

A YODERIAN APPRAISAL OF LATIN AMERICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

The span of John Howard Yoder's life and scholarship encompassed the rise of one of the most significant theological movements of the latter half of the twentieth century: liberation theology.¹ Naturally, Yoder was aware that liberation theology was and is not a monolithic entity as most people would like to think,² a fact that only serves to complicate the task of considering its major premises for a Yoderian appraisal.³ Yoder did esteem the movement sufficiently both to affirm and to criticize some of its tenets; nevertheless, the format in which Yoder addressed the movement (articles in scholarly journals and broader compendiums), is important: Yoder dealt with particular issues within the movement in an *ad hoc* manner (similar to many of his other endeavors), yet he did not offer a systematic and comprehensive criticism of the entire movement. The latter notion is important given the fact that Yoder could have thwarted some of the themes usually associated with the movement given some of his more prominent arguments.⁴

This observation of the manner in which Yoder dealt with LALT tempers the present work, thereby requiring a careful appraisal of the liberationists that is not at once completely dismissive nor unreservedly acquiescent. Such an appraisal must take into account some of the broad, methodological parallels and divergences between Yoder and LALT in order to account for some of the more refined particularities of each, which would subsequently lead to more nuanced considerations that would hopefully illumine the endeavor without resorting to haphazard generalizations and/or categorizations.⁵

RESPONDING TO THE MASSES

A Yoderian appraisal of LALT must begin with a certain rudimentary assessment

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of the movement's *Sitz im Leben*. LALT began within the context of a culture dominated historically by exploitation and conquest. Rather than attaining the self-determining status of some of the countries of the north (some of which were achieved through violent revolutions), the countries of Latin America continued to embody a status of "subordinacy" and "underdevelopment" due to the continuance of certain political, economic, and religious structures dating to their colonization. During the tumultuous decade of the 1960s, many of these arrangements were questioned in Latin America and were blamed for many of the unjust and oppressive conditions of the day.⁶ The Roman Catholic Church, because of its historical and continued presence within these cultural arrangements, did not escape some of the backlash of this collective criticism.

Despite the role of the Roman Catholic Church within these arrangements, a group of priests within Latin America came to acknowledge the outcry of these oppressive circumstances and took steps at organizing their concerns in a way that would be associated with the Christian Church while at the same time responding in an active way to the social reality in which they lived. The collective efforts of this group in rendering "a theological reflection [that was] born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human"⁷ came to be called "liberation theology." The movement came to be characterized as a new way of *doing* theology in which there was a "commitment to, and solidarity with, the poor and the vulnerable . . ."⁸ Through this solidarity with the poor, the actions of these priests led them to the "prophetic" denunciation of the unjust structures contributing to the oppressive malaise, actions which did not fall short of indicting even the complicity of the Roman Catholic Church.⁹

By being an internal movement within Catholicism, LALT exemplifies certain methodological tendencies that typically are Catholic. The active role of denouncing the unjust structures of modernity stems from the tradition of the Magisterium. With the tradition of social encyclicals begun by *Rerum Novarum* by Leo XIII, there exists within Catholicism a heritage of denouncing the inhumane living conditions occasioned by modernization.¹⁰ In many respects, the liberationists saw themselves as continuing this tradition through specific efforts within the Latin American context. Interestingly, many of the liberationists adopted Marxist categories¹¹ to interpret the present system of injustice and poverty, claiming all the while that these categories were already present within the Catholic encyclical tradition.¹² Needless to say, the Magisterium refused such associations with this atheistic ideology.¹³

Additionally, Roman Catholicism, as exemplified through certain Tridentine formulations and encyclical patterns, seems to be more at ease in accepting the existence of a "wider wisdom" than would Protestantism,¹⁴ as embodied in the repeated phrase of noticing the "signs of the times."¹⁵ Hence, from the outset, there are considerable methodological differences between the liberationists and Yoder. On the hand, the former wishes to partake in a process that is already taking place in the world; the latter believes that the church is a microcosm of what the world should be. The differences are considerable and yet not insurmountable for the present task.

INTRAFAITH TRANSFORMATIONAL GRAMMARS

Yoder's ecumenical and evangelistic concerns demonstrate that he was initially quite open to begin dialogue with various groups by meeting individuals within their own world of referents;¹⁶ hence, the use itself of Marxist categories by the liberationists would not be as important for Yoder as the way these categories functioned in their speech and reasoning. The usage of these categories would be particularly important in that they are usages taking place within a Christian tradition. Hence, it is important to note that these Marxist categories are being used within a tradition that already has a certain set of referents and resources that can be used to interpret present reality, thereby providing a foundation by which a Yoderian appraisal can be more exacting.

