

INTRODUCTION

—*Miguel A. De La Torre*

Cuernavaca, Mexico is known worldwide as “The City of Eternal Spring.” This charming resort city is a tourist attraction for Mexicans and foreigners who come to enjoy its many gardens, tennis courts, spas, golf courses, bathing resorts, gourmet restaurants, and luxury hotels. Tourists can browse through its many quaint shops for exquisite traditional handicrafts, specifically baskets woven from multicolor straws. Not far from the city of Cuernavaca sits an indigenous town on the summit of a nearby mountain range whose inhabitants attempt to preserve their Nahuatl spiritual and cultural ways from the onslaught of globalization. Many in this community live in huts with thatched roofs and dirt floors. In one of these huts, which I recently visited, there lives a three-generation family. Those who are old enough spend their days weaving baskets, the same baskets which tourists haggle over, trying to get the lowest possible price. Not long ago, one of the daughters, barely a teenager, gave birth to her firstborn. Only a week old, the child was underweight, suffering from a persistent cough. Sadly, this child will probably join the thirty thousand children worldwide that die each and every day of hunger and preventable diseases (Fukuda-Parr, 2003:8). Another deadly statistic for which this family provides a human face is their lack of clean water. For them, water comes from a polluted well on the side of a hill. They join the 1.1 billion people worldwide who lack clean drinking water and the 2.4 billion who need access to sanitation.¹ When this family wishes to quench their thirst, more often than not they walk over to the local bodega and buy a

Coca-Cola. It becomes the multinational's best interest not to support any governmental initiative to build a water processing plant.

On the other side of the world, a young thirteen-year-old teenage girl leaves her small impoverished Thai village for the Patpong district of Bangkok, the notorious red-light center. By working in the sex industry, more likely as a prostitute, her earnings will be enough to support the basic needs of her entire family. Although she leaves out of a sense of filial obligation, other girls have been known to be sold into sexual slavery by their parents for as little as \$266. The young girls of Thailand, as well as the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Taiwan (and more recently Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe) become desirable commodities for those wealthy enough to pay for their services.

The sex industry in Thailand got underway courtesy of the U.S. military. During the Vietnam War, Bangkok became the "Rest and Recreation" (R&R) center for U.S. soldiers needing to de-stress from the demands of warfare. By the end of the Vietnam War, the U.S. military presence in Thailand spent more than \$20 million for prostitutes, transforming that country into what has come to be known as the "sexual Disneyland of the world." The Thai sex industry was a profitable business, the demise of which would have led to the financial ruin of many capitalists. Consequently, U.S. soldiers were replaced with foreign tourists, specifically from the industrialized nations of the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, and Japan. Today, the United States remains one of the major "sending countries," contributing to the flourishing of the international child sex market. While exact figures of American tourists who travel abroad to engage in sex with minors are difficult to ascertain, arrest and detention records at popular travel destinations in the developing world, like Bangkok, reveal a significant U.S. presence. Sadly, the globalization of the economy is partly paid for through these young girls. Sudurat Srisang, founder of Fight Against Child Exploitation, notes that sex tourism has become a way of obtaining funds to pay off Thailand's debt to the IMF and the World Bank (Andrews, 2004:1).

The Rise of an Idolatrous Religion

The indigenous family living on the outskirts of Cuernavaca and the young teenager making her way to Bangkok have much in common. For one, they are part of, to borrow a term from Frantz Fanon, "the wretched of the earth." Their lives are hard, brutal, unjust, and short,

thanks mainly to neoliberalism²—the globalization of the economy. According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their book *Empire*, “Empire can only be conceived as a universal republic, a network of powers and counterpowers structured in a boundless and inclusive architecture. This imperial expansion has nothing to do with imperialism, nor with those state organisms designed for conquest, pillage, genocide, colonization, and slavery. Against such imperialisms, Empire extends and consolidates the model of network power” (2000:166–67). How? By developing a decentralized economic network called neoliberalism which encompasses financial institutions, multinational corporations, and mass media.

