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The Prophet and the Poet: Richard Shaull and the Shaping of Rubem Alves's Liberative Theopoetics

Raimundo C. Barreto 

Department of History and Ecumenics, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ 08540, USA;
raimundo.barreto@ptsem.edu

Abstract: This article explores the intersection between history, mission, and theology in Latin America by shedding light on the encounter between North American missionary Richard Shaull and Brazilian theologian and poet Rubem Alves. It examines Shaull's impact on Alves as Alves became, first, one of the founders of Latin American liberation theology and, later, one of its challengers as he moved away from normative theological language towards theopoetics. In this article, I underscore particular snapshots of Alves' vast work, noting that the images of the poet and the prophet that permeate much of it are not mutually exclusive. I argue that Rubem Alves' provocative work remains an important resource for a theory of action that takes subjectivity and beauty seriously. Throughout this article, Shaull and Alves are presented as different but complementary thinkers, representative of Alves' prophetic and poetic types. It is argued that a closer look at the similarities and complementarities in the works of this duo may provide us with new insights through which Rubem Alves' poetic voice and Richard Shaull's prophetic persistence can come together as resources for the reimagining of our hopes for a more beautiful and just world.



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1. Introduction

In this article, I tell the history of an encounter between a North American missionary and a Brazilian student who would later become one of the founders of an influential Latin American theological school, liberation theology. The focus of the article is on the mutual influence between these thinkers, with special attention placed on the impact of Shaull's prophetic reformed theology on Alves and the latter's development of what I am calling liberative theopoetics.

Rubem Alves was one of the most promising thinkers of his generation. As Harvard theologian Harvey Cox introduced Rubem Alves' first book to his American readers in 1969, he described Alves as a brilliant thinker whose genius deserved particular attention amid a very talented generation of young theologians rising in the "Third World" (Cox 1969). Likewise, in the preface to another of Alves' books, sixteen years later, Richard Shaull (1985a) referred to him as one of the most prominent voices that had emerged in the "Third World". Alves was often described as a thinker beyond his time, someone whose ideas prefigured important movements. He was one of the Latin American theologians who gave birth to liberation theology, one of the most influential theological movements of the latter half of the twentieth century. In a rare public admission of his prominent role in the formation of that theological school, Alves stated:

My doctoral dissertation had the title "Towards a Theology of Liberation" and was, historically, the academic document which created the expression "theology of liberation." Somehow Princeton Theological Seminary was the birth place

of this theological stream which influence the life of the Christian churches throughout the world.¹

Alves' dissertation was the first book-length treatise where this expression appeared, a few years prior to the publication of Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation* (Gutierrez [1971] 1986).² Moreover, Alves' contribution to the emerging movement was unique. Referring to an interview with Leonardo Boff on the occasion of Rubem Alves' death, Brazilian theologian Paulo A. S. Nogueira (2017) affirmed:

On that occasion, Leonardo Boff, in an official statement printed in a widely circulated newspaper, highlighted the uniqueness of Rubem's contribution compared with other liberation theologians by noting that, on top of not adopting Marxism as a tool of theoretical mediation, he utilized psychoanalysis and explored the universe of subjectivity.³

Paying singular attention to subjectivity, Alves integrated literature and poetry into his theology, gradually leaving aside the formality of conventional theology. In fact, over the course of twenty years following the publication of his doctoral dissertation, Alves became a storyteller, a philosopher, a poet, a psychoanalyst, and a daily chronicler. During that time, he reached a new and much broader readership, many of whom had never heard of his work as a theologian. Whatever form his writings took, though, they remained infused with theological themes and references.⁴ Alves was a thinker always on the move, refusing to be confined within a particular discipline or school of thought. As early as the beginning of the 1970s, he began to explore new directions, infusing theology with poetry.⁵

Princeton theologian Daniel Migliore underscores Alves' literary skills, wondering about the kind of literary contribution he could have made. According to him, Alves had "the ability, the poetic and narrative skills, to write out of his own Latin American experience a novel that would have paralleled the tremendous contributions of someone like [Toni] Morrison."⁶ In his opinion, had Alves written such a novel, "there would have been a 'non-theological theological' dimension to it, just as there is in Morrison's novels." Alves opted instead for a different path. Despite the vastness of his work, he preferred to write in a dispersed and fragmented way, as a chronicler of the quotidian.⁷ Yet, the "theological non theological" dimension Migliore mentions permeated his work, whether he was telling a children's story, writing a poem, or penning a chronicle. In a way, Alves' migration from theology to philosophy and poetry, a phase of his life scholars have called poetic-philosophical (Nunes 2007), freed him to become a unique interpreter of the Brazilian soul. Regardless of the adopted style, the (good and bad) memories of his Protestant formation, and his rebellion against it, were always informing his reflections. Alves' legacy is multifaceted and interdisciplinary. His thought cannot be reduced to a singular emphasis. Instead, his work can be better appreciated when one considers the multiple insights and challenges posed in a fragmentary style, which more closely resembles snapshots capturing the wisdom of life's instances than a logically sequenced plot. That was part of his radical move from the confinement of academic guilds to the world.

Mine was an academic education. However, there came a time when I ceased to find enjoyment in writing for my peers. I began to write for children and ordinary

¹ Undated letter from Rubem Alves to Ian R. Torrance in the Fall of 2007.

² According to Harvey Cox, if it were not for the change in his dissertation title, which Alves' publisher demanded for its publication, Rubem Alves rather than Gustavo Gutierrez would have been credited as "the father of liberation theology". Personal correspondence with the author on 29 August 2019.

