Agony in the Garden? Evaluating the Cosmology of Alejandro García- Rivera in View of the “Little Story” and the “Principle of Foregrounding”

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One cannot engage the work of Alejandro García-Rivera without being struck by the capaciousness of his theological creativity and insight. It is this capaciousness to which Robert Schreiter nods when he observes the diverse concepts of space that García-Rivera engages throughout his work. Schreiter delineates four concepts of space in the work of his former student, naming them: “the semiotic space of the subaltern, the interior space of the wound, the space and place of the garden, and the cosmic space of the final reconciliation.” Despite the distinctness of each of these spatial concepts, Schreiter detects “an almost harmonic quality” underlying the diverse character of García-Rivera’s work. In this essay, I will first affirm the harmonic quality resonating throughout the corpus of García-Rivera’s theology and suggest a way of accounting for this quality. I will then, however, shift my focus to a point of tension found within García-Rivera’s conceptions of space and argue that this point of tension can be leveraged to further develop his broad theological vision.

In St. Martín de Porres: The “Little Stories” and the Semiotics of Culture (1995), García-Rivera explores the manner in which “little stories”—the petit narratives of popular religion—were employed by Amerindian, mulatto, and mestizo populations in the Americas to subvert the “big story” of Christianity insofar as that big story was told for the purpose of sanctioning Spanish conquest. Through his exploration of the little stories surrounding the life of Martín de Porres, García-Rivera demonstrates how such stories affirmed the dignity of the culturally marginalized. As such, these little stories had the power of giving voice to the “subaltern” and, in so doing, reconfigure the big story of Christianity.

The desire to resist the various forms of domination is also present in García-Rivera’s work on aesthetics. In The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics (1999), he is not so much concerned with reflecting upon beauty in itself as he is in highlighting the subversive character of Gospel beauty. He underscores this character by developing theologically the concept of “foregrounding.”

The subversive aesthetic norm and the aesthetic principle of ‘foregrounding’ was discovered by Jan Mukarovsky when he wondered how it is that a poem converts a bunch of words, even a meaningful bunch of words, into something more, into something of Beauty. Mukarovsky noticed that the sense of Beauty was created in the poem through the sensuous foregrounding of sound through rhythm and cadence. Poetic ‘foregrounding’ contrasts the background prose by giving accent, i.e., value, to selected words. As such, ‘foregrounding’ consists of an elementary contrast and, thus, a sign.
After describing foregrounding in this manner, García-Rivera observes that this principle is embodied in Mary's "Magnificat," citing Luke's gospel: "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:51-52). Of this passage, García-Rivera writes, "Mary's aesthetics reveals the principle of 'foregrounding.' Not only are those who have been kept in the 'background' 'lifted up' into the 'foreground,' but also those who had previously achieved 'foregrounding' through the abuse and misuse of power now become part of the 'background.'" Thus, García-Rivera finds that the principle of foregrounding allows for the mutual realization of Beauty and Justice.

Finally, in *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology* (2009), García-Rivera elucidates a cosmological vision in which God intends for humanity to labor with God in cultivating ever deeper forms of beauty in a universe marked by suffering and evil. It is this text that García-Rivera views as his most direct response to his vision of hell referred to above. Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above. Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above.9 Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above.9 Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above.9 Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above.9 Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above.9 Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above.9 Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above.9 Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above.9 Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above.9 Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above.9 Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above.9 Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above.9 Here, García-Rivera argues for an understanding of the human vocation that runs counter to his vision of hell referred to above.9

It is noteworthy, then, to find that the manner with which García-Rivera attends to the problem of evil in *The Garden of God* raises some key difficulties. In order to understand why this is the case, it will be helpful to consider two related elements characterizing the book: its reliance on the thought of the twentieth-century Jesuit paleontologist and mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin; and the narrative form that García-Rivera adopts in articulating his theological cosmology.

Undoubtedly, Teilhard is the figure that exercises the most influence on García-Rivera's cosmological vision. Thus, in order to understand García-Rivera's argument in *The Garden of God*, one must understand the Teilhardian framework that García-Rivera adopts. Teilhard was a pioneer in attempting to correlate the Christian faith with evolutionary science. In particular, he retrieves the concept of cosmic Christology from the Christian tradition and correlates this Christology with a teleologically determined theory of evolution. Thus, Teilhard argues that the whole of the universe is Christic in nature and, through the progression of the evolutionary process, Christ comes to be more fully realized in the universe. Furthermore, according to Teilhard, the evolutionary process is aimed toward its goal: the full realization of the cosmic Christ in the universe. This full realization is the "omega point" of the evolutionary process. Here it should be observed that Teilhard's story of the universe is articulated within a metanarrative form.

