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# Symbolic Hermeneutics and Decolonial Thought: Interpretation, Liberation, and the Creation of New Educational Spaces

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## Abstract

This article develops a symbolic hermeneutic framework for interpreting contemporary socio-educational phenomena within the horizon of decolonial thought and Liberation Theology. It begins from the assumption that symbols are not merely decorative forms of representation but fundamental structures of meaning that shape both individual experience and collective life, especially through their educational effects. From this perspective, the article examines how the symbols circulating in social communication reveal the ideological underpinnings of imagination, authority, exclusion, and resistance. The essay then places this symbolic analysis in dialog with decolonial theory, arguing that the enduring epistemological legacy of colonialism continues to organize hegemonic forms of knowledge, subjectivity, and power. Particular attention is devoted to the concept of the frontier, first understood as a modern device of exclusion and then reinterpreted as a space of epistemic resistance, ethical encounter, and democratic confrontation among differences. The discussion further engages key authors of Liberation Theology and the philosophy of liberation—especially Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Enrique Dussel, and Paulo Freire—in order to show how religious discourse and pedagogical practice intersect in processes of emancipation. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretative approach grounded in philosophical hermeneutics and critical conceptual analysis. It reconstructs and compares major theoretical positions rather than presenting empirical data. The article argues that the integration of symbolic hermeneutics, decolonial thought, and liberationist theology offers an original framework for rethinking education as a transformative practice grounded in ethical responsibility toward the Other. By bringing the concepts of frontier, *sentipensamiento*, communality, and pluriverse into a single analytical constellation, the paper contributes to current debates in religious studies, critical pedagogy, and epistemic justice. In the context of contemporary global crises—migration, ecological devastation, social fragmentation, and the weakening of democratic participation—it proposes a renewed role for religion as a critical and generative force capable of opening new educational spaces for dialogue, liberation, and the reconfiguration of knowledge.



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## 1. Introduction

This article proposes a symbolic hermeneutic interpretation of selected contemporary phenomena from the perspective of education and religious studies. Symbols are understood here as generative structures of meaning rather than as secondary rhetorical

ornaments. They mediate relationships between memory and imagination, between institutions and collective subjectivities, and between visible forms of communication and the often invisible logics of power that sustain them. For this reason, a symbolic hermeneutic approach is particularly useful when one seeks to investigate not only what social realities say about themselves, but also what they conceal, normalize, or render thinkable.

The theoretical horizon of the essay is provided by decolonial thought. Colonialism, in this framework, is not treated merely as a past historical episode but as an enduring epistemological and cultural matrix that continues to organize hierarchies of knowledge, value, race, and civilization. Coloniality survives in school curricula, in media narratives, in economic institutions, in the criteria by which expertise is validated, and in the seemingly neutral forms through which the modern world defines truth. What appears universal frequently bears the marks of a provincial history that has transformed itself into global normativity. This has decisive educational consequences because the shaping of consciousness is inseparable from the shaping of what counts as legitimate knowledge.

The article also moves within the field of Liberation Theology and the philosophy of liberation, especially in the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Enrique Dussel, and Paulo Freire. These authors are central because they do not reduce liberation to a purely spiritual or interior dimension. Instead, they insist on the historical, pedagogical, and communal character of emancipation. They also show that religion can become a privileged site of critique whenever faith is interpreted as an ethical response to the suffering of the oppressed rather than as the legitimation of established power. In this sense, theology is not external to education. It can intervene directly in the formation of moral imagination, political responsibility, and collective agency.

A first objective of this study is therefore to reconstruct the relationship between symbolic forms, educational practices, and structures of domination. A second objective is to show that the concepts of frontier and pluriverse offer a particularly fruitful vocabulary for this task. The frontier is initially examined as a symbol of closure and exclusion in the modern West. It is then reinterpreted through decolonial and liberationist lenses as a site of resistance, encounter, and epistemic transformation. The pluriverse, by contrast, names a horizon in which many worlds, knowledges, and ontologies coexist without being reduced to a single universal model. Together, these concepts help us imagine new educational spaces grounded in plurality, ethical responsibility, and democratic dialog.

The article contributes to the field by developing an interpretative framework that explicitly bridges symbolic hermeneutics, decolonial theory, and Liberation Theology in the domain of educational studies. While these traditions have often been explored independently, their integration remains insufficiently developed, especially in relation to the pedagogical significance of symbols and the religious dimensions of emancipation. In the present global context—marked by migratory crises, ecological devastation, renewed authoritarianism, and widespread distrust toward democratic institutions—the need for alternative epistemologies and ethical frameworks has become increasingly urgent. Reconsidering the formative role of religion, imagination, and critical interpretation is therefore not only a theoretical task but also a civic and historical necessity.

Methodologically, the essay adopts a qualitative, interpretative approach grounded in philosophical hermeneutics. It does not offer empirical fieldwork. Rather, it proceeds through conceptual reconstruction, close reading, and theoretical comparison among major authors in the decolonial and liberationist traditions. The aim is to identify the networks of meaning that connect symbolic forms, socio-political conditions, and educational processes. This type of analysis is particularly suitable for a study concerned with the historical, ethical, and imaginative dimensions of formation. It allows us to understand how concepts

travel across theology, pedagogy, philosophy, and cultural critique, and how they may be mobilized to envision educational practices adequate to a deeply unequal world.

