer 2008:15). Practical theology was reduced to a set of activities – a technical subject training functionaries – lacking its own robust critical theoretical frameworks. Moreover, the interconnectedness between different important pastoral functions was never clearly interrogated.

Furthermore, in the past, in Guatemala like in most other places, liberation theology and its methods were seen as subversive and inflammatory to the point of becoming a death sentence to those who practised it (Nouwen 2006:65). Even today, liberation theology is still regarded with suspicion and disdain (Pacepa 2015). Liberation theologies are perishing under the postmodern style of thought. Liberation theology has been diluted to a way of expressing the process of liberation through the adoption and practise of global liberal-democratic capitalism (Mejido Costoya 2006:276–277). This is especially true in Latin America as the failed 21st-century socialist dictatorships have solidified a rejection to anything that speaks about emancipation, social justice, oppression and so on.

Note: This article is published in the section Practical Theology of the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa.

The importance of this article lies in clarifying some misunderstandings regarding both practical theology and liberation theology. The reader will see that practical theology is a rich field of study that goes beyond the training of church functionaries. It is an interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary theological field of study that is interested in the understanding and transformation of people's faith practices. Liberation theology, on the other hand, is a subversive way of doing theology. However, it is not a 'communist' or 'socialist' idea. It is a way of doing theology that is concerned with the marginalised voices of society, whatever that marginalisation may look like, depending on the context. Liberation theology is a non-sacrificial theology that seeks to call forth the stories of the innocent victims of contemporary society and its institutions. In addition, this article seeks to introduce mimetic theory as an expansive lens to both practical theology and liberation theology to bring about a practical theology of liberation.

The purpose of this article is that the reader, in Guatemala, South Africa and elsewhere, can consider the gains of liberation theology in practical theology and ponder how practical theological methodologies can complement and enhance liberation theological praxis. In addition, it proposes René Girard's mimetic theory as an additional lens to interpret scripture, one's context and society through the eyes of the victim, complementary in insight, to both practical and liberation theologies.

It is important, however, to keep in mind that we are fusing seemingly distant – and often contesting – worlds. On the one hand, Practical Theology has evolved as a theological discipline in and of itself (Osmer 2008:231–241). Liberation theology, on the other hand, has emerged as an epistemological break with classical theologies, developmentalism and colonial forms of church and mission (Gutierrez 2009:80). More than a distinct discipline, liberation theology has evolved as a different way of doing theology, initially mainly developed by systematic theologians, but later also shaping biblical scholarship (Tamez 1979; Trible 1984), mission studies (Shannaham 2014) and even practical theology. One of the original proponents of doing practical theology from a liberation theological perspective was Hugo Assmann, with his ground-breaking *Teología desde la praxis de la liberación* in 1973 (*Practical Theology of Liberation* in 1975). Consequently, one should not necessarily put these two alongside each other as two disciplines within theological work. Practical Theology is a distinct discipline interested in the study of faith practices, whilst liberation theology is a way of doing theology that wants to cut across all disciplines, in a sense, serving also to break the silos, as it embodies a theological methodology that is consistently praxis oriented.

In their conversations, both Aguilar Ramírez and De Beer wrestled with the question of what a truly liberating practical theology could look like; or, how do we practise a practical theology of liberation in our distinct contexts today; or, how are our faith practices reflected upon through the helpful and disruptive lenses of liberation theology and, through Aguilar's intervention, also through the insights offered by Girard's careful attention to the victim in mimetic theory?

During this conversation the authors also developed an awareness for the conversation that took place between liberation theologians and René Girard (ed. Assmann 1991). These dialogues brought together two seemingly different epistemologies to expand their own hermeneutical horizons. With this article the authors aim to bring awareness to such conversation, bridge a knowledge gap and expand the conversation to engage practical theology through its potentially emancipatory and liberative expressions (Müller 2004).

Why engage in such a conversation? The authors' commitment is to progress theologies that respond to the collective woundedness of developing countries in a way that is contextually relevant. The authors understand such collective woundedness to be embodied both individually and structurally; in persons and in institutions; in those who formerly represented the oppressed and those who represented the oppressor; and in contemporary and sometimes new forms of oppressor and victim relationships.

The question the authors attempt to respond in this article is: How do we bring together the insights from mimetic theory, liberation theology and practical theology to develop a practical theology of liberation? In the next pages, the authors seek to explore possible fusions of these worlds and ways in which such fusions could find application in real-life contexts.

Fusing three different worlds

The theological worlds that the authors are merging in this article are very different from each other. They were born in different contexts, times and circumstances. Thereby, each theological insight is distinctive, though complementary to each other. In the next pages, the authors want to introduce the reader to a logical progression of ideas that will tie mimetic theory to liberation theology and practical theology.

