

Look Back | Do You Know What Happens When You Fry Baloney?

Editor's note: This article [first appeared](#) on Sept. 17, 2007. At the time of publication, De La Torre was director of the Justice & Peace Institute and associate professor of social ethics at Iliff School of Theology in Denver.

Ever wonder what happens when you fry baloney?

I expect puzzled looks from my students every time I ask this question. Why would anyone in his or her right mind fry baloney?

Still, usually a few students provide the correct answer: It bubbles up.

Those who know the answer are usually students who have known poverty.

In fact, those who have lived in poverty - either by birth or as an act of solidarity with the marginalized - usually know the answer to my quiz.

That is because only the poor - sick and tired of eating the cheapest meat available as a dietary staple - finally rebel and attempt creative new ways of serving the food of the poor.

When Christians, specifically liberal Euro-American Christians, hear the testimonies of indignation experienced by the poor, they often shed tears.

But tears over present injustices all too often become a substitute for the scholastic rigors needed to understand how power actually works to bestow privilege.

No one questions that those who benefit from white supremacy and class privilege should feel guilty.

Nevertheless, the margins of society gain nothing from, nor do they need, the tears of white guilt or class shame.

Marginalized communities have shed enough tears for both themselves and the dominant culture.

What the disenfranchised need from the dominant culture is concrete praxis that will begin to dismantle systems of privilege.

Tears accomplish little, except for those with power who experience a “healing” or cleansing. Although beneficial to them, it provides no benefits for the marginalized.

The liberal Eurocentric discourse on ethics is as damning to the disenfranchised as the neoconservative project, which has worsened the predicament of many attempting to survive on the margins of society.

Let us not forget the liberal/progressive clergy’s criticism of Martin Luther King’s timing for his organized march led King to write his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

The eight religious leaders to whom King formally addressed his famous letter were no doubt among the few white residents of Birmingham who publicly opposed Gov. Wallace’s defiance of federal desegregation orders.

Still, King recognized the greatest stumbling block to freedom was not the Ku Klux Klan, but - in his own words:

“[T]he white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action;’ who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a ‘more convenient season.’ Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

Truth be known, I am less concerned with the neoconservatives. For if indeed a tree is known by its fruits, then those residing on the underside of power are all too familiar with their fruits.

The liberal and progressive politicians and clergy are more dangerous. Their fruits may be pleasing to the eye, due to their justice rhetoric, but it can be as damaging to the welfare of the oppressed as those of their neoconservative

counterparts.

Regardless of how Christian or sincere liberals appear to be, their participation in benefiting from the empire that privileges them ultimately places them at odds with the liberationist hopes and aspirations of the oppressed.

Liberals may demonstrate compassion toward the marginalized, but when all is said and done, they, like conservatives, will employ whatever means necessary to secure the interests of empire and the privileged space of those whom it safeguards.

It matters not if conservatives or liberals hold political or social power. Both sides will protect the global interests of IBM, General Motors, Wal-Mart and Coca Cola.

As alluring as U.S. liberal Christianity may appear to marginalized communities, it remains embedded within the empire and thus is incongruent with the gospel message of liberation found in the biblical text.

And before we jump on the liberationist bandwagon, we must confess the difficulty of doing liberationist work within the fabric of empire.

U.S. culture has made it possible to live with power and privilege and still claim to be a liberationist.