## 2. The Frontier as a Symbol of Exclusion and Liberation

In the contemporary West, the symbol of the frontier is most immediately associated with closure. It evokes border walls, detention regimes, police surveillance, and the defense of privilege against the mobility of the poor. Above all, it marks a refusal: the refusal to recognize in the migrant, the refugee, or the displaced person a subject entitled to dignity, history, and future. Behind the rhetoric of security, there often lies an older and more visceral fear—the fear of losing one’s own stability, prosperity, and imagined identity. Much of the discourse surrounding borders is sustained by this fear, even when it is disguised as realism, legality, or prudent governance. In this sense, the frontier functions as a symbolic condensation of the egoism characteristic of capitalist individualism.

Yet the frontier need not remain trapped within this exclusionary meaning. Decolonial thought invites us to reinterpret it as a critical site where the violence of hegemonic classifications becomes visible and where alternative forms of knowing may emerge. The frontier is where modernity draws its lines between civilization and barbarism, reason and superstition, progress and backwardness, knowledge and non-knowledge. But it is also the place where these binaries are destabilized by the presence of lives, memories, and epistemologies that exceed them. The frontier is therefore ambivalent: it can close, but it can also open. It can separate, but it can also become a threshold of transformation.

Within decolonial discourse, one of the most significant gestures associated with this opening is that of unlearning. To unlearn is not simply to forget. It is an ethical and political practice of disidentification from forms of knowledge that have become alien because they have been imposed through coloniality. Such a gesture requires the recognition that learning does not happen only in formal institutions such as schools and universities. It also takes place in everyday life, in communal practices, in languages, in memories, in suffering, and in the unfinished work of critical reflection. This expansion of the educational field is crucial because coloniality operates precisely by narrowing the sites and authorities of legitimate knowledge.

Santiago Castro-Gómez has emphasized that one of the greatest challenges in the Latin American context lies in the decolonization of the social sciences and philosophy (Castro-Gómez 2000, p. 159). This challenge is not merely academic. It has an emancipatory educational purpose, since it concerns the recovery of knowledges obscured, marginalized, or disqualified for centuries. Such recovery is inseparable from a critique of the media apparatus that often passes off the virtual as real, simulation as fact, and spectacle as political understanding. A symbolic hermeneutics attentive to social communication can reveal how such narratives shape desires, fears, and hierarchies. In this sense, interpretation itself becomes a form of critique.

At the same time, decolonial engagement calls for an empathetic movement capable of reconnecting feeling and thinking. This is not a sentimental supplement to reason but a challenge to the disembodied rationality through which colonial power has often justified domination. The effort to respect the Other in his or her irreducible alterity requires an imaginative and affective availability that purely instrumental reason cannot provide. It also requires courage, because colonial power reproduces itself not only through institutions but through fear. To confront this fear means, in the words often evoked in decolonial and liberationist contexts, confronting one’s own demons and accepting the labor of difficult interpretation.

Walter Dignolo describes this labor in terms of a pluritopic hermeneutics. What is at stake, in his account, is not multicultural celebration or cultural relativism but a socially

grounded need to narrate history as an act of political intervention (Mignolo 2005, p. 35). The point is not simply to add more stories to the dominant narrative, but to displace the monopoly of interpretation that has long belonged to modern Western reason. To interpret pluritopically means to think from different loci of enunciation, especially from those historically produced as subordinate. The frontier, then, ceases to be a mere line and becomes a zone in which subaltern reason and wounded memory can articulate their own truth.

This reinterpretation of the frontier has direct educational implications. If education is reduced to the reproduction of established knowledge, then it remains enclosed within the symbolic frontier of dominant institutions. If, however, education is understood as a practice of critical awakening, then the frontier becomes a pedagogical space of encounter with difference, conflict, and possibility. New educational spaces begin precisely where closure is interrupted—where learning becomes responsive to suffering, where narratives are reopened, and where democratic dialog is built through the recognition of plural histories. The frontier opens to liberation when it is no longer governed by the fear of contamination but by the ethical demand to share a world.

### 3. Liberation Theology and the Ethics of Emancipation

A comparable movement from closure to opening can be observed within Liberation Theology. Emerging in Latin America in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council and amid massive social inequality, Liberation Theology proposed a radical rereading of the Christian message from the perspective of the poor. It insisted that the Gospel could not be interpreted adequately if the suffering of oppressed populations remained a secondary concern. This was not a mere pastoral adjustment. It represented a theological and epistemological displacement. The location from which one reads scripture matters because the reality of poverty reveals dimensions of faith that remain invisible from positions of power.