Mimetic theory and the intelligence of the victim

Let us begin with a brief explanation of mimetic theory, as it is the paradigm through which Aguilar Ramírez, at least, seeks to fuse liberation theology and practical theology. Mimetic theory was introduced by René Girard as an anthropological perspective that seeks to understand violence in the human experience. Mimetic theory has two elements at its core. The first element is *mimetic desire*. The second element is the *scapegoat mechanism*. The concept of desire that Girard developed proposes that 'human desire is not based on the spontaneity of the subject's desire, but rather the desires that surround the subject' (Palaver 2013:35). This implies that what individuals think they desire is not born out of their originality and lust as proposed by Freud (Gammelgaard 2011:268–270), nor from their desire of

recognition from the other, as proposed by Heidegger (Kirwan 2005:31). For that reason, when mimetic desire goes out of control, and people seek to attain the same object that another person desires, rivalry arises, and violence is born. In Girard's (1977) words:

> [R]ivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, the subject desires the object because the rival desires it. In desiring an object, the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires. (p. 145)

In other words, desire for a specific object can turn violent, as those who imitate the desire for the same object will do whatever it takes to obtain the object of their imitated desire.

This brings us to the scapegoat mechanism. When people start reciprocating violence, they perpetrate it to achieve the object they desire. Violence, then, becomes like a virus and spreads throughout a community as a result of the *mimetism* that it carries. When all hell breaks loose, the community reaches a point of possible extinction as violence has become unstoppable. As a result, the community must find a way to appease the mimetic crisis created by the clashing of desires. The only way to control the violence is through finding a scapegoat to blame. Let us have Girard (1977) explain in his own words:

> [E]ach member's hostility, caused by clashing against others, becomes converted from an individual feeling to a communal force unanimously directed against a single individual. The slightest hint, the most groundless accusation, can circulate with vertiginous speed and is transformed into irrefutable proof. The corporate sense of conviction snowballs, each member taking confidence from his neighbour by a rapid process of mimesis. The firm conviction of the group is based on no other evidence than the unshakable unanimity of its own logic […] All the rancors scattered at random among the divergent individuals, all the differing antagonisms now converge on an isolated and unique figure, the *surrogate victim*. (p. 79)

The process described here is what Girard calls the *mimetic crisis*. It is almost the point of no return in the spread of violence. A mimetic crisis is when violence becomes unstoppable, when all members of a community are against each other. For example, the beginning of a possible mimetic crisis happened on 15 August 2005, when two of the most infamous gangs of Guatemala City, the MS-13 and the Barrio 18, broke a truce known as *Pacto del Sur*. This treaty promised relative peace among these two criminal groups in order to not disturb the everyday lives of common Guatemalans and the gangs' relationships inside the prison system. The breaking of the accord between the gangs left 30 inmates murdered across four different prisons (Prensa Libre 2017). In archaic societies, the only way to avert such communal destruction was through the institution of religion. Archaic religion instituted a triad – myth, rituals and prohibitions – to avoid carnage and mimetic contagion. The myth was the story of the first mimetic crisis. The purpose of the myth was to defuse violence, as it would present a community with the possible scenario of communal extinction. Rituals were the performance of the myth, that is to say, the religious practices that would re-enact the myth – the first mimetic crisis. Finally, prohibitions were the laws that addressed mimetic desire to avoid rivalry and thereby evade uncontrollable violence (Girard 1977:89–118). This for Girard is the birth of archaic religion and religious rationality. As a part of the ritual element of archaic religion, sacrifice became the ritual that keeps violence in check. Sacrifice is the mechanism through which all violence is poured into an innocent victim that atones for the sins of the community, which helps to avoid the repetition of a mimetic crisis.

What Girard's (1986:15) insight brought to the attention of his readers was the perspective of the victim. The persecutors will always convince themselves that they had nothing to do with the killing of the scapegoat. No argument will allow the victim's story to be brought to light as the mechanism has to remain secret to function. In facing the scapegoat mechanism and its power, Girard came to the conclusion that the gospels in the Christian Bible demythologise the founding murder (the beginning of religion), sacrifice and hidden mechanism of the surrogate victim through the person of Jesus. In his findings Girard (1987) argued that the Bible is the only sacred text that sheds light on the story of the victims. He argued that the gospels are explicit in the way mimetic rivalry works. The gospels begin with rivalry and violence and finish with reconciliation (Girard 2001:104).

What Girard's insights opened in theology is what James Alison (1998:80) has called 'the intelligence of the victim'. This is the next step in the process of mimetic theory's insight applied to theology. The intelligence of the victim is an ontological change that was revealed in the person of Jesus. It is the process of rereading and reimagining Jesus' life as the self-giving and self-revealing forgiving victim. According to Alison (1998), Jesus transmitted to his disciples a new way of believing and being. Jesus started an inductive process to teach them a new way of seeing the world, a way that brings to the front the stories of those who have been victimised by society. As a result, if one is affected by this kind of intelligence, one is called to stand in solidarity with the countless victims of archaic society and contemporary institutions.

