KOINONIA XV.1 (2003) 95-122

Christian Realism and Latin American Liberation Theology: Expanding the Dialogue

RAIMUNDO C. BARRETO JR.

In this essay, I am proposing a conversation between Christian realism—particularly in the thought of its most famous representative, Reinhold Niebuhr—and Latin American liberation theology with the intent of stressing the differences and commonalties that exist between these two schools. Both Christian realism and liberation theology emerged as public theologies in the twentieth century. While Niebuhr's Christian Realism has been widely acknowledged as one of the most influential Christian theories in the fields of social ethics and political philosophy in North America in the twentieth century, liberation theology has had an amazing impact not only upon Latin America, but also among all oppressed and disinherited peoples spread throughout the globe. Unfortunately, Niebuhr did not live long enough to engage in a dialogue with liberation theology, since the latter only began to be noticed by the academia in the late 1960s. In the beginning, liberation theology was perceived simply as local phenomena, and many mainstream theologians thought it would make no great impact upon mainline theologies which dominated the religious scenario in Europe and in the United States at that point in history. Furthermore, in Niebuhr's lifetime there was not much interchange between theologies from the Southern Hemisphere and those from the Northern.

The first available interaction between Christian realism and Latin American liberation theology dates from 1973. Niebuhr had already died, but one of his followers, Thomas G. Sanders, invoked his mentor's authority to accuse Latin American liberation theology of being nothing more than another type of "soft utopianism" (Sanders 1973:167). The reply, with equal vigor, came from Brazilian theologian and Princeton Theological Seminary's graduate Rubem Alves, who responded to Sanders' accusation by saying that

Christian realism was but an "ideology of the establishment" (Alves 1973:173). Ever since, these two streams of Christian public theologies have been mostly understood on an either/or basis, i.e., as two contrasting approaches to Christian social ethics. The debate started in two 1973 issues of Christianity and Crisis and has had continuity throughout the last three decades, with a climax during the eighties. Despite a few attempts of conciliation, the antagonism between the two approaches has prevailed. It is worth noting that after the initial debate in Christianity and Crisis almost no Latin American voice has been heard in this debate. The few Latin Americans who have addressed Christian realism, such as Miguez Bonino (1983:88), only reinforce the indignation Rubem Alves showed towards Sander's unfair charges against liberationist thought in 1973, and suggested a reading of Niebuhr from the perspective of the more progressive views of his early days.

One of the best attempts to analyze the relationship between Christian realism and liberation theology has been made by Dennis P. McCann. McCann (1981) does not see Christian realism and liberation theology as being mutually exclusive. As he puts these two schools of thought in conversation with each other, he implies he wants to give a fair hearing to both of them. However his language betrays his declared intention. From the outset of his book one can see the existence of some prejudice towards liberation theology. He refers to it as the "false promise of liberation theology," and makes comments such as, "we should take liberation theology as a sincere but confused protest" (McCann 1981:2-3). By using this kind of language McCann could not avoid setting Christian realism and liberation theology on opposite fields, and ended up making claims of superiority of the latter over the former.

I intend to enter this conversation from a Latin American perspective, being, however, more sympathetic to Niebuhr than Alves was, but also doing more justice to liberation theology than McCann, Sanders, and other North American analysts have done. Indeed, I want to argue that liberation theology can, in a certain sense, be perceived as a kind of Christian realism, even though it presents clear differences when compared to Niebuhr's Christian realism. I will hold that the major differences between these two types of Christian realism reside mainly in the different socio-historical situations to which they speak, their views toward power, and their expectations about the possibilities of human beings in history—i.e., their anthropological and eschatological perspectives. However, both schools share a concern with social justice and the structural

nature of sin, a strong pragmatism, and a serious reading of reality as their starting point. Those characteristics make these two theological schools much closer to each other than many would admit. Furthermore, in Niebuhr's own writings there is sufficient evidence for one to believe that had he lived long enough to see the development of Latin American liberation theology, he himself would have probably been more sympathetic to it than some of his followers have been.

In spite of the obvious differences between these two schools—differences which I by no means deny or overlook—I want to affirm that both Christian realism and Latin American liberation theology can be complementary to each other. None of the two can subsist in today's world without listening to what the other has to say. In order to achieve my purpose in this essay I will offer an overview of both Niebuhr's Christian realism and Latin American liberation theology, pointing out some of their common key themes, which can exemplify the differences and similarities between the two schools. It is my belief that in cooperating, and keeping an open-minded and unbiased conversation with each other, both Christian realism and Latin American liberation theology can become much more efficient in speaking to the contemporary world as two different—and yet complementary—Christian public theologies.

AN OVERVIEW OF NIEBUHR'S CHRISTIAN REALISM WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE THEMES OF SIN, POWER, AND JUSTICE/LOVE

It is quite difficult to systematize or fairly summarize the thought of someone whose mind was so dynamic and unsystematic as was Reinhold Niebuhr's. However, it is possible to identify the central points or ideas around which Niebuhr's thinking orbited. Niebuhr was an amazingly prolific writer as well as someone whose thinking changed significantly from his youth as a pastor in Detroit to his maturity as a social ethicist. I will focus on some themes that appeared in Niebuhr's work throughout his life, and will privilege those topics in Niebuhr that might prove more useful for the conversation between Christian realism and liberation theology, which I propose here.

