In the last forty years, liberation theology, feminist theology, and theologies attentive to religious diversity have been rethinking central topics in Christian theology. . . . God at the Margins serves as a solid introduction to these theological fields. . . . This volume is recommended for students of theology and anyone interested in incorporating the growing edges of Christian theology into mainstream discussions.

—Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Fordham University

[In] *God at the Margins* Aimée Upjohn Light traces recent developments in theology of religions, interreligious dialogue, and comparative theology. . . . Perfect for any number of courses in contemporary Christian theology that address method in theology, liberation theology, feminist theology, or interreligious theology.

—Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, Associate Professor of Theological Studies Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles

Aimée Light's *God at the Margins* . . . explicates how liberation theology, feminist theology, and theology of religions are central to the prophetic mission of the church. . . . She presents and analyzes the most promising comparative and interreligious work of contemporary theologians and then frames a Christian theology that builds upon these foundations. . . . Students of theology and religion will find the book both informative and insightful in the pressing demands it makes of any Christian theological mission that strives to be truly catholic, or universal.

—Madhuri M. Yadlapati, Louisiana State University Baton Rouge, Louisiana

In *God at the Margins*, Aimée Upjohn Light . . . offers a refreshingly lucid overview of the contemporary Christian conversation (often contentious) about how to make sense of and engage religious diversity, and . . . she offers a perspective that will clarify and vivify that conversation. . . . Her message needs to be taken seriously by anyone concerned about living religiously in an ever-more-connected multireligious world.

—Paul F. Knitter, Union Theological Seminary

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GOD at the MARGINS

Making Theological Sense of Religious Plurality

Aimée Upjohn Light



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To my mother, Francis Mary "Mamagod" Light, my first theologian, who taught me that to be a Catholic means to be a feminist.

To Sarah Kathleen Hedman, the other woman without whom this book would not have been possible.

To my children, Edwin, John, Peter, and Ottilie: may you light up the world as you find it to be lit up from within.

To my husband, with whom I have come full circle.

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INTRODUCTION

Where Christians Find God

Often when Christians in the West think about where to find or experience God, they imagine God as distant, "out there somewhere." Some hold on to childhood images of an old man with a beard and a staff, kindly watching over the world. God remains in heaven, observing from afar. That is to say, God is remote.

Paradoxically, even though many people do not consider God relevant to their daily existence, they assume God is responsible for much that happens in life. So while this God (usually thought of as male) directs things in the world and is somehow responsible for everything that exists, God is at the same time somewhat hands off in matters of daily life. Recent research suggests many Christians share the assumptions of a perspective called "moralistic, therapeutic deism," which implicitly holds that God exists and wants people to be nice and fair, that the goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself, that God is not involved much in people's lives unless needed to resolve a problem, and that nice people go to heaven.¹

Even when bad things happen, many people often assume these difficulties or even tragedies are somehow part of God's plan. Tornadoes happen. Parents get sick. Friends die. Loved ones lose jobs or end marriages. Many ascribe sometimes inexplicable suffering in their own lives and the horrendous suffering in the world to God's will. Despite doing so, they frequently insist on God's goodness, asserting that what appears painful, bad, or evil somehow serves the designs of a good creator.

^{1.} Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162–63.

God in the Everyday World

Amid a world that contains real suffering, who has walked through the woods and not felt a sense of peace and tranquility? Who has stood atop a mountain and not felt at one with nature? Who has held a newborn baby-perhaps a niece, nephew, or cousin-and not felt awe? Most people have experienced moments of real connectedness with the world, even felt a sense of the interrelatedness of all reality. Are these not spiritual experiences—encounters with the divine as mediated through our human experience? Most religions, including Christianity, have strong traditions of discovering God quite profoundly within nature. Saint Francis of Assisi, for example, regularly experienced the divine not only reflected in the created world but also inherent in it. Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin serves as perhaps the most inspiring modern witness of this. He recognized the created world as utterly infused with God's presence, referring to the world itself as "entirely lit up from within" with God's presence.²

In addition to encountering God in nature, people often experience God in their interpersonal relationships. This relates to the idea that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, as in the doctrine of *imago dei* (Latin for "image of God"). This doctrine teaches that all persons are created in a way that reflects the divine. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) taught that human beings image God through the intellect, while other Christian thinkers, such as Saint Augustine (354–430) and Pope John Paul II (1920–2005), have emphasized that human beings most closely image God through different kinds of love relationships.

Falling in love, for example, often causes one to view the presence of the beloved as part of God's plan or to feel like the beloved actually makes God present. Some experience God in the passing away of a loved one. For example, when a grandparent or parent dies peacefully after a long and painful illness, people often see that death as a release from suffering; they sense that God has drawn that loved one to God's very self. After a loved one experiences healing from illness or injury, many express gratitude to

^{2.} Annie Dillard, For the Time Being (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 11.

God for being part of their healing. Some become aware of God's presence when another person offers them forgiveness and extends kindness unexpectedly.

In addition, Christians often think of experiencing God through worshipping practices. These may include the celebration of the sacraments and other liturgies, the proclamation of biblical readings, preaching, and praying on one's own or with one's family. Some Christians and their traditions hold that God is especially present in such practices.

By looking carefully at everyday life, Christians hold, one can discover that God's involvement in human life is far more than orchestrating things from above. The Christian tradition strongly asserts that humanity finds God not only "out there" but also in nature, intimate relationships, and religious ritual and prayer, and that God is reflected in human beings themselves.

God at the Margins

Are these the only places to find God? Should Christians look in other places as well? The Christian tradition has at times overlooked some aspects of reality as places to find God. In theology, these places are referred to as "the margins," meaning the edges, mostly unseen by all except those who dwell there. People at the margins are those who are rendered largely invisible in a particular society and are often overlooked by those with economic and political power. Historically, in the United States marginalized groups have included but are not limited to those who are black, poor, female, and LGBTQ. Prior to the late twentieth century, theologians tended to exclude the experiences of the marginalized as sources for their work. In addition, Christians have tended to disregard the validity of religions other than Christianity and have, in a sense, relegated their adherents to the margins. Many have experienced social, political, or economic marginalization in countries such as the United States, where Christianity is dominant, and theologians and church leaders have until recently relegated non-Christians to the margins by disregarding the significance of their religious beliefs, practices, and experience.

African American churches (both Catholic and Protestant), for example, have a long and rich history in the United States,³ but the wider Christian tradition has not fully appreciated or used the life and insights of these churches in thinking about God.⁴ Those outside the African American community have tended not to consider the black struggle for liberation from discrimination as a place to find God.

Similarly, the lives of people living in poverty have garnered little attention as a place to find God or as a source for theological insights. Christian theology has traditionally been the work of educated and economically privileged people—for many centuries mostly the ordained—and poverty was often understood as suffering to be alleviated or even a punishment for a sinful life. Theologians and mystics conceptualizing God as all-good, all-powerful, and supremely rational looked to their own privileged lives and experiences. Rarely, if ever, did theologians in earlier times look at the lives of the poor as a place to find the divine.

Women's lives, like those of people living in poverty, have also received little consideration as a place to find God. Western thought has at times characterized women as irrational, subservient, and not worthy of the rights shared by men.⁵ Indeed, women's experiences were not looked upon as manifestations of divine presence to the extent that men's experiences were. Women learned to look to men for religious guidance, and theology was done by men. Because of this, theology typically reflected only men's experiences and understandings of God. Women's thought was generally not considered worthy, and to the degree women's experiences of God and thinking

^{3.} Diana L. Hayes, Standing in the Shoes My Mother Made: A Womanist Theology (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 24, 82, 118, 194.

^{4.} In the introduction to his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011), self-described black theologian James H. Cone explains that the underuse of African American theology was the impetus for his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969). Similarly, Cone notes that the purpose of his second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970, rev. 2010), was to provide theological foundations and arguments so that black and white theologians would take black theology seriously (cf. xv). Likewise, he wrote *God of the Oppressed* (1975, rev. 1997) because "most white theologians ignored black liberation theology" (ix).

^{5.} For instance, women did not gain the right to own property or vote in the United States until 1900 and 1920, respectively.

about God differed from men's, it was not appreciated as a unique reflection of the divine.

