

Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
“Liberation Theology and Unitarian Universalism”

By Rachel Carroll

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This morning I want to introduce you to “Liberation Theology”, a radical Catholic theology that emerged in the second half of the Twentieth Century and which was influential throughout South and Central America. We might think of Liberation Theology as the Latino / Catholic version of the social gospel Christianity, which thrived in the United States a half-century earlier. That movement stressed that Christianity was not about individual or personal salvation, not about waiting for the Kingdom to come. Rather, the primary emphasis of the gospel was service and the reform of society. It declared that what was required of Christians was care for the poor, the oppressed, and the vulnerable.

Many of us are probably familiar with this history. We know about some of the figures: Dorothy Day, Walter Rauschenbusch, Harry Fosdick, Bill Coffin, Martin Luther King. But the names that I am going to talk about this morning are likely less familiar: Ernesto Cardenal, Gustavo Gutierrez, Oscar Romero, Jon Sobrino, and Leonardo Boff.

The central tenet of liberation theology is that God has a “preferential option for the poor.” What does that mean? What it means, radically, is that God has a special relationship with the poor, that God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed. It means that while we are all God’s children technically, the poor are God’s favorite children.

Listen to a few of the quotes that have come out of this theology:

Oscar Romero wrote, “We must not seek the child Jesus in the pretty figure of our Christmas ribs. We must seek Jesus among the malnourished children who have gone to bed tonight with nothing to eat. No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything look down on others, those who have no need even of God – for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry,

those who need someone to come on their behalf will have that someone.”

Gustavo Gutierrez wrote, “Love of neighbor is an essential component of Christian life. But as long as I apply that term only to people who cross my path, and come asking me for help, my world will remain pretty much the same. Individual almsgiving is a type of love that never leaves its front porch... On the other hand, my world will change greatly if I go out to meet other people on their path and consider them as my neighbor... the gospel tells us that the poor are the supreme embodiment of our neighbor.”

According to liberation theology, Jesus is not to be understood primarily as a savior, but instead as a Liberator. Jesus came to liberate the poor of the world from the bondage of oppression and poverty. To follow Jesus is to work to abolish the systems that cause poverty, systems that actually enslave all of us. Marxism would say that we are all slaves to class struggle; liberation theology would say that none of us are truly free when there is poverty.

A third major tenet of Liberation Theology is the reform of the church. In South and Central America, liberation theologians were not unaware of the role the Catholic Church played in conquest and the creation and perpetuation of unjust social structures. Liberation theology offered not only a critique of society, but a critique of the church. In particular, it called for church where a powerful minority does not dominate a silent majority. It said, “Power to the people.” It called for a reform where the people of the church were empowered and were served.

Those are three of the hallmarks of liberation theology: a preferential option for the poor; salvation through social justice; and a reform of religious structures to make them more populist.

I might mention one or two of the heroes of liberation theology. You may have never heard of Oscar Romero. But you’ve probably heard of some of the people whose lives are most similar to his. At the Westminster Abbey in London, there are statues to the most influential martyrs of the Twentieth Century. The statue of Oscar Romero is flanked on one side by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who organized resistance to Hitler in Germany and died in a concentration camp. On the other side of Romero’s statue, is a statue of Martin Luther King. Romero was a conservative Catholic

appointed arch-bishop of San Salvador, capital of El Salvador, in 1977. In fact, his appointment was considered to be an enormous setback to those in San Salvador who were working for social justice.

But, Romero's life was transformed when he witnessed the assassination of a priest who was working to politically organize and mobilize a group of rural campesinos, rural farmworkers. Reflecting on this, Romero remarked that if this priest was killed for this work, he must follow in this path. Two years later, Romero was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. El Salvador, at the time, was a scene of fierce fighting between various factions and militias, some of them funded by the United States government. Romero especially worked to try to prevent and lessen the human rights violations – the torture, terrorism, disappearances, and civilian killings – that accompanied the battle for political control of El Salvador. In his influential sermons he called on soldiers to disobey orders they were given to violate human rights. As Romero celebrated Mass in 1980 he was gunned down. It is widely believed that his murder was committed by soldiers who received military training in the United States School of the Americas. Pope John Paul II opened proceedings in 1997 to beatify Oscar Romero as a Saint – for the people of El Salvador, he is already San Romero.

In many ways, though, this celebration of Romero was hypocrisy. The official church resisted liberation theology and expelled many of its practitioners, including Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the populist president of Haiti whose priesthood was revoked by the church before his presidency was revoked by the United States government. The church's turning against liberation theology was shameful

So, what I've done so far is kind of give you a quick orientation to liberation theology and to a few of its heroes and leading thinkers. What I want to do now is explore what impact and influence it might have on Unitarian Universalism.

