

Reading Scripture Through Tainted Glasses: Liberation Theology a la Karl Marx



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Abstract

The essay begins with a close historical examination of the ‘social justice’ concept, one of the central organizing principles of liberation theology as it emerged in South America in the early 1960s. A particular focus is placed upon the pivotal influence of the theological work of a renowned learned Jesuit priest living and writing in the heydays of Marx, Darwin, and Freud, arguably the three greatest atheist thinkers of modern times. The essay proceeds to a brief historical review and systematic analysis of the central tenets and philosophical assumptions underlying liberation theology as expounded in the main work of its founder contrasted with equivalent biblical notions to determine similarities and differences. Then the essay attempts to determine how notions intimately related to Marx’s capitalist critique were imported into various parts of liberation theology. The final parts of the essay provide some salient theoretical, methodological, and biblical critiques of liberation theology. Among other pointed criticisms, the essay

concludes that it coyly transfers the Christian notion of sinful nature in Genesis to the level of sinful social structure in contemporary social-scientific scholarship. In doing so, it effectively imports unfiltered socialist theoretical concepts and philosophical assumptions which create a false Christian religious veneer of approval that permit selective interpretation of biblical passages employed to promote socialist revolutionary battle cries. In effect, liberation theology perverts Christianity by converting it into its atheistic mirror image, that is, Marxianity.

Keywords: social justice, liberation theology, Taparelli, Marx, Catholic social structure, sin, human nature,

Introduction

The postmodernist ideology of 'social justice' was one of the central organizing principles of liberation theology as it emerged in Latin America in the early 1960s as well as many of its theological offshoots such as feminist theology, black theology, and queer theology (Novak, 1988, 1984; Schall, 1982; Bell, 2006; Restrep, 2018; Smith, 1991; McGovern, 1989). It is underscored heavily not only in the work of who is largely considered to be the father of liberation theology (Gutierrez, 1971), but also in its subset of core founders and followers (see Segundo, 1976; 1973; Bonino, 1975, 1976; Assmann, 1975a; 1975b; Fierro, 1977; Segundo, 1973, 1976; among many others).

As it turns out, research indicates the notion of ‘social justice’ was not so novel at all. It originated in the teachings of a Jesuit priest (Taparelli, 1840-43) basing himself on the teachings of Thomas Aquinas more than a century before Gutierrez even began to conceive about ‘just’ or righteous systems of social relationships. Since two early modern Catholic Popes were students of this particular Jesuit priest, they both incorporated his teachings into official encyclicals (Pope Leo XIII, 1879, 1891; and Pope Pius XI, 1931) and other documents as binding church policy, well prior to the theological writings of Gutierrez.

We will then engage in a systematic review of some of the central theoretical components of liberation theology as expounded in Gutierrez’s first book, *Theology of Liberation* (1971), and briefly contrast them with equivalent Biblical concepts such as justice, liberation, and freedom, aiming to identify any notable similarities and glaring discrepancies. Afterwards, we will try to determine the extent to which any secular philosophies or theories have influenced liberation theology in any way and, by logical extension, official policy of the Catholic Church.

Since theological literature itself indicates a strong Marxist influence upon liberation theology, prime attention will be focused on the impact of that particular secular theoretical model. The last part of this essay will be devoted to brief but poignant critical reflections upon some of the central features of liberation theology put forth in the established literature (Restrepo, 2018; Carter, 2018; Smith, 1991; Hebblethwaite,

1978; Bell, 2006; Novak, 1988, 1984; Carson, 2002; DeYoung, 2011; among many others).

Social Justice: Early Catholic Sources

As Behr (2019) emphasizes, the contemporary doctrine of social justice is by no means a particularly ‘modern’ notion. Historical research indicates that such notions originated during the early heydays of communist theory a la Karl Marx (Nunez, 2002). Luigi Taparelli, a Jesuit priest and scholar who lived during that tumultuous time period (1793-1862), a learned and well-educated man, was quite familiar with Marx’s written work and the work of related socialist thinkers and sympathizers. In his seminal book, “Theoretical Treatise of Natural Right Based on Fact”, Taparelli adopts a strong Thomistic approach to understanding the nature of human beings thoroughly infused with Marx’s lifelong concern with constructing a just social order, among many other key Marxian conceptual components (Behr, 2019).