Gustavo Gutiérrez was one of the decisive figures in this shift. His famous characterization of theology as *acto segundo* expressed the idea that theoretical reflection must follow transformative praxis. Before theology comes commitment; before doctrine, an intervention in history; before explanatory discourse, the practical struggle against dehumanization. This insistence on praxis was inseparable from the life of Christ himself, understood not as an abstract dogmatic figure but as one who transformed history by siding with the excluded. In 1968, during discussions in Chimbote on the documents of Vatican II, Gutiérrez opposed the developmentalist language then common in ecclesial and political circles by instead proposing the category of liberation (Gutiérrez 1969). The shift was crucial. Development could still imply paternalistic incorporation into an unjust order; liberation implied transformation of that order itself.

Earlier episcopal debates in Latin America had already recognized the need for structural reforms, literacy, and the integration of marginalized sectors into public life. Yet in Liberation Theology, the issue became sharper and more radical. Participation was no longer conceived merely as inclusion within preexisting institutions but as the emergence of the poor as historical subjects. Basic ecclesial communities played a crucial role in this process. They created collective spaces where people gathered to read scripture, interpret their lived reality, discuss injustice, and cultivate forms of solidarity. The educational importance of these communities cannot be overstated. They functioned as laboratories of shared learning, critical consciousness, and collective hope—a Christian version of the educative community grounded in practice rather than in mere rhetoric.

Gutiérrez further developed a methodological perspective intended to overcome the dualism between salvation history and human history. In Christ, he argued, these

two histories are not separate orders but converge. The theological consequence is clear: commitment to liberation becomes a criterion for judging the action of individuals, the Church, and civil society. The credibility of faith is measured in relation to the oppressed. This position explains why Liberation Theology soon encountered strong resistance from the Vatican. The Holy See, especially in the 1984 Instruction on certain aspects of the “Theology of Liberation,” reaffirmed hierarchical and doctrinal boundaries against what it perceived as dangerous political and epistemological deviations. The reaction was not simply a doctrinal dispute. It marked the closure of a symbolic frontier, one that sought to contain a theology rearticulating the Church as the people of God rather than as a vertical apparatus of power.

What was at stake in these debates was not only orthodoxy but the social meaning of Christianity. For Gutiérrez, the decisive interlocutor in Latin America was not the unbeliever in the abstract but the non-person—the one rendered socially insignificant through economic and political domination (Gutiérrez 1979). The true divide was not between believers and non-believers but between oppressors and oppressed. This insight remains powerful because it relocates theological reflection within the concrete field of social conflict. It also exposes the scandal of a Christianity that may coexist comfortably with oppression while maintaining the self-image of moral legitimacy.

Leonardo Boff radicalized this anthropological emphasis by arguing that the center of Christian reflection should not initially be the Church as institution but the human being whom the Church is called to make fully human and therefore free. In *Jesus Christ Liberator*, Boff foregrounded the anthropological datum in the Brazilian context of poverty and exclusion (Boff 1972). Later, he would go so far as to propose a refoundation of ecclesial life inspired by basic communities (Boff 1977). This did not mean abolishing the institutional Church in favor of a purely spontaneous religious collectivism. Rather, it meant recovering the Church’s vital force by challenging the limits of bureaucratized power and by affirming more horizontal, circular, and participatory forms of communion. A Church is authentically communal only when all believers share equal dignity. The educational implication is profound: liberation requires a reformation of the forms through which authority, participation, and recognition are organized.

Paul Ricoeur’s insight that love represents a state of peace is especially resonant here (Ricoeur 2005). Liberation Theology never understood love as a purely inward sentiment. Love becomes historically credible only when it takes shape as justice, hospitality, and the defense of life. In this sense, liberation is not external to faith; it is one of its most demanding expressions. Religion is central here not because it provides sacred legitimation to politics, but because it can disclose an ethical horizon in which the oppressed are recognized as bearers of irreducible dignity. Liberation Theology is therefore not only a socio-political movement. It is a theological reconfiguration of Christian praxis in which faith becomes inseparable from historical responsibility toward those whom dominant systems declare negligible.

#### **4. Enrique Dussel, Otherness, and the Formative Meaning of Liberation**

Enrique Dussel occupies a decisive place at the intersection of theology, philosophy, and pedagogy. Actively involved in early debates around Liberation Theology after the Medellín conference of 1968 and later academic meetings in Buenos Aires, Dussel developed a philosophy of liberation centered on ethical responsibility toward the Other. One of his most evocative concepts is that of epiphany: the manifestation of the poor, the oppressed, the excluded, whose presence interrupts the self-enclosed logic of power. When this presence truly reaches us and elicits a responsible ethical response, it inaugurates “the

beginning of real liberation” (Dussel 2011, p. 44). Liberation thus begins not with an abstract concept but with an encounter.

This encounter is irreducibly corporeal. The Other appears not as a category but as a vulnerable living being whose suffering cannot be dissolved into statistics or administrative classifications. Dussel’s thought is deeply marked by Emmanuel Lévinas, especially in its insistence that ethics arises from the relation to alterity rather than from the self-grounding of autonomous reason. Yet Dussel moves beyond Lévinas by situating alterity more concretely in the figure of the oppressed poor, the racially discriminated subject, the colonized body, the victim of patriarchal and capitalist systems. The face of the Other is therefore historical and political, not merely philosophical.