Christians have largely ignored the *religious other*—a contemporary theological term for people who do not share one's religious beliefs—as a place to find God. For Christians, *religious others* might mean Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, or Jews. The lives of entire populations of spiritual people have rarely been seen by Christians as contexts within which God is present and active. Instead, many Christians regard religious others as misguided about religion and in some cases even dangerous or evil. Christians have taught that non-Christians can attain salvation but also have considered the non-Christian to be in a "gravely deficient situation." Throughout the history of Christianity, Christians have not typically seen other religions and the lives of their adherents as places of value for discovering God's presence, and today still do not embrace non-Christian religions as sources for developing Christian thought about God and related topics.

Different Margins

In recent decades those at the margins of Christianity and society have become more visible to others. More and more theologians are recognizing that Christian theology has overlooked various populations as places to find God and are working to overcome this weakness in their fields of study. Many theological movements today teach that God is present with people whom the Christian tradition has too often not paid attention to. Black, liberation, and feminist theologians and theologians engaged in interreligious work hold that God is experienced in unique and significant ways by African Americans, by people who are poor, by women, and by religious

^{6.} Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* (On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church), Vatican Web site, August 6, 2000, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html, 22. Although this phrase sounds harsh and often is misunderstood, in context Pope Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Ratzinger) is affirming the possibility of non-Christian salvation; however, he notes that non-Christians are at a disadvantage when compared to Christians who have "the fullness of the means of salvation."

others.⁷ These theologians claim not only that God's presence can be found in the lives of these people and communities but also that God is present in a special or privileged way with these people and that this presence is important for the development of Christian thought. Starting with the figure of Jesus, who ministered to people at the margins and who himself suffered at the hands of those in power, theologians are recognizing that the experiences of people who dwell at the margins of society and Christianity are privileged places to find God and that Christianity is impoverished if it overlooks this reality.

Today, theologians emphasizing that God is truly present in the lives of those at that margins of society and of Christianity seek to augment traditional theologies with theologies done from the margins. This book shows how doing theology "from the margins" has propelled theologians to pay attention to the experiences of the poor and the experiences of women and has led to notable changes in the way interreligious scholars regard the religious other as a source for theology.

The main purpose of this text is to introduce readers to interreligious work being done from the perspective of Christianity. In addition to exploring this work, the text provides overviews of liberation and feminist theologies. This is because these theologies contribute to ways of thinking that lead theologians to consider God's overlooked presence with people in particular contexts, even outside Christianity itself. In recent decades, theologians involved in interreligious work have begun to explicitly draw on liberation and feminist theology. The result is that Christian interreligious work is now being done as a theology of liberation and out of feminist sensibilities. To appreciate the progress made by bringing liberation and feminist theologies into the interreligious conversation, it is important to have some understanding of these theologies. This text's brief overviews of liberation and feminist theologies (see chapters 1 and 2) and more in-depth exploration of interreligious work (see chapters 3, 4, and 5) will help readers to see the broadening of sources for Christian theology, just as

^{7.} Eco-theology is another important field that emphasizes God's presence in the environment and the whole of creation. Arguably, other theologies emphasizing God's presence at the margins ought to point toward eco-theology, since as one comes to appreciate God's intimate presence in different marginalized groups, one ultimately comes to a deeper awareness of God's presence throughout creation.

theologians have begun to more clearly see the religious significance of the lives of those who have traditionally dwelt at the margins due to factors such as gender, religious identity, and economic poverty.⁸

Liberation Theology

The first contemporary theologies to recognize the marginalized came to be known as liberation theology. Liberation theologians emphasize that God is found in a special way among people living in poverty. Borne of social justice work in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s, liberation theology understands God as being especially present among people struggling for survival in economically unjust systems. With their members struggling with landlessness and economic uncertainty, Christian communities in such places as Peru, Guatemala, and Brazil began to articulate how God was with the poor in their struggle. Far from siding with ruling-class landowners, leaders of local congregations, and those members of the Catholic Church's hierarchy who supported the wealthy, liberation theologians believed that God took the side of the oppressed—those living in poverty in Latin America.

Liberation theology—now well-known among theologians, church leaders, and some politicians in Latin America, Europe, India, and the United States—did not initially find much traction in Europe or the United States. Some economically privileged people have fought against liberation theology and have dismissed it as just an academic trend in the West or as a political movement. Yet its fundamental insight—that God is on the side of the oppressed—poses a significant challenge to those who think of God as primarily in the churches whose members are relatively well-off. Liberation theology challenges class privilege by expanding people's awareness

^{8.} A single book cannot begin to represent all movements, and this project does not address several important theologically marginalized populations. Although this book mentions black theologies, womanist theologies, and Asian and Hispanic theologies, its scope does not allow for a full treatment. This is in no way meant to denigrate the importance of these theologies. This book holds that the fields of liberation theology and feminist theology have begun to inform interreligious work today. As a liberative approach continues to inform interreligious theologies, one would hope that black, womanist, and Asian and Hispanic experiences will more greatly impact the conversation. For an excellent introduction to black, womanist, and Asian and Hispanic theologies, see Elizabeth Johnson's *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

of where God is present to the edges of society, to the margins where human beings live in dire poverty.

Feminist Theology

Theologians have identified a second margin from which to do theology: the experiences of women. Feminist scholars assert that God is present and active in these experiences and that when theologians recognize this, their theologies can enhance women's well-being and also serve the well-being of men by transforming society in ways that create justice and loving relationships for all persons. Like liberation theology, feminist theology holds that God is specially present in the lives of oppressed persons—in this case women. Women continue to suffer oppression from gender discrimination, and feminist theologians see God as present in significant ways in their struggles.

Interreligious Work

Theologians today have begun looking at another margin where God may be present—one outside Christianity. Having pushed the margins to include those who live in economic poverty and women, these theologians have moved beyond the bounds of Christianity itself. The work of these scholars, who understand the religious other and non-Christian religions as valid places to find God, is referred to as *interreligious work* because it aims to understand Christianity's relationship with other religions. These scholars understand the religious other as a gift because the other enables Christians to experience or understand the presence of God in new ways. Scholars in the field of interreligious work face the challenge of balancing the Christian understanding of Jesus' essential role in the salvation of human beings with the idea that other religions are good and perhaps as religiously significant as Christianity.

Margins Coming Together

Increasingly, the fields of liberation theology, feminist theology, and interreligious work are converging. As these three fields cross-pollinate

Letty M. Russell, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—A Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 47, cf. 65, 142, 154.

and scholars learn from each other, they generate work that seeks to inform interreligious thought with a commitment to economic justice and women's well-being. Put differently, scholars who do interreligious work with the commitments of liberation and feminist theology seek to ensure they take into account and further goals of economic justice for all and women's well-being. To be truly just, these scholars hold, interreligious work cannot counter—but instead must further—the aims of theologies that have come before. Indeed, the coming together of these three specializations makes sense, for liberation theology, feminist theology, and interreligious work have much in common. All three fields find God in places that, until recently, appeared unlikely as sites for divine presence in the minds of many Christians. All three fields hold that these places—the lives of poor people, of women, and of non-Christians-are privileged places to find God and that Christian theological understandings are inadequate if they don't factor in the experiences of these people as sources for theology.

Chapter 1 traces the historical development of liberation theology, which begins the trajectory of contemporary Christian theology's attention to the marginalized. This chapter explains why liberation theology developed and details its primary theological commitments. The idea, asserted by liberation theology, that God is specially present in the lives of the economically poor and in struggles to create systems of economic justice is also introduced. Latin American liberation theology is the "first wave," beginning the trajectory of modern Christian theology that finds God at the margins—a trajectory of thinking that, when applied to interreligious work, comes to mean that God should be found beyond Christianity itself.