As one enters into Girard's ideas, one can see that his epistemological point of departure seems to be away from current and practical realities. It comes from the knowledge of the great novelists (Girard 1965; Kirwan 2005; Palaver 2013). It appears to come from the ivory tower of academia. However, his insight brings a very specific view into the scapegoat mechanism, which keeps producing victims, even within contemporary society. Furthermore, as James Alison (1996) posits:

> [M]imetic theory proposes a way of understanding humans which is simultaneously personal and social, since it treats the person as absolutely dependent on the other, both social and personal, who is previous to it. (p. 18)

Because Girard points to sacrifice as the means religion has to bring peace and keep violence in check, one can agree with Durkheim that religious rationality is the beginning of all archaic and contemporary institutions. In a previous work of Aguilar's (2018), the practicality of Girard's insight is applied in the urban context.[1]

Mimetic theory in dialogue with liberation theology

This article has already summarised Girard's mimetic theory. Here, Girard's introduction of the scapegoat mechanism is emphasised as the gateway to the story of the victim and the gospels as a subversion of this mechanism. These two Girardian ideas are quite important, as they were key to a conversation held between Girard and some liberation theologians in Brazil, in 1991. There seems to be little knowledge about this conversation, which is why it is introduced here as a key element to the fusion and expansion of a combined lens.

In the origins of liberation theology, the epistemological point of departure was the suffering of the poor and the theologian's own solidarity with those living in conditions of poverty and suffering (Boff & Boff 1987:3). This point of departure has since been expanded to all who are marginalised and victimised by the current system of the global sacrificial theology (Míguez, Rieger & Sung 2009:130), thus enlarging the category of the poor to a wider expression of possible innocent victims of contemporary institutions. Further, the level of solidarity required from those doing liberation theology has been extended, to the point of practising an indecent theology that sees theology as a political, economic and sexual act (Althaus-Reid 2005).

During the conversations that Girard and liberation theologians held, Franz J. Hinkelammert (ed. Assmann 1991:43) made an important differentiation between *el don de sí*[2] and self-sacrifice after exploring Girard's ideas on sacred violence. For the liberation theologians, self-sacrifice implied a constant acceptance of the sacrificial order and an affirmation of such a mechanism. *El don de sí*, however, implied a refusal of the sacrificial order and a subversion of the scapegoat mechanism (ed. Assmann 1991:43). For that reason, the solidarity that liberation theology asks from those who partake in it is to the point of *darse a sí mismo* [give oneself to something].

Self-giving is a concept that goes beyond self-sacrifice. The term in Spanish, *el don de sí* [the gift of oneself], implies a profound ontological and epistemic transformation. One could argue that the insight presented in *el don de sí* comes from the intelligence of the victim. *El don de sí* immediately puts liberation theology and Girard's mimetic theory in an epistemic point of convergence. Instead of self-giving being

1. For further elaboration or clarification of Girard's ideas, also see Kirwan (2005), Palaver (2013) and Warren (2013).

2. 'The gift of oneself in self-giving' is the wording in English that in the opinion of the authors englobes the concept best.

an act that confirms and accepts a violent, victim-creating order, Girard pointed to the story of the victim as a subversion of the sacrificial system.

The liberation theologians had granted sacrificial victim status to the poor and marginalised when they categorised the sufferings of such groups as the historical continuation of the suffering servant of God (ed. Assmann 1991:46; Sobrino 1994:26). With these correlations put together, Girard and the liberation theologians came to the point of identifying both mimetic theory and liberation theology as non-sacrificial theological insights. The way this is phrased is quite significant as it leaves antisacrificial ideas out of conversation. Hinkelammert (ed. Assmann 1991:29) argued that *antisacrificial* should not be confused with *non-sacrificial* because in the name of antisacrificialism the West has justified sacrificial violence. Such is the case of the conquest of the Americas, where in the name of antisacrificialism the Spaniards sacrificed thousands of people to stop pagan sacrifices. The present liberation theologians made sure to state that in the name of antisacrificialism, more sacrifice and violence was perpetrated in the Latin American continent. The idea of *non-sacrificialism*, thus, is the overcoming of the need for sacrifices (ed. Assmann 1991:129). Thereby, both liberation theology and mimetic theory are non-sacrificial instead of antisacrificial (ed. Assmann 1991:29).

It is important to mention that during the conversations, Hugo Assmann arrived at the conclusion that the epistemological difference – liberation theology starts from the lived experience of the oppressed, and mimetic theory starts with the great novelists – guided liberation theology in a particular practical direction, the option for the poor. The issue at hand is that Girard was not focused on confronting violence directly, whereas liberation theologians are concerned with the transformation of structural sin and violence. However, Assmann (ed. 1991:101–103) argued that Girard's lack of concrete practical engagement opened the space for a more enriched exploration of Girard's ideas from a liberation theology perspective. The epistemological convergence of Girard's ideas and liberation theology lies within the basic presuppositions of liberation theology, because mimetic theory and liberation theology reject the sacrifices of human lives in the name of progress and the idols that require such sacrifices (ed. Assmann 1991:14).

