

NED CALONGE:

Okay. I have one job tonight and that's to make sure we start on time. So I'm sorry to quell conversation, I know this is a great time for networking. And we're going to start with just a quick announcement about interpretation services.

ALEX ARRIETA (INTERPRETER)

Thank you for having us. \*Speaks in Spanish about interpretation services available\*

NED CALONGE:

Thank you, Alex.

I'm Ned Calonge, I'm the president, uh, and CEO of The Colorado Trust, and I'm thrilled to welcome you to the first Health Equity Ser--, Learning Series presentation of the 2020-2021 season, uh, and I couldn't be happier than to be here with you this evening. At The Colorado Trust, we believe that all Coloradans should have fair and equal opportunities to live healthy, productive lives regardless of race, ethnicity, income or where we live.

And it ends up in, kind of, the public health arena, words like healthy and productive are discrete constructs that are relatively easy to measure. But not all of the metrics of well-being are as easy to measure. For example, spirituality and religion, uh, are things that can make people make sense of their time on this planet in meaningful ways-- in ways in which numbers really can't express. These are sometimes linked to a sense of belonging, of feeling part of a community, and whether it's a neighborhood or at a global level. They can help guide how people approach or believe in concepts like fairness and justice. And they are often intertwined with a sense or a feeling of hope. An anticipation, a wish, sometimes even an expectation that things are going to be different and better.

Our presenter for this evening expressed the sentiment with us that I wanted to share. He said there's a certain middle-class privilege that things will work out. But for the vast majority of the world population, hope is not a given. Embracing and learning from a lack of hope is at the core of the talk we'll hear this evening.

But before we get started, I just have a few notes. We're going to e--, email you all an evaluation for tonight's speaker and tonight's session. And I hope you look for it in your emails. I assure you we read every evaluation we get. I know some of you have brought guests tonight whose emails we don't have. We would love it if you would take the time to forward the evaluation to them as well, uh, for their completion.

The materials will be posted on our website after tonight's presentation. We include a video of the event. Please note that the video takes a couple of weeks to finalize and to post. It will be available with Spanish voiceover dialogue, and we'll try to get any written materials up on the website sooner.

I would like to ask for you to silence your cell phones if you haven't done so already. For those of you who have in the past taken part in the facilitated discussions across the state as part of the series, please note that these won't begin until the latter half of 2020. You can sign up for these on our website--coloradotrusted.org--to be notified by email regarding the Health Equity Learning Series grantee and viewing event opportunities as they become available later this year.

At this time, I'm really pleased to introduce you to Dr. Miguel De La Torre, our speaker for this evening. Born in Cuba months before the Castro revolution, Dr. De La Torre and his family came to the United States as refugees when he was six months old. Today he is one of the most highly regarded contemporary Latinx religion scholars. Since obtaining his doctoral degree in 1999, Dr. De La Torre, who describes himself as a scholar-activist, has authored several hundred articles and dozens of books. He is professor of social ethics and Latinx studies at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver.

Dr. De La Torre is the past director of the American Academy of Religion and has served as co-chair of its ethics section. He's past president of the Society of Christian Ethics, executive officer and cofounder of the Society of Race, Ethnicity and Religion and founding editor of the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Religion*. Dr. De La Torre received a Fulbright Specialist Scholarship, allowing him to teach at a university in Indonesia in 2012. He's also taught classes at universities in South Africa and Germany. He recently received a Louisville Institute grant that will allow him to do research in Cuba for an upcoming book on the political theology of José Martí. And at dinner last night, we learned that he often spends time at the border working directly with, uh, undocumented immigrants in their plight at the border, in these, uh, uncertain times.

With that introduction, I hope you will help me in welcoming Dr. Miguel De La Torre to the stage.

AUDIENCE: \*applause\*

DR. MIGUEL DE LA TORRE, PhD:  
Buenas noches.

The groundbreaking African American theologian, James Cone, wrote back in the 1970s that white Christianity is satanic. As you can imagine, it created somewhat of a stir. And what he was arguing is that when the religion of white people somehow justifies the genocide of Indigenous people, that Christianity is satanic. Any religion that supports slavery is satanic. Any religion that tears children from their mothers--whether they be slaves at one time, Indigenous peoples so they could be put in Indian schools or today the children at the border--that religion is satanic.