Chapter 2 discusses feminist theology, a movement that explores the experiences of women as a place in which to find God and a source for theology. Far from being an angry movement that seeks to privilege women over men, Christian feminist theology sees itself as a universal movement seeking to transform the world into a better place for women, men, and the whole of creation by adding women's insights and experiences to augment the traditionally male theological conversation. This chapter describes three key subjects that have been transformed by feminist theological work: views of the person, how one speaks about God, and salvation. It concludes by suggesting that Christian understanding of God will grow richer as more

categories of people do theology. Like Latin American liberation theology, feminist theology expands notions of where to find God. This orientation to paying special attention to people and places that have been too often overlooked by theologians aligns with the commitment of interreligious work to explore the meaning and import of the presence of God outside Christianity itself.

Chapter 3 begins to explore the challenge of the religious other for Christian theology. Today, most Christians believe that adherents of religions other than Christianity can be morally good and that they—and sometimes their religions—have much to teach Christians. Yet how a Christian receives the gifts present in non-Christian religions largely depends on one's understanding of God's presence beyond Christianity. This chapter explains the approach taken in the subfield of interreligious work known as *theology of religions*, including its typical positions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, as well as introduces newer, post-pluralist approaches.

Chapter 4 explains why the approach used by theology of religions has stalled as a way of thinking about non-Christian religions and, in light of this failure, discusses the value of engaging religious others through two newer subfields of interreligious work:

Subfields of Interreligious Work

theology of religions

A discipline that seeks to articulate the Christian theological understanding of non-Christian religions and the status of their adherents

interreligious dialogue

A discipline that seeks to learn about religions through dialogue with their adherents

comparative theology

A discipline that studies religions by comparing the sacred texts, theologies, and practices of two or more religions

interreligious dialogue and comparative theology. The chapter outlines the work of Leonard Swidler, Francis Clooney, and others who hold that theology must resist trying to develop theories that reconcile Christian beliefs about God with the existence of multiple religions and instead learn about these religions directly from their adherents. This chapter concludes with the subject of multiple religious belonging, which is the newest resource for thinking about religious multiplicity.

Chapter 5 revisits the subfield of theology of religions and explores how a form of it—informed by liberation theologies—may help reconcile Christian beliefs with religious diversity. The work of Peter Phan, Aloysius Pieris, and Paul Knitter is explored, each of whom turns to the religious other not only as a resource for theorizing about multiple religions, but as a privileged locus of God's self-revelation. From the perspective of a theology of religions *informed by liberation theology and feminist theology*, the religious other appears not just as a valid place for a Christian to find God but also as a privileged place. The trajectory of finding God at the margins has finally expanded, in theology of religions, to finding God present in unique ways beyond Christianity itself.

The conclusion brings the discussion of the book's thesis full circle. While Christians have tended to reference God from the perspectives of the relatively well-off, men, and Christians, God can also be discovered in places and among populations that Christians have tended to dismiss culturally and theologically. By making a commitment to finding God at the margins of society and of Christianity, one can see that the lives and experiences of poor people, of women, and of adherents of other religions constitute not only valid but privileged places in which to find and experience the divine. Attending to the experiences and realities of these groups allows Christians to expand their theological horizons and perceive the presence of God throughout creation: a perception deeply in keeping with the traditional Christian teaching that God is, indeed, everywhere.

Liberation Theology

Historical Context and Development

In the 1950s and 1960s, as millions of people in Latin America struggled for survival (a situation that continues today), a Christian and especially Catholic movement arose in Peru, Guatemala, El Salvador, Ecuador, and Brazil that sought to address economic injustice with the tools of Christianity. This movement was called liberation theology.¹

Liberation theology's leading figures, such as Leonardo Boff in Brazil (1938–), Gustavo Gutiérrez in Peru (1928–), and Óscar Romero in El Salvador (1917–1980), preached that an essential element in Jesus' message and ministry was liberation from suffering. Further, they believed that the Catholic Church's historically hierarchical and centralized structures of authority have hindered rather than helped people live and preach the gospel. In the understanding of liberation theologians, doing the will of God includes ending economic suffering for the poor and disenfranchised. God has made what they call "a preferential option for the poor," meaning God has

^{1.} This chapter references several seminal sources on liberation theology, including Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); Gustavo Gutiérrez, We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984); and Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

^{2.} Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 156; see also the section "Introduction to the Revised Edition," xxv–xxviii, xxxvii.

a special concern for those who are suffering from economic injustice. Liberation theologians see this preferential option for the poor revealed in Jesus' ministry to those at the edges of society. Furthermore, liberation theology asserts that the spirituality of the poor—though imperfect—offers the richest place to seek the experience and presence of God because the poor most resemble Jesus, who suffered and died at the hands of those perpetuating unjust power structures. Gustavo Gutiérrez, in particular, holds up the poor as *the* privileged place in which to find God.

Liberation theology analyzed the causes of radical poverty in Latin American countries. It identified the rapid "foreign-oriented growth," meaning export of natural resources and import of manufactured goods, that gained momentum in the 1950s as one major cause. This economic development benefitted already-industrialized countries greatly through their acquisition of cheap natural resources from impoverished places, but made the poor providers of these natural resources dependent on industrialized countries for consumer goods. The generation of jobs, money, and a more industrialized way of life was offset by the necessity of buying back the items made.

The international community claimed that industrializing Latin America would help these impoverished areas, but by the 1960s the differences in wealth between industrialized Western nations and those targeted by these economic efforts had increased. At the time, even an advocate of development policy for Latin America admitted the following:

[A]fter more than half of the decade of the '60s has passed, the gap between the two worlds is growing bigger, rather than slowly decreasing as was expected. . . . While from 1960 to 1970 the developed nations will have increased their wealth by 50 percent, the developing countries, two-thirds of the world's population, will continue to struggle in poverty and frustration.⁴

^{3.} Ibid., 50.

^{4.} Felipe Herrera, "Viabilidad de una comunidad latinoamericana," *Estudios Internacionales* (Santiago de Chile) no. 1 (April 1967). As cited in and translated by Gustavo Gutiérrez in *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 50.

By the end of the 1960s, optimistic attitudes about economic development based on the export of raw materials and the import of consumer goods had greatly decreased. Public opinion, as well as the opinion of economists, shifted toward pessimism about this developmental model. By the 1960s, one prominent Chilean economist stated that "the underdevelopment of the poor countries, as an overall social fact, appears in its true light: as the historical by-product of the development of other countries."⁵

Once native Latin American economists became convinced that the central mechanism of what had been called "economic development" for their countries actually benefited the wealthier Western nations, critical analysis of the real situation of Latin America in the Western model of economic development began. Many scholars who undertook this analysis began using the intellectual tools of Marxism.

Marxism, broadly understood to be an economic, political, and social theory developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the mid- and late nineteenth century, holds that all structures and practices in a society—class, family organization, morality, systems of education—trace their origins to economic activity. Economists call the theory that all aspects of society are based in work and the production of what is consumed, "historical materialism."6 Marxism gave rise to Leninism, Trotskyism, and other forms of state-run economic systems in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Thinkers following Marx tend to be extremely critical of capitalism, a more free-market economic system in which consumer demand and market forces determine what is produced, what wages are paid, and what kind of work a person performs. Noting that these market forces are amoral but that they are often immorally and ruthlessly manipulated by the ruling class, which controls economic capital, Marx and those following him believed in the necessity of autocratic control of the economy, initially by

^{5.} Osvaldo Sunkel, *El marco historic delproceso de desarrollo y subdesarrolo* (Santiago de Chile: ILPES, 1967), a study documenting this macroeconomic reality.