Schreiter has noted García-Rivera's penchant for creatively building upon already-existing concepts and ideas. However, while it is true that, in *The Garden of God*, García-Rivera develops Teilhard's cosmological narrative through an aesthetic lens—so that one finds the universe to be continuously opening to ever deeper forms of Beauty—it must also be noted that García-Rivera tends towards an uncritical adoption of both Teilhard's cosmological theory of evolutionary progress and the metanarrative form within which Teilhard constructs his theological cosmology. It is these uncritical adoptions that are most in tension with García-Rivera's previous work. The reason for this is that cosmological metanarratives of evolutionary progress—as Teilhard's surely can be described—tend to undercut one's ability to cultivate "ears to hear" (Mark 4:9) the cries of the poor and marginalized.

This is a point that J. Matthew Ashley makes in his critique of the recent propensity of theologians to interpret evolutionary history within a metanarrative form. As Ashley observes, regarding cosmological grand narratives, "it is impossible for any metanarratives of this sort to escape the Scylla of ignoring the problem of suffering or the Charybdis of explaining it away within a framework that … justifies past suffering in light of the greater good that arises once the telos of the metanarratives has been achieved." Indeed, both of these tendencies are evident in Teilhard's work. As Schreiter observes, Teilhard was apt to undervalue the reality of evil in human history.14

Ironically, given García-Rivera's background, this leaning of Teilhard's is perhaps most disturbingly exemplified in Teilhard's reflections after the first atomic bomb was detonated. In Teilhard's essay "The Spiritual Repercussions of the Atom Bomb," the French Jesuit does not dwell on the horrors that this device might unleash upon innocent populations. Instead the essay focuses on the genius of human creativity. If Teilhard tends to ignore the problem of sin, he also demonstrates a proclivity to explain away suffering caused by both sin and natural evil. Here suffering is justified as a necessary step in the ongoing movement toward the fully realized Christological omega point.

These same difficulties are present in varying degrees within *The Garden of God*. Although it is clear that
García-Rivera does not ignore the problem of suffering in his text (on the contrary, it is perhaps the central theme of the work), his discussion of suffering nevertheless tends to focus more closely on natural evil than the problem of sin. Second, and more apparent, one also finds within García-Rivera’s cosmology the problematic tendency to explain suffering away. This tendency is demonstrated by the very reason García-Rivera gives for his turn to theological cosmology. According to García-Rivera, “Only a cosmic theology of heaven and earth can truly answer the questions raised by human hell.” The problem that emerges, however, is that it is dubious as to whether a person could or should truly answer such questions. The political theologian Miroslav Volf, for one, questions whether some forms of suffering can ever be rendered sensible. To illustrate this point, Volf recalls a scene from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and asks how one is to answer the agonized screams of a mother who has watched soldiers throw her living child to dogs to be torn apart? Indeed, attempts at offering too firm of an answer here would run the risk of minimizing the reality of such suffering.

It must also be observed that adopting a cosmological metanarrative of progress has the unwanted effect of impairing one’s ability to resist various forms of injustice. This is the case because the suffering caused by injustice can now be defended on the grounds that such suffering was required for the emergence of greater goods. This is a line of reasoning with which modernity is all too familiar. After all, did not the violence and oppression of colonialism soon come to be justified by grand narratives of progress? While García-Rivera is clearly intent on grappling with the problem of suffering, the cosmological narrative structure that he adopts in *Garden*—along with his largely uncritical retrieval of Teilhard—makes it difficult for him to attend to this problem adequately. Thus, whereas García-Rivera’s work in *St. Martín de Porres* and *Community of the Beautiful* runs the risk of justifying various forms of injustice in order to give a totalized explanation to the problem of suffering.

How is it possible, then, to attend to this difficulty in García-Rivera’s cosmology? Here, I am again in agreement with Ashley who suggests that attempts at “large-scale narratives” need not be wholly jettisoned. Instead, as Ashley writes, “When a narrative has one omnicompetent plot device … it requires correction, even interruption, by other elements of the story, or even other genres.” In view of Ashley’s comment, one begins to see how the tension between the concepts of space that García-Rivera employs can be made to bear theological fruit. The aforementioned concepts explored in *St. Martín de Porres* and *Community of the Beautiful* can correct and nuance the cosmological vision that García-Rivera articulates in his final book—a vision which, it should be reiterated, need not be abandoned.

