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Special Issue Reprint

The Future of Liberation Theologies

Edited by
Peter Admirand and Thia Cooper

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Guest Editors

Peter Admirand
Thia Cooper

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Guest Editors
Peter Admirand
Dublin City University
Dublin
Ireland

Thia Cooper
Gustavus Adolphus College
Saint Peter, MN
USA

Editorial Office
MDPI AG
Grosspeteranlage 5
4052 Basel, Switzerland

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Cover image courtesy of Franco Folini
Culture Contains the Seed of Resistance Which Blossoms Into the Flower of Liberation by Miranda Bergman and O'Brien Thiele. Mural designed and painted in 1984 and completely restored in 2014 Balmy Alley, Mission District, San Francisco, CA.

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About the Editors

Peter Admirand

Peter Admirand is the Deputy Head of the School of Theology, Philosophy and Music, an Associate Professor of Theology, and the Director of the Centre for Interreligious Dialogue at Dublin City University. He also serves as the Christian Co-Chair of the Irish Council of Christians and Jews. His most recently published book is *The Last of Us: Violence, Ethics, Redemption?*, published in June 2024 as part of the Bloomsbury series, "Theology, Religion, and Pop Culture". His previous book, *Destruction, Ethics, and Intergalactic Love: Exploring Y: The Last Man and Saga*, was published in 2023 by Routledge in their book series, "Routledge Advances in Comics Studies". In 2021, *Seeking Common Ground: A Theist/Atheist Dialogue*, co-written with philosopher Andrew Fiala, was published by Cascade Books. *Humbling Faith: Brokenness, Doubt, Dialogue—What Unites Atheists, Theists, and Nontheists*, published in 2019, is also available as an audiobook. *Amidst Mass Atrocity and the Rubble of Theology: Searching for a Viable Theodicy* (2012) is his book on theodicy and witness testimony. He is also the editor of *Loss and Hope: Global, Interreligious, and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (2014; paperback 2015).

Thia Cooper

Thia Cooper is Professor of Religion and Latin American, Latinx, and Caribbean Studies at Gustavus Adolphus College. She teaches in the area of Religion, Culture, and Society. Her teaching and research interests include liberation theologies, feminist theologies, queer theologies, theology and development, non-Western Christianities, and religion in Latin America, particularly Brazil. Her recent publications include *Queer and Indecent: An Introduction to the Theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid* (2021, SCM Press), *A Theology of International Development* (2020, Routledge), and *A Christian Guide to Liberating Desire, Sex, Partnership, Work and Reproduction* (2018, Palgrave). She regularly publishes and speaks on a variety of areas within liberation theology.

Preface

The future of theology, as well as the future of life on our planet, is embedded in the future of liberation theologies. We are a fragile people living and struggling on a fragile planet riven too often by division and oppression of the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded. At its theoretical core and inception from the 1950s to the 1970s, liberation theology challenged and awakened much of the Christian world with action and reflection on the "irruption of the poor," the "preferential option for the poor," structural sin, base communities, and the liberation of the poor and oppressed in the here and now, not in some celestial or post mortem realm. The goal was—the goal remains—to inaugurate and develop the reign of God among us, pointing toward a new heaven and new earth where justice will rule. These are not platitudes but political, economic, and moral choices, systems, and praxes that need to include all voices, especially those silenced or forgotten, to build just relationships between ourselves as humans and with God. Liberation theologies articulate ways for religion(s) to free people from oppression, freeing people to act.

Advocating for the theologies of liberation means a commitment to establishing, voting for, protecting, legislating, funding, teaching, writing about, sermonizing, and enacting fundamental rights for all beings, especially the impoverished and forsaken. The history (and sadly, the future) of liberation theologies is also one of broken bodies, the disappeared, and the martyred. However, there is also much hope, not only because of those who have come before us, despite, in many cases, their untimely ends, but also because they have shown a glimpse of, and been a witness to, what the future of liberation theologies can be. While the death of liberation theology was the aim of some and loudly pronounced in the 1990s, liberation theologies are alive and well across the globe today.

This is especially evident with the evolution, growth, and plurality of liberation theologies today, not only incorporating all faiths (and none) but also expanding and building upon where partnership, praxis, and preferential love are needed. At its core, much of this work is still based on overcoming the shameful reality that a vast majority of human beings are mired and burdened with inhuman living conditions, from war and violence to a lack of clean water, nutritious food, housing and land, education for all, dignified employment and wages, legal recognition and equality, cultural and religious freedom, and other basic rights. Justice and change require desperately needed commitment and work, and the theologies of liberation can be partners and guides.

Since their more formal establishment, the theologies of liberation have also benefitted from insights, challenges, and examples demanding other kinds of liberation, from issues of gender, racial, and sexual identity oppression to the ongoing travail of decolonialization or the plight and destruction of all biological life. The future of liberation theologies is even more potent and relevant because of these expansions, nuances, pluralities, and diverse actors and voices. Their futures are built on plurality, interdisciplinarity, and intersectionality as much as faith, hope, and love.

In the call inviting academics and activists to submit papers for this Special Issue, we provided some key questions and themes, including the following: Where should liberation theologies direct their attention? Who and what are we continuing to exclude? Where are the hidden and not so hidden places where domination continues? In what ways must theologies of liberation also be liberated? What have been their failures and unfulfilled promises? Most importantly, how can they shape or contribute to a more just world, especially for the voiceless and broken?

Such questions were meant to encourage reflection and calls for praxis in a range of areas and fields in dialogue with, or through, liberationist lenses. The ten peer-reviewed articles included in this work answered this call in vibrant and diverse ways, with contributions from newer and senior scholars and activists across the globe.

The first contribution by Madeleine Cousineau describes the "attempted assassination" of liberation theology, with a focus on Brazil. The failure of this assassination attempt is clearly shown in the contribution by Jung Mo Sung, who discusses the need for the "resurrection from social death" of the excluded through the analysis of the work of Father Julio Lancelotti in Brazil to counter "aporophobia", the phobia of the poor in society. Sung emphasizes the need to equally value all human beings in contrast to our current economies and societies that sacrifice the poor. Continuing to address the theme of exclusion and exploitation, Joerg Rieger and Priscilla Silva bridge the U.S. and Latin American contexts; discuss the intersectionality of class exploitation and gender, sexual, and racial inequalities; and articulate the need for relationships of solidarity in the struggle.

Centered on the U.S. context, Julian Armand Cook details the work of Georgia Gilmore and the "Club to Nowhere" during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Not only is this an important description of a historical movement, but it also provides another salient example of the intersections of economics, gender, and race in orthopraxis. Another U.S. focused example of orthopraxis is detailed and analyzed by Etin Anwar in her study of Muslim women's participation in the Women's March of January 2017. This contribution analyzes the intersections of religion, race, and gender through women's activism in the political realm. Finally, Sheryl Johnson articulates the need for U.S. mainline Protestant churches to integrate their outward-facing social justice orientation and their church finances. Where the previous contributions articulated how movements and groups are addressing intersections, this article highlights the failure of churches to holistically address issues of justice, separating out their internal aim for profit from their external aim for a more just world.

Such focused studies of orthopraxis raise deep theoretical questions, which may lead to better praxis. Three further contributions focus on key concepts, including the options for the poor, liberation theology's ability to interpret today's realities, and liberation pedagogies. Levi Checketts addresses the problem of categorizing "the poor", noting that "the poor are a symptom of the upper classes"; in this case, poor is defined by differentiating it from wealthy, thus creating an "other". Javier Recios Huetos situates liberation theology within the critical thought tradition of prophetic denunciation and articulates the possibilities for interpreting global realities today, many of which remain the same as the original contexts in which these theologies emerged. However, it is also important to be able to see and engage with new realities. Finally, Jan-Hendrik Herbst analyses liberation pedagogies, comparing Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, and Johannes van der Ven to articulate the need for a matrix of theory–practice–relationship, a critique of current educational systems and practices, and an "emancipatory concept of education."

In the construction of a new area for liberation struggles, Hannah Bacon addresses fat feminist liberation theology, noting the silencing of fatness in society and theology. In addition to the importance of this particular issue, it also raises the question of what other issues of marginalization we may be failing to address. While the breadth and depth of the articles in this work hint at rich and ongoing areas for the future of liberation theologies to continue to probe, challenge, advocate, and liberate, we note that several areas remained less explored in this edition: sex and sexuality, ecology, indigenous peoples, ableism, nationalism, and many religious traditions, including Judaism, Buddhism, Vodun, and Hinduism to name just a few. There remains a need to determine where liberation struggles are occurring, share these in a broader context, and reflect on the praxis to enable better praxis.

We thank all the contributors, reviewers, and editorial administrators who helped to make this work possible. If these pieces are signs and testaments to the future of liberation theologies, then their call and challenge for greater liberation can also help us to provide a way and goal for a future of theology truly committed to a dignified life for all.

Peter Admirand and Thia Cooper
Guest Editors

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Article

The Alleged Decline of Liberation Theology: Natural Death or Attempted Assassination?

Madeleine Cousineau †

Retired Professor of Sociology, Boston, MA 02459, USA; madeleinecousineau@gmail.com
† Prior to 1996 this author's work appeared under the name of Madeleine Adriance.

Abstract: Is liberation theology dead or in decline? This article analyzes factors that have led to that perception and provides evidence to the contrary. It demonstrates that the theology has survived multiple attempts by certain sectors of both church and state to eliminate it, and that it remains very much alive in grassroots pastoral programs and social movements. Support for this last statement is provided by the author's field research in Brazil. The article concludes with signs that liberation theology will endure as it continues to inspire spiritually motivated people who commit themselves to addressing human needs by promoting social justice.

Keywords: liberation theology; preferential option for the poor; base communities; social justice; decline; future; Latin America; Brazil

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1. Introduction

The theology of liberation emerged in the early 1970s with the publication of a book by that title by Gustavo Gutiérrez (1971). The central idea of this theology is that the biblical commandment to love one's neighbor requires working to transform social structures that have confined countless numbers of people to lives of dehumanizing poverty. For the next twenty years, this belief would inspire the work of theologians and pastoral workers, as well as generating a considerable body of social science research.

Then in the 1990s, the word began to spread that the theology had failed and was in decline or dying. This article summarizes the factors that created this perception and presents an argument to the contrary. It provides evidence that, rather than suffering decline and natural death, liberation theology has survived multiple assassination attempts by sectors of the Roman Catholic Church and several governments, especially their military branches.

2. Social Science Research

The early literature on this subject focused on changes within institutional Catholicism,[1] specifically a shift by bishops from support of the status quo to the encouragement of new pastoral initiatives among poor people and advocacy for social justice. The earliest manifestations of this institutional shift were in Brazil and Central America (Adriance 1986; Berryman 1984, 1987; Bruneau 1974, 1982; De Kadt 1970; Della Cava 1976, 1988; Gómez de Souza 1982; Lancaster 1988; Mainwaring 1986; Ribeiro de Oliveira 1981). Researchers also studied comparative cases in Chile, Peru, Argentina, Colombia, and Venezuela (Dodson 1974; Levine 1981; Romero 1989; Smith 1982).

Although this new perspective came to be known as "liberation theology", it was more than an academic discipline. It was also a practical pastoral approach called "the preferential option for the poor" and was applied in pastoral programs among landless farmers and other marginalized people, as well as base ecclesial communities (CEBs). The latter are small groups, mainly subdivisions of parishes, that come together to celebrate liturgies, prepare people for sacraments, and study the bible. Because bible discussions include critical reflection on people's experiences of poverty, they sometimes lead to community action and the formation of social movements (Adriance 1995; Burdick 2004; Levine 2012).

The early researchers appeared to be in agreement that liberation theology represented a significant change in Latin American Catholicism that was likely to persist in the foreseeable future. However, they would later become divided in their opinions about its persistence. Some believed that it was dying or in decline (Drogus 1999; Hagopian 2009; Hewitt 1993; Mackin 2015; Nagle 1997), while others maintained that it continued to influence grassroots movements among workers, landless farmers, black people, women, and homeless people (Apolinário de Lira 2019; Burdick 2004; French 2007; Levine 2012). Several factors contributed to this divergence in interpretations of the situation.

3. The Impression of Death

3.1. Actions by the Vatican

The main factor that helped to create the scenario of the death of liberation theology was retrenchment on the part of the Vatican during the long papacy of Pope John Paul II from 1978 to 2005 (Burdick 1993; Cousineau 1997; Drogus 1999; Fleet and Smith 1997; French 2007; Hewitt 1993; Peña 1995).[2] This pontiff appointed as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith the ultra-conservative Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who would later serve the church as Pope Benedict XVI from 2005 to 2013. Over a total of thirty-five years, these popes promoted policies of censuring liberation theologians (especially Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez), replacing retired progressive bishops with more conservative ones, and prohibiting political involvement of any kind for people identified with the church.

The norm against political involvement did not appear to apply to Pope John Paul's special relationship with President Ronald Reagan (Kengor 2017; Lernoux 1989) or to communication between the U.S. State Department and the Vatican that occurred during the papacies of both John Paul II and Benedict XVI (Kovalik 2013). Evidence of connections between the U.S. government and the Vatican will be described in Section 4.

3.2. Myopic View from São Paulo

A second source of the impression of decline was the view of social scientists who focused their research on the Archdiocese of São Paulo in Brazil (Drogus 1999; Hewitt 1993), where the late Cardinal-Archbishop Paulo Evaristo Arns instituted top-down innovations. The archbishop sold his palatial residence and used the money to construct approximately 600 community centers on the urban periphery, where the majority of poor people lived. Each of these buildings served several base communities. This action convinced CEB members that the church strongly supported the preferential option for the poor. However, in 1989, that impression was severely weakened when the Vatican subdivided the archdiocese and appointed conservative bishops to head the new dioceses, mainly in poor areas (Hewitt 1993). People became demoralized, base community membership decreased, and remaining members became more focused on religious piety to the exclusion of social activism. It is important, however, not to exaggerate the extent to which the cause of this demoralization in CEBs was purely religious. The social context at that time also had an impact on activism. Base communities had flourished in the 1980s, when the political opening in Brazil provided the opportunity for activism of all kinds. Then in the 1990s, there was a crisis in urban social movements. As people became discouraged about the lack of improvement in their economic conditions, participation in those movements decreased. This author found that this happened even in a diocese with a progressive bishop (Cousineau 2003). This diocese was located on the periphery of an urban area. In rural areas, on the other hand, where there were continuing struggles for land reform, pastoral efforts related to liberation theology remained a vital force in people's religious lives and in their work for social justice (Adriance 1995; Burdick 2004; French 2007). Researchers who limited their studies to urban communities did not see this vitality.

3.3. Characterization of Liberation Theology as a Social Movement

A third factor in the erroneous reports of the death of liberation theology is its characterization as a social movement, rather than as a religious phenomenon that helped

to generate secular mobilization, such as the Movement of the Landless (Burdick 2004; Wright and Wolford 2003) and the National Movement of the Street Population Cousineau 2020). The view of the theology as a social movement may have been the result of the publication of an influential book that reflected that view (Smith 1991). By definition, a social movement is a form of collective action that aims to promote or resist change in a society. If liberation theology is a change-oriented social movement, it clearly has failed. Fifty years after its emergence, poverty continues to persist in Latin America. However, if we view liberation theology not as a social movement, but as a *religious* one (Hadden 2000; Levine 2022), it has succeeded. It helped to institutionalize change within the church, specifically the option for the poor and the base communities, which are still officially approved by the Council of Latin American Bishops.

3.4. Exaggerated Expectations

A fourth factor is exaggerated expectations (Levine 2012). In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a considerable amount of interest in liberation theology, which was reflected in the publication of numerous books and articles, a proliferation of university courses, and conferences devoted to the subject. However, the retrenchment by church authorities led to disillusionment. Because people had previously over-estimated the impact of the theology, they would now exaggerate its decline.

All these factors need to be understood in the context of the frontal assault on liberation theology.

4. Attempted Assassination

"Assassination attempt" is a phrase that frequently came up in the course of this author's research in Northern Brazil (Adriance 1995). Church-based activists would talk about close relatives, friends, or acquaintances who had been killed because of their support of the mobilization of poor people. Sometimes they would also mention death threats or actual attempts on their own lives. Because these people were identified with liberation theology or base communities, it seems appropriate to apply the concept of attempted assassination to the theology itself, especially given the evidence to support this idea. However, before examining the evidence of violent attacks on church people by military governments, it is important to look at the assault that came from within the church itself.

4.1. Religious Reaction against Change

To understand this religious assault, we need to take a closer look at the developments against which it was a reaction and which began long before the term "liberation theology" came to be known. The 1950s and 1960s were a time of pastoral innovations that began with efforts to prevent peasant farmers and factory workers from becoming communist (Adriance 1986). However, despite this initially conservative motivation, the new programs would develop their own change-oriented dynamic. Religious sisters, lay people and priests who worked in these grassroots pastoral programs came to believe that the Gospel required them to work among the poor. Father Helder Câmara, a Brazilian priest who would later become an influential bishop, saw the need to gain the support of the Latin American hierarchy for these grassroots initiatives. In 1955, he had helped to organize the Council of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) and served as its general secretary from 1963 to 1966. In that capacity, he was instrumental in organizing the general conference that took place in 1968 in Medellín, Colombia. The goal was to apply the recommendations for church renewal of the Second Vatican Council to Latin America. It was at this conference that the bishops signed documents establishing the church's commitment to the preferential option for the poor and opened the way for liberation theology and the base communities. However, the reaction against Medellín soon followed.

One of the strongest opponents was the Colombian Bishop Alfonso López Trujillo, who became the general secretary of CELAM in 1972, and in that position led the charge against liberation theology. He organized another general conference in Puebla, Mexico in 1979

(McGovern 1989). Although the progressives were able to maintain their influence there, reaffirming support of the preferential option for the poor and advocating the continued development of base communities, the conservatives did not cease in their efforts to defeat liberation theology.

After Cardinal Karol Wojtyla became Pope John Paul II, he chose López Trujillo as one of his informants on Latin America and named him Archbishop of Medellín in 1979 and a Cardinal in 1983. López Trujillo maintained contact with Cardinal Ratzinger, as did the conservative Archbishop Eugênio Sales of Rio de Janeiro. Sales urged Ratzinger to take action against Leonardo Boff, which resulted in the silencing of the theologian in 1985 (McGovern 1989). For nearly a year "Boff was not allowed to write, teach, edit any publication, or speak in public" (Lernoux 1989, p. 109).

Ratzinger wrote two "Instructions" on liberation theology in 1984 and 1986. The first one stated that liberationism reduced faith to politics, adopted Marxism uncritically, and undermined church authority (the last point likely referring to disagreements between the grassroots, or "popular", church and conservative bishops). The second Instruction emphasized spiritual freedom over this-worldly liberation (McGovern 1989).

Meanwhile, the Vatican was appointing anti-liberationist bishops throughout Latin America. By the time of the 1994 CELAM conference in Santo Domingo, it seemed that the opponents of liberation theology might triumph. The final document emphasized individual holiness rather than social justice, and base communities were scarcely mentioned (Cousineau 1997). However, the perception of triumph over liberation theology is accurate only if one defines church in terms of the hierarchy, excluding people at the grassroots level. During this time, pastoral activity at that level continued in places as disparate as remote rural areas and the south-central Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte (French 2007; Cousineau 2020). The relationship of grassroots pastoral activity to rural movements for land reform was mentioned above. The liberationist work in Belo Horizonte will be described in Section 6.

4.2. Military Assaults on Liberation Theology

Beginning in the 1970s, there were increasing reports of murders of priests, bishops, and members of base communities (Berryman 1984; Lernoux 1980). Later, religious sisters were also targets (Berryman 1994). These were results of a strategy by Latin American governments named "The Banzer Plan", after the Bolivian dictator Hugo Banzer (Berryman 1987; Lernoux 1980). This plan originated in 1975 within his country's Interior Ministry, which was known to be closely linked to the CIA, and had the following elements:

1. Intensification of internal splits in the church;
2. Harassment of progressive church leaders;
3. Arrest or expulsion of foreign missionaries;
4. Attempts to discredit these missionaries with propaganda emphasizing "that they have been sent to Bolivia for the exclusive purpose of directing the Church toward communism" (Lernoux 1980, p. 143).

The Banzer Plan was presented to the Third Congress of the Latin-American Anti-Communist Confederation (CAL) in Asunción, Paraguay in March 1977. The other Latin American governments that were CAL members adopted the plan (Berryman 1987; Lernoux 1980). These included Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Paraguay. The attack by CAL on the Catholic Church was an essential part of the Doctrine of National Security, which was derived from courses given to Latin American officers by the U.S. military (Lernoux 1980). This doctrine considered challenges to the status quo to be communist subversion, and it helped to generate authoritarian regimes throughout Latin America. In all of the CAL member countries, military and paramilitary groups violently attacked progressive church people and base community members (Berryman 1984; Calder 2004; Della Cava 1988; Fleet and Smith 1997; Lernoux 1980; Levine 1992; Morello 2015; Phillips 2015).

Not all of the attacks were overtly violent. The military strategists in the United States and Latin America were aware that too much repression would generate strong resistance. So, they advocated the use of propaganda, or what they called "counterpropaganda", given their view of liberation theology as communist propaganda. This has been documented by researchers with differing political views.[3] Ulrich Duchrow, a theology professor and social justice advocate, analyzed documents from a conference of Latin American armies held in Argentina in 1987 (Duchrow 1990). The documents presented liberation theology as an instrument of the International Communist Movement and proponents of the theology and CEB members as communist agents. They advocated dealing with dissent by means of psychological operations (psyops), which include fear and propaganda.

Similar information was provided by an author with views opposite to Duchrow's. Jennifer Marshall, a researcher with the Heritage Foundation, who portrays Christian liberationists as more Marxist than Christian, advocates using religion as counterpropaganda (Marshall 2009). She provides as an example the way that the Catholic Church and the U.S. government sought to discredit Christians who participated in the Sandinista revolution. Marshall notes that the Nicaraguan bishops spoke out against the Sandinistas, and refers to Pope John Paul's public reprimand of Father Ernesto Cardenal (described in more detail in Section 4.3). She also states that the U.S. government, for its part, "magnified their message around the world ... facilitating as much media exposure as possible" (Marshall 2009, p. 114).

If conservative analysts claim that liberationist Christians are instruments of the International Communist Movement, one might also suggest that conservative members of the Catholic hierarchy could be considered instruments of the U.S. government. The next section will examine the connection between Pope John Paul II and President Reagan.

4.3. The Combined Assault by Church and State

The relationship between the president and the pope is another subject that has been documented by authors with opposing political perspectives, leading them to be either critical of that relationship or enthusiastic about it. Political scientist Paul Kengor (2017) is an enthusiastic researcher. He indicates that the two men were united by several factors:

1. Their opposition to communism;
2. Their common experience of having been seriously wounded in assassination attempts and their conviction that their survival meant that they were to carry out a divine plan related to ending communism;
3. Devotion to Our Lady of Fatima—a one-page note in the Reagan Presidential Library indicated that the Fatima story was relevant to the president's views on communism;
4. Their friendship—Kengor quotes Reagan as actually saying that the pope was his best friend.

Regarding that last point, in 1989 Reagan received a visit from Chris Zawitkowski, head of the Polish–American Foundation for Economic Research and Education, and two men from Poland who were political candidates. In the course of the conversation, "the former president pointed to a picture of Pope John Paul II that hung on his office wall. 'He is my best friend,' Reagan told the Poles. 'Yes, you know I'm Protestant, but he's still my best friend'" (Kengor 2017, p. 386).

One fact, however, casts doubt on the genuineness of this friendship, and that is the way it began. In an article written three years after the book that is the source of the above quote, Kengor revealed an incident, in June of 1979, when Reagan saw a television broadcast of the new pope's visit to Poland. As he watched the enthusiastic crowd greeting the pontiff, Reagan became very excited.

> "That's it!!" Reagan had shouted at his television as he and close aide Richard Allen watched the remarkable news footage of the son of Poland's visit to Warsaw. "The Pope is the key! The Pope is the key!" Reagan told Allen, a Catholic, that he

> needed to win the presidency and they needed to reach out to this new Polish pope and the Vatican and "make them an ally". (Kengor 2020)

This incident occurred a year and a half before Reagan became president and three years before he met the pope, at which time Kengor appeared to present their special bond as developing spontaneously because of shared interests, experiences, and spiritual beliefs. The passage just quoted might cast doubt about this spontaneity. Long before meeting the pope, the president saw him as key to his political goals. Reagan further advanced those goals in 1984 by establishing an embassy at the Vatican. There was clearly an imbalance in the relationship between the U.S. government and the Catholic Church, with the government holding the greater advantage.

For Kengor, the most important part of the Reagan–John Paul relationship was their shared commitment to ending Soviet communism. Their personal bond strengthened that goal. However, there is no mention in his book of their shared opposition to liberation theology.

The viewpoint of the late Penny Lernoux (1989) was the opposite of Kengor's. She did not express enthusiasm for the bond between the pope and the president. Lernoux, a journalist who had spent many years in Latin America and identified with progressive Catholicism, noted that both men opposed the Sandinista government of Nicaragua because they perceived liberation theology as a wedge for Marxist revolution, which the pope opposed for religious reasons related to his experiences in Poland (Lernoux 1989). Although Reagan claimed to share the pope's religious sympathies, left-leaning Americans were more likely to attribute the president's position to a commitment to maintaining capitalist hegemony in Latin America. Neither the pope nor the president acknowledged any differences between Soviet communism and liberation theology, apparently viewing them as equally dangerous evils that should be eliminated.

The consequences of their identification of liberation theology with communism were painful for liberation theologians and the progressive sector of the Latin American church in general and particularly disastrous for Nicaragua. During the pope's visit to that country in 1983, the Sandinista leaders had made every effort to ensure that everything would go smoothly. However, the pope thwarted them right upon his arrival at the airport (Lernoux 1989). In the incident briefly mentioned by Marshall (in Section 4.2), when Ernesto Cardenal, priest, poet, and Minister of Culture in the government, knelt to kiss his ring, the pope pulled his hand away and shook his finger at Father Cardenal, admonishing him to regularize his situation.

> The scene showing Cardenal in tears was televised nationwide, causing anger everywhere. Cardenal was not only a hero of the revolution but also the most famous living poet of a country where poets are held in the highest esteem. For many the pope's rebuke signified the humiliation of the revolution as well as a beloved priest. (Lernoux 1989, p. 60)

It is worth noting that Marshall saw the worldwide broadcast of this incident to be a useful counterpropaganda device for the U.S. government, but according to Lernoux's account, it had a very different effect locally. Given that most of the supporters of the Sandinista revolution were Catholic and many of them were especially devout Catholics (Lancaster 1988), this incident resulted in a tension between their loyalty to their church and allegiance to leaders who had liberated them from a long dictatorship. When the pope celebrated an outdoor mass attended by 700,000, people were hoping for affirmation for their victory against the dictatorship and comfort in their grieving for sons and daughters killed by the U.S.-funded contras. Instead, the pope launched into a tirade against the popular church. When people shouted, "We want peace!", the pope demanded silence, but did not get it. Later Daniel Ortega pleaded with the pope for understanding, without success. Upon the pope's return to Rome, he instructed Cardinal Ratzinger to write the first of the two Instructions on liberation theology. That document became a diatribe against the grassroots church in Nicaragua (Lernoux 1989).

Meanwhile, President Reagan continued funding the contras as they killed men, women, and children in Nicaragua (Kinzer 1986; Wilkinson 1986), while Pope John Paul II, who spoke frequently of human rights and the sacredness of human life, did nothing to discourage his friend from promoting the bloodshed. Lernoux's book contains multiple references to the impact of the violence of the contras. However, Kengor's book does not mention this.

5. Continued Signs of Life in Liberation Theology

Despite attempts by both religious and political forces to put an end to liberation theology, it continues to show signs of life. One such sign is that it helped to create a generation of religiously committed lay leaders who continue to act through progressive social movements (Apolinário de Lira 2019; Burdick 2004; Cousineau 2020; French 2007; Levine 2012). Another sign noted by Brazilian sociologists is the continued vitality of base communities (Gómez de Souza 2000; Lesbaupin 2000). Most recently, the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI opened the way for a new kind of religious leader, a pope from Latin America who understands the struggles of people in that region, has a personal memory of a violent right-wing military regime, and does not confuse liberation theology with communism. Liberation theologians experience encouragement and support from Pope Francis (Bingemer 2016). This papal support also has an impact on pastoral agents working at the grassroots level, who know that their actions are now in line with church policy.

Although early reports suggested that Pope Francis was opposed to liberation theology, that assessment turned out to be erroneous. The confusion resulted from his support for the "theology of the people". Because the latter avoids a Marxian analysis of class inequality, it might appear to be in opposition to liberation theology. However, this view has been refuted by recognized experts in both camps. Juan Carlos Scannone (2015), known for his work in the theology of the people, denies any opposition to liberation theology, and liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez has stated that the two simply have "different accents" within a single theology. The positive attitude of Pope Francis toward liberation theology was demonstrated in his welcoming Gutiérrez to the Vatican shortly after his election as pope (Kirchengessner and Watts 2015). This pontiff has also breathed new life into the Council of Latin American Bishops. In preparing for the 2021 CELAM conference in Mexico City, Pope Francis called for the conference to be open for the first time to people other than bishops, who would make up only 20 percent of the participants. He also urged the participants to listen to the poor (San Martín 2021).

6. A Case Study in Brazil

This author's field research (Cousineau 2020) provides a case study of the continued vitality of liberation theology. In Brazil there are a number of "social pastorals", church programs that reach out to homeless people, landless farmers, urban workers, black and indigenous people, prisoners, marginalized women, elders, youth, parents of young children, and people with disabilities. These programs provide to varying degrees opportunities for both individual empowerment and social activism. One program that stands out for its activism is the Pastoral of the Street. It is especially noteworthy because it has resulted in the political mobilization of homeless people, a sector of the population that most activists consider impossible to organize.

The Pastoral of the Street began in 1987, around the very time that liberation theology was supposedly beginning its decline. That year, two religious sisters arrived in the city of Belo Horizonte, where they were welcomed by Archbishop Serafim Fernandes Araújo. One of the sisters described this meeting in an interview:

> We went to talk with Dom Serafim, and we brought a letter from Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns of São Paulo, introducing us, and we asked to talk with him. We wanted to begin work with the street population . . . He agreed. He said it was fine. And actually he was a very effective presence . . . But [the pastoral] was constructed at the grassroots level, together with the people.

Dom Serafim was not one of the famous progressive bishops. He was more of a moderate, that is, part of a large sector of the episcopate who do not actively promote liberation theology but do not impede grassroots religious initiatives. It was in their dioceses that some of the most long-lasting pastoral innovations occurred (Cousineau 2003, 2020).

After gaining the trust of the archbishop, the sisters went to work to win the trust of street dwellers, although this took a great deal of time and patience. A woman who had been homeless at that time and survived by collecting scrap paper and other recyclable materials told of her initial mistrust of the sisters:

> It was difficult for us to accept the pastoral. We thought that they were also police, that they were coming to take away our materials. But it was the pastoral that brought the paper collectors dignity and citizenship.

The sisters began by sitting down on the ground with the paper collectors and listening to them as they told the stories of their lives. This is an approach that continues more than thirty years later, as revealed by a woman who directs one of the regional offices of the pastoral:

> We go to the streets where the people are. Then we get to know them. For example, we go every Monday to the area around the bus terminal. And then we approach people. We chat with them. And we listen.

A similar experience was evident in an interview with a religious brother who spends a large part of his time on the street:

> It's that approach of *convivência* [shared living experience]. It's not just to go, look, and return home, but a matter of being present, being together with them, seeing their situations, hearing about their situations, and walking with them.

The process described in these interviews enabled street dwellers to develop an understanding of the causes of their hardships, and to strategize about ways to overcome the situation. One of the first projects organized with the help of the pastoral was a recycling cooperative. The people who scavenged for scrap materials experienced frequent harassment by police. This was described by the previously quoted woman:

> The police would come after us ... They would take away the [recyclable material] that for us was always a means of work for income ... Then the Pastoral of the Street appeared. If it hadn't been for the pastoral, we, the collectors, would no longer exist.

The cooperative not only provided a safe place for street dwellers to bring their materials, but it also brought them increased income by enabling them to bypass the middlemen in the recycling industry. From the pastoral's mobilization of street people, two social movements emerged: the National Movement of Collectors of Recyclable Materials (MNCR) in 2001 and the National Movement of the Street Population (MNPR) in 2005. Although these movements are legally autonomous from the Catholic Church, people in them have close ties with the Pastoral of the Street. The MNPR is especially close to the pastoral because its national headquarters is in the pastoral's own small building and there is mutual consultation between the leadership of the two organizations. However, even though people in the pastoral engage with movement leaders in discussions about politics and public policy, their own orientation is religious. As one of the sisters explained:

> All of that is based on a spirituality that comes from the theology of liberation. It comes from the base ecclesial communities, where, beginning with the Gospel, beginning with the Bible, you reflect on the life of the people. So for us, the people of the street are the people of God, who are making the journey in the desert, who are doing this process of liberation.

This liberationist orientation, which unifies spirituality with social justice, is also evident in the religious activities of the Pastoral. One especially vivid example is the Good Friday ritual—a procession of the Stations of the Cross on the streets of Belo Horizonte

that this author observed. At each station people stopped, prayed, sang a hymn, and gave testimony based on their own experiences, for example, as homeless or formerly homeless people, as women, or as victims of violence. They also linked the crucifixion of Jesus to more recent martyrs, such as Sister Dorothy Stang, a missionary who was murdered in the Amazon because of her environmental activism and organizing of poor farmers.

Both interviews and direct observations of the activities of the Pastoral of the Street made it clear that the people who perform this work are inspired by liberation theology. Their words and actions show where this theology is very much alive.

7. Testimony from an Unexpected Source

While some scholars were taking for granted that liberation theology was dying, an affirmation of its resilience came from an unexpected source—the U.S. State Department. This was revealed by Daniel Kovalik, who teaches International Human Rights at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. Through a Wikileaks search for the term "liberation theology" he discovered thirty-one cables sent to the Vatican from various U.S. embassies dealing with issues in ten different countries, along with the U.S. embassy at the Vatican (Kovalik 2013). Many of these cables reveal a considerable amount of communication between the embassies and the Vatican with regard to liberation theology, including expressions of concern about its resilience. Although Kovalik paraphrases or summarizes several of the cables, there are two direct quotes that are relevant to the present discussion. Both messages were sent during the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI and the presidency of George W. Bush.

One cable was sent to the Vatican in May 2007 from the U.S. embassy in Brazil, just prior to Pope Benedict's visit to that country:

> Another major contextual issue for the visit is the challenge to the traditional Church played by liberation theology. Pope John Paul (aided by the current pope when he was Cardinal Ratzinger) made major efforts to stamp out this Marxist analysis of class struggle. It had come to be promoted by a significant number of Catholic clergy and lay people ... To a large extent, Pope John Paul II beat down "liberation theology", but in the past few years, it has seen a resurgence in various parts of Latin America.

A cable sent in January 2008 from the U.S. embassy at the Vatican appears to be analyzing Pope Benedict's own views:

> Also important—and disturbing—to the Holy See is the resilience of Latin American liberation theology. During his time as the powerful Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the 1980s and 1990s, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger opposed liberation theology for its overt sympathy for revolutionary movements. Some of the supporters of this theology—including former clerics—now occupy prominent political positions in countries like Bolivia and Paraguay, a phenomenon that one commentator has described as the secular reincarnation of liberation theology.

Although there is much to ponder about this close communication between political and religious leaders, the most significant statements in these cables are those that appear to be lamenting the resilience of liberation theology. It would seem that these State Department officials were dismayed that, despite all attempts to "beat down" liberation theology, it actually has a future.

8. The Future of Liberation Theology

Before offering predictions about the future of liberation theology, it is important to note that religion, in addition to being a social institution, is a system of meanings. People experience their lives and actions, both personal and socio-political, in the context of a worldview that is meaningful to them and that legitimizes their actions. Liberation theology is a worldview that provides this kind of orientation to the people who identify with it.

For those who experience poverty or oppression related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, political repression, or the destruction of the natural resources on which they depend for survival, liberation theology provides spiritual and moral support for their struggles against systemic inequality. This belief system also provides support for people from more privileged classes who work as pastoral agents, helping to mobilize oppressed people in their struggles. It strengthens the resolve of those agents when they come up against religious or civil authorities that oppose their actions, as well as reinforcing their beliefs in contexts where the authorities support them.

People's beliefs have an impact on the broader social context. This was evident in the most recent presidential elections in Brazil and Chile, two of the countries where liberation theology first emerged and where the left-of-center candidates were victorious. Although it is common for religious leaders to congratulate the winning candidate, the statements by bishops in those two countries highlighted the importance of policies that help the poor. In Brazil, the campaign of President Lula da Silva was strongly supported by progressive Christians. He narrowly defeated the incumbent, Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer who was supported by conservative evangelicals. In the context of providing a religious meaning system to both oppressed people and their allies, liberation theology continues to grow and evolve. From the theologians' early focus on class inequality, they have developed analyses of other forms of oppression. Feminist theology and black theology have emerged in several countries (Bingemer 2016; Burdick 2004; Falcon 2008; Gebara 2007; Mackin 2015). There has also been a growing awareness of the importance of indigenous spirituality, which, because of the links between the ecosystem and the way of life of native peoples, converges with beliefs about the protection of the natural environment (Boff 1995, 2008; Irarrázaval 2000). Another convergence is between environmental concerns and gender analysis (Gebara 2007), which takes the form of ecofeminism. In this analysis, patriarchal Christianity is linked to the oppression of women and poor people, as well as the destruction of the natural world (Gebara 1999). Together, all these developments suggest that liberation theology has a promising future as it adapts to the awareness of a growing number of concerns about human beings and the planet that supports all life.

9. Conclusions

Despite numerous assassination attempts, liberation theology is alive and well and living in people who are engaged in struggles to transform unequal social systems. Its persistence suggests implications for future research. This could include studies of indigenous, black, feminist, and Earth-centered theologies; studies to examine the relationship of the theology to leftist governments, such as in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Venezuela; and finally, research to learn about pastoral programs in countries that have not been studied as much as others, such as Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Although these countries are not known for the presence of progressive bishops, they could provide case studies of the development of liberationist pastoral programs in the absence of episcopal support, as shown in Levine's (1981, 1992) studies in Colombia.

The continuing evolution of liberation theology described above is evidence of resilience in the face of both physical violence and psychological attacks. Those who claim otherwise may appear to be either promulgators of propaganda or well-intentioned people who have been influenced by that propaganda. There are certainly places where disillusionment has set in because of the presence of anti-liberationist bishops who have not yet retired, the weakening of social movements in which Christians had participated, or, in the case of Nicaragua, the transformation into a dictatorship of a revolutionary government that had previously been characterized by mutual support with progressive church people. Nevertheless, the research of this author and others, especially in Brazil, demonstrates that liberation theology continues to influence the actions of Christian lay people, clergy, and religious sisters who work with the poor. It also shows tangible results in pastoral

programs and social movements. Although the latter are separate from any church, they are populated by many people who identify with progressive Christianity.

Finally, as noted above, liberationist Christians are encouraged by the words and actions of Pope Francis. In addition to providing spiritual support to religious activists, giving them the strength to continue moving forward in their work, his appointing of progressive bishops and cardinals who will outlive the aging pontiff make it likely that the influence of liberation theology will persist into the foreseeable future.

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Notes

1. Although liberation theology has spread beyond the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America, the focus of this article is on Catholicism in that region because this has been the target of most of the attacks on the theology and its adherents.
2. A seminal version of this analysis will appear in Cousineau (Forthcoming). This material is used with permission of the editor of the volume.
3. Citations of authors with differing perspectives are intended to demonstrate the political neutrality of the evidence.

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Article

The Poor in Society, Resurrection from Social Death, and Latin American Liberation Theology

Jung Mo Sung

Faculty of Philosophy and Religious Sciences, Methodist University of São Paulo,
São Bernardo do Campo 09641-000, SP, Brazil; jung.sung@metodista.br

Abstract: Does Latin American liberation theology, with its option for the poor, still have something to contribute in a global scenario marked by neoliberal globalization and the discussion of identity politics? Based on the practices of Father Júlio Lancelotti against aporophobia (phobia against the poor) and the hostile architecture in Brazil, this article discusses the notion of the priority of orthopraxis over orthodoxy, the process of reordering the place of the poor in society and in the state budgets, and the notion of liberation practices and criticizes the process of dehumanization in neoliberal culture, in which personal identity and belonging to a community are marked by the pattern of consumption and wealth. Finally, it shows how the practices of recognizing the humanity of the poorest can been seen as a resurrection from social death, as a form of liberation within history, and as the affirmation of faith in a God who does not distinguish between human beings, while the idol demands sacrifices of life from the poor.

Keywords: neoliberalism; liberation theology; signs of the times; aporophobia; Júlio Lancelotti; the poor; dehumanization; identity

1. Introduction

After more than 50 years, does Latin American Liberation Theology (LALT) still have relevance or the ability to contribute to Christian churches and society? Should we not, as many people say, leave LALT and its option for the poor in the field of theological history and replace it with other critical theological currents, such as postcolonial or decolonial theology, or other theologies that discuss issues of identity in contemporary theological debates?

The answer to the second question depends on the answer to the first: can LALT have something to contribute today? I think so. The originality of LALT, which marked its emergence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was the dialectic articulation between (a) the ethical–spiritual experience of ethical indignation in the face of the sufferings of the poor in a capitalism that concentrates wealth in the hands of a few; (b) a theological reflection on these experiences and the practices of liberation of the popular and pastoral movements that leads to the affirmation that God made "the option for the poor"; (c) the use of the social and human sciences to theologically understand the causes of the suffering of the poor and the possible paths to liberation for a dignified and pleasant life for all; and (d) from a new reading of the Bible, a critical analysis of the ambiguous role that the churches assumed in the history of oppression in Latin America and in the world. In sum, LALT is characterized by a "path" of an ethical–spiritual choice and a theological method rather than a specific set of social theories or theological concepts applied to social problems.

In other words, we can say that LALT will continue to serve the cause of the poor and oppressed people as long as it is capable of correctly reading the "signs of the times" (Matthew 16: 1–4). Juan Luis Segundo, in the article "Capitalismo-Socialismo: *crux theologica*" (Capitalism-Socialism: *crux theologica),* reminds us that Jesus opposes the theologies that search for the "signs from heaven"—the signs that offer certainty, whether about

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divine or metaphysical realities, whether absolute truths about history—and offers the signs of the times, the "concrete transformations carried out by him in the historical present. And equally entrusted to his disciples for then and for the future" (Segundo 1974, p. 787). Therefore, LALT has always made it clear that the role of theology is not to defend *orthodoxy*, the a priori correct doctrine that must be accepted and applied in real life, but, rather, to seek *orthopraxis*, the truth that is achieved (see John 3: 21; 1 John 1: 6) within history and produces justice between human beings, no matter how ephemeral and contingent.

When we oppose the signs from heaven to the signs of the time, we need to be clear that the debate of Jesus is not taking place in the modern world, in which what is called the signs of the supernatural world (which would be an object of theology) and those of the natural world (object of the natural sciences) are opposed, just as it does not discuss the signs of the times from the perspective of the modern social sciences in which relevant themes, such as immigration or poverty, are analytically studied or the analysis of the subjectivity and identity of a given social group. What Juan Luis Segundo highlights in Jesus' dialogue with the Pharisees and scribes is the reading of the signs of the times in which the conflict appears between the liberating actions of Jesus or the Spirit of God within history and the oppressive forces of injustice, of sin.

In other words, what LALT can, and needs, to contribute is a reading of the signs of the times in which struggles appear between the liberating spiritual forces, which generate life and freedom for oppressed peoples and groups, and the spiritual forces of death, which cover themselves with sacred characteristics, what the Bible calls idolatry (Richard 1982; Assmann and Hinkelammert 1989). It is the struggle between the God of Life and the gods of death or the struggle between the Spirit of God in history and the spirit of the world. The spirit of the world that drives globalization today is not the same "spirit of capitalism" (Weber) of the 19th and 20th centuries but the spirit of neoliberal capitalism that has dominated the world since the end of the 20th century, with a new myth of the "free market" and the idolatry of money that denies the notion of human rights (Sung 2018).

Having provided this broader introduction to LALT, the objective of this article is, from the concrete liberating practice of a priest, Júlio Lancellotti, to propose some reflections on the signs of the times that we see in the struggle between the "god" of neoliberalism, with its dehumanizing spirit, and the Spirit of God, which appears in the struggles to affirm the humanity of all human beings. More specifically, this article aims to rethink the dialectical relationship between the praxis of liberation, which is always contextual and limited, and the utopian notion of liberation.

2. The Foolishness of a Priest and Orthopraxis

On 2 February 2021, Father Júlio Lancellotti, 74 years old, who has been working with people experiencing homelessness and the poorest and most marginalized in the city of São Paulo, took an action that many would consider foolish: with a sledgehammer, he broke the cobblestone blocks that the city government had placed under a viaduct in the city. He later posted the photos on social media. What is the motive for these stones and for the priest's action? It was an action taken by the city government to stop the people experiencing homelessness from using this public space to sleep. This situation brought many complaints from the neighborhood residents, and from merchants, and businesspeople. On the other hand, the priest reacted prophetically against the great social inequality and the new role of the state in neoliberal society.

Before neoliberal hegemony, the role of the modern state was seen as being a promoter and guarantor of the promises of the myth of socioeconomic development for all. Of course, this myth, or ideology, was contradicted by the social reality in which social inequality was evident in most parts of the world. However, the idea was sold that with the technological and economic development of capitalism, we would all achieve a better life. Thus, while economic progress did not reach the poorest, the role of the state was also to take care of the poor, for example, people experiencing homelessness, with the offer of shelters or hostels.

We know that these offers were always insufficient, but they were seen by the state and by society as necessary and a role of the state.

With the hegemony of neoliberal culture and the new myth of the "free market"—the market free from the interventions and regulations of the state—the role of the state changed. Now, the main roles of the state are no longer linked to guaranteeing the advancement of the population's socioeconomic wellbeing, called the social rights of citizens, but rather to guarantee the fulfillment of the contracts made in the market, the freedom of capitalist entrepreneurs to expand the space of the market in society (for example, with the privatization of education and health) and, most importantly, the defense of the "inviolable and sacred" right to private property (which appears in article 17 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, 1789, of the French Revolution). The other side of the coin of the neoliberal state's new role is to become a police state, which must guarantee the security of the members of the market, the consumers, and property owners against the poor and other social groups considered second-rate people.

Faced with this new situation, Father Júlio, a defender of LALT and the option for the poor, when breaking the blocks, probably remembered the small book by Gustavo Gutierrez (1998), *Onde Dormirão os Pobres* (Where the Poor will Sleep), in which the famous liberation theologian takes up the question posed by Yahweh to Moses about where and how the poor who have no shelter will sleep (see Exodus 22: 26). If in the 1970s LALT had a more optimistic or hopeful view about the possibilities for the poor to free themselves from oppression in Latin America, today, with neoliberal globalization and the great increase in social inequality, it may seem that the practices of Father Júlio and other Christian leaders are being reduced to actions called "aid". In other words, they would be leaving aside the so-called "liberation practices", political practices that confront capitalist economic and political structures, and assuming aid-based or reformist practices.

