In this essay I want to elucidate some of the basic principles of a US theology of “letting go.” I take this term from a small book published in 1977 by sociologist Marie Augusta Neale, titled *A Socio-Theology of Letting Go*. A “theology of letting go” is essentially the complement to theologies of liberation coming from oppressed peoples seeking to throw off oppressive power from hegemonic empires and ruling elites. It is a theology of solidarity between people engaged in particular liberation struggles and their supporters within dominant societies. For those who are oppressed to be liberated, those who hold and exercise oppressive power must “let go” or be made to let go. They must relax their grip on domination so others can go free and build alterative societies. In other words, there must be some repentance on the side of the sinners. Ultimately a transformation of both sides must take place so there is no more poor and rich, oppressed and oppressors, marginalized and privileged but a new society where all members enjoy dignity and access to the basic means of life.

Letting go was at least partially what the South African apartheid regime did or had to do in giving up its dream of two separate societies, white and Black, and allowing equal political citizenship for all in South Africa. Unfortunately this has hardly resulted in a full liberation, but an adjustment of the white ruling class took place, giving up political dominance that was no longer possible, while holding on to economic dominance. Letting go is what the United States has mostly refused to do in relation to the revolutions in the Third World, such as the one in Cuba and in Sandinista Nicaragua, endlessly seeking to undermine and embargo these small nations in order to overthrow their revolutionary regimes.
A theology of letting go addresses the appropriate role of conscientious citizens of imperial nations, specifically in this case the United States, in relation to peoples whom this country is dominating, impoverishing and oppressing, as well as in relation to the more impoverished and oppressed classes and ethnic communities within the United States itself. What is the role of somewhat privileged groups within the United States in responding to theologies of liberation coming from American Blacks, American Indians, from women, especially from poorer groups? What is the role of such privileged groups in relation to theologies of liberation coming from Africa, from Latin America, from Asia, from Palestine? I say somewhat privileged groups, since one hardly expects such a response from the top of the ruling class, which is the font of the problem. One is talking about socially aware and concerned groups in the middle strata of US society who have become aware of the injustices to others and want to find out what it is that they should do about it.

I speak here of a mediating group that struggles against its own government within the imperial nation. There is also a mediating group in more oppressed societies who have come from privileged classes, but who choose to engage in what liberation theology calls the “preferential option for the poor,” people like Archbishop Romero in El Salvador, who paid with his life for his option for the poor and his efforts to speak to the wealthy ruling class in his country, as well as to the president of the United States. Liberation theologians have generally come from more educated classes within a society or else from missionaries who dedicated themselves to poor people, such as Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria in El Salvador, Jesuit missionaries who came from the Basque region of Spain.

I see those who become advocates of a theology of letting go in a dominant nation as playing a different role from elites in impoverished societies who choose to serve the poor and to develop theologies of liberation. Theologians of letting go are also making a preferential option for the poor, but their role is to become educated in the reality of the oppressed community and also to discover the mechanisms by which oppressive power is exercised in their own society, in order to become critical mediators who press the powerful in their society to let go of supporting particular forms of oppression and to get out of the way of new realities emerging outside their power system. In many cases these mediators within the dominant society also play an important role in helping the liberation spokespersons and movements survive within the oppressed society that is struggling to be free.