

Sermon- A Travelogue through Liberation Theology

On Saturday evening, June 28, 2014, the guest speaker for the prestigious Ware Lecture at the annual General Assembly of our faith was introduced... This remarkable woman was described as, “one of America’s most articulate and effective advocates for compassionate public policy.” However, she wasn’t a Unitarian Universalist. This guest speaker wasn’t even a member of what is thought of as a traditionally liberal denomination.

Fast forward two years, and the guest speaker at the scheduled Public Witnessing event at General Assembly is a remarkable man, but again not a member of a traditionally liberal denomination. He even often describes

himself as a strict-interpretationist of the words of the Christian Bible.

Don't get me wrong. It's great for our faith to be embracing the voices of prominent people with whom we don't necessarily see eye-to-eye. However, that wasn't case, here. In both cases, these remarkable guests were friends of our faith. While clearly there are substantial differences of religious perspective, the core of the relationships between our faith and these two speakers is grounded firmly a shared theology.

The woman was Roman Catholic nun Sister Simone Campbell. The man was Disciples of Christ minister Reverend William Barber. The shared theology was Liberation Theology.

Liberation Theology generally is a theology that emphasizes liberation from social, political, and economic oppression as an anticipation of ultimate salvation.

Or, as I like to refer to it, the realization of Universalism, here on earth.

The term “Liberation Theology” is most often applied specifically to that which grew out of the Catholic Church in Latin America, in the 1950s and 1960s and 1970s. The torchbearer there was Father Gustavo Gutiérrez. He has said that his views were shaped by the shockingly high level of poverty he saw; 60% of the population living in poverty and what’s worse, the vast majority of those living in utter destitution. That kind of poverty surrounded by the rest of the world looks like a tumor surrounded by healthy

tissue. It stands out as something wrong; a flaw in the plan, and one that requires there be a different plan.

Quoting Father Gutierrez:

“It is becoming more evident that the Latin American peoples will not emerge from their present status except by means of a profound transformation, a social revolution, which will qualitatively change the conditions in which they now live.”

However, it was worse than that. The poverty in Latin America at the time was, and really to this day remains, a reflection of the structure of the society -- as much an echo of colonialism and the marginalization of the native peoples in Latin America, as is much of the poverty in the United States an echo of slavery and the exploitation of waves of immigrants.

Gutiérrez, of course, draws the force of his theology from his own Catholic faith, from the stories of the life of Jesus, his living among the poor. From among the entirety of Christian scripture, Gutiérrez elevates those stories, specifically, arguably above many other elements of Christian doctrine, in response to that tumor he sees, the abject poverty contrasted with the rest of society. He prioritizes the moral imperatives associated with anti-poverty, with anti-oppression.

Of course, where Liberation Theology meets forces that benefit from exploitation of oppression, there's bound to be a conflict, and power often gets its way, at least in the short run.

The ascendancy of Liberation Theology in Catholic Latin America 50, 60 and 70 years ago was met by Vatican

admonishments in 1984 and 1986. And the Vatican has continued to push back against Liberation Theology.

Pressure applied in the wake of Sister Simone's award-winning work for the NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice recently resulted in a Vatican reprimand that was eerily similar to the Vatican's response to the growth of Liberation Theology in Latin America.

Pope Francis seems to be more positively inclined toward Liberation Theology. Prior to becoming Pope, he observed that if people today, "were to read the sermons of the first fathers of the Church, from the second or third centuries, about how you should treat the poor, [they'd] say it was Maoist or Trotskyist." I would like to think that Pope Francis was referring to Origen (Adamantius) of Alexandria, who was tagged by 19th-century Universalist

minister Hosea Ballou as a forerunner of the Universalist thread of our faith.

Of course, it isn't only the Vatican that pushes back against Liberation Theology. The most forceful push back comes from the strongest apologists for unchecked capitalism, apologists such as the late Ronald Nash, who even falsely accused Gutierrez, a Catholic priest, of supporting violence.

Nash's efforts to rationalize the paths of exploitation and oppression that prevail in contemporary capitalism included his effort to case economic systems as all-or-nothing propositions - in Nash's words, "The Christian Choice Between Capitalism and Socialism". Nash attacked any notion that hybrid or mixed economies that involved any kind of economic interventionism could stand

the test of time, neglecting the reality that no economic system stands the test of time and we are therefore charged with regularly dealing with such tumult, rebuilding when necessary, just as a stone wall occasionally falls and needs to be built back up.