In the 1980s, the brothers Leonardo and Clodovis Boff (Boff and Boff 2011) published a small book, *Como Fazer Teologia da Libertação* [Introducing Liberation Theology, Orbis Books, 1987], that influenced various generations of Christians who assumed the struggle for the liberation of the poor. In this book, they synthesized what was known as the "method" of LALT and, what interests us here, differentiated between and classified three types of pastoral and social practices: aid, reformism, and liberation. For them, "'Aid' is help offered by individuals moved by the spectacle of widespread destitution. (. . .) helping the poor, but treating them as (collective) objects of charity, not as subjects of their own liberation." (2011, p. 15). Unlike aid, reformism "seeks to improve the situation of the poor, but always within existing social relationships and the basic structuring of society, which rules out greater participation by all and diminution in the privileges enjoyed by the ruling classes" (p. 16). Finally, in practices classified as liberation, "the oppressed come together, come to understand their situation through the process of conscientization, discover the causes of their oppression, organize themselves into movements, and act in a coordinated fashion. (. . .) work(ing) toward the transformation of present society in the direction of a new society characterized by widespread participation, a better and more just balance among social classes and more worth ways of life" (pp. 16–17).

As we return to this classification of the three types of practices so influential in LALT and in liberation Christianity groups and movements, I do not want to analyze these concepts in and of themselves here but to point out that this notion of a "liberation practice" was memorable in the understanding of what LALT is, remembering that all the important thinkers of LALT have always affirmed that this theology is born as a result of liberation practice, and that orthopraxis is prior to orthodoxy (Assmann 1976; Gutierrez 1975), and in the synthesis offered by the Boff brothers, the characteristics of the praxis of liberation, in opposition to aid and reformism, would be: (a) the coming together of the oppressed; (b) the process of conscientization; (c) the discovery of the causes of their oppression; and (d) the organization of political and social movements, aiming to transform society.

The practices of Father Júlio Lancellotti—of "aid" to people experiencing homelessness, which, with the social crisis increased by the COVID-19 pandemic, included providing

food in the streets and his campaign against aporophobia (the aversion to and fear of the poor) (Cortina 2014), which began with the breaking of the blocks—do not fit the above definition of liberation practices. They explicitly criticize neoliberalism, which deepens society's aversion to the poor, but a good part of his concrete actions could be classified as aid or, at most, reformism.

This question of classification is important in the field of theory, whether scientific or social, because the classifications and their relationships are what allow differentiating between objects or social practices and choosing the best existing options. Here we have a theoretical problem to consider. In order for us to differentiate aid-based or reformist practices from liberating practices, we need to assume the descriptions given are correct and, most importantly, assume the definition of the practice of liberation as the criterion for what it should be, that is, as orthopraxis, in other words, as a transcendental model or a necessary transcendental concept (in Kant's sense) that allows us to perfect concrete practices in search of liberation (Hinkelammert 2022). Without this ideal model of the perfect practice of liberation, which would lead us towards complete liberation (liberation from all forms of oppression, such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, hierarchy, and so on), we cannot discern which step to take to move forward in the fight.

The problem arises when the criterion of discernment becomes a "must-be", what must be sought and demanded, without taking into consideration the socio–historical context and the human and historical possibilities. In the context of Puritan Christianity, for example, the main must-be is "sexual purity", or the denial of sexual desires, without taking into account the sexual impulses and desires that constitute part of the human condition. In the case of neoliberalism, it is the must-be of a free market economy that denies (a) the need for the intervention and regulation by the state in the capitalist market so the capitalist economic system itself can function in the long term; (b) and the need for social programs that enable the realization of the social rights of the poor, that is, the satisfaction of their basic needs to live and to reintegrate themselves into the market and society. This is what many economists call "orthodox" economic theory. A third example of what we call the logic of "orthodoxy" is the temptation, which is a form of desire, of demanding from oneself or from society fully liberative social structures and practices, without any form of oppression or domination, a type of orthodoxy of liberation or of critical thinking that loses the concept of the context and of what is possible, whether in terms of the limits of the social system, natural reality, or the human condition.

I have had many experiences of—when criticizing the sacrificial and idolatrous character of the current capitalist market and then presenting the inevitable problems and limits that will come in the new society—receiving criticism for not being sufficiently radical, for not taking seriously the promises of full liberation that would be in the Bible or in the thought of Marx or another "prophet".

The assertion of the priority of orthopraxis over orthodoxy, made by the main theologians of LALT (for example, Gutierrez, Segundo, Assmann, Sobrino, and Hinkelammert) is not to oppose a conservative orthodoxy of Christianity or the neoliberal economy to an orthodoxy of liberation, but it is the assertion that the vision of the transcendental model or the utopian imagination of a reality that should be is necessary for us to move forward, but it is not feasible in history. This utopian imagination or the transcendental concept needs to be in a dialectical relation with the historical context and the limits of the conditions of the possibility (material, technological, systemic, and intersubjective relations) of the desired transformations.

Without the dialectical vision between the utopia that we desire and the limits of the feasibility of the actions, the notion of liberation tends to become empty. It is understandable that those who want a transformation of the systemic and intersubjective relations tend to believe that their desire is possible because it is good and just, and they can assume an excessively optimistic vision of history. In this sense, it is important to differentiate the optimistic vision of the possibility of "full liberation" and the hope, the spirit that maintains the struggle for justice despite so many difficulties. This hope is not the fruit

of an "orthodox" certainty but of a spiritual experience of encountering the face of the oppressed, a spirituality that humanizes us.

In sum, it is necessary to constantly rethink, from the concrete and possible practices within a given sociohistorical context, what the practices of liberation are that reveal the presence of the Spirit of God in our history and combat the forces of oppression and death.

3. The Reorganization of Space and the Poor

Faced with the scene of Father Júlio breaking the blocks, which went viral on social media, the then-mayor dismissed the person responsible for this architectural change. However, as we said above, this action was not the fruit of an insensitive official but was in response to the tendency of society and the state, resulting from a new logic of the organization of public and private space in the current neoliberal culture. Before, the so-called public spaces, such as squares, were open to all people in society, independent of their wealth or poverty; however, with neoliberal culture occupying almost all the spaces of social life, the poorest, the completely non-consuming, are expelled from the last places where they could try to spend the night "in peace", under the viaducts and bridges.

This neoliberal organization of urban space creates a border between, on the one hand, the neighborhoods of those who are well integrated into the market, the rich and the middle class, and the other poor neighborhoods, similar to the racial borders that existed in the neighborhoods or zones in the apartheid system in South Africa or the USA. With neoliberalism, the criterion is no longer race or ethnicity but wealth or the financial ability to consume.

At this economic–geographic border, a culture of "civil war" is established in which the police see the poor as the enemies of good society. As Z. Bauman (1998, p. 59) already said at the end of the 20th century: "Increasingly, *being poor* is seen as a crime; *becoming poor*, as the product of criminal predispositions or intentions [. . .]. The poor, far from meriting care and assistance, deserve hate and condemnation—as the very incarnation of sin".

In this undeclared civil war, the poorest are seen as enemies who must be expelled or killed. However, these poorest people insist on surviving in a space where they would not have the right to exist, which is why "civilized" society creates mechanisms of "voluntary expulsion", that is, a situation in which these unwanted people can no longer survive and "freely" disappear from the sight of "good" people. One of the ways that society finds to solve this problem is what is called "hostile architecture": a set of devices—such as stones, bars, and iron skewers—inserted into various public structures and buildings with the objective of preventing people from lying down, especially people experiencing homelessness, on park benches, in bus stops, on building facades, and other free areas of public space.

The hammer blows of Father Júlio Lancellotti were the beginning of a campaign against this hostile architecture, driven by aporophobia in a neoliberal culture, which does not recognize dignity and the fundamental rights of the poor to live with dignity.

This action and the campaign have various aspects or layers, but, for the sake of the limits of space, I want to point out just two. In the first place, the reaction of residents and businesses in the neighborhood makes sense. Nobody likes this situation, especially the leftover dirt, whether the residents of buildings and houses, those who work in the stores, or the people experiencing homelessness themselves. The question is how to solve it. Society's first option is to assert that the residents of the houses and apartments have rights; after all, they own or pay rent, and the poor must go elsewhere. The immediate solution would be to expel the homeless, but to where? It is not enough to send the poor to a place where, theoretically, the owners would not be upset by the arrival of people experiencing homelessness, it is also necessary for the poor to be able to obtain, one way or another, food each day. The body requires food every day; the pain of hunger does not give them the freedom to be where they offend no one. They need to be in places where they can obtain their daily food. The practical solution for the managers of the system is to expel them

from the view of the middle and upper classes. It solves the problems of those integrated into the social system but not the survival needs of the excluded.

On the other hand, Father Júlio and other people who defend the poor are not asking for the maintenance of this situation of social crisis. Quite the contrary, they are asking for the intervention of the state, and civil society institutions, and organizations to resolve the serious social problems and, more immediately, to increase shelters and other programs to reintegrate them into society and into the job market. The common response of the state is the lack of funds in the budget. This is because, with the implementation of neoliberal policies, the budgets of the social programs were drastically reduced, and the solution of the social problems is no longer a priority of the state. And the restructuring of the neoliberal government budgets was supported in the elections by a society marked by a neoliberal culture, insensitive to the sufferings of the poor that also criminalizes the poor.

Father Júlio and others began the campaign against aporophobia and hostile architecture to break with this cultural–political–economic circuit that reinforces this social insensitivity in the face of the sufferings of so many people and concentrates its aesthetic sensitivity and interest in the field of consumption and the accumulation of wealth. Without modifying the current relationship between the neoliberal market and the role of the state, it is not possible to overcome this socioeconomic crisis where the question "where will the poor sleep?" is only the tip of the iceberg.

4. The Identity, Belonging, and the Exclusion of the Poor

The second layer of the problem appears in the struggles between the campaign in favor of the poor and against aporophobia and the campaigns of the sectors of civil society and of the leaders of various Christian churches against the "communists", that is, the religious and social leaders who defend the poor. Behind this conflict, we find a theological–anthropological question fundamental for society and for Christian communities: "Are the poor human beings?"

Putting the problem another way, in this dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, which appears visible in the architecture hostile to those excluded from the system and in the essentially policing role assumed by the neoliberal state, we find the most fundamental separation: Who are the human beings socially recognized as human and the others who are treated as the "trash" of society to be discarded?

Being recognized as a human being by other people in society is one of the human needs (Allen et al. 2021; Baumeister and Leary 1995) The most fundamental level of human needs is, of course, the satisfaction of organic needs, such as food, water, and air, because this is the level of the condition of the possibility for survival. Therefore, the discussion about the identity of a person or of a social group presupposes belonging to a system of the production and reproduction of the material goods necessary to maintain life. To be expelled from this system of production and distribution is to be condemned to death or to a condition of misery. Without entering into a discussion of the hierarchy of human needs, we can assume here that having solved the problem of immediate survival, we have the importance of being recognized by other people who are also recognized by others.

The condition for the possibility of having self-esteem and the spiritual strength to overcome life's difficulties is to be recognized as a human being by people who belong to a community or a social group, preferably, to be recognized by a group that is recognized, admired, and even envied by other social groups. That is, to have a sense of belonging and, thus, to have the identity of being someone.

In neoliberal culture, the condition of belonging to a social group that gives a person a good feeling of social recognition is their ability to consume and to flaunt the desired objects that generate envy or admiration (Sung 2007). Self-esteem depends on the recognition by others of their "quality", that is, the possession of the object of desire (goods, prestige, social position, and so on) that generates admiration or envy. By definition, the objects of social positions that do not generate admiration or enby are not objects of desire. The concrete way in which a person is recognized by a group to which s/he wants to belong and remain

within is fundamental for one's self-esteem and identity. In this sense, in neoliberal culture, self-esteem, identity, and belonging are intimately linked to the pattern of consumption. I am what I consume and I flaunt!

To the extent that the feeling of belonging and self-esteem is linked to the possession of objects of desire that generate envy, these concrete social groups forge this feeling of belonging and of superiority in relation to others through the "othering" of members of other groups. Being more distant from the social groups that deny the fundamental values and criteria of one's group is a necessity for affirming one's identity and belonging. It is a logic of identity construction that presupposes and demands "othering" and exclusion, not only from the best urban spaces but also from the borders of what is considered the human species.

In this economic–cultural system, the poor, especially people experiencing homelessness, cannot be recognized as human beings as they are. For, if their problems were recognized as important by the society and the state, these people would be recognized as human beings with sufficient importance such that society and the state would spend a significant part of their budgets. In other words, here, we have a direct relationship between the construction of identity and belonging in neoliberal society and the neoliberal economic policy that opposes social programs in favor of the poor or the social welfare state. The classification of the social and economic problems to be cared for depends on the importance or lack thereof of the people who are suffering these problems. In this sense, to carry forward the neoliberal culture of consumption and the economic policy of the privatization of all aspects of personal and social life, so that everything is dominated by the free market, it is essential to expel the people experiencing homelessness.

5. Idolatry, the God Who Resurrects the Dead, and Humanization

To the extent that a large part of society is living in a culture of phobia of the poor and is, at the same time, Christian or believes in God, and Western society defines itself as Christian, we have an explicitly theological–religious problem. What is the relationship between God and the poor? In the premodern Christian tradition, independent of whether the poor were considered sinners or not, the Church taught charity toward the poor as a moral virtue. With the expansion of capitalist culture in society and the adaptation of theologies to this culture, especially the neoliberal one, the care for the poor or the struggle for the liberation of the poor came to be seen by many as a heresy. In general, the basic argument is: God is omnipotent, has "control" over history, and is good. Therefore, the sufferings of the poor would be the result of their sins and God's punishments and must be accepted as the necessary sacrifices demanded by God.

Here, we have a fundamental question of theological orthodoxy: who is God? As the main Latin American liberation theologians put it, in the early 1980s, the central problem of LALT is not modern atheism ("Does God exist?") but, rather, the discernment between the idol (that is, the god who demands sacrifices of human lives) and the God of Life, who recognizes the dignity of all human beings and the right of all to live with dignity (Richard 1982; Sobrino 1986). For authors such as Assmann and Hinkelammert (1989), (Sung 2007, 2018) and Coelho (2021), the main theological disputes of our time do not take place within the realm of traditional dogmatic theology but in the theological debates present in or underlying the socioeconomic theories and practices. This is because, "in the economic theories and economic processes, there is a strange metamorphosis of the gods and a fierce struggle between the gods" (Assmann and Hinkelammert 1989, p. 11) (translation of these quotations by article translator). Inspired by the thesis of Max Weber (2004) and the biblical perspective, Assmann and Hinkelammert, in their classic work *A Idolatria do Mercado* (Assmann and Hinkelammert 1989) (The Idolatry of the Market), analyzed what types of gods we find in society and stated that "the idols are the gods of oppression. Biblically, the concept of idol and idolatry is directly linked to the manipulation of religious symbols to create subjection, legitimize oppression, and support the dominating powers in the organization of human society" (p. 11).

This critical theological analysis of the neoliberal economy is one of the most important contributions of LALT that remains valid and deserves to be continued. For, as Assmann says, "if we speak of idolatry and the 'perverse theologies' present in the economy, it is because we are concerned with the sacrifice of human lives that is legitimized by the idolatrous conceptions of the economic processes" (Assmann and Hinkelammert 1989, p. 12).

Idolatry and its demand for sacrifices justify and demand, in the name of a false god, whether the free market or the vision of a perverse Christian god, the exclusion and death of the poor. It is because they exclude and kill in the name of a necrophiliac god, a god who loves death, that so many idolatrous religious leaders accuse those who defend the right of the poor to live with dignity of being communists, atheists or heretics.

One cannot correctly understand Father Júlio's theological arguments and actions without taking into consideration the concepts of idolatry and the God of life. I had the happiness of being his friend and classmate during four years of the theology course, and I also discussed these concepts with him. (Unfortunately, for non-Latin-American readers, a good part of this TLLA output is only published in Portuguese and Spanish.)

The actions and campaign in favor of the people experiencing homelessness is more than giving bread and a place to sleep at night, it is a practical and theological struggle over "who is a human being?". In addition to the satisfaction of the need to eat and to have a place to sleep, these actions also aim to offer people experiencing homelessness a human recognition that permits them to feel and know themselves to be human. In this action, what counts is one's gaze, face to face, with the gaze of another, the physical contact that warms the heart. Food kills the hunger of the stomach; human recognition, the solidary love for a human being in need, satisfies the hunger to be a "person", of being recognized as a human being by another person.

This experience of being recognized by other people who are recognized as "important" in the community, such as a priest, resurrects these people who live in a state of social death, that is, an existence in which the person has no legitimacy (Patterson 1982). With this event of becoming a full person with dignity, they can enter a community of the "saved", not from eternal hell but freed from a death in life. This identity of being saved, freed, and belonging to a community of people who mutually recognize each other leads them to new forms of intersubjective relations and action, and even to new social and political practices of struggle for other marginalized people.

The resurrection within history, the return to life overcoming social death, is a process of liberation from a dehumanizing relationship and/or structures toward a process of humanization, in which can or should be established a new level of the limits of what is acceptable and intolerable in society, whether in legal terms or religious and moral values. Contemporary society should not tolerate the most diverse social processes in which human beings are treated as nonhuman or subhuman just because they are poor (men and women), black, indigenous, or part of the LGBTQ+ community; however, we must recognize, it tolerates, and even justifies them. This is because many of the social groups that deny the humanity of the excluded are not even conscious of doing so. As Jesus said on the cross, "They know not what they do" (Luke 23: 34), because, for them, these people experiencing homelessness or others excluded from society are not human. It is not a problem of evil intentions or ill will but of a vision of the world and of life, or we can even say of a "metaphysics", in which the human-animal species is divided into two categories: human-human beings and those who are not human, not civilized.

In this reflection on humanization and dehumanization, it is important to differentiate between the notion of dehumanization and that of prejudice, of disliking someone or a social group. This is because the distinction impacts the practices against this dehumanization.

Let us take as an example, the prejudice against Asian tourists in Western countries, especially in regions where the economy is not very good, or a feeling of dislike of an Asian person who occupies a position of leadership at work. Those people who dislike these Asians do not go so far as to classify Asians, or other ethnicities, as "inherently inferior", whether in terms of intelligence, "civilization", or morality. After all, they are consumers

who are part of the market and are even recognized as being competent in their work. So, despite disliking them and holding prejudices, they recognize their humanity.

On the other hand, people or social groups who place social status as the central criterion for establishing a hierarchical differentiation between persons and groups tend more "to blatantly dehumanize low-status groups" (Bruneau et al. 2018, p. 1080). What is important for our reflection is the fact that this difference between the dehumanization of the socially inferior groups and the dislike of another person or group is not merely a difference of a certain degree (of liking more or less) along a spectrum. "Evidence that the neural processes associated with dehumanization judgments are distinguishable from those underlying judgments of dissimilarity and homogeneity (in addition to those underlying judgments of dislike) would enhance confidence that dehumanization is a distinguishable cognitive process [. . .]" (Ibid, p. 1080).

When we know that the process of the dehumanization or the negation of the humanity of these people is a cognitive process neurologically distinct from liking or disliking a person, we need to be clear that we are in two distinct ways of relating. A person may, as a matter of "education" or a politically correct discourse, pretend that s/he is dealing with a recognizably human person, but a brain scan would show that s/he actually deliberately considers the other as qualitatively "inferior". This has a fundamental consequence for social-intervention practice and what we think of orthopraxis and of liberation practices.

In terms of our discussion of the social insensitivity to the suffering of the poorest, we have here the central issue of the dehumanization of the poor. As the poorest are excluded from the set of human beings, beings with dignity, their sufferings and problems cease to be part of the moral field and even the religious field. It is worth remembering here that every human being is the bearer of fundamental dignity, independent from the social functions they may occupy in systems. Neoliberalism denies the notion of human dignity and reduces people to a set of social functions or roles in systems. Therefore, it does not recognize the notion of fundamental human rights in itself, which arises from the notion of dignity but only the rights that arise from the contract within the omnipresent market.

L. von Mises (2008), one of the principal thinkers of neoliberalism, radically criticized this modern thinking, of Christian origin, about human dignity and the fundamental human rights saying: "The worst of all these delusions is the idea that 'nature' has bestowed upon every man certain rights. According to this doctrine, nature is openhanded toward every child born. [. . .] Every word of this doctrine is false." (pp. 80–81). This critique by neoliberals of the notion of human rights—especially the social rights of the poor to have access to material goods sufficient to live—allies with postmodern thinkers who criticize metaphysical and modern thought for defending the notion of "human essence". If there is no universal notion of what or who is human, there would be no way to base or justify the notion of human dignity and human rights.

In the world of academic ideas, people can build theories without presupposing the ultimate criteria and values for making decisions in a macro social context. However, in the globalized socioeconomic world, one cannot make decisions without taking into account the ultimate criteria. And the ultimate and central criterion for neoliberal reason is economic value, and the scientific method is its calculation of economic values. In this sense, people experiencing homelessness are the most visible expression of what is worst in society and humanity. In addition to not producing economically, they do not consume in the market, and they disrupt the daily lives of "good" people in places where they should not be. More than being nonhumans, they are enemies of society and of God.

On the other hand, in the perspective of Father Júlio Lancelotti and of the tradition of original Christianity, especially the Apostle Paul, what the world calls wisdom is the foolishness of the world. As Franz Hinkelammert (2012, p. 32) says, "The foolishness that Paul talks about does not have the sense of an offense, being, in fact a characterization. [. . .] Foolishness does not prevent intelligence or wisdom". (translation of these quotations by article translator). When we criticize neoliberal reason or rationality (Dardot and Laval 2016), we need to be clear, as Hinkelammert says (p. 64), that it "is not irrationality *per se*. It

is the irrationality of what is rationalized". That is, when we critically analyze neoliberal rationality, we find within it a sacrificial theology that says: compliance with the law of the market (private property as a sacred right, free competition, the buy–sell contract, and the accumulation of value as the ultimate criterion of the system) is, or should be, the only path in life. However, this fulfillment of the law, in the perspective of Paul and Jesus, leads us to death, first of the poor and then to the death of nature and humanity itself.

Unlike the wisdom of the world, which, in Paul's perspective, is the foolishness of the world, God's wisdom confronts the calculation of utility of value. Calculations are necessary in real life; however, one cannot make the calculation of value the ultimate criterion of life. Human life only has meaning to the extent that we place life itself as the ultimate criterion. In this sense, the life of all human beings, however unproductive they might be, carries human dignity. More than that, the life of people experiencing homelessness is the most visible expression of the ultimate meaning of life: life "has worth" as life itself. That is, life cannot, and should not, be justified by something else, for example, wealth or power, but can only be justified by a faith that claims that life "has worth" in itself.

The practice of Father Júlio and of so many other people who defend the life of people who do not "deserve" to live is the testimony of following the path of Jesus, who became incarnate "that all may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10: 10), not just for a chosen few. By being able to see, through faith, beyond the lies of the world, that God shows no partiality between people (Romans 2: 11) and that, in Jesus, "there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female" (Galatians 3: 28), we, too, are saved from the lie and from death in life. In this way, we can say that by recognizing the humanity and the dignity of people experiencing homelessness, we confirm our faith in the full humanity of all human beings and faith in a God who makes no distinction between people.

6. Conclusions

Neoliberal economic rationality, which is the main theology in the world today, uses, when necessary, the theological discourses of prosperity or other forms of a theology of retribution to justify the economic and social policies that exclude the poor from the conditions of a dignified life. In this broad social process, in which the fight over "where the poor will sleep" is the tip of the iceberg, we also find how the foolishness of the world's wisdom suppressed the truth with injustice (see Romans 1: 18). The truth is not opposed to error or ignorance but to injustice and oppression.

The way to know the truth about the human being and God, within the limits of what we can know, is not through orthodoxy but through orthopraxis, the praxis of the struggles against injustice. It is through the praxis of love for the poor and for the "little" people who suffer that we will know the truth that sets us free (see John 8: 32).

Thus, as we have seen, the orthodox truth that all human beings have dignity and the right to live with dignity needs to be contextualized and transformed into a praxis of liberation that is constantly transformed. In these social and political struggles, we learn that there are short-term and long-term objectives, the possible and the impossible, and some impossible objectives can be transformed into possible ones in the long term, but there are just and desirable goals that will never be completely realized within history. Recognizing this, the limits of our conditions, and still continuing to defend the dignified life of all human beings, is the wager of our Christian and human faith.

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Liberation Theologies and Their Future: Rethinking Categories and Popular Participation in Liberation

Joerg Rieger [1,*] and Priscila Silva [2]

[1] Graduate Department of Religion and Divinity School, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37240, USA
[2] Religious Studies Department, Methodist University, São Paulo 09640-000, Brazil; priscilapromotora@yahoo.com.br
* Correspondence: j.rieger@vanderbilt.edu

Abstract: The first generation of Latin American liberation theologies was marked by the methodological status of the preferential option for the poor. In the following generations, this commitment was further developed in the struggle for a new way of doing theology, even more connected to material life, and disciplines such as history and economics were added. With this, the organizational structures of life in society started to be discussed in more critical, systemic, and prophetic ways. Especially thinking of the Latin American and US contexts, the production of theology derived from this intersectionality seeks not only to highlight and analyze the economic structures that cause exploitation (class), inequalities (gender and sexuality), and racism, but to identify how religion undergirds solidarity movements. The method applied to discuss these themes is bibliographical research. As a broad conclusion, this article indicates that future liberation theologies should discuss what the multiple victims of capitalism (always the majority of the population, never merely a minority) do in order to survive, related to the alternatives they create; discuss solidarity as the foundation that opposes social evil; and discuss the illusions of individualism that cover up both existing relationships of exploitation as well as solidarity.

Keywords: liberation theology; economics; solidarity; inequalities; Latin America; United States

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1. Introduction

The liberation theologies born in the context of Latin American dictatorial systemic violence between the 1950s and 1970s continue to be debated, produced, and criticized. After the prominent theological developments of the nineteenth century, including the emergence of fundamentalism and liberalism in Europe, which influence the study of theology and doctrinal discussions to this day, the twentieth century was marked in Christian history by the birth of the theological imagination of Catholics and Protestants of the "third world". This includes the socioeconomic categories of the time, themes that were not intended to be systematic but methodological-ethical. These themes were not abstract reflections about God but addressed divine participation in the pains of the world, which influence our own participation and ethical-spiritual indignation.

Assuming not only the methodological theoretical conventions of disciplines such as philosophy, but including history as a foundation of production and bringing together theology and social sciences, liberation theologies and their forerunners were accused, among many things, of being traitors and rioters.[1] These accusations resembled earlier accusations of the Jesus movement as leading to sedition. We might argue that these theologies took the forms of protest against some empire, understood as a totality that generates death. All opposition to this new way of producing theology, more connected to the daily life of communities, demonstrated not only that the church was willing to surrender its own members to the accusatory powers—as happened with Rubem Alves, for example—but that a new historical period had begun. In the midst of economic dominance,

the globalization of production and the culture of consumption, in addition to the political-ideological persecution of people through dictatorships, liberation theologies sought to debate and organize society from different horizons, in contradiction to what the liberal economic universe preached. In this sense, liberation theologies not only collided with a certain theological tradition and conservative religious institutions of European molds of humanity, but vehemently opposed poverty-causing policies from the outset, denouncing oppressive forms of organized life in society.

In this way, liberation theologies, often considered heretical for their demands to break oppression, marked the history of the Roman Catholic Church and revisited Protestant perspectives of how to interpret biblical texts in the light of the real life of real people: the poor of Latin and Central America. Although commonly treated as a diamond cut from the intellectual work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian and Dominican friar, liberation theology was a movement, a process that had been underway since the 1950s through various ecumenical student collectives, which addressed the need to promote actions of a revolutionary nature on a continent marked by exploitation and the hardening of doctrine that made people and institutions indifferent to suffering in material life. Vatican II, an institutional seed of liberation theology, which took place between 1962 and 1965, was not a naive movement, but a takeover of the church's position in the face of the visible lack of meaning of collective faith in a new world, with new challenges for the faithful. Updating the church, *aggiornare*, bringing it into the open, was the proposal of John XXIII, pope at the time, to gather the church amid the cries for renewal and even repentance in light of the hegemonic-imperial Catholic faith.

A little more than 50 years later, in the face of constant discussions whether it still makes sense to talk about this topic, writing about the theologies of liberation (assuming their plurality) is a way of indicating that yes, this ongoing theological work is not only a memory but keeps germinating in various formats around the world, in places where processes and systems of domination, exploitation, and oppression persist. With the establishment of neoliberalism[2] and its global dimension, the vicissitudes that the young revolutionary Christians of the first generations discussed have become even worse and cruel, and we experience attempts to naturalize the indifferent, indiscriminate, political, economic, and theological use of individualism that marks Western societies. This can be seen, for instance, in how immigrants around the world are treated, as well as the working majorities of our countries who are forced to endure very unfavorable conditions.

Liberation theologies, considering these new times, embody the constant need for Christian theology to rethink its statutes and praxis in a world marked not only by the majority of population seeking ways to survive (historically classified as the poor), but by pain, social suffering, and exploitation that has been transformed into virtue, into a culture of "hard work," and into the myths of progress and meritocracy. Currently, the experience of neoliberal exploitation is not limited to Latin America but invades even hegemonic countries such as the United States, making everyday life a challenge, a struggle for survival on the backdrop of the accumulation of the few and the lack of the majority. In addition to people being forced into a production system without pause, nature itself cries out for freedom, for rest. Therefore, everyday life is a problem that needs to be addressed by theology and theologians. Producing liberation theologies today means, first of all, debating and proposing more just and solidary alternatives for collective life, whether in the North or South.

In view of these issues, this article will be divided into three sections that highlight some aspects of liberation theologies in the Americas at present, especially from the third generation onwards, identified by the critical intersection between theology and economics. Section 1 will engage material life through the lenses of liberation theologies, briefly reviewing capitalism as/and the study of religion. Section 2 will address idolatry, victims, sacrifice, and other intersectionalities as well as new categories of approach to an old oppression system. Section 3 deals with experiences of liberation in daily life in light of the development of "solidarity circles" in the United States. Finally, it is important to highlight

that this text is a collaboration of two theologians deeply influenced by liberation theologies in two completely different contexts. A Brazilian Baptist theologian, female, born and raised in a favela in Rio de Janeiro, and a German-American Methodist theologian, male, born and raised in Germany, and a professor in the United States. Both are marked, each in their own way, not only by the method of liberation theologies, but by their living fruits and results.

2. Development

2.1. The Material Life through the Lens of Liberation Theologies: Brief Review of Capitalism as/and the Study of Religion

Classical theology, the heritage of the fathers of the Church, and an overlay of centuries-old theological and philosophical schools, were shaped above all by a series of dichotomies that seemed irreconcilable: sacred and profane, flesh and spirit, spiritual life and material life, etc. In the period of birth of liberation theologies, this structure of thinking and performing the Christian faith in the world reproduced, in a certain sense, the landmarks of so-called secularization as well as the stratification of knowledge and life. On the one hand was faith, on the other reason; on one side was God, on the other science; on one side were spiritual things, on the other material things, and so on. Christian theology, in this scheme, was synonymous with knowing things about God. The consequence of this approach was that the practice of the Christian faith was associated with the search for a life outside of one's own life, untouched by the escalation of violence taking the forms of racism, patriarchy, wars, and misery in the post-war period. This amounted to lingering in a spiritual limbo within real life and to waiting for a heaven inside a desolate earth.

In an attempt to point out the need for Christian faith to look at real life, to position itself in the face of the widespread oppression that was at stake, Gustavo Gutiérrez indicates in his classic work *A Theology of Liberation*:

> This work seeks a reflection, from the Gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation *in this subcontinent of oppression and exploitation* that is Latin America. Theological reflection is born of this *shared experience* in the *effort to abolish the current situation of injustice and the construction of a different, freer and more humane society*. The route of liberating commitment was undertaken by many in Latin America. (Gutierrez [1971] 2000, p. 51, our translation)

Gutierrez points to the oppression and exploitation of Latin America as the result of historical processes that become experiences and are not just ideas. He also indicates that the ideal would be abolition, not just improvement of a particular situation. What Gutiérrez's liberation theology was protesting was a theology of development that assumed increased inclusion into an expanding system of global capitalism would be possible for Latin American countries and elsewhere. In addition, it is worth remembering that between the 1960s and 1980s, almost all Latin American countries went through periods of military dictatorship. The Argentinean,[3] Chilean, and Brazilian dictatorships stand out for significant levels of violence and repression, as well as for their economic extremes: massive industrialization was introduced at the price of subsequent mass poverty. The expected tide of growth turned out to be nothing more than a new wave of inequality that continues today.

What we want to indicate in reference to this text of Gutiérrez, often considered the father of father of liberation theology, is that it not only attempted to understand the attributes of God and the central elements of the Christian faith but to undo the dichotomies that distanced theological labor and the consequent practice of faith from the harsh reality of the life of the masses. Post World War II, Latin America had become a field of economic experiments (cheap labor, raw material exploitation, etc.), mainly from the United States, and liberation theology proposed a method—"see, judge, act"—that tried to reconcile faith and its meaning in a context of "open veins," as Eduardo Galeano used to say.[4]

Thus, the first and second generations of liberation theologians were focused on defending the choice for the poor as a theological priority, on structuring methodological

principles and, as a consequence, on developing the first contents of a soteriology, ecclesiology, and pneumatology from the perspective of liberation. Marxist theories, often informed by indigenous voices like José Carlos Mariátegui, were used to substantiate theological thinking in these early days, but Christian and theological identities remained central and were persistently defended. That is, liberation theology was concerned about theological positioning, expression of incarnate faith, with denunciation of oppression and sociopolitical motivation. Marxist theories were part of the theological debate not because of some obscure academic interest, but because these were broad popular conversations, linked to indigenous Marxisms and organizing on the Left. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, Julio de Santa Ana, Enrique Dussel, and liberation theology's parents Gustavo Gutiérrez and Rubem Alves, stand out in this first generation.

Years later, with the end of dictatorships and the emergence of even more consolidated economic oppression through external national debts—disastrous social effects caused by industrialization—theologians such as Hugo Assmann, Franz Hinkelammert, and Jung Mo Sung began to argue that the option for the poor, which continually demands the contextualization of the experience of oppression and suffering, must not lose sight of the implicit agreements and common structures of dominant theology and economics. This new theological generation marked another milestone because it read the "signs of the times" (Vatican II) in new ways, noticing that the economy was a culture, a way of defining how to live and die, rather than merely the subject of an exact science.

In other words, based on classical texts developed by Walter Benjamin[5] and Max Weber,[6] which demonstrate the perverse changes of capitalism, the third generation of liberation theology takes a critical leap, realizing that it is not enough to denounce the situation of the poor of the so-called "third world," thrown into oppressive misery in search of liberation. It is necessary also to understand, in light of theology, how the structures of domination and oppression are sustained, classified as saving, and established as good news. This moment is perceived by Assmann and Hinkelammert in 1989:

> The themes we address most closely are the way economic rationality "hijacked" and functionalized essential aspects of Christianity; the way "economic religion" triggered a massive process of idolatry, which finds its expression more evident in the supposed self-regulation of market mechanisms; and the way economic idolatry feeds on a sacrificial ideology that implies constant sacrifices of human lives. We speak directly of theological notions present in the economy. In other words, it is claimed that economists are also, in their own way, eminent and dangerous theologians. But what interests us is not exactly to launch *accusations, but to reflect on the implications this has for the direction of economic policies and for human problems in general*. (Assmann and Hinkelammert 1989, pp. 9–10, our translation)

These references to economic policies and the human problems lead to the understanding that modern economic rationality is based on mythical foundations, which, in addition to not considering the real life of the population, are based on schemes that demand the sacrifice of human lives. This ethical-theological denunciation opens new paths of theological production, but the most important of all is that it reinforces that real life, mundane and experienced, should be the starting point and ultimate criterion of any elaboration, be it of an economic or theological nature, with the goal to improve the way people produce and access means of survival. From this moment on, liberation theology becomes more than a methodological, ethical content; it is now also a continuous source of revelation of idolatrous structures that victimize anything that promotes life. We will come back to this in the following section.

2.2. Idolatry, Sacrifice, Victims, and Other Intersectionalities: New Categories of Approach to an Old Oppression System

In opposition to classical theological perspectives, and entering the discussion of the materiality of life and the human body, which has basic needs such as food and shelter, Rubem Alves indicates the following:

> The liberation of the human being has nothing to do with the denial of the body, but with his liberation from everything that represses it, which does not leave it free for the world or the free world for him [. . .] The Messiah, the power of liberating freedom, is 'flesh'. There is no place for a God who gives himself to man or who works outside the material conditions of life [. . .] God is found among the things he gives humans. (Alves 1987, pp. 204–5)

In this perspective on the incarnation, promoted by the first generation of liberation theology, theologians turned their attention to the material and physical experience of people. The body, once perceived as a deposit of sin, would come to be contemplated as a gift that should be treated with dignity. The body is the first "space" where we show solidarity, where we perceive ourselves as a *self* in contact with the *other*.

However, it was necessary to understand how certain inversions originating in the economic universe changed the understanding of the body and of the human being itself. From the 1980s onwards, the so-called DEI School (Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones in Costa Rica) pioneered this issue by indicating that the capitalist free market, a human institution, had gradually become a god—actually, an idol. Assmann and Hinkelammert, the key thinkers of this school, pointed out that "idols are the gods of oppression" (Assmann and Hinkelammert 1989, p. 13), representing an inverted image of divinity, constantly requiring the sacrifice of the poor, while, on the other hand, promising life. The capitalist market, made an idol, pretends that people do not have basic needs but only desires that can be fed into a constant economic-sacrificial circuit (Sung 2007). The theological-economic critique of the DEI school, and of the entire generation of liberation theology they represent, can be summarized as follows:

> On an international scale, despite (and perhaps because of) the huge accumulation of wealth in rich countries, the socioeconomic problems of most of humanity are looming and sharpening; and the dominant economic science, deeply committed to established interests, being unable to dismember itself from god dogmas, works in favor of the perverse existing structures and does not admit alternatives that depart from them. In theological terms, this means that there is a solidly established idolatry, and that worshipped deities do not favor the creation of gospels (good news) for humanity. Established gods are hardened gods, especially when they originate from a long and difficult previous metamorphosis [. . .]. Concrete certainties about real hunger, real death, and all real needs have disappeared. They can no longer be known and determined, because these economists only know beings-with-desires who, apparently, *have astral bodies*. Then, *all concrete demands become debatable*, nothing can be known for sure, everything is unlimitedly complex, and nothing preserves the simplicity of tears, cries, hunger, and the danger of death. (Assmann and Hinkelammert 1989, p. 36, our translation)

Faced with the naturalization of people treated as sovereign consumers and not with dignity (Sung 2020),[7] outside the key of needs and within the key of desires, what we classify as sacrifices are understood as viable, legitimate actions and unique possibilities of achieving seemingly positive results. Sacrifice must be hidden so that it continues to produce meaning and cannot be denounced or brought to light in how it perpetuates itself on the basis of capitalism. Life is promised through death, peace is promised through violence, and abundance is promised in the midst of lack. And so we are led to believe that material life, the dignity of the human being, is more a commodity than anything else. In other words, what this third generation of liberation theology does is the production

of a theology that denounces oppression, reveals the idolatry of the market, and indicates that its result is the sacrifice of human lives. The target is a methodological and practical strategy that defines the meaning of life and turns it into a search for satisfaction through the market.

In this sense, as the Chilean theologian Pablo Richard warned, it is necessary not only to identify the existence of idols, to denounce them, but to constantly promote the "anti-idolatric discernment of false gods, fetishes that kill and their mortal religious weapons" (Richard 1982, p. 7). From this idea of discerning, we understand that, although the option for the poor is the classical methodological route of liberation theology, it is not sufficient to denounce specific oppressions that accumulate in various formats around the world. In fact, since the 1990s, some Latin American liberation theologians saw in the classical option for the poor a non-liberating scope. That is, from this time on it was argued that it is not enough to produce theology looking at macroeconomic contexts; one must also look at the deepest examples of everyday life, where oppressions and sacrifices are even more cruel. In other words, it takes more than talking about the poor; instead, it is necessary to develop more appropriate understandings of the problems and the potential of the people together with the people. This includes more adequate class analysis that goes deeper into exploitative relationships.

In this context, we highlight the work of theologian Ivone Gebara, a Catholic nun, who, when being silenced by the Vatican produced a thesis on the problem of evil, focusing on the experience of Latin American women, who were and remain the most sacrificed of all. For her, it was not enough to use the category of the poor as an epistemological-ethical foundation, it was also necessary to talk about how poverty painfully affects the lives of women, especially when associated with other types of oppression. Poverty, analyzed in a transversal way by Gebara, represents not only an economic situation, but an overlap of genders, a religious (Christian) morality, and a racist practice. This critique was and remains pertinent because the so-called option for the poor lacked analyzing and acting together with the poor themselves. Without names, addresses, or voices, liberation theology denounced a sacrificial structure that is latent to this day, but remained on the surface when the subject is to enter the reality of the most ordinary life (Das 2007). That is, there was talk about real people, but without sufficient qualitative approximation.

In this sense, a step forward, understood as a future for liberation theology, is to use a category that encompasses a larger portion of the capitalist operations that we have dealt with so far (idolatry, sacrifice, concealment, etc.), which deepens social and theological analyses and pushes beyond simplified perspectives. We would suggest, therefore, the use of the category of the *victimized* rather than merely of the *poor*, because it is necessary to highlight that in addition to unfavorable economic situations there are other mechanisms that limit the lives of people. As a result, only a very small group of people are able to accumulate and dominate. Historically in liberation theology, the term *poor* was almost always accompanied by the auxiliary expression *preferential option*, which indicates the central methodological option for Latin American liberation theology. What cannot be lost sight of is that this way of doing theology not only presented another possible image of God but was concerned with a way of being in the world marked by inequality and exploitation. That is, liberation theology, by making the poor the center of its production, denounces the fact that real life was/is marked by a dehumanizing poverty, because of various historical processes and structures.

When we prefer to use the category 'victims' instead of 'poor', we do so (1) in an attempt to go beyond an analysis of reality that might be too generic because poverty is not homogeneous; rather, it is variable and needs to be observed in each context and time;[8] (2) because the term 'victim' denotes that precariousness and exploitation have become worse and has deepened with the evolution of capitalism in its current neoliberal forms. That is, poverty (and here we include deaths caused by poverty as well) is not an accident, it is a necessary condition of capitalism and therefore constructed by it; and, finally, (3) because the term victim promotes a transversal discussion (including the categories 'race' and

'gender', in addition to 'class'), pointing out that poverty, exploitation, and inequality have other layers, depending on the group of people who experience them. In the case of Brazil, for example, black women and LGBTQIA+ people are the most exploited and find themselves in situations of greater social vulnerability. In the case of the United States, it is people of BIPOC and queer communities. In short, the victim category not only reveals the complex problem of poverty, it also observes it as a result of economic-social systems crossed by diverse forms of systemic violence, such as racism, sexism, and the exploitation of the labor force.

In sum, the category of the victimized helps to reveal how people are constantly exploited by capitalism and related structures. Talking about victims requires a more complex analysis as not all victims are the same, but it also reminds us of the structural roots of victimization. And not all who claim to be victims belong into this category; for instance, oppressors who misinterpret being challenged as being victimized. For the discourse on poverty and the poor, this means that the poor do not cause their own poverty and it requires a protest of the conditions that victimize them, as well as working towards alternatives. For the most part, the poor are victims of economic processes and of social evils that fragment relations and turn both human and other-than-human nature into commodities.

Producing critiques and theological content from the category of the victimized not only reveals a system that reverses life and death but also makes room for people themselves to participate, speaking of their experiences, and recognizing privileges and lack thereof. Ultimately, within the neoliberal capitalist logic, the proverbial 99 percent that have to work for a living experience some form of unavoidable exploitation and lack of power/dignity (Rieger 2022). For an even more liberating future, it is necessary to recognize and denounce the situation of specific groups within the 99 percent, including poor black women, stigmatized poor black men, queer people, whites descended from poor immigrants, young white women, the indigenous elderly, and many other realities where sacrifice is the norm. In addition, ecological devastation affects rich and poor, millionaires and the miserable, including everyone in what might be understood as catastrophes (Rieger 2022; Day 2016; Boff and Moltmann 2014).

In a recently published article, Priscila Silva and Sung (2022) discuss how it is necessary to listen to people who are in less dignified situations in order to understand the many dimensions of sacrifice and idolatry, including the co-optation of theology and the church for capitalist purposes. In this article written in the spirit of liberation theology, the socioeconomic structure of Latin America or of historically oppressed countries is not at the center. Instead, the testimony of a black woman, who at the height of the pandemic confesses her faith and hope in God rather than in the system, the state, or social policies, is emphasized. What this move indicates is that, in addition to conventional categories and methodologies, it is necessary to aggregate experiences and grievances that directly begin with those who suffer the most harmful effects of the socioeconomic system. In order to conceive of a fruitful, critical, and ethical trajectory for liberation theology, we should ask ourselves, 'What are the categories that the poor themselves use to classify their lives?' We might be surprised by alternative ways of understanding this complex sacrificial system, which is neoliberal capitalism.

This movement of approximation to ordinary life, from the broader use of the category of the "victimized" to the understanding of multiple experiences in the midst of neoliberalism, dates back to the beginning of liberation theology, the ecclesial base communities (CEBs), and the popular reading of the Bible, which was the foundation of the theological production of liberation. Even before liberation theology became an academic discipline, it was popular, pragmatic rather than analytical, both simple and complex. Even the connection to the social sciences came later. Gebara (2020) indicates that, because it has distanced herself from people's daily experience, liberation theology has become more an object of research rather than an ethical-methodological theology. With the weakening of base communities, given constant clerical/institutional pressures, it seems that liberation

theology has lost its largest field of popular cultivation, and the conception of its role as the protagonist of the poor has entered into crisis. That is, much of the founding structure of dialogue has been lost over the decades.

This situation, in a way, persists at present and therefore there is a need not only to defend the theological method born at the end of the 1970s, but to redevelop it from the cries of those who suffer the most unfair treatments. Unfortunately, scholars often fail to grasp this challenge because they are distant from what is going on every day. Nevertheless, it is important to note that there are people, projects, and perspectives attentive to this issue and people who, therefore, already operate theologically and sociologically from the experience of what might be called the "factory floor". To illustrate, we will now show how the perspective of solidarity can be a new ethical-theological key, critical of the strongest Christian pillars that have been co-opted by language and economic culture, such as common models of charity. This topic will indicate, above all, how it might still be possible to develop liberation theology and take steps that are historical signs that liberation is not primarily utopia but concretely happening even if the empire persists. In order to gain freedom, in this perspective, it is necessary to dialogue with and organize people, and to reclaim alternative forms of power.

2.3. Experiences of Liberation in Daily Life: Organizing Solidarity Circles in the United States

The so-called "historical project" of liberation theology has undergone shifts and transformations over the past five decades. While early on real alternatives to capitalism seemed possible, things have changed with the onsets of neoliberal capitalism, military dictatorships, the end of Soviet-style communism, structural adjustment policies, and challenges from the political Right in various countries (Donald Trump and his followers in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, etc.). In some cases, sheer survival is now the main goal, especially when substantial parts of the population are living below the poverty line. This is, of course, most urgent in many places in the Global South, but at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, 29.5 percent of families were food-insecure (Silva 2020).