With this in mind, one can argue that liberation theology was able to acknowledge the suffering voices of the poor, marginalised and vulnerable as the voices of the victims of contemporary forms of sacrifice. On the other hand, mimetic theory was able to explain how the scapegoat mechanism is at work in that suffering, how sacred violence is still at the centre of contemporary societal systems asking for the sacrifice of the poor and how the biblical text presents a response to human violence. Integrating the insights of mimetic theory into a liberation theological paradigm would enable it to go beyond only acknowledging the

voices of those who suffer under contemporary political, economic and religious institutions. Liberation theology now has a tool to engage the deconstruction of such institutions through a deeper understanding of religious rationality.

Practical theology infiltrated by liberation theology and mimetic theory: Possibilities of liberating practical theology

Liberation theology has a tradition of involvement in the struggles of people facing injustice. That is not always the case with those doing practical theology. In the case of South Africa, Müller (2004:294) observed that it was a small stream of South African practical theologians that was directly involved in the struggle against apartheid. In Latin America, and in South Africa, adherents of liberation theology, and black theology of liberation, were involved in the struggle for liberation of all people under social, economic and political oppression (Biko 2002; Boff & Boff 1987:41–42).

In seeking to infiltrate into practical theology the insights of liberation theology and mimetic theory, there is an insistence that practical theology that is not overtly liberative or emancipatory and, deliberately subversive of empire, has no right to exist in the Global South, or anywhere for that matter (Santos 2014:133–135) – because 'it was for freedom that Christ has set us free!' (Gl 5:1). Not all forms of practical theology are deliberately praxis oriented and therefore in the praxis model of Bevans' (1992:79–87) description of contextual theology. This article is intentional in seeking to foster a theological praxis that mediates cross-contextual connection of struggles in a project of emancipation that does not allow for historical or theological reductionisms that could hinder liberative theological work.

The epistemological points of departure between liberation theology and the dominant theorists who shaped practical theology over the past 25 years are markedly different. Liberation theology clearly departs from the lived experience of the poor, marginalised and those under oppression: the experiences of the non-person (Gutierrez 2009). On the other hand, when reflecting on Browning (1996) and Osmer (2008), who have shaped practical theological discourse fundamentally in recent decades, the starting point, or the lived experience that they aim to describe, relates primarily to the local faith community, in the Global North, from a narrower pastoral perspective (Osmer 2008:1). At first glance Browning (1996:273) seems to have an inclination towards a liberationist approach. However, in how he engages the black church experience, he reveals a rather disconnected criticism, not making sense of their communal experience as aspiration towards liberation, belying his own epistemic location.

It is not possible to overemphasise the importance of epistemic location and interlocution. Epistemic location is what will distinguish practical theology that serves empire from a practical theology that is radically emancipatory. In reality, practical theologians who engage concretely in struggles of liberation are always the result of an epistemic turn to those who are marginalised and excluded by society. The non-person, the vulnerable, in the city becomes the interlocutor of our theological work, even before the practising Christian in our faith communities. They might sometimes be the same person, but often they are not (Adam 2019:283).

In recent years, some practitioners of practical theology have opened a post-foundational door to theological inquiry, thus creating theological methodologies that engage both sacred and societal texts in their hermeneutical approach. In the case of Müller (2004), his post-foundational approach helped him turn towards new and emerging narratives. In the process his own understanding of practical theology changed (Müller 2004:304): 'this way of doing theology is also about deconstruction and emancipation'.

Once an epistemic turn has been made to locate oneself deliberately at the underside of history, practical theology too can engage in methodologies that are radically contextual. The shifts in Müller (2013) are an example of this, creating the freedom to now retrieve and merge methodologies, in ways that can respond faithfully to the cries of one's context. Now it becomes possible to see the correlation between practical theology's descriptive, interpretative, normative and pragmatic tasks (Osmer 2008) and liberation theology's socio-analytical, hermeneutical and practical mediations (Boff & Boff 1987). Even more: Since its beginnings practical theology held ethical decision-making as one of its central tenets (Browning 1996:96). The question that should be asked by any theologian, *What does my theological tradition truly stand for?*, every so often leads to the principle of neighbourly love as the golden rule (Browning 1996:105). Liberation, as the holistic freedom of my neighbour, is a result not of pity or guilt but of neighbourly love.