In 1984, Nash collected together a set of theologians, economists, and other scholars from what he referred to as “a wide spectrum of ecclesiastical fellowships,” to contribute to his compendium in an attempt to discredit Liberation Theology. In their treatises, they spoke authoritatively about the state of poverty in Latin America and more generally about the state of oppression there and elsewhere. If you recall from a couple of weeks ago the photo showing twenty five most older, privileged white men sitting around a table in the White House discussing

the future of women's health -- that will give you a feel for what reading Nash's compendium against Liberation Theology was like - a bunch of mostly older privileged white men talking about Latin Americans living in poverty.

Yes, we can see the echoes of Nash's apologism today, in the prevailing voices opposed to anti-oppression efforts.

While the term "Liberation Theology" is most often applied specifically to that which grew out of the Catholic Church in Latin America, I feel it readily applies wherever the moral standing of anti-oppression is placed above other considerations, including scripture and doctrine.

And one of the most notable prosecutions of Liberation Theology in ancient times was Moses' advocacy for the

Jews in bondage in Egypt, saying that God had directed that Pharaoh let the people go.

“And that’s where matzoh came from.”

However, Liberation Theology is not exclusive to the United States, Latin America and ancient Egypt.

Many Palestinian Christians have based their fight for freedom in the context of Liberation Theology. The Sabeel Center in Jerusalem refers to its members as “Local Christians inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ [who] stand for the oppressed, work for justice, [and] engage in peace-building.”

In Korea and India, we find related theologies, both focused on institutional oppression by society’s structures.

The Korean theology reflects a class divide between the elite, known as the Yangban, and the masses, known as the Minjung. “The Minjung are those people [in Korea] who have suffered from exploitation, poverty, socio-political oppression and cultural oppression throughout the ages. They know the pain of dehumanization,” which is a common theme underlying the moral justification for all Liberation Theology.

The Indian theology is known as Dalit theology. Perhaps predictably, it came about in response to the centuries-old caste system and its lingering after-effects. The word “dalit” is Sanskrit for “oppressed” and is generically used to refer to the 16% of Indians that suffer from a pattern of harassment, assault, and discrimination, though use of the

word “dalit” to refer to people or groups of people is now banned in India.

Let’s come back to the United States, now. As I mentioned, the guest speaker at the Public Witness event at General Assembly last year was Disciples of Christ minister Reverend William Barber. He’s the pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church and a leader of the NAACP’s North Carolina state chapter. In talking to us UUs at *our* General Assembly, perhaps he couched his words a bit. Are you curious what vision he shares with members of his own church?

I was.

Of course, as a strict-interpretationist, you'd expect that much of his vision would be grounded firmly in Christianity and the belief in a divine Jesus. Those matters are addressed in the first three points and the final point of his church's seven point vision. The rest of the vision - almost half - is practically UU: Stand for justice and liberation throughout the community - our Second Principle.

Enhance and empower the spiritual well-being of the community - our Third Principle. Develop ministries that follow Jesus' example of service to and liberation of humanity - our Sixth Principle. The common thread tying our values together is mostly Liberation Theology.

While I'm talking about people who spoke at UUA General Assembly in 2014 and 2016, I cannot leave out someone who spoke at UUA General Assembly in 2015. Cornel

West. Reverend Dr. Cornel West is one of the most well-known promulgators of Liberation Theology in the United States, today. In 2015, it was he who offered the Ware Lecture. In it he celebrated how we UUs (and I quote), “Shatter the dogma, shatter the doctrine if it doesn’t make sense to you.” There again we hear that fundamental impetus for Liberation Theology - the placement of the morality of anti-oppression over scripture and doctrine.

During his talk, Reverend West also said that, “The quest for unarmed truth, is always to allow those who are suffering to raise their voices and play a role in the shaping of all our destinies.” This is a fundamental aspect of Liberation Theology. It isn’t just a matter of the strong *rescuing* the weak; it is a matter of validating those struggling - not just lifting them up as a matter of charity,

but lifting up their voices, and lifting up the priority that we place on addressing the needs of those suffering.

And Reverend West underscored that his focus is on more than just white supremacy. Quoting him again, “Too much male supremacy inside of me. I grew up in America - too much anti-Jewish sensibility. There is no Christian civilization in the history of the globe that has not been shot through with anti-Jewish hatred. We’ve got to come to terms with that.” (Unquote.) We’ve got to come to terms with all of that. We cannot effectively work towards the cause of Liberation with any such baggage.