When times are difficult, organizing becomes more important than ever. Offering critique, protesting, and other popular forms of resistance are not enough. Even individual struggles for sheer survival can benefit from being organized, as they depend on building community power and relationships. Understanding the prophetic traditions as mainly "speaking truth to power," as they have often been interpreted, is inadequate if the prophets have the truth but the dominant system still has the power. Perhaps the most common but also the most problematic misunderstanding of liberation movements is that they are mainly protest movements—speaking out against the dominant system, offering critiques and making moral demands on the dominant powers, trying to change policies here and there without building alternative power and changing systems (political, economic, and religious).

In the United States, some of this is related to myopic interpretations of the Civil Rights movement that neglect the deep organizing and power-building that went on. The 1963 March on Washington, for instance, was about "Jobs and Freedom," rather than merely about civil rights, and it was put together by people like A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, closely linked to the labor movement, concerns for economic power, and the everyday life of African American communities. Instead of playing off matters of race and class, Randolph, Rustin, and many of their collaborators sought to fight the two evils in relation to each other. They knew what is often forgotten today—namely, that building economic power in minority communities can do more to fight racism than many other efforts, and dealing with racial divisions at the workplace by organizing workers can do more to build the power of working people than conversations about poverty or analyzing class structures can do by itself. It is perhaps not surprising that both Martin Luther King, Jr., and W.E.B. DuBois noted that the labor unions were the most effective organizations involved in the struggle against racism (King 2011).[9]

All that is to suggest that popular struggles for survival, instead of limiting themselves to protesting and resistance, have often understood that something needs to be built—the power of working people, in the example of the Civil Rights movement. It is hardly a coincidence that King was assassinated when he helped organize the sanitation workers in Memphis. In the United States, this constructive approach can be seen also in a long history of African American efforts to build solidarity economies and worker cooperatives (Nembhard 2014). Even the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, often perceived as a mere protest and resistance movement, has developed an economic platform that puts black liberation on the footing of building economic power but is unfortunately not very well known.[10] In Latin America, the ecclesial base communities of the early days of liberation theology offered support networks where new relationships were established and community power was rooted. Today, the Movimento dos Trabalhadoras Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Brazil pursues constructive projects that lead to building alternative relationships and power: going beyond conversations about land and landownership—fashionable in the United States at present—land here matters because it is part of the production of life.

These examples inspire some new efforts to bring together faith communities and projects in the solidarity economy, guided by the ever-evolving conversations of liberation theology. The Solidarity Circles of the Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice at Vanderbilt University provide a case in point. Putting together faith commitments and economic agency—we are also talking about religious and economic democracy—is not just a matter of economics: at stake is an approach that engages all of life and feeds back into the development of faith. Moreover, the alternative power that is built here addresses not only inequalities along the lines of class but also along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, and even age, because all of these aid the relentless exploitation of the capitalist system (BIPOC, women, non-gender-conforming people, differently-abled people, and older people generally get paid less, has less power and experience greater pressures at work).

Each solidarity circle is a virtual peer network that brings together about a dozen representatives from faith communities to "investigate, educate, and organize".[11] Each individual faith community engages in a specific project of the solidarity economy in consultation with seasoned organizers, including worker coop developers and labor leaders, in conversation with theologians and religious ethicists. These solidarity circles are designed to harness the mutual connections of economic and religious developments: in a world where all of life is dominated by the forces of what is sometimes called the "Capitalocene,"[12] developing alternative economic relationships determined by the interests of working people rather than employers or stockholders creates both power and freedom that are mostly absent today; these relationships, in turn, can inspire alternative religious relations determined by the faithful themselves rather than hierarchical structures that often resemble the structures of corporations. Religious inspiration and theological study are closely connected with these dynamics, based on the observation that God is often at work in the world most intensely where the pressure is greatest (back to the preferential option for the poor and not the victims), and that this is the context in which studies of biblical and other traditional sources of respective faith traditions is most fruitful. All of these components are processed over nine months in terms of the best insights of broad-based community organizing, aided by educational resources and monthly group meetings facilitated by theologians, ethicists, and some of their students.

The fundamental question underlying these efforts is how to build and construct the kinds of projects that might present real alternatives to the dominant status quo. In our experience, minority projects and even minority movements can always be co-opted by the status quo in terms of what is now called "inclusion". Yet the status quo of neoliberal capitalism is hardly challenged or transformed by the inclusion of a few leaders from minority groups. To the contrary, the common mantras of diversity, equity, and inclusion are welcome opportunities to expand the reach of capitalist domination and put it on broader shoulders without ultimately benefiting the majority of minorities.

Real alternatives to the dominant status quo require some form of solidarity among those most affected. Solidarity economies are places where such solidarity can be embodied and practiced. What we have called "deep solidarity" (Rieger 2022) is located here, as solidarity economies bring together a variety of people from all walks of life. Unlike right-wing solidarity, which is based on sameness and identities (usually misleading ones, such as race, gender, and nationality that mislead working people to assume they have more in common with their white, male, or American bosses than with non-white, female, or non-American workers), deep solidarity is based on practical collaborations where it matters most: in producing alternatives to exploitation and in the production of wealth for the benefit of the community. The fundamental paradox of deep solidarity is that it is does not require sameness but becomes stronger the more diverse those who collaborate are. This is true not only for racial, ethnic, gendered, or sexual identities, but for different religions too. Inter-religious dialogue takes on totally new forms here (Rieger 2021), and entirely different relationships can be built and strengthened. The goal is not to become more alike, to erase difference, or even to "see" and "hear" others—the goal is to work together to build a different world, starting with the places where exploitation is most severe and damaging: at work, where most people spend the largest part of their waking hours; or if they are excluded from work as an increasing number of people are, in informal economic relationships that are often profoundly dehumanizing and even destructive.

Deep solidarity is international by design, understanding that those who are exploited in the Global South are connected to those who are exploited in the Global North—making up the majority of the population in each place. Unfortunately, this has often been covered up by the misuse of certain theories, including the classical theory of dependence, which some have taken to mean that people in the North are generally wealthy and people in the South are not, preventing a deeper sense of solidarity among working people from the outset. The only kind of solidarity that can be imagined in this context is one according to which those who are more privileged put themselves on the side of those who are less privileged, making solidarity a moral matter that can be engaged as quickly as it can be abandoned. A distinction of privilege and power might help reconceptualize what is at stake and deepen the notion of solidarity.[13]

Privilege, of course, is real and can be observed in many places: being a resident of the Global North carries certain privileges, as does being white, male, heterosexual, and so on. Privilege also accrues to certain national, professional, and religious identities. However, privilege does not necessarily translate into power, especially the power to change things. The confusion of privilege and power is very useful for those who seek to preserve dominant power. North/South divisions may serve as an example: US privilege is actively referenced to suggest to workers in the United States that they have more in common with their American employers than with workers elsewhere. This approach is often used by union busters, and political and religious forces on the right. This leads to the commonly observed phenomenon that working people often vote against their own interests as well as believe religious and other doctrines that go against their interests. The result is frustration all around, because US workers are not benefiting from this confusion of privilege and power, and international solidarity is undercut because workers elsewhere are left unsupported. A distinction of privilege and power can help clarify things: according to a rule accepted in most capitalist economies, corporations exist for the benefit of their stockholders (and to some degree of their consumers), but never for the benefit of their workers. In the United States, Henry Ford was sued because some of his stockholders believed he did not sufficiently pursue the interest of his stockholders.[14] Power, therefore, lies in the hands of the stockholders (not the average US citizen who may hold a few stocks but does not control large amounts).

One of the most important insights, necessary to broaden the work of liberation theologies today, is to realize that dominant power is shared by relatively few people—the proverbial 1 percent, which is more likely the 0.1 percent. This means that the power of all others is limited, and even those who assume that their privilege translates into

power—professionals, pastors, professors, middle managers, most politicians—need to take another look at what is going on. Solidarity emerges when people realize that they are not benefiting from the dominant powers as much as they think, which includes an increasing number of members of the middle class, whose fortunes are dwindling. Once this is clear, whatever privilege people have can be put to use for the causes of liberation from dominant power, resulting in a deconstruction of privilege.

This conversation further broadens the classical notion of the preferential option for the poor and the victims, but it also brings it back in a stronger form that is less based on morality and more grounded in reality. If the suffering of some is connected to the suffering of all, as the apostle Paul argued in 1 Cor. 12:26, the realities of exploitation, extraction, and oppression deserve our utmost attention. More specifically, those who experience various interlocking forms of exploitation and oppression in their own bodies, via the intersections of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability, are the ones at the heart of the alternatives that are being built. Those who are more privileged need to pay attention to those with less privilege, not in order to establish another Olympics of oppression, but to understand what we are up against and what it takes to liberate ourselves collectively. The theological part of this process has to do with an understanding that this is where God is found and at work—reclaiming the old insight of liberation theology that there is an option for the poor, not because the poor are good but because God is good.

3. Conclusions

More than fifty years after the emergence of liberation theologies and other contextual theologies that aimed and still aim at the establishment of a more just world, we find ourselves in a period of history where the levels of inequality and the exploitation of human beings and other-than-human nature must be considered nothing less than catastrophic. We are witnesses of a time of unprecedented exploitation, in which the largest portion of society leads automated lives in search for survival and experiences only commercialized dignity and the precariousness of human relations, which include the precariousness of work, spirituality, health, and other fundamental elements of daily life.

In a way, after all that we have described here, it can be said that exploitation is not an isolated element of the relation of production in the current capitalist scenario but has become an ontological situation, a condition of life that seems inevitable for most of the population. As many as 99 percent—those who have to work for a living—are forced to live under this reality. Within these 99 percent, it seems that not only are many born poor and die poor, they are also born poor and, throughout life, the mechanisms of exploitation are perfected in such a way that they are silenced, worn out, and rendered helpless by certain images of God, which have more to do with the free market than with the life of the Son, always critical of the most powerful and their empires.

In this brief article we realize that the future of liberation theology passes not only through structural analyses, which are extremely necessary, but through the realization that the construction of power is part of the changes that we want not only to see in the world, but to enjoy. That is, more than pursuing contextual analyses, it is necessary for people to identify their places in society critically, seeing that capitalism is not only exploitative but, in many cases, exclusionary, harming even those who feel to be an unquestionable part of it. And in this lies the difference between privilege and power. Many privileged people mistake privilege for power. The future of liberation theology depends on the distinction of privilege and power in neoliberal capitalism; as the 99 percent realize the substantial limitations of their power to change the system, they can begin to deal with different levels of privilege that can help build solidarity and alternative powers that can help equalize relations and not verticalize them more.

In this sense, theology is a tool of critique, of motivation and, above all, of solidarity, because without a new look at others and the world, we only resign ourselves to accepting what seems normal—the common, the routine, and even destiny (God's desire). In neoliberal capitalism marked by selfishness, solidarity is a political-theological position

that positively reclaims self interest and communal interests. For us, solidarity also has to do with the recovery of a popular hermeneutic of the Bible, of a reading and practice of Christianity that is not disconnected from material life, from suffering and the anguish of living under the constant threat to survival. The future of liberation theologies, in this sense, depends on an ever renewed, committed, and indignant gaze at the dynamic structures that increasingly separate us from one another and from a God who laments misery, and from a more dignified life that will not become a reality without critical analysis, without struggle, and without organizing. While the option for the poor is still a valid methodological horizon, it is necessary to move forward, including at the heart of the project of solidarity the most victimized people who experience constant exploitation, in a search for developing the power that is denied to them. The point is popular participation, which is to say that liberation means building people power. Solidarity is a tool for this, and through this renewal of the mind and of life, more dignity has already been experienced in both Brazil and the United States.

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Notes

1. The list is long, but in the Brazilian context alone it includes prominent figures like Rubem Alves, Leonardo Boff, and Ivone Gebara. Alves was accused in 1968 of being subversive (considered a crime at the time by the national legal system) by the members of members of his own Presbyterian church, claiming that he held some heretical ideas that could cause social and political instability. Boff was silenced by the Vatican in 1985. In 1995, Gebara received the same punishment for denouncing the patriarchy of the church, the sexism in the biblical interpretations, and for speaking about the reproductive rights of poor women in the Northeast of Brazil.
2. To understand the deep connections between religion and the capitalism (and its changes), see "No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future" (Rieger 2009), and "Desire, Market and Religion: Reclaiming Liberation Theology" (Sung 2007).
3. Thinking about the pain caused by this history of dictatorial violence in LA, we highlight a beautiful work of the Argentine theologian Néstor Míguez, formed by ISEDET, in "Um Jesus popular: para uma cristologia narrativa," (Míguez 2013). Writing in a liberating perspective, Míguez composes a possible prayer of a "Mother of the Plaza de Mayo" who had her son disappeared or killed by the Argentinean dictatorship. Míguez continues to produce a theology that is critical, especially to oppressive economic systems.
4. To see more about that, read *Open Veins of Latin America* (Galeano [1973] 1997).
5. In portuguese translated as *Capitalismo como religião* (Benjamin 2010), "Capitalism as religion".
6. *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 2001).
7. For more on this topic, consult: https://www.metodista.br/revistas/revistas-metodista/index.php/ER/article/view/10502 (accessed on 9 February 2023).
8. Already in his 1998 book *Remember the Poor* (Rieger 1998), Joerg Rieger coined as one of the epigraphs the sentence "*The* poor do not exist".
9. This is not to say, of course, that racism therefore is not a problem in the labor movement.
10. https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/economic-justice/ (accessed on 7 July 2023).
11. https://www.religionandjustice.org/solidarity-circles (accessed on 7 July 2023).
12. The term is conceived in contradistinction to the claim that we live in the so-called "Anthropocene," where humanity as a whole has taken over the fate of the planet. See *Theology in the Capitalocene* (Rieger 2022).
13. For the distinction of privilege and power see *Theology in the Capitalocene*, chapter 4 (Rieger 2022).
14. See "Dodge v. Ford: What Happened and Why?" https://corpgov.law.harvard.edu/2021/12/01/dodge-v-ford-what-happened-and-why/ (accessed on 7 July 2023).

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Article

'It Was Just the Club from Nowhere:' The Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Gastro-Politics of Black Domestic Women, and Liberation Theology Futures

Julian Armand Cook

Religion and Society, Drew University, Madison, NJ 07940, USA; jcook@drew.edu

Abstract: This article posits Georgia Gilmore and the "Club to Nowhere"—a crucial fundraising arm of the Montgomery Bus Boycott—as a critical vector in a larger tradition in the U.S. In Black movements for Black liberation, food and food production are engaged as a communal pedagogy for constructing agency, behavioral reform, economic power, resistance, and sustainable social transformation. While Montgomery preachers made speeches, activists strategized, and male leaders debated the place of women in the Black liberation project, Gilmore and her cadre of Black women domestics secured thousands of dollars to fund the movement by selling soul food staples. Through their labor, "The From Nowhere" transformed the socio-political and epistemological positionality of Black domestic women into a valuable intellectual resource for generating a movement for social change. Consequently, Gilmore reminds contemporary and future liberation theologians that interrogating and re-envisioning our epistemologies is essential to sustainable revolutionary social praxes. Working at the juncture of history, ethics, and critical theory, I look to Gilmore and "The Club from Nowhere" for historical reflection on the intersections of food, race, gender, and the future of liberation theologies.

Keywords: epistemology; liberation; black feminism; ethics; economics; neoliberalism; racial capitalism; civil rights movement; self-definition

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1. Introduction

In March 2012, I was a rising college senior. Mentally and spiritually wrestling with post-graduation plans of seminary, law school, or a career in opera, a shaft of light appeared when the college president asked me to represent the institution at a week-long excursion that shaped the trajectory of my life.

The Congressional Civil Rights Pilgrimage, sponsored by the Washington D.C. non-profit, The Faith and Politics Institute, was a week-long tour of significant civil rights movement sites in Georgia and Alabama. Various U.S. Congresspersons, stalwarts of the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement, celebrities, and thought leaders led the tour. One afternoon, as our tour bus shuffled between sites in Montgomery, Alabama, I noticed a ranch brick home—453 Dericote Street—with an Alabama state historical marker in the front yard. It read, "*Georgia Gilmore... lived in this house during the days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott... Gilmore was ardent in her efforts to raise funds for the Movement and organized 'Club from Nowhere' whose members baked pies and cakes for sale to both black and white customers*".

Until reading that sign, I had never heard of Georgia Gilmore or "The Club from Nowhere", which she had established as one of the principal fundraising arms of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. While Montgomery preachers made speeches, activists strategized, and male leaders debated the place of black women in the Black freedom struggle, Gilmore and her association of Black domestic women secured thousands of dollars in the mid-1950s to fund the movement by selling fried chicken sandwiches, fish, greens, pound cakes, and cobblers. I would later learn that my lack of knowledge was not entirely the result of voluntary ignorance; few histories of the Montgomery Bus Boycott mention Gilmore, and

only one book—a 10-page children's book—is written about her. Still, the distinct timbre of Gilmore's brand of social movement leadership left an imprint on my scholarly interests that has lasted to this day.

I posit Georgia Gilmore and the "Club to Nowhere" as a critical and distinct vector in a larger tradition in U.S. Black movements for social change in which communities access food and food production as a communal liberatory pedagogy for constructing self-determination, agency, behavioral reform, economic power, resistance, and sustainable social transformation. Though woefully less known than other examples of culinary activism in the Black freedom struggle, Gilmore's house restaurant is a tress in a multifaceted and complex Black liberation trajectory evident in the wide-ranging behavioral and eating practice reform aims of the Nation of Islam restaurants, the anti-racist integrationist vision of Father Divine and his "Holy Communion Banquets", and the Free Breakfast for Children Program of the Black Panther Party, to name a few (Dixon 2018; McCutcheon 2011; Potorti 2017). The "Club from Nowhere's" social activism complicates flat retellings of the liberation visions and leadership of the 1950s–1960s Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, exploring their entrepreneurship offers contemporary and future liberation theologians and practitioners fresh historical accounts of the intersections of gender, race, and class in the movements for Black liberation.

From the earliest days of slavery, Black domestic servants and workers, who were women, were integral to the social anatomy and lore of white Southern culture. Their cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing were foundational to maintaining the white Southern home and economy. Domestics possessed profound culinary knowledge and intimate insight into the habitus of Southern white folks. Yet, despite their extensive expertise and significance to the Southern social order, Black domestics were often the objects of stereotyping, degradation, and social scorn by whites and even some upper- and middle-class Blacks. Through the movement efforts of the "Club from Nowhere", Gilmore (herself a former domestic) transformed the socio-political and epistemological positionality of Black domestic women into a valuable intellectual resource for generating a movement for social change. Consequently, Gilmore serves as a reminder to contemporary movements for liberation that interrogating and re-envisioning what we think we know about how ideas are generated in our communities is an essential component of sustainable revolutionary social praxes.

By cooking and selling food to maintain the Montgomery Improvement Association and its boycott of the city buses, Gilmore first sought to alter the behavioral patterns of Black Montgomery residents by funding a massive, Black-operated system of carpools and ridesharing that provided bus riders an alternative means of transportation. Through her efforts, Black working-class bus riders could feasibly become boycotters. Second, by selling and serving dinners to both Blacks and whites in an era when Jim Crow laws regulated the dining politics of American citizens, Gilmore created a social laboratory for anti-racist resistance, democratic participation, and imagination. Third, she advanced the economic empowerment and self-determination of her local Black community by assembling a business venture that functioned as the financial bedrock of a local social movement for Black advancement, while also meeting the community's food needs. In a nation where the vast majority of foodways remain ideologically and geographically controlled by corporations removed from the realities and concerns of communities of color, Gilmore hewed a pathway for Black and justice-seeking white Montgomerians to be sure that their consumption and spending promoted food security, human dignity, and justice-seeking praxes. Furthermore, through the "Club from Nowhere", Gilmore elevated and harnessed Black domestic women's culinary and socio-political knowledge as a critical intellectual resource for assembling local social transformation. Working at the juncture of history, ethics, and critical theory, I look to Gilmore and the "Club from Nowhere" for historical reflection on the intersections of race, gender, and the future of liberation theologies.

2. The Sociohistorical Role of Black Women as Domestic Cooks

The history of Black women's relationship with cooking and domestic work is both painful and complex. As African American psychologist and social critic Marvalene H. Hughes argues, the role of Black women as cooks in their professional or private lives cannot be divorced from the fact that this positionality is a "historically acquired role" assigned by her enslaver or the patriarchal society in which she is socialized (Hughes 1997, p. 275). Furthermore, the "message that the Black cook receives is that it is her duty to nurture white Americans by cooking their meals, taking care of their children, cleaning their homes, and doing the laundry. The kitchen-bound/domestic-bound Black [woman's] economic plight is still destined for poverty" (Ibid., p. 275).

The history of Black women cooking what is known as "soul food"—especially fried chicken—is a particularly storied cultural motif with its genesis in the plantation agrarian economy. In the Southern plantation system, enslaved Black women typically bore primary responsibility for the raising and care of hens and chickens for two reasons. First, fowl were viewed as the weaker livestock easily cared for by the socially sanctioned "weaker sex". Second, because Black domestics were fundamentally responsible for cooking, close access to the meat and eggs produced by chickens was crucial (Williams-Forson 2013, pp. 109–10). As a result, the image of the Black domestic cook standing over a cast iron vat of fried chicken was a fixture of Southern mythology regularly printed in magazines, books, and marketing materials. It was a dangerous symbol of Black inferiority, a production of the white supremacist imagination regarding which many equality-seeking Black people felt they must contend for self-definition and freedom. For this reason, the image of the Black domestic cook was viewed by some as socially repugnant and a relic of American apartheid to be discarded in the name of hewing what philosopher Alaine Locke termed "the New Negro" (Sharpless 2013, pp. 173–82). African American food historian Psyche Williams-Forson asserts, "Black people are engaged in an ideological warfare between race, identity, and food. For example, stereotypes concerning Black peoples' consumption of fried chicken—stereotypes that have been around for centuries—still pervade the American psyche today" (Williams-Forson 2001). As a result, many people questioned the benefit and consequences of critical inquiries into the role of Black women as domestics and their culinary practices.

Though looking at Gilmore and the knowledge of Black domestics as intellectually generative can be complex and agonizing at points, it is a crucial component of the process Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins terms "self-definition". "Self-definition" is "challenging the political knowledge-validation processes that result in externally defined stereotypical images" (Collins 1986). Often these are "conscious and unconscious acts of resistance" (Collins 1986, p. 517). In this process of self-definition, marginalized persons and groups may identify, perform and redefine the stereotypes and symbols forced upon them by the dominant culture, and refuse to allow the power brokers to dictate what represents their culture and personhood (Williams-Forson 2013, p. 109). The process of self-definition is complicated. Sometimes it is successful, but often, it never achieves its aim of redefining the problematic stereotypes of Black people promulgated by the dominant culture (Williams-Forson 2013, p. 109). Exploring the history of these violent but formative cultural narratives and images is essential to contesting their cultural power and destructiveness.

When historically reflecting on the movement activities of Gilmore and her fellow Black domestics as intellectually generative, it is essential to avoid romanticizing the degrading history of white supremacist patriarchal violence that circumscribed Gilmore's gifts, choices, and even her destiny, and it is equally crucial not to silence the significance of her social action expressed even in the liminality of her socio-political position as a Black cook. Gilmore's social action should be read in the historical context of her particular time and social location. To do otherwise is to erase Gilmore's legacy, story, and personhood.

Undeniably, the relationship between Black domestic women and cooking is heavily stereotyped in U.S. cultural history. However, these stereotypes are the stories white people

tell *about* black people. They are reflections of the stigmatized dominant white gaze. What is needed to resist this distorting gaze is prolonged theological consideration of the stories Black people tell about their relationship to the foods they prepare. By exploring the historical narrative of the "Club from Nowhere," a group of Black women self-define and tell their own stories about their relationship to their work, aspirations, political action, and the foods they prepare. Exploration of Gilmore's biography and the beginnings of the "Club from Nowhere" is crucial for situating her liberation activity and sentiments within the broader scope of her life and sociopolitical context.

3. "Georgia Gilmore Didn't Take No Junk": The Genesis of the "Club to Nowhere"

Georgia Theresa Gilmore was born on 5 February 1920 on a small farm in Montgomery County, Alabama. As with the many Southern Blacks of her generation, little is known about Gilmore's early years. What is clear is that much of Gilmore's extensive culinary prowess and knowledge of Southern foodways were formed on that farm. By her teenage years, Gilmore's considerable physical strength and size opened up job opportunities outside the farm. A railroad company hired her to do the strenuous work of laying tracks and changing railroad ties. The birth of six children further complicated Gilmore's economic realities. As a Black single mother rearing children in the years before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Gilmore was aware of the disparity in the education quality offered to white and Black children in segregated public schools. Consequently, she put all six of her children in Montgomery's integrated Catholic school system, which was a costly feat even by the standards of her day (Edge 2018, p. 20).

In 1955, Gilmore worked at the well-known National Lunch Company in downtown Montgomery. She was among the restaurant's most popular cooks, especially celebrated for her sweet potato pies and fried chicken. While Gilmore cooked and her sister Alice filled empty pans on the restaurant's steam line, city laws permitted only white women to wait the counters where white customers ate (Edge 2018, p. 20). Furthermore, as food historian John T. Edge explains, Montgomery city ordinances forbade race-mixing even in the dining space and required that "restaurants maintain separate entrances and erect seven-foot dining room partitions to prevent races from mixing" (Edge 2018, p. 20). National Lunch attracted Black and white patrons and fed them on their assigned sides of the literal and cultural wall that white supremacy had erected. The policies and practices of National Lunch were typical of most eateries in the Southern U.S. Some white-owned establishments did not permit Black patrons at all, while those who did subjected Blacks to a separate, often subpar, section of the restaurant. Black cooks such as Gilmore were embodied reminders of the absurdity of white supremacy and the Jim Crow system. Black hands had prepared and handled the foods and plates of white eaters in private, but they could not publicly wait their tables. Gilmore worked at National Lunch until the news of her involvement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott reached her employers (Edge 2018, p. 21).

The story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott is typically retold as the account of one woman's (Rosa Parks) mundane refusal to give up her seat in the colored section of a city bus and one man's (Martin Luther King, Jr.'s) harrowing leadership of a mass movement to end segregation. Gilmore's legacy serves as a correction for this grossly simplified popular rendering. Gilmore's historical memory insists that the Montgomery Bus Boycott was the 381-day culmination of years of highly strategized local grassroots efforts, involving a network of Montgomery's Black and progressive white residents to redress the ordinariness of racial violence against Blacks on Montgomery's city buses and public accommodations.[1] As the authors of "Respectability, Class and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement" suggest, the arrest of Rosa Parks—a trained political activist and highly regarded justice leader in Montgomery's Black community—on December 1, 1955 meant movement leaders finally had "the appropriate symbolic figures around which to build a mass movement that might transcend the city's class and gender divisions" (Chappell et al. 2018, p. 70). Similar to Jo Ann Robinson, Virginia Foster Durr, E.D. Nixon,

and King, Georgia Gilmore was among a community of critical resources that spurred the movement.

Gilmore learned about Parks' arrest via a bulletin on Montgomery's Black radio station. "Mrs. Parks was arrested and she being one of the senior citizens and a very nice person, they decided to get together because we had gotten tired of having so many things happen and nothing being done about it. So they got together and decided to have a mass meeting", she explained.[2] With little hesitation, Gilmore knew what her contribution to the movement would be. For the initial mass meeting on 5 December 1955, she spent fourteen dollars to purchase "chickens, lettuce, and white bread and packed a hamper full of fried chicken sandwiches" (Edge 2018, p. 16). For the duration of the 381-day boycott, Gilmore sold food at the Monday and Thursday night mass meetings, barber shops, beauty salons, laundries, cab stands, and doctor's offices. Eventually, the demand for Gilmore's food became so great that she organized several other Black women from the Montgomery community into the "Club from Nowhere". Most of these women were domestics, cooks, and day laborers, whose support could not be as overt as other boycott leaders. The "Club from Nowhere" offered these women the obscurity that enabled them to raise money to support the movement effectively and with a modicum of safety from white reprisal. According to Gilmore's sister, even the name "Club from Nowhere" was selected for its furtivity. When white employers and city officials would ask, "Where did this money come from" Gilmore and her team could cheekily retort, "It came from Nowhere" (Edge 2018, p. 18).

Gilmore clearly understood the importance of secrecy for her cooking partners' immediate physical well-being and economic sustenance. Her activism and knowledge of the regularity of anti-Black violence, especially on Montgomery city buses, was corroborated by personal experiences of abuse. In October 1954, Gilmore was verbally harangued by a white Montgomery bus driver for entering through the bus's front door. When she obeyed the driver's instructions and deboarded the bus to enter through the back door, the driver swiftly pulled away with her money. Gilmore vowed that day to never again ride a segregated transit (Edge 2018, p. 16; Miller 2019a).

In 1956, with the Montgomery Transit Authority (MTA) nearly bankrupt due to the boycott, Martin Luther King, Jr. and eighty-nine other members of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) were charged with conspiracy to ruin the MTA. Much of the defense's counter-testimony depended on Black domestic women's accounts of abuse on the buses. Black domestic women were among the bus company's most profitable demographics. Their money was the lifeblood of the MTA. Their gripping testimonials of abuse were at the core of its undoing. The boycott was not simply about seats on city buses; it was a mission to protect the Black bodies of the working-class women and men who occupied those seats. In court, Gilmore was called upon to testify against the driver who had abused her. "I don't know the driver's name. I would know him if I saw him. He is tall and has red hair and freckles, and wears glasses. He is a very nasty bus driver," she said (Edge 2018, p. 19). In our day of #MeToo movements and regular social media call-outs of abusers, the magnitude of Gilmore's public identification of her white male driver in an Alabama courtroom is easily lost. Edge's assessment regarding this is instructive:

> In its boldness, Gilmore's testimony compared to that of Mose Wright, the great-uncle of Emmett Till, who, six months earlier, testified against one of the white men who lynched his fourteen-year-old nephew. Standing tall in a Mississippi Delta courtroom, Wright dared to point at the white man and say "Dar he". Gilmore. . . showed the same courage when she turned to the judge and said, "When I paid my fare and they got the money, they don't know Negro money from white money" (Edge 2018, p. 19).

Moments such as these earned Gilmore a reputation as a woman whom people—Black or white—did not cross. As Rev. Al Dixon remembered, "Everybody could tell you Georgia Gilmore didn't take no junk. You pushed her too far, she would say a few bad words. You pushed her any further, she would hit you" (Godoy 2018).

As a heavyset, buxom, dark-skinned Black woman and master cook, Gilmore resonated with age-old Southern stereotypes and mythologies of the sassy Black woman cook—"mammy". Mammy is a figure commonly seen in literature and movies about white Southern life (e.g., Hattie McDaniel's "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind*, Octavia Spencer's "Minnie" in *The Help*). In the white imagination, because of her wisdom, cooking skills, purity, nurturing character, entertainment value, and intimate interactions with her employers, Mammy earned a revered place in the white family structure. As a result, Mammy had a platform to, at times, disrupt the rigid lines of Southern decorum and speak a level of truth—"*sass*"—to white people that other Blacks only dreamed of. Through an intricate and complicated performance of this role assigned to her by white society, Gilmore was often able to transgress social boundaries that would have resulted in violent retaliation for other Blacks. In this sense, Gilmore's legacy is marked by a complicated dance with self-determination and "vestiges of power", performing symbolic cultural images, and the ways that, in her particular sociohistorical context, her actions were covertly and overtly subversive and agential (Collins 1986, p. 517).

"The Club from Nowhere" would collect five or six hundred dollars each week. All of the money collected went to paying for the insurance, gas money, and vehicle repairs for more than three hundred cars and forty-two stops that comprised the alternate transportation system that made the lengthy boycott possible for Black workers who had no other means of getting to and from their jobs (Miller 2019b).

Retaliation for her efforts eventually led to Gilmore's firing from the National Lunch Company in 1956. The termination of her employment was met with an uptick in her business during the remaining few months of the boycott. King regularly enjoyed Gilmore's cooking and encouraged her to start her own home restaurant. "All these years you've worked for somebody else, now it's time you worked for yourself", he said (Edge 2018, pp. 20–21). His advice was accompanied by a financial investment from the King family that helped Gilmore purchase kitchen equipment. On that day Gilmore's home restaurant was born. The home restaurant would raise money for the remaining days of the boycott and remained a prominent culinary haven until Gilmore died in 1990.

4. The Epistemology of Black Domestic Women as Subversive Praxis

Throughout the history of Black people in the Americas, food has been a crucial modality for constructing meaning, exercising power, and advancing Black racial uplift. Georgia Gilmore and the "Club from Nowhere" are a distinct fiber in a lively and diverse tradition of Black gastro-political social action. As such, the "Club from Nowhere" aligns with salient themes uniting various expressions of Black political activism: democratic participation, behavioral reform, and economic empowerment. Moreover, Gilmore's brand of culinary activism contributes to movements for social transformation as she posits the culinary knowledge of Black domestic women as an intellectual resource for critiquing and reimagining visions of liberation and justice. The "Club from Nowhere" created an ethical vision for democratic participation that ruptured white supremacy and transgressed the strictures of the Jim Crow system by selling food to Blacks and whites. As a result, she resisted the power of racial categorization and enabled progressive Montgomery whites to financially support the boycott under the guise of *simply* purchasing food.

Perhaps Gilmore's most distinct contribution to the lineage of Black gastro-political activism is her construction of Black domestic women's knowledge as an intellectual resource for social movements. Through the "Club from Nowhere", Gilmore asserted the value and political potency of cooks' knowledge of Southern white and Black foodways and translated it into political power. Furthermore, she offered Black domestics a method of sociopolitical activism that would not raise suspicions and invite reprisals from white employers, landlords, and law enforcement (Edge 2018, p. 17). As Edge poignantly describes:

> While some black women avoided Jim Crow indignities by avoiding whites, black cooks and maids didn't have that option. They lived in a white-dominant

> world. By cooking in their own homes, selling food to their neighbors, these black women won some independence (Edge 2018, p. 17).

In American popular culture, Black domestic cooks were depicted as trustworthy, pitiable, entertaining, sassy, the foundation of the white family, and even the redeemer of the white soul from the stain of racism (Williams-Forson 2006, p. 6). However, Black domestic women have rarely been positioned as generative of communal movements for social change. Gilmore and the "Club from Nowhere" is a contestation of pejorative renderings of Black domestic women as powerless and passive. In Gilmore and the "Club from Nowhere", Black domestics define themselves and shape their communities and destinies through their own knowledge and abilities. Centering their knowledge, Gilmore and her band of Black domestics assembled an ethics of resistance that disrupted an ideological cornerstone of the Southern white social structure that believed Black domestics could be trusted because they loved their white employers too much to betray them. Armed with their intimate and unique knowledge of Southern foodways and the ways of white folks, domestics were not passive protectors of white supremacy but subversive harbingers of social transformation and democratic hope.

5. Getting Somewhere from "Nowhere": Reimagining Liberation Theology Futures

The efforts of Georgia and the "Club from Nowhere" is partly the story of the sociopolitical role of food in communal moral formation and social movements. The "Club from Nowhere" story is also about how the agency, entrepreneurship, and epistemologies of Black domestic women—triply marginalized for their race, gender, and social status—interacted with the social ideology, spiritual vision, and structure of the Montgomery Bus Boycott as a theological construction and liberation movement. Uncovering the historical account of the "Club from Nowhere" highlights how the movement leadership of Black skilled women laborers created a space in which they embodied, interrogated, tested, and reimagined the aims of Black liberation. Consequently, there are several lessons that Georgia Gilmore and the "Club from Nowhere" offer to the imaginations of the future of liberation theologies.

First, the "Club from Nowhere" elevates the role of erased and unseen labor(ers) in formulating liberation theologies by positing the systemically marginalized labor and experiences of Black working-class women as a knowledge source for the development of social movements and thought. While liberation theology from its earliest written articulations has taken the experiences, religious ways of being and knowing of oppressed communities seriously as a discipline and field of study, it has had to do so within the confines of an academy marred by a white supremacist, and neoliberal impulses to hierarchize knowledge. The sweeping force of the colonial project has left all theological inquiry in the Western world haunted by "an ecclesial reality inside a white patriarchal domesticity, shaped by an overwhelming white masculinist presence that always aims to build a national and global future that we should all inhabit" (Jennings 2020, p. 82). A component of this epistemological building is the privileging of particular forms of knowledge and the simultaneous destruction and neglect of others. Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes describes the ethical danger of epistemological hierarchies by framing "knowing" as a political act with consequences for both individuals and communities because of how it frames social perception and methodologies for the collective construction of truth claims, norms, and values (Townes 2006, pp. 111–14).

One way to subvert the tendency to devalue the knowing of non-white, non-male, and non-elite persons in the Western theological academy is to interrogate and reorder those experiences and ways of knowing to which we grant primary authority. Positioning the labor, skills, and experiences of the "Club from Nowhere" as theologically and intellectually generative is an invitation for liberation theologians to rethink the interpretive authority and position traditionally granted the scholar as a knowledge producer and hew fresh communal approaches to knowledge generation. Thinkers must give to the relationship of liberation theologians to their communities of inquiry, and vice versa.

Second, the "Club from Nowhere" ruptures traditional constructions and narrativizing of Black liberation movement leadership by refocusing on activism outside of formal *platform* religious leadership. Generally, historical retellings of the Civil Rights Movement, especially the Montgomery Bus Boycott, have been marked by a hegemony of the Black Church and church leader's role. However, while some Black churches and Black church leaders played an undeniably fundamental role in the Civil Rights Movement, they were not the center of many people's movement activity or ideology. The "Club from Nowhere" was an opportunity for liberation theologies to consider a future in which those outside of recognized institutional religious leadership may be seriously engaged in liberating liberation theologies from notions of progress and monolithic understandings of leadership. The result is the reimagining of alternative models and modes of movement leadership that do not reinscribe the myopic centrality of religious institutions, authority, and leaders, while untethering Christian religious leaders and thinkers from distorted understandings of freedom that reduce liberation to mere inclusion and market participation.

The Civil Rights Movement and its connection to the historic Black Church tradition are regularly appropriated as a collective mythology and clarion call to concerned Black Church leaders to assume the mantel of social guidance as a sacred duty. Such uninterrogated elevation of the Civil Rights Movement-Black Church narrative has resulted in the perpetuation of the culture of genderism, respectability politics, sexual objectification, dictatorial leadership, and exploitation of the most vulnerable that is as much a part of the Black freedom struggle and Black Church's legacies as victories such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

On the contrary, the most crucial conversion contemporary Black Christian religious leaders may undergo is a turn towards shared models of leadership that reject the Western Christian aspiration to be at the forefront of every movement for human flourishing. Such a turn will require honest exploration and expansion of our definitions of spiritual leadership that transcend the established boundaries of orthopraxy (i.e., preaching, singing, and liturgy) and include activities such as food preparation, strategic planning, conflict management, childcare, and gathering. The "Club from Nowhere" connects spiritual leadership not just to the abstract articulation of ideas but also to those who assemble and handle the materials that facilitate communal theological and political construction.

Lastly, the "Club from Nowhere" summons liberation thinkers and movements to re-envision their relationship to labor, laborers, neoliberal markets, and the racial capitalist economic system, given the significant shifts and increasing diversity in the socioeconomic conditions of many U.S. Black people.[3] Undeniably, Black people continue to bear the brunt of the comprehensive devastation wrought by the neoliberal economic system. As Black feminist womanist ethicist Keri Day explains in her book *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism,* neoliberalism is the global financial system that "demands individuals relate to each other in instrumental ways" (Day 2016, p. 9). It is more than a set of economic policies; it is also a "cultural project" in which the protection of unregulated free markets and not the flourishing of the human community becomes the centerpiece of the nation-state (Day 2016, p. 4). The result is an economic system that is highly individualistic, rewards proximity and growing degrees of participation in the global market, and subsequently further alienates the poor and the marginalized, blaming the vulnerable and not inequitable social structures for their condition. Joshua Bartholomew describes this in his essay, "Race, Economics, and the Future of Blackness". He says, "The impact of capitalism for Black people can be seen as early as the enslavement of ethnic peoples from Africa for the purpose of forced labor in the Western world" (Bartholomew 2021, p. 186). This lineage of devastation continues today as Black people lag behind white people and other racial and ethnic demographics in several critical socioeconomic benchmarks. According to the Federal Reserve and U.S. Census Bureau, despite exponential growth in Black representation in high-level corporate jobs since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, there has been little improvement in pay and wages and a worsening racial wealth gap.[4] In 2019, nearly 30% of U.S. Black families lived at or below the poverty line (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1998).

Still, since the 1960s, when the first wave of Black liberation theology was being shaped and articulated in the academy, there have been significant shifts in national sociopolitical and economic policies and practices that opened new possibilities for the social mobility of Black people. While certainly not remotely equal to chances for social mobility accessible to white people, these changes in policy and social landscape continue to grant more Black people than ever greater proximity to high-level labor and access to market participation. Such shifts in Black market participation trouble myopic tropes that synonymize blackness and poverty *and* reduce the mobilizing potency of universal portrayals of collective Black suffering that have historically strengthened appeals to racial solidarity. According to a Brookings Institute report titled "Black Progress: how far we've come, and how far we have to go", in 1940, 60% of employed Black women worked as domestic servants. By 1998, only 2.2% worked in domestic capacities, while over 60% held "white-collar" jobs.

Similarly, 42% of Black people owned their homes, and 40% used the politically and racially charged term "middle-class" to describe themselves. In the late 1990s, nearly one-third of the U.S. Black population had grasped the milestone of American prosperity of living in suburbia (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1998). The U.S. Bureau reports that in 2019, the Black poverty rate was 18.8%, down by half from the mid-1960s. In the early 1960s, less than 5% of U.S. Black people had attended college, compared to 26% in 2019. Furthermore, in 1962, just seven years before the publication of James Cone's *Black Theology, Black Power,* the 87th U.S. Congress had only four Black Representatives and one Indigenous American Representative. In 2021, the 117th Congress had fifty-four Black Representatives, the highest number of any racial-ethnic minority group (Horton 2021).

The goal in highlighting these statistics is not to overstate the reality of Black advancement, as I am thoroughly suspicious of racial progress narratives. Still, the point is to highlight that Black socioeconomic conditions are not monolithic and, in fact, more multifaceted than ever. Consequently, in the future, liberation theologies must assemble critiques of neoliberal racial capitalism that are more precise and nuanced when discussing and defining the parameters and aims of liberation. While racial capitalism continues to limit the lifeworlds, options, and outcomes of U.S. Black people with totalizing force, irrespective of class, it is also imperative to acknowledge that the sociopolitical and economic advances experienced by some Black people require that the *liberation* in liberation theology be clarified and reimagined lest it quickly becomes an ambiguous term that everyone is using, but no one can define. As theologian Vincent Lloyd describes in his *Religion and the Field Negro*, "Unfortunately, we cannot just *do* black theology, understood as critiquing idolatry and holding up the wisdom of the oppressed... because black theology has been systematically distorted by black secularism" (Lloyd 2018, p. 9). Instead, in the face of increasing global diversity and economic crisis, liberation theologians must continue to create "discordance that potentially disrupts the complacencies of whiteness" (Ibid., p. 8). In the future, liberation theologians will need to imagine how we create more robust critiques of market power and injustice that recognize Black planetary injustice alongside increasing Black socioeconomic diversity, Black presence and leadership in politics and industry, and the continued suffering of the masses of Black people. How do we do the work our souls, planet, and communities so desperately need while being honest about the impact of neoliberal aspirations, desire for recognition, and competition in a narrowing global market on our theological imaginings of liberation?

6. Conclusions

The "Club from Nowhere" was a vital fundraising operation for the Montgomery Bus Boycott through which a group of Black domestic women entrepreneurs translated their knowledge of Southern foodways into political action and leadership. The women's cooking, expertise, and fundraising activities created a spiritual and political space for reform that was the very lifeblood of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. As such, the "Club from Nowhere" offers contemporary and future liberation theologians and movements insight into possibilities when we position marginalized laborers as knowledge sources, refocus

on Black activism and movement leadership that is spiritually rooted but not confined to platform religious performance, and dare to reimagine our conceptualizations of liberation considering increasing economic diversity among U.S. Black people.

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Notes

1. For a more extensive history of the Montgomery Bus Boycott see (Ling and Monteith 2018; Jackson and Carson 2011; Robinson 1987).
2. "Interview with Georgia Gilmore", Washington University in St. Louis, Feb. 17, 1986, http://repository.wustl.edu/concern/videos/8049g7144 (accessed on 30 March 2020).
3. Racial capitalist refers to Cedric Robinson's notion of "racial capitalism" in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Robinson coined the term "racial capitalism" to describe how the "historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism" (10). Consequently, in a global capitalist market, race and the accumulation and control of production become mutually reinforcing social forces.
4. Reports included in Horton (2021), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52992795 (accessed on 13 January 2023).

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The Pursuit of Justice in the Women's March: Toward an Islamic Liberatory Theology of Resistance

Etin Anwar

Religious Studies Department, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, NY 14456, USA; anwar@hws.edu

Abstract: The Women's March on 21 January 2017, opened a new social and political landscape for Muslim women to engage in Islamic liberatory activism. I locate Muslim women's participation in the marches following the 2017 'Muslim travel ban policy' as a site for discovering the link between the politics of resistance and the utility of Islam as a source for liberation. I argue that Muslim women living in minority and post-secular contexts resort to faith as a source of agentival liberation to address the political rhetoric of anti-Islamic sentiments and policies. The outcome of this research demonstrates (1) how Muslim women activists challenge the Western narratives of being oppressed and explore the ways they want to represent themselves; (2) how Islam serves as a catalyst for theological resistance and how this enhances the role of Muslim women as moral and spiritual agents in transforming their political and social conditions; (3) how the Islamic liberation in the US context historically intersects with Black churches' resistance toward White racism; and (4) how Muslim women's agency as spiritual beings is linked to the promotion of justice in the Western liberatory movements. Overall, the article shows how Muslim women resort to their spiritual journey and use such narratives to confront unjust political rhetoric and policies.

Keywords: Islamic liberation theology; agency; Women's March; Justice activism; Islamic feminist resistance

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1. Introduction

This article examines the link between the Women's March and Muslim women's pursuit of justice and its impact on the exploration of a renewed role of faith in shaping their identities in the United States. I argue that the 2017 Women's March afforded Muslim women a new social and political context for getting involved in Islamic liberatory activism. Together with other women's marches that ran concurrently in many cities in the United States and all over the world, participants made the case for equality, climate justice, and the rights of individuals across cultures regardless of racial, linguistic, and religious differences. Men, women, youth, and children marched to voice concerns not only for women and humanity but also for the planet. I witnessed the variety of march signs during the 2017 Women's March in Seneca Falls, NY, the birthplace of the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments. They showcased a broad range of themes contesting the systemic and repressive treatments of women's bodies, the earth, and minorities, like Muslims, LGBTQs, immigrants, and underrepresented groups. The Women's March also pointed to a new direction for the politics of resistance among feminist and liberatory activists as it entered an era of convergence in which social justice issues dominate the themes of marches.

I locate Muslim women's participation in the marches and demonstrations in American public spaces following the 2017 'Muslim travel ban policy' as sites for the discovery of the link between the politics of resistance and the utility of Islam as a source for liberation. Muslim women resort to Islam to cope with anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiments, which were on the rise during the 2016 election campaigns and following the issuance of the travel ban (Timeline of the Muslim Ban 2020). Although a direct connection between Islamic terrorism and the 'Muslim travel ban policy' was never acknowledged, it appears that such

a political move was directed toward Muslims, especially from seven countries, namely Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. This ban reinforced the assumption that Islam is a violent religion and that Muslims are violent people. The association of Islam with violence should not come as a surprise. Kunnummal argues that religion often appears as the default source of conflict, especially in Western contexts (Kunnummal 2002, p. 2).

