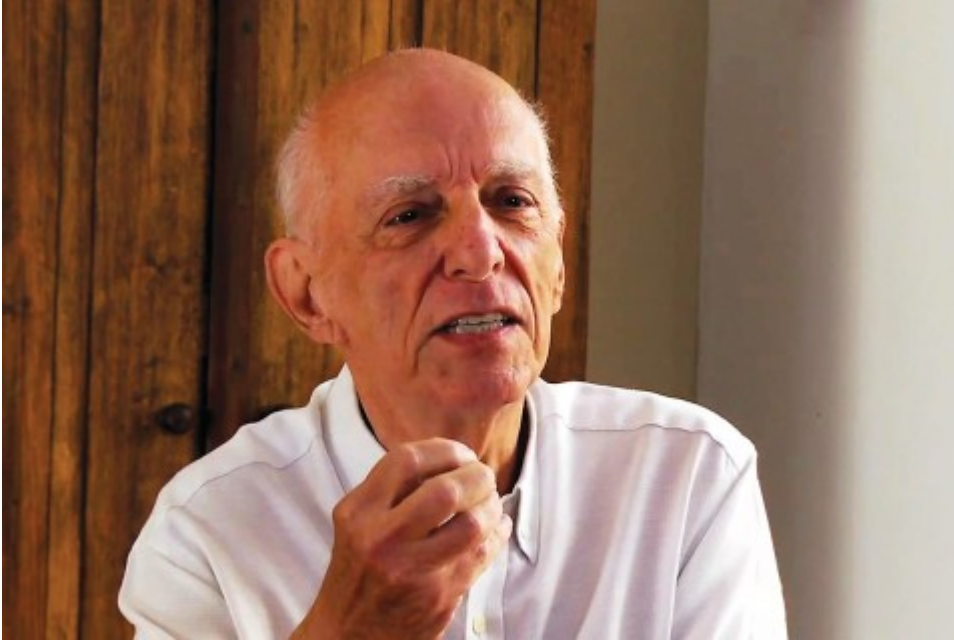


Rubem Alves builds altars of word and song

The bold visions of the grandfather of liberation theology

by [Thomas R. Gaulke](#) in the [October 20, 2021](#) issue



Rubem Alves (Photo from YouTube)

“I don’t know if I believe in God,” Rubem Alves once told a reporter. “But I know I’m a builder of altars. I build my altars with poetry and music. The altars must be beautiful. I build them before a deep, dark, and silent abyss. The fires I light in them illuminate my face and warm me. Yet the abyss remains the same: dark, cold, silent.”

Alves is not for everybody. He is no good for ministries with the goal of instilling proper theological constructs into their believers or stacking doctrinal scaffolding for the protection of their people from the void. He isn’t safe or easy. And yet, the altars he builds are not for him alone.

From the rubble of crumbled convictions piled upon lost loves, Alves builds as we gather around. With beauty there, he reveals to us the presence of an absence. Abysmal, perhaps, it is also warming and stirring. For this is the place (and perhaps

the only place, he says) where there still might hover something of a spirit, where there may be an inkling, a hunch, a prescient spring to the step, blush in one's cheeks, a wish or a desire for what might yet be.

Alves is known to many as the grandparent of liberation theology. Born in 1933, he became a pastor in the Presbyterian church in Brazil. Later, under charges from the government and from his own church that he was preaching communism, Alves fled to Princeton Theological Seminary in the United States with the help of the Freemasons and some of his friends. There he wrote.

His dissertation, *Towards a Theology of Liberation*, was published in 1969, its title modified by the publisher to *A Theology of Human Hope* in an attempt to make it "more publishable" in the United States. This was the same year James Cone published *Black Theology and Black Power*. Gustavo Gutiérrez would not publish his *A Theology of Liberation* in full until 1972.

In his dissertation, Alves calls on faith communities to develop a thick vernacular with which to speak what he considers to be the beautiful truth of faith: God's desire is for humans to live and to thrive and to be happy—just as God's desire, it follows, is for humans to create the world anew, just as they (with their Messiah) dream it ought to be. Alves calls this desire of God for the life of humanity "Messianic Humanism," an understanding which he claims is underdeveloped and significantly lacking in theological vocabulary.

Why is this so? Why do our theological words, our liturgies, and our songs not reflect this truth? Why do our communities so often speak the opposite today? Why, despite deep longings, do we give into or go along with oppressive regimes and orders that keep us unfulfilled and unhappy? Can God's Spirit still stir us? Will our elders dream dreams? Do we have any visions in the face of the world as it is? Alves's life work was his response to these questions.

Though over time Alves's beliefs changed, fading in and out as they do for many, his conviction that happiness was to be enjoyed remained vivid. It did not take long for the strictly theological bounds of his academic work to slip away as Alves turned toward the discipline of theopoetics.

In his essay "Theopoetics: Longing and Liberation," Alves describes the function of theopoetics as saying "the poetic word which opens up the infinite space of Longing, in the hope that the dead will become gardeners." Theo-poets, he writes,

should be those who are able to provoke dreams. Not to interpret dreams but to provoke dreams. Because we are entities made out of dreams. We are, according to the prologue of John, “the word made flesh,” the dream made a body; we are dreams which became bodies. And if people are going to struggle and to fight it is necessary for them to be rocked back to life from their oblivion, and this happens when they are able to dream again. And dreams have always to do with desires. It is necessary for people to be able to dream again about beautiful things, about utopias, about a new world, because when people are able to dream again they will be transfigured, they will be resurrected, they will be able to fight.

Even while he describes the work of the poet, Alves plays the role. Like many whose faith is shaken, he mines literature, theologies, and holy books, searching in modern and ancient places for meaning and hope. With a gift allotted to only a few, he then constructs. Infusing his own longings into old ideas and forgotten words, he stirs the hearts of devoted readers and fans who cling to the new and many meanings and emotions presented before them. In brief, Alves creates hope.

Among Alves’s writing available in English, much of it, from [*I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body*](#) (1983) to [*Transparencies of Eternity*](#) (2010) to the posthumously published [*Tender Returns*](#) (2017), reads well for small-group discussion in churches or as a personal daily devotional. While scripture is often included as an allusion rather than a citation, such collections are a gift for those of us who have grown frustrated with the clichés of Christian lingo, abundant pithy moralisms, and half-baptized political statements offered by countless devotional sources. These works are a gift for those of us who wish to hope and who are uncertain whether we believe.

There is no perfect place to start with Alves. Each work is a variation on recurring themes. If dissertations are not your flavor, [*Tomorrow’s Child*](#) or [*The Poet, the Warrior, the Prophet*](#) serve as helpful entry points, whereas *What Is Religion?* provides a more mature and nuanced glance at where exactly Alves might have been heading with his agnostic faith. His article “Confessions: On Theology and Life” is a surprisingly insightful introduction to Alves’s personal context.

Some of the devotional work, like *I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body*, is clearly theological, whereas later collections and anthologies leave God largely implicit or

absent. Whatever book you pick up, expect along the way appearances from the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche, Fernando Pessoa, Satan, Chico Buarque, and even the evil stepmother, along with elderly couples, dead men, lilac bushes, butterflies, and Holy Communion.

All of these are more than companions, as Alves would have it. Not only do they share bread with us, but they present beauty at the altars of the unknown. And the soul is warmed. Alves is not for everyone. But for those of us who find him to be a kindred spirit, his altars mean the world.

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