Any religious leader that refers to an individual whose racist policies are decimating Communities of Color today and says that they are moral or they're a baby Christian, as Dobson says--the religion they represent is satanic. This religion is not only satanic, it is life-denying to the vast majority of the people of the world. Building on James Cone's argument, I will say that all philosophies and theologies that are Eurocentric, are detrimental to Communities of Color and must be rejected by Communities of Color.

When I was a small boy living in New York City, going to the elementary school, we would begin each day with the Pledge of Allegiance. And when we got to the phrase "liberty and justice for all," as a small boy I knew as a Latino that that did not apply to me. When a slaveholder wrote the words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights and among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," no one needed to explain that Black people did not apply-- it did not apply to Black people. Everyone knew that slaves were not part of that declaration. And when the French cried out during their revolution,

“liberté, égalité, fraternité,” it was assumed that their colonies in Haiti, in Vietnam, and in Algiers were not included in that phrase.

You see, Eurocentric philosophy and theology must be constructed in such a way that it excludes those who are not white. Somehow we must create a religion, a way of life, a world view that eliminates from these lofty rhetoric the vast majority of the world's population. So to try to create our own way of thinking using European philosophical models is self-defeating.

But before I begin to explain why we should reject Eurocentric thought, let me begin by confronting the colonization of my own mind by these European thoughts. When I was a young man, not that long ago, in my 20s, I took a drive from Miami to New York City. In my red hot Capri. It was a really neat car. And as I was driving through New Jersey, I get pulled over, and I asked the officer, “Wh-, you know, what, what ha-, why was I pulled over?”

And the officer said, “Well, you were going four miles over the speed limit.”

And I go, “Okay.”

And he goes, “Would you mind if I search your car?”

And I said, “Okay. Why?”

He goes, “Well--”

This was before we had, uh, racial profiling.

He says, “We suspect that young Latino men with Dade County license plates are bringing cocaine up to New York City.”

So I said, “Oh, okay, well go ahead, search my car.”

He did. He didn't find anything.

So um, as I was driving away, the thought that went through my mind was not, “This is an injustice, how dare him assume this.” What I thought was, “Thank God the cops are doing their job and keeping us safe.” You see, my mind was so colonized, that I learned to see myself through the eyes of my oppressors. Not only did I see myself through their eyes, I defined my very being by how they see me.

So the first thing I must do is to begin to, to, liberate my de--, de--, my, my, my colonized mind, and I do that by rejecting Eurocentric thought. Now this includes a couple of major spiritual arguments. For example, that somehow in the hereafter, I'll get all my riches. Which satisfies me and my people with living in poverty now because one day we'll have mansions. The other rejection that I'm dealing with, which is the subject of tonight's conversation and probably a little more controversial, is the rejection of the concept of hope.

Which I realize is, really goes against the grain because after all, isn't hope one of the gifts of the Spirit? And here I'm saying we have to reject hope. But bear with me. My fear is, that the way hope has been defined in Eurocentric circles reinforces the oppression of my people and makes God vomit.

I therefore begin by looking at my own cultural symbols, and for me that would be José Martí, who is my intellectual mentor, who once said, "El vino, de plátano; y si sale agrio sigue siendo nuestro vino." Now for those of you who have yet learned the language of the angels, let me translate for you: "We shall make our wine out of plantains. And even if it comes out sour, it is still our wine."

I am going to construct my philosophy and my theology using my cultural symbols, and even if I get it wrong, it doesn't matter because it's mine. It belongs to my people. That becomes my first step towards the decolonization of my mind. To learn to see with my own eyes.

Hopelessness. Embracing hopelessness.

I came across this concept when I took a group of students to Cuernavaca, Mexico. And the idea at the time was, I wanted to bring students to the squatter villages of Mexico so that we can make a connection how--be, between the riches of the First World with the poverty of the so-called Third World. And the impact that neoliberalism is having on these economies.

So in Cuernavaca, uh, they have this, um, th- this, um, slum area this, this, this, um, settlement area which is called "la estación"--an old railroad station used to be there. And, you know, dirt floors, uh, some of the houses are basically huts. And as we walk through all this--I, I'll never forget that evening, we began to unpack for our students what they saw, and one of the students said that, "You know, I, I saw the poverty and the misery, but when I looked into the eyes of that little girl, I saw the hope in her eyes."