^{6.} Friedrich Engels seems to have coined the term historical materialism from Karl Marx's writings. See Friedrich Engels, "Engels on Historical Materialism," in New International (trans. Einde O'Callaghan) 1, no. 3 (September–October 1934), www. marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/ni/vol01/no03/engels.htm.

members of the working class taking over the rest of society in a revolution.⁷

In analyzing the economic situation in Latin America as one of exploitation rather than altruistic development at the hand of Western countries, scholars such as Orlando Caputo, Roberto Pizzarro, Franz J. Hinkelammert, and Augusto Salazar Bondy came to the fore.8 These thinkers saw capitalism as operative not only in the internal economies of the West, but in the international economy developing between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. Specifically, just as a nation's capitalist economy generates inequalities and requires an underclass, so the international capitalist economy requires some countries to serve those that control the means and methods of production. Latin America, these thinkers argued, entered the world market at a disadvantage from the start, because its resources and labor already had been depleted in the "service" of other countries. The development plan implemented by Western countries, therefore, was not primarily aimed at helping Latin America industrialize but rather at exploiting the economic vulnerability of Latin America to benefit those at the top of the global capitalist market. These Latin American scholars and those aware of their research concluded that autonomous Latin American development was not realistic within an international capitalist system and that truly working for the good of Latin America meant working for liberation from economic oppression.9

For decades, many people in Latin America worked for liberation through violent revolution. "Guerrilla groups," violent bands of soldiers meant to mobilize larger groups of people to revolt against established government authority, became common in many countries. Political protests, strikes, kidnappings—especially of children, to use in guerilla warfare—became regular occurrences. Within this

^{7.} Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, vol. 1, ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: International Publishers, n.d.), 421–27.

^{8.} For more information, see Orlando Caputo and Roverto Pizarro, *Imperialismo, dependencia y relaciones internacionales* (Santiago de Chile: Centro de Estudios Socio Económicos (CESO), 1971); Augusto Salazar Bondy, "La cultura de la dominación," in *Perú problema* (Lima: Moncloa, 1968), 75; and Franz J. Hinkelammert, *Imperialismo y dependencia* (Santiago de Chile: CESO, 1968), 138.

^{9.} Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 54.

political context the question arose of how the Catholic Church and Christianity in general should respond.

Theologians, mainly Catholic priests either native to or working in El Salvador, Peru, Guatemala, Brazil, and Ecuador, started to articulate a Christian response to the political and economic reality of Latin America. Having lived with and worked for those affected by the structural economic inequalities analyzed by the economists, these leaders spoke in terms of Jesus being on the side of "liberation." ¹¹⁰

What *liberation* meant and continues to mean for those who speak of it in terms of liberation theology is clear: *liberation* does not refer to a reality outside of history in which people attain spiritual fulfillment with God after death. Rather, the term as used in liberation theology denotes and prioritizes human existence in history. *Liberation* means liberation from economic injustice, liberation from suffering, liberation from exploitation and inhuman conditions. Yet one cannot reduce liberation theology to the political revolutions that others staged in Latin America. Instead, liberation in the theological context includes the understanding that work for justice is the work of God. God is at work wherever people seek human flourishing over exploitation. God is at work in and for poor people.

The question often asked, frequently by the Catholic hierarchy, is whether liberation theology ever tolerates or even advocates the use of violence. Certainly, no text by Gutiérrez, Boff, Sobrino, Balasuriya, or several other of the most prominent figures in the movement advocates violence. Yet the demand for social transformation for justice—including the overturning of unjust economic structures—voiced by all these authors implicitly seems to open the possibility of using force.

Liberation theology criticized the hierarchy of the Catholic Church for concentrating on otherworldly things and being complicit—sometimes even supportive—of unjust and even violent regimes. From Pope Alexander VI, who in 1492 divided the not-yet Christian

^{10.} Associating Jesus with liberation is a common theme in liberation theology writings from authors such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation (1988) and We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People (1984), Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology (1987), and Jon Sobrino, Jesus the Liberator: A Historical Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth (1993).

world between the Spanish and Portuguese kings, to pronouncements made by nineteenth-century bishops against independence movements, 11 liberation theologians made clear that the Catholic Church had a long history of injustice in Latin America. Because the Spanish government subsidized the Catholic Church, appointing bishops who were then beholden to the crown, the Church throughout much of its Latin American missionary history served as an instrument of a state seeking wealth in new lands. 12 Further, the Church also supported local dictators, sometimes doing the will of despots in Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Paraguay. 13 In the twentieth century, some parish priests systematically sided with landowners against peasants advocating for land rights in their communities.

In 1955 the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (Latin American Episcopal Conference), an official conference of the Roman Catholic bishops of Latin America, was created. Known as CELAM, it is concerned with speaking about and working for the needs of the Latin American Catholic Church. As the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council commenced in 1962, 14 CELAM pressured the council toward more progressive stances on economic justice, poverty, and the alleviation of poverty. In 1968 CELAM held the famed conference at Medellin, Columbia, in which it officially supported "base communities," small groups of Catholics, typically poor, who met together to read and interpret scripture from the perspective of their own lives. Members of the Catholic hierarchy who were not involved in CELAM sometimes considered these base communities a threat because the Roman leadership did not always have control over the communities' leaders and because the communities often did social

^{11.} As cited in www.socinian.org/liberty.html.

^{12.} For a detailed and comprehensive analysis of this thesis, see Emilio Betances, Church and Power Politics in Latin America: The Dominican Case in Comparative Perspective (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

^{13.} For more information, see John Lynch, New Worlds: A Religious History of Latin America (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

^{14.} The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) was convoked by Pope John Paul XXIII with the aim of renewing the Catholic Church. The council issued sixteen documents on wide-ranging topics including the nature of the church, the participation of the laity in the Mass, the Church's relationship to other religions, and the Church's relationship with culture.

justice work that favored radically egalitarian models of leadership and society. These models were feared by the Catholic hierarchy as potentially extending to Church leadership, with the possible result that ordained persons would lose leadership power. The fact that in some cases priests led these groups signaled a difference of opinion between local priests and Latin American bishops who were not part of CELAM, as well as bishops outside Latin America, and revealed that the Catholic Church had conflicted views about base communities and whether they were authentic models of Christian community or threatening splinter groups seeking to redistribute hierarchical power.

At its 1968 Medellin conference, CELAM embraced liberation theology's commitment to justice and liberation for the poor and affirmed the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez and other forerunners of the movement. The election of conservative Alfonso López Trujillo to head CELAM in 1972, however, is widely regarded as a sign that the Catholic Church's efforts to slow the growth of liberation theology had influenced CELAM. CELAM held another conference in 1979 at Puebla, Mexico. Here, the majority of the bishops sought to produce documents reflecting traditional teachings; they wanted to supplant ideas of liberation theology, which they believed conflicted with these teachings. Pope John Paul II opened the conference and criticized liberation theology in his remarks.

This conference will have to take Medellin's conclusions as its point of departure, with all the positive elements contained therein, but without disregarding the incorrect interpretations that have sometimes resulted.¹⁵

Now today . . . [w]e find "re-readings" of the Gospel that are the product of theoretical speculations rather than of authentic meditation on the world of God . . . people purport to depict Jesus as a political activist . . . even as someone involved in the class struggle. This conception of Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive of Nazareth, does not tally with the Church's catechesis. 16

^{15.} Pope John Paul II's Opening Address at the Puebla Conference; see www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP791228.htm.

^{16.} Ibid.

He also, however, criticized the mass accumulation of wealth by the rich and acknowledged the need for economic redistribution if "done in the right way." Most scholars agree that when taken as a whole, John Paul II's opening remarks at the conference are ultimately neither favorable nor unfavorable to liberation theology. 18

Since the conferences at Medellin and Puebla, liberation theology has remained the target of criticism from Vatican hierarchy. Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly expressed concern about liberation theology's use of Marxist theory. Yet liberation theology has continued to gain momentum as a movement, influencing numerous populations including women, African Americans, Asians, and Latinos to claim their experiences and situations as important sources for theology. Liberation theology remains an influential movement in Latin America, as well as in professional theological circles. ²⁰

Though members of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church have sometimes been suspicious or even openly critical of liberation

^{17.} John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, eds., Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 82.

^{18.} See, for example, the positive comments throughout John Paul II's opening address at Puebla directed at CELAM's members, including, "The whole Church owes you a debt of gratitude for what you are doing, for the example you are giving. Perhaps other local Churches will take up that example," and "I am well aware of your attachment and availability to the See of Peter and of the love you have always shown it. In the Lord's name I express my heartfelt thanks for the deeply ecclesial outlook implied in that, and I wish you yourselves the consolation of counting on the loyal adherence of your faithful" and "I have no doubt that th[e] truth about human beings, as taught by the Church, will emerge strengthened from this pastoral meeting." See www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP791228.htm.