But to limit the marginalization of the world’s underside to just the economic forces that created the new world order after the collapse of the Berlin Wall underestimates the potency of globalism. Neoliberalism moves beyond an economic order based on private property where buyers and sellers compete to obtain the best price on goods and services. Neoliberalism is a “spirit” which encompasses both an emerging culture and a corresponding morality that justify the economic arrangements brought about by neoliberalism, an economic arrangement that more often than not dehumanizes those made poor by neoliberalism. When the world’s disenfranchised are commodified, cultural consequences follow, specifically the disintegration of communal and familial life. As the world’s poor compete with each other in the race to the bottom of global compensation, traditional institutions that foster faith also suffer, not due to lack of interest, but lack of time, as more waking hours are expended in the pursuit of the basic necessities of life (food, clothing, shelter).

The emergence of a global culture complementary to neoliberalism provides both a model for the world’s poor to emulate and a substitution for the role faith has traditionally played. A century ago the “white man’s burden” was to bring civilization and Christianity to the world’s heathens and savages (understood as nonwhites). Civilizing and Christianizing the natives were a cover story for the colonial venture that subjugated (mainly through military might) the vast majority of the world’s resources and people for the development of imperial centers in Europe and North America. Today, rather than bringing the natives civilization, we bring them democratization, the new buzzword. Rather than bring them the faith of Christianity, today we spread the gospel of neoliberalism. As a spirit, neoliberalism has become the major competitor of Christianity for the souls of humanity. Moreover,

it has gained converts from other faiths, too, not just Christianity. I would argue that neoliberalism as spirit is more successful in winning converts than any other faith tradition presently in existence.

Neoliberalism as a religious movement is an economic doctrine that can only be accepted by faith. The economic truth of neoliberalism is maintained through a rigidly structured nondemocratic hierarchy in the forms of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As guardians of economic truth, these institutions succeed in making their neoliberal theories appear as the norm, the only legitimate choice for those who are rational beings. Belief in the market, and its free flow of goods, leads to a salvation characterized by “a rising tide that lifts all boats,” regardless of what the empirical data may show. Such beliefs are perpetuated through institutions which function much like a church that claims its own religious form of self-justification. Like most faith tradition, the economic pronouncements expounded by the World Bank or the IMF can neither be validated nor invalidated, but rather accepted through faith—a faith which lacks any moral or ethical foundation. This neoliberal faith is instead based on the power amassed by a decentralized network of institutions, and the militarily “advanced” nations it profits, which in turn verifies the universality of its economic doctrines. There can be no salvation outside the global market forces of “free trade.” Furthermore, even if these market forces create widespread devastation, destitution, or destruction, neoliberalism by faith continues to be confessed as the way to salvation. While past evangelists attempted to convince the nonbelievers of old to believe in their doctrines on God, today’s neoliberal evangelists seek to convert nonbelievers into entrepreneurs who can in turn intensify and expand the market (De La Torre, 2004a:78–79).

Neoconservative Catholic ethicist Michael Novak, commenting on the collapse of the Eastern bloc, boasts, “We are all capitalists now, even the Pope. Both traditionalists (Third World) and socialist methods have failed; for the whole world there is now only one form of economics” (1993:101). Novak is not alone in his assertion that capitalism is compatible with (in his case) Christianity. Capitalism as God’s ordained economic order is a presupposed concept found within many mainline churches of the so-called First World, a presupposition we can witness spreading to improvised societies (within both the “First” and “Third” World) in the form of prosperity theology.³ Regardless of the neoconservative agenda of linking God with a neoliberal economic order, liberation theologians have resisted neoliberalism. For libera-

tion theologians Clodovis Boff and George Pixley, “The theological status of [neoliberalism] today is precisely that of a vast idolatrous cult of the great god Capital, creator and father of so many lesser gods: money, the free market, and so on” (1989:144). Unfortunately, this resistance has failed to be effective, mainly because the global forces of neoliberalism were and continue to be underestimated.

Part of this underestimation was manifested in the misplaced trust Latin American liberation theologians had in the state as the means for creating a more humane society. Through the democratic process, attempts were, and continue to be made to elect individuals sympathetic to the marginalized. While such a strategy may have proven effective at one time, it is now naive. No doubt the move, specifically in Latin America, from right-wing U.S.-sponsored dictatorships toward a more democratic process should be welcomed as good news. Still, any good that may come from democratization is forfeited because the sovereignty of states have been coopted by neoliberalism. Regardless of any leftist-leaning, the state remains in danger of becoming the means by which market forces organize what is produced, who produces it, what is paid to those doing the producing, and who profits from what is being produced. Rather than protecting the poor, even in states headed by leftist elected leaders, the state’s *raison d’être* has become securing territories so that the production of goods or harvesting of resources can take place and, if need be, suppress any resistance to this global order. In effect, sovereign nations have been overrun by neoliberalism, either through “structural adjustments”⁴ imposed on nations, or a self-interested willingness to be aligned with the world’s only superpower. Hence, any hope that the state could have been a check on the operations of neoliberalism has led to disappointment, for states are now constrained by external economic forces constructed to serve the neoliberal global order.