At that point I had an epistemological meltdown. Because by her claiming hope, or better yet, by imposing white, middle-class hope upon this brown little body, excused her from having to do anything about the situation because God's in control and God will take care of it. Furthermore, it allowed her not to deal with the, what, how she is complicit with the poverty in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

So I found hope to become a major problem in the raising of consciousness. I could just hear many people in similar situations say, "Well all things work for good for those who are called according to God's purposes."

Yeah, it doesn't always work that way. And that's where I'm trying to understand why hope must be rejected. Now, now, again, in Spanish hope is the word "esperanza" from where we get the word "esperan." "Esperan" means "to wait." So when we in Spanish talk about esperanza, we're talking about waiting. The, there's this, there's this connotation of waiting to the word "esperanza," and when you wait, sometimes we're not quite sure what we're waiting for. So I'm trying to capture that, um, that, that connotation of the word into my own thinking.

If you are a religious person who goes to church, you probably heard the pastor one day give the story about the little girl at the beach after a big storm, and all the starfish were on the beach. Uh, uh, are you fam--, are you familiar with the story? You know and, and, and, and the little girl's throwing the starfishes back into the ocean. And there's a grumpy old man on the beach and he says, "You can't save them all." And she picks up one and says, "I'll make a difference in this one" and throws it back in." Okay. I'm the grumpy old man on the beach. Because while the little girl picks up the one starfish and takes the individual and says, "Look, a difference can be made in this one individual. We can ignore the thousands of rotting bodies on the beach."

Do, do you see what I'm saying? Because of the hyper-individualism of Eurocentric thought, we lift up and put on a pedestal the one that made it. As somehow ignoring all those who are six feet under.

I grew up in some of the worst barrios of New York City, and I woke up in Hell's Kitchen. Where a lot of my friends never made it to high school. Either getting into it or living to get into it. I have a PhD now, so it's easy to put me on a pedestal and say, "Look, he made it out of the slums! See! He could do it. Anyone could do it."

But the reality is I was just lucky. I wasn't smarter. I wasn't more of a go-getter. Just certain things happened that opened some doors for me that wasn't open for others. And I was able to walk through them. So as long as you are praising me because I made it out, we are ignoring all those bodies that did not. And I refuse to do that. I refuse to reduce the whole way of seeing reality to the individual. Which is contrary to the way Communities of Color usually operate, which is more communal.

So there's a philosophical aspect to all this, and I'm going to bore you with a little bit of, uh, philosophy for a moment, but, but bear with me. I, I'll try and make it easy. Not, not easy, but bearable. So we, we, all know Hegel's metaphysical historical dialect. I'm just going to say that what Hegel presents us is this idea--and it's more complex than what I'm about to say but, but bear with me. That history is progressively moving forward and in an upward trajectory. That somehow we are improving with each coming age. And as we look back in history we could see where we were and we could see where we're going and this, this linear movement. Most ways of doing philosophical and theological thought, adapted Hegel's view of history. In religion, we called it salvation history. That, you know, I'm moving upward and one day I'm going to make it to heaven. I'll get saved and, you know, I'll live in paradise.

But, but it doesn't have to be spiritual. It could also be material. Uh, Marxism is a salvation history, that we are moving towards the utopia of the part of the pro--, proletariat, um, controlling the state. And capitalism has a salvation history, that we're moving to a point where everyone's going to be middle class and everyone's going to be, you know, well off economically. Both really are trends of modernity. So what all these ways of looking at history have in common is this progressive upward movement.

Unfortunately I drank the Foucault Kool-Aid, which basically argues that history is not, is nonlinear, disjointed and not connected. That history is nothing but points of time that a "historian" connects together to give us a narrative, a story. But what that story really does, is justify what we are today and what we want to do tomorrow. So history really doesn't exist, it is but a construction used to justify whatever we want to do today. If this is true, then the idea that there's an end to history, where everything's going to work out, starts to become problematic.

