

male but despite it. Allowing the multiple images from the story of Jesus to be mutually corrective restores Jesus as a paradigmatic rather than an iconic norm.<sup>72</sup>

Some theologians seem to suggest that contemporary Christians should shift from the concreteness of Jesus of Nazareth to more generic terms: the Christ, Spirit, Logos, or Sophia. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points to an original community of disciples as the prototype of Christian equality and liberation.<sup>73</sup> While these more generic terms can bring out dimensions obscured by traditional Christologies, they can be problematic. Substituting abstractions for Jesus can leave Christian moral reflection imaginatively impoverished and affectively confused. Wisdom is a quality, not a story that can shape an identity. Equality and inclusiveness are important values but they do not make disciples; they cannot convey the full range of affective guidance offered in the Gospels or connect one with the transforming grace of God. Jon Sobrino seems to have it right, when he states that "even after faith in Christ, the New Testament goes back to Jesus, and has to go back to Jesus, precisely to safeguard true faith in Christ."<sup>74</sup>

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#### ETHICS AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Readers of this journal received their first look at liberation theology in 1970 when Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez published his "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," a ground-breaking essay that the editor called "theological dynamite."<sup>1</sup> Nearly two decades later in this same journal, Richard McCormick hailed this Latin American theology as one of the significant developments within moral theology over the past half century.<sup>2</sup> He identified three ways in which liberation theology has influenced moral theology. It first demolished the separatist mentality that dichotomizes reality into the profane and the sacred and replaced it with a perspective that sees Christ's action

Elizabth A. Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," in Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed., *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper/Collins, 1993) 115–37. Martina Blasberg-Kuhnke, "Jesus as Women See Him," *Theology Digest* 39 (1992) 205–208.

<sup>72</sup> Anne E. Carr speaks of "a pluralism of images of Christ that are mutually corrective when viewed in connection with women's experience" (*Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988] 168); see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 150–169.

<sup>73</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*; and her *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992).

<sup>74</sup> Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 38–39.

<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," *TS* 31 (1970) 243–61; see Walter Burghardt's introductory remarks p. 241.

<sup>2</sup> Richard A. McCormick, "Moral Theology 1940–1989: An Overview," *TS* 50 (1989) 3–24.

permeating every dimension of human existence. Second, it expanded the Church's mission of charity to include active participation in constructing a just order. Liberation theologians call this active form of charity "praxis."<sup>3</sup> Third, liberation theology reminded Christians, and continues to remind them at every turn, that morality should give primacy to social concerns and not yield to the individualism rampant in Western industrialized democracies.

While certain theologians, like Gregory Baum, Marciano Vidal, and J. Philip Wogaman, would concur that liberation theology has influenced moral thinking in important and perhaps lasting ways, others, like James Gustafson, Michael Novak, and Dennis McCann have raised questions about these ways and about the ethics of liberation theology in general.<sup>4</sup> This note will examine those issues in liberation ethics that have recently appeared in the theological literature, focusing primarily on how the preferential option for the poor relates to God's universal love and to ethical concepts, especially to the common good, justice, and human rights. It will conclude with a discussion of its moral identity: What kind of ethics is liberation ethics? The points raised in these notes arise mainly from a dialogue between theologians from Latin America and theologians of North America, Western Europe, and the Philippines.<sup>5</sup>

### *Preferential Option for the Poor*

The concept "preferential option for the poor" first arose at the Second Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín in 1968 and was formally defined by the bishops in their Third Conference at Puebla in 1979. This option, the bishops said, calls the whole Church to a conversion and to a "commitment to the poor . . . aimed at their inte-

<sup>3</sup> Roger Haight, "Praxis," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith A. Dwyer (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1994) 776–77.

<sup>4</sup> See the following for positive appraisals: Gregory Baum, *Theology and Society* (New York: Paulist, 1993) 113–27; Robert McAfee Brown, *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993); Marciano Vidal, *Moral Fundamental 1: Moral de Actitudes* (Madrid: Editorial Covarrubias) 275–84; and J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 256. For adversarial perspectives, see Dennis P. McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology: Practical Theologies in Creative Conflict* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981); and Michael Novak, *Will It Liberate? Questions for Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1986). For a balanced assessment of the liberation theologians and the adversaries, see Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> See the following for good treatments of African-American, feminist, and Hispanic/Latino ethics: James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History 2: 1980–1992* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993); Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Feminist Ethics," *TS* 51 (1990) 49–64; and Robert S. Goizueta, "The Church and Hispanics in the United States: From Empowerment to Solidarity," in Michael Downey, ed., *That They Might Live: Power, Empowerment, and Leadership in the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 160–75.

gral liberation." Answering this call means acknowledging and supporting the efforts of the poor to organize themselves and to reclaim their rights. Moreover, solidarity with the poor urges the Church to denounce "grave injustices stemming from mechanisms of oppression."<sup>6</sup> Since Puebla, Pope John Paul II, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, and the bishops of Canada and the United States have all affirmed the preferential option in their respective teachings.<sup>7</sup> This option, the linchpin of liberation theology and its ethics, has become, even with its strong hierarchical support by the pope and bishops, "the most controversial religious term since the Reformers' cry, 'Salvation through faith alone.'<sup>8</sup> It draws vigorous opposition as well as enthusiastic support.