The intradisciplinary nature of practical theology, which allows the borrowing of concepts, methods and techniques from other disciplines (Müller 2013:2), opens the door for mimetic theory to enter into a conversation with practical theology. In addition, the interdisciplinary nature of practical theology and the methods, also from the social sciences, that it employs, can help and expand liberation theological analysis and discernment. Simultaneously, the use of Marxist and other analytical tools by liberation theologians, can assist practical theology in its interpretation of societal structures, spatial configurations and local and global geographies. In combination, a practical theology of liberation, drawing from such a diverse pool of methodological tools, can become quite a potent post-foundational perspective. With the fusion of practical and liberation theology a post-structuralist and post-foundational perspective is taken. The theologian, now a practical theologian of liberation, has the possibility for a positive bias towards theologies that give a central place to the excluded voices amidst late capitalism (Mejido Costoya 2006:276–277).

Mimetic theory on its own has had a great deal of influence in different fields of study, ranging from religion and theology (Alison 1996; Girard 1977) to economics (Dumouchel 2014; Dupuy 2014), sociology (Tomelleri 2015) and psychoanalysis (Reineke 2014). The authors opine that the three elements of mimetic theory that resonate across different sciences are (1) an understanding of mimetic desire; (2) rivalry, violence and exclusion as a result of desire; and (3) the innocence of the scapegoat. With these three elements in mind, mimetic theory can contribute to a more robust practical theology of liberation. A fusion of insights from practical theology, liberation theology and mimetic theory can provide a new impetus for the practical theologian of liberation to explore the faith practices of faith communities amidst late capitalist society, from the perspective of the victims of current political, economic and religious institutions. The fusion of these worlds provides a tool for deconstruction and reconstruction of faith communities that could be more aware of their own exclusionary scapegoating practices.

What allowed us to bring together mimetic theory, liberation theology and practical theology was the intelligence of the victim. These three paradigms fused together are a powerful cross-contextual tool that allows the practical theologian of liberation to reimagine the humanity not only of the oppressed and marginalised, but also the humanity of the oppressors and perpetrators of violence. The fusion of this paradigms will build a theology of resistance that always struggles to rehumanise those who are about to be sacrificed (Aguilar 2018:131).

Practicing a practical theology of liberation and peacebuilding

Over the last three and a half years, Aguilar Ramírez had the opportunity to apply the fusion of these paradigms to his context. He wrote a dissertation titled *Living, Laughing, and Loving in Guatemala City: A Practical Theology of Peacebuilding*. The research responded to the question, what will a practical theology of peacebuilding look like in Guatemala City in response to the collective woundedness of Guatemalan society? The process was both challenging and exciting as he aimed to find the answer from within his missional faith community, the Centre for Transforming Mission (CTM), a local urban mission network in Guatemala City. Thirty grassroots leaders belong to the network, and they represent 25 different organisations and ministries. The theological merging presented in the previous pages was key to the research approach. It paved the way to develop three movements of theological exploration: *living*, *laughing* and *loving*. In the paragraphs that follow, the authors explain how Aguilar Ramírez approached the research and a practical theology of liberation helped him in the process of developing a practical theology of peacebuilding.

Living: Describing the context and faith practices

The way the research question was crafted was through the *intelligence of the victim*. The collective woundedness of Guatemala City is approached from the perspective of the victims as a history of traumatic events that affect the way Guatemalans understand their being-in-the-world. This was done through a post-rationalist understanding of the psychology of trauma (Cruz Villalobos 2015). As a result, the context revealed that in Guatemala, 'you cannot avoid confrontation with trauma, it permeates every aspect in everyday life, and the professional and organizational contexts as well' (Rohr 2015:108).

With this in mind the descriptive task of practical theology served as a starting point, which allowed for the interpretation of lives and practices (Osmer 2008:33) amidst a specific historical, social and religious allocation through the dialogue between Aguilar Ramírez's religious horizon and the horizon of the co-researchers of the dissertation (Browning 1996:91), the CTM network grassroots leaders. *Living*, as a descriptive movement, engaged the socio-analytical mediation of liberation theology (Boff & Boff 1987), which opened the space for a liberationist engagement through the analysis of the Guatemalan collective woundedness. In doing so, two faith practices surfaced as a result of the interpretation of qualitative data gathered through a series of interviews and a focus group. Firstly, the leaders of the network showed that even though they had worked with marginalised communities for many years, they hold onto exclusion as a faith practice. Interestingly, the leaders showed an ambivalent theology that brought up the second faith practice, the beauty of anthropological reimagination, which emerged from their discourse at the same level as their exclusionary practices. Anthropological reimagination is the capacity grassroots leaders have to reimagine the humanity of the communities they serve with reckless abandonment, communities that have been victimised by the global sacrificial theology through Guatemalan society's racist, socio-economic, sexist, religious and neocolonial forms of exclusion and violence.

All was done with the understanding that the grassroots leaders of the CTM network were also victims of the global sacrificial theology that supported the exclusionary institutions and representations of the Guatemalan collective woundedness. With the connection made between Girard's mimetic theory, practical theology and liberation theology, it was possible to begin the exploration and articulation of the Guatemalan collective woundedness without condemnation and vengeance, but with love and freedom (Sobrino 1994:34). The research process of *living* amidst the Guatemalan collective woundedness was quite challenging. It impacted Aguilar Ramírez deeply as he found himself amidst his own wounding. The CTM network was revealed as a micro-cosmos of the larger Guatemalan society. People are wounded in the same way, and people are wounding each other, as they repeat many historical patterns and faith practices that are exclusionary in nature.