^{19.} Pope Benedict XVI, Introduction to Christianity (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004); see the "Preface to the New Edition, especially 14–15. See also Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation," Vatican Web site, August 6, 1984, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html, written when Cardinal Ratzinger was Prefect.

^{20.} The American Academy of Religion, for example, includes sessions on the following topics related to liberation theology and its offshoots each year at its annual meeting: Liberal Theologies; Liberation Theologies; Latina/o Critical and Comparative Studies; Latina/o Religion, Culture, and Society; Religion in Latin America and the Caribbean; Religion, Colonialism, and Postcolonialism; Black Theology; Womanist Approaches to Religion and Society; Women of Color Scholarship, Teaching, and Activism; Feminist Theory and Religious Reflection; Women and Religion; Lesbian-Feminist Issues and Religion; Queer Studies in Religion; Gay Men and Religion; and Religion and Disability Studies. See www.aarweb.org.

theology,²¹ elements of liberation theology have become important benchmarks in recent papal speeches and documents. For example, both John Paul II and Benedict XVI emphasized a "preferential option for the poor," a phrase taken directly from Latin American liberation theology, and Pope Francis has used the term liberation theology, though he doesn't call himself a liberation theologian.

Catholic social teaching also echoes liberation theology's sentiments. Although John Paul II is famous for the slogan "Solidarity!" in the context of Poland's movement away from communism, Latin American liberation theology popularized this sentiment first. As far back as Pope Leo XIII (1810–1903), the Catholic Church has shown an explicit interest in and commitment to what it refers to as the "common good" (meaning government has a duty to protect the rights and well-being of the vulnerable), labor unions, and participation in the structures of government.

The encyclical *Rerum novarum* (On the Condition of Labor), issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, addresses the relationships and duties that should exist between labor and capital as well as between citizens and governments. Primarily concerned with the suffering of the working class, *Rerum novarum* (*RN*) advocates the right to form unions, the duties of the wealthy and of government toward the poor, the need to work for the common good, and the preferential option for the poor—here understood as the need for government and church leaders to prioritize the needs of poor people.

While clearly against socialism's main tenet, understood by Leo XIII as calling for the government to control the community's goods (see *RN*, nos. 11–12),²² *Rerum novarum* acknowledges that socialism would be unnecessary in the context of just relationships between persons. When churches bring people of different classes together for the well-being of all and when government works for the well-being

^{21.} See, for example, Pope Benedict XVI, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 115–37, in which Benedict associates liberation theology with Marxist philosophy, relativism, and New Age political thinking and also says "liberation theology had tried to give a new practice to a Christendom that was tired of dogma . . . This practice, however, instead of bringing freedom, left destruction in its wake," 130–31.

^{22.} All quotes from papal encyclicals and Vatican documents are taken from www.vatican.va, unless otherwise noted.

of poor and working-class people, justice is done without resort to the totalitarian governments feared in *Rerum novarum*.²³

Though some leaders of the Catholic Church have charged liberation theology with incorporating Marxist elements of social critique, even Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical *Populorum progressio* (The Development of Peoples, 1967), allows and calls for some Marxist tools of social analysis. Advocating for an equitable distribution of wealth and for government action to bring that about, Paul VI writes,

Granted all this, it is only too clear that these structures are no match for the harsh economic realities of today. Unless the existing machinery is modified, the disparity between rich and poor nations will increase rather than diminish; the rich nations are progressing with rapid strides while the poor nations move forward at a slow pace . . . created goods should flow fairly to all. (Nos. 8, 22)

All other rights, whatever they may be, including the rights of property and free trade, are to be subordinated to this principle. They should in no way hinder it; in fact, they should actively facilitate its implementation. Redirecting these rights back to their original purpose must be regarded as an important and urgent social duty. (No. 22)

No one may appropriate surplus goods solely for his own private use when others lack the bare necessities of life. In short, "as the Fathers of the Church and other eminent theologians tell us, the right of private property may never be exercised to the detriment of the common good." When "private gain and basic community needs conflict with one another," it is for the public authorities "to seek a solution to these questions, with the active involvement of individual citizens and social groups." (No. 23)

Thus while teachings and statements by leaders of the Catholic Church have sometimes expressed skepticism about liberation theology, they have also at times endorsed the very principles of liberation theology that they have in other contexts labeled "socialist" or even "Marxist."

^{23.} In *Rerum novarum*, Pope Leo XIII was concerned primarily about totalitarian governments and communism in general and particularly about the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR).

Key Ideas of Liberation Theology

Liberation theology has contributed many of the ideas influencing theology today. From the prophetic role of the Christian churches in social justice work to a Christology that understands Jesus as on the side of the oppressed, liberation theology has radically transformed much of today's theological landscape by holding up the impoverished as the privileged site of God's presence and self-revelation. This section outlines several key ideas popularized by Latin American theologians: (1) the prophetic role of the church in work for justice, (2) God's "preferential option for the poor," (3) the privileged insight of the poor for identifying and remedying injustice, (4) realized eschatology, and (5) the special spirituality of the poor as a place in which one finds God and the understanding that God is breaking into the world here and now in work for justice, not just when the world ends.

Prophetic Role of the Church

What is a prophet? In the Old Testament, figures like Moses, Aaron, Amos, Isaiah, and Hosea were all prophets, but what does this designation mean? Theology ordinarily views prophets as those who call people to conversion.²⁴ The members of the community have sinned in the eyes of God, and the prophet delivers the message that they need to change not only their ways of thinking but also of living. To be converted involves more than accepting a new way of thinking.

For Christians being prophetic thus means leading people to holiness or right ways of living. This involves not just preaching the right message but also living rightly; that is, the Christian community itself and the people comprising it would have to live rightly. To be prophetic, the church could not be hypocritical—preaching one thing but living another.

Historically, many have looked to the church to set out the proper moral course for the world. From the teachings of the church fathers on priestly celibacy as a model for ordinary

^{24.} Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, Saint Peter's Square, June 15, 2011, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20110615_en.html.

people²⁵ to Pope Benedict's assertion of a "prophetic ministry that the Lord has entrusted to the church" regarding evangelization, missionary work or conversion,²⁶ the church has often been viewed as helping people discover God's will for them. Liberation theology's understanding of the church as prophetic, however, was new.

In liberation theology, prophecy deals primarily with economic justice, which is understood as work toward economic equality. To be prophetic, in this context, means to call people to just economic practices. Thus, being prophetic in this sense requires the church to take the side of poor people. Gutiérrez describes this commitment to poor people as, foremost, the "struggle against oppressive structures" and the construction of a more just society.²⁷ Gutiérrez and others called for Catholic bishops, in particular, to lead the Christian movement against injustice, citing the bishops' assertion made at their meeting at Medellin: "To us, the Pastors of the Church, belongs the duty . . . to denounce everything which, opposing justice, destroys peace." Further, the conference stressed the way in which bishops are called to solidarity with poor people, meaning they are to make the problems and struggles of poor people their own.

Solidarity with those who are poor serves as a key concept for defining the church's prophetic call. *Solidarity* as a technical theological word should not be confused with charity or sympathy. Far from just feeling bad or giving money to help a situation, *solidarity* means taking on another's situation as one's own.²⁹ To be in

^{25.} See Saint Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning the Offices of the Ministers*, 1.50, in *Patrologia Latina*, XVI, 97–98, which says, "you must remain strangers to conjugal intimacy, for you know that you have a ministry, whole and immaculate, which must never be profaned by any sexual relations."

^{26.} Pope Benedict XVI, address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Bishops of Kenya on their ad Limina visit, November 19, 2007, www. vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2007/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20071119_bishops-kenya_en.html.

^{27.} Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 68.

^{28.} CELAM, Peace, no. 20, in Renewing the Earth: Catholic Documents on Peace, Justice and Liberation, ed. David O'Brien and Thomas Shannon (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 569.

^{29.} Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, eds., *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 20, 30–31; see especially Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz's essay "Solidarity," which continues this tradition of understanding solidarity and evidences how widespread Latin American liberation theology has become even outside its own context.

solidarity means to join with the other person or group. For Latin American bishops, being in solidarity with the poor means living like them and ultimately living among them, taking on their problems as one's own. Priests and bishops in Latin America committed to practicing theological solidarity thus not only worked in the slums and most dangerous areas of their cities and countries but also lived there themselves. A number of these figures—most notably Óscar Romero—were murdered or "martyred" for their dedication to living with and working for those who are poor.