Its opponents attack it on many fronts: theological, ethical, social-scientific, and epistemological. On the theological front, critics say the preferential option seems to circumscribe God's universal love by implying that God loves the poor more than the nonpoor and that God channels salvation exclusively through the poor. This perspective suggests that the Church should work with the downtrodden and forget the wealthy.<sup>9</sup> On the ethical front, critics charge that liberation ethics, by using preferential option as its foundational principle, seems to turn traditional ethics on its head. Traditional philosophical ethics and moral theology insist that moral thinking be impartial; they reject partiality, therefore, because by definition it gives unfair advantage to one group.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Third Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, *Evangelization in Latin America's Present and Future*, in *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, ed. John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979) nos. 1134, 1136.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, in David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) nos. 42–45; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), *Libertatis nuntius* (Vatican City: Vatican Polyglot, 1984) parts 3–4; CDF, *Libertatis conscientia* no. 68, in *Origins* 15 (17 April, 1986) 713–28; *Ethics and Economics: Canada's Catholic Bishops on the Economic Crisis*, G. Baum and D. Cameron, eds. (Toronto: Lorimer, 1984) Document 6: "Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis"; and National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1986) Introduction no. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992) 1.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Benne, "The Preferential Option for the Poor and American Public Policy," in *The Preferential Option for the Poor*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988) 54; and Gordon Graham, *The Idea of Christian Charity: A Critique of Some Contemporary Conceptions* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1990) 116–18.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of impartiality vs. partiality, see Alan Gewirth, "Ethical Universalism and Particularism," *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988) 283–302; R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981); James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 2d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993) 9–13. For a discussion of the limits of impar-

Regarding social analysis, critics see the preferential option conditioning the way liberation theologians select their instrument of analysis, especially their use of Marxist analysis and dependency theory.<sup>11</sup> Without condemning liberation theology, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith criticized certain theologies of liberation for adopting a preferential option that seemed to pit the poor against the rich according to a Marxian script of class struggle.<sup>12</sup>

On the final front, certain adversaries have questioned a corollary of the preferential option, namely, the affirmation that the poor, because of their social location, possess an epistemological privilege.<sup>13</sup> Its proponents say that the poor know better than the nonpoor a certain dimension of reality, especially how dominant institutional arrangements screen out the rights of the poor.<sup>14</sup> Because of limits of space, I shall examine only the first two issues, God's preferential love and how the preferential option works in the ethics of liberation theology.<sup>15</sup>

### *Is God Partisan?*

Critics object to the liberationist claim that God has a preferential love for the poor and takes their side because the assertion of such an option co-opts or instrumentalizes God. James Gustafson questions whether liberation theology has instrumentalized the deity and the sources of religious piety by putting them at the service of immediate

tiality in ethics, see Margaret Urban Walker, "Partial Consideration," *Ethics* 101 (1991) 758–74. Another strand, emerging out of moral psychology, feminism, and communitarianism, develops the notion of particularity, thus challenging the impartialist moral theories. See Lawrence A. Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (New York: Cambridge University, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Novak, *Will It Liberate?* 108–9; and Gary Dorrien, *Reconstructing the Common Good* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 139. Regarding criteria for choosing modes of analysis, see Clodovis Boff and Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) 26–27; and José Míguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 44–47.

<sup>12</sup> CDF, *Libertatis nuntius* part 9, no. 10. See responses to this critique by Juan Luis Segundo, *Theology and the Church: A Response to Cardinal Ratzinger and a Warning to the Whole Church*, trans. John W. Diercksmeier (Minneapolis: Seabury/Winston, 1985) 132; Gregory Baum, *Theology and Society* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987) 40–45; and Harold Wells, "The Question of Theological Determination in Liberation Theology," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 3 (1987) 209–20.

<sup>13</sup> Novak, *Will It Liberate?* 151.

<sup>14</sup> Clodovis Boff and Leonardo Boff, "A Igreja Perante a Economia nos EUA: Um Olhar a Partir da Periferia," *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 47 (1987) 356–77, at 371. In explaining the epistemological privilege, the authors say that the periphery (the poor) sees the center (the wealthy), but the center does not always see the periphery. See also José Míguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983) 43; and William O'Neill, "No Amnesty for Sorrow: The Privilege of the Poor in Christian Social Ethics," *TS* 55 (1994) 638–56, at 648–49.