³ Unless noted otherwise, all translations from Portuguese were done by Guilherme Brasil de Souza and revised by the author.

⁴ Besides being one of liberation theology's founders, Alves was also one of the first critics of the ossification he noted among some first-generation thinkers in this theological movement. In his second book, *Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture* (Alves 1972), Alves stated that he was moving beyond liberation theology.

⁵ In this sense, he also contributed to the formation of another field, namely theopoetics. For more on Alves' theopoetics, see Iuri A. Reblin (2014).

⁶ Personal correspondence with the author, on 9 August 2019.

⁷ Zwinglio Mota Dias, "Prefácio: Sobre Palavras Apetitosas e Criadoras da Vida . . ." (Reblin 2014).

people, playing with humor and poetry. That's what the following short texts are all about. They are like snapshots, rather than reasoning. I don't want to prove anything. I just want to portray. There is a thread that assembles them as pearls in a necklace. Yet each text is a complete unit. Through them I try to say what I have come to feel about the sacred. I don't ask the readers to agree with me. I only ask that they permit themselves to promenade through unknown woods. "The woods are lovely, dark and deep . . . ". What really matters is not what I write, but what you will think when provoked by what I write (Alves 2010).

As an artist painting pictures with his words, Alves turned to inviting contemplation rather than rationalization. His restless mind and soul always resisted systematization.

Despite his genius, Alves was still a man of his time, part of a particular generation, and the reflex of specific influences. In the short space of this article, my goal is to highlight a particular influence that deeply impacted Alves, especially in his young years, but which indelibly left marks in the entirety of his work. As the title gives up, this essay focuses on the impact of Richard Shaull upon Rubem Alves' life and thinking, examining the particular relevance of the bond formed between these two men—an American reformed missionary and a Brazilian rebellious theologian turned poet. Shaull was an important mentor in the early years of Alves' academic journey. In that process, they became close friends. This essay identifies some features in Shaull's theological thought, which one can also find—in the form of continuity, expansion, or rupture—in Alves' own thinking at various moments of his life and work. Those features can help us make sense of the social and political significance of Alves' ideas, but they also point to the complexity and mutual influence that can be seen in missionary encounters with transformative impact on both ends. In other parts of my work, I have examined what Shaull himself identified as his three conversions (Barreto 2003). Throughout his life and encounters with multiple "others", Shaull allowed himself to be deeply transformed. Without ceasing to be himself, he also incorporated what he learned from those encounters. To some extent, Shaull incorporated a reverse cannibalism, to think of an expression dear to Brazilian Anthropologist and cultural critic Oswald de Andrade. In his "Cannibalist Manifesto", Andrade turned the table on colonial fantasies of the colonized and their perceived "cultural inferiority", to develop a theory of "cultural cannibalism" that challenged the dualisms instilled into the construction of a Brazilian culture since the early days of the colony (Bary 1991). By contrast, Shaull allowed himself to be so immersed in local Latin American culture that once he returned to the U.S., his embodiment of what he had learned in Brazil/Latin America inevitably injected new life and perspectives into those he reached through his teaching and writing. The second time Shaull had Alves as his student, now at Princeton in the mid-1960s, he was already himself deeply impacted by his Latin American experiences—which had positioned Alves as one of his interlocutors. This is one of the reasons why we can speak of the relationship between these two men as a tale of mutual influence.

2. Encountering Richard Shaull

The event "Rethinking the Sacred: Rubem Alves and Liberation Theology", held on 27–29 August 2019, marked the 50-year anniversary of Rubem Alves' doctoral dissertation—one of the origins of liberation theology—as well the 100th celebration of the birth of his mentor and friend Richard Shaull. By combining those two memories, that conference reminded those who participated in it of how deeply the biographies of these two important Protestant figures are intertwined. Without Richard Shaull, it is difficult to imagine the journey Rubem Alves embarked on in the mid-1950s. The significance of Shaull for Alves' formation can be better scaled when one listens closely to Alves' own memories of his first encounter with Dick Shaull, shared on the occasion of Shaull's passing:

The stranger said nothing. But his eyes pointed the way. And my eyes were opened [. . .]

I moved from the path that leads to heaven to the many paths that lead to the world [. . .] All because of that man's gaze [. . .]

And I can say that my life is divided into two periods: before I met him and after I met him [. . .]

He taught us the fundamental lesson of theology: "As for the problem of heaven, God has already taken care of it for us. There is nothing that we can do about it. Once the matter of heaven is solved, we are free to take care of the earth, which is our destiny." [. . .]

If someone asks me, "What did you learn from him?"—The answer is simple: "Dick taught me to think" (Alves 2003).

In each of the phrases above, Alves describes the depth of the impact Shaull made on him when they met almost five decades earlier. His sense of reverence and gratitude is so overwhelming that it almost suggests a sort of epiphanic encounter. Alves was not the only of Shaull's Brazilian students who referred to the magnitude of his impact on their life and thinking. In fact, Shaull impacted the development of a whole generation of Brazilian and Latin American Protestant thinkers in the 1950s and 1960s, as several of them have reiterated.⁸