Okay. Jürgen Moltmann, who wrote the book *A Theology of Hope*--obviously my book *Embracing Hopelessness* is a response to him--um, would say that we don't know what's going to happen in the future, but God made a promise and God keeps God's promise, and it's all going to work out. So at the end of history, I could look back at history and say, "Oh yeah, I see where God was all along, and, and it all worked out."

The problem that I have with that is number one, God doesn't always keep God's promises. Primo Levi, uh, who was in Auschwitz, basically said there is no God, only Auschwitz. And in fact, many of the rabbis in Auschwitz had a trial about God for not keeping God's covenant to the Jews. So before, as a Christian, I start saying God keeps God's promises, I have to be cognizant that some of those earlier promises have not been kept. So what do you do with a God who may not always keep God's promises?

You see, history, or better yet the movement of time, has so many rotting corpses that it chokes out not only hope but also the audacity to say, "Oh yes, God was there all the time. That somehow slavery, Holocaust, Inquisition, conquest--all were part of God's design." There's a problem with that. Because if that's true then God is very sadistic.

Every so often we find Jesus in the tortilla. I mean really, have you ever noticed that every, every once and a while the--, there's this news article that someone was cooking a tortilla and all of a sudden the face of Jesus appears? And they sell it, like, for \$10,000?

Studies have been done in Korea, on the mind. And they discovered that if you look at something, like, that's very static, um, you know, images, like--I'm trying to say something--okay, like, like a marble that's on, on the wall down here, and if I say, if you look at that hard enough you can see the face? Your mind is programmed to see a face there, and you will see it. Okay. Our minds are programmed to see order in the midst of chaos and disorder. And what I'm arguing is that what we call the movement, the dialectical movement of history or what we're calling the hand of God moving history, it's really looking at, looking for Jesus in the tortilla. It's, it's looking at these points of time and trying to put order in the chaos that is order.

Walter Benjamin is also one of the individuals who influenced my thinking and where he begins to talk about that, what the, what, what, what we see as an orderly possession of history, the angel of history instead sees nothing but a gigantic, chaotic mess that is just blowing out of heaven. If this is true, if indeed "vanity of vanities," as the teacher tells us, absolute futility, everything is meaningless--one of my favorite verses of the biblical text--then what do we do when we don't have the anchor of history and the security that it's all going to work out?

I love MLK's work but he said one thing that I have a problem with. He says, "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

I really believe that the arc of the univ--, of the moral universe really could care less which way it bends. And if it's going to bend towards justice, we're the ones that have to do the bending. Because it's not going to happen by itself.

So. Now that everybody's happy, what, what do we do, what do we do with all this? I have learned to embrace Saturday. Saturday, for those of us who are Christians, is that day when you don't know if there's going to be a resurrection on Sunday, and all you know is the blood and the gore that occurred on Friday's crucifixion. It is that in-between space where you don't know what's going to happen on Sunday. There could be resurrection or the tomb can still be filled. It is the space where I would argue that the vast majority of the global South, of the oppressed of the world, live: in that Saturday.

If I am going to stand in solidarity with the oppressed--radical solidarity--I must be willing to sit in the dust of Saturday and not come with slogans how it's all going to work out. But sit in that space. It is a space where God is absent. Or as Jesus said, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?"

It is a space where God is totally irrational and cannot be understood with the human mind. Or as in the book of Job. Has anyone ever read the book of Job? I mean you have to read it. You have this book and where, you know, God and Satan are, are, gambling one day and, and, and Satan says, "I bet I can make Job curse you." And God says, "I'll take that bet." And, and Satan goes ahead, with God's permission, and, and wipes out his family, all his children, like 14 of them, and he wi--, and he wipes out all his riches and then he, just for fun, gives him all these boils and illnesses, and then for like 56 chapters we're trying to figure out why this is happening to Job. And you know how it ends? With God saying, "Psh, I'm God. I do whatever the hell I want to do. Who are you to question me?"

I don't know about you, but, but that's somewhat problematic for me. But you see when you sit in the Saturday of this b--, of desperation, that's the God with whom we are dealing.

My Jewish brothers and sisters understand better than Christians do that God has a dark side. The book of Isaiah: "If good and evil enter into the town is it not I, God, who bring it?" God brings good and evil. Or Saul? King Saul, to whom God sent evil spirits. Think about that. God is sending evil spirits to people. I have no desire trying to explain that. I'm just saying that what we think we know theology to be, it's not really based on the biblical texts. Because these type of passages makes me stop and rethink everything that I thought.