I don’t want you leaving today thinking that all the voices of Liberation Theology are members of other faiths. We UUs have our luminaries as well, most notably UU

minister and Harvard Divinity School professor, the late James Luther Adams.

Even today, UU theologians still promote the message of liberation. In Paul Rasor's 2012 book, "Reclaiming Prophetic Witness," he underscores a central message of Liberation Theology, "one's own personal welfare [is] inseparably linked to the welfare of all of humanity." He also discusses the biggest weaknesses in the promotion of anti-oppression. He highlights two necessary parts of promoting such values: Reason-Giving and Accessibility.

Reason-Giving is what it sounds like, promoting anti-oppression through giving reasons why change is appropriate. Our nation's Declaration of Independence is almost entirely reasons - a litany of justifications for the separation between the colonies and the British crown.

And I'm sure many folks here could come up with a similar litany of reasons for the anti-oppression work that our church engages in. However, people can agree or disagree with reasons you give. Accessibility is that aspect that makes your reasoning comprehensible and recognized as valid. Most of everything that comes in the realm of change hits a snag with regard to Accessibility.

Paul Rasor highlights how we as UUs are uniquely placed to promote liberal perspectives and liberation theology because our faith prompts us to ground our perspectives in universally-Accessible terms. UUs generally don't rely on a specific, supernatural or mystical source. UUs generally don't rely on what's written in some book. UUs generally ground our perspectives in the crucible of reason, so our Reason-Making is much more Accessible.

Let me make this real: We could say that society should do more to alleviate poverty. We could defend that by saying that the Bible says that, “Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses,” or that Jesus said, “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.” However, that’s not our way.

Instead we may defend our anti-poverty message by drawing a parallel between how one would wish to be treated if they were in the position of being poor instead of being in their current position. This UU reason is a much more Accessible reason and the fact that this is how we generally think makes us so much more called to do this kind of liberation work.

I would like the take-away from my words today to be more than just a travelogue through Liberation Theology and our special calling to it. I have said from this pulpit in the past that the anti-oppression work we do here is important. Sometimes, I make reference to how our combined efforts aggregate into the opportunity for more significant progress. If you recall last Summer, Paula and I brought back from General Assembly a ritual within which we all held the hands of another here in the Sanctuary and said each, in turn, one to the other, "I put my hands in yours, so that we can do together what I cannot do alone." Our point was that working together, our church's work can have so much more impact for good - it can take a bigger bite out of oppression in our society.

However, the point is larger than that. Much of what we are now seeking to do as a congregation we can do more effectively if we would put our hands in the hands of others of our faith, members of UU churches throughout Georgia, and seek to do more together than we can do just within our own congregation. And as I alluded to earlier in my comments today, we can do more effective anti-oppression work if we would put our hands in the hands of those of other faiths, in the hands of liberal Catholics like Sister Simone, in the hands of those of Reverend Barber's Disciples of Christ community, so that together we can do more than our own faith can do by itself.

May it be so.

References:

- Adams, James Luther. *On Being Human Religiously*. Skinner House Books, 1976.
- Ballou, Hosea. *The ancient history of universalism: from the time of the apostles*. 1842.
- Goñi, Uki. *The Peronist Roots of Pope Francis' Politics*. The New York Times. August 12, 2015.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, Orbis, 1973.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. "Juan de la Cruz desde América Latina". 1991.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. "Quehacer teológico y experiencia eclesial"; J.J.Tamayo y J.Bosch, eds., *Panorama de la Teología Latinoamericana*, Estella, 2001.
- Kanmony, Jebagnanam Cyril. *Dalits and Tribes of India*. Mittal Publications, 2010.
- Nash, Ronald (editor). *Liberation Theology*. Mott Media, 1984.
- Neuman, Scott. *Nuns And The Vatican: A Clash Decades In Making*. May 3, 2012.
- Park, A. Sung. *Minjung Theology: A Korean Contextual Theology*.
- Rasor, Paul. *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberation Religion in the Public Square*. Skinner House, 2012.
- Twitter. *Vice President Pence @VP*. 11:21 AM - 23 Mar 2017. Retrieved March 24, 2017.
- Various resources*. Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center. sabeel.org.
- Various resources*. Unitarian Universalist Association. uaa.org.
- Wojda, Paul J., "Liberation theology," in R.P. McBrien, ed., *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Harper Collins, 1995.