The realism of Reinhold Niebuhr was a response to both the optimism of liberalism about the achievements of reason, and the cynicism of those who were completely disenchanted with the progress of humanity. Niebuhr thought that the Christian Gospel was the only alternative to the blind optimism of modernity, which also would avoid the cynicism of other modern discontents (Niebuhr 1953:106). Although some people seem to see Niebuhr's realism only as against the background of the liberal optimism about humanity, making him look like a pessimist, Niebuhr cannot be simply depicted in that way. Robert McAfee Brown points out that there is in Niebuhr's thought an ultimate optimism about human beings that is frequently overlooked by his critics (1986:xi). One can see that in Niebuhr's own words:

There are no limits to be set in history for the achievement of more universal brotherhood, for the development of more perfect and more inclusive mutual relations. All the characteristic hopes and aspirations of Renaissance and Enlightenment, of both secular and Christian liberalism are right at least in this, that they understand that side of the Christian doctrine which regards the agape of the Kingdom of God as a resource for infinite development towards a more perfect brotherhood in history...The freedom of man makes it impossible to set any limits of race, sex, or social condition upon the brotherhood which may be achieved in history. (Niebuhr 1943:85)

This is, of course, only one side of Niebuhr's view of human nature and history. The point, however, is that any fair look at Niebuhr's thought must take into account the two extremes which he was trying to avoid, and not just one. Niebuhr possessed a unique ability to denounce the shortcomings of any human system and its pretensions. He saw human nature in its real situation, as paradoxical and full of internal conflicts. He pointed out the ambiguities of human nature in response to the exaggerated optimism of liberalism, trying at the same time to avoid the appeal of nihilism.

In the very first sentences of one of his major books, Niebuhr set forth the problem that was pivotal for his entire thought:

Man has always been his own most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself?...If man insists that he is a child of nature and that he ought not to pretend to be more than the animal, which he obviously is, he tacitly admits that he is, at any rate, a curious kind of animal who has both the inclination and the capacity to make such pretensions. If on the other hand he

insists upon his unique and distinctive place in nature and points to his rational faculties as proof of his special eminence, there is usually an anxious note in his avowals of uniqueness which betrays his unconscious sense of kinship with the brutes. (Niebuhr 1996:1) [*Emphasis mine*]

Niebuhr locates human beings in the juncture of nature and spirit, participating in both (Brown 1989:160). It is with this view of human nature in mind that Niebuhr engages any topic which he discusses. Niebuhr's view of human beings and the world is strongly influenced by a tradition that traces its way back to Paul, Augustine, and the Reformers. Therefore, Christian concepts such as sin and grace are crucial for his understanding of human nature, even though sometimes he translates that religious language into a secular one in order to speak to a secular society in a more relevant way. For the purpose of the conversation I am proposing here, I will focus on three key themes in Niebuhr—namely, sin, power, and the binary concept of love/justice—which appear throughout his work. These themes are also present in the writings of some Latin American liberation theologians. Thus, by understanding these key concepts in Niebuhr, it will be easier to put him in conversation with liberationist thought, as well as to clearly identify the differences and commonalties between them.

NIEBUHR'S UNDERSTANDING OF SIN

Sin is a central concept in Niebuhr. It is, in fact, the determination to take seriously the reality of sin in human nature that makes Niebuhr's approach to social ethics particularly significant. For Niebuhr, sin is at the very core of human nature. It has to do with the unwillingness of human beings to recognize their finiteness. His main criticism of modernity is that it fails to understand the real measure of human nature. That misunderstanding, consequently, leads to the reduction of the problem of evil to specific historical causes, failing to inquire "how such particular causes could have arisen" (Niebuhr 1996:99). Thus, the modern notion of individuality makes human beings forget the limits of creatureliness, which they cannot transcend.

For Niebuhr, Christianity has the highest view of human nature because it sets limits to the human spirit by bounding it by the will of God. He believes that only a religion of revelation such as Christianity is able to do justice to both the freedom and the finiteness of human beings and to understand the character of evil in them. Christian faith, differently from any modern philosophy, sets the limits of human transcendence because in it

humans are conceived as creatures; their freedom is subordinate to the freedom of God, the Creator. It is only in the encounter with this transcendent God as a wholly other that humans can understand the complexities of their behavior. As Niebuhr himself puts it, "Man does not know himself truly except as he knows himself confronted by God. Only in that confrontation does he become aware of his full stature and freedom and of the evil in him" (1996:131). God is the wholly other who confronts us from beyond ourselves. This experience of confrontation/judgment generates a sense of moral obligation laid upon one from beyond oneself as well as a feeling of moral unworthiness.

Niebuhr sees the origin of the evil dwelling human nature in three things: (1) the unwillingness of human beings to acknowledge the weakness, finiteness and dependence of their position; (2) their inclination to grasp after power and security, which transcend the possibilities of human existence; (3) and their effort to pretend to have a virtue and knowledge which are beyond the limits of mere creatures. Sin, then, is the attempt of human beings to make themselves God; their refusal to acknowledge the dependent character of their life.

Niebuhr sees sin as being preceded by anxiety. We live in a world that passes to us a sense of insecurity and meaninglessness. Anxiety is turned into sin as we tend to make ourselves doubly secure in an effort to prove our significance. However, anxiety itself is not sin; it is rather both the temptation to sin and the source of our creativity. Human beings are anxious because of the fear of falling "into the abyss of meaninglessness" (Niebuhr 1996:185).

When anxiety conceives, it brings forth two forms of sin—namely pride and sensuality. Pride is connected with one's attempt to raise one's existence to unconditioned significance, whereas sensuality has to do with one's attempt to escape one's unlimited possibilities of freedom and from the perils and responsibilities of self-determination. For Niebuhr, however, the sin of pride is more basic than that of sensuality. Thus his analysis of the human nature tends to focus on the sin of pride.

Niebuhr distinguishes between three types of pride: pride of power, pride of knowledge, and pride of virtue. These three, however, are never completely distinct in actual life. The first form of pride is the human desire for power and glory. It manifests itself as the will-to-power, which originates in a primal fear of death, i.e., as will-to-live. The will-to-power is present in human life as "an expression of insecurity even when it has achieved ends, which,

from the perspective of an ordinary mortal, would seem to guarantee complete security" (Niebuhr 1996:194).