<sup>15</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of social analysis in liberation theology, see McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics* chaps. 7–9. On epistemological privilege of the poor, see Stephen Pope, "Proper and Improper Partiality and the Preferential Option for the Poor," *TS* 54 (1993) 242–71, at 246–52.

needs and human projects, “. . . so that we now have a unitarian God of liberation, and unitarian liberation of particular groups?”<sup>16</sup> Gustafson acknowledges that there are ample biblical materials for justifying concern for the poor and oppressed, but raises two points about the use of these materials: first, whether liberationists’ selection of Christian resources is sufficiently comprehensive, and second, whether their interpretation of Scripture relative to practice is coherent. Regarding the selection, he asks whether liberation theology’s choice of passages and themes from the Bible and tradition is overly narrow. Regarding the coherence of resources, he wonders whether their use of biblical truths (e.g. gratitude, reverence, and service to God) controls human interests; or whether human interests use these biblical values, religious practices, and devotions for their utility value. If human interests assume greater authority, then “God is denied as God; God becomes an instrument in the service of human beings rather than human beings instruments in the service of God.”<sup>17</sup> Gustafson lets readers decide for themselves whether or not the liberation theologians instrumentalize God as they relate God to the poor and to the cause of their liberation.<sup>18</sup>

Has liberation ethics crafted a unitarian deity? I think not, and I would offer two reflections on Gustafson’s questions. First, any theological ethics that proceeds methodologically from praxis to theological-ethical affirmation and back to praxis, as liberation ethics does, risks falling into the trap of absolutizing its own praxis or specific human project. Yet for the most part, I see a consistent eschatological ethical framework operative in liberation ethics, where the word of God both illumines and challenges the theologian’s praxis, social analysis, and claims about human rights.<sup>19</sup>

Second, as McCormick rightly recognized, these theologians do not divide the world into the sacred and the profane, nor do they neatly separate revelation from experience. By starting from within the lived faith of the poor, theologians assume God is present within the suffering of the poor and speaks to them. Speaking out of a neo-orthodox theological tradition that begins with religious symbol, Gustafson systematically starts each ethical investigation with the question, “What is God enabling and requiring human beings to be and to do in these

<sup>16</sup> James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective 1: Theology and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981) 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Patricia McAuliffe, *Fundamental Ethics: A Liberationist Approach* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1993) 174. McAuliffe interprets Gustafson to be asserting that liberation theology does indeed put religion in the service of ethics. Clearly Gustafson suspects that it does, but he stops short of drawing any conclusions.

<sup>19</sup> Míguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics*; Francisco Moreno, *Moral Theology from the Poor: Moral Challenges of the Theology of Liberation*, foreword Gustavo Gutiérrez (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1988); and Antônio Moser and Bernardino Leers, *Moral Theology: Dead Ends and Alternatives*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987). These liberation ethicists all ground their moral thinking in the word of God, using God’s reign as the ultimate standard of what is just.

circumstances?" He searches for religious reasons grounded in the experience of the reality of God, such as a sense of radical dependence and a sense of gratitude.<sup>20</sup> Through the sense of gratitude, for example, believers come to see the goodness of God, to be thankful, and, moved with gratitude, become concerned for justice.<sup>21</sup>

Liberation theologians take as their starting point the everyday life of a people of faith where God's presence is discerned in light of the word of God. Using the biblical metaphor of the word as a two-edged sword, Gutiérrez says that people read the Bible, and the Bible reads them. Thus the word challenges their lack of hope, justice, and solidarity, and it informs their decisions about what they should do. Jon Sobrino sees suffering and exploitation as the point of encounter between God and the poor.<sup>22</sup> Recognizing the suffering Christ in the suffering people leads others, including the poor, to conversion and to the decision to follow Jesus. Ethics, Sobrino says, does not arise from hearing the verbal demands of Jesus but from experiencing the "total reality of Jesus" as one encounters the exploited, depressed, and ignored.<sup>23</sup> In summary, Gustafson and the liberation theologians have different methods and starting points; yet they agree on one important element, God's gratuitousness as a primary source of ethics.<sup>24</sup>

The question of the authority of Scripture posed by Gustafson has been raised by other critics.<sup>25</sup> Biblical theologian Jon Levinson criticized liberation theologian Jorge Pixley for giving greater authority to a Marxian class struggle in the latter's interpretation of the book of Exodus. He says that Pixley, by reading the book of Exodus as a revolutionary class struggle, fails to see a number of dimensions. The exodus, Levinson maintains, means more than emancipation from slavery; basically it involves a surrender in which the chosen people hand themselves over to God.<sup>26</sup> While Pixley may distort the exodus by his overly materialist interpretation, liberation theologians generally

<sup>20</sup> McAuliffe contrasts the basic differences between Gustafson's and the liberationist's approaches (*Fundamental Ethics* 173–77).

<sup>21</sup> James M. Gustafson, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975) 100–1.

<sup>22</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Jesucristo liberador: Lectura histórica-teológica de Jesús de Nazaret* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1991) 423–25. Sobrino uses the term "crucified people" (*pueblos crucificados*) as an apt description of the people's deaths inflicted by unjust structures, which he says is a historical continuation of Jesus' crucifixion.

<sup>23</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978) 111.

<sup>24</sup> To get a better sense of the different methodologies, read how Gustafson and Gutiérrez approach suffering: James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective 2: Ethics and Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) 219–21; and Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) 81–92.