So hopelessness rejects easy fixes. See, as long as I could sell hope, then I could wash my hand with the situation, and we could all move on. Le--, let me share who really helped me come to it, come, come with, uh, develop this concept. Um, I don't know if anybody's familiar with the Young Lords. They were a turf gang, back in New York, back in the day when I was in New York. Um, in the late 60s, early 70s. Um, they got radicalized by reading philosophy, and they went ahead and began a liberationist movement, a liberative movement, So, so here's what they did. Um, they went ahead and, and, in, in the barrios of New York and they, they cleaned up all the streets, and

they put all the garbage in bags, and then they put them on the street corner, and they called the sanitation department and said, you know, uh, we cleaned up the streets, can you come by and pick up all the garbage?

And the sanitation department, back in the late 60s, laughed at them and says, "Yeah, we'll show up whenever we feel like it."

Because back in that day in New York the sanitation department would always appear twice a week in white neighborhoods but showed up whenever they had extra time in Communities of Color. So the Young Lords grabbed all these garbage bags, and they went to 3rd Avenue, and they built a wall, and they set it on fire during rush-hour traffic.

Now of course, the cops came, beat them up, threw them in jail. But also *The New York Times* showed up and wrote stories about what was going on, and then wrote stories about the sanitation department. And began to, to raise the consciousness that something should be done. And now in, in, in the barrios of New York and in Spanish Harlem the sanitation shows up every Tuesdays and Fridays. Okay, that is the type of action, the praxis that hopelessness leads to. And I'm going to talk about that more in a few seconds. I just wanted to begin laying that groundwork.

I'm influenced also by Miguel de Unamuno, the, uh, Spanish philosopher of the early 1900s who is the unbelieving believer. And what he argues that it really doesn't matter if there is a God. What's important is believing in a God that may not exist. And think about this just for a moment. I cannot prove that there exists a God. And I cannot prove that there is not a God. You can't prove it one way or another. You can have a feeling about it, you could have, you know, an emotional or you could have that the Spirit came down upon you, and all that might be nice, but you cannot in any way scientifically prove that there is or that there is not a God.

That's why we call it faith. Okay. If you can prove it, it is not faith. It is science. It is something provable. We call it faith because we don't know. So what Unamuno says is we might as well believe because it's a lot better than the alternative of not believing. So I'm not a good theologian. Although some of my best friends are theologians. I'm an ethicist instead. I'm not concerned with the questions of is there a God or is there not. Sure, why not. I'm more concerned is what do we do with this God who we say exists? If you say there is a God, then what do you do about this God that you're claiming really exists?

I don't care about doctrines as to why people suffer. I'm more concerned with the correct actions. As to what to do with the suffering. So what do we do? If neoliberalism has won? If oppression continues? If after Obama, the white-lash that we are witnessing is only making matters worse?

If everything is loss, the response then becomes, "How do I..."--how can I say this? Well, in my book I quoted an ethics "para joder"--I can hear some of you know Spanish. Good. Um, for those of you who don't know Spanish, um, um, joder is the same as a certain English word that's four letters long and begins with F and ends with K. I only curse in Spanish, I never curse in English, I'm sorry. Is an ethics that "screws" with the structures, um, with the structures that causes oppression. Is an ethics that, it's subversive and disruptive. And, and, the example of the Young Lords is, is, is, is what helped me get to



this ethics para joder. Because what the Young Lords were doing was screwing with the sanitation department.

Another, let me give you another story about the Young Lords if I may. Another thing that the Young Lords did was, um, four weeks before Christmas they went to the Primera Iglesia Metodista in Spanish Harlem, and they went to the pastor and they said pastor, "We'd like to have, uh, you know, um, a kitchen to cook a breakfast for our children when they're going to school in the morning, so to get a meal. We'd like to have a Latinx--well, at that time--a Hispanic pride room that we could talk about our culture. We want to have lawyers that could help families with their issues. A food drive and a clothes drive."

And the pastor looked at them and said, "Ah, you're a bunch of commies, get out of here."