In this study, I argue that the travel ban policy and the debates regarding Muslim women's agency should be contextualized in light of how the West positions Islam as a violent religion and Muslim women as inescapably oppressed subjects. Such positionality comes from the long history of Western and Islamic ideological and theological contestation as well as from the political and social climates in the post-September 11 era. I agree with Ali A. Mazrui's view of how the dual paradigm of thinking as reflected in the 'us/them' dichotomy comes from political culture and the earlier competition of monotheistic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Mazrui 1990, p. 14). Although I posit the existing duality of the West and Islam, such duality is limited to Muslim countries or radical Islamist groups with assumed ideological and political conflicts with the US and the West.

While I acknowledge the impact of this duality between the West and Islam on the epistemological formulation of attaching violence to Islam and Muslims, I associate religion with conversion to the sacred (Novak 1978, p. 28). I borrow from Novak in his work, *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove*, that religion can be used and abused depending on its utility. The abuse of religion comes from its political appropriation, whereas its meaningfulness derives from its conversion to the Divine, which is extraordinary and elevating. In the case of Muslim women, they attempt to resist the hostilities associated with the travel ban and other discriminatory policies against Muslims. In doing so, they use their agencies to explore their faith and make it relevant to their lives as a minority in the US context. I frame the link between Islam as a spiritual source of agency and Muslim women's involvement in marches and community building as a starting point to discuss Islamic liberation theology. I am particularly interested in agency that is rooted in the Islamic faith and its intersection with the ongoing public perception of Islam as a treat, the pursuit of justice in social movements, and Muslims' status as a minority in secular settings.

I make the case that the link between the American public's perception of Islam as a violent religion and ideological conflicts in foreign countries serves a site for the political treatment of Muslim Americans. Greewal in *Islam is a Foreign Country* points to the way in which US governmental policies criminalize Muslims using legal measures that "are applied to brown and black Muslim populations through incarceration, mass deportation, and denial of entry without due process of law" (Grewal 2014, p. 8). As a corollary, the imaginary accounts and biased stories about Muslim women are used to insist on the threat posed by Muslim men to the US and even the world. Riley calls such a motif transnational sexism, whereby Muslim women are imagined as victims in "need of rescue and saving from local patriarchs", in contrast to Western women with freedoms for sex, occupation, and cultural expression (Riley 2013, p. 2). This dualistic portrayal between Muslim women and Western women runs parallel with the way Muslim men are given images as primitive, brutal, and rigid, while "Western men are posited as liberal, free-thinking, and appreciative of every aspect of female liberation" (Riley 2013, p. 3).

I juxtapose the othering politics of Muslims and Muslim women through discriminatory narratives and policies with the social movements that seek to address oppression in US settings. My research investigates how Muslim women responded to the travel ban policy and the extent to which Islam has played a role in their attempts to deal with the challenges they face as a minority group in American post-secular society. I attempt to recount Muslim women's experiences in responding to discomfort and vulnerability brought forth by the travel ban policy and the rise of anti-Islamic and Muslim sentiments. This study starts by developing a framework to deal with Muslim women's responses to the travel ban, highlighting the intersectionality between agency, resistance, and the liberatory element of political theology in post-secular, societal settings. I then discuss efforts by

Muslim women to challenge Western narratives that reinforce their representation as others and explore the ways in which they want to represent themselves. I limit the use of Muslim women's self-representations as 'the other' to statements in which they explicitly want to be recognized in such a manner. Such recognition is consistent with Islamic feminist epistemology, which recognizes Muslim women as speaking subjects and with the feminist idea of the personal as the political. By recognizing Muslim women's experiences, I honor their voices in their pursuit of justice and resistance in their own terms. I then trace the link between the politics of liberation and Christian and Islamic resistance. This section explains how Islamic liberation theology intersects with Black churches' resistance toward White oppression against minorities, especially African Americans. As I discuss the use of Islam as a catalyst for theological resistance, I also address how Muslim women discover their role as moral and spiritual agents in transforming their political and social conditions. I finally elaborate on the relationship between women's agency as spiritual beings and the promotion of justice. I show how Muslim women resort to their spiritual journey and use such narratives to confront unjust political rhetoric and policies.

2. Exploring the Intersectionality between Agency, Resistance, and Political Theology

Studies on resistance to anti-Islamic and Muslim sentiments continue to grow. The latest works by Iftikhar and Elfenbein address the increase of anti-Islamic and Muslim sentiments in US settings and the global world and how to address them (Iftikhar 2021; Elfenbein 2021). Iftikar points to the way the global narratives of the war on terror normalize anti-Muslim rhetoric and shows how such rhetoric is used to reproduce "all the traditional tropes of 'anti-Semitism' that white supremacists had used before" (Iftikhar 2021, p. 41). Elfenbein confirms that the growing trends of anti-Islamic sentiments cause Muslims in America to be subjected to hateful speech and behaviors that feed fear among Muslim communities (Elfenbein 2021, p. 11). Such anti-Islamic and Muslim sentiments have created an environment in which Islam is looked at as a threat and Muslims as enemies. These hostile environments place Muslims and Muslim women under constant social and political scrutiny. Such scrutiny increased with the election of President Trump and what ensued following the issuance of a travel ban policy directed toward selected Muslim countries during his presidency. For this reason, the discursive narratives of Muslim women's agency to resist the increased hostility and discrimination remain important to analyze.

Debating Muslim women's agency in post-secular society takes into consideration the intersection of religion and the public. Taylor in *A Secular Age* introduces the idea of a master story where the West became a model of secularization. This secularization project has resulted in placing religion under constant scrutiny (Taylor 2007, p. 423). Islam especially suffers from extra-scrutiny, as it is often viewed as promoting the inseparability of religion and politics and legitimizing the use of violence to maintain or achieve this union. The Western gaze on Islam as a violence-prone religion corresponds to how religion is defined. I borrow from Cavanaugh's idea of the myth that "religion causes-violence" (Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 13, 18). Such myth proliferates due to the assumption that religion is prone to being (1) absolutist, (2) divisive, and (3) insufficiently rational. This discourse of religion as the cause of violence views the secular as rational and modern. Islam happens to fit the narrative of religion that is absolutist, divisive, and irrational.

The duality of religion and secularity further legitimizes the discursive narrative of Islam as a "peculiar and abnormal religion because it 'mixes' politics with pure religion" (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 13). In this epistemic framework, Muslim women are often ensnared within Islam's irrational demand for veiling, domesticity, and total submission. The treatment of the Iranian and Taliban regimes over veiling directed toward Muslim women is taken as representative of the oppression in the rest of the Muslim world. The United States, for instance, has used the Taliban regime's oppression of women as an ideological justification for war. The radio address by Mrs. Laura Bush, the wife of former President George W. Bush, to the nation in 2001 called the Afghan war a struggle not only to combat terrorism but also to liberate Muslim women from the Taliban's oppression (St. John 2004,

pp. 29–32). She contrasted the irrationality of the Taliban regime with the rationality of "civilized" people (National Archives and Records Administration 2001). For this reason, the so-called war on terror was cast as a fight for women's rights and dignity. As Abu-Lughod posed it, the United States seems to have given itself the responsibility of saving Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2002).

Central to the US involvement in saving Muslim women and mitigating terrorist attacks is the marginalization of Muslim women's agency. The epistemic formulation of agency comes from the assumed duality of the West and the rest. Such duality predetermines how Muslim women's agency should be defined and what their liberation within Western contexts should look like. Emirbayer and Mische define agency as (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 970)

> [the] temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.

This definition is drawn from the Western conceptual development of agency and its empirical manifestation. Within such a framework, religion and its various dimensions, such as belief, practice, tradition, community, and meaning, play only a marginal role. In Western contexts, the relegation of religious tradition to individual experience affords agentival freedom to emerge within social settings (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 970). In this epistemological formulation, the link between religion and agency only matters to people who subscribe to it. Emirbayer and Mische see this link as particularly important in millenarian movements that consider the relationship between past patterns of interaction and their projected outcomes in religion important to them (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 992).

As the central role of religion is limited to people who believe in it, such attribution shapes how resistance is defined. Emirbayer and Mische perceive resistance as a social process that must resist and subvert "the logics and practices of the established order" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 1001). While this definition suits various contextual environments, it does not account for outside actors that impose agentival freedom on others. The cases in point are the military occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan that were carried out in the name of liberating Muslim women and promoting Western democracy. In these contexts, Muslim women were viewed as lacking agency to the extent that it was necessary for outsiders to impose liberation on them. While the outside imposition directed toward Muslim women's agency fits what Emirbayer and Mische call "the temporal relational contexts of action", such force removes freedom from Muslim women's deliberation. In this case, the formulation of Western agency as defined by Emirbayer and Mische does not neatly fit our discussion of agency.

Even when religion appears to play a role in shaping gender identities, the difference in majority and minority status matters. For instance, a study by Bartkowski and Read compares Evangelical Protestantism and Islam and finds that "[w]ithin evangelicalism, women's submission emerges as the core point of ideological dispute, and among Muslim elites, the meaning of hijab and the propriety of wearing it emerge as primary points of conflict" (Bartkowski and Read 2003, p. 76). Bartkowski and Read's study draws attention not only to the remarkable degree of agency among devout evangelicals and Muslims but also to their abilities to resort to cultural resources in shaping their religious gender identities (Bartkowski and Read 2003, pp. 87–88). Such abilities afford women in Evangelical Protestanism and Islam the ability to navigate patriarchy while attempting to embody piety within their respective religions.

Bartkowski and Read credit Evangelical Protestant women for being capable of appropriating the traditionalism and non-traditionalism divide on the question of "wifely submission" to its virtues (Bartkowski and Read 2003, p. 89). While Muslim women find virtue in veiling, they also face marginality as a minority in Western contexts, as well as the

multicultural meanings of veiling ranging from ethic identity, national origin, to religious affiliation. The diverging contexts of wifely submission in Evangelical Protestant women and veiling among Muslim women reveal more than differences in cultural meanings. The materiality of veiling signifies something beyond the worn fabric, as it includes a wide range of interpretations as well as historical debates about its relevance in colonial and post-colonial contexts. To compare the use of the veil to wifely submission ignores the Western historical biases toward veiling as backward and oppressive to Muslim women. In retrospect, the public harm carried out toward veiling obscures the way veiling is associated with piety and agency for Muslim women.

Bartkowski and Read are correct in considering Muslim women's positionality as a minority as a factor in how veiling is debated in public. This politics of location matters in practicing faith and defining identity. Roy argues that Islam in a minority context and post-secular society serves as a mere religion and a source of values. At the same time, deterritorialization delinks faith from politics (Roy 2004, pp. 25, 32, 40). As Islam experiences deterritorialization and gets secularized politically, it offers a renewed role for Muslims to function as a source for ethical and spiritual values (Roy 2004, p. 38). In this new epistemological formulation, Islam underlies the spiritual and ethical conversion to the Divine. Such ethical formulation brings back Bartkowski and Read's point that Evangelical Protestant women tend to frame submission in terms of virtue. To a certain degree, the emphasis on virtue in Islam, drawn from its function as a mere religion, identifies the performance of submission to God and veiling as representing virtuous behaviors.

When we frame religious behavior as virtue, it becomes easier to value Muslim women's responses to the travel ban policy as the embodiment of faith. As previously stated, religion is a matter of "a conversion to the sense of sacred" and to the Divine from "the standpoint of the profane" (Novak 1978, pp. 28, 32, 33). The positionality of Muslim women as transformers of mundane oppressive practices provides the context of the present study. I situate Muslim women's resistance toward the travel ban policy as a site for analysis. I question how Muslim women responded to the travel ban policy and how they have used Islam in their advocacy for justice. These questions stem from observing the Women's March on 21 January 2017, in Seneca Falls as well as Muslim women's involvements in other demonstrations in many parts of the United States. I was partly interested in finding responses from Muslim women who addressed the impacts of the travel ban policy within their communities. While it is difficult to find samples, I decided to interview Muslim women as respondents and ask them to tell the story of their life journeys, their activities, their responses to the travel ban policy, and their uses of Islam in their lives. The respondents' names came upon suggestions from people in the mosque's settings and from news media reports.

Upon interviewing them, I learned that all respondents have migrated to the US or were born into immigrant families. Understanding these familial backgrounds is important in understanding their reaction to the travel ban policy. I analyzed the data using discourse analysis and systematized them by identifying common themes. I narrowed down my use of discourse analysis to what Hjelm considers to be the most important thing to consider in religious studies research: (1) how religion functions for respondents in navigating their lives and addressing challenges, and (2) how it shapes their religious identities (Hjelm 2014, p. 144).

I identify three emerging themes from the interviews and show how they have shaped the discussion of this study. Firstly, Muslim women point to the need for recognizing their agency as speaking subjects in the context of living as a marginalized minority and subjected to discriminatory practices. While not all Muslim women living in Western minority contexts experience discrimination and marginalization, our respondents can relate to how they are represented as the oppressed. They shared a common concern about addressing the political narrative of Muslim women as oppressed. While such focus reveals unpleasant experiences and difficult topics to talk about, it honors Muslim women's experiences and their voices as speaking subjects. Central to the effort of dismantling the

assumptions that Muslim women are oppressed is the need for a new epistemology of agency that considers their experiences, knowledge, and contexts.

Secondly, Muslim women's respondents in this study frame their responses to the travel ban policy by tying faith to resistance. They explored resistance within the context of addressing the way Muslims are treated in the post-September 11 world and the impacts of national security policies on them. The perceived oppressive measures shape how Muslims and Muslim women engage with the challenges they face. Such responses come from the belief that Islam teaches Muslims to be just and to seek justice. This demand for justice is equally expected of men and women. The embodiment of such calling manifests through a wide range of activities, ranging from advocating the fair treatment of Muslims, promoting the rights of minorities, to helping Muslims cope with American life as immigrants. These women did not talk about engaging resistance inside faith, but they directed their resistance to hostile behavior in the American public. This type of resistance differs from what Mihelich and Storrs describe. Their work pertains to the way members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) resist religious ideology, such as motherhood, to pursue higher education. They conclude that the pursuit of education and the virtue of good women within faith "constitute resistance, but resistance conducted in a manner that simultaneously supports the hegemonic structure and exerts pressure on it to change and adapt" (Mihelich and Storrs 2003, p. 419). This type of resistance is certainly not unique to Christian women, as it exists in any religion with patriarchal tendencies. At the same time, Muslim women, just like their Christian sisters, navigate their relationship to Islam by instilling equality within faith. Ahmed argues that the ethical vision of egalitarianism produces tension with the hierarchical relations between the sexes, especially in marriage structures and familial patronage in Muslim cultures (Ahmed 1992, p. 64). While marriage and familial patronage could become sites for inequality, the Quran also requires justice, compassion, and kindness as the ethical foundation of such relationships. This egalitarian ethic creates opportunities for Muslim women to engage with communal affairs.

Finally, as Islamic ethics encourages the pursuit of justice, such values undergird the respondents' political resistance and theological liberation. Their resistance against injustice in minority settings and post-secular society comes from faith, but it also intersects with other social and intellectual movements. Kunnummal confirms that the elaboration of the "relationship between Islamic liberation theology and other theories, strategies, tools, and approaches to liberation, including decolonial theories, postcolonial studies, critical Muslim studies, and Islamic feminism studies", allows for advancing marginalized preferential options and choices (Kunnummal 2002, p. 3). Central to the Islamic liberation theology drawn from Muslim women's experiences is their agency to address forms of injustice inherited from the past, like slavery, patriarchy, sexism, etc., as well as its contemporary forms, like Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism, and others that directly impact them and their social milieus. Such agency affords Muslim women the ability to enact change within their own settings and on their own terms. For this purpose, understanding Muslim women's resistance and their agentival pursuit of justice needs to consider them as speaking subjects.

3. Representing Muslim Women: The Personal as the Political

The discursive narrative of Muslim women as oppressed hinges on the politics of representation. Efforts to dissect Muslim women's representation take into consideration the underlying assumptions on which such representation is based. I locate the politics of Muslim women's representation as a site where feminist objectivity is debated. Feminist objectivity refers to efforts to bridge the demarcation between the subject and object of study so that it reflects the positionality of women as speaking subjects. It also encompasses any endeavors to navigate the power relation between the researcher and the research as co-producers of knowledge. Doucet and Mauthner note that the relationship between the researcher and the research "has moved on from the question of whether there are power inequalities between researchers and respondents to consider how power influences

knowledge production and construction processes" (Doucet and Mauthner 2006, p. 40). This feminist objectivity, in Haraway's eyes, stems from "a limited and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and the splitting of subject and object" (Haraway 2010, p. 373). In this section, I locate my research within the pursuit of feminist objectivity. In this framework, I treat Muslim women as speaking subjects and ends in themselves.

Muslim women's representation as oppressed is tied into the Western assumptions of Muslims as violent people. As previously mentioned, Muslim women are depicted as victims of violent Muslim men and need to be saved. While this imagined portrayal of Muslim women is often substantiated through media and literary narratives, its perception stems from a series of terrorist acts enacted in the name of Islam. Muslim terrorists desecrated Islam with attacks on US soil, such as the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 2001 Al-Qaida attacks, the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing, the 2015 attack on a Navy reserve facility, the 2015 attack in San Bernardino, California, and a few others (Cable News Network 2013). Such attacks caused the deaths of innocent people and the suffering of their families. Families of terrorists and the broader Muslim community found themselves entangled in investigations and counter-terrorist policies. The social and political responses to these attacks had adverse effects on Muslims living in the United States and abroad.

Muslim women experience more detrimental effects as they are subjected to the liberation project. The discursive narrative of Muslim women's liberation is tied to civilizational, political, geographical, and religious differences. The colonial legacy of liberation, for instance, has seeped into Western consciousness discursively and non-discursively. Ahmed argues that the genealogical origin of the Western discontent over Islam's treatment of Muslim women rests on the assumption that Western civilization is superior to the Islamic one (Ahmed 1992, p. 152). Western feminism has repeatedly reiterated the different treatment of women in the West and the East, insisting on a civilizational gap. Freedman argues that the debate over colonial liberation has been selective. Historically, the focus on Sati in India and female genital mutilation in Kenya as sites of oppression demonstrates how feminist causes have been dominated by Western colonialist ideology (Freedman 2002, p. 97). As women's liberation is cast in conjunction with imperialist violence, it imposes Western superiority and emphasizes Islamic inferiority. Such portrayal is ultimately inseparable from how Muslim women are defined in relation to Western women.

The relationship between women's liberation and imperial violence should not come as a surprise. Mohanty argues that the Western representation of so-called Third-World women ignores "the formulation of autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies" (Mohanty 1991, p. 51). Such an approach shapes how liberation is perceived, formulated, and used. The epistemological formulation of liberation appears to be applicable exclusively to Muslim women outside the United States. With this approach in mind, American Muslim women who suffer from the assumed positionality of the oppressed have their suffering unaccounted for as the imagined oppression occurs in places beyond the United States. If we take the example of the overturning of abortion rights in the US, we understand that such a policy oppresses women who need access to them. However, the image of oppression denotes otherness: the foreign or the non-Western. Such exclusionary practice is rooted in the sense of otherness that often gets expressed through the accentuation of the geographical separateness between America and 'foreign places.' Slurs, such as "go back to your country", "why are you here?" or "why did you come to America?" are often uttered in the public space to mark Muslim women's otherness (CAIR 2017). While not all Muslim women are subjected to this othering politics, respondents in this research felt otherwise.

The 2017 PEW research justifies the trends of othering among a certain population of Muslim women. It highlights how Muslim women are more likely than men to find living in America more challenging (57% vs. 43%) (Gecewicz 2017). Muslim women are also more likely to be discriminated against because of their appearance (83% vs. 68%). One of our respondents confirms that

> Muslim women specifically are having difficulty because of the headdress that many of them wear. Many Muslim women are targeted because they wear headscarf. Many people who discriminate against Muslims feel that it is okay for them to say negative and derogatory things to people. This behavior has been seen more frequently lately especially since the Trump administration has come to office.[1]

Even if veiled Muslim women do not experience discriminatory practices, they are likely to know other women who have been subjected to verbal and nonverbal harassment due to veiling. With this in mind, the oppression of Muslim women happens not only in 'foreign Muslim countries,' but also in the United States.

The travel ban policy exacerbated the fear among Muslim women as they understood the negative impacts of such a policy, especially for refugees. This reality has caused a major concern for our respondents. One of the respondents is of Somali origin and came to the US as a refugee. She perceived her migration as a lifetime opportunity. Settling in Upstate New York, she recalled her experience moving from camps to camps before finally coming to the United States. She has never had a home other than in the United States. She was born on a truck on the way to Uganda and lived in the refugee camps for fifteen years before she migrated to the US with her parents. She considers America her only home and the home of her three US-born children. She expresses her disappointment with the travel ban policy, as she fears for her life and that of her children. She laments, "We are not terrorists. We are abiding lawful citizens. America is an immigrant country".[2] She points out that refugees have carried the burden of hostility due to violence committed by the few. She gives an example of a knife attack by a refugee from her ethnic background (Dickrell 2016; Williams et al. 2016). In the aftermath, the whole Somali community was cast as terrorists. For her, the attribution of the term 'terrorist' to Muslims is a personal issue, yet it affects the politics of her living conditions in the United States and refugees living in camps in the Middle East and Africa where she once lived. She is disappointed by the fact that the America she knew when she came as a refugee has now changed. In her mind, America had given the promise of a better life to people who had lost hope in refugee camps and violent conflicts.

Other refugee communities also felt the heat of the anti-immigration rhetoric pursued by former President Trump. On two occasions, the candidate, Trump, candidly shared his opinion on Muslims (Johnson and Hauslohner 2017). In his campaign town hall meeting in New Hampshire on 15 September 2015, a man in the audience shouted out, "We have a problem in this country; it's called Muslims. We know our current president is one." The man mentioned Muslim "training camps" and asked: "When can we get rid of them?" The candidate Trump responded: "We're going to be looking at a lot of different things". In the following week, while campaigning in Keene, New Hampshire, on 30 September 2015, he said that he would "kick all Syrian refugees—most of whom are Muslim—out of the country, as they might be a secret army. They could be ISIS, I don't know [. . .] This could be one of the great tactical ploys of all time. A 200,000-man army, maybe" (Johnson 2015). For an Afghan refugee, this kind of rhetoric is dangerous as it could fuel fear against Muslims. She explained:[3]

> With all the negative attention from the media and with the new President and his administration, Muslims and other minorities have been more targeted. This has not only portrayed us in a negative light but has also put a lot of stresses on us because people assume that we are bad and violent people. We are the opposite. Every group has a small number of people who do things that are out of the ordinary and cruel but that does mean that their religion has motivated them to do so, it just means that they have other underlying conditions.

The above statement shows that the attribution of the terrorist label to Muslims and Muslim women not only homogenizes Muslims but also induces fear in Muslim communities. It

reinforces the exclusionary rhetoric that Muslims are not "us" and are not welcome in the United States.

While some Muslim women activists would directly address the impact of this terrorist attribution, others, like Daisy Khan, the executive director of the Women's Islamic Initiative for Spirituality and Equality, call for eradicating what feeds such portrayal in the first place, especially within Muslim communities.[4] Khan identifies what she considers to be the real problem for Muslims and the world. She argues that the persistent problem for Muslim communities, law enforcement, and policymakers is the rise of Islamic extremism. She points to the emergence of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and al-Qaeda, their power in attracting members, their destructive impacts all over the world, as well as the need to address such an ideological threat (Khan 2017, p. 3).

As the political threat of ISIS and al-Qaida seeped into public debates, it reinforced security policies to deal with the violence perpetrated by Muslim terrorists domestically and internationally. While the Obama administration did not publicly name Islam as the factor in the increase of terrorism, media pundits and politicians of both political spectrums readily called Islam the problem. They appear to use anti-Islamic sentiments and invoke fear of Islam and Muslims to garner sympathy from their constituents and the American public. The April 2017 PEW research showed that Republicans and White Evangelical Protestants have more reservations about Islam and Muslims (Pew Research Center 2017). Both groups are likely to perceive Islam as a violent religion (63% and 63%, respectively), and consider that a great number of Muslims are terrorists (56% and 51%, respectively). Consequently, they perceive that Islam is not part of the American mainstream (68% and 67%, respectively).

The rise of anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments was further amplified during the Women's March because such protests involved Muslims as organizers and participants. Linda Sarsour, the US-born American-Palestinian, is especially important to mention for her role as co-organizer of Washington, DCs march. She was also much more noticeable to supporters and opponents of the 'travel ban' policy due to her Islamic background as well as her choice of donning a hijab (Przybyla and Schouten 2017). Her involvement drew media coverage as her political statement on Islam stirred controversy. She was called the 'sharia advocate' and was accused of being anti-Semitic and a jihadist. She was also linked to a terrorist group in Palestine (Lenarz 2017; see also, Ross 2017; Valle 2017). The prejudicial attitude directed toward Sarsour highlights how Islam is juxtaposed with terrorism and Muslim women with terrorist/jihadist labels.

The othering politics of Sarsour demonstrate the marginalization of Muslim women's agency. In the aftermath of the historic Women's March on 21 January 2017 in DC, where Sarsour delivered her powerful five-minute speech, right-wingers and anti-Muslim sites, such as *The Daily Caller*, *FrontPageMag*, *The American Thinker*, *The Gateway Pundit*, and others, discredited her as a supporter of terrorism (Mathias and Kuruvilla 2017). By linking Sarsour to terrorism, the media not only cast Islam as a violent religion but also warned the American public of the dangers of Muslim men and women. Sarsour, by this account, earns the political label of a Muslim terrorist. The emphasis on Sarsour's religion as a marker of her participatory engagement in public signaled that Islam by default causes violence. At the same time, such discriminatory practice denies Sarsour's major contribution as a peaceful and non-violent leader championing the opposition to the travel ban policy. For this reason, attempts to address the politics of othering demand recognition of the agent's positionality.

Muslim women's positionality as activists reiterates their agency as speaking subjects. Their involvement interrupts the hegemonic narrative of the oppressed victim and the outsider. This interruption was on display during the protest at the Reagan National Airport that was led by a Washington, DC-based activist and writer. This #NoMuslimBan protest on February 1st drew a crowd of 2000 people.[5] Such protests show female leadership in demonstration as resistance against Islamophobia and ultra-nationalist actions. One of

the respondents explains the importance of Muslims representing themselves and lending their voices to change the social and political conditions of their place of living for the better.

As Muslim women speak for themselves in resisting the politics of othering, they place their agency at the center of their social and political endeavors. The link between agency and resistance, according to Bell Hooks, a feminist activist, is necessary to address discrimination in personal attitudes or public policies (Hooks [1984] 2010, p. 52).[6] The efforts to change oppressive social conditions constitute political. For this political cause to succeed, Muslim women have actively defined what is challenging to them and have taken important steps to address it. Indeed, knowing the problem locally and globally allows Muslim women to avoid falling into the political narrative that they are oppressed and in need of saving. This self-knowledge distributes the responsibility of addressing the politics of exclusion to everyone involved. At the same time, Muslim women can represent themselves and speak for themselves in dealing with their problems and finding solutions. Arendt argues that women's ability to enact their politics through speech and action allows for "the disclosure of the agents" (Arendt 1998, p. 114). Muslim women's endeavors to challenge oppressive social and political conditions can be considered a manifestation of Islamic theological liberation. In the following section, I will highlight the link between the need to address oppressive social and political conditions and liberatory theology as a common strategy in both Islam and Christianity.

4. The Linkage between Injustice and Liberatory Theology

The link between the Women's March and liberation theology revolves around the urgency of addressing injustice in American settings. Muslim women's use of Islam in marches and their criticism of injustice can be framed in terms of a liberatory theology of resistance. The use of liberatory theology as a framework certainly raises an epistemic question. Ralston warns of the limitations of translating and transplanting the discourse and discipline of political theology rooted in the Christian and post-Christian origins of the Latin West into Arabic, Christian, and Islamic intellectual traditions (Ralston 2018, p. 549). He argues that the epistemological discussion of political theology within the Christian West and the Islamic Middle East is not only a matter of translation but also involves "significant differences over the place of theology, law, and power in the political imaginary of many people in the region" (Ralston 2018, p. 550). While there is a need to account for the phenomenon of political theology in the contexts of Islam and Christianity in a congruent manner, the location where theology encounters politics is historically and socially specific. In American contexts, the link between the Christian and Islamic theology of liberation is established through the common response against discriminatory practices. In this section, I will showcase how the link between black churches and Islamic resistance in addressing unjust social and political conditions in a US setting serves as a catalyst that shapes the emergence of liberation theology among Muslim minority community.

The discursive narrative of political theology emerged in the context of addressing social injustice. Within the Western contexts, Shelley explains in his "Introduction" to *Political Theology* that the political and social problems, such as "the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, American involvement in Vietnam, [and] economic discrimination in West Germany" (Shelley 1974, p. viii) drove Dorothee Sölle, a German liberatory theologian, to pioneer a working group and explore the diverse ways through which faith and praxis can act in union. The group originally initiated conversations about social and political problems, providing detailed analysis of the issues, reading from relevant scriptures, addressing each other's concerns and reflection, performing prayer, and ending with a discussion of "what can we do" to address such issues (Shelley, Introduction). This practice was spread around Germany and Switzerland and reaffirmed the need for a theological framework to address unjust world problems.

Sölle defines political theology as "theological hermeneutic, which, as distinct from a theology that interprets reality from an ontological or existentialist point of view, holds open an horizon of interpretation in which politics is understood as the comprehensive

and decisive sphere in which Christian truth should become praxis" (Sölle 1974, p. 59). Sölle's epistemic formulation of political theology suggests a correlation between social transformation, the potential it has for individuals, and the role of Christianity in it. This correlation is possible only if there is a modified understanding regarding the role of faith (the gospel) in liberation. It is "the *liberation* of all [. . .] that concerned with the oppressed, the poor, and those who mourn" (Sölle 1974, p. 67). In this sense, political theology addresses oppressive social conditions, traces the roots of their oppression, and shapes the transformation of individuals within their own geo-political locations by using faith.

The citation of the emerging discourses of political theology in Germany is significant to mention as they have some parallels to the development of theological frameworks in the United States. Cone, in his *Black Theology and Black Power* (published in 1969), describes how "American theology is predominantly 'footnotes on the Germans' [and] is largely an intellectual game unrelated to the issue of life and death" (Cone 2018, p. 96). While Cone admires German theologians, especially Karl Barth, he argues that American theology needs to cut its ties to its European models in order for the Church to function as a site in which the Gospel may speak to the economic, political, and social conditions in America (Cone 2018, p. 99). He writes that "[f]ew American theologians have made that identification with the poor blacks in America but have themselves contributed to the system that enslaves black people" (Cone 2018, p. 96). He holds that Karl Barth's theological perspective, which differentiated God's Words and Action from human ones when he responded to Hitler's campaign against Jews leading up to the Holocaust, is an appropriate model of liberation (Cone 2018, p. 98). Within US contexts, Cone sees the possibility of separating God from the oppressive system produced by the Christian "white" man. Cone writes: (Cone 2018, p. 102)

> The black church was born in slavery. Its existence symbolizes a people who were completely stripped of their African heritage as they were enslaved by the Christian "white" man. The white masters forbade the slaves from any remembrance of his homeland. The mobility created by the slave trade, the destruction of the family, and the prohibition of African languages served to destroy the social cohesion of the African slaves. The slave was a nothing in the eyes of the master, who did everything possible to instill this sense of nothingness in the mentality of the slave. The slave was rewarded and punished according to his adherence to the view of himself defined exclusively by the master.

Given the history of Black African America that was oppressed and marginalized, Cone proposes a Black Theology that aims at analyzing "the black man's condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ with the purpose of creating a new understanding of black dignity among black people and providing the necessary soul in that people to destroy white racism" (Cone 2018, p. 123). By assigning the importance of Jesus Christ in black people's lives, Cone differentiates white American Christianity, which was born in heresy, from Black theological power, which affirms "the essential worth of blackness" at the heart of Christianity (Cone 2018, pp. 116, 9).

In his "Preface to the 1989 edition" of *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone reframes what he considers "black freedom movements" by pointing to the "complete blindness to the problem of sexism", the reliance on "the Western theological perspective" as the source for black freedom and emancipation, and the failure to link the African-American struggle for liberation in the United States with similar struggles in the Third World" (Cone 2018, pp. xxviii, xxix, xxx). Cone makes special mention of the importance of Malcolm X's liberation theology, which reminded him of his own theological complacency (Cone 2018, p. xxv). Prior to preaching, Malcolm X lived the life of a hustler. He embraced Islam by following the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam, while he was in prison (Malcolm 2015, pp. 153, 159). Elijah Muhammad preached that black people were the original creation and considered "[t]he white man [as] the devil" (Malcolm 2015, pp. 178, 187). Malcom X adopted such rhetoric and worked toward the liberation of

the blacks against the whites. His contribution to the liberation of black people lies in his recognition of whiteness as an oppressive system.

Cone concurs with Malcolm's "cogent *cultural* critique of Christianity as it was taught and practiced in black and white churches" (Cone 2018, p. xxvi). Malcolm viewed Christianity as a white man's religion that brainwashed black people (Malcolm 2015, pp. 166, 205). He perceived whiteness as a system that is oppressive to blacks because they are inescapably the victims of American society, which treats them as inferiors (Malcolm 2015, pp. 93, 220, 279, 280). Malcom saw that white culture and the system it produced affected his own self-perception (Malcolm 2015, pp. 276, 293). Prior to his self-discovery about equality for all people during his pilgrimage in Mecca, he considered himself to be the angriest negro, a racist, and an anti-white (Malcolm 2015, pp. 340, 373).

As Malcom framed his theology of liberation as an opposition against a white-instituted oppressive system, he promoted black separation by encouraging black Muslims to develop their economies, schools, and health facilities. He even proposed the creation of an independent country, or migration (Malcolm 2015, pp. 260, 271, 280). Central to his political theology of liberation is his pilgrimage to Mecca. Malcolm's trip to Mecca for the hajj ritual (pilgrimage) transformed his theology of liberation. He linked the liberation of black people in America to the oppression of all post-colonial peoples. During the pilgrimage, he also discovered the equality of all races in practice (Malcolm 2015, p. 345). He shifted his liberation theology from attacking whiteness as an oppressive system to promoting respect for black people and advocating equality for all (Malcolm 2015, pp. 369, 383). What underpins Malcolm's new liberation theology is the teaching of Islam that promotes equality of human beings before God (Malcolm 2015, pp. 330, 338).

I draw from Malcolm's existential interiorization of suffering and his encounter with Islam as a site for the development of a political theology of liberation in the US context. The term 'Islam' itself is loaded, depending on who defines it. It entails a reflective interiorization of moral reformation, a voluntary surrender to God's Mercy and Grace, and the cultivation of humility with respect to others. The term 'Islam' also refers to external submission as recognized in historical and social contexts. Islam as a religion reflects the practices of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, who are models for those who surrender to God's will (The Qur'an, Āl Imrān, 3: 189).

The continual process of becoming Muslim takes place between people and with people. As the ethical dimension of Islam encompasses human relationships with God, humans, and nature, the underpinning of Islam is about being with people. In this sense, embodied Islam serves as a creative power to undergird efforts to better oneself in response to life challenges, including political oppression. In conceptualizing Islam as a meaning-making system within the constellation of political theology, Muslims value their religion as a catalyst to defend their dignity as human beings. The conditional constellation here involves a host of factors, contexts, or sites that shape the relationship between Muslims' existential religiosity and community making.

Islam, within the constellation of political theology, serves as a mechanism to carry out personal and civic responsibility. Islam as a religion is best described as a tripartite unity of faith (*imān*), experience (*islām*), and virtue (*iḥsān*). The word faith (*imān*) has been reified as the belief in God, His angels, His revelations, His messengers, and the Day of Judgment. At the practical level, the term *imān* demands an act of becoming moral, as it is the site for "the sphere of positive moral properties" and "the real fountain-head of all Islamic virtue." (Izutsu 2002, p. 184) The concept of *imān* involves pious acts (al-A'rāf, 7:2–4), such as engaging in charity and social work, repentance, worship, remembrance, fasting, bowing, prostration, enjoining the good, and forbidding the evil (At-Ṭawbah, 9: 112–3) (Izutsu 2002, pp. 141, 186).

Muslim women perceive their political theology of resistance as an embodiment of faith. They attempt to enact the call of enjoining "what is good" (*ma'rūf*), forbidding what is evil (*munkar*), and competing with one another in good works (*khayrāt*) (See verse 3; 109–10 and 113–14). See also (Izutsu 2002, p. 204)). The notion of "what is good" (*ma'rūf*) is

especially important in the Euro-American contexts since it connotes the practice of what is "traditionally known and (approved)", or as Bayḍāwī puts it, "in compliance with the legal provision and according to what is acknowledged by the law of humanity" (Izutsu 2002, pp. 214–15). Included in this good practice are civic responsibility, tolerance, and respect for pluralism within various social contexts. Even when Muslims are subjected to oppressive measures such as the travel ban policy or other discriminatory measures, they must respect the law and the people. With this in mind, we can associate Muslim women's action to change the oppressive social condition through marches or other means as an embodiment of enjoining "what is good" (*ma'rūf*), forbidding "what is evil" (*munkar*), and competing with one another in good works (*khayrāt*).

This enactment of faith and praxis in addressing unjust social and political conditions constitutes a liberation theology of resistance. Such resistance is rooted in faith and social activism to address exclusionary practices. For Muslim women in minority setting, attempts to address injustice constitute a perpetual struggle because they, like Muslims in general, constantly face existential challenges. A 2018 study by Sides and Mogahed demonstrates how Muslims are more prone to negative stereotyping. Americans perceive Muslims in a more negative light than their perceptions of Christians. They view Muslims as being incapable of cultural integration. Muslims also do not want to be part of this country and have no respect for its institutions and laws. The report also depicts the perception of Muslims as having outdated views of women and believing in a false religion (Sides and Mogahed 2018, p. 10). As this study was conducted a year after the travel ban's policy, it should not surprise us that it reflects the existing prejudice against Muslims. It is to this injustice that Muslim women respond and attempt to claim their own positionality. By addressing the unjust treatment of Muslims and Muslim women, they affirm their own agency in shaping their own identities.

5. The Making of Agency and the Pursuit of Justice

The link between the pursuit of justice and resistance takes us to a deeper understanding of Muslim women's agency. In this section, I bring to attention the definition of agency within the Islamic framework. I borrow Rinaldo's definition of agency as "living to pious ideals and actively creating themselves as religious subject" (Rinaldo 2013, p. 17). This definition overlaps with feminist agency in that agency comes from the freedom to act and to resist oppression. However, the freedom to act in Islam comes from embodying Islam and performing it daily. Rinaldo divides agency into two types: (1) pious critical agency, which refers to "the capacity to engage critically and publicly with the interpretation of religious texts", and (2) pious activating agency, which refers to "the capacity to use the interpretation of religious texts to mobilize the public sphere" (Rinaldo 2013, p. 19). This distinction of agency reiterates a different way of performing action, whether through critical analysis or through the enactment of sacred texts. However, both types of agencies point to the significance of faith as a point of reference in addressing political and social issues. The reiteration of agency as a religious manifestation is reflected in the statements of the respondents to this study.

Muslim women's enactment of agency as a minority in US context intersects with their social and political conditions. The agency of Muslim women in US context is often defined based on similarity. One way to define women's sameness is by collapsing all women into one homogenous group. As previously discussed, the sameness of Muslim women is constructed based on the epistemic formulation of otherness: wearing the veil, being oppressed, and coming from overseas. Such discursive narratives of Muslim women as the other derive from a Western model of women's agency and from the assumed sameness of Muslim women across cultures and societies (Mohanty 1991, p. 66). The assumed sameness of Muslim women's agency also comes from the use of the term 'Muslim.' This term in the West is used as an ethnic category of the non-white to signify all attributes embodied in such distinction. At the heart of this othering is the lack of respect for Muslims as human beings with dignity and equal moral agency.

Agency for Muslim women, as much as for Western women, is produced through experience and meaning. For instance, Mahmood examines agency based on her observation of the Muslim women's mosque movements in Egypt. She makes the connection between Muslim women's repeated bodily practices that are oriented toward God and the creation of a pious self (Mahmood 2005, p. 126). This finding coheres with the overall aims of Islam in that the attainment of a noble character is constitutive of individual agency. The embodiment of faith aims at generating what the philosopher Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030) calls the "acquisition of a noble character" (Ibn Miskawayh 2002, p. 5). He argues that each person strives for his or her own perfection that is essential, good, real, and appropriate (Ibn Miskawayh 2002, p. 10). While behavioral perfection differs from one person to the next, it seeks what the soul considers to be perfect and unique to itself. Each human being strives for his/her own happiness. Happiness refers to what is good relative to the possessor of such happiness. Such good is the ultimate end that is shared by those who possess it.

Central to happiness is the complete and perfect performance of human actions in accordance with discernment and reflection (Ibn Miskawayh 2002, p. 13). As human beings are naturally social beings, their happiness and virtue are embodied in their actions and in social engagement (Ibn Miskawayh 2002, pp. 25–26). Their enactment of faith and devotional practice could generate a noble character by embodying the virtues of wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice. Since Muslim women's experiences of religious beliefs and practices aim at acquiring virtue, their virtuous actions and behaviors shape their pious selves. The making of such piety undergirds personal and societal good. In this manner, Muslim men and women, as ethical agents, could partake in and enrich the creation of the public good wherever they are, including living as a minority in the United States.

I situate Muslim women's agency in feminist resistance within the pursuit of the public good. Efforts to use Islamic political theology to frame women's agency in feminist resistance have a dual character. The first is to address injustice across local and global communities, and the second is to show how the invocation of Islamic teachings in social settings provides new meaning. Women's marches constitute an ideal site in which both characters of the Islamic theological-political framework operate. In her speech to the half-million crowd in Washington, DC, Sarsour called for people of all races to unite and address injustices directed against them and against humanity. In another speech at the annual Islamic Society of North America conference, she invited people to stand up against injustice, stating that (Spellings 2017)

> I hope that [. . .] when we stand up to those who oppress our communities, that Allah accepts from us that as a form of *jihād*, that we are struggling against tyrants and rulers not only abroad in the Middle East or on the other side of the world, but here in these United States of America, where you have fascists and white supremacists and Islamophobes reigning in the White House.

The use of *jihād* certainly caused outrage among groups that associate the term with violence. Here, Sarsour invoked the concept of *jihād* to mean "exerting effort", resisting injustices, and pursuing the good in the broader United States' contexts. The use of *jihād* in this context shows how a religious concept is used as a framework to deal with the dehumanization of Muslims and to invoke solidarity with others who share a similar vision.

Along a similar line, one of the respondents is passionate about promoting justice and the value of all human life.[7] She finds that the unjust treatment of Muslims brought forth by the travel ban policy has torn families apart, isolated Muslims from their communities, kept the youth from education and professional opportunities, and, in some cases, led to death due to the lack of medical help. Her passion for justice motivates her to make the US and the world a better place by actively participating in the anti-war and anti-Islamophobia movements, campaigning for justice in Palestine, fighting against sexual assaults on college campuses, and contributing to the public good. In her own words, she said[8]

> I responded to the travel ban by organizing a rally [. . .] It was important to me that the rally included a broad range of voices—Muslims, queer activists,

> survivors of Japanese internment, Jewish Americans, congress people, clergy members, students, scholars, legal experts, and more. I also attended similar rallies at other venues, participated in the founding of the DC Justice for Muslims Coalition, and did some individual-level work with my community in New York.

Her leadership in resisting the unjust treatment of Muslims and other victims of aggression, whether due to war or sexual violence, constitutes the political theology of liberation. Such a liberatory framework sees the oppression of Muslims as a form of xenophobia. Within this framework, the struggle against injustice has a personal basis but is also politically connected to the problems that humanity is currently facing, namely xenophobia and racism.

The link between Muslim women's activism and the unjust treatment of Muslims and minorities within US contexts and those affected by US policies, especially the travel ban policy, provides the context for the exercise of agency. Within the realm of Islamic faith, Muslim men and women take God as a source of justice and mercy. As faith correlates to action, the embodiment of God's mercy underpins two simultaneous parallel efforts: (1) addressing political, environmental, and social injustice, and (2) cultivating good characters. While Muslims striving for justice regard their faith as an ethical system of meaning, the focus of their work addresses what dehumanizes Muslims and other oppressed groups.

As the embodiment of Islam is reflected in living a meaningful life, it orients Muslims to foster justice and equality through various means that are compatible within their localities. In this sense, Islamic liberation theology links the performance of spiritual life and civic responsibility toward the public good. In the context of Muslim women, they rose to resist the travel ban policy and the systemic marginalization of vulnerable groups, such as immigrants, people of color, and LGBTQ people. They engage in resistance by using an Islamic lens. Such resistance offers them liberatory agency to address how Islam, Muslims, and Muslim women are negatively perceived and how they may resist such portrayals. It also provides a framework for how religion can offer moral responses to political and social issues.

6. Promoting Justice as an Act of Faith

The use of Islamic political theology to address unjust problems shows how the particularity and the universality of Islam are deployed. The particularity of Islam refers to specific historical doctrines and practices that are rooted in the Quran, Prophetic Traditions (*ḥadīth*), the first generations of earlier companions (*al-ṣaḥābah*), and righteous predecessors (*al-salaf aṣ-ṣāliḥ*), whereas the universality of Islam refers to the ethics drawn from Islamic teachings that are universally applicable beyond the boundaries of historical specificity. Situating the particularity and universality of Islam as a framework is useful in leading a meaningful life as well as in making Islam relevant to current conditions. The recurring urgency to interpret Islam in every situation demonstrates that faith is important to Muslims, even within secular American contexts. One of the respondents, for instance, admits that she does not subscribe to Islamic rituals, but she uses Islam as her identity marker. As faith provides the basis for addressing temporal challenges in Muslims' lives, it plays a major role in the ways Muslim men and women solve their problems. Most women I interviewed resort to Islam as a paradigm to respond to political and social challenges. Through this paradigm, they find coherence and meaning in life. As Islam speaks to them in terms of what is meaningful, it agonizes them to have it cast as a religion of terror. This perception does not reflect their lived experiences as Muslim women. In this section, I will discuss the link between Muslim women's perception of faith as the foundation for action and their reliance on it as a site for restorative justice, self-will, and self-knowledge.

To understand the role of religion in the formation of self-will and self-knowledge, Kinnvall has suggested that we consider the relationship between identity-making and its challenges in the past, present, and foreseeable future.[9] In the cases of adult foreign-born Muslims, their identity formation depends on the sense of security and insecurity stemming from religion and their sentiments toward the country of origin and ethnicity. These factors

make them feel either attached to or detached from their social environment. Emirbayer and Mische consider these external factors as the conditional structures that shape the internal processes of agents in considering what is iterated, projected, and evaluated (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 970). While this approach is useful in examining Muslim attachment to the United States, it does not show the importance of enacting religion in one's life.