How might such correctives be employed? First of all, one can observe that an omnicompetent cosmological narrative—such as the one proffered in *The Garden of God*—appears distinctly unattractive when judged by the principle of foregrounding. In such a narrative, the “lowly,” the ones who might be lifted up, are allowed to disappear behind a flattened cosmological landscape that is overly determined by the emergence of the “victors” of the evolutionary process. By way of contrast, the concept of foregrounding indicates that the emergence of a more beautiful universe is predicated upon making central the stories of marginalized persons and the victims of history.

However, turning to the subversive, aesthetic principle of foregrounding is, in and of itself, an insufficient corrective. This is because this principle would still allow for the possibility of explaining away suffering, even as it moves it to the foreground. Instead, foregrounding must be taken together with García-Rivera’s concept of “the little story.” As García-Rivera suggests when the little story is used as a device to inform a person’s worldview, the view of the “whole” that emerges is not a perfectly unified image, but rather a composite image or, in García-Rivera’s terms, a “mosaic.” Each of the tiles of the mosaic contains something of the whole, but they also have the power to interrupt and reformulate the “big story.” As Schreiter observes, García-Rivera shows that such little stories have the power “to generate a larger space in which a more comprehensive, generous sense of the human could unfold.”

Schreiter’s comments would seem to hold true for the universe as well as the human. The little stories of suffering and injustice—those which resist any easy explanation—as well as the little stories of hope and solidarity, can be employed to form a more complex and comprehensive cosmology, one whose very framework allows for greater attention to suffering, and by extension, to lament and a praxis of solidarity. A mosaic cosmology would necessarily be less self-assured in its claims regarding the universe than a cosmology painted with unambiguously solid brushstrokes (i.e. a grand-narrative cosmology). However, the lament and solidarity that the cosmological mosaic can engender also
would allow for the suffering of the “lowly” to be lifted up in the midst of this ambiguity. It is from within this lament and solidarity, then, that deeper forms of beauty can be more fully realized.

Thus, it would appear that endeavors to interrupt García-Rivera’s cosmology with his previous work in semiotics and aesthetics would be a fitting tribute to a scholar whose theological career was aimed at finding the grace of God in the midst of a suffering world. This type of critical engagement could build on the legacy of García-Rivera’s own mystical vision of hell, his conversion, and his subsequent theological career by continuing to sharpen the focus on the need for repentance, solidarity, and the cultivation of deeper forms of Justice and Beauty within the lives of all of God’s people.

ENDNOTES
1 In addition to engaging the thought of Alejandro García-Rivera, this essay also draws from a paper presented by Robert Schreiter at the Cosmic Liturgy conference held in honor of García-Rivera at DePaul University in November of 2011 which I had the privilege of attending. An edited version of Schreiter’s paper appears in the present volume of Diálogo. I wish to express my gratitude to the editors of this volume for allowing me access to Schreiter’s article while preparing my own contribution. Robert J. Schreiter, “Spaces Engaged and Transfigured: Alejandro García-Rivera’s Journey from Little Stories to Cosmic Reconciliation,” in Diálogo 16:2 (2013), 43.


5 Alejandro García-Rivera, St. Martin de Porres: The “Little Stories” and the Semiotics of Culture, with foreword by Virgil Elizondo and Intro. by Robert J. Schreiter (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), see esp. 9-39.

6 Ibid, see esp. ch. 5-8.


8 Ibid., 37.

9 García-Rivera states this explicitly writing of Garden: “It is my answer to the question that a view of hell on earth raised within me.” See García-Rivera, Garden of God, ix.

10 García –Rivera writes: “Bringing abundance to the natural has more to do with gardening than engineering.” The Garden of God, 113. In this statement, García-Rivera calls to mind as well as juxtaposes both the vocation of the “gardener” given by God to humanity in Gen. 2:15 and García-Rivera’s own previous work with Boeing.


12 For evidence of García-Rivera’s uncritical adoption of Teilhard, see Garden of God, ch. 2; for García-Rivera’s development of aesthetics within a Teilhardian framework, see ch. 4. It should also be noted that Teilhard’s view of evolution as having a goal is not accepted within mainstream theories of Darwinian evolution.


16 García-Rivera, The Garden of God, ix (italics are mine).


18 J. Matthew Ashley, “Reading the Universe Theologically,” 888.

19 Ibid., 32-35.