Shaull's influence on the formation of an entire generation of Brazilian Protestant thinkers can be described in terms of a theological orientation that led to a liberative praxis. It occurred amid encounters and relationships developed in the context of Shaull's missionary initiatives in Brazil. During the ten years he lived in Brazil, Shaull played a singular role in the construction of a grassroots ecumenism immersed in the process of nation-building, which later took a revolutionary turn. In 1955, in partnership with his life-long friend Waldo César, Shaull founded the *Setor de Responsabilidade Social da Igreja* (Social Responsibility Sector of the Church—SRSI). What started as an independent commission to study the social responsibility of the church in Brazilian society during a time of social and political turmoil became a department of the *Confederação Evangélica do Brasil* (CEB), a catalyzer for some of the most important ecumenical initiatives of the time. During the same period, Shaull also played a key role in the revitalization of the Christian Student Movement, represented in Brazil mainly through the *União Cristã de Estudantes do Brasil* (UCEB). By encouraging the Brazilian students involved in that movement (Rubem Alves included) to become more deeply immersed in the social and political reality of the country and mobilize to change such a reality, Shaull contributed to creating a profound theological transformation with significant consequences at a time when a young generation of Brazilian intellectuals and activists was pressing for the construction of a national identity in reaction to the neocolonialism they saw taking shape in Latin America. Paradoxically, this young missionary from North America ended up playing a crucial role in a movement that fomented the rise of a Latin American way of thinking theologically.

Shaull also participated directly or indirectly in the formation of other important ecumenical initiatives in Brazil and in Latin America. Among others, his work is often associated with the planning of the *Conferência do Nordeste* in Recife in 1962, which, with the theme "Christ and the Brazilian revolutionary process", marked the peak of the church and society movement in Brazil. Likewise, Shaull participated in the formation of the *Junta Latino-Americana de Igreja e Sociedade* (ISAL) in 1961 and, even after his return to the United States, contributed with the creation of the publishing house and the magazine *Paz e Terra* (1966) and with the formation of the *Centro Ecumênico de Informação* (CEI) in 1965.⁹

⁸ Besides the stories penned by several of Shaull's former students and colleagues, which appeared in the Special Issue of *Religião e Sociedade* mentioned above, two other places where similar stories can be found are Eduardo G. Faria *Fé e Compromisso: Richard Shaull e a Teologia no Brasil* (Faria 2002) and the collection *De Dentro do Furacão: Richard Shaull e os Primórdios da Teologia da Libertação* (CEDI 1985), which Rubem Alves edited, along with the CEDI team.

⁹ Some of these initiatives emerged after Shaull left Brazil, in 1962. However, all these initiatives were connected with his work and relied on his support (César 1985).

Besides his activism in the creation of new spaces for ecumenical action in Brazilian society, Shaull also made a significant impact on the transformation of the theological thought of a golden generation of young Protestant theologians, pastors, and thinkers who would later become a reference for new ecumenical initiatives. Jovelino Ramos (1985), one of Shaull's students in the Presbyterian Seminary in Campinas, described Shaull's impact on him and his colleagues as follows:

Shaull represented a complete challenge to our way of seeing and reacting to the things we saw . . . For him, learning was not the same as assimilating knowledge. It was, instead, questioning knowledge. "I am much more interested in the questions that you ask than in the answers to them." "What does what you just said mean to those who are not used to the language of sermons?" "What does this have to do with the real situation of the Brazilian people?"

Uruguayan ecumenical theologian Julio de Santa Ana made a similar observation:

Shaull was a master at showing us that doing theology is taking part in the struggles of our time, participating in history; because only through history and from within history it is possible to find God, and above all, to create the conditions to hear God's voice (. . .) Shaull insisted in that priority be given to practice (Santa Ana 1985).

There are numerous accounts like this, which attest to the theological impact Shaull had on that generation of Brazilian (and other Latin American) Protestant thinkers. Joaquim Beato (2012), another participant in that movement, stated that Shaull was "the theologian that exerted the most profound impact on a younger generation of important Brazilian theologians". Rubem Alves was part of that generation of young theologians and later became its most illustrious representative. Shaull's teachings had a direct impact on his life's journey. In the case of Alves, such influence affected the course of his entire life. One cannot forget, for example, that Shaull was a key player in the efforts to bring Alves to study at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he wrote his famous dissertation, having Shaull himself as one of his advisors. More than a mentor, Dick Shaull became an important ally to him. Alves never hid the troubles he faced to get his dissertation approved at Princeton. He went so far as to say that there were those who wanted him to fail and that they "approved him out of charity with the lowest grade possible."¹⁰ At the same time, he mentioned Shaull as one of the friends who supported him in the difficult moments he faced during those years.

As a doctoral student, Alves also worked as Shaull's teaching assistant. Migliore, a student at the time, affirms that they formed "a dynamic duo, sharing much in the way of theological vision and life experience, but also complementing each other in important ways."¹¹

Considering such a connection, a look at Richard Shaull's intellectual trajectory is helpful for a deeper understanding of Rubem Alves' work. Obviously, one cannot reduce Alves to any particular source of influence. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that Shaull and Alves were very different thinkers. In distinguishing between the two, Migliore says:

Shaull was always more of a "prophet" and a "warrior," and far less of a "poet," to use the categories of vocation that Alves would later speak of. Shaull was primarily committed to concrete social and political action here and now, to protest movements against injustice and for systemic change in favor of greater justice. Early on (as you can see in his *Theology of Human Hope*, based on his dissertation), Alves, while not disagreeing with this activist political orientation, is intent on going deeper, probing the sources of creativity, imagination, and

¹⁰ Personal correspondence with the author, cited in Barreto (2016).