According to Niebuhr, intellectual pride is the pride of reason, which forgets that it is involved in a temporal process and imagines itself in complete transcendence over history. He rejects the certainty of rationalists by affirming that all human knowledge is tainted with an ideological taint. It pretends to be more than it is, that is finite knowledge, gained from a peculiar perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge. Here Niebuhr is profoundly indebted to Marxism, and he does acknowledge its contribution to the discovery of the ideological taint in all knowledge and culture. However he criticizes the Marxists for not being able to apply that principle to their own knowledge. The pride of virtue can be manifested in two ways. As moral pride it means "the pretension of finite man that his highly conditioned virtue is the final righteousness and that his very relative moral standards are absolute" (Niebuhr 1996:199). Moral pride transforms virtue into the very vehicle of sin. By its spirit of self-righteousness and self-justification, it is responsible for our most serious cruelties, injustices and defamation against other fellow humans. The pride of virtue can also appear as spiritual pride, which culminates in self-deification. This occurs when our partial standards and relative attainments are explicitly related to the unconditioned good, and claim divine sanction. For Niebuhr, this is the worst form of self-assertion, because under the guise of spiritual contrition, God is claimed as the exclusive ally of our contingent self.

There is no final guarantee against any of these forms of pride, because the self deceives itself in an attempt to avoid any check by the censure of conscience. Humans tend to have too good a view of themselves in order to justify or assert their sinful acts. Despite these affirmations Niebuhr still believes in the existence of sparks of goodness in human nature, reminiscent from the original form in which it was created. In the overall he is still more optimistic about the things human beings can achieve than many Reformed theologians would be.

NIEBUHR'S CONCEPT OF POWER AND HIS MOVE FROM RELIGION AND ETHICS TO POLITICS

One of Niebuhr's best contributions to the understanding of society was his distinction between individual egotism and group pride (See Niebuhr 1941). Niebuhr suggests that social groups are morally inferior in comparison to individuals. He affirms that whereas individuals may be morally able

to consider the interests of others in spite of their own in the resolution of some situations, this is more unlikely to happen in the level of human societies and social groups. This inferior morality of social groups in comparison to individuals reveals a collective egoism. Egoism achieves a more vivid expression and a more cumulative effect when it is united in a common impulse than when it expresses itself separately and discreetly.

In his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1941) Niebuhr tries to uncover the historical roots of social injustice. He intends to challenge the positions held by both religious and secular moralists, which do not recognize that there are some elements in the collective behavior of humanity that belong to the order of nature and, therefore, can never be brought completely under the dominion of reason or conscience. Thus, he criticizes modern educators and sociologists that ascribe the roots of all social problems to ignorance.

Niebuhr does not trust in the capacity of reason to solve our social difficulties. Reason itself, he affirms, is always the servant of interest in a social situation. Therefore, social injustice cannot be resolved by moral and rational persuasion alone. Social conflict is inevitable, and in that conflict "power must be challenged by power" (1941:xv). According to him, the roots of social conflict do not reside in ignorance, but rather in self-interest as well as in the disproportion of power in society. That conflict will never end while the disproportion of power remains. It can be mitigated by social intelligence and good will, but can never be abolished. Any social theory that does not take seriously the effects and continuity of this disproportion of power within society is naïve and utopian. So, Niebuhr proposes that while the relation between individuals must be predominantly ethical, the relations between groups must rather be predominantly political. By this he means that group relations are to be "determined by the proportion of power which each group possesses at least as much as by any rational and moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of each group" (1941:xxiii).

Despite believing in the existence of sparks of goodness and altruism in human nature, Niebuhr is convinced that on the social and political level sentiments of benevolence and goodwill will never be so pure as to create a truly just society. He believes that all social cooperation on a larger scale than the most intimate social group requires a measure of coercion. This coercive factor in social life and politics might be covert sometimes, becoming

[1] "The will-to-live becomes the will-to-power" (Niebuhr 1941:18).

apparent only in times of crisis, but it is never absent. On the other hand, he is aware that any kind of significant social power develops social inequality. And as it is impossible to justify the degree of inequality that is created in more complex societies due to the increased concentration of power in those societies, they tend to invent romantic and moral interpretations of the real facts, preferring to obscure rather than reveal the true character of their collective behavior. That social hypocrisy tries to hide the fact that the disproportion of power in a complex society perpetuates social injustice.

Every social group tends to develop imperial ambitions. The instinct of survival gives birth to a desire to expand itself.[1] For Niebuhr, that is the main cause of the modern wars. He believes that society is in a permanent state of war. Internally, it sacrifices justice to have peace; externally, the same forces that advocate an internal and unjust peace, become the makers of war to other nations. This conflict tends to remain to the end of history. Therefore, the dream of perpetual peace and brotherhood for human society is one which can only be approximated, but which will never be fully realized. In virtue of that, Niebuhr advocates a more modest goal for society: instead of trying to become an ideal society, we should try to work for a society in which there will be enough justice, and in which coercion will be sufficiently nonviolent to prevent humans' common enterprise from issuing into a complete disaster.

Power, thus, is a crucial concept in Niebuhr's social ethics. It is present in all group relations; it cannot be overlooked; and its accumulation is potentially a destructive force, which prevents humanity from fulfilling its utopian dreams of living together in a world of peace and justice. For him, the maximum one can expect is that society reaches a balance of power, where one power can check another in order to avoid the abuse of any unchecked power.

NIEBUHR ON LOVE AND JUSTICE

The last Niebuhrian theme I want to explore here is the relationship between justice and love. Niebuhr's view of justice cannot be understood apart from his understanding of love. He sees love as the primary norm and "the ultimate motive in the process of making an ethical judgment in the world" (Noh 1983:1). Justice, on the other hand, is the intermediate or penultimate norm for ethical decision-making. Although Niebuhr thinks that Christians

should not abandon the ideal of the law of love, he believes that in the real world only the law of justice can regulate the predominance of self-interest in the collective relations of humankind.