For this reason, Dussel rejects forms of reason that are merely instrumental or strategic in the service of domination. The rationality underlying capitalism presents itself as efficient, pragmatic, and universal, but in fact it often functions by reducing persons to means and by subordinating ethical claims to systemic reproduction. Against this, Dussel proposes a strategic-critical reason that remains accountable to life and to the suffering of victims. Its practical meaning is profoundly formative. Education, when shaped by such reason, cannot be neutral. It becomes a field in which subjects learn to recognize domination and to judge social arrangements according to their effects on concrete lives.

Dussel identifies at least three major forms of domination that bear directly on formation. The first is erotic domination, exemplified in the machista control of gendered bodies and relations. The second is pedagogical domination, whereby the teacher’s knowledge is absolutized and imposed as indisputable truth. The third is economic domination, intensified by neoliberal capitalism, which exacerbates inequality and pushes poverty to extreme levels (Dussel 2004, pp. 138–40). These forms are distinct yet interconnected. Together they reveal that education is never isolated from broader structures of power. What occurs in the classroom cannot be separated from the social world that shapes both teacher and learner.

This analysis is particularly illuminating when read alongside Paulo Freire. Dussel notes that more “scientific” psychopedagogues often dismissed Freire as merely political, as though politics and pedagogy were incompatible. Yet the alleged impurity of politics is, in fact, what allows education to confront the conditions of dehumanization. If the “fault” of politics lies in recognizing that education is impossible without the self-activity of the learner, then this is less a fault than an essential pedagogical truth. Liberation cannot be bestowed from above. The oppressed must become co-authors of their own process of emancipation.

Dussel’s contribution therefore lies not only in an ethics of alterity but also in an epistemology of responsibility. Knowledge must be re-situated in relation to the needs of bodies that suffer recurring injustice. This is why Mignolo’s later formulation of epistemic disobedience resonates so strongly with Dussel’s work. The starting point of knowledge shifts from academic self-referentiality to the historical claims of those excluded by dominant systems. In educational terms, this means that curricula, pedagogical authority, and institutional standards must be interrogated according to the lives they recognize or erase. Liberation is formative because it reorients the learner toward another criterion of truth: the dignity of the Other and the material conditions of life.

To stand at the frontier in Dussel’s sense is therefore to assume a critical position in the name of victims. These victims are not abstract. They are living beings whose pain exposes the violence concealed by triumphant narratives of progress. The pedagogical significance of this stance is immense. It asks education to cultivate ethical attention, critical judgment, and the courage to interpret history from below. It also asks religious thought to abandon self-sufficiency and to rediscover its vocation as a response to suffering. Liberation begins when the Other is no longer treated as an object of assistance or management but

recognized as a subject whose appearance transforms the horizon of what must be thought and done.

## 5. Paulo Freire: Denunciation, Announcement, and Critical Consciousness

The educational dimension of liberation finds one of its most fertile articulations in the work of Paulo Freire. A lawyer by training who discovered his vocation in the education of the poor, Freire transformed pedagogy by insisting that education is never a neutral transmission of information. It either domesticates or liberates. It either reproduces the logic of domination or assists subjects in becoming conscious of their historical situation. In this sense, pedagogy is inseparable from politics, not because it should be reduced to propaganda, but because every educational act presupposes a vision of the human being, authority, language, and social possibility.

Freire's educational thought is particularly important for a symbolic hermeneutics because it links interpretation to praxis. Human beings are not passive recipients of a pre-given world; they read the world even before they read the word. The act of interpretation is therefore part of becoming a subject. But this interpretation cannot be monopolized by the educator. The banking model of education, in which knowledge is deposited into supposedly empty learners, reproduces pedagogical domination. It assumes that truth already belongs to the expert and that learners have only to receive it. Freire counters this with dialog, in which teachers and students become co-participants in a common process of inquiry and transformation.

In Dussel's appendix on Freire, the liberation of the oppressed is reconstructed through what Freire understands as an ethical-critical process. Within this process two moments are especially significant: denunciation and announcement. Denunciation names the negative moment, the exposure of dehumanizing reality. It is the act through which the oppressed recognize the structures that deny their humanity. Announcement names the positive moment, the imaginative projection of an alternative, what may be called an unprecedented but viable future. Ernst Bloch's language of the not-yet and the promised land helps illuminate this dimension of anticipatory consciousness (Bloch 1972, 1980). Liberation is not only a critique. It is also the generation of hope.

Crucially, denunciation and announcement must not be separated. A denunciation without announcement risks becoming despair or sterile resentment. An announcement without denunciation risks turning into rhetorical consolation detached from reality. Freire's genius lies in understanding that critical consciousness grows through their dialectical relation. The oppressed community, through dialog, develops awareness of the structures of domination and at the same time cultivates the imaginative power necessary to envision a transformed world. The educator plays an important role in this process, but not as a sovereign dispenser of truth. Rather, the educator participates in a dialectical relation that fosters conscientização, the deepening of awareness through collective reflection and action (Freire 1993, pp. 112–14).