¹¹ Personal correspondence with the author on 8 August 2019. Migliore also mentions the common influence of Paul Lehmann, and through him of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, upon the two thinkers.

hope in human life, examining the use and abuse of language, marking the difference between humanistic messianism and messianic humanism, exploring the importance of the body, play, the gift of nature, the experience of beauty.¹²

While acknowledging such differences, and the profusion of theories, thinkers, and personal and historical circumstances that influenced Alves' intellectual trajectory, in the scope of this article, I am particularly interested in the ways that Shaull impacted Alves' education, considering their long collaboration after the first time they met in Campinas. Alves, although deeply impacted by Shaull, developed his own theology. In fact, like Alves, Shaull was not a systematic thinker either. He never developed a particular school of thought. He seemed to be more comfortable as an instigator of ideas than as a systematic thinker. Despite their differences, Alves always recognized the meaning of his encounter with that foreign missionary who seemed to swim against the tide, inviting young men and women to ride the "hurricane's wind".¹³

Shaull understood theology as a dynamic process in response to God's action in the world. Such a theological perspective prompted him to dialogue with different theologies in order to seize all possible opportunities to collaborate in the construction of better possible futures. Alves, in turn, contrasted his frustration with a Protestant tradition ossified by ideology with the dream of a creative theology informed by imagination and desire. In an interview with Elsa Tamez (1987), he alluded to Calvin's expression *pio conspiratio* to argue for an erotic theology and an ecclesiology that conceives the church as a community of desires, which conjointly conspires and respire. In that interview, however, Alves made it clear that the church he loved was not the church he empirically knew. On the contrary, he described it as an object of his dreams: "I dream of a church, and that is what keeps me connected with it."

Through distinct eschatologies, both Richard Shaull and Rubem Alves invite us to the subversion of an oppressive reality, and to participate in the creation of new possible futures. Each of them invites his readers in a particular way to be open to transformation and renewal. In the case of Shaull, this invitation is offered in theological and pastoral language. In the case of Alves, it happens through a more radical rebellion that breaks the bonds of both an institutionalized faith and the caged rationality of modernity. Influenced by Shaull's claim that the sacred cannot be contained in the internal gardens of religion, Alves became a living example of what can happen when the sacred is poured out and lost in the breadth of existence.

3. Reclaiming the Prophetic Legacy of the Protestant Reformation

Richard Shaull played a fundamental role in the development of Latin American theology as an organic intellectual who fostered a new way of doing theology, which insisted on the necessity of a continuous dialogue between Protestant faith and Latin American socio-cultural reality. Shaull expanded the horizons of Brazilian Christianity, contributing to the emergence of a theology that would turn the cultural, social, and political reality of Latin America into its main locus of enunciation. As Alves himself stated, in this process, "without knowing it, Shaull was sowing the seeds of 'liberation theology'" (Alves 2003).

Over six decades, Shaull's relationship with Latin America took various shapes and forms. His first experience in Latin America took place in Colombia, where he was sent as a Presbyterian missionary in 1941. During this first encounter with the region, he relied for the most part on pastoral-missiological language to interpret a reality profoundly affected by poverty, violence, and suffering. The second moment of his Latin American immersion occurred in Brazil, between 1953 and 1962. During that second encounter, Shaull played the role of an organic theologian in an emergent ecumenical movement searching for a new way of thinking theologically and being part of a church in Latin America. His

¹² In this passage, Migliore is referring to *The Poet, the Prophet, and the Warrior* (Alves 1990).

¹³ Some of these terms were used by Alves himself. See, for instance, his essay "O Deus do Furacão" (Alves 1985).

engagement with Latin America would take on yet another form when, from 1962 on, Shaull became a sort of “evangelist” for Latin America at Princeton. During his tenure at Princeton Theological Seminary, and beyond, he became a privileged interpreter of an emerging Latin American theology, which he had witnessed firsthand, and a proponent of a more sustained and substantive dialogue between North American reformed theology and Latin American liberation theology (Shaull 1991).

Especially during this third phase of his relationship with Latin America, one notices Shaull’s increasing interest in a dialogue with it for the sake of the renewal of the reformed tradition, which he believed to be at a morbid state of stagnation. For him, a tradition that tended to repeat old answers when confronting new problems and challenges in a world in constant change ran the risk of sclerosis. On the other hand, he saw a potential for renewal in that tradition, especially through its affirmation of a transcendent God who remained active in human history (Shaull 1991). For Shaull, that active presence of the Spirit of God in the world is an eminently innovative factor. Such a focus on the Spirit’s action in the world would lead him to a brief but significant interaction with the Pentecostal movement in the last phase of his life. Driven by a keen understanding of the hermeneutical privilege of the poor, during this final phase, Shaull turned his attention more intensely to the symbolic world of the poor, which, he thought, was infused with Pentecostal language.

Throughout his life, Shaull insisted on reinterpreting the legacy of the Protestant Reformation (Shaull 1993) from new discursive locations and in dialoguing with other religious and secular traditions. This led him to access new windows for the reinterpretation and innovation of a theological legacy that, as he repeatedly said, needed to escape stagnation. This fundamental opening to new horizons allowed him to interpret God’s redemptive action in history as a liberating process. In the drama of God’s liberating action in the world, people and communities victimized by violence and injustice recover the agency they lost in the process of building their own future (Shaull 1968). That being the case, faith in a transcending God, who is present in history through transforming irruptions of the divine, creates the circumstances for the innovative transformation of the conditions of people’s life.