In Muslim contexts, the interiorization of the Islamic identity within a specific ethnic group and beyond is shaped by variations in faith, ethnicity, and country of origin. Immigrant Muslims find comfort in the various languages they speak, the food traditions they enjoy, and the clothing they find to be comfortable and beautiful. The formative process of ethnic Muslims' identity becomes more defined as they encounter a variety of different people in each mosque with diverse languages, dresses, and ethnicities. Beyond the mosque settings, Muslims also encounter people from across races, ethnicities, faiths, and nations. These encounters allow them to externalize their cultural traditions and internalize what the US public has to offer. While Muslims' appropriation of their assimilation process is tied to the American attitudes and policies directed at them, it is important to recognize that Muslims' attachment to their own cultures gives them a framework to choose and act accordingly. Such contexts provide respondents in this study with the opportunity to enact faith as a platform for action and a broader pursuit of justice.

Efforts to take back Islam from the American hegemonic narratives of Islam as a violent religion and Muslims as violent people have inspired Muslim women. One of our respondents, Khan, as previously mentioned, describes her social justice work as being motivated by the desire to improve society and create more harmony. She locates the September 11 attack in the US soil as the site that motivated her to engage in dialogue. Along with her husband, Imam Abdur Rauf, she was at the heart of the controversial plan for building what is dubbed the "Ground Zero mosque." This challenge motivated her to address the question of Islam from local and global perspectives and to promote women's equality within her organization, the Women's Islamic Initiative for Spirituality and Equality. She does not call herself an activist, yet she does. She describes what she does as a spiritual journey. She believes that everything she does is tied to her spirituality. Her concern for justice is also informed by her spiritual life. She cites a prophetic saying that "[w]hoever among you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand (by taking action); if he cannot, then with his tongue (by speaking out) ; and if he cannot, then with his heart (by hating it and feeling it is wrong), and that is the weakest of faith" (Muslim bin al-Hajjaj 2007, p. 143). In her view, changing unjust conditions and promoting justice is one step toward building a just community.

Resisting injustice for Muslims is an act of faith. This politics of resistance starts with oneself. Khan is inspired by the Quran, citing chapter Ar-Rad, 13:11, which states that "Allah does not change a people's lot unless they change what is in their hearts" (The Quranic Arabic Corpus—Translation n.d.). Khan believes that one needs to engage in self-criticism and expand this process to one's community. She adds that "if one sees flaws in one's community and what is going on is not consistent with what Islam stands for, it needs to be addressed".[10] Khan encourages Muslims to ask questions and think strategically to address their problem(s) in the communities where they reside. For her, she sees problems that need to be addressed locally and globally. Within US contexts, she focuses on community outreach to Muslim leaders and law enforcement, especially to address Islamic extremism and promote interfaith dialogue. Globally, her foundation, Women's Islamic Initiative for Spirituality and Equality, actively addresses various issues, including genital mutilation, child marriage, imam (mosque's leader) leadership, and other pressing topics. Khan is adamant about promoting justice and addressing injustice through knowledge. Her organization attempts to provide a platform for Muslims to be more informed about their roles in creating a better community.

Such passionate expression of Islam in pursuing justice is shared by one of our respondents, who immigrated from Afghanistan as a refugee and now serves as a community leader. She credits Islam as a source of strength and hope in her life. She came to the

US after spending her childhood years in a camp on the outskirts of Pakistan due to her parents escaping the Russian invasion. She says that she is blessed and fortunate to have received an immigration visa to live in the United States when she was in high school. She is now married with three children. She is currently working toward her degree in social work. She has seamlessly put her skills to work, as she is passionate about helping others, especially refugees. She says, “I was once in their shoes I am able to better understand their needs and help them adjust”.[11] She credits Islam as a source of strength and hope. She attests that Islam, as a religion, not only promotes peace but also teaches kindness and generosity. She cites a famous Islamic saying stating that “smiling is a simple act of giving.” In such a small statement, she says, “I can tell that helping people to settle down and gain better lives is not only promoted in our religion but is also dear to me as I love doing such activities from the bottom of my heart”.[12]

The use of Islam as a reference for meaning-making is common among many Muslims. One of our respondents believes that her faith has helped her in times of trial. She laments that Islam is often judged negatively. One person does a bad thing; all Muslims get charged for the crime that they did not commit. She says that “Islam for me is about love, about helping, about giving”.[13] Although she feels that she does not get the respect she deserves as a human being, she believes that she needs to stay true to the teachings of Islam as a mercy to the world. The Quranic verse 21:1–7 states that “And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds”. Citing al-Anbiya, 21:107, is a common practice among Muslims, especially when they want to show that mercy is an important component of Islam. Central to Muslims is the desire to enact the Quran by imitating the Prophet Muhammad, who provides the most perfect model for living a meaningful life. For this Somali refugee, the Prophet Muhammad provides an example of how to embody mercy in everyday life. Giving and helping is an act of worship (*ibādah*).

From these Muslim women’s narratives, we learn that justice activism and spiritual life are linked. I consider the link between faith and justice activism a manifestation of Islamic liberation theology. This liberation theology allows Muslim women to internalize Islamic teaching as a response to temporary conditions that challenge their sense of justice and externalize it through bodily performance and activism. Such self-interiorization shapes the creation of an autonomous agency that has the will to resist selective US hegemonic practices and policies that the public perceives to be oppressive to Muslims. Through their spiritual lives, Muslim women create meaning in their activism. For Khan, her activism comes from her deep commitment to justice and from her aspiration to contribute to the peaceful elimination of injustice. For one respondent, she finds motivation in transforming the community from within through Islamic teachings and civic engagements, such as interfaith dialogue and domestic violence prevention groups. For the other respondent, her spiritual life helps her cope with the challenges she faces, especially in assisting other refugees to integrate into the United States. What motivates these women in their pursuit of justice is the belief that their faith is a source of strength and hope for a better future.

7. Conclusions

This study has examined the link between Muslim women’s agency in the Women’s March and the role of Islamic faith in pursuing justice. It has been shown that this link is useful in framing the formulation of the Islamic liberation theology of resistance. Central to the epistemic discourse of Islamic liberation theology, as displayed in Muslim women’s activism, is the enactment of Islam as a spiritual force and the role of women as speaking subjects. Islamic liberation theology provides a foundational discourse on how to respond to unjust situations through the convergent enactment of faith, action, and virtue. The dimension of faith undergirds the relevance of God to oneself, his/her community, and humanity. It serves as the pivot of an individual, God, and community triangle. The enactment of faith in everyday life shows how God exists through the individual’s commitment to promote the good and address oppression. In this sense, any responses to unjust social and political conditions require self-will and a commitment to change social and political

situation. However, the process by which such change occurs involves efforts to bring God's words into action.

This study also reiterates the need to address Muslim women's pursuit of justice using an Islamic lens. I developed the premise that the positionality of Muslim women as a minority and marginalized group in the US requires an epistemology of agency and liberation theology beyond the Western framework. This approach intends to bring Muslim women's voices into dialogue with scholarship from a Western framework. Such a dialogue allows for the recognition of Muslim women as speaking subjects and as partners in the production of knowledge. As Smith reminds us, it is important to recognize "that [we] have a different tradition, one that frames the way we see the world, the way we organize ourselves in it, the questions we ask, and the solutions that we seek" (Smith 2022, p. 190). While Smith's analysis pertains to Māori's culture in New Zealand, her framework speaks to the subject of our study. Thus, I have argued for an epistemological formulation of Muslim women's agency and their pursuit of justice by using an Islamic framework.

I have also acknowledged the situatedness of Muslim women's activism and the corresponding factors that led to the exploration of faith in their endeavor to promote justice. However, it should be noted that this study is limited to a few Muslim women and does not claim to represent all Muslim women in the United States. I have defined the scope and methodology of my inquiry to demonstrate how Muslim women responded to the travel ban policy and how they used their faith to address it. My work contributes to the importance of considering Muslim women's positionality, experiences, identities, social and political settings, and religiosity in defining their agency, resistance, and liberation. This work will pave the way for future studies on Muslim women's agency in many branches of Islam, such as law, history, philosophy, or Quranic interpretation.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study which is in accordance with the federal research guidelines.

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable to the public due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1. Interview with one of the respondents (H), 4 November 2017.
2. See note 1 above.
3. E-mail interview with one of the respondents (O), 12 November 2017.
4. A phone interview with Daisy Khan, 11 November 2017. I share ideas from my interview with Khan because she is a prominent figure who is known to the public, and her book is quoted for the purpose of this writing. She also gave permission to share her name.
5. CODE PINK press release received via e-mail on 2 April 2017. See also the following information, (Hand 2017).
6. E-mail interview with one of the respondents (A), 18 November 2017.
7. See note 6 above.
8. Please see the note 7 above.
9. I have adopted Kinnvall's approach to the formation of identity using psychological analysis. In this introduction, I substitute the use of nationalism by a sentiment toward one's country of origin. See (Kinnvall 2004, p. 721).
10. Interview with Daisy Khan, 11 November 2017
11. Please see the note 3 above.
12. Please see the note 11 above.
13. Please see the note 2 above.

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Whom Do We Serve? Dismantling the Church Industrial Complex in North American Mainline Protestant Churches

Sheryl Johnson

Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, CA 94704, USA; sjohnson@ses.gtu.edu

Abstract: Social justice is often identified as a central commitment in mainline Protestant churches in North America. However, it is often approached as a public-facing issue that engages broader society, rather than as a comprehensive value that also informs internal practices in those same North American Protestant congregations/denominations, particularly in the area of finance. This reality means that a profit orientation often informs and shapes practices, undermining the mission; this reality can be understood as part of an industrial complex. To counter this tendency, I present two themes that are rooted in a liberation-based critical understanding of inequality found in the World Council of Churches' AGAPE (Alternative Globalization Affecting People and the Earth) statement. These two themes are as follows: that one's personal financial resources (or lack thereof) are deeply connected to oppressive systemic factors, and that churches are called to exist in economic solidarity and communion with one another. I conclude by asserting that church finance must be rendered more coherent with churches' own values and commitments to liberating justice as a matter of faith.

Keywords: Protestant; North America; mainline church; finance; church; budget; WCC; stewardship

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1. Introduction

An important feature of mainline Protestantism in the North American context is its engagement with issues of social justice. This engagement takes many forms and includes sermons on topics related to social justice, congregational attendance at protests and marches, and, particularly at a denominational level, the adoption of statements and resolutions that articulate support of justice issues through public policy and action. While these commitments and activities are important to church identity, they are often approached as public-facing programs that address broader society as opposed to becoming fully engaged as commitments that shape internal church life and practice, particularly in the area of finance. When considering the values embedded in the practices of church life, one can see evidence of a Church Industrial Complex at play. The theoretical framework of the "Industrial Complex" explores how institutions established with a purpose external to themselves can become focused on their own self-perpetuation—pursuing power, growth, and profits—in ways that may well contradict and undermine that original purpose. The logics of capitalism can overtake systems and institutions and introduce practices such as an extreme focus on profit, efficiency, growth, and hierarchy (Best 2011). Much theorizing has engaged phenomena such as the Military, Healthcare, Academic, and Prison Industrial Complexes. The term and originating concept of the Industrial Complex is credited to US President Dwight Eisenhower who, in 1961, described the Military Industrial Complex as a growing threat in the United States, whereby the increased power and influence of the defense industry was undermining democracy to promote war in service of profit (Giroux 2007, pp. 13–14). Applying the analysis of various Industrial Complexes to the situation of churches, one can ask whether a profit orientation and other features of Industrial Complexes are present. In this time of financial and membership challenges for many mainline Protestant churches, it is also relevant to consider whether conventional economic assumptions, such as the notion that financial resources are inherently a sign of success,

and financial struggles are a sign of inferiority or failure, are correct. It is especially ethically consequential to find these values present in churches that have issued statements that articulate well-established critiques of economic inequality, profit motives, and prevailing economic structures.

In this article, I argue that elements of Industrial Complexes are indeed found in churches that have engaged in this critical work addressing the economy. Specifically, I examine North American mainline Protestant churches, whose membership tends to comprise populations that are more privileged (racially, economically, and so forth) (Masci 2016; Pew Research Center 2014). Although mainline Protestant churches are in no way solely comprised of members with these and other intersecting forms of privilege, my focus in this paper will be on these communities due to their particular positionality with respect to the social justice issues under discussion here, and also the official positions many of them have taken with respect to social and economic justice concerns. As an ordained minister serving in a mainline Protestant denomination (the United Church of Christ) and as a white, able-bodied, economically-privileged person, I speak primarily to my own tradition and to others like myself who are committed to justice in our words but who are still entrenched in—and benefit from—oppressive systems such as the Church Industrial Complex in many of our deeds and (in)actions.

Specifically, I argue that, in these relatively privileged mainline church contexts, broader church commitments to justice are not adequately addressed in local church conversations related to fundraising, finance, property/assets, and Christian stewardship (although this term is used in a variety of ways, Christian stewardship is often employed as an umbrella term for many conversations about financial life in church contexts). Efforts have been made, for example, to divest[1] from certain corporations (such as those in the fossil fuel industry) (see, for example, Markoe 2014) and to prioritize "mission" in congregational budgets. However, these initiatives tend to address justice issues in a siloed and segmented manner, without delving to the roots of the ideologies and values at play in our church financial life. These specific initiatives do not necessarily spur us to examine all of the facets of systemic oppression embedded in our church financial ideologies and practices, nor do they challenge the values inherent in many commonplace approaches to money and financial management. These values include the assumptions that more money is necessarily better than less, that survival—if not growth—is always our aim, that what we have (individually or congregationally) is rightfully ours, and that our primary financial responsibilities are to those "closest" to us (i.e., nuclear families and local congregations). Theorizing about the Non-Profit Industrial Complex is highly relevant to this topic and has revealed that, due to the Industrial Complex, non-profit structures "encourage social movements to model themselves after capitalist structures rather than to challenge them." (Smith 2011, p. 134).

While this article does not explore every aspect of the assumptions and values embedded in church financial practices, those I identified in the previous paragraph reveal some of the unspoken values that influence church financial practices and which arise and represent elements of the Church Industrial Complex. Often, they are seen as natural or inevitable, if they are considered at all. But of course, all assumptions are expressions—spoken or unspoken—of particular values rooted in particular cultures and worldviews and, as such, should be carefully examined in relation to our theological and ethical commitments. Our churches' manifold commitments to justice should shape all of our practices—even those that may seem to be simply "administrative." When our practices embody values that contravene our commitments to justice, we participate in oppression and we undermine our commitment to the gospel. When we fail to align our practices with our values and commitments, churches, and people of faith, miss out on important opportunities to embody Christ and to "practice what we preach"—to live into and experiment with the values we proclaim will one day be present throughout society, anticipating the kin(g)dom of God among us.

2. Overview

Through multiple passages of scripture that explore economic issues, we are told that the values of money or wealth and those of faith are at least distinct, if not also competing and contradictory. We can clearly see that sense in the instruction that appears in both Matthew and Luke's gospels: "you cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24b, Luke 16:13b, NRSV)[2]. At the very least, as Christians, this verse should give us pause whenever we consider financial matters. This reflective pause has been considered at length in the vast academic sub-discipline of Christian economic ethics and in many official church statements addressing economic concerns (see, for example, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 1999; The United Methodist Church 2006). Still, these are not the only appropriate sources to consider when evaluating our church practices related to finance. All of our commitments to justice (racial, gender, disability, queer, ecological, and so forth) are relevant to every facet of our lives—individually, societally, and in specific reference in to the practices of churches.

However, due to limitations of space, in this article I focus primarily on the relevance of just two important themes that arise from church statements and pronouncements related to justice and which directly challenge the Church Industrial Complex. I draw specifically on the World Council of Churches' AGAPE (Alternative Globalization Affecting People and the Earth) statement as it comes from the largest global ecumenical body. There are many reasons why this or other church statements might not be fully claimed or assented to by various churches and individuals, but these statements do describe, at least at a macro level, what these churches believe to be just. I begin by first briefly offering an introduction to the AGAPE statement. I then consider some mainline Protestant financial practices through the lens of two themes that arise from the AGAPE statement, and note the ways that some church values and practices do not align with those expressed in the statement. These two themes of focus are that one's personal financial resources (or lack thereof) are deeply connected to oppressive systemic factors, and that churches are called to exist in economic solidarity and communion with one another. I conclude by asserting that church finance must be rendered more coherent with our commitments to justice.

3. Introducing the AGAPE Statement

Arising out of a seven-year global study process, the AGAPE (Alternative Globalization Affecting People and the Earth) statement was adopted by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 2006 at their ninth General Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil—the home of the World Social Forum. The statement followed the work of the WCC's Advisory Group on Economic Matters, which was established in the 1990s (The Lutheran World Federation et al. 2018, p. 59). However, engagement of the WCC in economic justice and liberation theology dates back much earlier. Many cite the 1960s as the decade when this truly flourished, brought about in large part by interactions with Latin American Catholic liberation theologians. In 1968, the Catholic Church and WCC established a "Joint Committee for Society, Development, and Peace" and, at a related meeting in 1969, the Catholic Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez presented the material that would be published in 1971 as his *A Theology of Liberation* (Odair Pedroso Mateus 2020). The work of the World Council of Churches has long been in dialogue with and shaped by liberation theology through this platform and others, and many statements prior to AGAPE articulated a liberation-oriented approach to various social ills.

In the years since the 2006 AGAPE Statement, the WCC's Poverty, Wealth, and Ecology Process has continued to advance economic justice with an integration of ecological concerns.[3] A 2012 WCC meeting issued a related statement entitled "International Financial Transformation for the Economy of Life" and advocated a more just global financial system.[4] In order to enact this work, ecumenical partner organizations were called on and a Global Ecumenical Panel was established to continue the work. Rogate Mshana, former Programme Executive for Poverty, Wealth and Ecology in the World Council of Churches, describes the Global North–South tensions that arose during the AGAPE process, but notes

that global consultations were conducted in the seven years following 2006 in order to better integrate these varied global perspectives while also engaging them in the work (Mshana 2007).

The introduction of the AGAPE statement begins by sharing the conviction that a "world without poverty is not only possible but is in keeping with the grace of God for the world" (World Council of Churches 2006). The statement connects this conviction to the tradition of ecumenical social thought and action, as well as to the liberation theology tradition of the preferential option for the poor. It also includes a recognition of global division, stating that "we recognize that the divisions of the world are present among us" but that "we are called to be one in Christ ... transformed by God's grace for the sake of all life on earth, overcoming the world's division." (World Council of Churches 2006). This suggests that injustice is understood to be a source of division, an impediment to and even a "worldly" intrusion against the unity to which Christians are called. The WCC's AGAPE statement is structured as a communal confession and an appeal to God for transformation. The repeated refrain, "God, in your grace, transform the world," makes clear that our work for justice relies on God. Simply stated, the document makes clear that systemic oppression is the primary cause for economic inequality and that individuals, churches, and other bodies are called to respond to this inequality through a sharing of resources and to work for justice to address these root systemic causes.

4. Christian Stewardship and Church Financial Practices

As with many religious practices, it is difficult to state with certainty or universality how mainline Protestant churches individually approach Christian stewardship and finance. Though my analysis is not relevant to the practices of every church, I attempt to speak about these practices generally by drawing upon material from a research survey of Christian-finance-related literature published in North America since the year 2000, which analyzed twenty books on this topic. I conducted this survey as part of my PhD dissertation research, supervised by Dr. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda through the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Each of the authors and publishers are affiliated with mainline Protestant churches, and many of the works are sold in the online bookstores affiliated with various mainline denominations.[5] These books are useful in offering a general sense of some of the financial values, practices, and ideas that are likely to be present in mainline Protestant churches. While I cite only a few of these books here, the underlying sentiments are shared between most of the books I surveyed. Through my dissertation research, I also conducted interviews with mainline clergy and other church leaders in 2018–19, who confirmed that they had experienced many of the ideas and sentiments expressed in these books in their own churches.

5. Thematic Analysis: Personal Financial Resources and Oppressive Systemic Factors

Many scholars have delineated the manifold ways in which one's economic resources (or lack thereof) arise from a complex matrix of factors related to one's identity and social location and through various oppressive systems, including neoliberal capitalism, colonialism, and racism. From within these systems, the myth holds that one's own resources arise solely—or at least primarily—from one's merit and as a just reward for hard work. Conversely, poverty is largely viewed as an individual failing and as a phenomenon that is distinct from any broader systemic factors. Critical social and economic scholars and ethicists refute these claims through wide-ranging evidence. Christian ethicist Miguel A. De La Torre argues, for example, that a thorough examination of economic inequality is critical because justice-based ethics must begin with this sort of structural analysis, rather than simply striving to address poverty through charity (De La Torre 2014, p. 71). Theorist Andrea Smith also critiques a charity-based approach to addressing inequality and argues that charities and non-profits serve to fill gaps in services that should be provided by the government via tax dollars (Smith 2011, p. 141). Charitable organizations can serve to

support the myth that poverty is an individual failing rather than a social issue that is endemic to our present economy.[6]

Contrary to this, the AGAPE statement is oriented with a critical understanding of the systemic origins of wealth and poverty. It begins by identifying economic globalization and unfettered market forces as the primary origins of the present inequality and injustice in the world, both between humans and with the earth (World Council of Churches 2005, p. 1). It then notes that this global inequality is also present in the church, which is incompatible with the call to be one in Christ (World Council of Churches 2005, p. 2). The statement also lifts up the many social groups who suffer injustice most acutely through these unjust systems, including women, children, and people with disabilities (World Council of Churches 2005, pp. 2–3). Although more could be said about the specific systems and factors that lead to this economic inequality, the statement makes clear that one's resources are neither simply the just rewards for one's own work, nor reflections of personal merit.

However, similarly to the myth supported by Industrial Complexes, in literature related to Christian stewardship and church finance, it is generally assumed that the resources that one has (as an individual or as a church) rightfully belong to their owner. The roles played by various oppressive systems in determining or distributing those resources are generally not addressed.[7] When economic differences are presented, it is usually suggested that a person should give to their church in proportion to their ability. However, the drive to raise as much money as possible (an element of the profit-centric Church Industrial Complex) can cause the economic realities of poorer church members to be ignored, or lead to the creation of campaigns that pressure these members to give beyond their means. At the other end of the spectrum, questions regarding the origins of wealth are also not considered and, therefore, the ethical case to engage in redistribution is omitted from discussion.

Similar realities can be observed when congregations' resources and wealth are addressed as a whole. For example, in J. Clif Christopher's 2012 book about church finance entitled *Rich Church, Poor Church*, the ordained United Methodist minister uses the terms "rich churches" and "poor churches" to describe two approaches to finance that he believes are unrelated to economic circumstances. He defines poor churches as those "always behind financially and searching for money" and rich churches as those "that are not struggling to find resources for mission and ministry." (Christopher 2012, p. ix). Moreover, any wider socio-economic context aside, he suggests that any church can become a "rich church" by following his recommendations, even going as far to assert that, in relation to his rich church/poor church metaphor, "there is no excuse to be poor anymore!" (Christopher 2012, p. xi). This suggestion, though perhaps not intentional, that financial challenges and poverty, at least within the context of churches, are simply an "excuse" (and not connected to systemic inequality) is highly problematic and perpetuates myths such as the one that posits that poverty is simply the result of the bad choices of individuals (or congregations) and that wealth arises from personal (or congregational) merit.

Regarding individual givers, Christopher seems satisfied that members giving the same percentage of their income demonstrates sufficient attention to differing economic circumstances (despite the fact that the same percentage does not correspond to the same level of "sacrifice"). Still, he clearly demonstrates greater regard for larger gifts and those able to offer them, since he recommends that churches make clear, high expectations for giving (Christopher 2012, p. 63), host special church retreats to acknowledge major donors (Christopher 2012, p. 56), and place the church's top givers on the finance/stewardship committee (Christopher 2012, p. 75). Together, these suggestions demonstrate a profound lack of understanding of economic inequality at both the macro and micro levels. They conform to mainstream fundraising practices of prizing larger gifts and those who give them and devaluing those who give less, regardless of their reasons. Christopher states that he is merely suggesting that those who have the gift of financial generosity be put in corresponding positions of leadership (as would be done for those with gifts/abilities in other aspects of ministry) (Christopher 2012, p. 76) and that churches commonly cel-

ebrate peoples' ministry offerings in other areas of church life (i.e., thanking musicians) (Christopher 2012, p. 57). However, I would argue that this is a false parallel: differences in wealth are not the same as differences in spiritual gifts, and we must be very careful that our congregational practices do not align so easily with those of capitalism such that, for example, we create exclusive spaces to which poorer members of the congregation do not have access.

Another facet of this ideology can be seen in the 2006 book, *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life.* Author Mark Allan Powell, an ordained ELCA Lutheran pastor and professor, again presumes a relatively economically privileged audience, largely ignoring the reality of poorer churches and congregational members. He states that one lesson we learn from the Bible is that we should be content with whatever we have and that we should focus on pleasing God rather than satisfying our own needs (Powell 2006, pp. 41–42). For wealthy readers, this could be understood as encouragement toward simpler living. However, for poorer readers, this idea suggests that they should be content with their own insufficient material resources and that, in fact, focusing on those needs is a distraction from serving God. Later, Powell even goes as far to state that "it is quite frankly none of our business if God chooses to give more generously to others than to us." (Powell 2006, p. 92). This perspective is highly problematic since it suggests that God not only desires income inequality but is the reason why some people are rich and others are poor. This position is quite contrary to that taken in the AGAPE statement and by many Christians who are working to address forms of economic and social justice.[8] While Powell's intended message is that relatively affluent people should not focus on jealousies of those who are even wealthier, it is, nonetheless, theologically problematic.

Among the surveyed books that address Christian stewardship, most of them generally assume that the resources that people have are rightfully theirs and are not connected to larger systems of privilege and oppression. While some authors might admit that these systems exist but that their purpose is only to help churches raise funds, these assumptions lead to all sorts of theological and social consequences that further marginalize those who already face systemic oppression. Additionally, by suggesting that what privileged people have is rightfully earned through individual merit, the ethical case to use church finance as a system for redistribution across lines of inequality is severely reduced. People (and churches) with economic means are not required, under these terms, to grapple with the history and social and environmental impacts of their resources, nor with their complicity in systems that deprive others of what they need.

6. Thematic Analysis: Churches in Solidarity and Communion

The forms of economic and social inequality that exist in our global society also appear in our varied churches and denominations. For various interconnected and systemic reasons, some churches have a great deal more economic privilege than others.[9] In part due to this fact, churches need to be in greater relationships with one another and to think of their community much more broadly than in terms of their particular congregation or denomination. Around the mid-point in the AGAPE statement, its focus turns from naming and explaining the current world to describing a vision of what ought to be. Theologically, this is framed around discipleship, described practically as the effort to "keep our hope and advocate for justice and liberation." (World Council of Churches 2005, p. 3). This includes the development of an "agape economy of solidarity." (World Council of Churches 2005, p. 4). Churches are specifically called to reflect on the themes of power and empire and to stand against unjust power systems (World Council of Churches 2005, p. 7). Further, they are called to be held accountable to those impacted by economic injustice, meaning that privileged parts of the church are responsible for more oppressed parts, with their "first loyalty" extending to those experiencing injustice (World Council of Churches 2005, p. 7).

A similar sentiment is expressed in the broader ethical vision presented in *Justice in a Global Economy* by Pamela Brubaker, Rebecca Todd Peters, and Laura Stivers. These authors, who are Christian ethicists, underscore the ways in which many churches have

been shaped by dominant economic ideologies (Brubaker et al. 2006, p. 42) and argue that churches should serve as sites where alternative economic practices are modelled (Brubaker et al. 2006, p. 46). One such dominant ideology is that of individualism, focusing primarily on oneself and, by extension, one's own congregation. It is clear, however, that one's commitments and sense of Christian community should extend far beyond that and move across any forms of unjust and oppressive division. Competition and individualism are values that are rooted in an Industrial Complex orientation. With respect to non-profits, Andrea Smith argues that the Non-Profit Industrial Complex "promotes a social movement culture that is non-collaborative, narrowly focused, and competitive," (Smith 2011, p. 143), in part due to the need to attract grants and secure the funding of donors. We can see a similar dynamic in churches, as congregations compete with one another (and with other community organizations) for members, donations, volunteer time, prestige, and so forth.

It is perhaps not surprising that many of the books focusing on Christian stewardship attend to the context of the local congregation, as most are written for individual and congregational use. This functional purpose, however, does not mean that the books and their authors do not still have a responsibility to consider the needs and realities of the wider church and society. The AGAPE statement and many Christian ethicists make it clear that Christians are called to challenge global wealth inequality and share beyond the borders of our local (or even denominational) churches. For many churches, this wider, more global attention comes by way of support for global mission work or assistance to other congregations through denominational contributions. However, these relationships outside of the congregation are often presented as optional or, at least, less important obligations. The books in this survey do not suggest that wealthy churches need to grapple with the systemic reasons for their greater resource share, such as the ongoing legacies of colonization, racism, global inequality, and more.[10]

This prioritization of local stewardship at the congregational level is, I suggest, directly challenged by the critical perspectives of social and economic justice. For example, it is apparent that wealthier churches tend to have more and better-paid staff and nicer buildings/facilities (which can be used to earn greater rental income), while poorer churches, comprised in many cases of less privileged people, tend to have less by way of building and staff amenities and are at greater risk of closure. Parallels to this inequality can be seen in public education, where studies show that models of funding through local property taxes lead to a great deal of inequality with more and less affluent communities having very different educational and extracurricular offerings at their schools.[11] Such educational disparities further entrench inequality for the next generation (see, for example, Mota et al. 2021). On the other hand, when resources are shared across different communities—whether in schools or churches—there can be a greater potential to rectify inequality and achieve a better prioritization of resources for places and people in need.

In another church-finance-related book, *The Good Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth*, John R. Schneider, a former professor at Calvin College, which is affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church, challenges the ethical basis for global sharing by employing moral proximity. This concept states that we only have a moral obligation to help those closest to us (Schneider 2002, p. 11). Although ethicists differ in their perspectives on the role of proximity in relationship to ethical responsibility, we must contend with the fact that we are more likely to be "close" to those of similar economic circumstances. Even if we might sense a greater responsibility to those closer to us, this does not mean that we bear no responsibility to those further away, especially in our economically connected world. We must also consider the relationship between wealth and poverty, particularly since some actions associated with wealth may primarily impact those who are quite far away and who might be more vulnerable (with respect to climate change, for example).

Another book, *Ministry in Hard Times*, by Bill Easum and Bill Tenny-Brittian, who are ordained, respectively, in the United Methodist Church and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), focuses on financial practices for churches going through particularly challenging circumstances. Due to this specialized focus, one must be cautious in considering this book

too critically; it is possible that the authors would recommend other financial practices under more positive circumstances. Their primary argument is that, when churches are going through difficult times, certain aspects of ministry should be cut so that other areas can be given additional resources. On the side of what to “always cut” in challenging times, Easum and Tenny-Brittian place “foreign and local missions,” (Easum and Tenny-Brittian 2010, pp. 33, 41), allowing free use of the church building to outside groups (Easum and Tenny-Brittian 2010, p. 33), and even the church’s own youth program (since “[youth] are the future of someone else’s church. Not yours. Most of them will grow up and move on to some other city”) (Easum and Tenny-Brittian 2010, p. 42). These recommendations focus unapologetically on cutting funding for anything that is not oriented directly to the benefit of the congregation’s membership and financial situation. Like Schneider, these authors think that it is reasonable, even beneficial, to highly prioritize the local congregation. Such a sentiment stands in stark contrast to the solidarity between churches that is promoted in statements like AGAPE. Rather than recommending that a single church “hunker down”—paring its focus and resources down to the most internally focused purposes—the AGAPE statement calls for a greater solidarity that is open and vulnerable. This solidarity must be rooted not in a superficial understanding of the benefits of relationships and community but in a deep and authentic grappling with the ways that some churches have directly and indirectly participated in the oppression of other churches, people we in privileged church contexts see and name as our siblings in Christ.[12]

7. Rooting Our Financial Practices in Our Values

The Christian stewardship and financial practices summarized—and critiqued—above have not emerged in a cultural vacuum. In many cases, they align with and arise from mainstream fundraising principles and widespread financial practices that are seen throughout a variety of Industrial Complexes. These approaches to funding are connected to deeper ideologies such as white supremacy, patriarchy, and coloniality, as Nuri Heckler compellingly argues in the article “Whiteness and Masculinity in Nonprofit Organizations: Law, Money, and Institutional Race and Gender” (Heckler 2019). As such, these systems are embedded within many of our church financial practices, including the very idea and use of money (where and how it has been earned, invested, managed, and so forth). These financial practices are rooted in an oppressive prizing of wealth (and the values associated with it) over more countercultural practices rooted in the gospel, which prioritize a critical analysis of money and resource (re)distribution. Our scriptures also draw connections between financial matters and other intersecting forms of justice (such as racial justice, gender justice, etc.) and make explicit calls to respond to inequality through redistributive and reparative means. If we—mainline Protestant churches in the Global North— root our faith and church financial commitments in social and economic justice, other possibilities begin to emerge. Moreover, when we look at other churches and communities on the undersides of power, those of us with relative privilege can see a great many powerful alternative ways, enacted for generations, of being and funding “church.”[13]

The AGAPE statement is clear that various aspects of identity and social location need to be considered in relation to our economic systems. It compels us to ask: who is marginalized and who benefits? Therefore, if we are to critically understand the ways that money has been differentially allocated or restricted between various individuals, communities, and churches, the ways in which we in privileged church contexts approach stewardship and giving must also be viewed critically. Stewardship cannot merely be a matter of an individual approaching it within their own means (i.e., larger or smaller gifts depending on our personal financial resources); rather, Christian stewardship must be understood instead from within the matrices of privilege and marginalization. Church finance must be approached within the context of reparations[14] across relationships marked by inequality (and deeply attentive to historical as well as present circumstances) and should support social and ecclesial transformation toward justice. Those who have experienced economic marginalization need to be placed at the center of the conversation and the structures

of decision-making, rather than relegated to the sidelines because they do not have as much personal wealth to contribute. Theologically speaking, rather than viewing God as the source of economic inequality, we must recognize God at the center of this work of redistribution, shaping our principles of justice and calling us to unity and equality.

8. Conclusions

The decline in membership and financial resources in mainline Protestant churches presents intensifying challenges to some of the problems I have raised. For example, placing the primary focus on one's own congregation (or denomination, etc.) might be a greater temptation in times of financial turmoil. Yet this sense of difficulty, and the fear that may come with it, cannot be an excuse not to strive to better live into our values. Those of us with greater privilege must be aware of the ways that many communities have experienced financial distress for generations (due to racism, colonialism, and other systems of oppression), caused by us personally, our institutions, and the systems in which we are embedded.

Moreover, if our broader values and commitments to justice do not shape our local churches' financial practices, then we must consider what values are being expressed and what systems are being perpetuated and reinforced by our ways of giving and spending. The notion that one's personal financial resources are primarily the result of merit is both entrenched within and reinforced by oppressive systems such as neoliberal capitalism and white supremacy (see, for example, McNamee and Miller 2004). The idea that we are primarily, if not exclusively, responsible to and for our own local congregation has an embedded theology and ecclesiology that is more in alignment with the value of wealth accumulation than with the values of Jesus, who challenges us to continually reimagine who is our neighbor. Our very identity as Christians—individually and collectively as the church—is at stake in how we understand and approach financial practices.

It is a fallacy to believe that we can so deeply compromise our values, even in difficult circumstances, to save ourselves. If we are not striving to live out our values, then we cease to be who we say we are. If we seek to preserve our churches through "any means necessary" then whatever remnant we might "save" will not be the church. For those of us in the guild of Christian ethics and political theology, we must consider what particular responsibilities we have in this situation. Much excellent, high-level work has been undertaken to critique unjust economic and social structures, but too often specific guidance for church practices has been absent, or is minimal and secondary at best. Burdened church leaders then turn to the resources that are readily available and appear specifically tailored to their situations, despite the fact that many such books and resources are rooted in worldviews that exemplify the Church Industrial Complex by prizing wealth and growth, and which contradict a justice-rooted ethic.[15]

In this paper, I have argued that there is a significant chasm between the values espoused by North American mainline Protestant churches and those expressed by some of the financial practices and understandings of money in those same churches. Future study should seek to elucidate the additional reasons why this divide may exist and to test how widespread this issue may be and what other manifestations may exist. I have focused primarily on church statements as a source for understanding church teachings related to justice, and literature related to church finance to explore church practices related to money. However, additional study involving a wider array of sources would be helpful in broadening and generating nuance in our understanding of this situation. It would also be important to ask church leaders, pastors, treasurers, and others whether this chasm resonates with them (and, if so, what explanations for it they would offer), as well as to elicit the views of church members and others who are impacted by church financial values and decisions (i.e., organizational and individual recipients of church funds, those who rent space in churches, etc.). This is a complex issue that I do hope will be pursued further due to its serious implications.

Alignment between values and practices is not only important for ethical and theological reasons but also for practical ones. A 2016 Pew Research Study found that one in five people who left their childhood religion did so due to a dislike of organized religion, for reasons including pervasive hierarchy and religious communities operating too much like businesses (Lipka 2020). This finding is similar to those of a 2009 Pew Research Study, which found that about 50% of those who have become unaffiliated with religion have done so because they find religious people "hypocritical, judgmental, or insincere." (Pew Research Center 2009). This is not to say that changing our financial practices, including the values embedded within them, will magically draw people (back) to the church, thus leading to growth in membership and finances. This is not a growth tool. This work is our calling regardless of the outcomes for our congregational membership or our church coffers. Still, a better alignment between belief and action may help people to see the possibilities alive within the church, which might bring new life and renewed faithfulness to our communities.

The rupture between the values articulated in our church statements and those expressed within our financial practices—stated otherwise, the gap between following God and following Mammon—is not inevitable or unavoidable. While the decline in mainline Protestant communities is real and felt acutely, this sense of waning can be a force for positive change if it is taken as an opportunity for radical reformulation and a re-focusing on ethically rooted values, rather than Industrial-Complex-related markers of success such as property, size, and reach. A central theological and biblical theme of Christian life is that, in dying, we may find new and eternal life. In Matthew 16:25–26, Jesus offers this counsel to his disciples as he foretells of his own death and resurrection: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" I believe this is particularly instructive for considerations of church financial practices. By trying to "save" our churches through oppression-ladened approaches to finance, we are already dead because we have ceased to be the church and to be Christ's followers. If, however, we cease to fear the "death" of the church, no longer allowing that fear to dictate our choices, and turn instead to living by our deep commitments to justice, we may well find new life. That "life" may not be full pews and full offering plates, the hallmarks of success within the Church Industrial Complex. In fact, it may lead to further losses, the closure of some churches, perhaps even the end of some denominations. But if those are not our metrics of success, could we not be freed into new life, new understandings that are more rooted in God than in wealth?

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Notes

1. It is important to note that this divestment work has not been without controversy. Of particular note has been the campaign to divest from products and services related to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. This campaign has had particular implications for Jewish–Christian relations and has led to accusations of antisemitism.
2. Broadly speaking, the Hebrew Bible paints wealth in a more positive light; however, there is a consistent message that one should be concerned with issues of justice and equity in society.
3. Called to Transformative Action. p. 59.
4. See notes 3 above.

[5] Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain information about the books' sales from the publishers. When I inquired, I was told that this information is not shared publicly. As such, the matter of how widely these books are read or in what contexts or ways they may be used lies beyond the purview of this study.

[6] Regarding the systemic and structural causes of poverty, see, for example, (Rank et al. 2003).

[7] This was a finding that arose from my study of Christian stewardship literature and which is also echoed in critical analysis of non-profits, see for example: (Finley and Esposito 2012, p. 20).

[8] For example, the AGAPE statement is clear that the church must address systems such as neoliberal globalization and multinational corporations as they are root causes of global economic inequality; it also makes it plain that those in the Global North are primarily responsible for global poverty. See (World Council of Churches 2006, pp. 35–36, 39).

[9] For example, Joe Pettit argues that churches have participated in and contributed to racial housing apartheid in the US. By opening new congregations in whites-only suburban communities, they have implicitly and explicitly supported these racist practices, which would not have happened if the churches had taken a stand against racial housing segregation and refused to operate in whites-only neighborhoods. See (Pettit 2020).

[10] However, it is important to note that some churches, universities, and other institutions are grappling with this history and engaging in reparations work. See, for example, (Georgetown University n.d.; McFarlan Miller 2020).

[11] This article notes that the per-student funding differences in wealthier and poorer school districts may be as large as $10,000 (American University School of Education 2020).

[12] My argument is primarily directed toward members of North American mainline Protestant churches and Christians who hold various forms of privilege (racial, economic, and otherwise). Those two groups are certainly not synonymous, but my primary audience is those who do fit into both categories.

[13] These practices might include models of church that do not include the burden of maintaining a physical structure, as well as those that engage in practices of economic solidarity, such as helping members connect to housing, jobs, or services, or supporting one another financially through times of economic hardship.

[14] Many Christian ethicists argue that reparations are the appropriate response to historical injustices perpetrated by the church, such as colonialism and slavery. See, for example, (Harvey 2007).

[15] This claim arises from my finding that the vast majority of books addressing church finance and Christian stewardship are rooted in a capitalist economic model and do not pay a great deal of attention to justice concerns. On a related note, it has been argued that conservative content also dominates more broadly in internet searches related to the Bible: (Wingfield 2022).

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Article

The Poor as Symptom: A Lacanian Reading of the Option for the Poor

Levi Checketts

Department of Religion and Philosophy, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong SAR, China; checketts@hkbu.edu.hk

Abstract: Latin American liberation theology contributed perhaps the most significant theological contribution of the twentieth century in the "preferential option for the poor". This insight has been an uneasy call to conscience for the magisterial Catholic Church, which has often buttressed the positions of the powerful. However, despite the central significance of this discovery, liberation theologians themselves often betray their own positions by romanticizing the poor, speaking on their behalf, diluting the meaning of poor and other such seeming shortcomings. This article argues that the incongruence regnant in discussions of the preferential option can best be understood through the Lacanian notion of a "symptom". As "woman is the symptom of man", the poor are the symptom of the upper classes. In order for nonpoor to understand their own socioeconomic position—including academically trained clergy—they must posit the poor as an Other against whom they understand themselves. As such, reaching "the poor" is an impossibility for anyone who is in a position to truly advocate for them. However, the insight of the preferential option tells us that the impossibility should be pursued nonetheless, with full understanding that it is an impossibility.

Keywords: Jacques Lacan; option for the poor; liberation theology; Emmanuel Levinas; ideology

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1. Introduction

The "preferential option for the poor" has enjoyed being the center of focus in Latin American Catholic liberation theology (hereafter referred to simply as "liberation theology") since it was coined in documents leading up to the Second Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellin, Colombia. Although liberation theology has remained a controversial mode of theology within mainstream Catholicism, this central tenet was formally adopted into magisterial teaching in Pope John Paul II's social encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* in 1987 (John Paul II 1987). While Pope Francis has expressed some criticism of what he considers liberation theology's excesses, some have argued that his papacy has "reconciled" liberation theology with the Vatican (Løland 2021).

It is tempting to say that the mainstream tolerance of liberation theology, as well as its expansion beyond merely the "poor" to include various other marginalized groups (e.g., in various other branches of liberation theology such as black liberation theology, Mujerista theology, Minjung theology and so forth), shows the unquestionable significance of this tradition. However, two challenges remain open. The first is the challenge ushered by more conservative strands of theology. The passing of fifty-five years, the end of the Cold War and the ravages of global capitalism have not been enough to soften the visceral reaction of some against any perceived creep in of Marxist ideology or methodology. This is a point of ideological dispute, so the intractability can only be resolved through ideological means. The other problem, however, is more subtle, and it is the subject of this paper. As liberation theology has gained more prominence it has, ironically, dulled its prophetic bite.

Liberation theology's preferential option has always been its strength and is perhaps the single greatest theological insight of the twentieth century (cf. Goizueta 2003, p. 143). This insight, liberation theologians are right to note, requires an entire reorientation of

our life—a metanoiac transformation. The simple truth of this insight has led to the prominence of liberation theology across the Catholic world. However, when this statement is expanded, liberation theologians often contradict themselves. The poor must be listened to, for example, but are said to be voiceless. Or the poor are our guarantors of salvation, but on the other hand, they themselves have to be evangelized. This seeming contradiction is under-explored in liberation theology. How can we make sense of this problem in good faith? I contend that Lacanian psychoanalysis gives us critical insight into this problem. The poor, as "the poor", exist as "symptom" of the upper classes, including liberation theologians. Because of the structure of our symbolic orders, it is impossible to simply break out of this framework, but the Christian eschatological orientation and a Levinasian "unsaying" help us recall that our own psychological limitations require us to place our hope in the perfecting work of God who alone is able to overcome the "impossibility".

2. A New Word: The Preferential Option

It is no great secret that Christianity writ large and Catholicism in a special way have too often been intertwined with the interests of the most powerful in society. Whether one looks at Constantine convening the Council of Nicaea, the conflict of crown and cross in the Investiture Controversy, the elision of military and religious aims in the Crusades, the secret policing of the Spanish Inquisition, the papal blessing given to the conquistadors or the ultra-monism of the First Vatican Council as the Italian Army took Rome, it is undeniable that throughout Catholicism's history, the hierarchy has long had a vested (or invested) interest in questions of political, military and economic power. Indeed, this is so typical that Karl Marx declared in "On the Jewish Question" that a state that claims to be Christian "can only escape its inner torment by becoming the *myrmidon* of the Catholic Church" (Marx 1978, p. 38, emphasis original). Thus, Marx's own atheism is rooted in the assumption that religion is inherently a tool of hegemony, and that a classless society would have to be rid of the power structure of religion. For roughly one hundred years, the magisterial Catholic Church maintained the corollary to this view—Marxism must be inherently anti-Christian and so must be opposed in its entirety.

At the same time, Catholicism itself seemed hard-pressed to prove Marx correct by buttressing the powerful and elite. Take the situation in the United States, for example. While early Catholic immigrants often were themselves marginalized and relegated to second class citizens, American Catholic leaders such as Fulton Sheen and Isaac Hecker wanted to convince the largely Protestant country that Catholicism was not only compatible with American mores but was the embodiment of the American spirit. Thus, despite anti-Catholic worries that an American president would be a vassal to Rome, the U.S. elected their first Catholic president in 1960. Few American Catholics seemed to think this was unfortunate—only radicals of the sort such as Dorothy Day, who was herself the frequent subject of ecclesial censure and reprimands, would deny that Catholics should hope to be fully integrated into American society. On a larger scale, the magisterium seemed reluctant to critique the machinery of power in the Industrial age. Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, to take the prototypical example, does critique abuses of power by industrialists, but places an equal burden of responsibility on the worker to cooperate with their oppressor (Leo XIII 1891). Similarly, Pius XI's *Quadregesimo Anno* asks capitalists to be more humane in their capitalism but flat out condemns communism as being without any hope of redemption (Pius XI 1931, para. 112).