This emphasis on imagination is politically and educationally decisive. Contemporary public life often devalues the imagination in the name of supposedly pragmatic realism. Politics is reduced to administration, media performance, or technical management. In such a climate, the ability to imagine a world other than the present one is dismissed as naïve or dangerous. Yet without imagination, there is no liberation. The capacity to announce another world is what prevents critique from collapsing into cynicism. It is also what allows education to become transformative rather than merely adaptive. The imagination is not the opposite of reality; it is one of the conditions for changing it.

Freire's perspective also helps us understand the frontier in formative terms. To inhabit the frontier is to experience contradiction: one lives within a world that names one inferior

while also discovering, through collective reflection, the possibility of resisting that naming. The frontier thus becomes a site of politicization and pedagogy. It is where subaltern subjects learn to interpret the codes through which they have been marginalized and where they begin to formulate different narratives of self and community. For this reason, Freire's work remains indispensable to any attempt to connect decoloniality, religion, and education. He shows that liberation is not merely a change in structures but a change in the ways people speak, remember, hope, and understand themselves as historical agents.

The relevance of Freire today extends beyond classic literacy campaigns or pedagogical theory narrowly understood. His thought offers a criterion for evaluating contemporary systems of communication and technological mediation. Whenever knowledge is presented as something consumed rather than co-produced, whenever participation is replaced by passive reception, and whenever language is used to inhibit rather than deepen understanding, the logic of the banking model reappears in new forms. A symbolic hermeneutics attentive to these processes can reveal their hidden educational effects. Freire reminds us that emancipation requires not only access to information but the collective capacity to name the world critically and to act upon it.

## 6. From Border Thinking to the Pluriverse

If the frontier can become a space of resistance, the concept of the pluriverse extends this opening into a broader ontological and political horizon. The pluriverse names a world in which many worlds fit—a world that refuses the modern Western claim that reality must be organized according to a single civilizational model, a single trajectory of development, a single rationality, or a single authorized way of inhabiting the earth. In decolonial thought, this concept is not a poetic metaphor but a practical and epistemological challenge. It contests the assumption that plurality can be tolerated only insofar as it is ultimately absorbed into a universal framework defined elsewhere.

Marta Zulma Palermo, working in comparative literature and in close dialog with the decolonial constellation around Walter D. Mignolo, offers an important pathway into this discussion. She takes seriously the subject's experience of living between worlds under coloniality—a condition of double consciousness in which one is aware both of one's imposed subalternity and of a partly inaccessible ancestral memory. Palermo engages a notion particularly dear to decolonial thought: *sentipensamiento*, or feeling-thinking. This concept refuses the split between reason and affect that has shaped so much of Western modern epistemology. It proposes instead a mode of knowledge in which cognition is inseparable from embodied relationality, memory, sensibility, and community.

Palermo connects *sentipensamiento* to two other crucial notions: heterogeneity and communality. Heterogeneity acknowledges that the Americas cannot be reduced to the homogeneous form of nation or state imagined by Western modernity. The continent is marked from the beginning by multiplicity, conflict, layered temporalities, and divergent cultural formations. Communality, by contrast, points to the persistence of collective life among Indigenous communities, including forms of direct democracy and shared responsibility in public life. These are not archaic residues waiting to be modernized; they are living organizational principles with educational significance. They shape subjects through participation, belonging, reciprocity, and common decision-making.

Palermo is equally critical of the "discursive apparatuses of the academy," which often present their own categories as if they were universal. Writing itself, however, can become a site of transgression against institutional models when it reveals that values such as truth, goodness, and beauty are historically produced constructions tied to privileged habits of power (Palermo 2017, p. 18). Her insistence on local writings and on the shift from object to subject is especially important. Local expressions are not merely instances of

cultural material to be interpreted by metropolitan theory; they are themselves modes of self-knowledge and critical discourse. This has direct relevance for symbolic hermeneutics, because it reminds us that interpretation must not confiscate the voice of what it interprets.

The pluriverse therefore requires a reconfiguration of educational language. If the universal has historically functioned as an instrument of domination, then education cannot simply add diversity to an unchanged framework. It must question the very architecture of knowledge. This means interrogating what counts as theory, which histories are teachable, which languages may articulate truth, and whose memories become curricular matter. Such work is not a relativistic abandonment of judgment. It is an ethical and political commitment to forms of coexistence in which plurality is constitutive rather than residual. To educate for the pluriverse is to cultivate the capacity to inhabit difference without reducing it to hierarchy or folklore.

## 7. Pablo González Casanova, Collective Knowledge, and Democratic Formation

The Mexican sociologist and historian Pablo González Casanova contributes a further and highly significant dimension to this discussion. His work on democracy, exploitation, and the new sciences foregrounds the collective character of knowledge and the political necessity of learning how to learn. For González Casanova, development cannot be conceived as a technocratic process administered from above. It must involve modes of research and political organization that teach subjects to reflect, dissent, and propose alternatives (González Casanova 2017, pp. 30–31). In this sense, formation is inseparable from democratic practice.