<sup>25</sup> CDF, *Libertatis nuntius* part 9.

<sup>26</sup> Jon D. Levinson, "Liberation Theology and the Exodus," *Midstream* 35 (1989) 30–36.

give Scripture the highest authority in their attempts to discern the contemporary existential situation.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, they underscore the importance of knowing both the historical context in which the biblical passage was written and the contemporary situation in which the passage is being read today.<sup>28</sup> Reading Scripture in a communal setting, such as in an ecclesial base community where people gather for prayer and discussion, generates deeper meaning and communal discernment.

Stephen Pope, a friendly critic of liberation theology, wishes to expand the meaning of God's preferential love, lest it be dismissed as a narrowing of God's universal love and as an unfair moral criterion.<sup>29</sup> He agrees fundamentally with Gutiérrez's emphasis on preferential option but thinks that the latter's explanation of why God opts for the poor conflates two different features of divine partiality: (1) favoring the poor because of their faith and openness, and (2) favoring the poor because they are needy. The first sense of divine partiality refers to the fact that God wills salvation to those who have most fully responded to God on earth. The second sense refers to divine care for the materially poor. Why does God save this second group? Gutiérrez replies, "because they are poor." True, says Pope, but we can also assert on solid biblical grounds that God saves the poor both because they are needy and because some of the poor (the *anawim*) have responded generously to God's gifts. He suggests that Gutiérrez should distinguish between "love" and "care," the latter term being a specific form of love proportioned to need. It makes perfect sense to speak of God's "preferential love" for the poor as long as "love" is specifically understood under its subcategory of "care" or "caring love."<sup>30</sup> God's special love for the poor in virtue of their need takes the form of care, mercy, and compassion, which God expresses for them because of their suffering independently of their virtue or merit. We see this sense of love in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who cared for a dying man simply because of his suffering and without concern for the victim's desert.<sup>31</sup>

Pope's constructive criticism of Gutiérrez's explanation of why God opts for the poor provides an important ontological basis for the theological claim. He would like to see liberation theologians expand the implications of the preferential option, showing, for example, its relationship to other groups (kith and kin, friends, and colleagues) and how it relates to the concept of the common good. His insightful dis-

<sup>27</sup> For a critique of Pixley's interpretation of Job, see Gutiérrez, *On Job* 127–28, n. 23; and for an assessment of Pixley's interpretation of Exodus, see Thomas L. Schubeck, *Liberation Ethics: Sources, Models, and Norms* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 147–51.

<sup>28</sup> J. Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987); and Carlos Mesters, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> Pope, "Proper and Improper Partiality" 242–71.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 257–58.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 259.

inction between love and care clears the way for his defining the preferential option in terms of distributive justice. The option "rests on the belief that moral concern should be proportioned to need, where 'need' can be interpreted to include poverty, but also vulnerability, powerlessness, marginality, etc."<sup>32</sup>

### *Should Ethics Be Partisan?*

Critics suggest that the preferential option for the poor fosters an unjust partiality, favoritism, or reverse discrimination. Defenders counter this criticism first by emphatically stating that "preferential" love does not mean "exclusive" love, and second by showing that partial solidarity seeks full realization in universal solidarity.<sup>33</sup> Should ethics be partisan? Yes, says Philippine theologian Patricia McAuliffe, because our historical nature "leads us to recognize that we are limited in terms of our capacity to give and to relate to all others." Following Juan Luis Segundo's notion of efficacious love, she says we must choose between needs of groups, and should make that choice on the basis of the greatest need.<sup>34</sup> Like Latin American theologians, McAuliffe argues that the universal good is achieved through the particular good. Preferential commitment intends justice for all and not a reversal of situations (i.e. reverse discrimination). In a similar vein, Brazilian moral theologians Antônio Moser and Bernardino Leers maintain that taking the viewpoint of the poor does not mean "abandoning the privileged minorities," but rather offering the nonpoor "another line of vision which will integrate them in a gospel perspective."<sup>35</sup> Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff says that the Church never forgets the catholicity of the faith and therefore remains open to other groups as it opts for the poor. He agrees that preference should be given to the most needy, but thinks that the type of giving should go beyond material assistance. Preferential option does not simply mean "more" or "special," as for example, when a mother loves all her children but gives more and even special attention to her sick child. Preferential option goes deeper. It is like the care of a physician who loves her patients by eradicating the cause of their maladies. By uprooting the structural

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 252.

<sup>33</sup> *Puebla and Beyond* no. 1165; and Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983) 127-29.

<sup>34</sup> McAuliffe, *Fundamental Ethics* 61-62. By "efficacious love" Segundo means the total self-gift of God revealed in Jesus and given gratuitously to human persons. He calls it "efficacious" because the person gifted with it possesses the power to transform other persons and to change institutions using the means available in the concrete situation. It is also efficacious in the sense that it calls for a prudent distribution of its energy in order to be effective. See Theresa Lowe Ching, *Efficacious Love: Its Meaning and Function in the Theology of Juan Luis Segundo* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990).