Shaull reiterated numerous times that his theological reflection was significantly impacted by his encounter with the Latin American reality, and, above all, with a group of avid Brazilian Protestant students in the beginning of the 1950s. It was in dialogue with those students, including Rubem Alves, when he began to investigate more profoundly the connection between his reformed legacy and social transformation, giving rise to a process of critical reexamination of history in light of the new reality he encountered in Latin America.¹⁴

4. Richard Shaull’s Theological Influences

All of the above is not to say that Shaull did not have any concern for social transformation in history prior to his coming to Latin America. What happened in Latin America, which he would later compare with a conversion or a spiritual transformation, should rather be seen as the deepening of his theological journey. Early on in his life, Shaull showed interest in the theological understanding of the “human drama”, influenced, among other things, by his encounter with Swiss theologian Emil Brunner, as a seminarian at Princeton Theological Seminary. Brunner’s call for a divine–human encounter that put the active and compassionate presence of God at the center of human existence, helped Shaull understand that he could not speak of God without referring to the human, or to understand human

¹⁴ It is worth noting that, in contrast to some of his students, who always gave him some credit for the formation of this movement, Shaull did not see himself as the initiator of any movement. On the contrary, for him, the Brazilian situation at the time of his arrival in the country was already ripe for what he would come to offer, and he only played the role of a catalyst. In his own words: “Before my arrival in Brazil, a new spirit was already invading the Church. Several men and women were already in touch with the evolution of theology in Europe and the United States, and had their own views on the renewal of the Church. Almost all of my initiatives were preceded by equal efforts on the part of others who, in conjunction with even others, went beyond what I did. On my part, I only contributed with something very personal to that situation. At the same time, I became a catalyzing agent. Perhaps that was inevitable. I have the impression now that this factor may have prevented other people from taking their own initiatives” (Shaull 1985b).

existence apart from divine grace and action (Shaul 2003). This conviction informed the questions he began to raise about the meaning of Christian responsibility and the Christian commitment to the transformation of unjust realities. It became increasingly clear for him that Christians were urged to discern divine action through radical immersion in the world and to respond to it in a morally responsible way.

Czech theologian Josef Hromadka was also an important theological reference to Shaul. Among other things, Hromadka brought attention to “the signs of the emergent crisis of Western civilization” and the “necessity to understand Marxism and its role in the revolutionary world” (Shaul 2003). This interest in engaging with Marxism became important later, as, during the period Shaul lived in Latin America, the category “revolution” came to occupy a central place in his theology. In addition to that, Hromadka’s influence contributed to Shaul’s adopting of an eschatological perspective, which profoundly shaped his perception of the world. It was that prominent eschatological perspective—a transforming orientation toward the future—that led some in Latin America to refer to Shaul as the “prophet of revolution” (Leão Neto 1995). With an emphasis on the eschatological centrality of the Scriptures, Hromadka helped Shaul see the value of understanding reality from the perspective of its future possibilities. According to that perspective, one can act more responsibly in the world if guided by the vision of that which contributes to its future transformation (Shaul 2003).

This continuous attention to world events from the perspective of what may come into being turned Shaul, in the eyes of his Brazilian students, into the prophet of a new era, someone capable of interpreting historical events from the perspective not only of the present, but also in light of the reign of God. In the final tribute to his old friend, Rubem Alves refers to Shaul’s prophetic-eschatological perspective:

Prophets aren’t fortune tellers that announce a future to come. Prophets are poets that draw a future which may happen. Prophets suggest a path. Richard Shaul spoke of a future of which we had never dreamed of. He saw what no one else was seeing (Alves 2003).

While in other parts of his work Alves distinguishes between the prophet and the poet, when speaking about Shaul he saw the prophet and the poet blending to suggest new possible futures.

John Mackay was a third significant influence preparing Shaul for his Latin American immersion. For Shaul, Mackay’s theology affirmed an understanding of the Christian faith that inevitably led to action (Shaul 2003). One of Mackay’s best-known analogies was the contrasting image of the balcony and the road. He used it to assert the point that Christians are not called to stay on the balcony as spectators of historical events, but are urged to get on the road, taking on a passionate commitment to those who suffer in their concrete struggles (Escobar 1992). This image impacted Shaul’s theology, contributing to his placing of praxis at the forefront of his concerns. Alves also embraced that kind of perspective in the initial years of his theological journey. As he migrated, though, to the realm of poetics, he began to question the primacy of praxis, emphasizing instead people’s subjectivity and desire.

If Shaul’s encounter with Reinhold Niebuhr was key to his approach to Marxism and his theological engagement of revolution (Shaul 1955), it was his interactions with Paul Lehmann that left some of the most indelible marks on his theological thinking. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent a year studying at Union Theological Seminary during 1930–1931, Lehmann became one of Bonhoeffer’s closest friends. The two men remained in contact until the tragic death of the German theologian in 1945. Lehmann, in a certain way, ended up inheriting some of Bonhoeffer’s theological concerns. Influenced by his studies with Lehmann, Shaul became an interpreter of the work of both theologians to his Brazilian interlocutors, including the young Alves. Bonhoeffer contributed to enrich Shaul’s understanding of the Christian community and its role in the world, informing his view of the church in a more organic fashion—as a community where Christ is being formed. Lehmann, in turn, helped Shaul understand Christian ethics through a non-moralistic

lens (Lehmann 1998). For Lehmann, the Christian mandate begins not with a moral axiom, but with attention to context—i.e., an acute interest in what happens around us.¹⁵ Instead of being bearers of ready-made moral answers or principles, theologians are challenged to be learners, open to discerning what God is doing anew in the world. This attitude of permanent openness to learning anew promotes a readjustment of theological agendas. Therefore, no particular perspective can be treated as definitive. Theology becomes an embodied praxis, which is always done in humility by individuals and communities that learn through immersion in and dialogue with the world.