He begins by claiming an adequate understanding of the human person requires both faith and reason because humans are fundamentally truth seekers. Essentially, it was a natural law theory of a ‘just’ social order. The emerging social sciences were offering a value-free study of society which Taparelli swallowed hook and line but without the sinker. That means he believed that the findings of the social, economic, and political sciences were integral to our understanding of humans as

'social' animals, largely accepting the Darwinian evolutionary and Marxian economic theoretical viewpoints so dominant at that time especially in scholarly circles.

As such, his ideas about social justice and 'subsidiarity' soon became fundamental components of early Catholic social thought up to the present time. His concept of 'subsidiarity' was just as attractive to social thinkers and to religious officials as were his thoughts on social justice. Essentially, this concept simply meant that every organization or 'consortium' was forced by natural necessity to conserve its own unity but without damaging the 'unity of the whole system of consortia'. The duty of the Whole consortium, the larger society, if you will, is not to destroy the existence of the smaller individual parts of the larger society or the 'consortia' (Behr, 2019).

Framing his arguments in the vernacular of 'duty' imparted a moral flavor that was quite palatable to Catholic Church officialdom. Evidently, the emphasis upon both faith and reason in understanding the nature of human beings also represented a serious movement away from a tradition-based or conservative view wholly dependent on standard biblical sources towards a more modern 'liberal' social view incorporating some of the findings of scholarship in the newly emerging social sciences. Although he constantly deconstructs and criticizes both Adam Smith's liberal laissez-faire economic theory and the communist theoretical progeny it gave rise to in a Catholic journal he founded in 1850, firm allegiance to

conservative Church tradition and Papal sovereignty soon gained pontifical attention and favor.

In fact, research confirms that the central tenets and arguments of his teachings were incorporated prominently into an encyclical by Pope Pius IX (1864). That was just the beginning of the incorporation of secular theoretical ideas into official Catholic policy and teaching. Later, Pope Leo XIII sought to incorporate Taparelli's contributions into his own encyclicals (1879, 1891). Pope Pius XI followed in the footsteps of previous popes by incorporating Taparelli's concept of subsidiarity into his own official Church policy on social teaching (1931), even seeking to advance Taparelli studies in universities and colleges.

Taparelli's incessant inclusion of secular philosophical and social scientific ideas about a just social order and social justice into official Catholic social teaching didn't stop at the level of Papal encyclicals. Its theoretical tentacles reached much deeper into the body of Church policy on social teachings more like a progressive social disease than panacea. For example, it was included in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church :

“a large part of the Church's social teaching is solicited and determined by important social questions, to which social justice is the proper answer.” (quoted in Carter, 2018, p. 1).

Even the official Catechism of the Catholic Church devotes a prominent section to social justice:

“Society ensures social justice when it provides the conditions that allow associations or individuals to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and their vocation. Social justice is linked to the common good and the exercise of authority.” (Quoted in Carter, *ibid.*)

Liberation Theology: Basic Introduction

As mentioned earlier, liberation theology developed in various countries of Latin America during the early 1960s primarily in response to perceived inadequacies in the established theological views and practices of the Roman Catholic Church at the time. Latin American theologians, many of them heavily involved on the ground and playing a much more activist role in so-called ‘doing theology’, that is, directly helping poor and oppressed people in their respective countries. Unsatisfied with how the Church was responding in practice in a doctrinally passive manner to the sufferings and economic plight of these people, such theologians started to question official Church doctrine and policies themselves.