Marxist categories are used by some liberationists as "scientific" means¹⁷ by which to interpret the past, present, and future. Although there is an acknowledgment of the broader idealistic and philosophical contexts from which certain Marxist categories derive their more elaborate connotations and functions, liberationists do not hesitate employing Marxism in interpreting social reality.¹⁸ Such usage and the givenness of certain terms make Marxism, whether explicitly or implicitly, a significant factor in the liberationists' social critique. As an example of this usage, history is interpreted as being an interplay between a majority of disenfranchised individuals and a powerful, elite minority. Such a condition, however, gradually is changing as individuals come to realize their present status through a process of "conscientization."¹⁹ The rising, unsettling *Zeitgeist* calls for action that can only be revolutionary,²⁰ given that the powerful elite will not hand over their privileged status in any other way. The future calls for a ruling of the majority in which a fairer and more just society will be insured by virtue of the change of power. In sum the Marxist categories function as a hermeneutical grid for interpreting social reality and action.

In fact it is the primacy of the social reality that dictates the usage of Marxist categories and of the sources available within the Christian tradition.²¹ One of the more prominent methodological moves by the liberationists is their theological starting point: the conditions of the poor and oppressed of Latin America.²² From their commitment expressed in solidarity with the poor,²³ the liberationists seem to be trying to make sense of present reality in Latin America in order to offer some sort of Christian response to these conditions. Hence, the givenness of the rising awareness of the general populace of their conditions and the revolutionary expedients required for the necessary changes envisioned by these conscientized individuals are affirmed throughout the work of the liberationists.²⁴

Naturally, Yoder would want to question some of these moves. In typical Barthian fashion, Yoder would affirm the primacy of revelation, as embodied and demonstrated in the person of Jesus Christ. Additionally, Yoder would want to stress whether there exist the necessary "criteria for the church's necessary appropriation of non-Christian moral ideas,"²⁵ which in this case are Marxist categories in the work of the liberationists.²⁶ Such a suggestion at this point, however, would be untypically Yoderian, for despite the primacy of Jesus Christ for all of his considerations, Yoder would be willing to suspend this notion for a time in order to communicate more effectively to his audience.²⁷ The flexibility demonstrated by Yoder at this point is quite appropriate, for if differing methodological starting points would be raised from the beginning of dialogue with the liberationists, resentment could possibly ensue in that it would appear that the conditions of the poor would be easily dismissed.

Hence, I believe Yoder would join with the liberationists in affirming the conditions of the common Latin American as being one of poverty and oppression. The existence of structural and institutional oppression can be seen as a real experience, and Yoder would interpret much of that reality through the terminology of the "powers." These powers are "invisibly determining human events" and are the biblical equivalents to "the modern term *structures*. . ." ²⁸ The powers "were part of the good creation of God," but their biblical depiction portray them as fallen ²⁹ and as ruling the world. ³⁰ Hence, the activity of these powers in determining social conditions are destructive and very real, a notion that I believe both Yoder and the liberationists could affirm.

Yoder perhaps would proceed to critique the meaning and functions of the terms employed by the liberationists in describing their project. To begin with, Yoder would probably question the presence of "class conflict," for such a term is used by the liberationists largely to describe present circumstances rather than to explain their causes. Perhaps, Yoder would pose the question of whether descriptive categories are sufficiently substantive to then be programmatic for future action. In other words, would the Marxist analysis of history go far enough in analyzing the present conditions of the poor? ³¹

The reality that exists for the poor of Latin America drives liberationists to want to ameliorate the situation in a manner that is in conformity with much of Western Christian history, for the attempt to interpret history in order to change it to fit a predetermined agenda ³² is a mode of acting that the Church has been struggling with for centuries. Yoder terms this kind of tendency as constituting part of Constantinianism, ³³ and he would classify the liberationists' project as being a form of neo-neo-neo-neo Constantinianism, which would be "the conviction. . . that everything is so bad that revolution is the only meaningful imperative." ³⁴ Therefore, despite siding with the poor, the liberationists nevertheless are functioning as the interpreters and formers of social action by virtue of their clerical status, thereby exemplifying a form of theological reasoning that would only contribute to the continuance of a church-world relation that would not be sufficiently revolutionary ³⁵ to accomplish their desired goals. ³⁶

