
Otto Maduro: In Remembrance and Celebration

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IT IS A DISTINCT HONOR AND PRIVILEGE for me to write these words of remembrance and celebration on behalf of Otto Maduro. They were initially offered within the context of a Special Topics Forum at the 2103 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), *Honoring the Legacy and Life of Otto Maduro (1945–2013)*, in which the members of the AAR gathered to honor the life and work of its former president. They are now offered, in extended fashion, as a companion piece to the in memoriam notice, and as an accompaniment to the publication of his 2012 Presidential Address in this issue of the *JAAR*.

Otto was a dear friend. Otto was a close colleague. Otto was a fellow Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino American. Above all, Otto was for me a great human being—what the wisdom of the people would call *una buena persona*, noble in mind and heart. Given our respective origins in Venezuela and Cuba, we even wondered, in recent times, whether we would ultimately become compatriots as well, in light of the ever-closer alliance between President Hugo Chávez Frias and President Fidel Castro Ruz. We would joke about what we would call ourselves: would it be Vene-cubanos or Cuba-zolanos? This was, of course, but a classic example of Latin American ironic humor in the face of seemingly never-ending political morass and despair in our continent—more biting now, no doubt, as a result of our advancing age and shared historical trajectory.

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I do not recall when it was that I first met Otto in person. It must have been not long after his arrival in the United States, in the early 1980s, perhaps at an early meeting of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States or at a joint Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. I clearly recall, however, when it was that I first came across his name. This was by way of his volume *Religion and Social Conflicts*, which Orbis Books brought out in 1982—a translation of *Religión y lucha de clases*, originally published in 1979 by Editorial Ateneo of Caracas. These, we should recall, were the glory days of both Liberation Theology and Orbis Books, when an unceasing number of works appeared, year after year, in Latin America as well as throughout Africa and Asia and were promptly rendered into English at Maryknoll. As a result of this work, I associated Otto with the early years of Liberation and thought of him as someone much older than I. I placed him instinctively in that first generation of religious–theological thinkers, alongside such figures as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff. It was only years later, when I got to meet him in person, that I learned that we were not that far apart in age, only a couple of years. From early on, therefore, Otto proved a leading figure of the liberationist movement and project.

When thinking of Otto as a human being and a scholar, three important dimensions come immediately to mind. To begin with, among liberationists, he was a sociologist of religion by training and profession, someone who had read extensively in social theory in general and Marxist theory in particular. He knew philosophy and theology as well, but his grounding was in the social sciences. In addition, he was a classic intellectual of the Third World. What do I mean by this? First, he possessed a wide knowledge of world affairs. One could talk with Otto about events and conditions in, say, Kenya and South Africa, Cuba and Brazil, the Philippines and Vietnam—both in individual and comparative fashion. Second, he had an expansive cultural repertoire. He could converse at length about economics or politics, history or religion, literature or art. Third, he possessed a solid command of various academic fields of study. From the start, he engaged in highly creative and sophisticated interdisciplinary work. Such figures are now very much of a vanishing breed, I am afraid. Quite ironically, in times of heightened global networks and flow of information such as ours, there seems to be less and less awareness of global society and culture. Lastly, from the beginning to the end, he espoused and exercised a profound commitment to the have-nots and the excluded of the world, all those left behind by society and culture. Otto was not only in Liberation; he was, he signified, Liberation. In sum, he was an engaged global academic, with deep roots in his native

Venezuela and Latin America, significant ties in his adopted country, the United States, and unremitting investment in the world as a whole.

All three dimensions of his work and life, and above all the last one, are clearly in evidence in his Presidential Address, a piece that constitutes, as fate would have it, his last will and testament. I find it to be most insightful and most revealing. In it Maduro harks back to the past, to the beginnings of the Liberation movement and project, and examines the present, updating both project and movement in the process. The problematic of the address involves the juxtaposition of two conditions or situations, one material and the other discursive. On the one hand, he cites the growing phenomenon of the undocumented, the poor, and the exploited—signified most acutely for him by the migration from South to North across the Mexican–U.S. border. This is well captured by the title, “Migrants’ Religions under Imperial Duress.” On the other hand, he refers to the mounting pressure on the academic study of religion to define its task under such circumstances—marked most tellingly for him by the religions that such migrants bear with them across the border and their effects on the religions already in place. This is well conveyed by the subtitle, “Reflections on Epistemology, Ethics and Politics in the Study of the Religious ‘Stranger’.” Its development constitutes a classic exercise in liberationist thinking.