So, they tried to construct a theological framework which would provide them with an alternative to the traditional abstract biblical focus of Church doctrine on Christ’s promise of

otherworldly deliverance, abundance, and salvation in the future. According to these theologians, the Church should respond in concrete practice to people suffering from immediate here-and-now, inner-worldly destitution and exploitation under what they viewed as oppressive, unjust, and inhumane social and political structures and relationships, not simply offer prayers or divert attention to an other-worldly resting place. In their view, a Church that did not actively resist and act to transform such exploitative social structures into newer and more humane forms benefited directly from such unjust structures and from the government that enforced them.

The last point is important because it underlines what the relationship between Church and government should be within liberation theology. Liberation theologians stridently call on the Church to always side with the poor and oppressed, not political or economic power structures. Further, the Church must become politically involved in active ways against oppressive social structures and relationships which cause suffering and oppression.

This is one of the new dimensions to theology which liberation theologians brought to the table, that is, the fervent revolutionary demand for the Church to actively push for the creation of new structures of social relationships very much in Marxian style. Simply feeding the poor is not enough; in addition, and more significantly, unjust and sinful social systems which were believed to cause poverty, oppression, and

suffering must be replaced by systems of social relations that are just and righteous, by systems of social justice, as it were.

These systems of righteous social relations should be based on the principles of the Kingdom of Heaven as outlined in the Bible. In other words, the aim of the Church should be to unhesitatingly become actively and genuinely involved in helping to establish this Kingdom in the here-and-now, not postponed to some future time in the spiritual afterlife. In other words, the goal became to use the Bible to engage in active revolutionary change of unjust and sinful social structures into righteous structures that reflect humane standards of social justice according to modern or contemporary materialist and secular ways of thinking which represented a thorough politicization of the Bible.

Fundamental Assumptions of Liberation Theology

According to Encyclopedia Britannica (2014, 2011), the Roman Catholic Peruvian priest, Gustavo Gutierrez, is considered to be one of the most important “fathers of liberation theology”. Generally, the date that is accepted by most knowledgeable scholars as the birth of liberation theology is the Second Latin American Episcopal Conference that was held in Medellin, Colombia, better known as the 1968 Medellin Episcopal Conference. At this Conference, the Latin American bishops who attended all voted publicly to affirm and support the rights of the poor, and they published a press release to that effect.

After spending many years in Peru and other parts of South America giving a variety of talks and writing numerous papers on the need for a new kind of theology in Latin America, Gutierrez published his seminal book in 1971, *A Theology of Liberation*, even now considered the core text of liberation theology used in many theological seminaries and divinity schools across the world. For example, in a course offered at Princeton Theological Seminary called TH 3444 Liberation Theology of Gustavo Gutierrez, it is the standard core text.

In this book, Gutierrez attempted to systematize rudimentary Christian principles, aspirations, and practices under a philosophical and theoretical model of class struggle and the installation of new structural systems of social justice. Very importantly, this book also referred to a great number of Bible passages and findings reached in numerous church councils in a concerted attempt to provide through his own biblical hermeneutics some kind of firm, legitimate theological foundation for this new liberation theological practice which had already taken root for many years among the Latin American clergy.

So, then, it can be said with confidence that this kind of theology was not born in the heads of armchair theologians. To the contrary, it emerged from the day-to-day practices of Roman Catholic clergy and people on the ground as they struggled to contextualize their faith under the concrete political and economic conditions and circumstances of Latin American

society at that time. Reading through Gutierrez's book, we can easily see that liberation theology is based upon a number of fundamental assumptions which need to be clearly identified and explained before this theology can be adequately understood.

The first basic assumption is that God values humankind as a whole. Freedom and justice, therefore, belongs to every human being because God genuinely desires all of us "to be free from all types of slavery" (*ibid.*, p. XLVI). Internal moral corruption is not only caused by (original) sin, but also by sinful, inhumane, and enslaving systems or structures of social relationships. Here Gutierrez effectively displaces the biblical emphasis in Genesis upon sinful human nature and transfers the doctrine of original sin to sinful social structures, while at the same time passively genuflecting to sinful human nature.