Yoder would certainly press the liberationists on the urgency and necessity of revolution. Many liberationists would pose the alternatives as being either for revolution or for being complicitous with the present social regime with its oppressive actions. ³⁷ Yoder would want to reconfigure the question and ask what kind of revolution would be foreseen as being necessary. "How clear is it that a given 'revolution' will genuinely liberate?" ³⁸ Must nonviolent techniques be ready-to-wear immediately whereas military techniques have had millennia to develop. . . ?" ³⁹ These questions are serious considerations that the liberationists cannot answer in advance. ⁴⁰

Additionally, the "success" of overpowering one social structure by a certain group does not guarantee that the new rulers will form a more just society; history has proven otherwise. ⁴¹ Hence, the threat of replacing one unjust structure with another is a very real possibility when considering the alternative of revolutionary violence. Do the liberationists have an understanding of what they are liberated *to* in their programmatic efforts, ⁴² or are they inordinately focused on the present circumstances?

Naturally, Yoder's form of revolution entails a programmatic agenda in that the revolution he envisions is generally persistent throughout (as opposed to the liberationists' "now

and then" categories), for Yoder places a primacy on the Church which entails her as being a microcosm of what society should be because of her "doing already on behalf of the wider world what the world is destined for in God's creative purpose."⁴³ This stems from Yoder's conviction of seeing history doxologically⁴⁴ with its ultimate turning point being the person of Jesus Christ.⁴⁵ By resorting to the "revolutionary" love ethic of Jesus, Yoder would counter any form of revolution that would not be consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus.⁴⁶

One of the downfalls of separating individuals into social classes is falling short of the redemptive purposes of Christ for all individuals, oppressors and oppressed. Hence, Yoder would surely question where the oppressors fall into the schema of liberation for the liberationists. How does Marxism view the oppressors, and is this consistent with the demands placed upon believers?⁴⁷

With all of these considerations in mind, Yoder would probably use the Marxist categories to demonstrate some of the difficulties that they would pose for accomplishing the liberationists' ultimate goals: interpreting the present context for an informed Christian praxis. Overall, it seems that Yoder would conceive of revelation (in particular the example of Jesus Christ) as being the primary "tool" of choice for interpreting social reality in order to render a Christian praxis in impoverished and oppressive circumstances.

THE BIBLE AND SOCIAL REALITY: A CROSSING OF PLANES

Having considered in Yoderian perspective the role of Marxist categories in the work of the liberationists, the next logical theme of importance in this study would be the appropriation of the Scriptures in the liberationist agenda. Yoder considered the theme of Scripture among liberationists sufficiently important to write about it on several occasions. From Yoder's own assessment, there are some parallels and divergences between his usage of Scripture and the usage of the liberationists.

The title of this section is purposeful in that it alludes to a concept developed by Gustavo Gutiérrez called the "distinction of planes."⁴⁸ According to Gutiérrez's analysis, the history of the Roman Catholic Church up to Vatican II had made a "a very clear distinction between the Church and the world, within the unity of God's plan;" the Church evangelized and inspired the temporal sphere but did not actually construct the world.⁴⁹ Similarly, the roles of the priest and layperson were likewise differentiated. From these distinctions there occur distortions as to the political irrelevancy of the clergy and the spiritual destitution of the laity.⁵⁰

Yoder for the most part agreed with Gutiérrez's analysis,⁵¹ given that much of the same points are considered in *The Politics of Jesus*. In this work, Yoder demonstrates how research of New Testament scholars and of Christian ethicists has largely functioned independently of each other, thereby depriving each a more comprehensive analysis. Hence, Yoder undertakes to report on the state of New Testament scholarship in order to demonstrate some of the applications of this work for the interests of Christian ethicists. Yoder implicitly has his own set of dualisms to counter, namely *Geschichte* and *Historie* in general, the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, the precepts and the evangelical counsels, etc.