One of the striking aspects of González Casanova's perspective is his insistence on networks of collectives engaged in the coproduction of knowledge. This approach demystifies the figure of the solitary researcher and challenges a sacred image of science detached from common life. Knowledge becomes a practical and dialogical activity generated through the interaction of different actors, experiences, and forms of expertise. Such a model has enormous educational implications. It calls into question the passivity often assigned to the "public" in relation to science and technology. Citizens, especially the popular masses, should not merely receive incomprehensible communications from experts. They should participate in the making, interpretation, and orientation of knowledge itself.

Three key terms organize this horizon: dialogicity, equity, and politicality. Dialogicity refers to a conception of knowledge as social praxis, one resonant with Freire's "relations between human beings and world." Different positions need not be erased for common work to occur. Through what may be called diagonal knowing, subjects may identify shared objectives, negotiate difference, and construct a resistance necessary for alternative worlds. Equity means that scientific and technological progress cannot remain the property of elites while the many bear only its consequences. Politicality means that knowledge is transformative. It is not external to politics because it shapes capacities, institutions, and horizons of possibility.

In a period in which many democratic systems appear emptied of substantial participation, González Casanova's ideas become especially relevant. Contemporary politics often seems estranged from citizens' difficulties and needs, while widespread disinterest in public affairs signals a deeper crisis of democracy. Against this backdrop, collective knowledge emerges as a form of sovereignty. The right to education expands beyond access to schooling and becomes the right to participate in the production of socially consequential knowledge. Education is thus redefined as a global value linked to self-government, co-responsibility, and the democratization of expertise.

Jaime Torres Guillén, one of the most incisive interpreters of González Casanova, presents in a 2023 essay seven theses summarizing the political force of his work. For the present discussion, the seventh thesis is especially important: the possibility of a different world built by many worlds willing to enter into dialog within the horizon of the pluriverse (Torres Guillén 2023, p. 236). This proposal is not a utopian fantasy detached from conflict. It demands learning how the capitalist world-system uses new sciences and technologies, and learning as well from the experiences of peoples resisting dispossession, patriarchy, and the destruction of subsistence. Education here acquires a militant and ethical dimension. To learn is to become capable of understanding domination in order to resist it collectively.

González Casanova's earlier work on the sociology of exploitation provides the background for this orientation (González Casanova 1969, p. 225). Humanistic knowledge, far from being obsolete in the age of advanced technology, retains a decisive ethical and political importance. It preserves the question of freedom, memory, and value precisely where systems increasingly present themselves as self-regulating, adaptive, and beyond contestation. In a communicative environment dominated by informational flows and algorithmic management, there is a strong temptation to believe that technical mediation itself guarantees rationality. Yet such systems can lie, manipulate, and even celebrate ignorance whenever this serves their operative goals. The educational challenge is therefore not only to transmit competencies but to cultivate forms of judgment capable of exposing these operations.

This is why González Casanova's legacy belongs firmly within the broader pedagogical and religious question addressed in this article. He helps us see that emancipation requires institutions and practices capable of generating subjects who can speak, deliberate, and know together. Such democratic formation resonates with the communal ethos of Liberation Theology and with decolonial critiques of epistemic hierarchy. The pluriverse is not simply an ontological proposition; it is also an educational project of collective world-making.

## 8. Arturo Escobar, Ontological Politics, and the Possibility of Another World

The Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar, who has worked in close dialog with González Casanova and with the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality group, sharpens the political implications of the pluriverse by asking a decisive question: can modernist political practice contribute to the emergence of a pluriversal politics (Escobar 2020, p. 330)? The question is urgent because contemporary neoliberalism continues to operate through destructive relations to nature, territory, and social life while sustaining asymmetries that have lasted for centuries. If politics remains confined within liberal forms oriented toward a unilateral idea of progress, then it is unlikely to respond adequately to worlds whose aspirations exceed the categories of that tradition.

Escobar's answer is not simply a rejection of all modern politics, but a call to open political imagination toward ontological plurality. Liberal political forms often presume that there is one world and many competing interests within it. Pluriversal politics begins from another premise: there are many worlds, many ways of composing the relation between human and non-human beings, many territorialities, many forms of life, and therefore many ontological commitments at stake in political conflict. This shift matters enormously for education. It means that learning cannot be reduced to the acquisition of neutral competencies for navigating a world already decided in advance. Education must instead become capable of narrating how worlds are made, defended, and transformed.

Escobar's earlier English formulation, "Another possible is possible," carries a deliberately utopian charge. The phrase insists that possibility itself can become a historical force when it is desired and organized by a majority rather than blocked by a minority.

His subtitle, “walking toward transitions,” underscores the dynamic and processual character of such possibility. Politics is not a sudden leap into perfection but a movement of transitions rooted in memory, territory, and collective experimentation. This is especially visible in his reference to Abya Yala/Afro/Latin America. By recovering the Indigenous name Abya Yala and explicitly including Afro-descendant histories, Escobar exposes the coloniality embedded even in the naming of the continent and invites a more faithful relation to ancestral and displaced memories.