<sup>35</sup> Moser and Leers, *Moral Theology* 55-56.



causes of poverty, preferential action ultimately benefits the universal good. Following the second metaphor, the Church should probe the deep causes of poverty and then work toward eradicating them.<sup>36</sup>

All this sounds good, yet we may want to ask these theologians to explain more specifically how laboring for the poor works toward the justice of all. First, how does preferential option for the poor fit with human rights and the common good, or how does a partial solidarity agree with universal solidarity? Secondly, how does preferential option become specified as principles of justice?

### Preferential Option, Common Good, and Human Rights

As U.S. theologian Ismael García has pointed out, liberation theologians appeal to an updated concept of the common good, while criticizing the traditional forms espoused by the Roman Catholic Church and liberalism. The traditional Roman Catholic understanding of common good assumed a society that functioned like an organism or body. The parts, organized and united as one body, possess a common meaning and common goals, which all should pursue in common. The good of the whole takes priority over the good of the parts. The problem with this image of the common good, as liberation theologians see it, is that it assumes a fundamental harmony and an agreement about what is good for the whole and what is good for the part. It fails to reflect the profound differences that exist between parts, or to take into consideration group conflicts that shake the foundations of the whole. The organism model, while perhaps viable in a homogeneous society such as in medieval Christendom, seems less applicable in a pluralistic society, especially in Central America, Peru, and Brazil, where fissures divide the body into hostile classes, races, and groups.<sup>37</sup>

Salvadoran theologian Ignacio Ellacuría pinpointed the reason why liberation theologians are critical of the concept of the common good. The reason is that in historical usage the concept has been ideologized and become a cover for special interests. It has been used to express not genuine pursuit of the interests of the whole, the totality, but pursuit of the good of a single part—the wealthy aristocracy, whose interests include enjoying the fruits of the land and labor while preventing the workers from sharing in what they have produced.<sup>38</sup>

Despite such criticism, certain liberation theologians continue to employ the concept of the common good, but they approach it critically. Its best Latin American reconstructionist to date has been Ignacio

<sup>36</sup> Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, trans. Robert R. Barr (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 24–25.

<sup>37</sup> Ismael García, *Justice in Latin American Theology of Liberation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987) 184–86.

<sup>38</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, "Human Rights in a Divided Society," in *Human Rights in the Americas: The Struggle for Consensus*, Alfred Hennesly and John Langan, eds. (Washington: Georgetown University, 1982) 52–65, at 57–58.

Ellacuría. His reconstruction involved a historical study of the meaning of the common good within a historical-political context. In light of his historical investigation, he “de-ideologized” the concept by distilling its essential meaning from its historical and cultural biases or ideologies. He defined the common good as a coherent set of structural conditions that promote the interest of all members in society.<sup>39</sup> Using this formal definition, he examined how the common good is actually being used in Latin America to disguise powerful interests and unjust practices. In the name of the common good, regimes in collusion with the wealthy minority raise the flags of national security and Christian democracy, while systematically violating the human rights of the poor majority. Egregious, long-standing violations denied any credibility to government pronouncements that democracy or security was the prime objective. Ellacuría presented El Salvador as a case study.<sup>40</sup> The landowning oligarchy there held a monopoly of fertile farmland, payed its workers low wages, and executed those who sought agrarian reform. Ellacuría argued that if a particular group pursues its own gain to the detriment of the whole, it runs counter to the common good and therefore commits an injustice.<sup>41</sup>

Ellacuría, in my judgment, has creatively reworked the concept of the common good by examining it in its various historical contexts and by integrating it with human rights. By employing concepts of the common good and human rights he also answers the question whether an ethics based on the preferential option for the poor can be objective. His moral reasoning supported by historical analysis and his willingness to debate the issue publicly further demonstrates objectivity. Conceiving the common good as a coherent set of structural conditions, he argued that these conditions would foster development of all persons, rich and poor, in every dimension of society. They would allow all people to have equal access to land, basic necessities, and political offices, as well as a new lifestyle in which people would use goods in a nonacquisitive and nonexclusive sense.<sup>42</sup>

Ellacuría’s linking the common good with human rights leads us to an article by U.S. theologian William O’Neill, who also dealt with the preferential option in relation to basic rights and the common good;

<sup>39</sup> Ellacuría’s definition of the common good is similar to that of the Second Vatican Council, which defines it as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment” (*Gaudium et spes* no. 26).

<sup>40</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Historicization of the Concept of Property,” in *Towards a Society That Serves Its People: The Intellectual Contribution of El Salvador’s Murdered Jesuits*, ed. John Hassett and Hugh Lacey (Washington: Georgetown University, 1991) 105–37.

<sup>41</sup> Ellacuría, “Human Rights in a Divided Society” 63.