Resistance to the Neoliberal Global Marketplace

What then is the hope of the world’s marginalized? Is Novak right? Is there no other system but neoliberalism? Although capitalism won as witnessed by the collapse of the Eastern bloc, are we left with just one choice? And if not, what other choice exists? I would argue that the alternative to the spirit of neoliberalism can be found within the faith of the people. Daniel Bell insists that within the present postmodern condition, a space has been opened—perhaps inadvertently—for the

sacred. In this space, Christianity (and I would add any faith tradition) can directly challenge global capitalism (2000:18).

In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx saw religion as the “opiate” of the people. For the twenty-first century, it is the emerging global entertainment culture, which derives from neoliberalism, that is effectively drugging much of the world’s population. The political and economic thrust of neoliberalism seduces the world’s marginalized through a global culture that to a great extent is based on U.S. middle-class tastes of music, movies, television entertainment, and the desire for the occasional Disneyland excursion. Ironically, what Marx once saw as the cause of people’s despondence to the devastating effects of the prevailing oppressive economic social structures—religion—is becoming the hope of their liberation and salvation. For the real struggle is not between Christianity and Islam, or Hinduism and Buddhism. Rather, the struggle occurs between the world’s disenfranchised and the materialistic religiosity of the world’s elite. The faith of the people as a worldview understood by the world’s disenfranchised, can very well hold the revolutionary message for a new vision of justice for all of humanity by providing the masses the spiritual strength and courage to resist the imposed neoliberal construction of reality.

I would argue that the alternative to neoliberalism, the hope for the vast majority of the world’s population, can be found within their own faith traditions, specifically how those faith traditions equip the marginalized within their midst to seek their own liberation. While the actual tenets of any faith are important, the poor and disenfranchised usually approach their faith tradition differently than those who usually serve as the academic or ecclesiastic spokespersons of the faith. Any attempt to understand the faith of the people from the margins of the community will find itself rooted in the everyday, attempting to discover how their faith provides the means of surviving the condition of their disenfranchisement. Before exploring how different faith traditions throughout the world can provide such a hope in resisting the spirit of neoliberalism, it behooves us to first review the basics of liberation theology, specifically its first manifestation within Latin America.

Development of Liberation Theology

The liberation theology which developed in Latin America was influenced by five major events. The first, and probably most important,

occurred when Pope John XXIII (1958–1963) convened the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The purpose of the Council was to modernize Catholicism. One of the major documents to come out of the council was the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* (1965), which emphasized the church's responsibility for "those who are poor or afflicted in any way." The document declared that the church could no longer tie itself to any particular economic or political system, but rather would have to find its purpose of existence through its solidarity with the most marginalized segments of society.

The second event which contributed to the development of liberation theology was the 1968 Medellín conference held in Colombia which attempted to implement the pronouncements of Vatican II within Latin America. Specifically, the conference discussed how the church can complete its earthly mission from a Latin American context of poverty and death caused in good measure by the U.S. economic policies designed to benefit multinational corporations. Third, Gustavo Gutiérrez published his groundbreaking book *Teología de la liberación* (1971), translated into English in 1973. The book provided a reflection on the proper role of theology in its attempt to be faithful to both the poor and the gospel and on how theology can be constructed by learning from the daily struggle of the poor.

Fourth, Christian Base Communities (CBCs) began to develop. These were spaces where the dispossessed gathered to discover how to use their religious convictions to bring about change to the reality of their marginalized lives. CBCs were physical locations where the dispossessed organized grassroots political action and received education, or as they would prefer to call "conscientization." Finally, the earlier 1959 Cuban revolution served to demonstrate that nations in Latin America could indeed break free from the U.S. hegemony. While Cuba was never accepted as a model to emulate, it did prove that society need not be organized along a pro-U.S. capitalist paradigm.