So they showed up the next Sunday and they picked up the pastor and they threw him out of the church and they nailed on the wall, on the door, "The People's Church," in red letters. And for four weeks it truly was the people church because they did all those things. Then the cops came, threw 'em out, put them in jail, and it ceased being the people's church. You see, this ethics para joder is an ethics that holds government and religious institution to the rhetoric that they expound. And when they fail to do it, you can't fight them because they have all the guns. So you have to think of how to subvert the conversation. This is not something I'm inventing. I want to be very clear. This is not something I came up with. This is what Communities of Color have always done for centuries.

I'm using the Young Lords because they are from my culture. The African American community has the stories of Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Bear, which are the trickster images. I like to say that I am a Roman Catholic Southern Baptist Santero. On the Santero part of it, I am a child of Elegua. For those of you who don't know, Elegua is the trickster. So my Orisha, my, my diety on my head, is a trickster. So when I say that decolonizing my mind is embracing the symbols of my culture, I am literally embracing Elegua and the doing of Christian ethics. That's what I'm talking about when I talk about subverting the normative discourse.

You see, we have been so trained that we now go to the police department to get a permit from the police department so we could protest the police department for police brutality. We are so domesticated in how we respond that we follow the laws and the rules that are designed to keep us silent and oppressed. If we follow the rules, we are only reinforcing our own oppression. So this ethics para joder is an attempt to subvert those rules in a way that doesn't get us killed in the process but still raises the consciousness of the people. And if done effectively, uses media to raise the consciousness of the whole community, not just of our own communities.

I know what some of you are thinking. You're saying, "Oh but if it's hopeless, why bother?" Right?

If you're thinking that, you are revealing your white middle-class privilege. Because for the vast majority of us, we have no choice but to continue to struggle. I wish that my parents didn't have to struggle so much and just not bother. But their survival depended on it. Now grant you, my survival doesn't depend now on struggling. I'm a professor. They pay us nicely. So why do, why do I continue? Why do I bother?

I struggle for justice not because I think I'm going to win. Because I probably am not. Neoliberalism is like 10 steps ahead of us. I don't care if we have a new president next year, the damage done is going to last for a generation at least. So we're nowhere close to any, you know, Kumbaya moment here. I do not struggle because I think I'm going to win. I do what I do because it defines not only my faith, but it defines my very humanity. If you're not a person of faith, good for you, I could care less. Struggle for justice because it defines you as a human being.

What I'm trying to do in the work I do, is how do I create an ethical paradigm that nonviolently lies so that we could find out what the truth is. That steals so that our children could be fed. That destroys and, and, and disrupts, so that we can construct and build. How do I, through my jokes and deception, lead to something that is truer and holier? And that's the paradox of the work that I'm trying to figure out. Ethics is not what's right and what's wrong. It's a lot more--life is messy and, and, and ethics is even messier.

Let me just end by saying that I know a lot of people are going to have a hard time with this idea of embracing hopelessness. You probably love the part about "jodiendo", but, but, but embracing hopelessness I know, is, is hard and that's okay. You don't have to, you know, I could care less if you agree with me or not, but, but, but let me tell you two things.

First, hopelessness, the opposite of hopeless, or the opposite of hope is not despair. Moltmann said that and I think that does a great disservice to the conversation. The opposite of hope is desperation. And, and, and, and that's a big difference. You see, desperation propels me into action. People don't cross a desert to enter this country because they have hope that it's going to work out. They leave out of desperation because if they stay they die, and if they go into a desert, they may die also. But desperation forces them to take that chance. So by embracing hopelessness, we embrace the desperation of the moment. And if I have hope, then that means that I might have something to lose, and if I have something to lose I probably won't be too radical. I'm more dangerous when I have nothing to lose. And hope provides the illusion to those who have nothing to lose that they have something to lose and keeps them domesticated.

When I was in Auschwitz, and if anybody's been there, there's a sign that says, "Work will set you free." It didn't. But if I hope that that was true, I kept my head down, I didn't make waves, I didn't, you know, look anybody in the eye and maybe I would survive. Chances are you didn't.

Hope domesticates the oppressed not to rebel. So my embracing of hopelessness is an attempt to really realistically understand the desperation of the moment and where our people are at. So we could do the radical acts to bring about liberation and a more just society.

Thank you so much for your time.

AUDIENCE: \*applause\*