Niebuhr thinks that American Christianity has been irrelevant to the problems of social justice because it persists in presenting the law of love as a simple solution for every communal problem (1992:25). For him, love cannot be used as a mediator in the relations between different social groups. As he states, nations, classes and races do not love one another. The maximum one can expect from them is a high sense of obligation to one another. That sense of obligation will be expressed in the form of justice; that is the desire to give each other their due. Because of this erroneous emphasis on love, instead of an emphasis on justice, Christians tend to substitute philanthropy for justice in their societal life.

This emphasis on love, according to Niebuhr, was also the great mistake of the social gospel movement, as it attempted to develop an adequate social ethic for the reconstruction of society out of the social teachings of Jesus. For him, the ethic of Jesus was rather a personal ethics. Jesus did not have much concern with social and political issues. His ethical ideal, centered on the individual life, "was one of complete disinterestedness, religiously motivated" (Niebuhr 1992:31). Niebuhr believes that this emphasis on pure disinterest, with actions that result purely from religious motives, puts the ethics of Jesus above the area of social ethics. According to him, Jesus' ethical ideal is impossible to attain because of the powerful drive of self-interest in life, but it cannot be completely renounced. It has a place as an ideal which convicts every moral achievement of imperfection, being, however, beyond the realm of actual human history. Niebuhr calls this ethic of perfect love "an impossible possibility"(Niebuhr 1935:109). Here lies the element of hope in Niebuhr's thought. Love, as an impossible ethical ideal, functions as a motivation for humans, towards achieving a level of justice which approximates this ideal. Love is not set aside for the sake of justice. On the contrary, it has to be present in the practice of justice, because of the imperfection and limitation of the justice human beings can attain in society. As Niebuhr himself puts it, "justice that is only justice is less than justice. Only imaginative justice, that is, love that begins by espousing the rights of the other rather than self, can achieve a modicum of fairness" (1992:32).

The relation between love and justice is complex, paradoxical and dialectical. He affirms that love is both the fulfillment and the negation of all achievements of justice and history. On one hand it indicates that the pos-

sibilities of the achievements of justice in history may rise in indeterminate degrees to find their fulfillment in a more perfect love and brotherhood. On the other hand, it testifies that each level of fulfillment also contains elements which stand in contradiction to perfect love. So, the best possible harmony achievable within the conditions created by human egoism is that which is achieved through justice, which is only an approximation of that more perfect ideal of love and brotherhood. There are two universal principles of justice by which the formulation of specific rules and systems of justice is oriented. These are the principles of equality and liberty. He describes the principle of equality as a pinnacle of the ideal of justice, which points towards love as the final norm of justice. However, in spite of the general validity and universality of these principles, they cannot be applied as absolute principles in history, because even those principles in a given social conflict are ideologically tainted. The function of these principles of justice is to serve as a reference to check the injustices in the exercise of political power.

For Niebuhr, social justice requires the organization and balance of power among social groups. This equilibrium of power is the highest level of justice attainable in history. It is the most successful way to avoid the domination of one life by another. Achieving this equilibrium of power, nevertheless, is not the same as living in a utopian brotherhood. It is simply the possible way to limit the imperial impulse of one class or group within the community. Having offered this overview of Niebuhr's understanding of sin, power, and the relation between justice and love, we can move to liberation's theology approach to these themes.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND ITS UNDERSTANDING OF SIN, POWER, LOVE AND JUSTICE

Latin American liberation theology can be seen as a byproduct of the increasing disillusionment that filled the hearts of most Latin Americans in the early 1960s. In the 1950s, the situation in Latin America was marked by a great optimism with regard to the possibilities of the continent to achieve self-sustained economic development. That was known as the decade of developmentalism (Gutierrez 1990:180). Due to the frustration of those aspirations, the term development fell into disgrace among Latin Americans in the next decade. As Gustavo Gutierrez affirms, the word development was turned into a pejorative term in Latin America due both to the deficiencies of the development policies proposed to the poor countries to lead them out of their underdevelopment and also to the lack of concrete achievements of the interested governments (1986:26). Latin Americans realized that developmentalism was nothing more than a synonym of timid measures of societal reform and modernization, which were really ineffective in the long run, and insufficient to achieving real transformation. At the same time they began to realize that part of their underdevelopment was a byproduct of their relations with the richer countries. Since the attempts to bring about changes in the existing order had failed to achieve any significant transformation, people in those poor countries realized that it was more appropriate to speak about a process of liberation, which would attack the root causes of the problems they were facing.

The term liberation was thought to be more meaningful for the Latin American context, and expressed "the inescapable moment of radical change which is foreign to the ordinary use of the term development."[2] Liberation implies a radical break from the status quo, which entails "a profound transformation of the private propriety system, access to power of the exploited classes, and a social revolution that would break this dependence [upon the rich countries, and] would allow for change to a new society, a socialist society" (Gutierrez 1986:26, 27). In liberationist thought human beings are viewed not as subject to any form of destiny, but as masters of their own destiny. The capacity of human beings to transform society is emphasized, and the conquest of true freedom is seen as both the drive force and ultimate goal of history.