Much has taken place since the early heady days of Latin American liberation theology. During the 1980s, U.S.-supported military dictatorships gave way to elected civilian governments. With the election of leftists and a few former guerrillas to public office, some began to question the relevance of liberation theology. Others declared defeat in bringing about a socialist-based revolution. Is liberation theology therefore passe? Does liberation theology have anything to say to the world's poor and oppressed today?

Gustavo Gutiérrez, who is often credited with being among the first to articulate a Latin American version of liberation theology, probably said it best during the 1996 conference of the American Academy of Religion in New Orleans. He stated that he did not believe in liberation theology. Rather, he believed in Jesus Christ; while all theologies are born to die, a theological voice from the margins will always exist. Specifically, he wrote,

In the past few years we have been witnesses to a series of economic, political, cultural, and ecclesiastical events, both in the international arena and in Latin America. This might cause one to think that important aspects of the time that birthed and developed the reflection of what we call liberation theology since the late 1960s, have come to an end. Undoubtedly, the convulsive events within that period of Latin America were stimulating and creative, while at the same time, tense and conflicted. Faced with new situations, many of the statements and discussions of that period of time do not respond to today's challenges. (1998:97)

But what happens when the poor, to whom Gutiérrez refers to, are not Christians? Then they must seek their own liberationist perspectives from within their own faith traditions.

Some would argue that whenever and wherever the poor existed throughout history, their spirituality, as a way of dealing with their oppression, was in fact a form of liberation theology. The religiosity and perspectives of the poor, regardless of whatever academic term was used to label their beliefs, were in fact a liberationist perspective. This was true of historical groupings of people, as well as future groupings, irrespective of a religious expression that is or is not Christian. It is not the intent of this book to simply export liberation theology (as though it was a commodity) and impose it upon other faith traditions. Rather, our purpose is to look within different faith traditions to discover if they contain their own understanding of liberation for their more marginalized believers, and if they do, what interfaith conversations can develop that can serve as a counterforce to neoliberalism.

Primary Concepts of Liberation Theology

Although no monolithic tenets for liberation theology exist, there are several concepts that appear to be generally accepted. While it is not the purpose of this introduction to provide a complete exploration of

liberation theology, it is important to at least review some of these major concepts.

- a) Liberation as salvation. Liberation theology insists that liberation must be from all forms of oppression, specifically political, sexual, economic, environmental, and religious. In a real sense, to be “saved” (a very Christian-centric concept) is to be liberated from both personal sins committed and the social sins imposed. To a great extent, the process of liberation involves the process of consciousness-raising, the unmasking of the forces that create poverty, marginality, and disenfranchisement. So rather than convincing the nonbeliever to believe, the liberationist evangelical goal is to convince the nonperson of their personhood. The oppressed of the world cease to be objects to be used by a neoliberal means of production, instead, the nonperson is recognized as having worth and dignity (Gutiérrez, 1983:92).
- b) All theologies are contextual. Liberation theology bills itself as a grassroots theological movement. That is to say, the theological reflections developed originate among the faith community, which at times will be at odds with the church and academic hierarchy. Because local cultural settings are seriously considered, one can expect different social and political contexts to produce different theological perspectives. For this reason we cannot speak about a liberation theology, but about liberation theologies.
- c) Emphasis on orthopraxis (correct action), rather than orthodoxy (correct doctrine). Contrary to the deductive methodology employed by the dominant culture’s theology which begins with a truth, doctrine, scripture, or church teaching and then moves toward creating praxis based on that starting point, most liberationists begin with the experiences of the poor and oppressed. Reflection based on the praxis of the poor leads to theological and hermeneutical “truths.” This hermeneutical circle (seeing-acting-judging) insists that liberating praxis constructs theory (truth?) which informs and strengthens praxis (Segundo, 1976:8).
- d) Preferential option for the poor. God is the God of the poor and oppressed. Because God always sides with the oppressed against their oppressors, believers in God must do likewise, for God only reveals Godself to those who do justice and stand in solidarity with the oppressed (Gutiérrez, 1983:209). As Gutiérrez reminds us, “To know God is to do justice” (51). Therefore, there is only

one point of departure—the reality of the oppressed, and only one goal—their liberation (Boff and Boff, 1984:24). To stand by while oppression occurs is to confess one’s own lack of faith. God’s option for the oppressed is not due to them being holier or wiser but merely due to their disenfranchisement. In a very real sense, to listen to the voices of the poor is to hear the voice of God.