The 1960s presented opportunities for a change in perceptions and understanding of the poor and the meaning of Marxism in Catholic theology. In 1963, following the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the U.S. nearly engaged in a nuclear war with the Soviet Union, Pope John XXIII issued the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, which affirms, among other things, the state's responsibility to ensure basic economic rights for its citizens (John XXIII 1963, para. 65). At the same time, the Second Vatican Council was discussing new challenges to the Church, which would manifest in three distinct stance changes that opened the door for liberation theology. First, the opening line of the Pastoral Constitution

for the Church in the Modern World prioritizes the poor: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, *especially those who are poor* or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ” (Paul VI 1965a, para. 1, emphasis added). The Church’s rhetorical commitment to align itself with the interests of the poor may not have been borne out fully in most countries following the council, but it gave justification for those who would take this position seriously. Second, the same document emphasizes the need of theologians to use new methodologies to help the modern age understand the deposit of faith (Paul VI 1965a, para. 62). Finally, the Pastoral Decree on the Office of the Bishops emphasizes the importance of local bishops’ councils to address the spiritual and moral needs of their own populations (Paul VI 1965b, para. 38). Taken together, these three important changes open the gates for local theologians, under the guidance of their local bishops, to use those methodologies that best express “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” of the poor as the proper task of theology. Thus, three years later, the Second Latin American Bishops Episcopal Conference gathered in Medellin, Colombia, where the phrase “preferential option for the poor” was first recognized as a central tenet of their position.

The emphases on new methodologies and the experience of the poor meant, to theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, Juan Luis Segundo and others, that the Marxian notion of praxis—a process of taking one’s assumptions of the world, trying to enact change, observing the outcomes, reflecting on the meaning and repeating—was the best option for directing the faith to the interests of the worst off. The tri-fold methodology of “look, judge, act”, responding to social ills outlined by John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* (and previously developed by Joseph Cardijn) (John XXIII 1961, para. 236), aligned well with Marxian praxis, at least as a methodology. And so Latin American clergy began reflecting on the lived poverty of the faithful in their communities, the origins of these problems and the needs of their church. In the Second Conference of the Latin American Bishops, the poverty of the region and its pervasiveness was a central theme, and the bishops called for the Church to be a “poor church” directed to “a sign and a commitment—a sign of the inestimable value of the poor in the eyes of God, an obligation of solidarity with those who suffer” (CELAM 1968, para. 7). From this cue, the first generation of liberation theologians took the orientation of poverty as a central commitment in their theological focus.

The expression “preferential option for the poor” is the most important symbol of this development of thought. Depending on which theologian one is reading, the expression means a prioritization of human rights (Boff 1989, p. 14), a “locus theologicus” of God “preferentially identified with the victims of history” (Goizueta 2003, p. 144), the “salvation and liberation” of those through whom “the mystery of reality breaks through” (Sobrino 2008, p. 19) or “solidarity with the poor and protest against the inhuman situation of poverty” (Gutierrez 2007, p. 30). The variations of interpretations suggest that the phrase itself signifies more than a simple dogmatic statement. But chiefly, the expression emphasizes the priority of the poor above the interests of the wealthy. The tacit or express cooperation of the Church with the elite is explicitly denounced. The “church of the poor” is oriented toward the salvation and interests of the worst off. The theology that articulates the experience of poverty is not the theology that the powerful have wielded. The Christ of liberation theology is a Jesus who truly dwelt among us, a God who suffers with the suffering.

Liberation theology gained notoriety, however, not because of this prioritization of the poor but because, in adopting a perspective of poverty, they recognized the conflictual nature of society. Marx’s insistence that society is contextualized by conflict is not well regarded by churchmen who have interests tied to the status quo. Paulo Freire’s language of “oppression” entails a clear demarcation of victims and perpetrators in society, and if the church has not always adopted the perspective of the poor, they must have propped up the guilty (Freire 2017). The language of class consciousness, so often tied to language supporting violent revolution, has been regarded as suspect, and liberation theologians have been regarded as potential instigators. Nonetheless, in a true imitation of Christ, liberation theologians insist on peace and harmony, all while the poor are devoured by the

rich. It is, in fact, not the liberation theologians who support violence, but the institutional church which props up systems of violence and oppression.

Liberation theology has earned the ire of many comfortable Catholics perhaps most sharply because it holds a mirror up to them. Thus, although Josef Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) condemns the violent injustice resultant from centuries of capitalist exploitation, he more strongly condemns the violence inherent in Marxist thought (Ratzinger 1984, sct. VIII). Just as Pope Leo XIII a century before, Ratzinger gives a pass to the violence of the powerful by placing the burden of peace on the weak. However, the witness of liberation theologians is vindicated in the blood of their martyrdom, those whose deaths disprove the inflammatory rhetoric. Famous examples, of course, include the assassination of San Salvador Archbishop Oscar Romero and the murder of the six Jesuit professors at the University of Central America. Liberation theology sees this cost as worthwhile because it is the cost the poor pay. As Jon Sobrino notes, the poor are those who are unable to take their lives for granted (Sobrino 2008, p. 58). They are the nameless "millions of victims and martyrs" of violence, and their witness demands our response (ibid., p. 17). The witness of liberation theologians, some of whom testified with their own blood (see Boff 1989, p. 11; Sobrino 2007), stands strong against the claims of an indifferent society and a church that has too often been silent on the issue of oppression.

3. Contradictions and Impasses

The results of liberation theologies across different cultures and perspectives should not be downplayed. But the preferential option articulated by Latin American liberation theologians has significant shortcomings, namely that it rarely accomplishes its goal of articulating theology from the perspective of the poor. Indeed, the theologies of liberation theologians often contain contradictions or blind spots when trying to lift up the voices of the so-called voiceless. There are a number of ways these shortcomings appear, but all of them to one degree or another are indicative of a hermeneutical impasse, a failure to truly understand the perspective they are championing. This failure, I contend, owes to the cultural background of liberation theologians. The poor are, to them, "symptom" in a Lacanian sense—a defining part of their identity existing outside of them. This not only explains the apparent impasses but also their inability to notice the impasses.

One of the more obvious failures is the notion of being "voices for the voiceless". In numerous expressions of liberation theology, the poor are characterized as the "nameless" and the "voiceless"—those who lack status in society and those who lack power. As Gustavo Gutierrez points out, we are to listen to the poor and "not pretend to be—as is said many times with goodwill that we are all aware of—'the voice of the voiceless'" (Gutierrez 2007, p. 31). And yet, his nuanced caution reveals that somehow liberation theology has acquired the reputation of being a voice for the voiceless. This is not in the least surprising, however, as Gutierrez himself, only a few pages later, takes it upon himself to articulate the perspective and to be the "voice" of the "nameless" woman in the Gospel of Mark who washes Christ's feet (ibid., 34). Similar parallel contradictions persist across liberation theology writings. The poor are those who reveal to us our own sinfulness (Sobrino 2008, p. 49), but at the same time they must be conscientized through evangelization (Gutierrez 1973, p. 116). The poor are the clients of Yahweh who have special privilege before God (Gutierrez 1973, p. 296) but are also the "crucified people" who appear to us as though abandoned by God (Sobrino 2008, pp. 4–5). The poor are the "nameless thousands" (Sobrino 2007, p. 99; cf. Hartnett 2003), while liberation theologians are named, even by each other, as models of faith (see: Sobrino 2007, pp. 99–100, 101). Ultimately, this impasse reveals the problem that the "voicelessness" of the poor allows them to stand in as proxies for the liberation theologians themselves. In Gayatri Spivak's provocative phrase, "the ventriloquism of the subaltern is the left intellectual's stock-in-trade" (Spivak 2010, p. 27); the "voicelessness" and "namelessness" of the poor is not the brute silence that defies our comfortable moral standing but rather serves as the bona fides for the speaking liberation theologian.

A second failure, less pervasive perhaps than the first, is the notion, in Stephen Bede Scharper's words, that "in order to opt for the poor, one must be nonpoor" (Scharper 2014, p. 99). "With goodwill we are all aware of" (to borrow Gutierrez's phrase again) as this notion is, it is quite obviously untrue. In the first place, this notion contradicts the central virtue of solidarity in liberation theology. How can one be in solidarity with the poor if one claims that the poor cannot advocate on their own behalf? How can the poor participate in their own liberation (Gutierrez 1973, p. 113)? The poor can and do advocate for themselves, and even, as noted by numerous Marxists, for the rich through the process of "false consciousness". Indeed, Freire's notion of conscientization, important in Gutierrez's theology of liberation (Gutierrez 1973, p. 116; cf. Freire 2017, p. 41), insists that the poor can and should be active in advocating for themselves; though, once again, this assumes that the non-poor contain the correct information, which must be imparted to the misinformed poor. Thus, the larger failure that Scharper's unfortunate phrase reveals is the assumption of the "entitled advocate" (Taylor 2003). Liberation theologians, themselves often coming from upper-middle class backgrounds and wealthier Western nations with pedigreed educational backgrounds and all of the due trappings for living among the professional class (if only as pariahs), write as and to "people of privilege" (Groody and Gutierrez 2014, p. 6). Their assumed position is the upper classes and their assumed readers are of the same category. Scharper's expression reveals, then, that much of the conversation of liberation theology has been *by* and *to* the elite *about* the poor. As such, the preferential option for the poor has often meant the objectification of the poor, those "nameless thousands" who are talked about and not talked with.

In a third "goodwill" failure, the notion of "option for the poor" was undermined over time by the evolution of the notion of "poor and marginalized". Initially, this movement began as a recognition, in line with Kimberle Crenshaw's insights on "intersectionality", that poverty is exacerbated by other forms of oppression (Crenshaw 1993). Thus, theologians lifted up in an important way the concerns of U.S. Latinos and African Americans (Elizondo 2007; Copeland 2007), women (Aquino 2007; Hilkert 2007; Tamez 2007), LGBTQ persons (Tamez 2007) and peoples in Asia and Africa (Kalilombe 2007; Pieris 2007). But this shift also allowed for a sort of duplicitous movement. Virgilio Elizondo, for example, notes: "No matter how much individuals of [minority] ethnic backgrounds succeed *economically*, educationally and professionally, the dominant culture by and large still considered them inferior others" (Elizondo 2007, p. 160, emphasis mine). As he points out at the beginning of his essay, despite ascending into the professional class, Elizondo still felt disfavored by virtue of his ethnic background as a Mexican American. The *despite* is telling: Elizondo willingly flees poverty but cannot flee his ethnicity. Thus, he adapts the notion of "poor" to mean something beyond mere material poverty (cf. Hartnett 2003) to include the "spiritually" and "existentially" poor, some of whom are in the upper socioeconomic classes (Elizondo 2007, p. 159). When option for the poor and marginalized eventually means even options for those who exploit the poor, then the symbol has become entirely distorted.

A fourth contradiction lies in the romanticization of the poor. Jon Sobrino cautions against this tendency, recognizing the inhumanity of the condition of created poverty (Sobrino 2008, p. 9). And yet, Sobrino himself speaks quite romantically about the poor—the "crucified people", those who bring us salvation (ibid., 3, p. 49). Other liberation theologians repeat this error, waxing lyrically about the "the just ones" (Gutierrez 1973, p. 297), the happy poor (Sobrino 2008, p. 15), spiritual children (Gutierrez 1973, p. 297; Boff 1989, p. 23), icons (Sobrino 2008, p. 75), those who hear the divine call (Boff 1989, p. 81), God's "suffering servant" (Gutierrez 1973, p. 202; Boff 1989, p. 86; Sobrino 2008, p. 4) and so forth. The overall image one gets from this view is that the poor are entirely innocent saints. While this aims to correct the vilification of the poor (a term that itself bears the traces of anti-poor sentiment), the result is the poor remain useful abstractions and not real persons. One should understand the poor as sinners and saints, as holy and vile, as persons who do make decisions—constrained as they may be—within a constellation of options. To describe the poor as mere victims, or to impinge on them the burden of granting our salvation to us, is

to reinscribe the process of erasing their subjectivity. It is to continue to fail to see the faces or hear the voices of the poor as they are relegated to types.

Fifth, then, this leads to the question of why, after sixty years of liberation theology, are the poor still silent? Why have we not heard the poor in their own words? Gayatri Spivak's provocative question "can the subaltern speak?" seems to be answered negatively by liberation theologians who describe the poor as voiceless. Indeed, the reality is rather that theologians generally—including liberation theologians—have not learned to listen to the poor. To say the poor are voiceless is another way of saying they are unheard. The poor do, in fact, speak. Indeed, the poor quite often have to speak in the language that the upper classes will understand. Consider "Mrs. H", a poor Irish mother pleading to the Archbishop of Dublin for aid. She knows the archbishop is perhaps more concerned about losing Catholic faithful to Protestants than about the deaths of the poor (assuming, perhaps, that the faithful poor will wind up in heaven). Thus, to incentivize the archbishop to hastily send aid, she threatens apostasy, noting that a relative has promised aid if she becomes a Protestant, though she has resisted so far (Earner-Byrne 2017, pp. 14–15). Irish historian Lindsey Earner-Byrne notes several other such "speech" acts of the poor who understand how they are seen by the upper classes—they characterize themselves as pious, down on their luck, victims of circumstance, repentant sinners or potential apostates, all to elicit sympathy to their cause.

Thus, a final impasse: the upper classes must educate the poor for their liberation while claiming the poor are voiceless. In fact, the poor speak, but are not heard because pedagogy itself is a type of master discourse. Thus arises the apparent irony that liberation theologians are to, on one hand, adopt the perspective of the worst off, but also, on the other, educate the oppressed to their oppression. The process of praxis, meant to be transformative and dynamic, is a feedback loop. The assumption that the poor are oppressed fuels the adopted perspective of poverty, namely the view that the poor are oppressed and silenced. The "conscientized" upper classes then educate the poor to conscientize them of their own oppression. If the poor accept this, then the assumption that the poor were hapless victims unable to speak their own perspective is verified. If the poor reject this, they are deemed victims of false consciousness. It is important to note that whether or not the assumption that the poor are oppressed is true is irrelevant; what matters in this situation is that the so-called option for the poor actually begins as an option from the perspective of the non-poor and is ascribed to the poor after the fact.

The beginning of a way out of these impasses would be to start a liberation theology that begins authentically from the voice of the poor. This is a long-standing challenge of Marxism generally—the revolution of the proletariat should actually be led by the proletariat and not by intellectual or military leaders, as has typically been the case. However, the degree to which the poor accept the proposition that they are oppressed and need to overturn the system of their oppression varies from place to place. The poor understand their position as poor in various forms—as misfortune, as fate, as cosmic justice, as a temporary setback or as truly human-inflicted injustice. The meaning of their poverty, as well as whether or how they wish to escape it, will depend in part on their location in culture, economic systems, political structures and religious beliefs. As a result, it is not unfair for liberation theologians to declare that the poor are oppressed—they need only look at economic history and its social ramifications—but to say this as though they were speaking from the voice of the poor is disingenuous. To declare that the poor need to be liberated and that one is going to help the poor in understanding their need for liberation is fine as long as one is willing to confess that it is a declaration made from above and not from below. But to avoid the temptation to speak on behalf of the poor, one must be ready to "unsay" the declaration that the poor need liberation even as it is proclaimed.

4. The Poor as Symptom

This leads to a greater problem, however, which is illustrated by these impasses, namely that there are no "the poor". Awkward as this expression is, it reminds us that

the "nameless" poor remain nameless in part because they are constructed as a monolithic entity. They are not Rosita Herrera or Jose Lopez, peasants living in a shack with four children and a handful of chickens on a farm they work for a landlord—they are "the poor". "The poor" must remain nameless because they are an abstraction, a construction of the bourgeoisie necessary to create the class unity of the dominant class. As a monolithic entity, the poor are, in the words of Jacques Lacan, the "symptom" of the upper classes. There are, of course, poor people, individuals with life histories, cultural backgrounds, networks of relations and so forth—specific Johns and Marys, Josés and Marias, Seans and Mollys, Cheol-sus and Young-hees—but no "the poor".

The intimations of this fact are traced out through Liberation Theology itself. Marcella Althaus-Reid, for example, notes that "the poor" described by first-generation Catholic liberation theologians are not the "urban poor" of Latin America. Her work explores sex and gender as a lens for talking about "the poor", including the prostitutes of Buenos Aires. These "the poor" are different from those "the poor" whom Gutierrez and Sobrino write about. "The poor" of post-Medellin Liberation Theology exist conceptually as Latin American peasants, and thus, other groups of the poor were left out. Often enough "the poor" are spoken of as entire nations, or even, as Gutierrez is wont to do, even entire continents. (Nonetheless, we must not look too closely at even this designation, lest we question whether Latin American middle classes should be included while North American homeless are not.) "The poor" of liberation theology are voiceless and anonymous because they are a monolithic entity. How can an entire peasant population speak with one voice? What name can the throngs of a continent have?

The non-existence of the poor is demonstrated, ironically, by the well-intentioned writings of those advocating for them. Where the liberation theologians say "the poor", one can read the same sentiments, ideals and apparently class spirit in Spivak's "subaltern", Marx's "proletariat" or Foucault's "plebs" (Foucault 1980). These are the masses Spivak so wryly notes function as puppets for left intellectuals. So, unsurprisingly, the interests of Foucault's plebs are his interests, as are those of Marx's proletarians. Indeed, the insistence upon the "rightness" of the perspective of one's projected alter-class is so sharply delineated that Lukacs can claim, on one hand, that only the proletariat can experience class consciousness because "the outlook of the [peasants] is ambiguous or sterile because their existence is not based exclusively on their role in the capitalist system of production" (Lukacs 2017, p. 47), while Fanon argues "only the peasantry is revolutionary. It has nothing to lose and everything to gain" (Fanon 2021, p. 22). The dialectically opposed readings of the peasantry and the proletariat between these two critical thinkers demonstrate the disconnect most clearly: the poor, whom they envision as being most in line with their own philosophy, are meant to be the ones who embody the Hegelian World Spirit that expresses itself in the act of revolution.

The reason Catholic theology still talks about an option for "the poor" (with or without the added "and oppressed") is because "the poor" is a necessary fiction for bourgeois theology. They are "symptom" for the bourgeoisie as "woman is a symptom" for man (Lacan 1975, p. 65). A symptom is "the effect of the symbolic on the Real" (ibid., p. 20). The symbolic constitutes, for Lacan, our entire framework of language and (conscious) understanding of the world. The Real, on the other hand, is all of reality, not all of which fits into our symbolic frameworks. The symptom exists in the liminal space where the symbolic comes up against the Real. The symptom is something that a person "believes in" insofar as the symptom gives meaning to the person's consciousness (ibid., p. 63). Therefore, as "woman does not exist" (ibid., p. 70), "the poor" does not exist. Obviously there are human beings we call women, but to discuss what a woman is is to accept the counterfactual, i.e., that there is man, and, in line with de Beauvoir's insight, woman is defined in relation to this man (de Beauvoir 2010, p. 283). Lacan takes this further—not only is woman defined in relation to man, but the definition of woman constitutes man. Without positing woman, there is no identifier by which man—the dominant gender in patriarchal society—can identify himself. The key, then, is that "the poor" is a symptom of the bourgeoisie (or,

more accurately, the dominant class). "The poor" is the necessary condition for positing a bourgeoisie and especially to establish the bourgeoisie's dominance. This *economic* marker is necessary as a descriptor for all, an umbrella under which the most diverse groups of people (peasants, factory workers, farmhands, panhandlers, service workers, sex workers, thieves, drug dealers, scavengers, cleaners, domestic helpers, nannies and so forth) fall so that the bourgeoisie can recognize *themselves* as one unified group.

Understanding "the poor" as symptom helps illustrate why Marx's hope for the imminent proletarian revolution has never been realized. What Marx and his followers failed to understand is that, despite the "goodwill that we are all aware of", he still approached the question of revolution from the background of the scholar class. For all the discussion of the poor needing to be part of their own liberation, the intelligentsia are more than happy to be the ones leading this charge. It is the educated, those already inhabiting privileged spaces within the dominant classes, who "speak" of "the poor". This unfortunately means that the poor themselves only recognize their classed role if they can see it through the eyes of the fearful bourgeoisie—they can only be radicalized if they see the literate, economically-motivated middle classes as their natural enemy against whom they must unite. While this narrative certainly persists among the bourgeois literati, it beggars belief that the "voiceless" poor would have this same consciousness. Thus, in direct contrast to Lukacs, it is *not* "the proletariat" who alone can have true class consciousness because "the proletariat" are a symptom of the bourgeoisie.

Thus, like the woman who must maintain consciousness of the man, who defines himself by defining her, the poor must be always aware of how they are perceived and defined by the upper classes within the anxious exchange of interpersonal connection (Lacan 2014, p. 264). The example of Mrs. H again proves illustrative: in pleading to the archbishop, she betrays amazing guile and tact—she does not fit the "holy" image of the poor as one who grants salvation—she threatens apostasy if her needs are not met. Earner-Byrne notes many such cases of the poor employing tact, strategy and cunning. These poor appeal to their religious backgrounds, the same backgrounds as liberation theologians' "the poor", but they recognize the intricacies of social, economic and religious dynamics at play. They "know the score" enough to understand how to appeal to fantasies about the "good" poor. But they are only able to do this because they are defined in their position as "the poor" by those whose identity depends on them being a monolithic other to preserve their own unified class distinction.

The reason why Groody and Gutierrez refer to themselves and their audience as "people of privilege" and Scharper claims only the nonpoor can opt for the poor is because "the poor" are a necessary symptom for the "nonpoor" in their identity as "nonpoor", and thus, only in this dialectical construction can "the poor" be advocated for. Thus also, "the poor" can be transmogrified into any number of alternative constellations that function the same way—proletarians, peasants, plebs and so forth, each of which descriptors functions as a stand-in for a general notion of "the poor" against dominant interest groups. To identify concrete individuals within this constellation is to reveal that the construction itself is only possible with its own self-deceptive consciousness. The poor must remain nameless because "the poor" are nameless; any named poor person escapes the tautological constraints of this construction against which the dominant classes define themselves. To be "Joe the plumber" is not to be "the poor" in this mute fashion. In turn, the definition of poverty is subject to redefinition at the whims of the upper classes. As Javier Echeverria notes, the definition of poverty has experienced alterations and redefinitions according to governmental and social interests—whom we want to include as "the poor", whether to expand our own circle of elites or restrict it, to enlarge our social responsibilities or to limit them, is entirely the purview of the upper classes (Echeverria 2014, p. 50).

Because "the poor" remain a symptom of the dominant classes, the poor as constituted in their individuality cannot be aggregated as an anomalous group. Those qualities that liberation theologians or various "people of privilege" attribute to them, whatever their significance for the dominant classes, are true of individuals as often as not. The meek, the

holy, the generous, the honest, the wicked, the naïve, the vicious, the criminal, the lazy, the earnest—every attribute ascribed to invoke a certain sense of who "the poor" are and how they should be treated—are more symptomatic of the person expressing the view than they could ever be to describe people whose sole unifying feature is a lack of material resources. They tell us what we think about ourselves and our relation to the barred Other of "the poor". They reveal our own desires and anxieties. In the case of liberation theologians, "the poor" are often ascribed too many romantic qualities—simple faith, grantors of salvation, innocence and so forth. All those holy attributes we wish to uphold are found in the poor of liberation theology. Recall Sobrino's thesis that martyrdom, the ultimate demonstration of one's Christian faith, is "the maximum expression" of "the reality of the poor" (Sobrino 2007, p. 93). The ideal Christian icon is pasted onto faces constituted by "voicelessness, and anonymity that millions of human beings have suffered" (Sobrino 2008, p. 24). "The poor" stand as an empty signifier onto which we project our innermost anxieties, desires, yearnings and fears.

5. Conclusions: Eschatological Tension

One must read the writings of liberation theologians—as is also true for subaltern scholars—with an eye askant. The intellectual pedigrees these scholars represent betray their "epistemology from below". Spivak, a Brahman, studied under no one less than Jacques Derrida and teaches at Columbia University; she occupies one of the most privileged positions a thinker possibly can. It is hard to not read in her own work the "ventriloquism of the left intellectual" she so astutely critiques in others. We see this as well in theologians such as Gutierrez, who studied with Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar and Marie-Dominique Chenu at Leuven, or Igancio Ellacuria and Leonardo Boff who both studied under Karl Rahner. One could hardly call these titans of theology (or philosophy, for Spivak) marginalized voices. Their educational pedigrees are unquestionable, except insofar as they are meant to represent any voices outside of the center.

The aim of liberation theologians to speak from the margins is further complicated by the celebration surrounding their work. After decades of teaching at prestigious institutions such as the University of Notre Dame and Boston College, first-generation liberation theologians' students and these students' students have secured academic pedigrees. The highly competitive nature of these graduate programs ensures that those who succeed their academic seniors are those who are already conformed to the writing and thinking style typical of bourgeois theology, just written in the key of liberation. To the degree that generations of theologians since the 1960s have furthered this work, the revolutionary insight of the "option for the poor" has become a cliché, in some ways a mere designator signifying one's bona fides in the right circles of Catholic theology. The marginalized view of the poor has become a central perspective, made clear by no one less than the head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, whose liberation theological engagement and context have given liberation theology renewed interest.

In spite of the way liberation theology has become banal, we should not underestimate the importance of the option for the poor. The freshness of this view can only be maintained, however, through something like the Levinasian concept of "unsaying". In addressing the question of transcendence, that is, what is "otherwise than being", Emmanuel Levinas insists that this can only be "stated in a saying that must also be unsaid in order to thus extract the *otherwise than being* from the said in which it already comes to signify but a *being otherwise*" (Levinas 1998, p. 7, emphasis original). Put in Lacanian terms, we recognize that in the saying of a new term, it enters into the currency of the symbolic order. It enters initially as an irruption, creating a crack or break in the world that exists, revealing the Real beyond (Lacan 1997). The initial iteration of the option for the poor was so significant because it was just such an irruption of the real into the symbolic order. But because subjects cannot exist outside of the symbolic order, this term must be adopted into the symbolic. Just as Heidegger's laborious terms like *Dasein* and *In-der-Welt-sein* became domesticated

by other philosophers, the option for the poor loses its bite because it is adopted as an official position within magisterial theology!

Unsaying the said means to renounce (or denounce) the development of liberation theology as it is being unfurled. This is necessary insofar as liberation theology seeks to speak from the margins, but to speak from the margins means one must never occupy the position of the center. At the same time, liberation theology hopes to be prophetic, to call the powerful to attention. The tension inherent in this work requires continual renunciation. The liberation prophet must, on one hand, remind the "people of privilege" she writes to that the focus is to be the poor and not her, and, on the other hand, she must continually question her own assumptions through the process of praxis, recognizing that the Other who is "the poor" is a barred subject, one whom we can never approach in fullness (Lacan 1998, p. 81; cf. Derrida 2008, p. 82).

In unsaying the said, we recognize that all of the statements made about the poor must be understood only through negation. A proper unsaying in liberation theology involves dialectically opposing those statements which too easily are accepted by the audience to whom the liberation theologian speaks. Thus, instead of Sobrino's "the poor bring salvation", we must say, "the poor testify to our guilt". Instead of "the poor are voiceless", we recognize "the bourgeoisie are deaf to their speech". Instead of "the poor are the crucified people", a statement that sanctifies the senseless evil done to the poor, we must insist "we are the hangmen". Against "the poor must be conscientized", the bourgeois intelligentsia must "unlearn what we are teaching". Most of all, in the unsaying, we must acknowledge that all statements are bourgeois distortions because the process of "legitimate" knowledge production is inherently hegemonic; to be able to speak to the rich means being unable to understand the poor.

Finally, we might unsay the "option for the poor" in the words of Jesus: "The poor you always have with you". Understanding the impossibility of crossing the barred subject to understand what it means to be marginalized, we recognize that the seeming dismissal of the poor by Christ can be understood as a mantra to contextualize our eschatological orientation. In the fallen world we inhabit, the poor we always have with us. No society has succeeded in removing the margins; to remove the margins would be to fulfill the coming Kingdom of God. However, because we are not God, and because we are unable to cross the threshold of the Other, we must recognize that ultimately our action is inadequate. The task of liberation theology, then, is to continually seek the margins, to retreat ever outward. The task is impossible because the poor we always have with us, and so our statements must *always* be understood as inadequate. The saying must always be unsaid. Therefore, the option for the poor is the unsaying of the bourgeoisie, the expanding of the circle, the continual epistemological humility in the face of the other whom we can never fully know because the other is wholly other.

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Liberation Theology Today: Tasks of Criticism in Interpellation to the Present World

Javier Recio Huetos

Universitary Institute for Religious Sciences, Complutense University of Madrid, 28040 Madrid, Spain; jarecio@ucm.es

Abstract: Latin American liberation theology appears to be an obsolete phenomenon that is unable to speak about the realities of today's world. Since the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published two instructions on liberation theology, the Vatican has been considered to have condemned it. Likewise, the Vatican of John Paul II and Benedict XVI focused on the reprobation of several liberation theologians attempting to silence their voices. However, liberation theology aimed at the realisation of justice in a world in which the injustice that gave birth to this phenomenon still prevails in new ways. This article establishes a relationship between liberation theology and critical thinking to offer an alternative to the future of liberation theology. We insist that, despite the end of the era in which both were born, they continue to challenge the present world. Using Adornian optics, we establish how critical thought constitutes a prophetic denunciation. Thus, liberation theology will be understood within this critical tradition and how it critiques the current reality, in which the logic of late capitalism prevails. Afterwards, the contemporary world will be studied from this point of view to try to discover the pending tasks of criticism. It is the question of discovering the tasks of critiques to challenge the present.

Keywords: liberation theology; post-Marxism; Adorno; neoliberalism; Latin America; Catholicism

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1. Introduction

Latin American liberation theology[1] experienced a period of victories and flourishing since the II General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, which met in Medellin in 1968. However, today, it appears to be a phenomenon of the past. This article philosophically analyses the tasks in the present for the future of the theology of liberation.

Liberation will be understood as a social movement (Smith 1991) equipped with a theory that directs its action towards the present. It is none other but understanding liberation theology as the reflection on the praxis of liberation, as self-conceived by liberation theologians (Gutiérrez 1972; Geffré and Gutiérrez 1974; L. Boff and Boff 1985).

Special attention will be paid to the main works on liberation theology's future: *The Future of Liberation Theology* (Petrella 2004) and *Liberation Theology after the End of History* (Bell 2001), which supposes two opposing proposals, as well as more contemporary works to be used for their criticism (Althaus-Reid 2004, 2007; Sung 2007, 2011, 2015, 2018a, 2018b). In reading these works, the choice is made to establish an alternative reading that, while attending to and borrowing certain analyses from these works, opts for a different proposal that involves attention to the Adornian perspective and the need to rehabilitate theory (Adorno 2007, p. 1).

The proposal involves a first section in which the choice is made to understand the theology of liberation within the tradition of critical theory. To achieve this objective, an approach is made to the question of the role of knowledge and theory in liberation theology and critical theory (Gordon 1996; Lamola 2018; Horkheimer 2000; Dussel 2014a, 2014b), as well as to tracing their influences on the theology of liberation (Lamola 2018; Coelho 2022;

Löwy 1996, 2008; Ellacuría and Sobrino 1994a, 1994b; Comblin et al. 1993; Dussel 2017b; Neut Aguayo and Soto Pimentel 2014).

After that, in the second part, the paper tries to understand the present world, for which it is necessary to carry out an analysis of the defeat of liberation theology from a historical perspective (Smith 1991; Lernoux 1982, 1990; Berryman 1984, 1987; Cousineau 2022; Comblin 1993; Dussel 1979; López Trujillo 1980; Hinkelammert 1995, 2021) and a socio-philosophical one (Fukuyama 2006; Hinkelammert 1995, 2018, 2021; Bell 2001; Mendoza-Álvarez 2016; Bingemer and Susín 2016; Adorno 2007; Harvey 1989, 2019; Gouzoulis 2023; Mau 2023; CEPAL 2022), which are mutually interpellated by each other.

The third section of this paper is its propositional part. For this purpose, a brief analysis of the present world is carried out, taking into account both the economic and cultural aspects of postmodern reality from the Marxist critical tradition and the critical elements of liberation theology (Adorno 2007, 2008, 2012, 2017; Reed 2020; Jameson 2007; Heinrich 2012; Mau 2023; Hinkelammert 2021; Maiso 2022; Bobka and Braunstein 2022; Schumpeter 2008; Horkheimer and Adorno 2007; Gordon 1996; Sobrino 1991; Dussel 2021; CELAM 2007; Gouzoulis 2023; CEPAL 2022).

In this way, a critical methodology for the present is developed, following the perspective from which critical theory and liberation theology seek to understand reality from the perspective of the victims. This perspective challenges the appearance of reality as a harmonious totality. Likewise, a critique of the critique itself is carried out, trying to discover the points through which it can be developed in a different world than the one from which it arose.

The results are focused on Adorno's philosophy, attempting to revive a radical critique of the present while retaining the progress of the past and refusing to succumb to the triumph of capitalism. The task for the present and future of liberation theology is, therefore, to reconstruct a theory capable of providing answers to the antinomies of the present.

2. Why Understand Liberation Theology as a Critical Theory?

Latin liberation theology can be presented as a critical thought. This theology draws its influence from Western philosophy (Lamola 2018), especially from a Marxist analysis. This is why da Silva Coelho argues that "with regards to its relationship with Critical Theory, it can be said that Liberation Theology in Latin America occupies a place in what we could call critical thought" (Coelho 2022).

The use that liberation theology makes of the work of Marx and Marxism is widely known (Dussel 2017b; Löwy 2008; Lamola 2018). However, this approach to Marxism has always been critical, far from dogmatism. It has chosen to use the tools at its disposal for analysing reality: "what attracts them is rather 'Western Marxism'" (Löwy 2008, p. 227).

Names such as Marcuse, Horkheimer, Gramsci, and Walter Benjamin can be traced and found in the main works of liberation theology (Gutiérrez 1972; C. Boff 1980; Gutiérrez 1988; Löwy 1996; Ellacuría and Sobrino 1994a, 1994b; Comblin et al. 1993; Neut Aguayo and Soto Pimentel 2014; Dussel 2017a). Other unorthodox Marxists such as the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui can also be found in them (Gutiérrez 1972; Löwy 1996).

Placing liberation theology in the tradition of critical theory is not, therefore, far-fetched. On the contrary, it allows us to point out its influence and expand critical theory beyond the academic limits of the so-called Frankfurt School and Marxian work.

This does not mean that liberation theology is simply a repetition of critical theory. In contrast, liberation theology constitutes thought that borrows from multiple influences (Coelho 2022).

This original thought can be located within the tradition of critical theory, not because of the content itself, but rather due to the way that a critical reflection on reality is carried out and the practical-transformative sense that is given to it.

If we can speak of liberation theology as a critical theory, it is not because of its specific content, but because of the method developed and the understanding of the role of theory in transformative praxis.

> Liberation theology is a particularly vivid example of how the purpose and the reflexive structure of critical theory operate. Recall that critical theory intentionally and self-consciously reflects on the particular situation in which it is rooted, in order actively to respond to that situation. (Gordon 1996, p. 98)

Liberation theology is a critical theory insofar as it understands that a radical critique of reality is necessary for social transformation. To do so, it is necessary to critique the negativity of reality (Adorno 2007, 2008), that is, from the suffering subject.

A theory is not constructed from an abstract place, as modern science pretends, but from a position in the world (Petrella 2004, p. 84). Building a theory involves taking a side. It is a political decision that constructs a place from which to interpret and interact with the world (Horkheimer 2000; Dussel 2014a, 2014b).

Critical theory and liberation theology consider that those subjects who are victims of the process of social reproduction occupy a place that is considered a non-place (Ellacuría 1991, 1:117). For liberation theology, this non-place refers to the "place of the cross" (Ellacuría 1991, 1:120–21) that the poor, the victims of the social and economic system, occupy. In this sense, liberation theology places the poor in the place that critical theory gives to the victims of society. In this sense, liberation theology argues that God is not neutrally observing reality, but takes sides with the poor and disadvantaged, and that Jesus Christ occupies this place of God on the cross, dying for them (Gutiérrez 1972).

It entails comprehending and scrutinising the world as part of a social transformation process. It recognises that transformative praxis is inconceivable and, above all, unfruitful without radical and immanent critique. Liberation theology can be understood as a critical theory to the extent that it understands itself as a reflection on and from the praxis of liberation (Gutiérrez 1972; Assmann 1976; L. Boff and Boff 1985), taking a side in reality.

3. Two Processes of Defeat

The concept of defeat discussed in this article is twofold.

On the one hand, it refers to sociohistorical defeat. Liberation theology loses institutional and social importance in a battle against its adversaries and counterparts.

On the other hand, it refers to defeat in the realm of social ontology, which occurs simultaneously with and as a result of the sociohistorical process. This is the ontological victory of capital (Bell 2001, p. 34). It is not an exclusive defeat of liberation theology, but of emancipatory thought in general. It points out the inability to build utopian projects that go beyond capitalism (Traverso 2021).

With this ontological victory of capital, the immanent laws of capital are further entrenched, elevating the commodity category to its highest power. Now, "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Fisher 2009, p. 1). It is a defeat that not only affects liberation theology but also all critical and transformative thinking.

However, in the face of capitalism's victory, critical thinking must seek in the contradictions—accentuated by the process itself—the way to turn criticism back into practice, to interpret the world for its transformation (Adorno 2007, p. 3), so that new forms of resistance to capital can arise.

It is this second defeat that will be the focus of the analysis, trying, nevertheless, to connect it to the present historical situation, as it is a form of defeat that is continuously reproduced.

Both forms of defeat involve each other, so the solution proposed will not simply come from the realm of theory, but from history. This proposal relies on the praxical capacity of theory, hence the use of Adorno, to transform the context in which it is carried out.

3.1. The Historical Process of Defeat

The historical defeat of liberation theology was not an isolated event. It is not a moment when liberation theology disappears. Instead, it is a process that we can identify in the decade from Puebla (1979) to the assassination of UCA martyrs (1989). Several significant

events happened during that decade, both within the Church and outside society, that we can highlight when we talk about its apparent defeat.

It is important to point out that the process of the historical defeat of liberation theology coincides with a universal historical process of the defeat of emancipatory thought in general (Trigo 2005, p. 45). This process could be marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the "end of history" (Fukuyama 2006). It coincides with a historical defeat of the alternative to capitalism (Hinkelammert 1995, pp. 25–37; Hinkelammert 2021, pp. 211–41). This is what makes it possible to speak of a defeat at the level of social ontology.

After the Medellín conference (1968), liberation theology enjoyed a four-year institutional "honeymoon" period, in which liberationists conquered the main positions in CELAM (Smith 1991, pp. 165–88) and it was accepted as the official theology (CELAM 2018). Reaction, however, began to organise itself around the Sucre assembly (1972), a counter-offensive at the following Puebla conference.

In Sucre, Alfonso López Trujillo was elected Secretary General of CELAM. Trujillo was an opponent of liberation theology and led the Church's positional turn to eliminate all subversive aspects (López Trujillo 1980): "The strategy, then, was not to oppose and condemn overtly the idea of liberation, but to reshape the meaning of liberation according to their view, and to subordinate it to the work of evangelization" (Smith 1991, p. 210)[2].

Trujillo made sure to prevent the presence of liberationist representatives at the Puebla conference (Berryman 1987, pp. 103–4). Many of them were, however, involved as advisors and assistants to the more progressive bishops (Dussel 1979; Smith 1991, p. 212). This was fundamental to the outcome of the conference (Smith 1991, p. 220).

Puebla did not turn out as Trujillo had hoped. Nor was it a victory for liberation theology (Cousineau 2022, pp. 3–4). The battle centred, then, on the interpretation of the documents produced and the positional play that each one managed to take in the decade that followed (Comblin 1993; Smith 1991, pp. 209–21; CELAM 1979). While liberation theology saw Puebla as a continuation of Medellín, conservatives saw the conference as a correction of their imperfections (López Trujillo 1980; Berryman 1987; Lernoux 1982, 1990; Smith 1991).

In 1978, Karol Wojtyla was elected to the pontificate as John Paul II. His election entailed the appointment of Cardinal Ratzinger as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This fact, in addition to boosting conservative positions on the road to Puebla and an institutional offensive against liberation, led to the publication of the two instructions on liberation theology in 1984 and 1986 (Ratzinger 1986; Lernoux 1990, pp. 89–104; Turner 2007). The publication of the *Rapporto sulla fede*, an interview with Cardinal Ratzinger outlining his theological ideas and Church project, also suggests a regression from the progress made during Vatican II. In addition, it presents a clear opposition to liberation theology (Ratzinger and Messori 1985).

These instructions were understood as a condemnation and were accompanied by the silencing and/or condemnation of several theologians, such as Leonardo Boff (Smith 1991, p. 225; Lernoux 1990, pp. 85–88), or John Paul II's quarrel with Ernesto Cardenal during the pontiff's visit to Sandinista Nicaragua and the subsequent condemnation of the Nicaraguan theologian (Lernoux 1990, p. 60).

Moreover, these condemnations were accompanied by an institutional replacement in the Latin American Church (Cousineau 2003, pp. 350–52; Trigo 2005, p. 46). With the accession of John Paul II to the pontificate, positions of responsibility changed hands. The Church stopped supporting the progressive bishops and, taking advantage of their resignations due to age, replaced them with conservative ones (Lernoux 1990, pp. 79–115).

During the same period, two transcendental events occurred that are significant for the symbolic acts they represent. These events marked the opening and closing of the 1980s and signalled the beginning and end of the process of defeat. These two violent events refer to the assassination of Óscar Arnulfo Romero in 1980 and the assassination of the martyrs of the UCA in 1989.

These murders are not one-off events but are part of a process of political violence from the very beginning of the liberation movement (Table 1). Repression against the Church became commonplace in the liberation theology movement (Berryman 1984; Lernoux 1990). Social and political action against national security dictatorships and the denunciation of injustice made the most socially minded religious people a target of professional armies (Lernoux 1982, pp. 15–60).

Table 1. Documented repression against the Catholic Church (1964–1978) [1].

	Threatened/ Defamed	Arrested	Tortured	Killed	Kidnapped/ Disappeared	Exiled/ Expelled
Bishops	60	35	2	2	2	3
Priests	118	485	46	41	11	253
Religious	18	44	7	3	3	26
Laity	12	371	18	33	21	6
TOTAL	208	935	73	79	37	288

[1] Extract from (Lernoux 1982, p. 466).

After the process encompassed by these assassinations, liberation theology entered a new epoch. This is the moment when we can begin to speak of defeat. Its influence began to wane, and it ceased to occupy the main front pages of the media.

Similarly, military attacks on liberation theology and its movement were supported by US aid. Reagan's fight against the communist threat led to US intervention in various forms: economic and military aid and CIA involvement in Latin America (Lernoux 1982, 1990; Smith 1991; Cousineau 2022).

3.2. *The Disappearance of the Alternative and the Socio-Ontological Defeat*

This section will briefly describe the resulting social ontology. The aim is to understand the constitution of the reality resulting from the victory of capitalism, a victory that, although it maintains the existence of inequality, seems to have caused the capacity for resistance and the socio-political response to vanish.

In the attentive reading of the sign of the times (Second Vatican Council 1965), Catholic pastoral work had been able to find a place in which to deploy the social doctrine of the Church (Scannone 2019a, p. 88). At this point, the emancipatory horizon was within civil society's possibilities for action. The idea of a transformative praxis appeared as one of the possible social imaginaries (Taylor 2004) of civil society:

> Under conditions of ontological insecurity (. . .) [i]n the face of an expanding revolutionary crisis, the conventional uses of Christianity were made irrelevant, opening Catholicism itself to being adapted in ways that allowed actors to strategically contend with an increasingly hostile political climate. (Reed 2017, p. 1)

In the period before the defeat, Latin American Catholicism had been able to ally itself with existing emancipatory movements. Emancipation constituted a viable alternative to capitalism. Whereas in the 1970s, Catholics had come close to revolution, with the change in social imaginaries, this is now impossible (Reed 2020, p. 154).

Historical defeat coincides with a transformation of reality in which the conditions that allowed its emergence have disappeared (Scannone 2019b, pp. 3–6), thus resulting in the disappearance of not only the political opportunity but also the factors of subjective will and consciousness capable of carrying out a praxis of liberation (Smith 1991, pp. 58–64).

This disappearance of context is not only historical but also accompanied by a transformation in social reproduction itself, sharpening capitalism's grip on the world (Mendoza-Álvarez 2016, pp. 274–76).

Thus, the alternatives to the existing reality disappeared, and the end of history (Fukuyama 2006) was imposed, naturalising capitalism as the ultimate reality: "the awareness that there is an alternative is lost. It seems that there are no alternatives anymore, and the Everything, the form in which the First World presents itself, is the expression of this

state of consciousness" (Hinkelammert 1995, p. 28). Utopia and emancipation now appear as impossibilities (Hinkelammert 1995, pp. 157–210), as thoughts that escape assimilation and therefore the security of the system: "the failed 21st-century socialist dictatorships have solidified a rejection to anything that speaks about emancipation, social justice, oppression and so on" (Aguilar Ramírez and De Beer 2020, p. 1).

At this historic moment of defeat, a transformation of the world's political economy was taking place (Scannone 2009, p. 64), from a Keynesian paradigm to a neoliberal one under the Thatcher and Reagan governments (Harvey 1989; Gray 2009). It was then that there was a victory of capitalism as a totality: "Neoliberal economics presents capitalism as an inevitably historical reality and proclaims its definitive triumph" (Bingemer and Susín 2016, p. 19).

The historical situation of the defeat of the alternative implies that the inherent laws of capital are no longer subject to restrictions (Hinkelammert 1995, p. 41). They can expand globally without resistance. They cover not only the entire geographic sphere (Harvey 2019) but also the sphere of social relations beyond the sphere of work. The rules of production expand and conquer all social relations of modern life (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007, pp. 94–136). There is such a dominance of capital that, as Daniel M. Bell argues, it "is not merely an economic affair (...) but is ontological" (Bell 2001, pp. 12–13). Then, "reified consciousness has become total" (Adorno 2007, p. 346).

The essence of capitalism studied by Marx has crossed all the limits of classical production, expanding into the whole of life (Dussel 2017b). There is no longer an individual sphere abstracted from the laws of capitalism:

> Capitalism has enveloped society, absorbing all the conditions of production and reproduction. It is as if the walls of the factory had come crumbling down and the logics that previously functioned in that enclosure had been generalized across the entire time-space continuum. (Bell 2001, p. 31)

With the "transformation of world capitalism, which came to light at the most dramatic moment of the crisis of socialism, i.e., with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989" (Hinkelammert 1995, p. 25), not only capitalism is transformed but, above all, the socio-ontological conditions of reality: "The culture of the advanced capitalist societies, has undergone a profound shift in the structure of feeling" (Harvey 1989, p. 39).

The victory of capitalism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses many aspects of life, requiring constant adaptation on the part of the individuals and societies that experience it. It is not a dictatorial victory in the sense of fascism, but the total and universal expansion of immanent, all-embracing laws: of the process of capitalist reproduction, which reproduces the laws and social relations of production in all spheres of society (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007).

Nowadays, although the socio-economic situation has not significantly improved for the masses in Latin America—since the beginning of the 21st century, extreme poverty has remained and even increased (Figure 1)—the transformative possibility has disappeared from the realm of possibilities. The ontological victory of capital has changed the previous sociohistorical context, disciplining the very desire of the subjects (Bell 2001), that is, transforming the very social constitution of the subjects subjected to the power of capital (Mau 2023, pp. 70–88).

In conclusion, it can be said that the defeat to which liberation theology is being subjected is contextual. The political context in which it could have been generated has disappeared, but the sociohistorical context has been maintained and even expanded with the emergence of new excluded subjectivities, namely, those who were "indecent" (Althaus-Reid 2004, 2010), the marginalised that the purely economic category of the poor used by early liberation theologians did not include (Althaus-Reid 2007).