An example of what solidarity might mean in the US context can highlight the difference between solidarity and sympathy, empathy, or charity. Bullying is now recognized as a widespread problem in the United States, and most people have either been the target of bullying themselves or know someone who has. Bullying can take place at school, at work, on a sports team, or in one's neighborhood. What might solidarity with the bullied person look like? It could mean being physically present with them when bullying takes place and challenging the bullies: "If you are going to insult or push him, you are going to have to do the same to me." Solidarity does not mean telling bullies to go away and then watching as they hurt someone. It does not mean just seeking help from a teacher. Solidarity means taking on the reality of the suffering person: making their situation one's own, experiencing what they are going through, and ultimately making one's self as vulnerable as the other. For Latin American Catholic bishops, solidarity with the poor means, quite literally, becoming one of them.

Being prophetic means that members of the church, including its leaders, must move beyond expressing ideas about justice to living it. The prophetic message of liberation theology calls Christians, especially bishops and priests, to disassociate themselves from unjust orders, making sure not to use Christianity to legitimize established social practices that privilege some over others. Specifically, to be prophetic means to enter into "conflict with those who wield power." Gutiérrez understands this concrete prophetic mission as twofold, or what he calls "constructive" and "critical." Constructively, the church

^{30.} Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 69, n. 79.

^{31.} Ibid., 69.

must recognize and affirm elements of social revolution that work for the well-being of persons and that help people to participate in the construction of society. Critically, the church must call attention to social forces, structures, and realities that harm people and work within the wider society to change these.

Perhaps more abstract but no less important than working for concrete social change, the church's prophetic mission as understood in liberation theology includes what is often called "consciousness raising" or "conscienticizing." Consciousness raising means building people's awareness of their own economic victimization as well as helping them to recognize that "the doctrinal riches of the gospel contain a revolutionary thrust." It is not enough for the prophetic church to proclaim to the world a message of economic justice. In addition, the church must help train and empower people to recognize and receive this message, internalizing it as part of their self-understanding.

The combination of solidarity, constructive recognition of justice work, critical recognition of injustice, and conscienticization necessarily lead to the recognition that the Catholic Church's own structures are inadequate and possibly even inappropriate to this task. Existing structures contribute to an institutional style that compromises Christianity's liberating task. Many Catholics, especially members of the clergy, live comfortably, too removed from real suffering to empathize with the gospel's demands.

Jon Sobrino's book *Jesus the Liberator*, surveys four traditional Christologies that have been used to gloss over gospel demands to live in solidarity with and empathize with the poor. First, Christologies that emphasize an abstract Christ as love overshadow the Jesus of Nazareth who was concretely involved with outcasts. Second,

^{32.} See Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); E. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation," in *Churches in Struggle: Liberation Theologies and Social Change in North America*, ed. W. Tabb (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986), 49; Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 70; Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986); Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976).

^{33. &}quot;Socioeconomic Structures of Peru," in *Between Honesty and Hope: Documents from and about the Church in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Maryknoll Publications, 1970), 74.

Christologies that highlight Christ as power obscure what Sobrino identifies as the real Jesus, "whose power is service and whose place is below."³⁴ Third, understandings of Christ as reconciler stress Jesus as a peacemaker, but one who makes no demands on the rich and no defense of the poor. He does not call on the rich to be converted.³⁵ Fourth, absolute and abstract images of an a-historical Christ that forget that Jesus was a person in the world tend to stress the kingdom of God and ignore the suffering world.³⁶ Each of these traditional ways of understanding Jesus as the Christ show how those in power, those who construct Christologies (theological explanations of the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ), overlook the experiences and understandings of poor people in their approaches to Jesus. Fundamentally, then, these approaches fail to reflect the reality of the gospel message.

Gutiérrez and others urge clergy to change their whole lifestyle. Liberation theology abounds with suggestions ranging from the necessity of earning a living in ways unrelated to the official ministries of the Catholic Church—a change that would help Catholic priests understand the daily reality of everyone else—to the idea that priests should marry. Broadly, liberation theology asserts that the commitment of the Christians to social change requires that Christianity's leaders live in the everyday world, not apart from it in privileged and isolated ways. Liberation theology contends that changes in how the Catholic clergy live would help them better understand those they serve and also build the new economic world advocated by the gospel.

The Preferential Option for the Poor

Liberation theology's hallmark phrase is God's "preferential option for the poor."³⁷ Christianity has long known that Jesus ministered especially among those shunned by society: lepers, prostitutes, and

^{34.} Jon Sobrino, Jesus the Liberator: A Historical Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 15.

^{35.} Ibid., 15-16.

^{36.} Ibid., 16.

^{37.} Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), 182, cf. 449.

tax collectors for Rome, whom Israelites would have resented.³⁸ Yet Jesus' concern for those on the margins was not, for the most part, seen as the central priority of his ministry. Instead, in many eras the church has focused on Christ's victory over sin, sometimes even understanding financial success and standing in the community as a sign of election.³⁹ The majesty of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome or the recently acquired Crystal Cathedral in Orange County, California, suggests that the Catholic Church—as well as other churches—has concerned itself with acquiring and displaying wealth.

Liberation theology understands Jesus' ministry to the poor and marginalized as his central concern and, by extension, as God's central concern. In the Christian understanding, Jesus is the unique and most important revelation of God; that Jesus focused his ministry on people left out of social structures reveals their importance to God. Theologian Leonardo Boff speaks not just of individuals seeking alms but also of the collective poor or the entire class of people who live in poverty as a result of oppression. The poor are the destitute but also the exploited workers under capitalist systems who do not reap the benefits of their labor, making other people rich. They are the "underemployed, those pushed aside by the production process—always at hand to take the place of the employed; they are the laborers of the countryside, and migrant workers with only seasonal work."40 According to Boff, liberation theology sees the face of Christ in these people because Christ stands in solidarity with those who suffer. Turning to Matthew 25:31-46, scholars such as Boff cite Jesus' explanation that whatever is done to the hungry, naked, or imprisoned is done to him. Scholars typically understand Matthew 25 to signify Jesus' identification and actual presence with those in need. 41 Insofar as Jesus not only represents God's will but actually incarnates it, as Christians believe, Jesus reveals that God is on the side of the oppressed.

^{38.} See Matthew 8:1–4, Luke 17:11–19, and Mark 1:40–45 for references to lepers, Matthew 9:10–13, 21:31–32, Luke 19:1–10, and Mark 2:13–17 for references to tax collectors, and Matthew 21:31–32 for a reference to prostitutes.

^{39.} Ernst Tröltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 580.

^{40.} Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology, 3-4.

^{41.} Ibid., 4.

God "sides with the oppressed against the pharaohs of the world," ⁴² meaning that God favors those who struggle against wielders of unjust, repressive power. God is "particularly father and defender of those who are oppressed and treated unjustly. Out of love for them, God takes sides, takes *their* side against the repressive measures of all the pharaohs." ⁴³ Liberation theology asserts that God is not neutral. Instead, God specially wills the flourishing of people who suffer under others who prosper.

While those who live comfortable lives may find it hard to consider that God is on the side of the poor, authors like Sobrino hold that God's preferential option for the poor does not mean God does not also will the flourishing of the rich. ⁴⁴ Instead, God's special interest in the poor expresses God's universal love, since so many in the world live in poverty. To will the well-being of those who suffer does not entail willing the suffering of those who have privilege. Instead, God is universally loving, with special attention to those in need.

According to liberation theology, because God takes the side of the poor, Christians too must make a preferential option for the poor; they must privilege the poor as a focus of concern and a site of revelation. The reasons typically offered by liberation theologians for why Christians must make a preferential option for the poor focus on two mutually informative aspects of God's revelation: God's revelation through the people of Israel and God's revelation through Jesus Christ.