The argument goes as follows. It stands to reason that if God wants to save humankind from internal sin through Jesus Christ, then He must also want to deliver humankind from the outward structural manifestation of this internal sinful state. Sinful social structures are simply an outward structural manifestation of an internal sinful state. In other words, Christ delivers salvation simultaneously at all levels of material human existence; "God's saving work encompasses the totality of human existence (*Ibid.*, pp. 162/164). Christ in the Bible also delivers freedom from the chains of sinful political and economic structures (or "liberation"), not just freedom from the

chains of original sin.

The core feature of Gutierrez's liberation theology is "God's special love for the weak and the abused during human history", he states categorically. Beginning with the passages referring to the Cain and Abel narrative and throughout the entire Bible, "the poor are thus the privileged members of the Kingdom" (Ibid., p. XXXIX). Since they are privileged members of the Kingdom, the Church needs to direct its support resources "primarily...at the oppressed and the poor" (Ibid., p. 136). Therefore, the "prerequisite for being a Christian" (Ibid., p. XXXVIII) is nothing less than always taking the side of the poor and being against enslaving exploitative systems of social relations without hesitation, doubt, or reservation. Only then can the Good News and freedom message of Jesus Christ in the Holy Bible be truly understood.

On this crucial point of revolutionary social action, Gutierrez (ibid., p. 211) quotes Jeremiah 22:13-16 where Jesus is delivering messages to all Kings:

"Woe to him who builds his house without
righteousness and his upper rooms without
justice, who uses his neighbor's services without
pay and does not give him his wages...Did your
father eat and drink and do justice and
righteousness? He pled the cause of the afflicted

and needy; then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?”.

Here he insists there are many biblical examples confirming the legitimacy of active revolutionary resistance to effect social change. For example, the deliverance of the Hebrew people from Egyptian bondage was “a political act...and the beginning of rebuilding of a new and just society” (Ibid., p. 169). When social systems are unjust, as they clearly were in Egypt, then it is the “duty of the Church to unmask” this injustice (Ibid., p. 131), to “resist those who are in power” (ibid., p. 133), and to “participate in delivering the oppressed from others” (Ibid., p. 224). Here and elsewhere throughout the book, the messianic revolutionary message in Gutierrez’s liberation theory echoes loud and clear.

If sinful, unjust, and inhumane structures of social relationships exist which oppose the Kingdom of God, Gutierrez urges, then Christians cannot simply go into delay mode, kneel down to pray in solitude, and wait for an ethereal Heaven to come. They must become actively, forcefully involved in social, political, and economic areas of society on behalf of the privileged poor to bring about the Kingdom of God. In other words, the Church and all Christians must start establishing the Kingdom here and now on Earth. Surely, if that is not sounding the Marxian revolutionary trumpet, then Marx was simply a wayward poet.

Gutierrez pushes this revolutionary logic one step further. If the Church and all Christians fail to do so, they condemn themselves eternally by straying away from the Bible (Ibid., p.328). In the final analysis, turning to the Gospel for the solution to sinful social structures “means a fundamental transformation” of those social structures (Ibid., p. 227) largely through local volunteer-based Christian groups who have studied Scripture and who are aware of the everyday needs of the poor for adequate food, water, electricity, shelter, and so forth. By coming down to the people in this way, the Church is no longer leading them from above in abstract doctrinal terms, but instead leading them to agitate for social transformation of unjust social structures from the ground up.

Within Gutierrez’s way of thinking, it stands to reason that if the poor are God’s privileged few and if the mission of the Church is to lead this privileged few to the promised land of God’s Kingdom on Earth (revolutionary social transformation), then the Church must set up organizational structures closer to the poor themselves or local community-based structures. Remember, God only talks to the privileged poor, the suffering poor. So, then, the Bible can only be authentically understood from their perspective, from the perspective of the poor, not from the perspective of abstract Christian dogma.