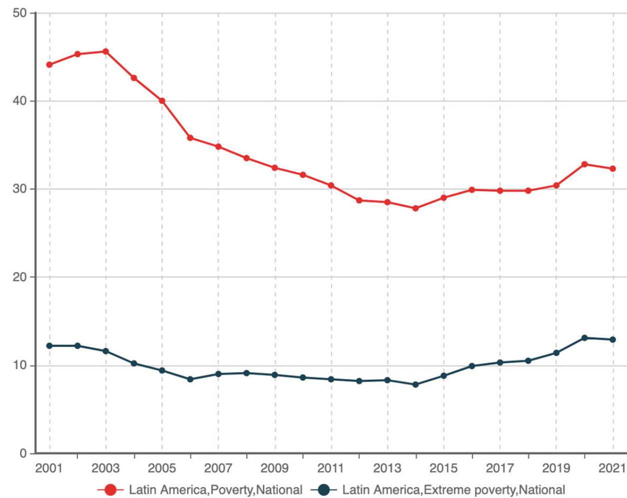

Figure 1. Population living in extreme poverty and poverty by geographical area, 2001–2021. Source: (CEPAL 2022).

It is therefore a political defeat, a defeat of social praxis, in which liberation theology is no longer able to offer satisfactory answers to the new reality. The rebirth of this theology can only be linked to the reappearance of a determined sociohistorical context that allows its development, for which the theory must be prepared. The recovery of this context is, in the first instance, a task for theory.

4. Present and Future of Liberation Theology

Concerning the future of liberation theology, there are several works to be taken into account. This article will focus on the works of Ivan Petrella (2004) and Daniel M. Bell (2001). Each of the authors represents a different and, to some extent, contrarian approach.

Although Bell and Petrella made some important arguments, their proposals fail, as they do not sufficiently consider the critique of reality. They are also unable to address the multiple faces of poverty that will be shown in the next section, as they do not take theory seriously, that is, in its unity within praxis, which the Adornian perspective makes possible, as it understands categories and concepts as material realities that constitute the damaged life (Adorno 2007, 2008, 2020; Maiso 2022). In the critique of those two works, Marcella Althaus-Reid (2004, 2007) and Jung Mo Sung (2007, 2011, 2018a, 2018b) will be reviewed.

Petrella argues that with the historical process of defeat, the historical project on which liberation theology was based disappeared. Having been incorporated—critically—into the socialist context, liberation theology would be unable to continue its transformative action in the present, losing the transformative potential of its theory in mere emptiness (Petrella 2004, pp. 8–10).

To remain relevant, liberation theology will have to put at its centre the construction of a new historical project adapted to the present reality. For Petrella, capitalism today has generated numerous versions of itself. This should imply a reduction in liberation theology's criticisms of capitalism since some versions of capitalism with a friendly face have now emerged (Petrella 2004, pp. 69–85). Likewise, Petrella's proposal does not set out how this "historical project" should be constructed but rather waits for it to emerge.

Daniel M. Bell's book examines how liberation theology can be relevant in a post-communist and postmodern world from his Radical Orthodoxy position. Bell argues that the ontological victory of capitalism has brought about the end of history (Fukuyama 2006), creating a reality that makes effective action in the secular world difficult. Faced with this situation, Bell suggests an alternative that involves looking to the Church. In his opinion,

liberation could only be achieved from within the Church, detached from the secular world. For Bell, the future of liberation theology consists in the refusal to stop suffering as an act of hope (Bell 2001, pp. 190–95), taking refuge in the interiority of the Church.

However, interaction with the secular world has been a fundamental element of Catholic doctrine and pastoral care since Vatican II (Second Vatican Council 1965): "the Council insisted on a third truth, the autonomy of the world, which is one of its most original and theologically revolutionary contributions" (Bingemer and Susín 2016, p. 32).

Bell's proposal would mean, for Catholicism, a regression to pre-conciliar positions: the abandonment of the world by the Church and a radical separation between the two. It is difficult to understand how the Church could seek liberation if it does not interact with the secular world (Second Vatican Council 1965; Scannone 2019a; Bingemer and Susín 2016, pp. 31–32).

While both approaches are interesting and need to be considered, they both fail—in their own ways—in the need to approach reality as it is, in its plurality, as both are set in a different context from the current one—as the liberation theologians did.

On the one hand, Petrella paid no attention to the subjects of liberation theology, as Althaus-Reid would do with her "indecent theology" (Althaus-Reid 2004, 2010). These are the subjects who are located outside society, but whose existence is necessary for social reproduction (Mau 2023, pp. 152–73). Bell, on the other hand, while accepting the postmodern world, understands liberation in its purely spiritual sense, which leads him to the *refusal to end suffering* as a theological way to salvation.

The approach presented here proposes an integration of liberation theology with the tradition of critical theory, paying particular attention to the work of Adorno. It understands the need to evolve thinking and avoid idolatry, while maintaining the goal of emancipation, without renouncing the use of social sciences and Marxism. The aim is to return to praxis from theory, to recompose the thought of liberation against a blind praxis, the *pseudopraxis* (Adorno 2007, 2008, 2017). To achieve this, it will be necessary to carry out a self-criticism of the theory itself to discover the subjects that have been forgotten and that, by their mere existence, question reality itself.

4.1. Signs of the Times: New Subjects, Same Struggles

> [The] connection between Christianity and progressive politics is not new, although it is often misrecognized [. . .]. The potential of this connection, you could say, is now dormant; but perhaps the present cultural and socio-political crisis we find ourselves in—climate change denial, increased wealth disparity, the rise of the political right, and class, gender, and racial discord—will prove an opportunity for its reemergence. (Reed 2020, p. 154)

Nowadays, the disappearance of Marxism as the main point of reference for social debate has given rise to the emergence of new forms of resistance and the identification of new subjectivities (Baptista 2017). In this context, a field of reflection on the reality of the poor opens up, which, although it has never been homogeneous (Baptista 2017; Althaus-Reid 2007), can be understood in a more comprehensive way than under the logic of classical labourism.

In this sense, the category of the poor has been expanded. This is why the criticism made by liberation theologians has become obsolete. In this sense, the criticism made by Athaus-Reid and Jung Mo Sung of the classical subject of liberation becomes necessary, as they understand this subject in a completely new way.

Latin American liberation theology "was never concerned with finding chairs for everybody but only with providing chairs for some of the nobodies of church and theology, the poor" (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 124). As set out by Althaus-Reid, traditional liberation theology neglected to include all excluded voices and conceived "the poor" without questioning the interrelated discourses of power and privilege (race, gender, sexuality . . .): "The poor who were included were conceived of as male, generally peasant, vaguely indigenous, Christian and heterosexual" (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 125).

The question of the transformative subject that so interested critical theory and liberation theology now must take on a new, broader reality. The space from which to realise liberation must expand, as the category of the poor expands.

Plurality appears, new voices with which to criticise and denounce reality (feminism, anti-racism, decolonial thought, etc.) that expand the conception of the subject from which the critique was developed beyond the purely economical (Baptista 2017; Althaus-Reid 2004, 2007, 2010): "The poor in Latin America (. . .) include urban poor women, transvestites in poor street neighbourhoods and gays everywhere" (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 125). The difference has long been forgotten, but this difference constitutes the very social reproduction of reality (Mau 2023, pp. 152–73), and it has to be addressed.

This expansion of the subject into a plurality of identities occurs while social inequality is expanding and accentuating and poverty takes on new faces (Filgueira and Peri 2004), as pointed out by the feminisation of poverty (Sung 2007, p. 6) (Figure 2). These facts only highlight the multiple faces of poverty, as the "poor come in many colours, cultural contexts and sexualities" (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 127), which cannot be overlooked in the critique of the real.

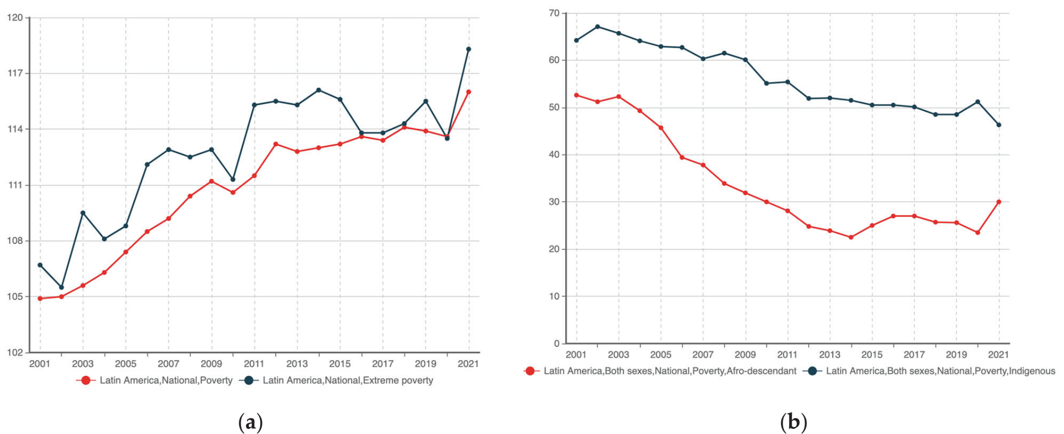

Figure 2. (**a**) Femininity index of extreme poverty and poverty in Latin America, 2001–2021. Source: (CEPAL 2022). (**b**) Population living in extreme poverty and poverty by ethnicity and sex, 2001–2021. Source: (CEPAL 2022).

The need for a theory that understands the economic and social aspects of dialectical interrelation becomes evident (Marx 1981; Adorno 2007; Jameson 2007; Heinrich 2012; Mau 2023; Althaus-Reid 2004, 2007, 2010). That is the task of the critique of the political economy, which understands the social relations that constitute society as a whole (Marx 1981; Heinrich 2012; Mau 2023; Adorno 2008).

It is not a question of discrediting cultural criticism by economic criticism—as a certain Marxism would do—but of understanding that criticism in general needs to attend to the plurality and multiplicity of reality itself (Mendoza-Álvarez 2016, p. 275; Scannone 2019a, p. 95; Sobrino 2007a, 2007b): to address the different forms of exclusion that occur under the capitalist mode of production, both discursive and material, in their unity (Dussel 2021, p. 961).

"Thus, a basic task for the Christian churches and for ecumenical organizations is to give visibility to the lives of those living on the periphery or outside the system" (Sung 2011, p. 261). Steps in this regard can be seen in the documents of the 5th CELAM Conference in Aparecida, a Church of the poor in which all the excluded peoples of Latin America are included (CELAM 2007).

As a critical theory, liberation theology can only undertake the critique of totality presented as an absolute—this absolute totality of capitalism and neoliberal society being

the supposed end of history—and reveal that it is nothing more than a false idol (Petrella 2004, p. 124).

The task of critique, therefore, consists in discovering that, behind the appearance of reality, there is nothing but exclusion and misery in the various forms that present themselves under the capitalist mode of production. The critique of the real must therefore focus on overcoming the existing order:

> To understand the social order as artifact is to grasp simultaneously the possibility of acting upon it, (. . .) To understand the social order also means that social action can take place on the basis of knowledge rather than illusion or ignorance. (Gordon 1996, p. 89)

Criticism must therefore study[3] reality if it is to end inequality: "the overarching reason to study capitalism is that one wants to contribute to the end of suffering" (Baumann 2022, p. 67). It is, for liberation theology, a question of sharpening the critique and interpretation of the sign of the times (Second Vatican Council 1965) for today's world. To discover that what was originally denounced has not disappeared with the victory of capitalism, that its denunciation is still present as a "message in a bottle" (Adorno 2012) waiting to be updated and criticised.

However, such denunciation should not uncritically bring the past into the present. Theory must address its failure and incapacity to challenge the world, as well as to make a merciless critique of its discourse on the issues it failed to confront—such as the mentioned gender, race, and sexuality issues that liberation theologians failed to challenge.

Against settlement positions (Andelson and Dawsey 1992; Petrella 2004), to recompose the historical project, it would not be necessary to abandon Marxism, but rather to deepen—radicalise—it in the critique of the order of the real—by uncovering the mystified character that lies behind the naturalised appearance—taking into account the new emerging realities. It is time to address the "indecent" issues (Althaus-Reid 2010) and the many faces of poverty and exclusion (Althaus-Reid 2007), which constitute an immanent reality of capitalism.

> The absolute ruling of the market's logic means cuts in social expenditure and exclusion of the 'incompetent' (the poor) and of those who are not necessary any more in the current process of accumulation of capital. [. . .] The sufferings and deaths of the poor, to the extent that they are considered the other side of the coin in the 'redeeming progress', are interpreted as necessary sacrifices for this same progress. (Sung 2007, p. 17)

The objective conditions for the emergence of a sociohistorical context of liberation are present: poverty, exclusion, injustice, etc. A theory capable of organising thought for the transformation of the present is now needed. A theory is needed that is capable of criticising not poverty, but the very conditions of the society that reproduces, through the existence of poverty itself, its antagonisms[4]:

It is the reality of those who are indecent (Althaus-Reid 2004), excluded from society as 'the others', that challenges the mystified unity of society as a transparent and naturalised reality. The role of theory will be to unmask reality as a sociohistorical construct in which exclusion is not an exception, but the norm. Thus, this theoretical position will have to be able to guide praxis to bring about conscious transformation. That is, to reconstruct the sociohistorical context in which the possibility of liberation is evident.

4.2. Adornian Optics on the Future of Liberation Theology

Returning to Adorno to try to resuscitate a thought in apparent decadence seems quite necessary since "much of Adorno's philosophical work turns precisely on this question of how we are to engage a living thought that is no longer historically current" (Jameson 2007, pp. 20–21).

Adorno's work represents a deepening of Marxist work, at the same time as it attempts to bring Marxism out of the historical impasse into which it has entered with the evolution of Soviet dogmatism. Adorno, who, since 1950, had been denouncing the decadent state

of Marxist theory, exposes the need to return to theory when the transition to praxis has failed:

> Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world (. . .) becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried (. . .). Theory cannot prolong the moment its critique depended on. A practice indefinitely delayed is no longer the forum for appeals against self-satisfied speculation [. . .] philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticize itself. (Adorno 2007, p. 3)

Adorno refers here to the *11th Thesis on Feuerbach* (Marx and Engels 2010, 5:5). Faced with the defeat of praxis, Adorno proposes not to rush to recover praxis but to reflect to avoid an unproductive praxis, which does nothing but reproduces the state of things. This is what, for Adorno, would be pseudopraxis, that blind action against the world that, in the final analysis, only serves to prop it up (Adorno 2008, pp. 52–54; Maiso 2022, pp. 100–3):

> If the transition to praxis has so far failed, that should not lead to a desperate escape towards immediate action, but rather to a more ruthless reflection on the relationship between the activity of thought and the objective shaping of reality, on the configuration of praxis and its mediations; that is (. . .) the task of critical theory. (Maiso 2022, p. 84)

In the face of the defeat suffered by emancipatory thinking, utopian thinking has disappeared. It has ceased to have a place in favour of political realism and pragmatism: "we have become all too practical" (Adorno 2020, p. 58). As a result, the theory has been discredited: the positions of liberation theology have been emptied of their subversive meaning and can now be used to legitimise the present and advance the deepening and expansion of neoliberalism (Petrella 2004, p. 9).

For Adorno, in this situation, the attention of theory has to be turned back on itself: theory "finds itself compelled to criticize itself without restraint" (Adorno 2008, p. 183). Self-criticism now appears as a fundamental task in the face of the twilight. It is not a moralistic self-criticism, but an epistemological one, directed at the very core of the philosophy that had promised to be realised.

Liberation theology, faced with the defeat of its possibility of realisation with the ontological victory of capital, would have seen the importance of its historical project disappear. In this sense, it suffers the same process of defeat as the philosophy that Adorno recorded. This philosophy is not just any philosophy but refers to emancipatory thought: Marxism. Liberation theology emerged in the context of the Cold War, borrowing and making use of Marxism from a critical perspective (Petrella 2004, pp. 8–10). Liberation theology, therefore, cannot but suffer the same defeat as the context in which it emerges.

Both Marxism and liberation theology emerged and gained relevance within a specific sociohistorical context. Both schools of thought are influenced by the social, political, and economic conditions in which they emerged and developed, and will lose strength as those conditions change. This is where criticism and self-criticism become most relevant: to prevent both lines of thought from becoming stagnant, entirely dependent on objective conditions for their realisation.

Criticism and self-criticism would allow these emancipatory thoughts to continue challenging the world based on new experiences and realities. They would prevent reality from setting the conditions for realisation and enable emancipatory thought and its subject to construct those conditions themselves. Instead of waiting for better times to come, they would actively work towards building them.

Critical thought, in the face of this defeat, cannot succumb to the temptation of immediate praxis. That is, it cannot resign itself to indefinite resistance, to waiting for the moment when praxis can once again realise philosophy (Adorno 2007, p. 3). On the contrary, emancipatory thought, critical theory, must turn back on itself, reflecting on the

impossibility of its realisation in the present to try to reconstruct the historical project in the new reality in which it finds itself.

It must, therefore, turn back on itself in a self-critical task that allows it to discover the weaknesses that prevented its survival in the context of defeat. Likewise, the task of critique must also focus on the reality of the present. By observing the new reality, it must be able to carry out the necessary self-criticism, which will allow the discovery of those problems that have not been sufficiently thought through, such as gender, race, and sexuality (Althaus-Reid 2007), uncovering the power relations that have prevented adequate critique.

The new situation, in which an emancipatory praxis is not possible, offers the possibility of overcoming this problem in theory: "paradoxically, it is the desperate fact that the practice that would matter is barred which grants to thought a breathing spell it would be practically criminal not to utilize" (Adorno 2007, p. 245). Faced with the impossibility of organising the praxis of liberation, theory is offered the possibility of reorganising thought and sharpening critique. That is, the possibility, as Petrella pointed out, of reconstructing the historical project of liberation theology, of organising critique as a prior step to the reconstitution of a historical context of liberation.

In this sense, we find a divided panorama of liberation theology. On the one hand, we find theologians such as Jon Sobrino, dedicated to the reproduction of liberation thought, delving into the question of the victim and its relationship with Christology (Sobrino 1991, 2007a, 2007b).

On the other hand, we find a wide range of liberation theologies that reflect on new emerging subjectivities. These include feminist theology, LGTBQ+, theologies of the South, and environmental theology (Gebara 1999, 2002; Diniz and Gebara 2022; Mendoza-Álvarez 2016; Mendoza-Álvarez and Knauss 2019; Althaus-Reid 2003, 2010; L. Boff 2006). However, these reflections do not enjoy the importance that liberation theology enjoyed in the past. The task, therefore, is not to do theory in the abstract, but to realise theory in praxis. That is, to construct a theory that challenges the world in its totality and is capable of transforming it.

It is not about interpreting the world, but about transforming it (Marx and Engels 2010, 5:5). But this does not imply forgetting about theory. It is about realising the unity of theory and praxis proposed by Adorno (Adorno 2007, p. 3).

However, this is not a task for liberation theology alone. It is a task for the entire critical tradition. Liberation theology's connection to the historical context from which it emerged determines its present and its future. The future of liberation theology, therefore, depends on the re-emergence of a sociohistorical context of liberation; this should not be expected, but built through the realisation of theory through praxis, considering the Adornian approach.

If we can consider liberation theology as a theological reflection on the historical praxis of liberation, recovering liberation theology for the present implies recovering the praxis of liberation itself. For this, theoretical critique and self-criticism take on a fundamental role in the construction of a new historical opportunity. Theory is the first moment of praxis, the reflexive moment that precipitates it (Ellacuría 1991, 1:47–122).

Faced with the blockage and the impossibility of developing praxis, there is no alternative but to reorganise thinking for the present (Adorno 2007). Reconstructing, as Petrella (2004) proposes, the historical project of liberation requires the reorganisation of critique and the reconstruction of thought to challenge action.

5. Conclusions

Liberation theology has been historically defeated in the context of global transformation (Hinkelammert 1995, p. 25; Trigo 2005, p. 45). There has been not only a victory of capitalism in the realm of the political economy with the disappearance of opposition and alternatives but also a victory at an ontological level (Bell 2001). As a result, the prospect of its historical project has been lost (Petrella 2004).

However, the requirement for the establishment of a novel historical project persists. Societal conditions have undergone alteration, but the persistent existence of poverty and exclusion remains.

As a result, it is necessary to undertake a two-pronged approach: criticism and self-reflection. This will entail criticism of the existing reality and self-reflection of the critical thought that comprised liberation theology: returning to the task of constructing, from a liberating praxis, not behind the previous theory, but trying to update and adapt it to the new "sign of the times" in which other social subjects appear with legitimacy: the category of the poor expands (Althaus-Reid 2007).

In contrast to the assertions made by Daniel M. Bell (2001), the development of a new historical project must not occur within the confines of the Church, but rather within the context of secular society. Furthermore, while Petrella's (2004) accurate differentiation of the various forms of capitalism is noteworthy, their underlying socio-ontological structure remains unchanged, as well as the exclusion of the others in the margins: not just the poor in the economic sense, but the "indecent" (Althaus-Reid 2004, 2010), the poor as an all-compassing social, political, and economic category.

The future of liberation theology lies in establishing a historical project (Petrella 2004) that resists the ontological triumph of capitalism (Bell 2001) while adapting the analysis to new cultural, political, and economic realities, such as the triumphant neoliberalism and postmodernity (Sung 2007) and the emergence of the forgotten subjects, the indecent realities (Althaus-Reid 2004, 2007, 2010). A thorough study of the concrete reality is necessary for this approach. Liberation theology, as a reflection on praxis, cannot abandon the mediation of social sciences, as it is from this reflection that a theological project of historical transformation can be constituted.

Establishing a historical project to resist the triumph of capitalism, and adapting to new realities, is essential for the future of liberation theology. The interpellation of liberation theology to the existing reality is parallel to the recovery of a critical Marxism far removed from dogmatism while exploring the emancipatory subject in its plurality and complexity.

The future of liberation theology is linked to the constitution of theory to praxis, a future that corresponds not only to liberation theology but also to emancipatory thought in general. It depends on the constitution of a sociohistorical context that allows its resurgence, and that task begins with the construction of an adequate theory in praxis.

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Notes

1 In this article, when speaking of liberation theology, reference will be made to Latin American liberation theology.

2 It is noteworthy that, during this period, there was a departure from the previously demonstrated support for the reformist proposals of the liberationists by the moderate bishops in Medellín: "The key to this shift at Sucre was the majority of moderate bishops. The moderates had backed the progressive bishops at Medellin. Afterwards, however, some of them began to suspect that they had been hoodwinked by the progressive organizers of Medellin, who appeared to have railroaded their agenda through. More importantly, many moderate bishops became disturbed by the radical consequences that Medellin produced among clergy and laity, especially Christians for Socialism, and so began to back away from Medellin" (Smith 1991, p. 191).

[3] The sense of study is that of criticism. To study reality means to criticise reality: to uncover the antagonisms and contradictions on which reality is based and that reproduce it, discovering the conditions of the "damaged life"(Adorno 2020; Maiso 2022). That is, to unravel the power that shapes society in interrelated discourses and social constructs (Althaus-Reid 2007; Mau 2023).

[4] "Society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it" (Adorno 2007, p. 320). "Bourgeois society, as an 'antagonistic totality', was only able to maintain itself qua its contradictions" (Bobka and Braunstein 2022, p. 38).

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Current and Future Potentials of Liberation Pedagogies: A Discussion of Paulo Freire's, Augusto Boal's, and Johannes A. van der Ven's Approaches

Jan-Hendrik Herbst

Department of Humanities and Theology, Institute for Catholic Theology, Technical University of Dortmund, 44227 Dortmund, Germany; jan-hendrik.herbst@tu-dortmund.de

Abstract: In a time of social crises, pedagogical approaches are necessary that are sensitive to power relations, social crises, and political transformations. The pedagogies of Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, and Johannes A. van der Ven represent such approaches. In this article, I aim to critically re-read these three theories and contextualize them within the vibrant and transnational history of liberation theologies. This historical approach makes it possible to uncover untapped potential for today and to think of liberation pedagogy at the cutting edge. Even though the three approaches were developed in contexts different from today's, Freire, Boal, and Van der Ven, reflected on some commonalities that are also characteristic of the social crises of our time. With their help, I am going to outline three elements useful for the much-needed elaboration of a contemporary liberation pedagogy. A lively *theory-practice-relationship* and an embedding of theory in social movements (1); a complex *analysis and critique of society and education* and an easy-to-understand short version of it (2); and a profound *emancipatory concept of education* that gives freedom to learners while not being politically neutral (3).

Keywords: history of liberation theology; history of liberation pedagogy; Paulo Freire; Augusto Boal; Johannes A. van der Ven; theory-practice-relationship; critique of society and school; emancipatory education

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1. Introduction

The present is characterized by social inequality and poverty, violence and war, ecological peril, and exploitation (e.g., Herbst 2020). In such a time, pedagogical approaches are needed that are sensitive to power relations, social crises, and political transformations. Liberation pedagogies (e.g., Wolf 2017; Oldenski 1997), such as Paulo Freire's, Augusto Boal's, and Johannes A. van der Ven's approaches, stand for such pedagogical thinking, which will be discussed in the following article. The article answers the question of the current and future potentials of these approaches to liberation pedagogy. The perspective of the article combines a general and a religious pedagogical view. In this way, the liberation-*theological* content of the approaches discussed and the potential of religious education (especially in schools) should become clear.

Four Weberian ideal types can describe the present references to liberation pedagogy. First, there is a *radicalized continuation*: pedagogues like Bell Hooks (1994), Henry Giroux (2011), Peter McLaren (2015), and Frei Betto (2018) carry on Freire's approach in particular and liberation pedagogy in general. Their references are not purely affirmative, but they remain within this tradition of thought. Their aim is to take Freire and other approaches seriously and to continue–and, if necessary, radicalize–them under current conditions (McLaren and Jandrić 2017). A similar development can be found in relation to Augusto Boal, for example, in his son Boal et al. (2015).

Second, there are *defusing adaptations*: authors of this reception often limit the impulses to the fact that liberation pedagogy brought about an orientation toward learning subjects and pupils. For example, Kira Funke (2010) embeds Freire's thinking in a social

constructivist pedagogy. Thus, she partially weakens Freire's socio-critical perspectives. After all, these ideas fit well with a school system that focuses on competency orientation. A similar development can be observed, for example, in the work of the *Centro de Teatro do Oprimido* in Rio de Janeiro, insofar as rather reformist adaptations of Boal's approach are advocated there.

Third, there is *harsh criticism and rejection:* authors like Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) consider liberation educators like Freire as precursors of identity politics today (which they regard problematic). In their view, these educators laid the groundwork for a dangerous tribal worldview. In some countries, such as the US and Brazil, liberation educators are even the bogeymen of right-wing identity politics. During his presidential campaign, for example, Jair M. Bolsonaro boasted to his supporters that he would "enter the Ministry of Education with a flamethrower to remove Paulo Freire" (quoted according to Woods 2020). In the horizon of such escapades, the vehement but well-founded criticism of educators such as Martin Stauffer (2007) seems almost harmless.

Fourth, the issue of *academic oblivion* is significant. Van der Ven's "Kritische Godsdienst-didactiek" is the prime example of this. This Dutch religious educator with an international reputation is best known for his empirical research and human rights pedagogy. His 700-page work on liberation pedagogy was primarily noticed mainly in the Netherlands and partly in Germany (e.g., Mette 1986). Without invoking the scientific discipline of *agnotology*,[1] it is clear that the forgetting of such approaches may be a consequence of their problems, but also of the changing zeitgeist and new epistemological interests (e.g., Herbst 2022, pp. 211–97; Knauth 2003, pp. 51–152).

It is interesting that the four types have different emphases. Type 1 and type 3 elaborate on the socio-critical and utopian perspective of liberation pedagogy but evaluate it differently. Type 1 perpetuates it. Type 3 devalues it. Type 2 and type 3 share reservations about this critical orientation, but deal with it differently. Type 2 deradicalizes the liberation approaches. Type 3 rejects them. Type 3 and type 4 are related because the latter can follow the former. Moreover, type 4 (*academic oblivion*), is probably the most effective way to achieve type 3′s goal: to debunk liberation theories and the questions and attempted answers that accompany them.

The aim of this article is to take seriously the strengths of the different types, especially type 1 and type 2, and to make them productive in their mutual field of tension. In doing so, I do not simply presuppose a position, but it should be possible to unfold a reasoned view–even in the face of the fundamental critiques (type 3). The following re-reading of Freire's, Boal's, and Van der Ven's approaches thus does not simply aim at a "Retrotopia" (Bauman 2017). Its goal is not to 'make liberation pedagogy great again'. Rather, I pursue a redemptive critique ('rettende Kritik') of the three approaches in the sense of Walter Benjamin. In doing so, the focus is primarily on their positive impulses, without thematizing their problematic sides in detail (in contrast to e.g., Zumhof 2012).

Moreover, also with a view to the following remarks, it should be noted that historiography of liberation pedagogy still too rarely considers the entire breadth of approaches (e.g., Orth 2021) and that, especially, out-of-school education still receives too little attention (e.g., Gärtner and Herbst 2020, pp. 421–609).

2. History and Context: Liberation Theology and Education

On the one hand, a distinction must be made between liberation theology and liberation pedagogy. There are theological approaches that do not address pedagogical issues and vice versa. For example, critical pedagogy in the U.S. often leaves out any spiritual or religious dimension (for a brief overview of this tradition: Vossoughi and Gutiérrez 2016, pp. 140–45)—even though this dimension has been increasingly addressed recently (McLaren and Jandrić 2017). On the other hand, there is an explicit convergence of theological and pedagogical thought among the authors mentioned in this article. In particular, their roots in the context of liberation theology are important in order to understand their pedagogical concepts.

The three approaches selected are representative of liberation pedagogy in the 1970s and 1980s. They come from Brazil and the Netherlands, two countries that were strongly influenced by liberation theology and political theologies. The names of Dom Hélder Câmara, Pedro Casaldáliga, Clodovis, and Leonardo Boff as well as Carlos Mesters or Edward Schillebeeckx are examples. The Dutch catechism and the Brazilian basic ecclesial communities became pioneers.

The connections between European and Latin American theology and church become clear in what the historian Gerd-Rainer Horn (2015) calls the "Spirit of Vatican II". This means that the Second Vatican Council was an *event* that linked church reform movements across national borders. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* was of particular importance. A key figure of this period was the German theologian Johann B. Metz (Metz 1973; Metz and Rottländer 1988), who promoted the exchange between Europe and Latin America (e.g., Horn 2015, pp. 37–43; Janßen et al. 2018). The "Spirit of Vatican II" directly influenced Câmara, the Boff brothers, or Schillebeeckx (and vice versa). Moreover, this spirit had an impact on Freire or Van der Ven, mediated, among others, by the aforementioned theologians. All these authors, the theologians as well as the pedagogues, shared the basic theological concept of a "utopian messianism" (Horn 2015, pp. 24–25). This refers to the idea that the kingdom of God is not otherworldly and purely transcendent. Rather, it aims at an active humanization of this world here and now.

The Second Vatican Council can also illustrate the historical connection between liberation theology and education. The various synods, such as the *II. Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellín* (1968) or the *Pastoraal Concilie van de Nederlandse Kerkprovincie* in Noordwijkerhout (1966–1970), tried to implement the decisions of Vatican II at the local level. In this context, educational efforts were also developed, for example, within the framework of the Semana Internacional de Catequesis (1969), which also took place in Medellín in 1968. The influence of this congress on liberation pedagogy was great (e.g., Grzona and Arés 1999, pp. 1588–89). It led to a transnational exchange (e.g., Exeler 1968) and to educators like Freire being received in Europe (e.g., Herbst 2021, p. 23). In the wake of this vibrant dynamic, scholars developed a political religious pedagogy and a liberation catechesis in Europe and Latin America (e.g., Gevaert 1987, p. 367; 1985, chp. 1.II). In this course, educators in French speaking countries (e.g., Avalos 1971), in the Netherlands (e.g., Lombaerts 1976), in Italy (e.g., Medica 1973), or in Germany (e.g., Exeler 1970), for example, received Latin American pedagogy (e.g., Van der Ven 1982, pp. 400–5). In addition to these strongly Catholic exchange processes, the role of the World Council of Churches, for which Freire was active in Geneva, for example, should also be highlighted (Ahme 2022b).

The differences between Latin American and European liberation pedagogy, which may be rooted in the fact that they were dealing with military dictatorships on the one hand and liberal democracies on the other, should not be ignored. With Horn (2018, p. 2), however, it can be argued that "the boundaries sometimes erected between post-Vatican II Latin American Liberation Theology and Western European Left Catholicism are, to a significant extent, historically–and theologically–unwarranted and artificial".

3. Liberation Pedagogies: Three Different Approaches

In the following text, I will present the three different approaches to liberation pedagogy mentioned above. They were chosen because they represent different aspects of liberation pedagogy: internationally known (Freire, Boal) and forgotten approaches (Van der Ven); intuitive (Freire) and systematic theories (Van der Ven); cognitive (Freire, Van der Ven) and aesthetic pedagogy (Boal); approaches from central Europe (Van der Ven) and the global south (Freire, Boal); adapting (Van der Ven) or partially disregarding academic customs (Boal, Freire). In this horizon, they represent a broad spectrum of liberation pedagogy and can therefore be used to reflect on the topic more generally than it would have been possible in relation to one or two approaches. Moreover, there are relationships between the three pedagogies, e.g., Van der Ven and especially Boal refer strongly to Freire.

3.1. Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Paulo Freire is the best known and most cited liberation educator. In the international context, the importance of Paulo Freire is enormous (e.g., Ahme 2021). Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy has left a deep mark on international pedagogy and religious education up to this day (Ahme 2022a, pp. 226–39; Byrne 2011). His thinking has several sources, such as Marxist theory and liberation theology. However, his approach also has some similarities with poststructural theories (Funke 2010, pp. 126–31). Anthropological and social ontological assumptions about humans and society, which also inform the thinking of Boal and Van der Ven, form the basis of his theory: it is not predetermined what the human being is. The human being is unfinished and open. People can free themselves from the conditions of alienation by which they are shaped and they can develop themselves in greater freedom. They can help shape society, which can be changed through practice, and work responsibly for a better world in which all people can live in dignity. This can be achieved by people joining together in dialogue. Freire's hope for a good life for everyone is based on this fundamental understanding of the world.

Against this background, Freire formulates a profound critique of modern schooling, which is determined by external factors such as economic expectations and the state's goal of combating extremism. The main subject of criticism in his "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" is the so-called "'banking' concept of education as an instrument of oppression" (Freire 1970, p. 7). This notion of learning is characterized by the fact that students are expected to accumulate knowledge. Curricula and teachers specify the content of this knowledge. Students are seen as a blank page, a tabula rasa, to be filled. The difference between teacher and student in this learning model is very large. An *imaginary red line* separates them. The teacher is the knower who passes on his knowledge. The students are the ones who are ignorant and absorb the knowledge. "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor." (Freire 1970, p. 72). Freire criticizes this model of learning in several ways. An important point of criticism is its political implications: it perpetuates a "culture of silence" (Freire 1970, p. 30) and thus stabilizes the unjust status quo of social relations. The bankers' method of learning makes students passive. They accept the world presented to them and conform to the apparent reality. The name of the model already suggests a perspective critical of capitalism, which Freire later elaborates in relation to a specific historical phase. "Neoliberalism" leads to a pragmatic reduction of education, to the training and evaluation of competencies that "the market" demands, which makes a critical-utopian education impossible (e.g., Freire 2007, pp. 97–121; 2008, pp. 104–20; for a discussion of these recent texts: e.g., Mette 2021, pp. 21–24).

Freire's counter-model to this is the concept of problem-posing dialogue, which centers around so-called "generative themes" (Freire 1970, pp. 79–86). Liberation is a main goal of this education; it is "not a gift, not a self-achievement, but a mutual process" (Freire 1970, p. 7). In this model of thinking, it is assumed that learners bring their own experiences and interpretations of the world into the learning process. These are shaped by the social conditions in which they have been socialized. Together with the teacher, learners now try not to simply adopt the knowledge presented to them, but to question it. The objective is to develop a critical awareness of reality. On the one hand, this means questioning seemingly self-evident basic assumptions and, on the other hand, accepting what stands up to criticism. In this model, there is no imaginary red line between teacher and student because students are experts in their own life experiences. In this sense, the people who participate in the learning process are *teacher-student* and *student-teacher*, respectively. Thus, dialogue is a two-way communication that is subject-oriented and"world-mediated" (Freire 1970, p. 7). Methodologically, Freire further develops his educational conception in relation to the study of so-called generative themes, i.e., the themes that emerge from the context of the students' social circumstances and shape them in their everyday life (Freire 1970, pp. 87–124).

Freire is also aware that education alone does not make a new society possible. Therefore, he draws two results from his dialogical approach and his goal of liberation. First,

education is understood as part of social movements that already choose social and political ways to change society. From the dialogical approach to the world arises the desire to act together with others and to shape coexistence (Freire 2007, pp. 144–47). The importance of social movements for Freire is exemplified by his sympathy for the Landless Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*). Moreover, he even recognizes in such movements a paradigmatic role model for other excluded people (Streck 2012, pp. 7–8). And second, education is not only or even primarily school-based education, but also extracurricular practice. Freire himself has always understood education as part of social change that overcomes poverty, exploitation, and oppression. Freire's literacy work and alphabetization campaign in the global south (e.g., Brazil, Chile, or Guinea Bissau), which he developed, respectively, and which applied the educational concept described, are an example of this pedagogical practice. Before teaching people to read and write, it was about learning about their context and knowledge. The goal was to empower people and to break the culture of silence. Only after that was it about developing a reflexive relationship to these pre-concepts and learning about the concrete cultural techniques. In such a program, reading and writing enable a new access to the world, cultural participation, and the possibility of criticism and resistance.

3.2. Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed

Augusto Boal, a Brazilian like Freire with similar experiences (e.g., migration biography and conflicts with the military dictatorship), further developed Freire's concept of education. Boal takes over the anthropological and social ontological basic assumptions from Freire for the most part. He transfers Freire's critique of the teacher–student relationship to the theater, where he also sees an imaginary red line between active actors and passive spectators (e.g., Boal 1993). He crossed that line, for example, by having people write plays in groups. He recruited actors from slums and prisons and had them perform their own plays. Overall, the Theatre of the Oppressed deals not only with the past and with the imaginary but with present reality and future possibilities.

Freire himself understood education as the development of consciousness and thus primarily as a rational process. Even though sensory perception, feelings, and the body play a role in Freire's consciousness-raising (Mette 2021, p. 23), their fundamental importance only becomes truly clear through Boal's general approach. With Boal, and especially in relation to the further development of his approach (Boal 2009; Fritz 2012; Santos 2016), an *aesthetic turn* enters liberation pedagogy. It is assumed that oppression involves not only thinking, but also feeling and perceiving. Thus, according to Boal, the culture of silence is not only based on cognitive structures but is inscribed in the body. The human senses of seeing, hearing, and smelling have been profoundly shaped by modern capitalist society (e.g., media consumption) and must be reappropriated. To achieve this, Boal develops a multi-layered approach that can be located at the intersection of theater, pedagogy, and political practice. He developed various methods and techniques that show how theater, education, and political action can collaborate to humanize society. Famous examples include the "Forum Theatre", the "Newspaper Theatre", the "Legislative Theatre", the "Rainbow of desire", and the "Invisible Theatre" (Boal 2022; for a brief overview, see Staffler 2009, pp. 66–124). Two of these methods will now be explained in more detail.

First, Forum Theatre is developed by a group of people who want to work on a political issue of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism, exploitation). In different ways, but mostly with the help of creative techniques and exercises (e.g., "Image Theatre"), this group deals with their own experiences on the chosen topic. In the course of this process, they develop their own play, which they perform in public spaces (e.g., on the street). Crucial for storytelling in Boal's understanding is thereby a conflict between protagonist (oppressed) and antagonist (oppressor). Invited and passing people can–the short play is repeated several times–slip into the role of the actors and act themselves. At the point where they want to intervene, they can shout "Stop!" and try out alternative ways of acting. In this way, the red line between actors and spectators is broken, there are only "spect-actors", as Boal

calls them. Thus, a new play is spontaneously created with old and new actors. After each different repetition of the play, the respective plot is reflected in relation to the potential for liberation. The so-called "joker" (*Curinga*) takes on the task of moderating the discussion between all participants and spectators. The main goal is to understand the problem, the conflict, in its complexity in order to create adequate and collective possibilities of action. One implementation of Forum Theatre is, for example, the reflection of controversial issues such as LGBTIQ* (Hammer 2021).

Second, Boal developed the Invisible Theatre primarily for public spaces (e.g., restaurants or subways). In a social conflict situation, a group of actors develops a play on a topic that is performed in real life. The bystanders, who are not actors, do not know (at first) that it is a play. They think it is an everyday scene and they must respond in some way. In these scenes, the actors play out typical oppression situations from everyday life, such as racist discrimination or a sexist assault. The method is well thought out and there are various protective mechanisms to prevent explosive developments (e.g., Staffler 2009, pp. 74–78). After the Invisible Theatre, bystanders are engaged in reflection conversations by insiders. This method can also be used in history or religion classes, e.g., to teach about the Holocaust or to deal with the topic "Christian churches under National Socialism". Such performative simulations open up cognitive and emotional learning opportunities with regard to one's own entanglement in contexts of power (Herbst 2022, p. 437).

3.3. Johannes A. van der Ven's Approach of Liberation Catechesis

Johannes A. van der Ven's approach is the most systematic outline of a Dutch liberation catechesis (on the term: Lombaerts 1976, pp. 15–20; Van der Ven 1986, pp. 432–33). Liberation catechesis is a "current" ("*stroming*" in Dutch) that discusses the social framework in religious education critically and contrasts it with the anthropological and social ideas of the Gospel (Van der Ven 1986; 1982, pp. 400–5). There are also other names for liberation catechesis, such as emancipatory, political, or critical religious education (Eijkman and van Lier 1979, p. 9). The main sources of liberation catechesis are, on the one hand, political and liberation theology (e.g., Metz and Gutiérrez), and, on the other hand, critical and liberation pedagogy (e.g., Mollenhauer and Freire) (Van der Ven 1986, p. 433). The anthropological and social ontological assumptions are more or less the same as those of Freire and Boal. The context, the Netherlands in the 1970s, was important for this kind of liberation catechesis. Similar to the developments of religious education in other European and Latin American countries, there was the so-called "anthropological turn" in theology and the Catholic Church. An orientation towards experience, everyday life, concrete persons, and their interests was common. Some scholars thought this shift further and developed political conceptions of religious education that reflected critically the societal context (e.g., Kuiper 1980, pp. 407–11; Van der Ven 1986, pp. 432–33). Indeed, Catholicism and theology in the Dutch 1970s were namely influenced by political and liberation theology (e.g., Hoger Katechetisch Instituut (H.K.I.) 1979), such as Van der Ven's academic teacher Edward Schillebeeckx.

In his major work, "Kritische Godsdienstdidactiek", Van der Ven (1982) develops a critique of contemporary religious education and argues for a new concept based on the biblical idea of the "kingdom of God" as opposed to a "bourgeois ideology". He thus shows how to combine fruitfully a pedagogy of liberation with a theology of the kingdom of God (Stachel 1984, p. 87). To illustrate this, Van der Ven's critical examination of how exactly religious education contributes to the reproduction of social ideology can serve as an example. For this purpose, the author uses the aforementioned and theoretically determined concept of religion as "bourgeois ideology" in the sense of critical theory and political theology (Van der Ven 1982, pp. 23–43). Van der Ven concretizes his considerations by means of a pedagogical analysis of church texts and the curricular orientation of religious education (Van der Ven 1982, pp. 44–61). He thus offers a qualitative-empirical approach that complements other studies in this historical period–in particular, a critical analysis of religious education textbooks (Herbst 2022, pp. 245–47). Therefore, he an-

alyzes two bishops' letters on religious education from the Netherlands and France to identify the extent to which bourgeois ideology is explicit and implicit in them. In doing so, Van der Ven (1982, p. 61) specifies this form of ideology on the basis of the characteristics "humanistic pedagogy", "personalism" and "compensation and differentiation programs" and transfers abstract social theoretical considerations to concrete questions of religious didactics. Within this approach, Van der Ven offers what he calls a blueprint for future analysis (Van der Ven 1982, p. 61). Finally, he outlines some perspectives on how his approach can be implemented concretely in schools and religious education (Van der Ven 1982, pp. 365–669). In the Dutch 1970s, there were also some projects that further illustrate how religious education for liberation can be concretized: Lombaerts (1976, pp. 3–11), for instance, presents two projects of Bulckens and the H.K.I. (Higher Catechetical Institute of Nijmegen). These projects and Van der Ven's approach, like Freire's, are about making space for children and young people's issues and giving them the opportunity to reflect on their social environment. At the same time, the pupils are confronted with the liberation message of Christianity, which can invite them to act and shape the world together with church or secular actors.

4. Current Potentials: Discussion of the Approaches

Even though the three approaches (hereafter: Freire and Co.) were developed in a different context than today, the three authors have given much thought to commonalities that are also characteristic of the aforementioned social crises of our time (chap. 1). Therefore, their approaches still have current and future potential. I will outline at least three elements that are useful for the urgently needed elaboration of a contemporary pedagogy of liberation:

First, I want to stress the *Theory-Practice-Relationship*: Freire and Co. were part of social movements responding to the respective contexts and the crises there (e.g., Freire and alphabetization; Boal and resistance to military dictatorship; Van der Ven and collective education in the 'Jewish Teaching House' (*joodse leerhuis*)).[2] They worked as Gramscian 'organic intellectuals' rather than as 'free-floating intellectuals' (similarly conceptualized in Critical Theory: e.g., Honneth 2017). They show that today liberation pedagogy can only work if there are social movements and fields of practice to which the pedagogues belong. This fact becomes even clearer when looking at the differences between the three authors. Freire's and Boal's thoughts have survived until today in the framework of international networks that support liberation pedagogy. Although Freire and Boal are not really established in the scientific community (like Van der Ven), their liberation pedagogies are more alive because there are groups all over the world that read and live their visions. In terms of the Theatre of the Oppressed, for example, it is worth mentioning: the *Centro Teatro do Oprimido* in Rio de Janeiro, the *Curinga Berlin*, the *Centre for Community Dialogue and Change* in India, the *ARGE Forum Theater Wien*, and the *Theatre of the Oppressed New York City*. There is also the *International Theatre of the Oppressed Organisation* and the international *Magdalena Network*. Freire and Boal are global phenomena although their approaches are not relevant to academic pedagogy (except in "critical pedagogy"). It is obvious that Freire's and Boal's style seem less academically elaborated than Van der Ven's on the one hand, but on the other hand, it is easier to understand and more vivid. This could be a reason for their success outside the academic world. The goal of both authors is not only a theory of liberation pedagogy but also a praxis that must be lived if it is to survive. Today's context for such practices of liberation pedagogy might be social movements like "Black Lives Matter" or "Fridays for Future". They advocate a "Revolution for Life" (von Redecker 2021) in terms of Freire and Co. While Van der Ven has also been influenced by social movements, his approach was not part of the corresponding groups and did not influence social movements as much. This is probably one reason why the "Kritische Godsdienstdidactiek" is not in general memory until today. It lacks the space and resonance in which his thoughts and concepts could survive practically in a social form of life. At this point, it can also be productive to seek connections to other concepts of liberating education,

such as concepts of humanistic psychology like *Theme-Centered Interaction* (e.g., Hagleitner 1996) which emerged and were received in a similar context (Ahme 2022a, pp. 231, 237–38). An examination of the approaches of Freire and Co. shows that "pedagogical concepts of medium range" (Gärtner and Herbst 2020, p. 626) such as *Anti-Bias* and *Social Justice and Diversity Training* can enrich liberation pedagogy because they are forms of living learning in the context of political groups.