Theological Reasons for the Preferential Option for the Poor

According to historical Christian theology, God reveals God's self not only in the life of Jesus Christ but also throughout the history of Israel. Liberation theology pays special attention to Old Testament stories about God and the enslaved Israelites, coming to the conclusion that God "feels impelled to come to the help of the oppressed

^{42.} Ibid., 50.

^{43.} Ibid., 51.

^{44.} Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 16. The quote reads in part, "a Jesus who proclaimed beatitudes for the poor . . . and no curses on the rich, a Jesus who loves everyone, but without specifying the different forms this love takes, defending the poor and issuing a radical call on their oppressors to be converted."

poor."⁴⁵ The Exodus story, in which God rescues the Israelites from Egyptian enslavement, not only reveals a God at work in history but also a God at work for those who are suffering. Similarly, Isaiah 1:10–17, in which care for the needy and oppressed feature prominently, serves as a foundational text for liberation theology's understanding that God too takes the side of the poor. Theologically (which means literally "according to the logic of God"), God shows particular concern for the poor and oppressed. Throughout the history of the people of Israel, God reveals Godself as both primarily concerned with the oppressed and as most present in the one who died violently and unjustly.

Christological Reasons for the Preferential Option for the Poor

"Christ undeniably made a personal option for the poor and held them to be the main recipients of his message."46 So begins Boff's discussion in Introducing Liberation Theology on the Christological reasons to adopt liberation theology. Jesus directed his message and work to people at the edges of society who held little or no power, rather than to the prosperous and those who held sway in their communities. As Jesus' edict in Matthew 19:24 or Mark 10:25 states, it is "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Similarly, Jesus shares the story of the good Samaritan, in which a foreigner helps a total stranger on the road by paying for his room and board at an inn so that he can heal (Lk 10:25-37), to illustrate what being a good person entails and to demonstrate his commitment to the suffering. If the good Samaritan exemplifies how to follow Jesus, then discipleship means taking care of people in need, even among populations ordinarily considered to be one's enemies.⁴⁷ According to liberation theology, because of Christ's own witness, "[t]he followers of Christ

^{45.} Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology, 44.

^{46.} Ibid.

^{47.} For example, tension and complications existed in the relationship between the Hebrews and the Samaritans. At various times, Samaritans were described as a group of "dissenting Hebrews" with a separate identity. For more information, see Robert Murray, "Jews, Hebrews, and Christians: Some Needed Distinctions," *Novum Testamentum* 24, no. 3 (July 1982): 198.

make this option for the poor and needy the first and foremost way of expressing their faith in Christ in the context of widespread poverty in the world of today."⁴⁸

Ultimately, Jesus, the height of God's self-revelation, reveals that God is present in poverty. Though language about Jesus' victory over sin and saving of other people has often dominated Christian theology, Jesus himself suffered and died in apparent defeat at the hands of people affected by particular political structures. Liberation theology emphasizes "theologies of the cross" that focus on Jesus' suffering and death. If Jesus reveals what it means to be God, then God is present wherever there is suffering and death caused by unjust structures that victimize the weak.

The Privileged Insight of the Poor for Identifying and Remedying Injustice

Historically, highly trained scholars, often scholars of philosophy, have done theology. Saint Augustine (354–430), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Gregory of Nyssa (335–394), Basil of Caesarea (330–379), and many other influential Christian theologians had extensive scholarly training. Indeed, such training was considered necessary to engage in theology, which was understood as a *scientia*, or science.

Liberation theology turns this idea of theology upside down. Rather than seeing theology as a professional specialization done by sophisticated experts, liberation theologians see theology as a process of reflecting on experience and action that can be done by anyone regardless of academic training. For example, theological reflection might focus on an unjust situation or on efforts to promote justice and might be carried out by a person in the unjust situation or by a pastoral worker trying to alleviate suffering. In this approach theological reflection follows experience and action. Both are sources for theology. ⁵⁰ Some refer to the idea that theorizing by pastoral workers

^{48.} Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology, 45.

^{49.} Jon Sobrino, Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 29, 182, 216.

^{50.} Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 9.

takes place after work for justice as "praxis before theory." ⁵¹ *Praxis* is another word for *practice* or *activity*, which liberation theology values over speculative thinking. Right practice, which works for economic justice, generates theology.

Praxis serves as a new starting point for theology. As theologian Yves Congar notes, "Instead of using only revelation and tradition as starting points, as classical theology has generally done, it must start with facts and questions derived from the world and from history."⁵² The world and history are full of oppressed and suffering people. In this new model, they become the privileged source for liberation theology.

According to liberation theologians, only the poor can fully recognize the realities of injustice, for they know firsthand its debilitating effects. People in the ruling (including ordained) class are unlikely to adequately assess inequalities and suffering, because they have not experienced these firsthand. This makes it absolutely crucial that those who seek to address imbalances in societies join in solidarity with those who suffer from them most egregiously. Without solidarity, those who seek to better the situation of the poor risk imposing their own views, values, and remedies on a situation that might better be addressed by those who have experienced it firsthand.

Poor people have what is known as "epistemic privilege" for understanding injustice and determining solutions.⁵³ Epistemology is a subfield of philosophy that deals with questions of knowledge: how one knows what he or she knows, the conditions under which knowledge is justified, and so forth. Epistemic privilege thus refers to a superior location or vantage point for knowing. For liberation theology, the poor have better or privileged vision for identifying and remediating poverty.

^{51.} Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 10; Daniel Franklin Pilario, Back to the Rough Grounds of Praxis: Exploring Theological Method (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), 264–65; and also Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s," in Lift Every Voice, who continues this spirit in her mujerista theology.

^{52.} Yves Congar, Situation et Taches Présentes de la Théologie (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1967), 72.

^{53.} See Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., Feminist Epistemologies (Thinking Gender) (New York: Routledge, 1993). Feminist epistemology gave this commitment a name but the insight that theology has to be done not "for" the poor but "from" the poor permeates Latin American liberation theology. See also Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s," in Lift Every Voice.

Liberation theologians urge professional theologians and church leaders who seek to understand the church's role in the world to live amongst and listen to the poor. Because God has made a preferential option for the poor, Christians must do the same. To truly work for the poor, rather than for one's own self interest and that of his or her privileged class, one must do theology from the underside.⁵⁴ It is amid the poor that one finds the will of God.

Realized Eschatology

Another key theme in liberation theology is known as "realized eschatology." *Eschatology* refers to the end times or God's final judgment on the world. *Realized eschatology* understands God as having already begun to inaugurate God's kingdom or coming reign in the world. This eschatology sees the incarnation not just as an event that concludes with Jesus' death but also as a moment in the process of God's ongoing action that began with creation and will continue until the end days. It interprets all history as working toward the eschaton, with the active participation of people and movements helping to bringing about God's reign, one that has already begun. People can participate in work that furthers God's plan or work that thwarts it. Acts of evil work against the eschaton; acts of justice further it.

Scholars who advocate realized eschatology uphold it as the proper understanding of eschatology. They stress that understandings of eschatology that are solely otherworldly or about something beyond and outside of history risk making it into something magical or even irrelevant.⁵⁵

Realized eschatology has been enormously influential, with scholars and leaders across the theological spectrum advocating some form of it. Most often, advocates of realized eschatology view political and economic movements as helping to bring about God's reign. Yet others who hold a realized eschatology may see personal morality as the arena in which God's reign is primarily realized. Pope Benedict, for instance, explicitly rejects political and economic

^{54.} Thistlethwaite, Lift Every Voice, 1.

^{55.} Monika K. Hellwig, "Eschatology," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, vol. 2, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 357.

movements as the site of realized eschatology but holds that the "Kingdom is found in those persons whom the finger of God has touched and who have allowed themselves to be made God's sons and daughters." ⁵⁶

Liberation theology popularized realized eschatology, explicitly identifying political and economic arenas as places where God's reign is brought about by human participation and advocating work for justice as the way in which persons help to do God's will in the world. Gutiérrez, for instance, describes the close relationship between faith and political life. Drawing largely upon the work of Johann Sebastian Metz,⁵⁷ Gutiérrez rejects the post-Enlightenment approach to faith as a private, interior, personal matter that sees Christianity as a movement among other movements. Instead, Gutiérrez holds that Christianity must return to a self-understanding the de-privatizes faith and reinserts it into the public, social sphere.⁵⁸ The reclamation of Christian faith as an integral part of one's being in the social world is called "political theology."⁵⁹

The integration of personal faith and political life unites eschatological faith and social life, in which work for the marginalized commemorates "the coming of the kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus." ⁶⁰ Metz and the liberation theologians who draw on his work thus inextricably link political participation and action with eschatology.

