



# Waves of Liberation Theology: God non-science since Rubem Alves

Ondas da Teologia da Libertação:  
a não-ciência de Deus a partir de Rubem Alves

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## Abstract

The present text problematizes the debate about theology while scientific knowledge related to divine mysteries since Rubem Alves' theological thought through a bibliographical exploratory approach. It redeems the possibilities Rubem Alves set to the problem of the scientificity of theology starting from two ideas of the author regarding the theological speech: 1) In order to know God we have to forget God and 2) Theology is a game which is played when life is at stake. The text concludes that Rubem Alves' theological thought points out some directions: (Re-)thinking theology as a human science leaned on religious experience, its symbols, legacies and hopes; (Re-)thinking theology focused on the social daily life, the reality, a theology that is born from the bowels of people who can speak from them and for them; (Re-)thinking a theology that does not lose its fascination with the mystery, a theology that sustains its poetic freedom and its prophetic criticality, i.e., a theology that is, first of all, beautiful because it is from dreams of beauty that lovers are born of.

## Keywords

Theological epistemology. Scientific knowledge. Rubem Alves. Theology.

## Initial Considerations

One of the most heated debates of the contemporary age in the scientific field is whether theology is or is not a science. In Brazil, this debate becomes even more interesting because theology academies were recognized by the Ministry of Education as legitimate institutions of higher education (college) a little more than a decade ago. And the inclusion of theology in the list of the great academic sciences recognized by the Brazilian State has occurred only about two decades ago, since the

## Resumo

O presente texto problematiza o debate acerca da teologia enquanto saber científico relacionado aos mistérios divinos a partir do pensamento teológico de Rubem Alves por meio de uma abordagem bibliográfica exploratória. O texto recupera as possibilidades que Rubem Alves coloca para o problema da cientificidade da teologia a partir de duas ideias do autor acerca do discurso teológico: 1) Para conhecer Deus é necessário se esquecer de Deus e 2) A teologia é um jogo que se joga quando a vida está em jogo. O texto conclui que o pensamento teológico de Rubem Alves indica algumas direções: (re)pensar a teologia como uma ciência humana calcada na experiência religiosa, seus símbolos, legados e esperanças; (re)pensar a teologia focada na vida social cotidiana, na realidade, a teologia que nasce das entranhas das pessoas, as quais são capazes de falar a partir delas e por elas; (re)pensar a teologia que não perde seu fascínio pelo mistério, a teologia que mantém sua liberdade poética e sua crítica profética; isto é, uma teologia que é, antes de tudo, bela porque é a partir dos sonhos de beleza que nascem os amantes.

## Palavras-chave

Epistemologia teológica. Conhecimento científico. Rubem Alves. Teologia.

recognition of post-graduation programs of theology and sciences of religion, although these post-graduation programs have already been periodically evaluated since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Besides this recent issue of a Brazilian birth certificate to an

<sup>1</sup> ANDRADE, Paulo F. C. O reconhecimento da teologia como saber universitário: tensões e articulações entre as dimensões confessional e profissional. *Ciberteologia: revista de teologia e cultura*, São Paulo, ano 5, n. 26, nov.-dez. 2009. p. 24-34. Available at: <<http://ciberteologia.paulinas.org.br/ciberteologia/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/03ORreconhecimentoDaTeologia.pdf>>. Access on March 10<sup>th</sup> 2011.

ancient knowledge, theology has always been plagued by questions concerning the life of many Christian communities and, in general, the presence of theologians in academic debate circles was often diminished. Inside the theological field the discussion about the scientificity of theological knowledge went generally through two paths. On one side, there was the debate on the possibilities of adequacy (or not) to the parameters of positive science, and on the other side, there was the discussion on theology while a divine science, accentuated by the fundamentalists. The insistence on the debate on the epistemological status of theology, on its degree of scientificity is, deep down, a quest for recognition by the legitimate circles of knowledge. In other words, theology wants to have its speech taken seriously, it wants to have the possibility of establishing a dialogue with other scientists and in this way be able to help build a better society.