Second, I want to highlight the *analysis and critique of society and education* that is necessary for liberation pedagogy. Freire and Co., within the framework of various critical theories, made a profound critique of education in the 1970s and 1980s. An important object of reflection for them was the notion of a so-called "hidden curriculum" (e.g., Giroux and Purpel 1983). According to this view, students learn objectives that are not in the official curriculum but have a social function. Behind the backs of teachers and pupils, an educational program unintentionally takes place that reproduces the social status quo. Students learn about competition and achievement through grades and other practices (Van der Ven 1982, pp. 23–65). By drawing a red line between acting subjects (e.g., teachers) and passive objects (e.g., students), for example, Freire and Co. assume that students learn to accept social hierarchies. This fundamental critique of education is inevitable for a liberation pedagogy. It is an important impulse for today's theory building because current critical approaches rather problematize single aspects like textbooks–but not the framework of the school system as such (e.g., Winkler and Scholz 2021). This places them in a tradition of critical engagement with schooling that other authors have also advocated (e.g., Ivan Illich, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Basil Bernstein, and Siegfried Bernfeld) (Chitty 2010, pp. 73–74). Many scholars challenge this tradition fundamentally, seeing it as overly unproductive. For example, Chitty (2010, p. 73) states that those approaches offer an "educational fatalism" which "helps the Right to make its case": schools and education cannot change society. Nevertheless, this critique does not apply to Freire and Co. because they developed an alternative concept to the criticized forms of education. Their pedagogy was groundbreaking because it combined a complex analysis *and* an easily understandable short version of it. Although the analysis found in Freire's or Boal's pedagogy is less systematic, complex, and scientifically based than in Van der Ven's thinking, all three approaches are based on similar basic assumptions as outlined. However, only Van der Ven (1982, pp. 23–65) discloses his theoretical interpretive framework in detail and applies it to real educational processes based on empirical research. In this respect, it resembles contemporary critiques that, while not as fundamentally oriented as Freire and Co.'s, are similarly systematic and empirical as Van der Ven's. Beyond Marxist analyses of society and schools (Freire and Co.) and their empirical verification, e.g., with regard to religious education (Van der Ven), references to postcolonial theories (Winkler and Scholz 2021), recent approaches of critical theory (Gruschka et al. 2021) or the theory of governmentality (Ideland 2019; Wohnig 2017) are constructive today. Such a multi-theoretical and scientific approach has many merits, including the opportunity of actualizing liberation pedagogy in a post-Fordist dispositif in which capitalism and emancipatory values such as autonomy and individuality interact (e.g., Boltanski and Chiapello 2007).[3] However, a difficulty in contrast to Freire and Boal also becomes apparent. If critical analysis is to be perceived globally, it also needs a simple and figurative language that gets to the heart of the critique. Freire succeeds in this with terms such as the *banking concept of education*. Even if this makes some seemingly trivial statements, social groups can cluster around such ideas because they offer a clear critique and vision. Freire's aforementioned critique of neoliberal education and Boal's critique of a "brain invasion" ("invasão do cérebro") (Santos 2016, pp. 294–303) as a description of internalized forms of domination could give direction to future critiques. What is interesting about Boal's approach here is that, in contrast to Freire and Van der Ven, he does not represent older notions of ideology critique as a critique of a false *consciousness*, but furthermore focuses on the corporeal dimension of ideology (e.g., practices, rituals, and discourses) that, for example, Bourdieu and Foucault emphasize (Rehmann 2014).

Third, I would like to stress the *emancipatory concept of education*. Even though Freire and Co.'s critique of society, school, and education is fundamental, they remain optimistic about the possibility of liberating education. In doing so, they follow Gramci's well-known dictum "Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will", which other critical theorists such as Max Horkheimer (1988, p. 337: "Pessimism in theory. Optimism in practice") have similarly formulated. Through critique and beyond it, the three educators offer a positive conception of education. Notwithstanding the differences between their approaches, they all aim at an emancipatory conceptualization of pedagogy by trying to enable people to think and act more autonomously. A first step in this direction is to remove the problematized barriers, such as thinking differently about the educators' role as teacher-pupils and empowering learners by engaging them with their own questions ("generative issues" or "sociological imagination"). Freire and Co. also assume that, as Rancière (1981, p. 102) writes in "The Ignorant Schoolmaster", "no party or government, no army, school or institution, will ever emancipate a single person". Emancipation cannot be institutionalized because institutions already embody social inequality *and* emancipation requires the willingness of individuals. However, there are institutionalized obstacles to emancipation that must be removed, according to the three authors. Even today, liberating education is based on reducing such obstacles as (e.g., Loick 2012, pp. 297–302):

- Fewer exams and more freedom to work on topics in a self-determined way;
- Fewer curricular requirements and more forms of extracurricular education beyond formal courses;
- The advocacy for subjects that enable a reflexive reference to reality and open up self-critical perspectives;
- The resistance to the economic logic of optimization and exploitation.

However, these perspectives, which aim at genuine thinking by trying to overcome the ideological barriers of reflection and discussion, face a difficult aporia: how to deal with the fact that not everyone wants to humanize the world? The question is significant because the lack of an answer may lead to two different problems: first, there is the danger of undermining education in the emphatic sense as a purpose-free engagement with an object of learning. While Freire and Co. aim at education, they also deal extensively with the social conditions of educational success. In practice, it is important to avoid the danger that combating the social conditions that prevent education becomes the actual goal and that education is thus subordinated to this political goal–as can also be observed in some social movements, where education primarily means socialization. Second, there is a danger that approaches to education that are critical of domination and emancipatory–contrary to their own intention–give rise to new forms of discrimination. For example, they can cause the exclusion of conservative students (Hammer 2021, p. 9).

These two problems cannot be dealt with *in general*. Freire and Co., however, offer conceptual perspectives to mediate the outlined tension *in concrete educational situations* (similar to others likeRanciére, Gramsci, or the critical psychologist Klaus Holzkamp) (Haug 2020). Therefore, they value *transparent* positioning, reflexivity, and the ability to criticize and disagree with educators (e.g., through retreats for small group reflection or dissenting opinions). The role of the "joker" in Forum Theatre, who can be seen as the structural equivalent of the teacher, illustrates this. Following Hammer (2021, p. 9), the "joker" combines directive (e.g., designing the scene; certain questioning strategies) and non-directive forms of learning (e.g., not taking one's own position; openness to the best solution). Thus, the "joker" connects humanizing positioning with the freedom of the students. In this regard, the works of Freire, Boal, and Van der Ven are instructive for contemporary pedagogy because each show how a true person-orientation can work and that it is intrinsically opposed to external commitments and curricular goals such as competencies.

In conclusion, it has been shown how an affirmative *and* critical engagement with the approaches of Freire and Co. can mediate the four types of contemporary references to liberation pedagogy described above. On the one hand, critical perspectives of type 2

(*defusing adjustments*) and to some extent of type 3 (*harsh criticism and rejection*) can focus on virulent problems that every liberation pedagogue has to deal with. On the other hand, affirmative perspectives of type 1 (*radicalized continuation*) and type 2 can emphasize the current significance of liberation pedagogy. Obviously, type 4 (*academic oblivion*) is the only type that, in my opinion, cannot contribute to the improvement of liberation pedagogy and pedagogy in general. At least the questions and attempted answers that accompany liberation pedagogy should be remembered today.

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Notes

1. Agnatology is a scientific discipline that has recently been developed (mainly in the U.S.) to examine the political and economic conditions of scientific research. In short, agnatology means a critical examination of the production of scientific knowledge and especially ignorance.
2. The "Jewish Teaching House" is a model of lifelong learning that goes back to the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig. Such educational programs offer religious education and an examination of Jewish writings and traditions.
3. The term "post-Fordist" refers to a shift away from the Fordist model of production and society. The core of this model, named after the entrepreneur Henry Ford, was the rationalization of production (Taylorism), which led to standardized products. This caused a strong division of labor in hierarchical structures and standardized work activities and consumer goods. In contrast, a post-Fordist dispositif is about individuality, freedom, and creativity, or the ability to innovate and autonomy, which are required in a project-based economy.

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Article

Embodying a Different Word about Fat: The Need for Critical Feminist Theologies of Fat Liberation

Hannah Bacon

Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Chester, Chester CH1 4BJ, UK; h.bacon@chester.ac.uk

Abstract: In contemporary Western society, fatness speaks for itself, affirming the fat person as an aesthetic and moral failure even before they say a word. Fat bodies, and fat female bodies in particular, are produced and reproduced as sites of excess and obscenity. Christian theology has protected itself from the contaminating touch of fat by ignoring fatness in theological discourse. Especially concerning is the relative absence of 'fat talk' from liberation and feminist theologies. It is time for a different word to be offered on fat that does not speak for itself and that emerges from the lived experiences of diverse women as they interpret their own faith and fatness. This essay explores the need for critical feminist theologies on fat liberation and identifies some features they might display. Here, I discuss Feminist Participatory Action Research and ethnography as methodologies that might help feminist theologians researching fat to prioritise the overlooked bodies and stories of fat women, and to continue liberation theology's longstanding commitment to constructing historical projects oriented towards social change. Fat liberation, as a historical and theological project, calls for a 'conversion' to fatness and for a critical questioning of assumed 'truths' about fat. It positions the struggle against fat hatred as a pursuit of life and as faithful participation in the liberating activity of the God of Life.

Keywords: fat; women; feminist theologies; Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR); ethnography; solidarity; conversion

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1. Introduction

According to Marcella Althaus-Reid (2004, p. 158), theological thinking that transcends the politics of limits placed on women's bodies necessarily leads to 'indecent, unfitting and transgressive theologies', theologies that refuse to be domesticated and civilised. Such theologies, she claims, always produce uncomfortable feelings because they engage in 'honest talk'. In contemporary Western culture, fat, and women's fat in particular, is a symbol of indecency. Representing too much appetite, too much corporeality, and (thus) too much femininity, fat bodies are produced and reproduced as sites of excess and obscenity. Christian theology has protected itself from the contaminating touch of fat by refusing to engage in honest 'fat talk'. This is alarming given the way fat phobia and weight-based stigma are destroying the lives of multitudes of people across the globe, especially women, contributing to a range of intersecting inequalities including economic, sexuality, and race disparities (C. Cooper 1998, 2016; Solovay and Rothblum 2009). Especially concerning is the relative absence of fat from liberation theologies and feminist theologies, given the ways in which fat is gendered and informed by other forms of prejudice, constituting a considerable site of marginalisation.

In this essay, I argue that there is an urgent need for an expanse of critical feminist theologies of fat liberation that draw on the lived experiences of diverse Christian women from within the fat community. I set out some of the historical, methodological, and hermeneutical commitments of such theologies as I imagine them, charging liberation theologies with opting for the '"decent" poor' (T. Cooper 2021, p. 39) and with ignoring

the existence of 'indecent' nobodies. Fat persons, and fat women especially, are among the indecent 'non-human' nobodies that liberation theologies have overlooked. Critical feminist theologies of fat liberation are, thus, crucial. These theologies will develop thick descriptions of 'liberation' drawn from a sustained engagement with diverse women's lived experiences of being fat, and commit to concrete actions that resource the flourishing of fat women's lives in defiance of fat shame. If the body is a place of divine revelation, then there is a need for a different 'word' or (more precisely) 'words' to be offered on fat, which originate from the uncensored bodies of ordinary fat Christian women and from valuing their flesh as sacred. Such feminist theologies of liberation will develop in conversation with the critical discipline of fat studies, and will do more than simply give voice to fat women; they will call Christian communities of all sizes towards a 'conversion' to fatness. If the task of liberation theologies is to locate voices that have been silenced and claim those voices in an act of embodied solidarity, then the challenge to ordinary Christians and to liberation theology is to *GET FAT!*

2. Searching for the Fat Christ/a

Where is the fat Christa? This is a question asked by feminist practical theologian, Nicola Slee, as she reflects on the multiple images and forms of Christa. We might join her in her querry given that Christa—the female Christ—has been imaged in ways that support White cultural expectations about beauty and bodily perfection. Slee, as a poet, finds the fat Christa in the enormous body of the world, 'diffused in the dimpled flesh of the earth' (Slee 2011, p. 141). However, we might need to extend the search even wider because it is not just the fat Christ/a that has been missing from much theology, including feminist theologies, but any serious engagement with fatness more generally. Mary Bringle's (1992) *The God of Thinness*, Lisa Isherwood's (2007) more recent *The Fat Jesus,* and my own *Feminist Theology and Contemporary Dieting Culture* (2019) are the only theological works to date that offer sustained theological engagements with fatness. In religious studies, at the intersections of religion and gender, there has been slightly more attention paid to fat embodiment by scholars such as Michelle Lelwica in *Starving for Salvation* (Lelwica 1999), *The Religion of Thinness* (Lelwica 2010), and *Shameful Bodies* (Lelwica 2017); by Lynne Gerber (2011) in *Seeking the Straight and Narrow,* by Susan Hill (2011) in *Eating to Excess,* and by R. Marie Griffith (2004) in *Born Again Bodies*. However, these works tend to focus on thinness or so-called 'eating disorders', and do not seek to construct alternative theologies about fat or to engage faith with the political struggle against sizeism. Where fat liberation is discussed from the point of view of scholarship and activism is within the critical discipline of fat studies. However, this discipline has been slow to consider the intersections between fat and religion, to the same extent as theology and religious studies have been slow to engage with the insights of fat studies (Gerber et al. 2015, pp. 82–91).

In feminist liberation theology, Lisa Isherwood has offered a rich theological engagement with cultural obsessions with thinness and related fears regarding fat. She imagines the search for liberation as the struggle to resist the desire-denying forces of heteropatriarchy and Christianity, both of which feed into contemporary thin-centric culture, setting up the skinny, young female body as normative. According to her, fat bodies reveal the truth of incarnation by occupying space without apology and 'in a way that violates the rules of sexual politics and of body movement' (Isherwood 2007, p. 103). She offers the Fat Jesus in celebration of fat women's bodies and desires, and as a sensual Jesus who lives counterculturally, proclaiming God's kingdom through food and through an embodied physical connection with the untouchables of his day. This is a Jesus connected to the flesh rather than a Christ who floats above it, and a Jesus who embraces the flesh with riotous passion, calling us to do the same.

My own work on slimming culture provides a feminist theological account of fat liberation resourced by qualitative fieldwork inside a UK secular commercial weight-loss group. Exposing how the Christian nomenclature of 'Syn' is recycled by weight-loss organisation and how women's salvation narratives reproduce dominant theological ideas

about embodiment and perfection, I reimagine the theological tropes of sin and salvation in ways that resist the politics of fat hatred. I align salvation with the daily cultivation of fat pride and with the personal and communal practice of a 'Sabbath sensibility' that dares to rest from the frenetic sacrificial work of burning fat. I also imagine salvation as the practice of 'sensible eating'—an approach to food that refuses to take leave of the senses and that embraces greater levels of attachment to eating. I identify sin with sizeism, with the victimization of food, and with a divided self that is 'conditioned to enact its own dismemberment' (Bacon 2019, p. 216).

While such feminist theological contributions have been important for taking fatness, and women's fat specifically, out of the closet, in so doing they potentially illuminate one reason fatness has failed to take up space in Christian theologies.

3. The Failing of Liberation Theology: A Preference for the 'Decent' Poor

In Western culture, fat is viewed as indecent and unsightly, and fat bodies frequently rendered invisible. Despite being ever present in the commercial media and at the forefront of medical, psychological, and capitalist discourses, they are erased by these very same discourses—pathologized and declared unclean (Braziel and LeBesco 2001, pp. 1–15; LeBesco 2004, pp. 1–9; Kent 2001, pp. 130–52). Conjured as diseased or impaired, morally weak, and as a drain on a nation's economic resources, fat people are seen as freakish and monstrous, and take up the position of the spectacle. In postmodern capitalist patriarchal society, there is no room for alternative interpretations of fat. One possible explanation for the paucity of theologies focusing on fat is that fat is assumed to be unsightly in theology and is best kept out of view. Whether wittingly or not, fat may be assumed to be so obviously obscene that its absence from theological conversation is deemed unproblematic if it is noticed in the first place.

In feminist and other liberation theologies, we might expect a more serious engagement with fat, not least because of how fat phobia feeds financial markets, commodifies thinness, and acquiesces with the neoliberal capitalist ruse of limitless choice and self-improvement (Guthman and DuPuis 2006; Guthman 2009). Feminists have identified how Western philosophical thought has associated a lack of self-control with women and reason with the intellectual pursuits of men (e.g., Grosz 1994, pp. 4, 14), exposing fat phobia, in part, as an outworking of patriarchy and the commodified pursuit of self-improvement as an attempt to make women responsible for their own surveillance. Theologically, corporeality and a lack of self-control have also been identified with women and with sin, glimpsed in early Christian interpretations of Genesis that present Eve as 'the devil's gateway' (Tertullian 1995, II.1.1), and that see her lust for food as the reason for Adam's sin (e.g., Augustine 2002, 12.12.17). This is largely due to the influence of Greek metaphysics, where matter was often denigrated and viewed as a threat to the operation of reason (Grosz 1994, p. 5). In this philosophical system, fat occupied the symbolic space of the female and was aligned with excessiveness and with a lack of restraint. Aristotle, for example, identified corporeality with softness and softness with incontinence, the female, and corpulence (Braziel 2001, pp. 231–40). Such assumptions about bodies and fatness have shaped the Western cultural imaginary and fuelled a suspicion of corporeality that establishes women's bodies as cultural carriers of guilt and shame, and women's fat as an especial site of danger. If fat is feminine, then women's fat is doubly feminine, and doubly dangerous. This is reflected in Western culture, where, as Le'a Kent (2001, p. 61) rightly observes, 'real women' are expected to be 'thin, nearly invisible'. Fat women are often accused of 'letting themselves go', and this exposes fat oppression as carrying 'the less-than-subtle message that women are forbidden to take up space (. . .) or resources' (Kent 2001, p. 66). The absence of fat talk from theological debate thus assists with keeping fat bodies out of sight and in their place.

However, the obvious relevance of fat to feminist and other liberation theologies makes its absence from these theological settings alarming. This difficulty, I suggest, is reflective of a wider problem in liberation theology, which Marcella Althaus-Reid helps illuminate. Charging early liberationists with failing to go beyond a 'gender-tolerance model', she

accuses early liberation theologies of including gender and sexuality without 'question[ing] further' how the pursuit of social and economic justice was supported by colonial ideologies of gender, race, and sexuality (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 24). Liberation theologies were only concerned with including *some* of the nobodies of the Church and theology (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 26), and so only sought to include the '"decent" poor' (T. Cooper 2021, p. 39)—the poor conceived as 'male, generally peasant, vaguely indigenous, Christian and heterosexual' (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 27). As such, the project of liberation theology 'did not set out chairs for poor women, or poor gays—or at least it never did so willingly' (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 27). Its message of love and justice did not stretch to those outside the decent structures of monogamy and the patriarchal family, and functioned as colonial theology to conform the poor of Latin America to European norms. Such a refusal of difference and tight control over who constitutes the poor, Althaus-Reid thus suggests, means that liberationists often continued to work in a colonial 'military mode' (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 28), characterised by rigidity and authoritarianism rather than disruption. Crucially, they failed to attend to the realities of the poor as people of different sexual and gender identities.

I want to suggest that the projects of feminist and liberation theologies have served in similar ways to demarcate which women's bodies are allowed to count as nobodies in need of theological attention and inclusion. While this is not a new charge given the way feminist theologies have sometimes ignored the voices of women of colour, overlooked gender diversity, and failed to adequately address the intersections between genders, class, race, sexualities, and dis/ability, the failure of feminist theologies to 'question further' and set out (larger) chairs for fat women suggests fat women are part of the indecent nobodies that have been forgotten. If liberation theologies have closed their eyes to the colonial ideologies of gender, race, and class, then it is my charge that feminist liberation theologies have similarly ignored fat bodies and insufficiently attended to how a diversity of women from across contexts are normed according to a White colonial thin ideal.

Liberation theology has also been charged with losing sight of one of its primary tasks: the construction of historical projects. According to Ivan Petrella, although Latin American liberation theology was born with the promise of not only talking about liberation, but helping achieve it by freeing people from material deprivation, it now struggles to imagine and develop such concrete historical projects (Petrella 2006, p. vii). Theology has been separated from institutions and from the historical and political task of devising concrete alternatives to the oppressive status quo. As such, it has been 'excused from dealing with the reality of massive social misery' (Petrella 2006, p. ix). This disconnect has meant that key principles of liberation theology such as 'liberation', 'the reign of God', and 'God's preferential option for the poor' have been separated from historical action and abstracted from the content of theology (Petrella 2006, p. 13).

The relative silence of liberation theologies on fat oppression evidences a similar disconnect. If the task of liberation theologies is to connect theology to institutions and rethink oppressive social structures, then they have not helped much with this yet when it comes to fat. Apart from the contributions of Isherwood and Bacon liberation theologies have not connected the good news of the gospel to revolt against the oppressive social system of sizeism, but the task could not be more urgent. As Prohaska and Gailey (2019, p. 2) observe, 'the oppression of people who are fat is systematic and systemic, as negative ideologies about fat pervade societal institutions'. Indeed, a number of social institutions are implicated in the re/production of sizeism, including health, political, and media institutions. In terms of health, we only need look at the medicalisation of 'obesity' to see how anti-fat discourse shapes health policy and practice. In England, the Department of Health and Social Care (2020) cautions that obesity is 'storing up future problems for individuals and our NHS' and warns that fat people are more likely to die from COVID-19, to suffer with poor physical and mental health, and are creating a drain on public finances, not to mention placing unwarranted pressure on health and care services. The solution, according to Public Health England's *Better Health* campaign (NHS 2021), is to empower fat people to make 'healthier choices' and to support those 'in need' to lose

weight through 'weight management' programs. The implication is that fat is an 'obvious' result of individual faulty choices and unhealthiness, and that the only responsible action is for the individual to remove it.

In the Euro−American news media, fat is presented as 'impending disaster' (Saguy and Almeling 2008, p. 53) and fat people are frequently pictured without heads with their faces cropped out of view. This identifies fat people as tragic and monstrous and confirms that fat people have no right to speak and nothing of value to say (C. Cooper 2007). In Euro−American politics, fat is framed as a risk to a nation's safety, described by the US Surgeon General appointed by President Bush six months after 9/11 as 'the terror within every bit as real to America as the weapons of mass destruction' (CNN 2003). Of course, the weapons of mass destruction did not turn out to be 'real', but such anti-fat sentiment shores up cultural assumptions that present fat as an enemy that must be neutralised.

By presenting fat as fault and as danger, such health, political, and media institutions enable fat people to become the financial fodder of capitalist weight loss industries, fuelling a culture where fat shaming and fat blaming are not only acceptable, but defended as necessary. They also conveniently cement associations between fatness and ill health when health professionals and fat activists have shown that fat does not necessarily correlate with unhealthiness. While studies show that high BMI sometimes accompanies other health conditions, they do not show that it causes them. Not only are diseases often associated with high BMI such as cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes present among thinner people, some studies suggest that higher BMIs are actually related to lower rates of cancer and heart disease (Oliver 2006, p. 26). Some health complaints often linked with being fat, such as high blood pressure, may be caused by stress related to fat stigma and conditions such as adverse body fat distribution and high blood pressure produced by weight cycling (Burgard 2009, pp. 46–47). Furthermore, studies that claim to link BMI with ill health tend not to control for variables known to impact this relationship, such as socio-economic status and levels of physical activity (Burgard 2009, p. 46). The ability to access fresh food and good nutrition, medical care, and exercise as well as over access to high-fat, high-calorie food plays a significant role in determining the health outcomes of individuals, and it is often those from minoritized communities, for example, those on lower incomes and from minority ethnic groups, who are especially impacted. In the US, 1 in 5 African American and 1 in 6 Latino households are food insecure, with non-Hispanic Whites accounting for 42.8% of US people in poverty in 2017, Blacks accounting for 21.2%, and Asians for 10% (Fontenot et al. 2018, p. 14). The preponderance of fast-food outlets and convenience stores offering cheap, high-energy, poor-quality food in low socio-economic areas where many already minoritized people do not have the time or money to prepare nutritious food from scratch means that poorer women, and in the US, often non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic Asian, and Hispanic women more specifically, are especially at risk. That women are routinely at the forefront of such inequalities is not surprising given they often shoulder the responsibility to procure, prepare, and serve food. Given the demands of work, childcare, and other caring responsibilities that women are often heavily involved in, fast food industries especially harm and victimize women's bodies by offering inexpensive options that are nutritionally poor (Yancey et al. 2006, p. 433).

Fat stigma is also linked to structures of racial prejudice and to the global spread of Western values. According to sociologist Sabrina Strings, during the renaissance in Europe, the fuller female figure was celebrated, but this shifted in the 18th century with the development of the slave trade. As slavery became more established, size as well as skin colour came to be a way to distinguish people into racial groups. Europeans were assumed to be the most well-disciplined and rational racial group and Black people—Black women in particular—were assumed to be stupid, gluttonous, and self-indulgent, loving food and sex; Black people were thus assumed to be fat and White people assumed to be thin. Fatness came to be linked to Blackness in the European imagination, seen as evidence of savagery and barbarism, and thinness linked to Whiteness and civility. These associations,

she argues, continue in the European imagination to this day, lurking behind contemporary phobias about fat (Strings 2019).

Theologies of fat liberation must thus attend to such structural inequalities and analyse the complex ways in which anti-fatness intersects with other systems of prejudice. Gender remains a key denominator in fat oppression because fat women often do not have the same life chances and social outcomes as thinner people. In employment, for example, evidence suggests that fat women are more adversely impacted by weight-based discrimination than their male counterparts at a number of levels, including hiring, promotion, performance, evaluation, and compensation (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012, p. 576). They are often paid less and can be fired or suspended because of their size. Fat women experience higher rates of household poverty and receive lower hourly and lifetime earnings than thinner people (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012, p. 577). Women who are fat and transgender are likely to experience significant barriers to participating in mainstream society (Vade and Solovay 2009, p. 167) and fat women may experience higher levels of poverty, not because fatness causes chronically poor health, but because fat discrimination often results in unemployment or low-paid work. The racist underpinnings of fat hatred in Europe and America previously outlined also expose its links with Western colonialism, which makes it unsurprising perhaps that fat phobia is now shaping women's perceptions of body image across cultures and ethnicities (Isono et al. 2009, pp. 127–38). Michelle Lelwica describes the White, thin, affluent, able-bodied, and heterosexual feminine ideal as a 'colonial paradigm' (Lelwica et al. 2009, p. 32) because it norms all women's bodies according to this narrow White Eurocentric template. All of these examples suggest that fat women are subject to various forms of interpersonal and institutional violence.

4. Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR): A Disruptive Praxis of 'Critical Hope'

If feminist and liberation theologies have overlooked fat oppression, but are concerned with understanding and critically responding to institutional, systematic, and systemic forms of dehumanisation, then it is time for feminist liberation theologies to develop historical projects around fatness so that new words can be offered about fat. Such work needs to move beyond a Christian form of 'body positivity', which remains rooted in the politics of thinness and only affirms fat people who wish to be thinner or who continue to worry about their weight (Harrison 2021, pp. 4–6). This common rendering of body positivity is problematic because it lacks any real political weight. It reduces fat liberation to the internal work of self-love when the reality is that self-love will not eradicate the methodical and systemic violence of fat hatred. Critical feminist theologies of fat liberation will instead concern themselves with the radical revolutionary work of disrupting dominant ideologies around fatness. This means exposing and critically analysing how the politics of anti-fatness are resourced by Christian systems of thought and are supported by the politics of race, class, sexuality, ability, age, and gender. It also means attending to the way anti-fatness is normalised through ideological systems such as neo-liberalism, capitalism, and colonialism, as well as reshaping theologies to dismantle these systems. To do this, critical feminist theologies of fat liberation will need to follow liberation theologies in engaging with social sciences, but must draw on the insights of fat studies in particular (I will explore this point in more detail later). Such engagement should not only be used to illuminate the contemporary social situation of fat hatred, but should also be given constructive theological significance as it could help imagine historical projects to change the status quo and improve the lived experiences of fat women that are diminished by fat hatred. The political project of fat liberation is thus a theological project because it is a matter of bringing together God's reign of justice with building and transforming the world.

Isherwood's *The Fat Jesus* and my own *Feminist Theology and Contemporary Dieting Culture* heed to this political challenge in many ways, but neither work engages with the real lives of fat women. Although my work on size is ethnographic, none of the women I

interviewed spoke about themselves as fat. Isherwood's work engages with the ways in which fear of fat is informed by a wider fear of flesh, and female flesh more specifically, but she does not draw on the real lived experiences of fat women. We might thus wonder where the voices and bodies of fat women are in current feminist theological work on weight. Indeed, it seems to me that even if we have found the fat Christa/Fat Jesus, we are still missing the concrete voices, bodies, and lives of fat women!

Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) provides one methodological framework that can position fat women's experiences at the centre of feminist theologies of fat and engage theology with the historical project of fat liberation. Following the trajectory of liberation theologies, this approach begins with the 'non-person', but does not seek an abstract universal or fixed notion of 'liberation'. Instead, it is driven to pursue concrete forms of action—personal, communal, political, spiritual, and religious—that are determined by fat women.

FPAR brings together feminist research with participatory action research to form what Reid et al. (2006, pp. 93–94) describe as a democratic research process directed towards social transformation, founded on the lived experiences of diverse women. This process situates the researched group as co-researchers with shared responsibility for creating knowledge and forms of social action that disrupt hegemonic systems of power. It attends to how social relations are embodied in women's everyday lives and how women's diverse and divergent experiences are embedded within larger relations of power. FPAR also employs an intersectional lens that recognises the complexities of women's experiences and the multiple ways in which various forms of oppression interlink, allowing for more meaningful possibilities for activism and social change. It is committed to making diverse women's voices more audible by allowing women space to narrate their own stories and ordinary lives.

As a methodology to aid feminist theologies of at liberation, FPAR situates the feminist researcher *alongside* fat women at the centre of the research and frames the research as a collaborative, participatory process. Here, fat women are not the objects of study, but are instead subjects with agency to influence the research process. My own research interests as a feminist Christian are moving towards investigating the theological meanings of fat from the perspectives of the experience of self-identifying fat Christian women, as well as exploring and transforming the barriers fat women experience in Church and society, especially around developing a positive body image. Based on the lack of feminist theological reflection on fat and on how fat is often constructed theologically as a site of sin, I am keen to explore with fat women how different women's lived experiences of faith and fatness can contribute to changes in thought and action, thus lending content to the meaning of fat liberation. However, by choosing to employ a feminist participatory methodology in my future research, focussing on the lived experiences of fat women, I aim to involve fat women in deciding what specific problems to address concerning fatness and the courses of action to pursue in the struggle for fat justice. This will involve using self-identifying fat women to assist in co-designing the research methods with me, as well as taking part in the data collection, analysis, and dissemination (c.f. Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014, p. 316). In this respect, this methodology emerges as a form of fat activism and as a radical theological praxis of fat liberation because it positions fat women as producers of theological knowledge and affirms their bodies as sacred. It affords space for a diversity of fat Christian women to voice their own lives and makes their 'unsightly' fat bodies visible, confronting the theo-politics of indecency that erase them with new words about fat that emerge from their own fat embodiments.

This feminist theological approach to fat liberation can also be seen as a form of 'research justice', defined by fat activist C. Cooper (2013) as 'rocket-powered ethics', which offers a paradigm for creating accountability towards the people on whom fat research is focused. Rather than speaking *for* or *about* fat women, it considers fat women as agents of knowledge, research, and social change. It is rooted in a feminist epistemology that recognises that 'the best knowers about fatness are fat people [. . . and] that fat people are

the appropriate people to produce knowledge about fatness' (Pausé et al. 2021, p. 538). Such a 'fat ethic' insists that it is morally incumbent on feminist researchers to include fat women in research about fat women and to recognise that fat women deserve to be self-determining (Pausé et al. 2021, p. 543f). Feminist theological participatory action research—as a form of research justice—thus politicises women's fat by making fat embodiment a resource for thinking, speaking, and acting theologically. Understood this way, it engages in participatory forms of 'honest talk' by bringing together fat Christian women to speak their flesh and bring their fat out into the open.

This is politically important because fat is often considered to speak for itself in contemporary Western culture. According to feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (1995, pp. 34–35), bodies often speak without talking because they become coded with signs, laws, norms, and ideals. Drawing on Grosz, feminist Samantha Murray states that fat bodies are routinely read as immoral, seen to already confess a 'truth' about the inner self. The fat body 'stands as an *exhibition* of a subject's moral investment in health/normality', she claims, exposing the fat person as a failure even before they say a word (Murray 2008, pp. 69–70). Critical feminist theologies regarding fat liberation will challenge this orthodoxy around fatness by redefining fatness on the basis of fat women's speech about their own bodies. In so doing, they have the potential to offer transgressive, uncomfortable theological words on fat that refuse to acquiesce with the status quo. Such theologies thus have the potential to engender what Cahill et al. (2010, p. 150) refer to as a feminist praxis of 'critical hope', where 'what could be, is sought; where what has been, is critiqued; and where what is, is troubled'.

This methodological framework does not insist that feminist theologians researching fat must themselves be or identify as fat. I am not fat and do not experience the social exclusion and marginalisation of being fat. I am, however, also not thin and am aware of the way my body is culturally read as being 'not thin enough'. I have not experienced weight-based discrimination in employment and have usually been able to shop for clothes on the high street (for example), but I have always been aware of my size growing up, compared with my twin sister as the 'chubbier' one, and immersed within cultural discourses that make me see my body as too big. I have felt the need to be smaller and have engaged in weight-loss dieting to try and become smaller (Bacon 2019).

Although I do not identify as fat, I do not position myself as an outsider to the diminishing touch of fat phobia and see fatness as a slippery, undecided category. Despite weight measures such as the body max index (BMI) seemingly offering objective clinical evaluations of bodies, the classifications used of 'overweight' and 'obese' have changed and shifted over time and in tandem with social attitudes and prejudices about body size. BMI is also often used by insurance companies to increase premiums and was developed originally based on a narrow White European template. As such, it does not offer an objective metric of a person's health. It is also possible to be clinically 'overweight' and not look fat or to be clinically underweight and 'feel' fat. Fat, then, is not self-evident and cannot be reduced simply to a 'visible stigma' (Saguy and Ward 2011).

Such a reading of fat does not, however, deny that fat is an adjective that describes the amount of flesh on a person's body. It simply avoids falling into the trap of essentialism, where fat is assumed to be self-evident and wedded only to a visual economy. It takes account of the way fat phobia impacts multitudes of women of various sizes and acknowledges that women's bodies often change over time. Fat is also a claimed site of marginalisation; an experience of being situated in a thincentric society where women's bodies are made to conform to narrow spaces (physical, social, cultural, political, and discursive) and where women who transgress these prescribed boundaries are made to feel as if they do not belong. If fat is an unstable category that can have multiple meanings—physical, discursive, and political—then insisting that feminist theologians researching fat must be 'fat' seems too simplistic and reliant on the (mis)conception that fat speaks for itself. Instead, feminist research on fat invites women theologians such as myself who

research fat, but who do not identify as fat, to reflect on their own privilege, power, and obligations (C. Cooper 2016, p. 38).

Of course, such an emphasis on participation in the doing of fat feminist theologies of liberation may underestimate the real or perceived risks of participation for some fat women (c.f. Reid et al. 2006, p. 326). The impact of fat stigma on the health and wellbeing of fat women, as well as the multiple ways in which fat women are disenfranchised within society and church, may cause some involved in this kind of participatory research to feel powerless and/or afraid to take collective action. Current political discourse on fat in Euro–American society certainly does not encourage any such collective organising and instead works to personalise and moralise fat. We have already noted how Christianity can assist with this, but American fat activist J. Nicole Morgan draws this into sharp focus. Reflecting on her own experience as an evangelical Christian teenager, she recalls how she used to think fatness was associated with a lack of self-control and became 'terrified' that her 'witness' would be sabotaged by the size of her thighs (Morgan 2015; also see Morgan 2018, p. xiv). Such theological constructions of fat, taken together with wider cultural stigmas, may cause some women to be reticent about challenging the theological and wider cultural cannon about fat. Some may fear family, work colleagues, or members of their churches finding out about their involvement. This must be taken seriously because, as C. Cooper (1998, p. 54) pertinently puts it, 'we live in the real world' and this is a world where there is frequently much to gain from being or aspiring to be thin, and consequently much to lose by coming out as fat and organising for fat justice. As such, it is possible that some actions will be considered too risky or threatening, and a 'fat ethic', where priority is placed on relationships, must be sensitive to this. These kinds of difficulties mean that feminist theologians must appreciate the many diverse individual and collective actions fat women may take.

5. Ethnography and Solidarity: Conversion Rather Than Allyship

Ethnography offers a valuable theological tool that allows feminist theologians to practice a preferential option for fat people and to epistemically prioritize the voices and stories of fat women, specifically as indecent nobodies. Empirical fieldwork and the use of immersive qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and different kinds of participation (physical, social, mental, emotion, spiritual, and theological) provide opportunities for feminist theologians to enter the social, cultural, and religious worlds of fat women. Ethnography allows Christian feminists to discern the sacred in fat women's lives and confirms fat women's bodies as sites of theological truth and divine presence. Where feminist theologians do not identify as fat, ethnography provides a strategy for bridging the gap between themselves and women who experience the lived realities of fat existence. It enables feminist theologians to develop thick descriptions of sizeism and to attend to the complex and varied meanings of fatness and faith from the point of view of those within the fat community. It also allows feminist researchers to engage in attentive listening through observations, interviews, and other methods—a form of listening that Nicola Slee identifies with the spiritual practice of prayer (Slee 2013, p. 18). For Slee, attentive listening means that we listen with our bodies, our emotions, and our intellects and put ourselves at the other's disposal, 'letting them speak as and when and where they will' (Slee 2013, p. 19).

Critical feminist theologies of fat liberation thus continue the task of liberation theologies in identifying liberation with the pursuit of *life* (c.f. Gutierrez 1991, p. 3; Gutierrez 1974). They involve feminist theologians alongside communities of fat Christian women entering into partnership with the Living God, who bids all humans be full with life (Jn 10.10), against the historical, systemic, and social evils of fat hatred, which stand to diminish life. As feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson makes clear, 'living' means not dead, and as living water is 'fresh, alive, flowing', the appellation of the living God conjures up a God who is 'full of energy and spirit, alive with designs for liberation and healing' (Johnson 1992, p. 4). Reforming Irenaeus' axiom, she claims that '*Gloria Dei vivens mulier*: the glory

of God is woman, all women, every woman everywhere, fully alive' (Johnson 1992, p. 15). Feminist theologies of fat liberation that interrogate the systemic conditions of diverse fat women's experiences of fat stigma and work towards different levels of collective action in the struggle for fat justice, are pursuits of God's glory and offer ways of materialising the livingness and aliveness—*the flourishing*—of fat women. They are theological performances of justice making or 'love making', as feminist theologian Carter Heyward (1984, p. 146) would put it, and are crucial to the re-creation and redemption of church and society.

Theologically, this brings to the fore the importance of 'solidarity' as a critical task of feminist theologies of fat liberation. A key principle in liberation theologies, solidarity insists that individuals and communities participate in the liberating activity of God through identification with the marginalised. According to Black liberation theologian James Cone, the meaning of God's revelation is found in God's liberative activity of siding with the oppressed. To be in relationship with this God means to join God in this plight—to struggle with the unfree for freedom from sin and for relationship with God and others. Cone thus writes that '[k]nowing God means being on the side of the oppressed, becoming *one* with them, and participating in the goal of liberation'. He goes on to claim that '[w]*e must become black with God!'* (Cone 2010, p. 69). For Cone, becoming Black with God does not mean those racialised as White taking pity on the Black community; it means receiving the gift of Blackness as a gift of salvation from God, and joining God in the work of liberation (Cone 2010, p. 70).

Cone speaks about this as 'a radical reorientation of one's existence in the world' where those racialised as White turn away from their Whiteness and take on the Blackness of God (Cone 2010, p. 103); where they 'die to whiteness' (Cone 1997, p. 222) and cooperate with the Black Christ as he liberates his people from bondage (Cone 2010, pp. 135–36). For Cone, theologically speaking, this is a call towards 'conversion' (Cone 2010, p. 103; Cone 2008, p. 81) and towards a conversion to *Blackness* specifically. It requires those racialised as White to join the oppressed Black community and it requires a total transformation of the White person's self and a commitment to action, not just words (Cone 2008, p. 82).

Ethnography allows feminist theologians researching fat to practice solidarity by converting to *fatness*. If God is the Living God who calls all women everywhere to be fully alive, then conversion to fatness means rebellion against sizeist systems of violence and a refusal to collude with the powers of thin culture that thwart life. With Cone, we can say that this Living God has 'made the oppressed condition God's own condition', seen in God's liberation of the Israelites in the exodus, in the incarnation of Jesus, and through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit as she breathes God's life into the world (Cone 2010, p. 67). If 'God is known where humans experience humiliation and suffering', and in contemporary Western society it is the case that fat people, and fat women especially, experience dehumanisation through weight-based discrimination, stigma, and oppression, then *God is fat*, and, furthermore, *God is a fat woman*. To become fat is to join the Living God in God's fatness, to share in God's word of '*NO!'* to fatism, and to actively participate in God's divine liberating and life-giving movement of justice.

Solidarity also expresses with confidence that God is *for* rather than *against* fat people and fat women. It emerges not only as a methodological feature of critical feminist theological ethnographies of fat, but as an ethical challenge to the church to actively participate in God's life and thus in the liberation of the oppressed. To become fat, however, is more than allyship. It is true that feminist theory and activism have stressed the importance of being an ally, accomplice, or co-conspirator for establishing coalitions across differences (Beltrán and Mehrotra 2015). However, fat allyship can play into the hands of thin privilege, allowing those who are thin/ner to feel good about themselves by offering tokenistic support without taking the risk of joining fat people in the political struggle against sizeism. In this sense, allyship threatens to be simply performative and risks reconstituting rather than resisting the anti-fat machinery of power. The language of 'accomplice' or 'co-conspirator' has been suggested to avoid this disassociation with political action and as a challenge to the way allyship has been commodified within neoliberal capitalism. However, all of these

terms lack theological content. Although accomplice or co-conspirator could suggest a form of plotting with God in acts of rebellion against the dominant system, the role of accomplice or co-conspirator does not need to have theological meaning or motivation. Conversion, on the other hand, suggests a spiritual transformation and an intentional faith decision to side with fat people. It suggests a full-bodied, total-self investment in challenging fat phobia as a form of sin and identifies rebellion against sizeism as an agential participation in the salvific activity of a fat God.

6. Feminist Theologies of Fat Liberation as *Critical* Theologies: Engaging with the Critical Discipline of Fat Studies

To end, I want to outline how feminist theologies of fat liberation might serve as *critical* theologies. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1975, p. 607) argues that the task of a critical feminist theology of liberation is to tender a 'feminist critique of culture' and to remind the church of its 'constant need for renewal' (Fiorenza 1975, p. 612). With this in mind, I hold that feminist theologies of fat liberation will need to be critical in a number of ways. They will need to engage seriously with the criticisms of Latin American liberation theology and other forms of liberation theology, as I have started to express above; they will need to unmask thin culture and offer a critique of the current social situation of fat oppression, locating individual and community experience within the wider social system of anti-fatness and in relation to gender, race, class, dis/ability, sexuality, and other intersecting forms of identity. Related to this, they will need to interrogate the roots of fat phobia in interlocking systems of power, including misogyny, patriarchy, neo-liberal capitalism, and racism (Strings 2019; Tovar 2018; Wann 2009). They will need to offer a critique of the church and how Christian systems of thought and practice, including doctrines, ecclesiologies, liturgies, and biblical interpretations, support institutional inequalities and ideological systems of violence against fat people, and fat women in particular, and they will also need to engage with the critical discipline of fat studies to challenge existing knowledge about fatness.

Engaging with the critical discipline of fat studies is crucial if feminist theologians are to understand the current social situation of weight-based stigma and imagine historical projects with the potential to rupture the status quo. In their editorial Introduction to *The Fat Studies Reader*, Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum describe fat studies as an interdisciplinary discipline 'marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body' (Solovay and Rothblum 2009, p. 2). It is a field of study that asks scholars to 'interrupt' their everyday thinking about fat and to question the questions that are being asked about fatness in the first place. Theologically, it chimes with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's invitation to practice a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and calls feminists to disentangle the ideological workings of current anti-fat discourse in society and in Christian religion. Just as critical race studies has questioned the category of race and considered what lies behind its usage, so critical fat studies questions how the category of fat has been constructed and asks what agendas are being served through such constructions in religion, public policy, and wider society.

Critical feminist theologies of fat liberation will challenge the structures of a society and culture that operate to keep fat people, and fat women in particular, in their place, and will explore the role Christian religion plays in assisting this. They will emerge from the 'wound' of sizeism and use this as a creative space for the production of new readings of Christian faith. They will seek out new cultural and theological images and languages; new forms of spiritual practice; and new Christian expressions of community that are reshaped by attending to the lives, voices, and bodies of fat women. The critical task of feminist theologies of fat liberation, similar to all liberation theologies, is to aid the transformation of Christian theologies, symbols, and institutions and the redemption of society; to offer what Fiorenza calls 'prophetic criticism' by daring to challenge 'common sense' about fatness as a Christian practice of 'critical' hope and as a performance of God's radical reign of justice. The liberative horizons of such theologies would not serve as a motivation for constructing

new fixed theological orthodoxies around fatness, as this would constitute nothing but 'colonial mimicry' (T. Cooper 2021, p. 37), erecting a new static canon that risks the false universalization of diverse experiences. Instead, fat liberation will take many forms, calling for broader, more expansive—*fatter*—theologies.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, I have argued that within current liberation theologies, fatness remains almost invisible. Out of sight, fat people, and fat women in particular, take up the place in theology and in feminist liberation theologies that they occupy in wider society, as voiceless, invisible, and without value. This leaves the toxic workings of sizeism in place. It is time for a new word on fat that refuses to accept that fat bodies speak without needing to say a word. Critical feminist theologies of fat liberation will return face and speech to fat women and will depart from the lives and bodies of self-identified fat Christian women. Feminist Participatory Action Research and ethnography are methodologies that have the potential to help ensure fat women are at the centre of feminist theologies about fat and to connect theologies to the development of concrete historical projects. Fat liberation is a theological call towards a conversion to fatness. It unmasks thin privilege and calls it out of hiding. It demands a rejection of fat phobia and thin culture, together with its offering of thin privilege, and undertakes theology as advocacy for size acceptance. Conversion marks a turn away from the sin of sizeism towards change and action. It challenges ordinary Christians and the academic discipline of theology to *GET FAT* and to join God in actively working for fat justice. *Becoming fat* by identifying with fat women who experience dehumanization and marginalisation because of their size is a faithful response to God's expansive love and a call to participate in the liberating activity of the God of Life.

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Grosspeteranlage 5
4052 Basel
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Tel.: +41 61 683 77 34

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