Gutierrez then tied the emphasis upon revolutionary social action directly and firmly to the intensity and authenticity of the faith which Christians professed to believe. In his mind,

there was greater “understanding of faith, more faith as such, and more zealousness for the Lord” when Christians wholeheartedly and fervently engaged in “revolutionary processes in Latin America” than if they remained in cloistered “egotistical Christian circles” frowning upon such participation (Ibid., p. 225). According to Gutierrez, if the Church cannot be a “visible sign of the Lord’s presence” by actively struggling “for a more righteous and humane society”, then the “validity and efficiency of the message it’s bringing” is morally bankrupt and truly against the Gospel. Now, if that doesn’t represent a thorough politicization of the Christian Bible, then Gutierrez is simply a choirboy singing offkey.

Marx in Liberation Theology

In his book, as well as throughout his various writings and the writings of proponents of liberation theology in general, there is absolutely no doubt about the nature of the oppressive and exploitative structures of social relationships that the Church and all Christians should fight against. These sinful, inhumane social structures include capitalism, the United States of America (the ‘West’ viewed in extreme pejorative terms), and all of the ruling national groups and organizations allied to their social, political, and economic interests (Ibid., p. 87). In fact, he claims that real social, political, and economic development of Latin America cannot take place “until it’s delivered from them” (Ibid.). Here the strong implication is that the deliverance of the Hebrew people from Egyptian bondage allegorically becomes the

deliverance of the Latin American people from American capitalist bondage.

Like raw unadulterated Marxism, Gutierrez's liberation theology quite simplistically (some would say primitively) divided all people in a society into two basic social segments: the oppressors and the oppressed (Veigel, 2018; Novak, 1984; 1988; Carson, 2002; McGovern, 1989; Restrepo, 2018; Smith, 1991; Bonino, 1976; and a host of others both from within and outside of liberation theology). The 'oppressors' are by definition of their virtual existence (not by their character, motivation, behavior, virtue, etc.) those who own and control capital and the means of production, while the 'oppressed' are by definition of their existence (the same proviso applies here) those who work for the oppressors.

In this way, all of society consists of social structures put into place by the oppressors "to benefit the few who are appropriating the fruits of other people's labor" (Gutierrez, p. 223). Since these power relationships between the oppressed and the oppressors have been created by the oppressors themselves and solidified at the institutional level of society, they require to be changed at the objective organizational level of society and not at the subjective psychological or individual level.

This is the meaning inherent in the term social 'structure', denoting solidification. Solidification of power relationships into

systems or 'structures' requires power 'structural' agents of social change. Hence Gutierrez's emphasis upon 'the poor' as powerful structural agents of social change existing in a temporary state of dormancy, just like Marx's proletariat class that needs to be awakened from its dormancy and moved into an invincible revolutionary state of being to change by force private property or private ownership and control of society's means of production into a system of public property or public ownership.

Simply put, capitalism is pushed aside and transformed into socialism. Since it is impossible for the structured relationship between the private owner of the means of production in society (the 'oppressor') and those who work for them (the 'oppressed') to be just and righteous in any way, shape, manner, or form because it is inherently wrongful appropriation or robbery, it must be forcefully overthrown. The oppressors will not give up power willingly, so the full unreserved support of the Church and all Christians must be enlisted to convert this social transformation from a mere dormant potential into a true revolutionary material reality. The time for armchair theological philosophizing is over because "the world needs changing" (Ibid., p. 236).

It's easy to see here how Gutierrez imports the political battle cry contained in the Marxian socialist theoretical framework into a theological equivalent. Like Marx criticized the capitalist economy for its weaknesses and failures especially towards the

exploited working poor so, too, does Gutierrez criticize the official Roman Catholic Church for its failure to actively get involved in protecting the poor by pressuring for social transformation of the capitalist economic system. What Gutierrez appears to be doing is constructing a religious hermeneutic to transform the Bible into a revolutionary weapon in Latin American society.

Given the widespread revolts and rebellions which subsequently took hold and devastated much of Latin America, Gutierrez's ideas about using the Bible to effect revolutionary social change begins to make sense although his socialist idealism probably did not foresee actual outcomes. Surely, one of those outcomes was the installation of a plethora of right-wing and left-wing dictatorships across South America which then hastily proceeded to kill and oppress their citizen populations to a much greater degree than any sinful capitalist structured power relationships could have ever done over a lifetime.