If you look at the three main emphases of Liberation theology, I'd like to offer how they might speak to Unitarian Universalists. I will take these from easiest to hardest. Liberation theology's critique of the church would look different for UUs. Within our church, we do not have the same

problem that liberation theologians identified, that of a power-wielding minority oppressing a silent, suffering majority. Our situation mirrors the difference between the political process in the El Salvador or Haiti and that in the United States. The problem is not that a military coup or dictator who has seized control; it is that at times there can be apathy in the democratic process. Democracies place the responsibility in the hands of the people. Democratic institutions are only as strong as the level of participation they inspire. We've talked before about the need for increased participation for UUs in community.

Similarly, the idea of salvation by liberation is something that we Unitarian Universalists know. It is also something of which we can stand to be reminded. Our faith has historically had a this-worldly orientation. To paraphrase Rev. Brent Smith, we are not called to wait for transportation to some distant heaven. We are called to create heaven here on earth. If you want peace, work for justice. *Si quieres la paz, trabaja por la justicia.*

It is that final part of liberation theology, the idea of a preferential option for the poor, that gives us the most trouble. And when I say that it gives us trouble, I am not saying that intellectually we fail to grasp it. It is a very easy concept. God cares about poor people. God is on the side of the poor. Everybody here can understand that. So, when I say that it gives us trouble, I am not talking about a challenge to our intellect. It is a trouble to our soul.

What would it mean for us, as Unitarian Universalists, to embrace the idea of a preferential option for the poor? I want us to sit with that question for just a minute.

For liberation theology is first and foremost a theology of action, of practice, of doing together, of finding and exercising our human power to change the world, to bring into being justice and peace, to counter and overcome oppression with love. Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, considered the father of written Liberation theology, offers this analysis of poverty: poverty is destructive, never romantic or noble. Poverty is not accidental but structural, built into the way society is organized. The victims of poverty are a social class. On the one hand, members of this poor class are often seen as a "type," and not as unique and precious human beings. On the other hand, when members of a social class become self-conscious about their reality, they can

band together, organize, and bring about change on their own behalf and in society as a whole.
[Robert McAfee Brown. 1993. Liberation Theology: An Introductory Guide. p. 46].

And liberation theology, though its heart is in the poor communities, carries a mandate of justice and peace for all people. Once we become aware of the destructive nature of poverty we must be moved to address this injustice. But the response must be a new response.

The new response that liberation theology call for is first a response of compassion – a word that means “suffering with.” Liberation theology begins with an understanding and an acceptance of the reality of the situation – the hunger, the disease, the death, the desperation, the truth not only of inequity but also of oppression. First of all we must be willing to understand – not only what “they” are living, but also what our own role is in the social structure that is so familiar, so ever-present, that we must work hard to even be aware of its complex interrelations and interdependencies. Brazilian sociologist Paolo Friere used the word conscientization to describe this work of consciousness-raising, of becoming aware of things we had lived without noticing.

Understanding must be followed by commitment, taking a stand – the Spanish word is *compromiso* – a movement into action fueled by a conviction that our action can make a difference – to ourselves, to those around us, and eventually, eventually to the world. *Compromiso* is the energy that unfolds in the base communities, that shines in the eyes of those who are taking action on their own behalf, or on behalf of the world their children will inherit. *Compromiso* carried Oscar Romero into the Salvadoran countryside, and the garbage dumps where the death squads dumped the bodies. “These days,” he said, “I walk the roads gathering up dead friends, listening to widows and orphans, and trying to spread hope.”

[John Dear. Oscar Romero, Presente! CommonDreams.org. March 24, 2005.
<http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Heroes/Oscar%20Romero.html>].

And the action we take must be predicated first and last on the dignity and the strength and the wisdom of the people, as fresh and hopeful and tough as grass. Unlike aid or reformism, the action we take must address the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized and disempowered as

subjects not objects; must support and empower them, and their work on their own behalf. Our action must carry forward the message of justice, of peace, of hope, of love. The action we take must be informed and inspired by the holy books and the holy lives that teach us the stories of those who have come before us, the stories that are also our stories. The action we take – with our hands, with our feet, with our voices, with our lives – must be brave, for the reward of liberation is life. And when the price of liberation is life, as it was for Oscar Romero, and for countless others in Latin America, and throughout human history, then the stakes only get higher. In the words of a young Salvadoran woman: “Do not mourn their deaths, imitate their lives.” [Robert McAfee Brown. 1993. *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Guide*. p. 11].

This morning I hope you’ve learned a little. I hope, if you are a person who carries strong feelings about Catholicism or grew up in a Catholic community, that you can take heart knowing that there is a movement within the Church that is totally radical. And I hope you will sit with this idea of the preferential option for the poor and take the time for action.