This kind of thought is not peculiar to liberation theologians in Latin America. Prior to the emergence of liberation theology, other Latin American

[2] Gutierrez does not completely reject the use of the term *development*. However, he believes that only in the context of the process of *liberation* "can a policy of development be effectively implemented, have any real meaning, and avoid misleading formulations" (1986:27).

intellectuals paved the way that liberation theologians would walk through. The distinctive element brought about by liberation theology was not the use of Marxism as an analytical instrument to read the reality of Latin America society. It was, instead, the use of both the Bible and Christian tradition to offer a theological language to interpret that reality. This reading of the Bible from the perspective of the oppressed led Latin American liberation theology to its preferential option for the poor. Gutierrez speaks of three levels in the unfolding of the process of liberation :

> In the first place, liberation expresses the aspiration of oppressed peoples and social classes, emphasizing the conflictual aspect of the economic, social, and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes…At a deeper level, liberation can be applied to an understanding of history. Man is seen as assuming conscious responsibility for his own destiny…The gradual conquest of true freedom leads to the creation of a new man and a qualitatively different society…Finally…the word liberation allows for another approach leading to the biblical sources which inspire the presence and action of man in history. In the Bible, Christ is presented as the one who brings us liberation. Christ the Savior liberates man from sin, which is the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression. Christ makes man truly free, that is to say, he enables man to live in communion with him; and this is the basis for all human brotherhood (1986:36,37).

Latin American liberation theology takes seriously all these three levels of the process of liberation, and puts them into a dialectical interaction, which makes it able to listen to the reality of the social struggles of the unprivileged, to history itself , and to the insights that come from the Bible. Since liberation theology tries to take into consideration all the factors that compound the reality of the poor and oppressed, one can say that it is a realistic theology. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff describe three scandalous scenes to portray the experience that they have had with people dying of hunger in northeastern Brazil, one of the most famine-stricken parts of the world. They describe those three terrible hunger scenarios in order to affirm that the starting point of liberation theology is exactly "the perception of scandals such as those described…which exist not only in Latin America, but throughout the Third World"(1987:2).[3] They move on to show that liberation theology is mainly concerned with those who are starving in the world, with those who are living

in absolute poverty, with those who do not even have access to the most basic medical care or to regular water supply, with those who are illiterate, etcetera. That is the reality from which Latin American liberation theologians reflect. Their starting point, then, is the reality of "com-passion", of "suffering with" the oppressed. For these theologians, without a minimum participation in this suffering that affects the great majority of the human race, liberation theology can neither exist nor be understood. As Sobrino says, there is a vital environment, a reality that all Latin American liberation theologians take into consideration when developing all the important themes of their theology (2000:154). Jurgen Moltmann has affirmed that his contact with Latin American liberation theology has shown him that "any good Christian theology knows in which context, in which kairos, in which community it must be situated" (2000:227). In that sense liberation theology is rather realistic than utopian and corroborates Niebuhr's understanding of the contextual and limited character of all knowledge.

Latin American liberation theology conveys not only a perception of a specific reality of oppression and poverty, but also a strong and vivid commitment with that reality. Therefore, methodologically, it is only after one is able to "do" liberation that one can do theology (Boff & Boff 1987:22).[4] This is why most liberation theologians define theology as "critical reflection on the praxis of liberation" (Oliveros 1993:12). With this background information in mind, I want to engage the discussion of how liberation theologians have approached the topics of sin, power and the relation between love and justice.

LATIN AMERICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY'S VIEW OF SIN

In *A Theology of Liberation* Gustavo Gutierrez defines sin as "the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression" (1986:37). By affirming that sin is the ultimate cause of poverty, injustice and oppression, Latin American liberation theology shows that it is not only concerned with the structural reasons that produce these situations, but also with a personal and collective will that is behind all unjust structures, some-

[3] This is the reason why the use of the social sciences as instruments of social analysis becomes something so vital for Latin American liberation theology.

[4] In other words, for liberation theology, *orthopraxis* is more important than *orthodoxy*. Theology is a second moment in the process of liberation. As Clodovis Boff affirms, "faith is first and foremost, although not exclusively, *orthopraxis*" (Boff 1987:37).

thing defined as "a willingness to reject God and neighbor" (Gutierrez 1986:35). Here, once more, liberation theology goes beyond Marxism. It cannot be charged with reducing religion to class ideology. Sin is a historical reality for liberation theology. However, like Niebuhr himself, and the Social Gospel movement prior to him, Latin American liberation theology does not consider sin as a merely individual, private, and interior matter. On the contrary, it depicts sin mainly in its collective dimension. Sin is "a social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood and love in relationships among men, the breach of friendship with God and with other men, and, therefore, an interior, personal fracture" (Gutierrez 1986:175). Sin is born in the interior of human beings, but it becomes visible and evident in oppressive structures, in exploitation of human beings by their neighbors, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes. It is at the root of all injustice and exploitation, and is the fundamental alienation of humanity.

There are similarities and dissimilarities between liberation theology's approach to sin, and Niebuhr's. Among those similarities one can include the following: (1) there is no denial of the reality of sin. Sin is real and affects all humanity; (2) sin oppresses human beings both as individuals and as collectivity, but its reality and effects are seen more clearly in its social dimension; (3) humans tend to make use of self-deceptions to disguise their sin; and (4) sin is understood as "the masking of the truth by unjust egoism" (Faus 1993: 534). All these points coincide to some extent with Niebuhr's conception of sin.

However, those similarities should not allow us to overlook the differences between them. The main differences between Niebuhr's Christian realism and Latin American liberation theology have to do with the social contexts to which each of them speaks. Since Latin American liberation theology's starting point is the reality of the poor and oppressed, there are some peculiarities—proper to that context—in its understanding of sin that cannot be expected to be found in the context of Niebuhr's social ethics. One of those peculiarities is that, although liberation theologians do not deny the sinfulness of all human beings, they tend to see the poor and oppressed not as sinners, but as victims of structural sin. These people need not to be blamed for their sin; they rather need to be liberated from the sinful structures that victimize them. As Jose Comblin says,

Some human beings are more deserving of compassion than blame. Although sin is committed by human beings, it is committed collectively and anony-

mously; it comes from established structures rather than the personal malice of individuals. This does not exclude the possibility of individual malice, but what is due to it bears no comparison with the enormous mass of evils proceeding from structures of domination and exploitation, in which human beings are more often manipulated than manipulators. Sin is the statement of an immense human passivity, a lack of freedom (Comblin 1993:528).