- e) Institutional violence. Violence is more than physical abuse; it incorporates the long-term violence imposed by political, social, and economic institutions that foster death through the denial of basic human needs (Gutiérrez, 1973:175).

Liberationist Perspectives in a New Millennium

If liberationist theologians and ethicists are correct in asserting that a preferential option for the oppressed exists, and that their faith has something important to say about the inhuman conditions they find themselves in, then how their particular faith traditions manifest liberationist tenets becomes crucial in understanding different world belief systems. I believe that when world faith traditions are explored from the margins of society, specifically those who are normally disenfranchised due to their race, class, and gender, readers who are accustomed to studying world religions from a Eurocentric academic paradigm can be jarred from a normative way of thinking. To read from the margins of power, the reader is forced to move beyond a traditional understanding of the faith that fuses and confuses how those privileged by the religious tradition present their faith to the Euro-American audience with how the vast majority of believers, who exist on the underside of power and privilege, interpret that same faith for daily survival. Reading from the margins provides an approach to dealing with life issues that can be quite liberating.

The purpose of the book you hold in your hands is to explore how the theological concepts defined as liberation theology, which to some degree was initially a Latin American Catholic phenomenon, might be manifested within other world faith traditions. The book’s modest focus will be on elucidating how the powerless and disenfranchised of the world look toward their belief systems to articulate a liberationist perspective of hope. The reader will be exposed to liberationist concepts from the perspective of marginalized communities through a survey of different world faith traditions presented by leading religious scholars who are “believers” or participants of the belief system of which they

write. The authors hope that the reader will come to comprehend the ever-growing diversity existing within the liberationist discourse.

The Difficulty of this Project

To seek liberationist perspectives within different faith traditions can lead to the pitfall of essentializing different religions. The authors of these chapters avoided the trap of arguing that all religions are basically the same, with a similar message of liberation. Such a reductionist view is avoided by clearly stating that each religion covered is different, some to which the word “religion” or even “liberation” can prove to be a difficult concept to apply. After all, we must remember that the construct “religion” and “liberation” are Western terms rooted in the Enlightenment that are imposed on the traditions and beliefs of others throughout the world. For this reason, the authors approached their individual faith traditions as insiders attempting to uncover any common ground that might exist. Members of different faith traditions hope to find some mutual vocabulary to counter the gains neoliberalism, as a false religion, is having within our different social contexts. An additional difficulty of a project like this is the vastly different levels of discourse occurring within the faith traditions being discussed. For some traditions, a liberationist discourse has been present for several decades. In others, the concept of looking within one’s own faith to emphasize liberationist trends is a recent phenomenon, even though such impulses may have existed for centuries. Yet for others, this will be the first time that a belief system is discussed from a liberationist position. For some of the traditions covered, the discussion may appear more natural, while for others, the conversation may not be as congruent. In a very real sense, this book may be the first conversation concerning liberationist perspectives that cuts across a multitude of faiths. The difficulty of initiating first conversations is that there exists no previous models to follow. This holds true for the editor, as well as several of the chapter authors who are conceptualizing liberationist tenets within their own faith. Nevertheless, if we wish to mine the power and possibilities of people’s faiths to serve as responses to the all-inclusive emergence of neoliberalism and the global oppression it produces, then the conversation must start somewhere.

The Hope of Liberation in World Religions is one place where this important conversation can begin to take place. If the reader is

expecting a detailed response to neoliberalism, or a list of praxis that can be employed to combat this global oppressive structure, then she or he will be disappointed. If the reader, however, is seeking to discover if such a liberationist discussion can even occur within different faith traditions, then the book has accomplished its goal. Here we begin the conversation of practicing one's faith, whatever it may be, from the margins of power and privilege—in effect, while in solidarity with the disenfranchised within one's faith and/or social community. The hope is that such an approach to world faith traditions will lead to further conversations and even cooperation in dealing with global oppressive structures.

Special Thanks

No book is ever the product of one individual. Many became my conversation partners as we wrestled together in our quest for liberation. Although we each approached the subject from diverse religious perspectives, we all share a strong commitment to justice. I am deeply grateful to my colleagues who took the time to write a chapter on this crucial issue facing our world. I am also thankful to the editor at Baylor University Press, Carey Newman, who worked with me from the conception of this project to its final conclusion. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to Debbie McLaren who assisted me during the proofreading process.