The concepts emerging in his work—pluriversality, autonomy, and civilizational transitions—are not abstractions. They arise from struggles over land, water, community, and survival. They also reframe environmental conflict as ontological conflict. When Indigenous peoples defend a mountain or a lake against extractive projects, they are not only protecting resources. They are defending worlds in which those entities are sacred, relational, and constitutive of communal life. Modern extractivism, by contrast, treats them as commodities available for exploitation. Symbolic hermeneutics is especially helpful in reading these conflicts because it reveals how different worlds are organized by different meanings, and how those meanings shape institutions, desires, and educational practices.

Escobar’s notion of ontological politics thus resonates with the educational concern of this article. If the modern universe has been sustained by an analytic logic of disjunction, the pluriverse requires more holistic and relational forms of thought. To educate for ontological plurality means cultivating sensitivity to ways of life in which the human/non-human relation is configured otherwise. It also means interrogating the technological “facilitators” of knowledge that contemporary societies consume so uncritically. Do these technologies actually deepen understanding, or do they produce dependence, distraction, and cognitive simplification? Such questions are not external to pedagogy. They bear directly on how subjects learn to inhabit the world and on what forms of existence are normalized as inevitable.

Escobar’s work further reminds us that imagination is indispensable to transformation. A politics without imagination becomes a stage populated by mediocre actors, while educational systems without imagination produce technical competence without historical depth or ethical orientation. In this sense, the crisis of political imagination is also an educational crisis. The possibility of another world depends on subjects capable of envisioning and narrating it. Here, religion may once again play a critical role—not as dogmatic closure but as a reservoir of symbols, hopes, and ethical demands that exceed the reduction of life to consumption and management. The pluriverse, then, is both a political and a spiritual challenge, because it asks how many worlds we are willing to let exist and what forms of conversion are required for that willingness to become real.

## **9. Educational Implications: New Spaces for Dialog, Critique, and Common Life**

What, then, does the symbolic hermeneutic and decolonial itinerary reconstructed in these pages imply for education? First, it suggests that education must be understood more broadly than the transmission of disciplinary content within institutional walls. Educational processes unfold wherever subjects learn how to perceive reality, how to interpret symbols, how to name injustice, and how to imagine alternatives. Media environments, religious communities, social movements, local narratives, and everyday interactions all participate in formation. If this is the case, then educational responsibility can no longer be confined to schools alone. It becomes a social, ethical, and political task.

Second, new educational spaces require a critique of epistemic hierarchy. Coloniality persists whenever some knowledges are treated as naturally universal while others are tolerated only as local color, testimony, or folklore. A decolonial pedagogy informed

by symbolic hermeneutics does not merely diversify content; it interrogates the conditions under which knowledge is authorized. This means opening curricula to subaltern memories, Indigenous and Afro-descendant cosmologies, communal practices, and religious interpretations forged in contexts of struggle. It also means teaching students to analyze the symbolic operations through which exclusion is normalized: the language of security, the rhetoric of development, the image of neutral expertise, the spectacle of technological salvation.

Third, educational spaces must become dialogical in a robust sense. Dialog is not the exchange of polite opinions within an unchanged framework. It is the difficult process through which subjects encounter other histories and allow those encounters to transform the criteria by which they understand truth and justice. Freire, Dussel, and González Casanova all insist, in different ways, that formation depends on participation rather than passive reception. Basic ecclesial communities offer a religious example of this principle, while decolonial thought expands it into a broader epistemic and political demand. To create dialogical spaces is therefore to create spaces in which people can speak from their own histories without being required to translate themselves entirely into dominant terms.

Fourth, imagination must be restored to a central pedagogical role. The devaluation of imagination in favor of narrow pragmatism impoverishes both politics and education. Without the capacity to anticipate a different world, denunciation loses force and democracy becomes managerial routine. An education adequate to the present crisis must cultivate symbolic literacy: the ability to read the meanings embedded in social forms and to generate alternative narratives of common life. In religious studies, this also means taking seriously the power of theological symbols—not as relics of a precritical age but as resources through which communities have named hope, suffering, justice, and liberation.

Fifth, education must recover the relation between ethics and knowledge. One of the strongest lessons of Dussel and Liberation Theology is that thought is accountable to life. A curriculum that produces technical competence while remaining indifferent to the suffering of the excluded is not neutral; it is complicit. New educational spaces should therefore be judged not only by measurable outcomes but by the kinds of subjects they form: whether they deepen indifference or responsibility, whether they normalize domination or cultivate solidarity, whether they reduce the world to utility or open it to plurality and care.

Finally, the educational horizon suggested here is inseparable from democracy. Communality, coproduction of knowledge, and ontological plurality all require forms of life in which participation is substantive rather than symbolic. Education cannot prepare subjects for democratic life if it itself is organized according to authoritarian, extractive, or radically unequal logics. To educate for the pluriverse is to educate for coexistence without erasure, for conflict without dehumanization, and for shared worlds that remain open to difference. Religion can contribute significantly to this task when it acts as a critical force of remembrance, hospitality, and ethical interruption. In this sense, the creation of new educational spaces is not ancillary to liberation; it is one of its most concrete and necessary forms.