Throughout the second half of the previous century, many Brazilian and Latin American theologians have tried to answer the question of the scientificity of theology while developing new theological methods or while believing a theology with a Latin American soul along the effervescence of the Liberation Theology. By being a new theological perspective in gestation, strongly based on wishes and contexts of the Latin American peoples, new theological parameters were outlined: hermeneutics, contextuality, the relation between religion, society, economy, faith, culture, politics, theology and science. Among those theologians, Rubem Alves deserves special attention, because he is someone who was responsible for defining what Latin American theology would become.

Rubem Alves is not just one of the precursors of Liberation Theology; he is also one of the articulators of an extremely peculiar theology and was extremely significant for the construction of the theological thought in Latin America. And that is because he has gone beyond the sociological speech of Liberation Theology at the time, rescuing in the same way senses and dreams with irreverence and cunning. Moreover, he has understood that theology is basically a game which would be played when life is at stake and that the theological speech

should not only comprehend one aspect of human life, but life in all its integrity, diversity and complexity. It is a Liberation Theology which does not ever forget the hope and the need of dreaming. Naturally, it is not possible to reproduce here all Rubem Alves' emblematic thoughts on theology. However, it is possible to redeem the possibilities he set to the problem of the scientificity of theology. These possibilities were outlined here from two ideas of the author regarding theological speech: 1) In order to know God we have to forget God and 2) Theology is a game which is played when life is at stake.

### Knowing God means Forgetting God

The greatest challenge of theology as a speech is to find a balance between what is said and the power that is attributed to what is said. And the reason for that is simple: theology as God speech or speech on God pronounced by human beings is subject, whether intentionally or not, to the tricks of power struggles among those who supposedly master the theological knowledge and assume leadership positions in religious institutions. The charge is serious. The crimes committed in the name of God throughout the history of humanity are serious as well. According to Rubem Alves, theology cannot be a divine science, because it is not allowed to tell the truth about God. Every time someone advocates an absolute truth about God, they become a potential inquisitor. And Rubem Alves asseverates the following provocation: "God doctrine is for theology in the same way adornments, the colonnade, murals and sculptures are for the cathedral. They are parts of the building without being what sustains it".<sup>2</sup> And this provocation goes further throughout the following points:<sup>3</sup>

- 1) "Behind every speech on God, there is a hidden subject."
- 2) "The acceptance of one true and orthodox speech and the rejection of another as false and heterodox happen at the level of the political power of the subjects who enunciate these

<sup>2</sup> ALVES, Rubem. *Dogmatismo e tolerância*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2004. p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> ALVES, 2004, p. 45-46.

speeches. What matters is who has the last word.”

- 3) “The orthodox confession is, thus, a circular form of making a political confession of the Church”.

Theological decisions on themes, rituals, and speeches to be accepted or refused occur at a political level. And whenever there is a lack of dialogue between different theological groups, there is a danger of subjugation and exclusion. Of course, this tension also occurs in other institutions and knowledge fields, but on a much smaller scale than it occurred with the theological knowledge allied to political power centuries ago. It is not simply a question of a political tension in theology either. The problem of theology is precisely the fact that it has an object (if it can be named) that transcends the frontiers of human understanding. God is too great to be caught, studied and dissected. Rubem Alves uses a very interesting metaphor to illustrate the non-task of theology: “Theology is not a net we weave to catch God into its meshes, because God is not a fish, but Wind that cannot be held...”<sup>4</sup> And the reason for this is in another metaphor of the author concerning the divine mystery: “An encaged God in a cage of words called dogmas is always smaller than the cage. This God is not a bird that flies, it is a stuffed bird”.<sup>5</sup>

As said by Rubem Alves, the knowledge of The Absolute is beyond the frontiers of human understanding. The attempt to embrace it will result in – at most – a projection process as featured by Feuerbach in his *The Essence of Christianity*. God is an unspeakable mystery that surrounds human existence. It is just not possible to speak about Him or Her. Thus, theology finds itself in a freak situation: as scientific knowledge, it cannot intend to enunciate what it always wanted throughout the centuries: to tell the truth about God. This situation calls into question not just the query on being (able to be) or not a science, but if we overcome this issue, also the query on what kind of science it can be. That does not mean the end of theology, but it

means rethinking its place, its (kind of) speech, its purpose in society and people’s lives.

