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Liberation as Praxis: Revolutions of Faith

The word “liberation” according to the Oxford Dictionary¹, means “an occasion when something or someone is made free”, or “...used to refer to activities connected with removing the disadvantages experienced by particular groups within society”. I define liberation as a continuous revolution, where an individual or group frees themselves from bondage. Liberation is like the moon doing revolutions towards a better world. The movement of liberation theology grew out of small radical groups of people who wanted a Church more like the church of Jesus and the apostles. Over centuries, the Catholic Church had morphed into a creature that the people who it originally claimed to serve - the poor, the marginalized - could not identify with its seemingly arcane ways. It originally started in Latin America - then soon spread to North America and Africa, creating a global socially minded church.

In philosophy, I have noticed that it deals with the complicated nature of existence and the principles that guide our actions. In texts like the Bible, Daodejing, and others, we developed a greater understanding of foundational texts and how those shaped philosophical thought of the time. In this paper, I seek to explore liberation theology both as a philosophy and as a political

¹ "Liberation - Definition of Liberation in English | Oxford Dictionaries." Oxford Dictionaries. Accessed October 17, 2016. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/liberation>.

movement built on the concept that injustice and suffering must be dealt with in the present, and redefining the Catholic Church's mission and more importantly, how oppressed peoples in the 20th century embodied their faith.

Liberation Theology as a concept has a complicated history. It was the result of generations of change within Catholic theology, and religion in general. At the time of the initial beginnings of liberation theology, the 20th century was in the midst of revolutionary change. The concepts behind this philosophy are built in the lived realities of a distinct group - Latin American Catholics. This philosophy is interesting, because it was grounded on the political events of the time. In the 20th century, the Catholic populations started to shift. Demographics were not just Eastern European or Irish, but moving towards Central American, Peruvian, Argentinian, Mexican communities. This also occurred at a time when society was becoming more secular.

The Catholic Church as a body was beginning to seem archaic in a world full of war, changing attitudes towards sexuality, and an increasing amount of poverty. One of the early forces behind Vatican II was a council titled, the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, which was a Colombian group that supported a Church and a faith that began with the small community. The committee supported these "basic ecclesial communities"² as spaces where the Church would congregate in the everyday lives of its members. CELAM³ focused on the grassroots Church as a way of serving marginalized communities. Where it conflicted with the Vatican was in its support of political reformers in Latin America and as the spread of Marxism grew in Latin

² <https://www.ncronline.org/news/celam-update-lasting-legacy-liberation-theology>

³ "Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano." Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano. Accessed October 17, 2016. <http://www.celam.org/>.

America, CELAM became an institutional threat from the inside. The Vatican condemned the organization because of its Marxist affiliations. However, even though CELAM was controversial, its focus on building vibrant local community churches made it a large influence in the Second Vatican Council of 1962.

Vatican II was an institutional response to the world's changes. The liberation theology movement was a philosophical and social response to the unjust conditions that Latin American people were up against. It was a kind of return to the early church, where believers in Christ promised to find both salvation in heaven, but also salvation through their trials in their lives. This notion of supporting people who are suffering is one that I also see in the Book of Job.

In the Book of Job, Job questions why good people suffer. He thinks that if he prays and does good works, then he should receive God's favor. Job's initial idea is that suffering is equal to sin, and if one sins, then they should suffer. His struggle to reconcile goodness/evil of God is the main point of the text, and whether or not he is deserving of salvation because of his righteousness. I think that in liberation theology, God is much like Job's God, he values those who are good, and favors them. This quote displays God's kindness to the downtrodden, "He delivereth the poor in his affliction, and openeth their ears in oppression." In the Old Testament, God goes back and forth between punishing His people and delivering them from suffering. I think that Job's poetic story shows the complicated nature of both God, and the concept of salvation.