In a manner of expression, truly what Gutierrez was 'doing' in creating his theology is actually painting over it a Marxian socialist theory as a shiny but false Christian religious veneer to make it attractive and acceptable to innocent, naïve, simple, and vulnerable minds existing in Latin American society who were falling prey to all manner of Marxist socialist ideas spreading through the Cuban revolution and becoming popular in Latin America at the time. So, then, as many other scholars

have made clear, even many of those within liberation theology itself, the direct influence of Marxist socialist theory is crystal clear.

The same analytical framework is employed, the same conceptual apparatus is used, the same political-economic vocabulary is applied, and the same enemy is explicitly identified and roundly condemned as irredeemable or irreparable. Capitalism is mercilessly and ceaselessly juxtaposed as the central villain against a harmonious and just social order and righteous social relationships. It is no wonder then that liberation theologians tend to claim stridently that “Communism is the obligation of Christians” (Miranda, 2004 (1982), p. 8). This means that in order to properly understand the real significance of the Holy Bible, it is a religious ‘duty’ of all Christians to actively agitate against ALL authorities to install the Kingdom of God on Earth not solely or simply in the hearts of individual people, but also, and more importantly, into the structure of social relations at the societal level.

Some Criticisms and Hermeneutical Reflections

Understandably, numerous weaknesses have been identified within liberation theology from both inside and outside its theoretical camp. Since it is not practical here to provide a comprehensive overview and in-depth analysis and assessment of all such criticisms, a task provided by several scholarly works already mentioned above and noted in the extensive

bibliography. Here it would seem be more appropriate to concentrate on a small number of obvious telling criticisms in a more focused way than already implied above especially as they reflect the opinion of notable Catholic officials and scholars or other Christian professionals.

The first and perhaps foremost weakness contained in liberation theology is its wholesale irreflexive incorporation of the Marxist socialist theoretical framework into the form and content of its own theological framework. In particular, the introduction of the Marxist view of human history contrasts markedly with the established biblical view of human history across most if not all theological persuasions. Stemming from this predominant weakness, the problem of selective Bible reading has also been a weakness noted in the research literature.

Also resulting from the unfiltered application of a Marxian socialist theoretical model is the highly questionable ethical equation of the biblical poor with the 'oppressed' classes under a capitalist economic system. Lastly, there is the thorny problem of equating the staged or planned fighting against the 'oppressor' capitalist class and allies as a God-ordained activity (Carson, 2002; Vegel, 2018; Novak, 1988, 1984; Bell, 2006; DeYoung, 2011; Restrepo, 2018; Smith, 1991; Behr, 2019; McGovern, 1989; McCann, 1981; Griffin, 1979; Yoder, 1972; Cullman, 1970; Sobrino, 1976; Bonino, 1975; Fierro, 1977; Lehman, 1978; Davies, 1976; Kirk, 1980; Brown, 1993; De La

Torre, 2004; Rowland, 2007).

Biblical Considerations

Profound criticisms have also been laid by various Catholic and other Christian officials, most notably by Joseph Ratzinger when he was both a high-ranking Cardinal or prefect in charge of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) at the Vatican and eventually as Pope Benedict XVI. In one of his preparatory documents at the CDF titled, “Instructions on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation”, he notes explicitly how liberation theologians equate the love of Jesus in the Bible predominantly but wrongfully with taking the side of the poor in the class struggle against the capitalist class.

In this view, the sacred spiritual foundation of the Kingdom of God in the communion of Christian believers emphasized by Jesus and others throughout the Bible is reduced to a mere physical material political-economic reality as Kingdom of God on Earth. This misleading theological conception falsely pressures Christians to transfer attention, focus, and hope from God’s sacred Kingdom to an imagined profane Kingdom on the Earth. Therefore, from this theological viewpoint the core symbolic presentation of salvation history, namely, the exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt, becomes a revolutionary act rather than a salvific act in human history.