Liberation theology thus focuses on the oppressive structures which are the fruit of exploitation and injustice. When human beings sin, they create structures of sin, which, in their turn make them sin. These are the structures in which "the sins of unsolidarity are crystallized" (Faus 1993:537). Father Oscar Romero defined social sin precisely as "the crystallization of individual egoisms in permanent structures which maintain this sin and exert its power over the great majorities" (Faus 1993:537). As Latin American liberation theology exists in the midst of those who are the main victims of structural sin, it sees its task as combating these sinful structures instead of stressing the sins of individuals. That does not mean that individuals are not held responsible for their sins. It just means that individuals are both responsible for and are victims of sin.

For liberation theology, sin builds its dominion upon human passivity. Therefore, human beings need to gain awareness of that situation as well as to be empowered to overcome the structures of oppression and injustice. Here lies the second major difference between liberation theology and Christian realism concerning their understanding of sin. In liberationist thought, sin needs to be overcome, and it can be so. Grace is the instrument through which people are freed from sin. To be sure, Niebuhr also describes the role of Grace in very similar language. He sees Grace as the power of God in and over human beings, which enables them to become what they truly ought to be. He affirms that Grace is synonymous with the gift of the Holy Spirit, that is, the spirit of God indwelling in human beings. However, Niebuhr explicitly states that this indwelling Spirit never means a destruction of human selfhood. In other words, Grace does not annihilate human nature; nor does it end with sin completely. According to him, human life and history cannot complete themselves, and sin is precisely related to the abortive attempts to complete them. It is this sense of completeness beyond human incompleteness in history that enables human beings to be aware of the limits of human possibilities, and to depend on the revelation of God beyond those limits, by faith.

Liberation theology, on the other hand, understands Grace as God's solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Thus, Grace "is liberation from sin and the achievement of freedom" (Comblin 1993:528). Liberation theologians see some continuity between human selfhood, and the Spirit of God. However, that continuity is mainly understood in terms of the connection between God's action and human action. Indeed, Grace, that is, God's action, "does not destroy or suppress or diminish or replace anything in human action...On the contrary, the presence of God's grace makes human action more fully human, with more initiative, more spontaneity, more autonomy, than if grace were not present" (Comblin 1993:529). Grace enters human history, and manifests itself in the lives of those who suffer. It is hidden in the history of the oppressed, producing resistance, faith and hope.

In spite of the enthusiasm of its early days, Latin American liberation theology cannot be easily charged as soft utopianism any more. Its understanding of sin and grace demonstrates this. Liberation theologians no longer expect the overthrow of all systems of domination and oppression in the world once and for all. Instead, they are aware of the fact that there will always be in human history a struggle against evil and sinful structures of oppression. But any time that the poor win their rights or that a specific system of domination is overthrown, there is victory in the struggle for liberation. Complete justice might never be achieved in history, but this does not mean that the struggles for justice are ineffectual. As Comblin says it, "God's grace is not ineffectual...Its effects are perceptible even if they do not bring about in this world what is reserved for the end of time. Grace does not destroy determinisms, inertia, or the weight of the past and of structures. Nevertheless, it introduces a new element, a force which revives the hope of the oppressed" (1993:531). Whereas sin is the negation of God's will to humankind, grace is its affirmation, and the guarantee that God is taking the side of those who are being prevented—by the structures of sin—from fulfilling their full realization as human beings. Grace is God's liberating action in history, which is directed towards building up a new society.[5]

LIBERATION THEOLOGY'S CONCEPTION OF POWER

One will rarely encounter any systematic approach to power by Latin American liberation theologians. They seem, instead, to be much more concerned with the reality of powerlessness of those who experience oppression, exploitation, and injustice. That is not to say, however, that liberation theologians do not speak about power. Their writings are replete of expres-

sions that are related to power, such as the frequent references to the powerful and the powerless. But because liberation theologians often divide society into those who have power and those who lack power, they tend to have an ambiguous approach to power, and tend to avoid any conceptualization of this word.

One of the Latin American theologians who most systematically approach the issue of power is Jose Miguez Bonino. His views on power can engage Niebuhr, because he explicitly attends to political power, and also because of his use of his Protestant heritage in a respectable and amicable conversation with Roman Catholic tradition. Miguez Bonino's political ethics places the Spirit of God as "the ultimate power that addresses earthly powers and powerlessness" (Schubeck 1993:205). He understands that the Spirit of God represents Christ's active presence in the world, through which God's kingdom is manifest. In his political ethics the kingdom functions as the ultimate standard of truth and justice. It judges the unjust and encourages all to commit themselves to the victims of injustice. Thomas Schubeck describes Miguez Bonino's project as one that seeks to develop "an ethics that relates God's power to political power"(1993:205).

Miguez Bonino sees power in ambivalent ways. As enabling, power is the possibility of hope's realization. Nevertheless, as restricting, power is the limit of its possibility. He complains of those who have mythologized power, elevating it to the category of an abstract entity, and understands that a Christian political ethics' first task is to identify and locate power within concrete political relations. Therefore, he classifies political power into four different concrete types of social relations: (1) the power to affect and control matters of economic decisions; (2) the power to affect and control the matters of political decision; (3) the power to affect and control an ideological apparatus; (4) and the power to affect or control the disposition of force, that is to say, the ability to use physical force or coercion to compel obedience and restrain deviancy.