By acknowledging these distinctions, Gutiérrez proceeds to point out some themes of the Bible that for some time had been ignored by most of Western Christianity. Some of

these themes include the prominence of the poor, liberation, exodus, alienation, etc. All of these themes serve Gutiérrez in a more significant fashion, namely of showing the political relevance of the Bible for present society. Naturally, this is the broader agenda of Yoder in *The Politics of Jesus*. Rather than letting others interpret and select the particular pericopes and themes to explore, both individuals would want to let the Bible speak for itself with all of its diversity and relevance for contemporary belief and practice.⁵²

True diversity, however, would attempt to consider all of the major themes of the Bible, and Yoder found this lacking in some of the work of the liberationists, particularly with their exorbitant reliance on the Exodus motif.⁵³ The liberationists came to associate the Exodus passage as being one that was indicative of the kind of revolution required for the people of God to attain liberation/salvation.⁵⁴ The oppression of slavery suffered by the Israelites under the hands of the Egyptians was a theme that resonated well with “enslaved” masses of Latin Americans who were and are at the mercy of the ruling elite. The narrative is interpreted further by the liberationists as the Israelites uniting and overcoming their alien status by overthrowing the Egyptians, thereby beginning a nation in a new land. The people of God in this story are depicted as overcoming their status, even to the point of violent, revolutionary means in order to attain a more just and peaceful society.

Yoder found this depiction highly problematic, particularly since it represented more of a re-narration of the events in light of the pre-existent agenda by some of the liberationists. Rather than criticizing this usage from an outside, neutral point, Yoder perceived to engage the Exodus motif in order to show how some of the implications of the narrative are not included and/or altered by the liberationists.⁵⁵

In the first place, Yoder states that the Exodus was not a program but a miracle.⁵⁶ The Israelites did not gather together and by their own means overcome the Egyptians⁵⁷ nor was this even a model that was repeatedly followed in Scripture; rather, the Exodus event occurred because of the providential action of God, and it was His actions (the plagues, the separation of the Red Sea, the destruction of the Egyptian army) that allowed the Exodus to be successful.

Secondly, the Exodus was not a takeover but a withdrawal. Rather than overcoming the Egyptians in order to subject them to similar practices that they had endured, the Israelites refused this option and obeyed God’s calling of forming a new people in a new land. Certainly, the option of takeover was possible (by the sheer numbers themselves), but it was not God’s will to do so.

Thirdly, the Exodus was not a beginning but a culmination of a particular community who had in common their beliefs of faithfulness and obedience to Yahweh, for “peoplehood is the presupposition, not the product of Exodus.”⁵⁸ Moses appealed to the God of their fathers in his speeches, and the people believed in God’s promises through Moses. Hence, the social location of the Israelites (their poverty and their disenfranchisement) was not the primary factor that unified them for their liberation; rather, it was their faith in God.

Fourthly, the Exodus also marked a beginning in the life of Israel in the sense that subsequent, constitutive events were required for the Israelites. Rather than concluding the narrative as a completed event after the Exodus, the narrative proceeds to document the falling away of the children of Israel within a forty year span of wilderness wandering.

Such a falling away required further acts, including the dying away of the Exodus generation and the giving of the law on Sinai.

Finally, Yoder wishes to point out that the Exodus is an exception and not a norm for the people of God. Given the full scope of the biblical narratives, the status of God's people is more often depicted as one of alienation and diaspora.⁵⁹ This point is closely related to the prophetic function that liberationists wish to draw upon in their deliberations. Many of the liberationists call upon the prophetic denouncement of the structures and alignments of this world, but it is important to note that the prophetic in the Old Testament usually occurred *for* the people of God themselves who were *in* a state of exile *because* of their unfaithfulness.

What Yoder wishes to point out in these observations are the limitations involved in relying on one particular theme to the exclusion of the many others found in Scripture. Hence, one can adopt the language of Scripture (e.g., liberation) without the full extent of its corresponding meanings. Hence, as Scripture denotes, liberation takes place in a particular form (a confessing community, not guerrilla warfare) and has a particular content (covenant peoplehood, not nation-state brotherhood), means ("might Acts" and not justified violence), and atmosphere (wonderment/praise/doxology, not compulsive management of events).⁶⁰

Although the matter cannot be treated exhaustively here, the topic of Biblical usage naturally raises the place of Christ within the Yoderian and liberationist perspectives. Both parties would consider Jesus Christ as a model for Christian action, but their interpretation of the actual content of such action varies.⁶¹ Gutiérrez states, "Christ is presented as the one who brings us liberation. Christ the Savior liberates from sin, which is the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression."⁶² Yoder would affirm this statement but would wish to amplify the *way* in which Jesus brought us liberation as a program for our discipleship. One way Yoder demonstrates the way of Jesus is by pointing to Jesus' action of sacrificing, "in the interest of nonresistant love, all other forms of human solidarity, including the legitimate national interests of the chosen people."⁶³ Certainly, the social setting in which Jesus lived was in many ways similar to the Latin American context, particularly since the Jews of his day were for the most part politically disenfranchised. Jesus had many of the similar options open to him that are open to many today; yet, Jesus' form of revolution was bearing the cross.⁶⁴