In the view of liberation theology, realized eschatology requires not only individual political action but also institutional political action. The church, an influential institution called to preach and witness to the life of Jesus, must be a leader in political work for justice. The church must become an "institution of social criticism" with a mission of service to human liberation.⁶¹

^{56.} Joseph Ratzinger, Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 62.

^{57.} Johannes Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Seabury Press 1973), 108–10.

^{58.} Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 128.

^{59.} Metz, Theology of the World, 110.

^{60.} Ibid., 111.

^{61.} Ibid., 116.

Finding God in the Spirituality of the Poor

Though Gustavo Gutiérrez's earlier book *A Theology of Liberation* was enormously influential in the development and popularization of liberation theology, his later work *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, published in 1984, further develops his thinking. In this text, Gutiérrez largely departs from economic analysis of the situation of poverty in Latin America to focus instead on Christian spirituality and response in the midst of this situation. According to Gutiérrez, the poor of Latin America understand solidarity, joy, and what he calls a spiritual childhood in a unique way. These understandings are vital and beneficial for other Christians who seek to follow Jesus. Henry Nouwen describes the book in its foreword as

the nuanced articulation of the Christ-encounter as experienced by the poor of Latin America in their struggle to affirm their human dignity and claim their true identity as sons and daughters of God. As in all true spiritualities, this spirituality of liberation is deeply rooted in the lived experience of God's presence in history, an experience that is as unique and new for the poor in Latin America as it was for St. Benedict, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Ignatius Loyola, and their followers.⁶²

Gutiérrez holds that the poor encounter the living Christ in their struggles for sustenance, freedom, and dignity in a unique way. In thinking about where one finds God, one can overlook or even reject situations of widespread poverty and suffering as likely locations. He contends that the situation of dire poverty in Latin America not only offers a valid site for finding God but also a lifegiving, unique locus to encounter the living spirit of Christ and the authentic gospel message. It is a special and privileged place to find God, for God has made a preferential option for the poor. Nouwen suggests that this encounter between impoverished people and God is every bit as

^{62.} From the foreword by Henri Nouwen, in Gustavo Gutiérrez, We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), xiii.

valid and important as the encounters had between people whom the Catholic Church has considered saints and God.⁶³

The spirituality present in the contemporary reality of the poor of Latin America is a "new knowing." 64 It is not a theory to apply across time and history but rather a discernment of how the spirit of God is moving now. This spirituality stays in constant dialogue with the gospel and also attends deeply to the realities of injustice facing those in this exploited part of the world. Liberation theology recognizes a spirituality borne of the wretchedness of those struggling for survival and of those who live among them and work to alleviate their suffering, those who make the condition of the destitute their own. Out of this intersection between the historical gospel message and present-day reality, a new, unique, and authentic spirituality is born. The poor, in their radical dependence on God—because they have little else-manifest and reflect an openness to God from which the rich must learn. This attitude of openness and trust in God allows one to truly interpret the gospel and discern the work of God in the world today. Being poor, writes Gutiérrez, is not only the experience of hunger, exploitation, lack of education, and a struggle for rights but also a way of feeling, knowing, reasoning, befriending, loving, believing, suffering, celebrating, and praying. Commitment to the poor means entering and in some cases remaining in that universe with a much clearer awareness; it means being one of its inhabitants.65

What Gutiérrez calls a "spiritual childhood,"66 or a new trusting and intimacy with God, emerges from the experience of dire material poverty. Without this experience, people too easily get caught up in concern with and the taking for granted of material possessions. Far from being a type of Pelagianism (the view that people must save themselves through their own efforts, in this case toward economic reform), liberation theology stresses a radical, childlike dependence on God. One achieves this dependence only by learning from those who already practice it because they have little else. The spirituality

^{63.} See Nouwen's foreword in We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), xiii–xxi.

^{64.} Gutiérrez, We Drink from Our Own Wells, xix.

^{65.} Ibid., 125.

^{66.} Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 139.

born of poverty is a privileged location for learning about real intimacy with the one in whom Jesus trusted even as he died.

Among the most important contributions of liberation theology to the broader field of theology is its understanding of the dependency of all spiritualities on context. Just as liberation theology emerges out of its social and historical location, Gutiérrez analyzes how *all* spirituality is interwoven with its time and context. ⁶⁷ Thus liberation theology is not unique in responding to its age and culture. All theologies do just this, and liberation theology—because it arises in a new location and era—continues to renew the gospel message in lived community. Some have misread liberation theology as novel because it demands an incorporation of social location into theology. This serious misreading, however, leads one to view liberation theology as a different methodology than the rest of theology, rather than the one that correctly identifies the contextual nature of all theologies.

Out of the context of extreme poverty, new, real, authentic experiences of God are born. In this context Christians recall and emphasize Jesus' special love of and ministry to the poor. Insights borne of this experience include the understanding that God's presence is not experienced primarily or solely in individual mystical experiences but in community; that God has made what has been defined as a preferential option for the poor; that authentically living out the gospel means imitating Christ's ministry to the disenfranchised; and that God works right now, in history, for justice. Gutiérrez contends that the poor of Latin America have real and powerful experiences of and relationships with Christ. Christians must not only focus their attention on the situation of these people as those for whom God is most concerned but also learn from their living spirituality as a unique site of God's self revelation.

In Gutiérrez's own words, We Drink from Our Own Wells is a reflection "on the experience of 'walking' that is going on today in Latin America, the experience of the road to holiness—to use a term not often mentioned in discussion of such difficult and controversial contexts." The spirituality of the poor "is the well from

^{67.} See Gutiérrez, We Drink from Our Own Wells, 26-29.

^{68.} Ibid., 136-37.

which [Christians] must drink. From it [Christians] draw the promise of resurrection."69

Conclusion

Liberation theology places poor people at the center of Christian life, practice, and thought. Because Jesus himself died in great suffering as a result of unjust political structures and because his ministry was centrally concerned with people at the margins, liberation theologians assert that God is most fully present in the lives of the marginalized. Poor people, even more than privileged Christians, dwell at the center, not the margins, of God's presence and saving activity. Work for the flourishing of those who suffer at the margins of society because of economic injustice invites the coming of the kingdom of God. Through a preferential option for the poor, individuals and ecclesial leadership bodies and institutions help bring the justice begun by Jesus in his ministry to the margins.

Liberation theologians direct those who wonder where to find God to look to the spirituality of the poor and not to interpret suffering and poverty as signs of God's absence. Because God is a God of history who works in the ways that Jesus taught and lived his life, God too can be found in the current context of both unjust situations and work for justice. The poor of Latin America today have unique, authentic experiences of the spirit of Christ in the context of their struggles for survival, dignity, and freedom. These experiences arise in the political and economic realities that shape the lives of these followers of Jesus. Just as all theologies stem from the context of those thinking about God and Christian life, liberation theology speaks about the reality of God in Latin America. The insights borne of those who struggle for justice in this context prove indispensable for those seeking living spiritualities that take the fullness of God's presence seriously.

At first, Latin American liberation theology may have seemed strange to some because it regarded God as actively present in the midst of dire circumstances, situations in which God may have appeared absent. Liberation theology grappled with the challenge of

^{69.} Ibid., 137.

reconciling Christian belief in God's presence in the world with the reality of poverty and suffering. The lives of poor people have become a rich source for theological reflection. Today more and more theologians are exploring the meaning and significance of the experience of marginalized people for Christian theological understandings.

Questions for Discussion

- 1. Identify reasons why a Christian might overlook the idea that God is active in the lives of those who suffer in poverty and why a Christian might be threatened by this idea.
- 2. How might an understanding of liberation theology help a Christian theologian reconcile Christian beliefs with the reality of multiple religions in the world?

For Further Reading

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