Miguez Bonino affirms that if one controls all these four kinds of power, one would have an absolute power. However, that is not what usually happens in democratic societies. There are tensions, balances, controls and agreements among the various sectors of society, and everyone participates

[5] Ronald Stone affirms that on this point liberation theology is strong and Christian realism is weak. For him, "Realism did not emphasize sufficiently the possibilities of a new humanity in a new society and those possibilities are essential to keep Christian political thinking from becoming reactionary and defensive" (1977:184).

in these relations. His concern is with how one should participate in these relations as Christian vis-à-vis the standards of love, justice, and peace of the kingdom of God. For him, the ambivalent character of the human exercise of power—whose historical signs are seen in absolutism and oppression—makes it difficult for Christians to know how to deal with it. Most Christians when dealing with questions of power "have oscillated between the poles of absolute rejection and total submission—between the cult of powerlessness and the claims to exercise absolute power" (Miguez Bonino 1983:95). Christians usually have a hard time trying to relate political power to God's power. On one hand, those who affirm that all power belongs to God tend to derive from this statement a theory of church power. On the other hand, those who are more aware of the demonic are frequently led to a policy of absolute withdrawal. Miguez Bonino proposes a theological ethics of politics that seeks equilibrium in the use of political power by subjecting the whole question of power to a careful theological analysis.

Miguez Bonino does not avoid the doctrine of God's omnipotence. However, he avoids making this affirmation of God's power in any abstract manner. The idea that all power belongs to God is used to affirm the confidence in God's promised acts of deliverance. God's "is the power that prevails over the chaos, that sets limits to the onslaught of the forces of destruction and ensures the conditions needed for human life and prosperity" (Miguez Bonino 1983: 96). So, in its positive features, power is defined as the power of God, that is to say, God's active presence in the world through "those powerful acts of liberation, protection, vengeance, or punishment that correspond to his faithfulness to his people and to the whole of humankind. In other words, God's power is his justice in action—in defense of the weak, judgement of the unjust, protection of the powerless, and strengthening of those to whom he has given a mission" (Miguez Bonino 1983:96).

This power of God is affirmed in the midst of conflict in a world where injustice, oppression, and arrogance are rampant, and is mediated by human agents. Those agents are empowered and commissioned to execute God's righteous judgements of deliverance and of punishment. But if, on one hand, human exercise of power works as a mediation of God's power and justice in history, on the other hand it tends to absolutize itself and to negate justice. Here resides the ambivalence of the human exercise of power. It can either serve God's justice and peace or it can negate those things. For those power-bearers who overreach themselves and thwart justice, God retains his own authority to judge and overthrown them within the conflicts of history.

Miguez Bonino's view of power resembles Niebuhr's discussion of power in several points. However, because he emphasizes a divine intervention in history that is alien to Niebuhr, he presents a different solution to the corruption of the structures of power. Whereas Niebuhr stresses the need for a balance of power so that one power can check the other, Miguez Bonino points to Jesus Christ who paradigmatically disclosed God's rule of justice. Through Jesus' resurrection that rule of justice was "destined to be the true future and the inescapable judgement of all political life" (1983:99). Both men start with a reality of ambiguity in the human exercise of power, and both believe that society must seek to be the most just it can be. It seems, however, that despite his awareness of the limitations of human beings to achieve the standard of justice and peace foreseen in the paradigm of the kingdom, Miguez Bonino is more hopeful than Niebuhr concerning the levels of justice that human societies can achieve.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY, JUSTICE AND LOVE

Both justice and love are pervasive themes in the writings of Latin America liberation theology. What I want to do here is to decipher the meaning of these words for Latin American liberation theologians, to explain how they relate to each other, and, finally, to compare liberation theology's view on these concepts with Niebuhr's understanding of them.

As Robert McAfee Brown has pointed out, for most liberation theologians the central message of the Bible can be expressed in the sentence, "To know God is to do justice" (Brown 1978:90). By affirming that, liberation theologians first and foremost intent to state that to know God does not mean to engage in a private piety, or subscribe to certain orthodox statements, or worship correctly. Instead, it means "to practice justice and right, to defend the cause of the poor and needy." This same kind of attitude defined above as "to do justice" sometimes can also be described by liberation theologians as an act of love. Camilo Torres, a priest who became a revolutionary in Colombia, quit exercising his priestly duties because they became a diversion from his duties of love toward those who were being oppressed and destroyed by an unjust order. Like Ernesto Che Guevara, Torres understood his involvement in an armed revolutionary movement as an act of love. He affirmed that he had ceased to say Mass in order to practice love for people in temporal, economic and social spheres (Brown 1978:93). So, love and justice seem to be

closely related in the praxis of liberation. But how are these words defined by liberation theologians?

Despite the central place given to the theme of justice, liberation theologians rarely approach it with any theoretical definition thought in mind. In order to understand what justice is and what it requires, liberation theology begins by denouncing and condemning "the grave injustices rampant in Latin America" (Gutierrez 1986: 114).[6] That fact should be no surprise for anyone, since one of the pillars of liberation theology is the affirmation that theology is not "a set of timeless truths," but rather "a certain kind of reflection on what is going on in very specific situations" (Brown 1979:13). Liberation theology analyzes the injustices experienced by the oppressed, and defines those injustices through the use of specific words such as slavery, humiliation, exploitation, and poverty, among others. Once it has defined in concrete terms those situations of injustice and oppression, liberation theology sets as its main task to oppose and reject those injustices. Then, a step further is taken. Liberation theologians establish that injustice is not only a condition or circumstance; it is rather structured, institutionalized, and systematized. Thus the system that produces injustice is itself called into question.