## 10. Conclusions

This article has argued that symbolic hermeneutics, when brought into conversation with decolonial thought and Liberation Theology, offers a compelling framework for rethinking the educational and religious challenges of the present. Symbols do not merely reflect social reality; they organize it by shaping perception, legitimating hierarchies, and making certain futures imaginable while foreclosing others. For this reason, their interpretation is a critical task. A symbolic hermeneutic approach allows us to uncover the ideological dimensions of social communication and to identify the educational effects of the images, narratives, and distinctions through which contemporary societies reproduce exclusion.

Within this interpretative framework, the frontier emerged first as a symbol of closure and then as a possible site of resistance. Decolonial authors such as Castro-Gómez and Mignolo show that the frontier is where modernity draws its lines between legitimate and illegitimate worlds, but also where those lines can be contested by subaltern memories and border thinking. Liberation Theology adds an explicitly religious and ethical dimension to this process. In Gutiérrez and Boff, liberation becomes the criterion through which Christian faith judges itself historically. In Dussel, the appearance of the oppressed Other interrupts self-sufficient reason and opens the path to real liberation. In Freire, education becomes the dialogical process through which denunciation and imaginative announcement generate critical consciousness.

The concept of the pluriverse further deepens this horizon by challenging the universalist assumptions of Western modernity. Palermo, González Casanova, Torres Guillén, and Escobar help us see that plurality is not a secondary cultural ornament but an ontological and political condition. Many worlds already exist, and the task is not to absorb them into a single framework but to construct forms of coexistence, knowledge, and education adequate to their dignity. This requires a transformation of the symbolic, pedagogical, and institutional arrangements through which societies define reason, development, and legitimacy.

The educational consequences are substantial. New educational spaces must be dialogical, critically interpretative, ethically responsible, and open to multiple loci of enunciation. They must challenge epistemic hierarchy, restore imagination to a central role, and reconnect knowledge with the defense of life. They must also take religion seriously as a field in which symbols, memories, and ethical imperatives can sustain emancipatory practice rather than merely institutional authority. In the face of global inequality, ecological crisis, and the erosion of democratic participation, such an approach is not optional. It is a matter of historical urgency.

The integration proposed in this article contributes to contemporary debates in religious studies by showing that Liberation Theology and decolonial epistemologies remain highly relevant for understanding the present. More specifically, it suggests that religion can still function as a critical and transformative force when it enters into dialog with the suffering of the excluded, with the plurality of worlds, and with the pedagogical labor of liberation. To rethink education in this light is to reopen the possibility that another world is not only desirable but learnable. The task before us is therefore both interpretative and practical: to create spaces in which plurality, justice, and common life may be imagined, taught, and enacted.

#### *Discussion and Prospects*

A final consideration concerns the relation between critique and institution-building. Decolonial and liberationist thought often gain their strongest energy from moments of rupture, denunciation, and resistance; yet their pedagogical fertility also depends on the capacity to create lasting practices, spaces, and languages. If new educational spaces are to emerge, they cannot remain occasional or merely symbolic gestures. They must become durable environments in which alternative forms of authority, participation, and evaluation are rehearsed and refined. This requires curricular choices, teacher formation, institutional courage, and forms of public support capable of protecting dialogical and critical pedagogies from the pressures of standardization and market utility. In other words, liberation must also become organizational intelligence.

This point is especially relevant for religious studies. The field often oscillates between confessional closure on the one hand and detached descriptive neutrality on the other. The perspective developed in this article suggests another path: a critically engaged study of religion that takes seriously both the symbolic power of traditions and their

historical entanglement with domination and emancipation. Such an approach does not instrumentalize religion for politics, nor does it isolate theology from the world. Rather, it asks how religious languages, practices, and institutions may participate in the formation of subjects capable of ethical attention, democratic dialog, and critical resistance. In a time when religion is alternately privatized, commodified, or mobilized for exclusionary agendas, recovering its liberatory and pedagogical dimensions becomes a task of evident public relevance.

There is also a methodological lesson to be drawn. Philosophical hermeneutics, when opened to decolonial critique, cannot remain content with the interpretation of canonical texts alone. It must interrogate who is authorized to interpret, whose worlds are rendered legible, and what forms of suffering are bracketed by established procedures of knowledge. This broadening of hermeneutics does not weaken rigor; it relocates rigor within a more demanding ethical horizon. Interpretation becomes more exacting precisely because it must account for asymmetry, silence, and the politics of enunciation. Future research could fruitfully extend this framework through empirical studies of basic ecclesial communities, decolonial pedagogical experiments, or curricula that integrate plural epistemologies in concrete institutional settings. Such work would help verify how the concepts discussed here operate within lived educational practices.

For the purposes of submission to *Religions*, the central claim can therefore be restated succinctly: symbolic hermeneutics acquires renewed relevance when it is linked to liberationist and decolonial traditions that understand religion not as a residue of the past but as a contested field of meaning with concrete implications for justice, knowledge, and coexistence. The article's wager is that the educational future of democratic societies depends, in part, on our ability to cultivate interpretative communities capable of learning from wounded histories without reducing them to victimhood, and capable of imagining common worlds without sacrificing plurality. This wager is demanding, but it remains one of the few intellectually and ethically credible responses to a present marked by fragmentation, exclusion, and the narrowing of political imagination.

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