I see liberation theology making an effort to raise concerns similar to Job's - that not only the righteous deserve to be saved, but also, the poor and oppressed are intrinsically deserving of salvation. Liberation theology says that the oppressed do not need to suffer in their human lives

in order to receive blessings in the next one, but they need to be valued and uplifted. I think that the idea of creating equity through faith and action is a powerful philosophy. Even though there are differences in their roots; the Book of Job coming from the Old Testament, and Liberation Theology arising from the early Church and teachings from the New Testament, I see similarities in their approach to addressing suffering. I question that suffering should be necessary to salvation, and I think that those who are struggling should have the chance to be supported in faith and action. A dilemma of mine is whether the poor should deserve to have their suffering eased because of their poorness, or rather because of their humanity. I think liberation theology aims to recognize the humanity within the oppressed, by working towards a better world for them in the present day.

Gustavo Gutierrez is a Peruvian priest who was one of the leaders of the liberation movement. His thought has roots in his upbringing - he grew up disabled and poor in Peru. He studied abroad and got to study under numerous theologians and social scientists who worked on the Second Vatican Council. His seminal work, *A Theology of Liberation*, discusses the need to return to a simpler doctrine of faith. Gutierrez' main idea, is that the Church, and religion in general, should have a "preferential option for the poor"⁴, where poverty is centralized as a point of prayer and action. He talks about the need for the Church to acknowledge the poor as they did in the Beatitudes, saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"⁵ In the centuries after the the Beatitudes was written, poor people, poor Latin Americans especially, had felt like the Church had forgotten them.

⁴ Gutiérrez, Gustavo, and Yōm Sōng. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*

⁵ Matthew, *The Bible*, 5:1

Due to colonialism, the Catholic Church had been, and still is, an epicenter of Latin American life. This faith is not just a racialized one, but also, built on class. Poor people saw themselves in Jesus' narratives. They saw a faith that was living their realities, that was meant for working class Peruvians and Mexicans. These ideas were based off of the early Church, where Jesus' ministry focused on the most marginalized of society. He purposefully sought out and respected the people who the elites shunned. Gutierrez takes this notion of loving the poor to another level by saying that humans must act against poverty as a sign of valuing the Church as a body on earth. In his newest book, *On the Side of the Poor*, Gustavo Gutierrez says "For the theology of liberation, the existence of poverty and injustice is not only a social-ethical issue...[it] concerns not only the Seventh Commandment, but also and first of all the First commandment"⁶ Basically, if you are loving poor people, and being faithful to both the Commandments of the Old Testament, you must also be working against social conditions that create suffering. I see a lot of similarities to some Buddhist traditions that value mitigating suffering. The idea that these social structures were systematic and not a result of individual choices was seen as radical, and Communist in nature by the hierarchical Church.

Liberation theology was seen as a threat to the mainline Catholic Church not just because of its mobilization of the Latin American people, but also because of the Cold War. As the Cold War became the United States main focus, stamping out any possible religious dissent became an important mission. Liberation theology was seen as a Communist force largely because of the

⁶ Gutiérrez, Gustavo, and Gerhard Ludwig. Müller. *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation*.

conflicts between US backed civil wars in Central America, specifically, El Salvador. One of the main leaders of liberation theology in El Salvador was a priest named Oscar Romero.

Oscar Romero was a priest from San Salvador, who eventually became the Archbishop of San Salvador. He was originally a conservative leader in the community, who defended traditional teachings of the Church. After the assassination of one of his dear friends, he became radicalized. He had a new devotion to the poor, and also used his new position to call out injustices in the political world. When a violent military group funded and supported by the United States took power, Romero fought against it. His convictions that faith meant political action were beginning to take form. He became more outspoken and critical of political regimes, and used his faith to defend his reasonings.

Romero sent a letter to President Jimmy Carter protesting the involvement of the US government in the regime, because of the increased level of violence that his people were facing. In the letter, he says, “It would be unjust and deplorable for foreign powers to intervene and frustrate the Salvadoran people, to repress them and keep them from deciding autonomously the economic and political course that our nation should follow⁷”

The increasing amount of political struggles combined with the dissatisfaction with the traditional tenets of the Church made proponents of liberation theology enemies. Pope John Paul II would disagree with the politicization of Jesus, and the “Marxist” ideals of supporting the poor. He criticized the idea that Jesus was subversive, saying, “his idea of Christ as a political

⁷ Dosenrode-Lynge, Sören Zibrandt Von. *Christianity and Resistance in the 20th Century: From Kaj Munk and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Desmond Tutu*. Leiden: Brill, 2009. Pg 231

figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive of Nazareth, does not tally with the Church's cathesis”⁸