According to Rubem Alves, what happens frequently in the dialogue with the theological speech is a language spell. Theological words and their representations or meanings lose their temporariness. The provisory is considered absolute, and the fact that language is a social phenomenon subject to nuances of each society, age, and relationships that are routinely lost in oblivion. “The psychosocial mechanisms of the obscuration of the precariousness of our world are meant to bewitch us to live as if the precariousness were permanent, as if facts were things”.<sup>6</sup>

At this point, Ludwig Wittgenstein has already approached in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* the bewitching character of language and how people become prisoners of the statements they create, although they are also able to break the spell.<sup>7</sup> And Jürgen Habermas has stressed enough that the truth is a property of language, it belongs to grammar and it is responsible for the normativity of reason. In other words, according to Habermas, there are not immutable truths, just “behavioral” certainties subject to questioning and reasoning.<sup>8</sup> Neither the social reality nor the truth is ontological. So which paths remain to theology that seeks for scientificity? Which ways remain to theology that wants to make a difference in the world? Is there a theological speech that is not capable of being betrayed by the own words it professes? Is it possible to talk about God?

In an exceptional text named “Forgetting God”,<sup>9</sup> Rubem Alves takes up the importance of getting rid of the ontological status attributed to social facts and the intention to sustain strict meanings on words and enunciations. Not even a hermeneutics or a one-way, restricted, infallible exegesis is possible. What remains then? The first

<sup>4</sup> ALVES, Rubem. *Da esperança*. Campinas: Papirus, 1987. p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> ALVES, 2004, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> ALVES, Rubem. *O enigma da religião*. 5. ed. Campinas: Papirus, 2006. p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> ALVES, 2006, p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> HABERMAS, Jürgen. *Pensamento pós-metafísico: estudos filosóficos*. 2. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro, 2002. p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> ALVES, Rubem. *Esquecer de Deus. Tempo e Presença*, Rio de Janeiro, n. 298, p. 34-35, maio-jun. 1998.

alternative for theology is simply let God be God and not fit him or her into human categories.

God has never been seen. That is why the sacred poems expressly prohibit his name of being pronounced. If God is not given to our senses, it is a mortal sin to think and say how he is. The speech, the name create the illusion that God is an object next to others. Just saying “he” to refer to God already creates the illusion that he is male. If it is said “she” [God] is female. But could it not be an “it”, such as the wind, the fire, the water?<sup>10</sup>

And he argues for the need to detach what has been taught:

It happened like this. I knew nothing. People were talking, and their words were joining each other until all together became a thing that God was in their heads. Now I know that it was not God: it was a jumble of invented words. But back then, boy, I believed what was told to me: I was bewitched. I believed because I thought they knew more than me. It took me so long to discover that they knew nothing.

Here comes the question: if the words that the adults used to talk about God had not been taken from God, where did they take them from?

There is only one place: They took them from within themselves. This mechanism has a name: we call it projection. Projection is what you see in the movies [...]

The God people think and talk about is made with pieces of themselves [...]