To begin with, Maduro undertakes a critical analysis of society and culture. Here he lays out the global crisis before us: the program of globalization, which was to uplift everyone everywhere in its path, has yielded instead even greater inequality than before, with an ever-widening fissure between the elite and the rest. He further points to a radical reversal in values in its wake: concern for, compassion toward, and solidarity with the vulnerable, the persecuted, and the victims of violence and marginalization—such as migrants—have been replaced by indifference, coldness, and neutrality. Such developments, he argues, have had a deleterious effect on migrants and their religions. Both, he describes pointedly, are viewed as:

increasingly subjected to the forces of unbridled, free-market, global capitalism; to the ravages of the current economic crisis; to the natural catastrophes of global warming; to the unpredictability and insecurity that accompany these processes; to the scapegoating of undocumented non-white workers that emerges from such a situation of uncertainty and fear; and particularly to the government policies against undocumented immigrants that have been implemented in the last four years.

Subsequently, Maduro carries out a critical analysis of the social study of religion as an academic-scholarly field. Such studies, he argues, lie

inextricably and intricately embedded in this context of global crisis. Before the scholar, therefore, lie two options: to ignore it altogether, mostly out of fear of inevitable and considerable personal consequences, or to address it directly, raising the key question of a new global ethic. Such options, he adds, have consequences for the field as such as well as for its vision of migrants and their religions. In a most effective rhetorical use of repetition, he lists the kinds of questions and visions that are either bypassed or foregrounded:

Would we like to consider for a split second that such poverty and violence south of the border owes too much, precisely, to the economic, military, political and cultural policies of both U.S. governments and corporations? That it is impoverishment—an act done by the powerful to the powerless—that creates the poverty they are fleeing? Do we want to know that the affordability for the U.S. middle classes of many of the staples we find in our supermarkets is but one result of those very policies—an advantage that we, as relatively powerful people, enjoy? Or would we rather not let any of these “inconvenient truths” disturb our research?

Lastly, Maduro issues an urgent call to action in light of both analyses, that of society and culture, of the global crisis in general, and that of social theory and practice, of the field in particular. It is a call to hear the cry of the oppressed. Such a call demands, he argues, a response from scholars of religion that bears in mind their power as intellectuals, their ethical responsibility, and their role in the production and dissemination of knowledge. His challenge goes to the core:

What do we know about these migrants’ religions under imperial duress? How do we study them, with what aims, and with which consequences? How does their current predicament challenge our views, our methods, and our research? How does it change our intellectual disciplines? As intellectuals, we brandish a special kind of power. How do we use that power, with whom, for whom, for what?

I find uncanny the similarity that exists between the message of this last will and testament of his, composed and delivered in the 2010s, and that of his initial academic work, written and delivered in the 1970s. It is almost as if nothing has changed between the liberationist currents that set out to respond to the crisis of industrial capitalism then, in competition unto death with state communism, and the critical currents that seek to respond today to the crisis of global capitalism, with no real alternative system in sight. Indeed, if anything, the situation of the have-nots

and the excluded has changed for the worse in the course of these some forty years.

Otto spoke eloquently on their behalf at that time and continues to do so now, calling upon all scholars of religion to make such a crisis their own and to craft an appropriate response as a fundamental part of their work and mission. His is a call, a last will and testament, that, I fear, will not only endure far into the twenty-first century but also become more urgent with time, as the crisis grows deeper and wider. It is a call that should hover over all of us, awakening and conscientizing us. It is a call that should move and inspire us, compelling and guiding us forward. It is a call that I myself am resolved, that I have no choice but to make my own. Such is, I should think, the ideal way to remember and celebrate him, and especially so for me—as a close friend, a true colleague, a matchless *latinoamericano* and *caribeño* and *latino americano*, and a magnificent individual—*una bella persona, de verdad*.



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