It is interesting to me, as I think that Jesus is inherently political. Jesus, who flipped tables in the market, who went against the government, who purposefully sought out the lepers of society, is political, in my view. If he is not political, then I wonder where the Church's mission of social justice comes from. Oscar Romero was gunned down while he was celebrating Mass, after he discussed human rights violations by the US backed Salvadoran Army. His death in 1980 marked a new phase in the movement - people were dying for publicly supporting changing the narrative. By the early 1990s, the initial fervor over liberation theology was struggling, due to the loss of so many Latin Americans who sponsored “Marxist” beliefs.

As the philosophy changed from ideas to praxis, it became clear that faith was changing. The reorganization of churches from rigidly organized bodies to decentralized christian base communities allowed for a more flexible practice of faith. With changes spurred by Vatican II, namely the ability to receive Mass in languages other than Latin, a closer connection between priests and parishioners, and the elimination of old traditions. In christian base communities, people experienced faith in small-scale environments, without the larger structures that churches and parishes provided. People from different walks of life, rich and poor, got together, read their Bibles, and at times said Mass, all outside of the construct of the Church. This exemplified the tenets of liberation theology.

Liberation theology has its roots in South America, but has connections to Africa, the African diaspora in the United States, and other ethnic and racial groups. I see similarities

⁸ "Longman World History." Longman World History. Accessed October 16, 2016. http://wps.pearsoncustom.com/wps/media/objects/2427/2486120/chap_assets/documents/doc30_7.html.

between the Latin American movement, and the Black spirituality of enslaved Africans in the early 19th century. Black spirituality developed out of bondage, and the enslaved took something that was oppressive to them, and found freedom through it. Slaves often heard the Bible through a lens that reinforced their submissiveness, with masters who would use the Bible as a tool to demean them. Negro spirituals reflect that the enslaved saw themselves in Biblical stories. In some songs, they compare themselves to the enslaved Hebrews in Egypt. As in Latin America, faith became a rallying point for revolution. Many slaves would hold their own services, separate from the mainstream ones, and built their own autonomous churches. Most notably, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, developed their own structure and teachings off of the existing structure that did not meet their needs.

In present resistance movements, I have noticed that class and race are being included in discussions of freedom. However, I also find that discussion of religion is neglected. I think that religion, as I have explored in this paper, can be a lens through which people can organize themselves for their liberation. By connecting to Christian notions of valuing the poor and oppressed, people find creative and powerful ways of finding their freedom. As I was reading some of these main texts about liberation theology in the 70s and today, I had several questions. What happens when we center the oppressed? When we bring the marginalized to the center? When we ease the suffering of the poor? Why isn't that a focus in our politics? Why do we accept that people will suffer? Who gets to decide who gets freedom and who doesn't? In a righteous world, I envision that people would ask these questions of religious and political leaders, and hold them accountable. Our present day is full of suffering, and as Job questions whether God is just in the Old Testament, I wonder whether we, as humans are just ourselves. If

we create space for people to come together and interpret these intense conflicts of life, maybe global issues surrounding poverty and disadvantage could be solved. Resistance movements like black lives matter should center faith more. Faith based organizing can be a powerful force, but has been neglected and forgotten about. It has been pushed to the side, ignored, seen as unnecessary. Martin Luther King, Jr used faith based organizing to his advantage, working with a movement of people who saw supporting civil rights and worker's rights, not merely something good to do, but something moral, a religious duty to do. When we start conceiving of social justice as theology, we start to live out faith in realistic ways. Living in a world that is shaped by political, economic, and social forces leaves room for religious people to act according to their faith.

When the oppressed are given power, when the poor are given value, it makes an example of humanity as a whole. Liberation theology, as I have shown, illustrates the complicated nature of religion and social justice, and whether the two are separate or intertwined. I believe that all religions, but especially Catholicism, has a duty to support the marginalized of society, and eliminate forces that seek to harm humanity and disturb the ideal of world peace. Liberation theology as a praxis, pushes boundaries of orthodoxy in favor of radical love for all people. With this paper, I hope to have illuminated the religious, philosophical, and political concepts that make liberation theology a movement for all people.