So that means that God is just an illusion, like the illusion of the cinema? No way. This means that in order to talk of God, the first thing to do is to unlearn what we have been taught about God. We must forget in order to see straight. You must go back to the place before education. You must become a child again.<sup>11</sup>

Anyway, according to Rubem Alves, the first task of theology is to overcome the inflexibility of the concepts and statements about God. That does not mean abandoning the tradition or denying the

entire history of theological thought and ecclesiastical institutions, but reaffirming the dynamics of daily life and the precariousness of social facts. Moreover, it does not mean despising the historical legacy, but giving it the value it deserves, neither more nor less. Unlearning what was taught does not mean denying the existence of God, but seeing it through different eyes. And this attitude toward the theological thinking avoids, in turn, theological arrogance, decreasing the possibility of theologians conferring themselves with the title of representatives of God on earth and of describing Him or Her “just because they think that God changes His mind or His art of being at the mercy of things we think and say”.<sup>12</sup>

### **Theology is a game that is played when life is at stake**

If the object of theology is too grand to be studied, if theologians have no authority to talk about God, if it is impossible to apply scientific criteria such as objectivity, verifiability, mathematical structure (logic) to the imaginary object, which paths remain to theological knowledge? Rubem Alves’ answer to this question appears in the continuation of the metaphor about fish and a fishing net already mentioned:

Theology is not a net that can weave to catch God in its meshes, because God is not a fish, but wind that cannot be held...

Theology is a net we create for ourselves, in order to lie our bodies therein.

It is not valued for the truth you can say about God (it would require us to be Gods to verify this truth) it is valued for the good it does to our flesh.

Ah! They think I’m a heretic... None of this. I am just repeating something very old, forgotten in the Protestant tradition, which says that “Knowing Christ is knowing his benefits”: from God, the only thing we can know is the good He does to our body. With wise Riobaldo’s agreement:

<sup>10</sup> ALVES, 1998, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> ALVES, 1998, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> ALVES, 1987, p. 15.

“How is it possible without God out there? With God out there, everything turns into hope, the world resolves itself. But if there is no God, people are lost in the coming and going, and life is pointless. It is the opened danger in large and small hours...With God out there is less severe to be little careless, because in the end it works. But if God is not out there, then, we have no license for anything.”

Here it comes down to theology, the rest is embellishment.

There are words that live in the head and are good for thought. With them science will be made.

But there are words that live in the body and are good to be eaten. They come to our flesh without going through reflection.

Magic. Or poetry, which is the same thing.<sup>13</sup>

The question of theology (being able to be) a science or not is directly bound, therefore, to its task. Far from describing, analyzing and demystifying the mystery that surrounds human existence, the task of theology is far more modest. “God is the mystery that surrounds human existence and theology is the discourse about this mystery. As this mystery is unspeakable, it remains to human being the speech about themselves and how they meet or confront this mystery”.<sup>14</sup> Thus theology becomes, above all, a speech about hope. And the purpose of hope is not to think, but feed the soul, motivating experiences, bringing transformations, waking dreams. In this sense, Rubem Alves understands theology as a practice of witchcraft. Inspired by Ezekiel 37.1-14, he said: “I would like theology to be this: the words that make dreams visible and, when spoken, turn the valley of dry bones into a crowd of children”.<sup>15</sup>

According to Rubem Alves, theology is not a science, cannot be a science and does not want to

be a science.<sup>16</sup> Theology is before *sapientia* (wisdom intimately linked to the pursuit of meaning and reason for living and dying). That does not mean that a part of theology cannot be science at all, that it cannot think about itself. It depends on the kind of science that we are referring to. However, it does mean that, as a science, theology needs to realize that it is, first, an activity inherent to every human being and that it seeks, first, to answer the human quest for meaning, a home, a horizon to which people can be guided. It is a speech about hope in the face of the dissatisfaction with the reality of suffering which stands among us. Hope is linked to desire, and we only wish for what we do not have. Hope involves the desire to have what we do not have,<sup>17</sup> which makes theology a discourse on the absence. This desire is not in any way superfluous, because it implies deeply the question on how to live today:

In the world of appearances, formed by vision, articulated through evidence, faith is banned. It is not necessary to rely on what is told to us: the word is subordinate to the eye. But in the world of absences, when the eyes are useless, we only have word and imagination as tools for the construction of the *not yet*, for which our nostalgia inclines us to. And here is where the fascination and the absurdity of theology is built, because it starts at the leap of faith in which I take the risk of living “as if” the universe feels, talks, promises; as if the universe had a fate, the brother of our fate; as if creation and men moan in unison; as if from the future depths come words of promise; the reconciliation of men with nature; the humanization of nature and the naturalization of men; nature with a human face, human faces with the ease of birds and the simplicity of lilies; unification of all things in one body, the Body of Christ, Host. [...]