Obviously, this theological approach to history effectively

dilutes and devalues the import of the Bible's 'Good News' message. What's more, the dilution process doesn't stop at that point. Just as the concept of 'salvation' is corroded (some would say corrupted) by secular philosophy, so, too, is the Bible's concept of the Eucharist. The sacred behaviors and acts associated with the Eucharist in Jesus' spiritual world are watered down to a physical celebration of deliverance from exploitation by a capitalist class in material reality. By logical extension, the concept of 'liberation' in liberation theology comes to be the substitute for eternal 'redemption' in Christian doctrine.

In his concluding remarks, Ratzinger firmly warns all theologians and especially Christian believers to beware about the false conception of 'sin' contained within and championed by liberation and allied theologians, whether intentionally or unknowingly. This theology pushes aside the traditional biblical notion of eternal freedom from the chains of sin offered by the crucifixion and death of Christ and replaces it with deliverance from political-economic exploitation of a capitalist class. In this conception, the salvation offered by Jesus Christ is replaced by a social structural salvation offered by leaders of the revolution of the poor against the capitalists, a complete abomination and corruption of the true Christly message in the Bible.

It effectively equates and confounds the biblical 'poor' with Marx's proletariat class as well as the Church of the privileged 'poor' now localized in small community settings with official

hierarchical Church as a ruling class agent that must be avoided and disobeyed. Within the myopic confines of liberation theology, the established hierarchical Church has identified itself as a ruling class agent by the very fact of NOT supporting the privileged 'poor' in their God-ordained task of overthrowing the sinful, inhumane capitalist class.

As mentioned earlier, liberation theology can also be faulted for cherry-picking biblical passages that conform more easily to its general theological principles and philosophical pre-suppositions, values and assumptions and then attributing highly questionable meanings to them. It scours Scriptural verses looking for Christian events, activities, and images that it can take out of context and attach a new meaning to them by applying a Marxian-based hermeneutic.

For example, it may be true that the Hebrew people emerged from spending a very long time in the desert in dire poverty (Deut. 8:3). It may also be true Jesus asserts at some places in the Bible that being poor in spirit is one of the fundamental requirements for being admitted to God's inheritance (Matt. 5:3). It may indeed be true that the Bible is interested in promoting what is righteous and just. That doesn't mean by any stretch of the theological imagination that the Bible in part or as a whole is a trumpet call towards a socialist revolution.

As well, it doesn't mean by any theological sleight of hand as liberation theology heavily underscores that the Bible is always

and exclusively on the side of ‘the poor’ and its spiritual swords drawn exclusively against ‘the rich’, although it does say we should always demonstrate genuine consideration for ALL people in need, especially but not solely ‘the poor’. There are many passages in the Bible which suggest otherwise. For example, Leviticus 19:15 and Exodus 23:1-6 mentions how we should never exhibit in our behavior or words any partiality toward ‘the poor’ nor ‘the rich’. Proverbs 22: 2 declares unashamedly, “The rich and the poor have a common bond, for the Lord is the maker of them all”. In 1 Samuel 2:7, “The Lord makes poor and rich; He brings low, He also exalts”.

Perhaps the most profound statement on the theme of rich versus poor in the Bible comes from one of the apostle Paul’s letters (2 Corinthians 8: 9): “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich”. Nowhere in the Bible do we find any reference whatsoever to “social justice” or to an irredeemable, despicable, sinful class of rich people whose riches and power at the societal level needs to be resisted and overthrown by a God-ordained class of ‘the poor’ cum poor people in some kind of historically predestined ‘revolution’. The only genuine ‘revolution’ referred to extensively in the Bible is the salvation offered by Christ to all humanity.