At a certain moment in his life, Shaull began to see the understanding of the Latin American revolutionary context as the most urgent topic with which theologians should engage. In order to understand that context more thoroughly, he immersed himself in dialogue, not only with Marxist thinkers, but also with Catholic theologians, something rare at the time. Later, he became interested in the theme of liberation, and from that point on, understanding his unsurpassable alterity to the region as a white male U.S. missionary, he became a student of his former students and of the Base Christian Communities (BCC); he began to increasingly engage. In the last decade of his life, this openness to the dynamics of God's renewed action in the world caused him to engage the rising Pentecostal communities, particularly among economically impoverished communities. In the company of his old friend Waldo César, Shaull did considerable ethnographic work among Pentecostals in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1990s. Among other things, he was interested in understanding the theological meaning of a change he and César noted in Pentecostal discourse, which had moved from an earlier otherworldly emphasis on salvation to a worldly focus on solution (Shaull and César 2000). For him, to interact with Pentecostal discourse and practices was imperative to understanding a new reality, particularly to those who, since the 1960s, affirmed the hermeneutical privilege of the poor. To be consistent with such a claim, Shaull invited liberation and reformed theologians to engage with the worldview of the poor, which, based on what he saw in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, had been pentecostalized.

Throughout his life, one of Shaull's most important virtues consisted of his ability to combine different theological insights as he thought to discern God's presence and action in a given reality. His gaze always focused on Christian praxis and the transformation of the world. Without ceasing to be himself, he repeatedly entered into dialogue with different communities and traditions, reinterpreting and reinventing his own understanding of the prophetic legacy of Reformed Protestantism. Such an attitude influenced many of his pupils, including Alves' early theology.

5. The Lasting Impact of Rubem Alves' Protestant Formation

As I mentioned earlier, Rubem Alves summarized the impact of Richard Shaull on his life and work by saying, "Dick Shaull taught me how to think." Shaull was the mentor who exerted the longest influence on Alves' formation from the time they met in the Presbyterian Seminary in Campinas until the completion of his doctorate at Princeton. He was a key influence informing Alves' first important intellectual turn, when he moved away from the conservative Protestant formation he received in the Brazilian Presbyterian Church—which he would later refer to as fundamentalist—and began to develop a more critical approach to his engagement with religion, in dialogue with philosophy and science. During Alves' Princeton years, Shaull continued to play a key role—as professor and advisor—in his education. This influence can be perceived in Alves' doctoral dissertation (Alves 1968) and continued to appear in his later writings.

In an article published in *The Ecumenical Review* in 1970, Alves wrote about the ideological function of Latin American Protestantism and its utopian possibilities. In that essay, he contrasted the concepts of ideology and utopia to discuss the choices before Latin American Protestants. These two concepts reappeared multiple times, in different shapes

¹⁵ For Lehmann, the first ethical question was "what God is doing in the world?" According to him, God is always acting to make human life more human. God's action in the world is, therefore, always a humanizing action. The Christian koinonia is called to discern God's humanizing acts in the world and to unite with God in this action as members of communities where Christ is being formed (Lehmann 1998).

and forms, in his later writings. Alves defined ideology as a mental structure geared at preserving things as they are, while describing utopia as an attitude that promotes and directs actions that lead to change (Alves 1970). For Alves, the Protestant heritage is torn between utopian and ideological propensities. As for the former, he pointed to Luther's emphasis on freedom and Tillich's Protestant principle and the Protestant emphasis on the "radical rejection" of the final or sacred character of any human structure, as examples of its utopian promises (Alves 1970).

While praising Protestant emphasis on individual freedom, Alves criticized the dualism he perceived as prevailing, especially among Latin American Protestants who had lost sight of the structural dimension of injustice, putting instead an exacerbated emphasis on the transformation of the individual with no serious consideration of societal structures. In order to retrieve the political dimension of the Protestant tradition, Alves proposed a dialectical ethics of change that sees the transformation of the world as a vocation. Comparing the two contrasting possibilities, Alves underscored that while Protestantism as ideology "supports the forces that desire to perpetuate the prevailing structures," Protestantism as utopia "is open to the future and demands an ethic of social change." Because the antagonism of these proposals seems insurmountable, Alves suggested a new form of ecumenism based on the "messianic-prophetic" orientation that he saw emerging among "utopian" Protestant groups (a small and marginal brand of Latin American Protestantism) and Catholics influenced by the Second Vatican Council. He clearly understood that the ideological type prevailed among Latin American Protestants, while the utopian type emerged as "a symphony of hope" (Alves 1970). While not mentioned by name, Shaull's influence on Alves concepts in this article is undeniable. Alves' description of the utopian and its messianic-prophetic orientation clearly resembles Lehmann's "messianic vision of a world in transformation" (Shaull 1985b) and Shaull's own eschatological perspective, which oriented his ministry in Brazil (Hall and Shaull 1972).

Three years later, the magazine *Christianity and Crisis*, founded by Reinhold Niebuhr in 1941, invited Alves to respond to an article written by Thomas G. Sanders, one of Niebuhr's students, who accused Latin American Liberation theology of being merely a type of "soft utopianism". Responding to that charge with indignation, Alves exposed not only the flaws in Sanders' argument, but also charged the movement he represented, Christian realism, as an ideology of the establishment (Alves 1973). Drawing on the dialectical distinction between utopia and ideology mentioned above,¹⁶ Alves exposed the self-deception of realist Christians who could not understand that what they called "reality" was nothing more than a human construct. In accusing liberation theologians of falling for a utopianism that made them prone to delusion, Sanders failed to realize the deceptive nature of his own understanding of reality. Driven by imperialist arrogance, theologians like Sanders applied criteria to assess the emerging Latin American theology, which they refused to use to examine their own ideological theologizing. On the other hand, the negativity they attached to the term "utopia" ended up resulting in what Alves called the eclipse of imagination.