That is what theology talks about, any theology that grows from the bowels of men: the meaning of life and the sense of death. And that is why their glass beads are not only glass beads, they are bread. The symbols are devoured, lend to be eaten, they give life. It is

<sup>13</sup> ALVES, 1987, p. 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> REBLIN, Iuri Andréas. *Outros cheiros, outros sabores... o pensamento teológico de Rubem Alves*. São Leopoldo: Oikos, 2009. p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> ALVES, Rubem. *Lições de feitiçaria*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2000. p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> ALVES, Rubem. *Variações sobre a vida e a morte ou o feitiço erótico-herético da teologia*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2005. p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> ALVES, 2005, p. 147.

understood that it is not, do not want to be, cannot be a science. [...]

Theology talks about the meaning of life. Statement that can be reversed: whenever men are talking about the meaning of life, even though they do not use those glass beads that bring the traditional colors of the sacred, they will be constructing theologies: worlds of love in which makes sense to live and die in.<sup>18</sup>

Theology is a game that is played when life is at stake. It is much more than a supposedly scientific discourse settled by time. It goes beyond the limits of institutional walls. It happens out there where lives are being lived. Just because it is precisely the search for a loving order (*ordo amoris*), by announcing hopefully the absent, theology expresses symbols of beauty. Its speech does not aspire to create convincing ones but lovers. And precisely just because it is a natural activity inherent to every human being,<sup>19</sup> it can be practically found everywhere, under the most diverse forms of expression. Now, which implications exist for the theological doing that intends to think about itself, about its place in the world – an attitude that can be called here as a scientific perspective of theology?

As already mentioned, theology must realize that it is, first, an activity inherent to every human being and that it seeks, first, to answer the human quest for meaning and that in this quest for meaning, its dynamics involves hope, absence, beauty, poetry. Secondly, while acting in its scientific perspective, the task of theology is to understand the religious phenomenon in its diverse forms of expression, and it has the political task of making its speech about a desired utopian order become a reality. That is why thinking a public theology (something that is “coming into fashion” in the Brazilian theological field), or even better, rethinking the Liberation Theology, concerned with current social issues regarding human rights, ethics in society, the different forms of violence, the questions pertaining to public health, housing, economy, dignity, is so important today. That is why theology maintains the tension between hope

and policy. So far “the hand reaches” theology must be put into action. Where the hand does not reach, theology must put itself in prayer: *Ora et Labora*.

According to Rubem Alves, “[...] theology is always done with a prayer...” And what is prayer? A prayer is the junction of powerlessness and the love that wants the absent thing. It is a whole ‘turn’ to transcendence, to the emptiness that haunts the existence, with an intense and immanent desire that ‘what is not’ will be. Between the lines of the prayer lives hope. “[...] prayer is only a moan. ‘Sigh of the oppressed creature’: will there be a more beautiful definition? These are words of Marx. Sigh: speechless moan that hopes to hear the divine music, the music that, if heard, would bring us joy”. That is why, before being a systematic, analytical, rational and qualified speech, theology is an emotional and existential say that emerges from the bowels of the bodies as a cry: ‘sigh of the oppressed creature’.<sup>20</sup>

Thus theology in its scientific perspective has a double task. The first one is to understand the religious phenomenon in its various forms of expression. This search for understanding happens as from its expression, traditions, heritage, impact on society and on the behavior of people as from its understanding as an activity inherent to human being in several instances, while quest for meaning, discourse of hope, without subtracting the pleasure its symbols of beauty produce. In this respect, theology can come into friction with the many sciences of religions (in which it can feed off) which have made religion an object of study. However, these many sciences of religion usually do not realize the complexity of the phenomenon – fragmenting often their approaches in specific reduction in taxes– and paying too little attention to the issue of tradition and legacy that also made it the phenomenon it is. The second task of theology is therefore political: to ensure that its speech about a new social order becomes real. Of course, this task can become a risk, especially when theology becomes a servant of institutions and is used to satisfy the desire of a few. In any case, the prophetic character of theological thought remains,

<sup>18</sup> ALVES, 2005, p. 144-145.