Concluding Reflections

Due to severe time and space consideration, this essay has focused mostly on providing a brief theoretical history and general descriptive aspects of liberation theology as well as some of its most telling shortcomings in relation to traditional biblical theology and Scriptural passages. That doesn't mean that liberation theology has not made any valuable contributions to Church doctrine, policies, or practices within and across communions. Indeed, it has made significant contributions. However, it is all too often the case that modern scholars are too quick to cast a deferent eye upon theological systems which touch a positive emotional cord somewhere in their personal life experience. Most scholars tend to avoid dealing critically and reflexively with theories they subjectively cherish.

That being said, the other much more important point that can be made as part of final remarks is that it is ethically and hermeneutically questionable at best for scholars in general and theologians in particular, especially theologians claiming to be full-blooded genuine 'Christians', to cherry-pick Scriptural passages, events, images, parts, or sections of the Bible looking to force feed correspondences to components or elements of cherished theoretical perspectives (Marxian or otherwise), nor hoping to construct new theological skyscrapers to impress others with or to employ as stepping stones to enhance material human achievements.

There are serious problems inherent in alienating Bible passages from the immediate organic flow of meaning and the context within which they were written in the effort to attribute foreign contemporary meanings to them for whatever purposes may be desired, let alone scholarly or theological or otherwise. There are also serious interpretative ramifications involved in separating such passages from the systemic conceptual context of the entire Bible itself. Arguably, a suitable and proper biblical hermeneutic would be to interpret biblical passages in from within biblical contextual terms. This means not only to comprehend such passages as they were intended to be interpreted at that time by the intended audience but, as well, interpreted as they fit in relation to a larger conceptual apparatus constituting the Bible itself.

This is not a wholly difficult idea to digest, as it were. Who would dream to interpret Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in terms of Mark Twain's "*Tale of Two Cities*", and still hope to absorb the essence of Shakespeare's intended messages in writing *Macbeth*? No one would hope to play selectively with passages from Shakespeare to create another version of Shakespeare, would they? Shakespeare's intended messages to be understood in penning *Macbeth* cannot be alienated from his authorial intentions and foreign meanings attributed to them without diluting and devaluing the genius and authenticity of Shakespeare himself. Why should it be any different when considering the relationship between liberation theologians like

Gutierrez and passages from the Bible?

As a final word on the subject of biblical interpretation, it may be useful to point out another, often overlooked consideration, namely, the serious hermeneutical and spiritual significance of the attitudinal and ideological disposition of the reader of the biblical passages during the interpretative process. If Christians genuinely and honestly 'believe' that Jesus Christ passed on to humankind His "living Word" (Hebrew 4:12), then they must also believe in their hearts that the Bible itself 'speaks' to us when we 'read' it; perhaps it has a voice, its own voice, only not the kind of physical voice we are accustomed to hearing.

It follows, then, that those readers and interpreters who do not possess this particular hermeneutical predisposition cannot hear the 'voice' of the Bible. In other words, what is probably required to hear the authentic voice of the Bible, the "living Word of God", is a genuinely faithful aortic hermeneutics, a hermeneutics of faith (Watson, 2015). If it is possible for Norman Habel and his entire Earth Bible team of scholars and other professionals to treat the voice of the Earth in the Bible as a 'subject' which has its own voice and speaks to them (Habel, 2001-2002), then why can't the same logic be applied at a higher general level to say that the Bible itself as a whole can be treated as a 'subject' that has its own 'voice', not just a cherry-picked part of the Bible?

If a small part of the Bible can be subjectivized to have its own

voice, surely a hermeneutically questionable exercise from a steadfast biblical point of view, then arguably the same hermeneutics can be applied to the entire Bible viewed as an organic whole system of meaning flow. As the example of liberation theology reviewed above clearly illustrates, there is a real contaminating effect which occurs when readers of the Bible steadfastly refuse to adopt this hermeneutic of faith before, during, and after interpretation of biblical passages and then proceed to import foreign secular meanings into them.

Many contemporary scholars have pointed out all of these problems noted above and other problems inherent in biblical interpretation as well as the historical relationship between Marx and the Bible. However, the focus and limitations of this essay prohibit such a broader review here. Again the reader is referred to the many excellent citations in the extensive Bibliography.

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