<sup>42</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, “Utopia and Prophecy in Latin America,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, trans. James R. Brockman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 289–328, at 319–25.

indeed, he uses Ellacuría's notion of the common good ("union of structural conditions") to support his own position.<sup>43</sup> He speaks about preferential option as he carries on a debate with representatives of liberalism, especially with John Rawls on human rights. The privilege of the poor, O'Neill believes, rests more on the moral exigency of the poor's universal claims than on the restrictive attribution of negative rights. He argues that the privilege of the poor, considered in both its moral and its epistemic aspects, is justified by the ideal of impartiality itself. Reflecting on Plato's principle in the *Laws* that "equal treatment results in inequality when it is given to what is unequal—unless given in due measure," O'Neill interprets what "due measure" means and what it does not mean. It does not mean what Rawls claims, namely, that fair distribution entails restricting the agents' liberty "only for the sake of liberty." Due measure means that the justification of liberty depends upon a positive respect for persons as moral agents realized through basic rights. We all have an entitlement to equal respect and therefore to those rights which ensure this respect. In sum, due measure calls for the satisfaction of equal basic rights and, in materially dissimilar conditions where rights are violated, it justifies a discriminate response.<sup>44</sup> O'Neill's argument, like Pope's and Ellacuría's, is illuminating because it shows how partiality on behalf of the poor is justifiable by objective standards of the common good and human rights.

### Preferential Option and Justice

Critics have raised the question whether liberation ethics has developed an adequate principle of justice that can address injustices among the poor as well as injustices between the rich and the poor. Brian Hebblethwaite suggested that liberation ethics with its emphasis on love as justice is a situational ethics and thus runs the risk of being manipulated and controlled by circumstances<sup>45</sup>—a point similar to the one raised earlier by Gustafson. Dennis McCann and Charles Strain fault certain liberation theologians (Dussel, Segundo, and Míguez Bonino) for not engaging in "ethics in a more limited sense,"<sup>46</sup> that is, for not employing precise normative principles. Do liberation theologians have norms of justice in a more limited sense? Theologians such as Ellacuría and Leonardo Boff, who frame their arguments in terms of the common good and human rights, do indeed have principles of justice, though probably not as concrete as McCann and Strain

<sup>43</sup> O'Neill, "No Amnesty for Sorrow" 646.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 639–47.

<sup>45</sup> Brian Hebblethwaite, *Christian Ethics in the Modern Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 94–96.

<sup>46</sup> Dennis P. McCann and Charles R. Strain, *Polity and Praxis* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985) 151.

would wish. A prior question is what liberation ethics says about the meaning of justice in its various aspects.

Liberation theologians understand justice, philosophically speaking, in its basic Aristotelian sense of giving to each what is due to each, but they develop its deepest and fullest meaning in relation to the concept of liberation and basic human rights associated with it. Liberation involves a double movement, a "liberation from" all forms of oppression, and a "liberation for" a shared freedom and communion. Neither movement by itself is adequate, because freedom cannot be integral when basic needs are not being met. "It is humanity that must be free," says Ellacuría, "and not a few privileged members of humanity, whether individuals, social classes, or nations."<sup>47</sup> Liberation incorporates and unifies both freedom and justice. It includes a longing to be free as well as a struggle to be just. Justice cannot exist without freedom and freedom cannot long endure without justice. Yet justice has a priority over freedom in the political order, because it establishes the structural conditions for the possibility of freedom.

Many theologians from Latin America and North America have found Gustavo Gutiérrez's conceptual structure of liberation with its three levels of meaning helpful in developing more specific aspects of justice and in organizing human rights.<sup>48</sup> Gutiérrez conceives of liberation as a single process having three distinct but reciprocally interpenetrating levels of meaning. On the first level, liberation expresses the aspirations of the poor and oppressed who struggle for freedom in the economic, social, and political process. The work of liberation concentrates on establishing the material conditions necessary for subsistence and a dignified livelihood. These conditions fulfill both basic rights, which the liberationists classify as "economic-social-cultural" and "civil-political."<sup>49</sup> Liberation theologians order these rights in terms of the most pressing needs to survive. In contrast to the liberal tradition, liberation theologians rank economic-social-cultural rights, which defend the poor (rights to survive, employment, and health care), over civil-political rights, that entitle persons to exercise their freedom according to their interests (freedom of speech, of worship, of peaceful assembly). The economic-social-cultural rights, liberationists maintain, share in and complement human dignity guaran-

<sup>47</sup> Ellacuría, "Utopia and Prophecy" 308-9; and Moser and Leers, *Moral Theology* 168-69.

<sup>48</sup> Moreno, *Moral Theology from the Poor* 79-82; Patricia Ann Lamoureux, "The Development and Analysis of Latin American Liberation Ethics" (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1993) 17-31; and Ismael García, *Justice in Latin American Theology of Liberation* 31-109. All three authors show the relevance of Gutiérrez's threefold distinction of liberation for ethics.

