

Actionability of Liberation Theology As Seen In Peru and India

Liberation theology is a religious and social ideology and movement. Based on the book *A Theology of Liberation*, by Gustavo Gutiérrez, the movement sought to right the socio-economic wrongs prevalent in Latin America during the mid-1900s from a Catholic standpoint. Liberation theology takes a Marxist lens to the bible, highlighting class struggle and poverty as a spiritual connection amongst everyone. Gutiérrez highlights three points about poverty and the attitudes needed to approach it. First, he describes poverty as a scandal. It is a shameful, immoral condition that shouldn't exist. This scandal is, of course, not the fault of those experiencing it, but of those with power who allow it to continue. Second, he describes poverty as spiritual. Looking at Jesus Christ, who had lived a life of poverty, Gutiérrez notes that an impoverished and immaterial life is more in line with that of Jesus'. The last point is solidarity. Solidarity involves the choices to lead an immaterial life, share wealth with others, and to be of service to others. This choice of lifestyle again is in line with how Jesus lived as well as what he preached about serving others. The notion of the wealthy and the impoverished isn't limited to material wealth. Gutiérrez includes groups that have been cast aside, such as ethnic and racial minorities or people persecuted due to gender or religion. In the decades nations worldwide gained independence from colonial powers, wealth and power were still in the hands of the nations' elite communities (Gutiérrez 1988). Gutiérrez and other priests and theologians shifted their religious services and practices to meet the needs of the poor, majority population in response to a Catholic Church they saw as corrupt, favoring the rich and elite. Under this framework, how may Liberation theologies successfully confront poverty and where may it fail? How actionable is this theology?

An important idea from Gutiérrez's writings that has gained popularity outside of Liberation theology, is the preferential option for the poor. This is based on biblical teachings in which help is given to those most in need. The preferential option for the poor is meant to lift people out of most material and spiritual poverty. Spiritual poverty is the disconnect between a person and God. This can be due to poor conditions or unfulfilling work. (Gutiérrez 1988). Gutiérrez believed that poverty was a man-made problem and not one a natural condition of God. Poverty is the lack of love, so God is with those most in need. Therefore, by helping those in need, one is closest to God. By illustrating different types of poverty, liberation theology presents itself as beneficial to all that participate.

Social stratification in Peru is based on race and ethnicity. Most Peruvians are mixed White and Indigenous (*Mestizo*). The two largest Indigenous groups are Quechua people, who speak Quechua, and a much smaller group of Aymara people. In addition, there are Afro-Peruvian populations and Asian populations mostly of Chinese and Japanese descent, and the White population of mostly Spanish descent. Like many Spanish colonized Latin countries, White populations hold most economic and social power within Peru. Peru's most elite are located in Lima, with other upper classes dispersed in surrounding provinces. Rural areas consist mostly of Indigenous and lower-class *Mestizos* (Rex A. Hudson). Gustavo Gutiérrez himself was born in Lima, Peru into a *Mestizo* family. He studied theology in Europe where he was exposed to different non-theistic ideologies such as Marxism. After studying in Europe and returning to the poverty and social injustices in Peru, he wrote *A Theology in Liberation*.

Though most of the population has Indigenous blood, mixed or not, those in power rarely do. Even throughout Peru's tumultuous political history, it was only in the past two decades they

had their first Indigenous president. Peru doesn't have much space for Indigenous people in political settings and populist attempts to do so have been met with resistance.

Catholicism was brought to Peru through Spanish colonialism. It is the dominant religion in the country. The same systems that made White Spaniards the ruling elite class centuries ago, cleared out Indigenous religions and customs, forcing Catholicism on most of the population. Catholicism in the country today is still dominant, but the Church does not hold much power compared to government systems. The Church separated itself from the state through the efforts of Catholic Action, a global group that worked to spread Catholicism among the working class. This work gave precedent to religious practice alongside social movements that would inspire future generations. It allowed the Catholic Church in Peru to grow with the needs of its people, especially in the 60s and 70s when Liberation theology was founded, to accommodate more social causes (Peña 1994).

Liberation Theology fits the needs of Peruvian people because of the majority Catholic population. The theology looks to biblical stories as examples of how followers can be actionable. Though individuals can be inspired by other religions since this ideology is geared to help those in poverty, the impoverished being of the same religion creates more room for understanding and less pressure of conversion which missionary work can sometimes do. To Gutiérrez's three points, class structure in Peru is not a natural condition, the boundaries drawn around ethnicity are a man-made scandal that is relatively recent in history. The lack of visibility and importance are given to Indigenous communities can be parallel with the experience of Jesus and his followers being outcasts in society because of man-made social ideals. Solidarity can be found in different minority groups in the country similarly banding together under the title of

outcasts. Liberation theology does treat the issues of Peru fairly by illustrating poverty as both a physical and spiritual problem.

In India, Liberation theology took root found a home within Dalit theology. The caste system in India has existed for centuries, but the version we see today was created under British rule in the subcontinent. It divides lineages of people by their labor and determines socioeconomic status. Today's caste system consists of a hierarchy of *varnas* or orders. Dalits are excluded from the traditional four *varnas* creating their own fifth class of untouchability. Occupations common among Dalits include butchers, tanners, gravedigging, and public sanitation work. Dalits face discrimination and violence on a daily basis. About 27 acts of violence are committed against Dalits in India daily including assaults, murders, rape, arson, etc. These acts are also focused in rural areas where caste is more visible (GOI 2007).

Though founded in Hindu societies, caste has morphed to include and be included by different religions, such as Christianity. Caste practices within Indian Christianity go back to the start of the first century when the religion was sold mostly to the upper caste societies (Duraismamy 1986). It wasn't until the Western colonial powers arrived at the scene that Christianity became popular among lower castes. Christian missionaries, mostly Catholic from Portugal initially and eventually largely from Britain, started their work in the subcontinent to challenge the dominant non-Christian religions. Many Dalits throughout India and other South Asian countries converted to Christianity as a means to escape caste (Webster 2007).