<sup>19</sup> ALVES, 2005, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> REBLIN, 2009, p. 157-158.

as Rubem Alves said, “What we want is to live not only in the nostalgia and the beauty of the symbol, but we want these symbols of beauty to become a reality for the world in which we live”.<sup>21</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

Obviously, this theoretical summary provided here is superficial and it only tangents issues which the theologian deals with undermining depth, without considering all nuances of the critics and proposals Rubem Alves presents to the contemporary theological thought.<sup>22</sup> More questions were raised than answers provided. However, Rubem Alves’ theological thought points out some directions: 1. (Re-)thinking theology as a human science leaned on religious experience, its symbols, legacies and hopes, 2. (Re-)thinking a theology focused on the social daily life, the reality, a theology that is born of the bowels of people who can speak from them and for them, 3. (Re-)thinking a theology that does not lose its fascination with the mystery, a theology that sustains its poetic freedom and its prophetic criticality, i.e., a theology that is, first of all, beautiful because it is from dreams of beauty that lovers are born of.<sup>23</sup>

These perspectives have been delineated by new generations of theologians, whose thinking has particularly turned itself to a need for contextualization, in order to imagine a contextual theology rooted in daily life. Some suggest a kind of public theology, similar to the movement that has happened in other parts of the world such as in the United States and in South Africa as an alternative to the Liberation Theology. They propose that kind of public theology as an evolution or even a substitute for the Liberation Theology in an attempt to respond to new challenges. Naturally, this new theological trend that also redeems terminologically the publicity of theology has

problems to solve: the question of the concept of public rather than the concept of liberation, widely known and significantly more important (see the history of Latin American people) than the notion of the public; making its speech audible to the changing times, both in terms of language and in terms of audience (a bigger challenge yet).

So far, I am not sure public theology is a good road to be taken specifically in Latin America. Thus there are also those among the younger generations who identify the need to recognize a theology of daily life and rethink the Liberation Theology for the new context that has been outlined. As Kathleen Luana de Oliveira and Valério Guilherme Schaper said, the Latin American Theology is a theology on the move.<sup>24</sup> It changes as far as the soil from which it springs changes as well. Anyway, the difference between the proposals will not be solved in a matter of which one better corresponds to the contemporary world; it is rather a reflection of plurality, diversity and complexity of thought and ways of acting. Ultimately, following Rubem Alves’ perspective, what really matters to the theologians who wish to engage in a scientific approach is not missing the simplicity or the humanity, neither the magic nor the prophecy which makes theology an indispensably interesting game to be played when life is at stake.

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<sup>21</sup> RUBEM Alves: os símbolos. Direção e produção de Armando Celia Jr. e Celso Pavarin Jr. Coordenação de Marina Escolar. Campinas: Vídeo Arqui/ABEC, [s.d]. 1 videocassete (51 min), VHS, son., color.~ 48’.

<sup>22</sup> For further study: REBLIN, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> “I want a theology that is closer to the beauty than to the truth, because the lovers emerge from the view of beauty, but Inquisitions are built from the conviction of truth”. ALVES, Rubem. *A gestação do futuro*. 2. ed. Campinas: Papirus, 1987. p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> SCHAPER, Valério Guilherme; OLIVEIRA, Kathleen Luana de. A Teologia Contemporânea na América Latina e no Caribe: Teologia em Movimento. In: SCHAPER, Valério Guilherme; OLIVEIRA, Kathleen Luana de; REBLIN, Iuri Andréas (Orgs.). *A Teologia Contemporânea na América Latina e no Caribe*. São Leopoldo: Oikos; EST, 2008. p. 7-8.