Once again, despite Alves' omission to mention either Shaull or Lehmann by name, the structure of his argument in this article remained strongly influenced by both thinkers. The expression "ideology of establishment", for example, which he uses in the title of the article to refer to Christian realism, closely resembles "logic of the establishment", a term used by Lehmann to criticize the establishment for not creating a place for the new (Lehmann 1975).

More than a decade later, on the occasion of the celebration of Geneva's 450th anniversary, Alves discussed his complicated relationship with Protestant heritage, using terms that point to the same binomial utopia–reality seen above.

Protestantism is part of my body, my dream, my nightmare, something which I love, something which I hate . . . Yes, I was dreaming, I am dreaming, you are

¹⁶ In conversation with Karl Mannheim (1936).

my dream, Geneva, all the fantasies which I can put in those 450 years. What I have to offer are not clear and distinct ideas, but dreams: I invite you to see Protestantism from a non-Protestant point of view: to enjoy Protestantism from within a non-Protestant bubble . . . And I must tell you a secret: there was a moment when I was about to vomit Protestantism—it was necessary, for me, to step outside it, and taste it as a sacrament in a different land . . . And from a thing it became a dream: and that which was bitter became sweet (Alves 1987).

By the time he spoke these words, Alves had reached the peak of his move from theology to theopoetics.¹⁷ Yet, the marks of his earlier thoughts remained visible. The language, however, had changed. In this passage, he no longer uses words like “utopia”. He insists, however, on the rejection of any fixed idea of “reality” (his early understanding of ideology), moving beyond the confines of a modern rationality that inhibits the new towards the realm of imagination, the realm of dreaming (the word he chooses to replace utopia). The messianic-prophetic structure we discussed earlier, though, remains in the background, as one can see in the following words:

And we forget that it is in our dreams and desires that lies, hidden, the possibility of salvation. It is a messianic promise: that those who have no future, the elderly, will dream . . . Our desires can be beautiful: fragments of the image of God. And nothing has the power to move the body as beauty has. Deep, inside our flesh, a groaning is heard, and its reverberations are felt all over creation, sighs which are too deep for words, nameless desires. But it does not matter: a Wind hears them, and understands our wordless sighs, and takes them to God: our prayer. Every dream is a prayer . . . (Alves 1987).

In this passage full of poetic beauty, we find the messianic idea of salvation now mediated through dreams, the body, and beauty rather than “clear, distinct ideas”. The wind and music emerge metaphorically as references to the divine. God is described in nostalgic terms, as an absence.¹⁸ Silence is revered, as it evokes that absence. As a poet, Alves no longer uses words to be merely understood. He now wants his words to be savored, digested by the body. He has become a cook whose “stove is his own body, lit with the fire of imagination . . . ” (Alves 1992).

At this point, Alves speaks from outside Protestant institutions. His new teachers are no longer in churches: “They adore at solitary altars: poets, painters, magicians, anthropologists, medieval and bizarre characters of the world of fairy tales and . . . children” (Alves 1987). The words of admonishment that Alves brings to the Genevan Protestants come from “different traditions and religions which look at us in amazement.” They note “that we lack poetry, that we do not love the mystery of the forests and the depth of the sea, that we hide from the darkness of our nocturnal side and keep in secret the dreams that we dream at night” (Alves 1987). Still, he acknowledges that what he says is but a “variation” of a motive that was first proposed and developed in his own backyard. His Protestant background has not disappeared. It has been turned into a dream, a symbol, and imagination. “Protestantism is, for me, a dream. I love it because, when I am possessed by its symbols, I feel that my body becomes lighter, it almost flies” (Alves 1987).

While he has now become a poet, a cook who puts words together as a dish to be savored, Alves cannot let the prophet go. So, in his love–hate relationship with Protestantism, Alves restates his love for “the beauty of prophetic solitude”:

And I love the beauty of the prophetic solitude, when you are totally alone, and you are left with your last word, the word which you have to say lest you die, and even if the whole world would say that we should keep silence you say it,

¹⁷ Leopoldo Cervantez-Ortiz (2005) describes this turn as a conversion to imagination. Alves himself would state, later, the nature of this shift in language: “Not theology. Poetry.” For him, it is in beauty that one can find the fragments of the divine (Alves 1992).

¹⁸ According to Alves, “What we refer to with the name of God is like that: a great, huge Emptiness that encompasses the whole beauty of the universe. If the glass were not empty, we wouldn’t drink water from it. If the mouth were not empty, we wouldn’t eat fruit with it. If the womb were not empty, life wouldn’t grow in it” (Alves 2010).

out of the infinite passion which burns in altars inside your body. How beautiful is this prophetic solitude: like Venus, alone, in the blue sky after the sunset . . . (Alves 1987).

Here, the poet and the prophet kiss. Alves chose poetry, in contrast to Shaull's prophetic activism. However, he continued to appreciate the messianic-prophetic tradition he learnt from Lehmann and Shaull, which he now portrayed as a symbol, a vision, a nostalgia, a dream. Alves remained a Protestant even though he rebelled against Protestantism. Moreover, Shaull played a key role in showing Alves, especially in his young years, the beauty of a tradition he had known mostly as an ideology.