However, caste still has strong roots within South Asian Christianity. Non-Dalit Christians and Dalits are buried separately, for example. In addition, Christians as a whole are undermined and discriminated against in the largely Hindu societies within India. Plus, many government programs created to lift lower caste people don't apply to Dalit Christians or

Muslims. Therefore, the conversion to Christianity may help Dalits escape the spiritual poverty Gutiérrez described but creates more disparities for them to combat physical poverty.

To truly confront the nuances of the Dalit Christian experience, Dalit theology began in the 80s. Dalit theology confronts caste and seeks to abolish the limits of being Dalit while maintaining the rich culture of the unique identity. An interesting distinction with Dalit theology is that the state of poverty of Christian Dalits was originally created by a religion outside of their own but permeates into Indian Christianity. This experience parallels the religious persecution depicted in the new testament perhaps more strongly than the examples Gutiérrez saw in Latin America since there are at least two distinct religious groups. Connecting back to Gutiérrez's three points, caste is man-made oppression, and Dalit theologians see Jesus as Dalit. Jesus' struggle both in poverty and social oppression is the Dalit experience. Jesus also chose solidarity by choosing to live among those who were looked down upon by society while opposing the law and greater systems in place. This illustrates the major difference between Latin American Liberation theology and South Asian Dalit theology. Dalit theology focuses more on social class rather than economics. Most Dalit theologians were most critical of the Marxist ties to Liberation theology. Many are critical of the Marxist lens itself that doesn't give caste the different types of attention it needs by just looking at the economic structures involved (Massey 1994). Economic equality is a goal of Dalit theology but ideally is the by-product of social reforms. Dalit theology needs Marxist analysis in addition to other viewpoints on the Dalit Christian experience.

The issue that Dalit theology has that prevents it from being actionable may be the opposite issue Liberation theology has within Peru. Dalit theology branched out from the umbrella of Liberation theology to address the needs of Dalits specifically. While there were Liberation theologians in India who sought greater economic situations for everyone in poverty

due to caste, religion, and other reasons, Dalit theologians sought a movement that couldn't erase Dalit experiences and culture (Packianathan 2012). This may lead to Dalit theology being too insular by narrowing down on a small group within an already minority of people. This leaves little room for actionable solidarity. That is not to say they can't create movement together. In fact, some of the thought processes put into Dalit theology could shine a new light on the issues in Peru.

Indigenismo is a separate political ideology that seeks to bring Indigenous experiences to the forefront of a nation's political and social worlds. This includes the inclusion of Indigenous people, languages, customs, cultures, etc, that have existed since pre-Spanish influence in the Americas (Giraudó 2012). Though Peru is majority Catholic, Liberation theology fails to confront how and why the country became that way. By looking solely at economic structures and how groups of people fall into them, Liberation theology doesn't critique the spread of its own base religion. While Dalit theology heavily focuses on one group's past, present, and future, Liberation theology may fail to meet the needs of everyone it hopes to with its more general definitions and goals.

However, the main reason Liberation theology and its branches haven't gained much traction is due to the world's biggest critique of the movement. That is its proximity to communism. In March 1937, the Vatican, with Pope Pius XI, released the *Divini Redemptoris*, an official decree against communism. Communism is described as "atheistic" as it "aims at upsetting the social order and at undermining the very foundations of Christian civilization" (Pius 1937). Many of the messages in the decree were geared towards the Bolsheviks and communism in the Soviet Union. It recognizes the issue of wealth disparities across the globe but claims that communism's approach to the issue is too idealistic and dangerous in the false hope it

can propagate. The decree also claims that communism takes away the individuality and spirituality of man, putting one's morals and humanity at stake. It specifically critiques the role communism proposes for women. They claim that this system will destroy family ties, removing women from the home and "thrust instead into public life and collective production under the same conditions as man" (Pius 1937). The Vatican turns the purpose of communism on its head by claiming it is the most materialistic system. Though it is in response to the wealth inequalities in our world, its only focus is on the production of material goods. "It would be a collectivity with no other hierarchy than that of the economic system" (Pius 1937). This insularly described system has no room for spiritual growth and questioning according to the Vatican. It leads back to their most pressing issue, the spread of communism to them is the spread of atheism.

Liberation theology, however, can't be atheist. It is a Catholic theology. The Vatican did also release official instructions in regards to Liberation theology. While again acknowledging the wealth inequalities across the globe, the Vatican also describes Liberation theologians as "impatient" which has led to the "despairing of every other method, to turn to what they call 'Marxist analysis'" (Second Vatican Council 1983). Marxist analysis sees class struggle as the one truth throughout history and abandons God as truth. Similar to Dalit theology, the Vatican finds an issue with the importance placed on politics and the newness of Marxism so "one is led to deny the 'radical newness' of the New Testament and above all to misunderstand the person of Our Lord Jesus Christ, true God, and true man, and thus the specific character of the salvation he gave us, that is above all liberation from sin, which is the source of all evils" (Second Vatican Council 1983).

Critiques of the theology from the Vatican may be enough to demobilize it, but even without support from up top, Liberation theology may ask to take on more than it can handle.

While the theology doesn't ask for communism at its most extreme, it seeks to fix physical wealth disparities through Catholicism. That can never truly help everyone equitably since not everyone is Catholic. Even amongst Catholic groups, such as those in India, there are too many social differences that one system, that uses the bible as its main framework, can not combat. Perhaps the theology can help people in the type of spiritual poverty Gutiérrez described, but one religion may never safely fix our global wealth disparities.

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