Laughing: The silliness of exclusion

With the context laid out and the paradigms fused, the work proceeded to frame the research and writing within the realm of contextual theology. This created space to frame the grassroots leaders' faith practices and way of theologising. This was an important element of the theologising process, recognising the contextuality of grassroot leaders' theologising (Bevans 1992:3). The acknowledgement of context as a key element of the theological practice provides the inter-contextuality needed to avoid historical and social reductionisms that render the theological articulation locally limited.

At this point the dissertation engaged interdisciplinary dialogue to explore *space* as a meta-philosophical category that enhances contextual theology. The reason behind this lies in the global urban reality that most people face today (Davis 2006; Um & Buzzard 2013). If a practical theology of liberation and peacebuilding aims to be contextually relevant, it must consider the production of space (Lefebvre 2013) as a key element of the theologising act. It is through the spatial experiences of suffering, marginalisation and exclusion that the victims of contemporary institutions can open a space of lament (Prinsloo 2016). The *negative lived spatial experiences* (Prinsloo 2013:774) of people become the centre for the development of non-violent hermeneutics. The understanding of how space is produced thereby enhances contextual theology, the descriptive task of practical theology and the social mediation of liberation theology. The victims of contemporary institutions and the way they develop their *spatial experience* are elevated within the theological articulation, action, reflection and discernment. In addition, taking *space* as a category to add to theologising process allows grassroots leaders and the practical theologian of liberation to place one's exclusionary practices within the physicality of urban, religious, economic and political spaces and bodies.

Because the collective woundedness, the negative lived spatial experiences and the suffering of the vulnerable are at the centre, the practical theologian of liberation has no option but to turn to the exuberance and goodness of God's love to look for hope. Here is where the intelligence of the victim comes back into the theologising process. It is after describing the context and feeling the weight of people's spatial experiences that mimetic theory brings hope amidst such despair. The practical theologian of liberation can now look at the anthropology of mimetic theory, the nature of human relationships and the scapegoat mechanism to realise that God has nothing to do with the exclusion and perpetration of violence on the person of Jesus. Thereby, God has nothing to do with inflicting suffering on humans (Alison 1996:42). It is humans who hurt each other. At the level of non-violent hermeneutics, one can agree with Alison (1996) when he says:

> [W]e can see a positive intention of love in the way in which Jesus gave himself up to death; and that positive intention of love is described by saying that God gave his only son. (p. 45)

Arriving at the conclusion that God did not ask for Jesus' sacrifice, thus not purposefully inflicting suffering on humans, reveals that our exclusionary practices are just plain silly. Humans are not supposed to carry the deeds of a violent god in their hands. Humans have the opportunity to live out of love and the exuberance of God's vivacity. This is truly a practical theology of liberation. We are liberated from the weight of exclusion in the name of purity. We are freed to embrace the other and enter the faith(ful) practice of radical hospitality (Beck 2011), thus creating a space for ourselves and the boundary-breaking other (Volf 1996:126).

Loving: Ethics of love and human catechism

It is impossible to fuse these three worlds without developing an ethical framework. Liberation is rooted in the ethics of liberation, which departs from the alterity of the victim, which reveals the oppressive material value system as intrinsically evil (Dussel 1998:311). Practical theology is rooted in the ethics of love (Browning 1996:139–148). Mimetic theory opens the space for the innocence of the victim and the possibility of a God who is not violent (Alison 1996:41–44). With these ethical frameworks at hand, Aguilar Ramírez took the liberty granted by practical theology to merge and expand an ethical scaffold that would respond to the collective woundedness of Guatemalan society, and beyond.

The development of a contextual ethics of love was no small task. And yet, Aguilar Ramirez's dissertation only scratched the surface of what can be done with the fusion of these three worlds. The beginning of the ethics of love and *human catechism* lies within the CTM network in Guatemala City. It begins with the spiritual, physical and emotional faith practice of anthropological reimagining of the grassroots leaders of CTM Guatemala's faith community. *Human catechism* is the formational process that people undergo when entering a community of positive imitation and desire. If what Girard proposes is true about violence and rivalry, then it must be true about positive ways of imitating each other in a way that brings societal transformation.

It was the intelligence of the victim in conjunction with liberation theology and then infiltrated into practical theology that naturally led us to the understanding of the other as being otherwise. With those few words, the reader may sense the direction of this ethical turn. It is in Levinas (1977, 1987, 2006) that the practical theologian of liberation can find a language of alterity that would not allow for simplistic philosophical and ethical reductionisms. A practical theology of liberation and peacebuilding has no other option but to see God beyond language. God is present and made tangible in the responsibility towards the other (Meylahn 2013:80). This leaves the liturgical, ritual and corporate expressions of practical and liberation theology with the task of teaching the faith community to be more human.