So, liberation theology is committed with the struggle to abolish injustice and to build a new society, to free the oppressed from all forms of exploration in order to create the possibility of a more human and more dignified life—that is the creation of a new humanity (Gutierrez 1986:307). From the viewpoint of the Latin American poor, to oppose injustice in the forms that it affects that social context means to oppose the system that produces it. This system is opposed as a totality, which excludes and negates the existence of those who live in the periphery of the world, in the poorer countries. Justice can only be achieved if there is "a negation of the negation," that is to say, a transcendence of this totality, allowing these "others" to appear and demands their rights, i.e., justice (Dussel 1988:231ff.).

For Latin American liberation theology, justice presumes some freedom of choice. People are victims of injustice because they have no alternative. The violence of the system forces them to capitulate before the situations of exploitation, especially regarding their hard and unjust conditions of work.

[6] As Karen Lebacqz has put it, "liberation theology presents in the first place, therefore, *a theory of injustice*" (Lebacqz 1986:104).

As Rubem Alves states, this systemic violence that keep the poor from being free and experiencing justice,

> ... is whatever denies him a future, whatever aborts his project to create a new tomorrow; it is the power that keeps him prisoner of the futureless structures of a futureless world. Violence is the power of defuturization, which strives to close man's consciousness to the future and the future to man's consciousness. Violence is the power that denies to man the possibility of exercising his freedom for himself, by making it a function of the project of the master (Alves 1969:111).

In light of all this, liberation theology ends up defining justice as the acts of God in history to free the oppressed from this institutionalized violence. "Justice is what God does," that is, "to liberate and love the poor." Under this view of justice one discovers that there is no separation between love and justice. "God's justice is God's love or compassion on those who suffer. God's love is God's justice or liberation of the oppressed" (Lebacqz 1986:107). There can be no justice without love, because true justice is the establishment and maintenance of right relationships, and that cannot happen apart from love. Latin American liberation theology understands that whenever Christianity has differentiated one from another it has made a disastrous mistake. Gutierrez has said that the gratuitous gift of God's love calls upon us to break with sin, injustice and death in contemporary Latin America, and to stand in solidarity with the poor and dispossessed. According to him, this is love, and this is the purpose of our freedom (Gutierrez 1996).

For Niebuhr, love is an ultimate ideal that regulates justice. Principles of justice such as freedom and equality are the expressions of love in society, or the forms that love takes in social life. Liberation theology takes a step further and says that love and justice can be interchangeable terms to speak of God's acts of liberation in history.

CHRISTIAN REALISM AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY AS COMPLEMENTARY PUBLIC THEOLOGIES

Christian realism and liberation theology cannot be treated on an either/or basis. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary: they can function as good partners in addressing the problems of our society from a theological perspective.

As I have shown in this essay, Latin American liberation theology can be conceived as a kind of Christian realism, since it starts with the analysis of the reality surrounding it. All theological reflections in liberation theology are born from the reality lived and experienced by most Latin Americans and from a commitment with that reality. Any situation in which oppression, poverty, and exploitation are constantly present, is considered to be a fruit of sin and self-interest.

Sin is mainly understood as a structural condition. At this point it is important to notice that liberation theology lacks a more profound analysis of the ultimate origin of sin, in order to deepen its reflection about structural sin. Here Niebuhr can be extremely helpful to liberation theology as a resource. Some Latin American liberation theologians like Jose Miguez Bonino and Rubem Alves seem to be aware of that. As Stone notices, Alves has made use of this resource, turning to Niebuhr "to explain in Augustinian terms how the powerful pridefully justify their self-interested domination in moral rationalizations" (Alves 1969:186).

The other face of the coin is that liberation theology can hold a more optimistic view of the possibilities of human achievement in history in comparison to Christian realism, because it places a special emphasis on the resurrection of Christ, and on the power of God to intervene in human history as well as to oppose the powers of oppression and destruction. Whereas Niebuhr has a more negative understanding of power, and warns society against its perils, liberation theology's approach to power is more complex, allowing for a more positive understanding of it. Liberation theologians are aware of the perils presented by the accumulation of power, but since they are speaking from the reality of those who have been victimized by oppression and domination, they feel that the main issue they need to address is how to empower the powerless. So, they place God as the ultimate source of power and justice, and as one who can enter human history and take sides with the oppressed. In spite of these different perspectives on power, one cannot say that liberation theology's and Christian realism's approaches to this topic are incompatible. Niebuhr, speaking mainly to the powerful, alerts against the perils of the accumulation of power and urges for a balance of power for the sake of justice. Liberation theologians are also interested in balance of power, but from the perspective of those who lack it. So, by emphasizing the empowerment of the powerless, liberation theology also contributes to a more just and balanced world.

Finally, both theories are seriously concerned with social justice, with equality and freedom. For Niebuhr, love is an ideal standard, and justice is the statement of that standard in societal relations. For liberation theology, on the other hand, love and justice exist together, and cannot be understood apart from each other. Solidarity with the poor is an act of love, and the struggles for liberation an act of justice. On this point, Niebuhr can probably help liberation theologians in a move from their initial romantic expectations about the new society to the reality of the continuous struggle for justice, since justice will never be completely satisfied in history. On that regard, theologians such as Juan Sobrino and Jose Miguez Bonino have made clear statements about the historical limits to the achievement of a just society. This indicates that in its three decades of existence liberation theology has matured and made some changes in its initial romanticism. On the other hand, liberation theology has kept its strong emphasis on the kingdom of God—with its tension between the "already" and the "not yet." Therefore, Latin American liberation theology holds more hope for a better future than Christian realism does.

For all this, Christian realism and liberation theology can and should become partners in the development of Christian public theology for our new globalized reality. I really believe that had Niebuhr lived to see the post cold war world, he would probably be much more supportive of liberation theologies, and would realize that they could not be confused either with the social gospel or with Marxism. Liberation theologies are still a new voice, coming from the margins of the world, and as such, they should be taken seriously as a factor among others in our present reading of "reality."

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