<sup>49</sup> Segundo Montes, Florenín Meléndez, and Edgar Palacios, "Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in El Salvador," trans. Phillip Berryman, in *Towards a Society That Serves Its People* 158-68. See also Gregory Baum, "Human Rights: An Ethical Perspective," *The Ecumenist* 1 (May/June 1994) 64-67.

teed by the civil-political rights. Both sets of rights acknowledge the right of all individuals to be regarded as persons of "supreme dignity, bearers of rights and obligations, and therefore to be treated as such by the state and society."<sup>50</sup>

Justice on this level is primarily social, which calls for the transformation of structures that fail to respect human dignity and which enables the poor to participate in the workplace and to have a political voice. Working for social justice, Dean Brackley wrote, establishes the material conditions that allow greater participation by the poor in the production, distribution, and enjoyment of good and services.<sup>51</sup>

On a second and deeper level, liberation expresses the people's yearning to be free by assuming responsibility for their own destiny. Gutiérrez calls this dimension "utopia" because it calls the downtrodden to become new human beings in a qualitatively new society. Becoming a new human being entails growing in one's inner freedom, but a freedom that is realized in contemplation and active protest, dialogue, and permanent struggle. The utopian metaphor addresses the people's aspiration (and the theologians' also) to think critically and imaginatively in a communal process to bring about this new human being and new patterns of relationship. Gutiérrez speaks of human freedom on this level as "historical conquest" in which persons as protagonists of their own history discover in their struggle new ways of being and relating as human persons.<sup>52</sup> The conquest involves more than individual self-determination; it requires cooperative effort and solidarity with the oppressed. Justice at this level might best be described as solidaristic, which requires an awakening of self as creator and an awakening of the community as doers of justice.<sup>53</sup> The bishops at Medellín spoke about a justice and peace that moved the oppressed from resignation to critical awareness and action.<sup>54</sup> The awakening of ourselves involves a search for personal and group identity. Brazilian theologian Yvone Gebara, reflecting on the machismo present even among the liberationists, says that this search means that women, laboring alongside men for liberation, must work on themselves, "fighting from within the false images we have acquired for ourselves."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Montes et al., "Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights" 159.

<sup>51</sup> Dean Brackley, "Salvation and the Social Good" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, School of Divinity, 1980) 160-61.

<sup>52</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 21-22.

<sup>53</sup> Matthew L. Lamb, "Solidarity," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith A. Dwyer (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1994) 908-12.

<sup>54</sup> Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, "Peace," in *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council 2: Conclusions* (Bogotá, Colombia: General Secretariat of CELAM, 1970) no. 18.

<sup>55</sup> Yvone Gebara, "Option for the Poor as an Option for the Poor Woman," in *Women, Work and Poverty*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Anne Carr (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987) 110-17, at 115.

On the third and religious level, liberation expresses the aspiration of people to break with sinful patterns and to be joined in communion with God. Sin—understood as selfishness that alienates a person from God, from neighbor, and from self—is the root of all oppression.<sup>56</sup> This level presents the primary motivation for moving forward in the struggle for liberation: gratefulness to God who instills hope in place of fatalism and despair. Moreover, it expresses human beings' deepest needs, the need for God's forgiveness and for solidarity with all people united in Christ. Justice at this level is called justification, an experience in contemplation where persons encounter the gratuitousness of God's merciful love. This experience moves one from self-focus to other-focus, from legal justice to justice tempered by compassion.<sup>57</sup>

### *What Kind of Ethics?*

Critics have labeled liberation ethics "situationist," "unitarian," and "utilitarian," all of which, in my judgment, are off the mark. Classifying this ethics is a risky venture. I would conclude by setting in relief certain primary characteristics that might reasonably be said to constitute an ethics of discipleship.

Most liberation theologians approach ethics through discipleship, a moral discernment process that involves the following of Christ. At first glance, it may seem paradoxical that an ethics which emphasizes the autonomy of the moral agent should identify itself as following another. Patricia McAuliffe poses the question this way: How can a liberationist ethic, which stresses the active participation and creative discovery of the moral agent, identify itself as an ethic of discipleship, which emphasizes following another?<sup>58</sup> But following does not mean slavish imitation of Jesus's demands; rather it involves acting faithfully, justly, and freely, reproducing the Spirit of Jesus in proclaiming the reign of God. Discipleship involves a call to personal conversion and, at the same time, a movement toward establishing a community of worship in which disciples engage in corporate moral discernment and the promotion of justice for the poor. Hence, discipleship for many of these theologians attends to both the subjective and objective dimensions. The subjective aspect focuses on the agent's motives, freedom, and commitment; and the objective aspect examines facts, values, and norms drawn from analysis of experience, Scripture, and church teaching.<sup>59</sup>

An ethics of discipleship involves discernment, or a reading of the "signs of the times"—what Pope John XXIII called the "distinctive

<sup>56</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 138.

<sup>57</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job* 93–101.

<sup>58</sup> McAuliffe, *Fundamental Ethics* 139.

<sup>59</sup> Schubeck, *Liberation Ethics* 177.

characteristics" enmeshed within events, achievements, or currents of thought.<sup>60</sup> Signs consist of both negative and positive currents that indicate a crisis and that call for a response. For example, the contradiction between great wealth, rich natural resources, and economic power living next door to destitution, starvation, and illiteracy is a sign within North and South America urging a response.