Human catechism is the result of the paradigm fusion and a practical theology of liberation and peacebuilding. It is the

outcome of human relationships that at times went sour. It cannot be emphasised enough: the fusion of these paradigms is challenging. It is emotionally and spiritually tiring at times. However, the freedom that is found at the individual level is something that is worth holding onto. The openness that was developed to relate to the community of grassroots leaders who served as co-researchers is worth all the work with its adventures and misadventures. Such a process can never start without showing up – deeply present, in solidarity, with one's own wounds.

Conclusion

The importance of what is mentioned in the previous paragraphs goes beyond the academic contribution of a practical theology of liberation and the dissertation that was born out of this encounter. The significance lies within the practicality and community from which all comes. It is impossible that the authors would have been able to arrive at all of these ideas without a practical and liberative approach to the research. The construction of knowledge was not done in isolation. It was done through a relational approach that reimagines the grassroots leaders of the CTM network as theological voices that need to be heard in the academic setting. The fusion happened at street level to then be articulated in theological, social studies and anthropological jargon. This, of course, implies that there is a great deal of liberation that still needs to happen at the academic and street levels to have both worlds in close connection with each other. This was a step, nevertheless, as it is a response to finding oneself deeply wounded amidst a specific context. The essence of the shift to a liberated practical theology lies in the mutuality of the theologising act. It is the liberation of oneself as a theologian, practical theology as a discipline and a pedagogy that allows one's community, friends and family to be in constant theological action, reflection and discernment.

We want to argue that theological liberation and innovation are of utmost importance for the times we live in, especially in the pandemic and post-pandemic world. In order to stand with the victim, theological commitments, constructs and methods need to be liberated from their own servitude to empire. Innovation does not ask the practical theologian of liberation to create something from scratch. It calls Christians to be the resistance amidst times and institutions that seek to dehumanise the vulnerable. Innovation – and theological advancement – require retrieving those resources that the Christian tradition truly stands for – love, peace and true humanity – and turning those assets into faith practices that boldly resist wherever the contrary finds dominance.

The fusion of theological worlds creates a practical theology of liberation and peacebuilding with the fullness of its possibilities and the breadth of its limitations. The fusion of theological accents implies that one cannot pick and choose only the good elements of each methodology. It implies that one has to be completely conscious of the shortcomings and strengths of each theological scaffolding to bring a comprehensive theological articulation that can respond well to the collective woundedness of our context. The fusion of mimetic theory, liberation theology and practical theology indicates that *glocal* theological articulations are not close to being exhausted. The authors would argue, as practical theologians of liberation from the Global South, that we are just beginning.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this research article.

Author's contributions

J.D.A.R. and S.D.B. conceived of the presented idea. J.D.A.R. developed the theory and performed the computations. S.D.B. verified the analytical methods. S.D.B. encouraged J.D.A.R. to investigate connections between mimetic theory and liberation theology and supervised the findings of this work. Both authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

This article was written as part of the requirements for a PhD in Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria. The title of the PhD thesis was *Living, Laughing, and Loving in Guatemala City: A Practical Theology of Peacebuilding*.

Ethical considerations

The University of Pretoria granted the authors the ethical clearance to engage in the empirical research, writing of J.D.A.R.'s dissertation and to explore the themes presented here.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

Adam, J.C., 2019, 'Practical theology in Brazil and Latin America today: An attempt to report', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 23(2), 274–286.

Aguilar, J., 2018, 'Guatemalan grassroots theology as resistance to global sacrificial theology', in S. De Beer (ed.), *Just faith: Glocal responses to planetary urbanisation*, pp. 103–133, AOSIS, Cape Town.

Alison, J., 1996, *Raising Abel: The recovery of the escatological imagination*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, NY.

Alison, J., 1998, *The joy of being wrong*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, NY.

Althaus-Reid, M., 2005, *La Teología indecente: Perversiones teológicas en sexo, género y política*, Edicions Bellaterra, Barcelona.

Assmann, H. (ed.), 1991, *Sobre Idolos y Sacrificios: René Girard con Teólogos de la Liberación*, Editorial DEI, San José.

Beck, R., 2011, *Unclean*, Cascade Books, Eugene, OR.

Bevans, S.B., 1992, *Models of contextual theology*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, NY.

Biko, S., 2002, *I write what I like*, in A. Stubbs (ed.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Boff, L. & Boff, C., 1987, *Introducing liberation theology*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, NY.

Browning, D.S., 1996, *A fundamental practical theology: Desciptive and strategic proposals*, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, MN.