6. The Political Relevance of Rubem Alves

In 1993, Rubem Alves was invited to speak at the Presbyterian Health, Education, and Welfare Association (PHEWA) Conference, in Albuquerque. After talking about his transition from liberation theologian to poet, Alves criticized the churches for allowing themselves to be guided by a Cartesian pedagogy, based on "clear and distinct ideas" (Alves 1993). In his speech, Alves stated, "Happiness has to do with things that are totally useless." For him, this was one of the things Protestantism had forgotten: "human beings are moved by beauty." However, he did not think of beauty in escapist fashion. The inclination to think about the demand to transform the world remained important for him. The source for such imperative, however, had changed. "If we want to change the world," he said, "we need first of all to make people dream about beauty" (Alves 1993). Alves' turn to aesthetics was not devoid of ethical concerns.

This overlap between the desire to change the world and his turn to beauty deserves attention. Here, the key seems to be to discern the apparent dilemma between the liberation theologian and the poet some seem to see in Alves. This overlap captures our attention particularly because it points to the possibility of combining the types "poet" and "prophet". As Alves matured, he seemed to have made a clear choice, the path of poetry and beauty to the detriment of that of the action-oriented prophet represented in the life and work of his mentor Richard Shaull. Although the option for one does not necessarily cancel the other, in the case of Alves, he moved from ethics to aesthetics, from the emphasis on doing to an emphasis on contemplating and dreaming. This was his proposal to the American Presbyterians he met in Albuquerque in 1993. Would he, then, have totally abdicated the need for action in the polis? That does not seem to be the case. At one point, Alves himself asked his audience, "What is the meaning of this to politics?" This is the answer he offered to his rhetorical question:

It seems to me there is a politics that grows out of heartburn. When you get something burning inside you, that burning becomes political action. And political action becomes bitter, because it is not based upon a vision of beauty. But then there is another type of political action that is like that of Michelangelo and the Pietà. It is not because of heartburn (Alves 1993).

In this passage Alves admits that despite the primacy of beauty, there is a place for political action that derives from beauty. However, politics cannot be understood in its most traditional forms. For not all political action is the same, and he feared that the wrong motivation to act may lead to bitterness, not to liberation. In a reality marked by divisions, suffering, tragedy, horror, destruction, and death, Alves proposes "that we begin to operate with the aesthetics of beauty." Beauty, he argues, can move people. "If we are able to operate with this type of vision, then we will be able to awaken inside persons the dreams that lie dormant inside them. And they will be resurrected" (Alves 1993).

Alves never fully abandoned the ethical. Instead, in a dialectical way, he advanced what seems to be a sophisticated theory of action according to which ethics and aesthetics are conceived as a holistic project. Through the ability to dream, beauty feeds a deeply rooted motivation to transform reality, not from outside, but from within broken bodies and hearts, which only beauty can move. Alves' criticism of a social activism devoid of

subjectivity and reflexivity is welcome. His move toward beauty is not an abandonment of the need to deal with the body that suffers. In fact, some of his writings highlight the resurrection of the body. However, conceiving the body as the nerve center of our desires, he concludes that life cannot be limited to subsistence, to self-preservation. The body is the center of activities that express life. Thus, “the body doesn’t just want to live. It wants to live in pleasure” (Alves 1984).

Therefore, one cannot simply dismiss the mature Rubem Alves—the poet and the cook—when discussing the realm of ethics and politics. Although we may find clearer resources for a discourse focused on justice in the writings of the younger Rubem Alves, a turn to the dialectical method that he himself used can provide an innovative lens through which to rethink our theories of action in the light of beauty.

When one examines Alves’ work, it is possible to identify the persistent remnants of what Ludek Braz called a “radical utopian program” mediating between ethics and aesthetics (Braz 1972). In the preface to Alves’ *The Poet, the Warrior, The Prophet* (Alves 1990), Jo Ind expresses her difficulty in categorizing Alves’ work. Was it theology, poetry, psychotherapy, literature, or linguistic theory? Ultimately, Ind gave up trying to classify it, trusting that Alves knew what he was doing when he did not classify his own work.

In this article, I focused on some snapshots of Alves’ vast work, noting that the images of the poet and the prophet that permeate much of it are not mutually exclusive. This may be a hint for us to revisit Alves’ contributions as he challenged paralyzing ideologies that continue to produce and deepen divisions, prejudices, and suffering. For Alves, when functioning as an ideology, religion legitimizes oppression, prejudice, and violence. Even though he chose not to tackle these problems directly in the latter phase of his work, his provocative thinking remains an important resource for us to understand that most maladies plaguing our world are deeply rooted in forms of violence legitimized through various forms of language, including religious and academic discourses. Given the profound way in which these legitimizing discourses affect the human psyche, they need to be resisted from within the body, the center of our subjectivity, on a level where action and beauty meet to produce new dreams and visions of other possible realities.

In this article, I also presented Shaull and Alves as different but complementary thinkers. By comparing and contrasting the two, I sought to offer a clearer representation of Alves’ prophetic and poetic types. Over the years, the life and work of these two men remained entangled to one another. They continue to capture the imagination of tens of thousands in Brazil and elsewhere. A closer look at the similarities and complementarities in the works of this duo may provide us with new insights through which Rubem Alves’ poetic voice and Richard Shaull’s prophetic persistence can come together to help us boldly and innovatively reimagine our dreams and hopes of a more beautiful and just world.

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