Discernment involves a double reading of the signs: first, an analysis of experience and of the operations of institutions done with the tools of social analysis and ethics; and secondly a discernment that distinguishes the Spirit of God from evil spirits. The starting point of discernment is often the experience of massive suffering brought on by oppression. Certain liberation theologians have adopted the concept of "negative-contrast experience," a concept developed by Edward Schillebeeckx, that implies human resistance to oppressive activity.<sup>61</sup> Patricia McAuliffe, who has integrated Schillebeeckx's concept into her own liberation ethics, maintains that the negative experiences also imply an awareness of positive values, though not yet articulated. "We experience positivity," she writes, "primarily as the negation of negativity."<sup>62</sup> We come to understand the *humanum* better by our instinctive resistance to demeaning or exploitative acts. Gregory Baum expresses well the import of negative-contrast experience for ethics: "It was the revulsion from the cruel repression and genocide practiced by German fascist dictatorship and the massive killing and devastation exercised by relentless bombing on all sides that prompted the nations in 1948 to affirm human rights and commit themselves to their protection."<sup>63</sup> Thus the experience is not one of pure negativity, but engenders positive values, including hope for liberation.

Resistance to the bad spirit of oppression must be guided by listening to the good spirit, lest resistance turn into equally cruel vengeance. Jon Sobrino presents Jesus as the prototype for discipleship. Jesus shows by his ministry *how* his disciples are to discern, not *what* they are to discern.<sup>64</sup> From the life of Jesus, Sobrino draws up a tentative list of general criteria for discerning the Spirit of God at work, including justice, openness to conflictive love, and verification by the fruits of the Spirit. Chilean moral theologian Tony Mifsud has developed a sophisticated model of ethical-social discernment that uses both the gospel and Catholic social teaching to read the signs of the times.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> John XXIII, *Pacem in terris* nos. 40–41, in *The Gospel of Peace and Justice: Catholic Social Teaching since Pope John*, ed. Joseph Gremillion (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976) 209–10.

<sup>61</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Schillebeeckx Reader* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 54–56.

<sup>62</sup> McAuliffe, *Fundamental Ethics* 6.      <sup>63</sup> Gregory Baum, "Human Rights" 64.

<sup>64</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) 135–37.

<sup>65</sup> Tony Mifsud, *Moral de Discernimiento 4: Una Construcción Ética de la Utopía*

Much more could be said about the discernment mode from within this ethics of discipleship, especially about the importance of social analysis as a prerequisite to moral analysis and the link between the two types of analysis. An important contribution to moral theology is the emphasis given to spirituality as a vital source for shaping the dispositions or attitudes that motivate the moral life. Many theologians, such as Gutiérrez, view spirituality as the heart of liberation ethics. Recent systematic treatments of liberation ethics have helped fill an earlier vacuum of ethical reflection and moral argument.<sup>66</sup> More carefully reasoned arguments about issues stemming from people's experiences needs to be done. Another distinctive contribution to moral theology, in my view, is liberation theology's search for the distinctively human, demonstrated by Gutiérrez's tridimensional structure of the liberation process and by the process of negative-contrast experiences within a model of moral discernment.

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#### NATIONALISM, ETHNIC CONFLICT, AND RELIGION

In the post-Cold War period, it is no longer the global, nuclear, ideological confrontation of the superpowers and their networks of alliances that dominates our thinking about issues of peace and political order. It is the conflicts of nationalities, of ethnic groups, of communities divided by historic struggles and parochial allegiances that have come to the center of the stage. The struggles of Croats and Serbs, of Armenians and Azeris, of Hutus and Tutsis, of Ulster Protestants and Catholics, of Palestinians and Israelis, of Tamils and Sinhalese are not struggles which are satisfactorily explained by the categories of Cold War thinking on either side, or which were eliminated or even fundamentally modified by the great international conflict that went on for over four decades.

William Pfaff speaks of the desire of the peoples in what had been Soviet-controlled Europe to "become free again to be themselves—which logically implied, of course, the possibility of their becoming again, as many of them had been in the past, not at all democratic, but authoritarian in government, intolerant of religious and ethnic difference, and aggressive towards their neighbors."<sup>1</sup> The grievances and fears of Québécois in Canada, of Russians in Ukraine and Estonia and Kazakhstan, of Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania, of Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia, of Catholics in Sudan and Ulster, of Kurds in

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*Cristiana* (Santiago, Chile: Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Educación, 1987) 262–303; and Tony Mifsud, *Propuestas Éticas hacia el Siglo XXI* (Santiago, Chile: Talleres Gráficos Pia Sociedad de San Pablo, 1993) 75–89.

<sup>66</sup> Mifsud, *Propuestas Éticas hacia el Siglo XXI*; and Moser and Leers, *Moral Theology*.

<sup>1</sup> William Pfaff, *The Wrath of Nations: Civilization and the Furies of Nationalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) 81.