Cruz Villalobos, L., 2015, 'Psicología y Hermenéutica de la Esperanza', in H.F. Bullón (ed.), *Misión Holística, Acción Interdisciplinaria y Realidad Latinoamericana*, pp. 75–109, Libros Desafío, Grand Rapids, MI.

Davis, M., 2006, *Planet of slums*, Verso, New York, NY.

Dumouchel, P., 2014, *The ambivalence of scarcity and other essays*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, MI.

Dupuy, J.-P., 2014, *Economy and the future*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, MI.

Dussel, E., 1998, *Ética de la Liberación: En la Edad de la Globalización y de la Exclusión*, 6th edn., Editorial Trotta, Madrid.

Fanon, F., 2004, *The wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, NY.

Gammelgaard, J., 2011, 'Love, drive and desire in the works of Freud, Lacan and Proust', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 92(4), 963–983. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-8315.2011.00355.x

Girard, R., 1965, *Deceit, desire and the novel: Self and other in literary structure*, 2nd edn., Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.

Girard, R., 1977, *Violence and the sacred*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.

Girard, R., 1986, *The Scapegoat*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.

Girard, R., 1987, *Things hidden since the foundation of the world*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Girard, R., 2001, *I see Satan fall like lightning*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, NY.

Gutierrez, G., 2009, *Teología de La Liberación*, 8th edn., Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca.

Kirwan, M., 2005, *Discovering Girard*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Plymouth.

Lefebvre, H., 2013, *La Producción del Espacio*, Capitán Swing, Madrid.

Levinas, E., 1977, *Totalidad e infinito*, 3rd edn., Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca.

Levinas, E., 1987, *De Otro Modo que Ser o Más Allá de la Esencia*, 5th edn., Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca.

Levinas, E., 2006, *Humanism of the other*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, IL.

Mejido Costoya, M.J., 2006, 'The postmodern: Liberation of language', in E.D. Aponte & M.A. De La Torre (eds.), *Handbook of Latina/o theologies*, pp. 276–283, Chalice Press, St. Louis, MO.

Meylahn, J.-A., 2013, *The limits and possibilities of postmetaphysical god-talk: A conversation between Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida*, Peeters, Leuven.

Míguez, N., Rieger, J. & Sung, J.M., 2009, *Beyond the spirit of empire*, SCM Press, London.

Müller, J., 2004, 'HIV/AIDS, narrative practical theology, and postfoundationalism: The emergence of a new story', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 60(1–2), 293–306. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v60i1/2.516

Müller, J.C., 2013, 'Practical theology as part of the landscape of social sciences and humanities – A transversal perspective', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69(2), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i2.1299

Nouwen, H.J.M., 2006, *Love in a fearful land: A Guatemalan story*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, NY.

Osmer, R.R., 2008, *Practical theology: An introduction*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI.

Pacepa, I.M., 2015, 'The secret roots of liberation theology', *National Review*, viewed 03 May 2020, from https://www.nationalreview.com/2015/04/secret-roots-liberation-theology/.

Palaver, W., 2013, *René Girard's mimetic theory*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, MI.

Prensa Libre, 2017, '2005: Maras Se Enfrentan en Penales', *Prensa Libre*, Guatemala City, viewed 23 July 2018, from https://www.prensalibre.com/hemeroteca/maras-se-enfrentan-en-penales.

Prinsloo, G.T.M., 2013, 'Suffering bodies – Divine absence: Towards a spatial reading of ancient near Eastern Laments with reference to Psalm 13 and an Assyrian Elegy', *Old Testament Essays* 26(3), 773–803.

Prinsloo, G.T.M., 2016, 'Suffering as separation: Towards a spatial reading of Psalm 11', *Old Testament Essays* 28(3), 777–806. https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2015/v28n3a13

Reineke, M.J., 2014, *Intimate domain: Desire, trauma, and mimetic theory*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, MI.

Rohr, E., 2015, 'Supervisión Psicosocial en una Sociedad Traumatizada. Programas de Paz y Reconciliación en Guatemala', in R. Spiller (ed.), *Nunca Más*, pp. 105–124, F & G Editores, Guatemala City.

Santos, B.D.S., 2014, *Epistemologies of the South*, Routledge, New York, NY.

Shannaham, C., 2014, *Voices from the Borderlan*, Routledge, London.

Sobrino, J., 1994, *Jesus the liberator: A historical-theological reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, Burns & Oates, Kent.

Tamez, E., 1979, *Bible of the oppressed*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR.

Tomelleri, S., 2015, *Ressentiment: Reflections on mimetic desire and society*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, MI.

Trible, P., 1984, *Texts of terror: Literary-feminist readings of biblical narratives*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA.

Um, S.T. & Buzzard, J., 2013, *Why cities matter: To god, the culture, and the church*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL.

Volf, M., 1996, *Exclusion and embrace*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN.

Warren, J., 2013, *Compassion or apocalypse?: A comprehensible guide to the thought of René Girard*, Christian Alternative Books, Winchester.