Given these considerations, it is worthwhile to note that both the liberationists and Yoder find the biblical narratives as having important ramifications for social reality, but they have different ways of interpreting that influence. These differences in appropriation undoubtedly stem from the liberationists' starting point of the conditions of the poor. The liberationists might find in Yoder's option a certain disregard for the reality of the present circumstances of most Latin Americans, but Yoder would further reply that such conditions, as legitimately deplorable as they might be, cannot function in and of themselves as interpretive tools for assessing the Scriptures and the will of God. Nevertheless, despite these differences in starting points, both Yoder and the liberationists would affirm that such conditions demand a certain response by attentive and faithful Christians.⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

There are many other topics that could have been pursued to render a potential Yoderian appraisal of liberation theology,⁶⁶ but the purpose of this work was to use some of the more direct comments Yoder made with regards to the movement. By contextualising the liberationist movement and proceeding to consider its appropriation of Marxist categories and biblical themes within a Yoderian point of view, the present work points to some of the key similarities and differences between the two parties. Undoubtedly, Yoder and the liberationists viewed (and continue to view, in the case of the latter) the conditions of poverty and oppression for the majority of Latin Americans as requiring a Christian response. The crucial point for both, however, is the way this response is articulated and enacted.

Ultimately, Yoder took the liberationists seriously. Rather than considering the movement a fad that would eventually subside, Yoder considered liberation theology as making serious claims that could not be swept aside; therefore, any critical judgments made by Yoder or implicit in his writings were and should be made for the sake of offering to the poor and oppressed a truly revolutionary option: one that takes Jesus Christ as the norm for all human actions and endeavors.

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NOTES

1. Given the particularities of both Yoder's work and Latin American liberation theology (hereafter LALT) as a movement itself, this work will proceed in several distinct ways. The term "liberation theology" will refer in all cases to Latin American liberation theology due to the fact that the Latin American form is generally considered as the most popular and unified strand and because of the primacy which it was given by Yoder himself (see "Biblical Roots of Liberation Theology," *Grail* 1 (September 1985): 56; hereafter *Roots*). Because Yoder addresses the movement directly, the present study will be both descriptive (in relation to these works) and constructive (in relation to the potential implications of a Yoderian appraisal of this movement given his other works). As far as the operational definition for liberation theology, the definition provided by Gustavo Gutiérrez will be used: "a critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the word of God" (*A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), xix). Although Gutiérrez is willing to say at another point that "liberation theology is a critical reflection on the word of God received in the church" (*Ibid.*, xxxiii), it is clear that praxis, with all of its connotations and implications, remains the starting point that tempers and shapes *A Theology of Liberation*.

2. See *Roots*, 64. Yoder states that LALT has different components, including a "martyr minority" who challenge the ready approval of violence and who "raise deeper critical questions, both of pragmatic effectiveness and of faithful moral reasoning."

3. Because of this fact, this work will focus on the thinkers in LALT whom Yoder considered as primary, namely Gustavo Gutiérrez and Juan Luis Segundo (See *Roots*, 57). This is not to exclude other voices but to narrow the field to a manageable level. Additionally, the fact that Yoder was aware of these thinkers sets the stage for a more legitimate Yoderian appraisal since he would have been acquainted with these individuals and their work.

4. In fact certain places in which one would think that Yoder would come hard against the liberationists show him giving the movement the benefit of the doubt. One particular instance of this preference is in "The Wider Setting of 'Liberation Theology'" (*The Review of Politics* 52 (Spring 1990): 285-296) where Yoder states, "Nonviolent commitment and initiatives in nonviolent action (whether on principled or on pragmatic grounds) arise more frequently within liberation theology settings than within establishment or uninvolved theological milieux. To hold against liberation theology the room made by some thinkers for some violence in extreme revolutionary situations *coming from anyone but some kind of pacifist* is in serious danger of being an argument in bad faith. A liberationist nonpacifist is probably more restrained in the room he or she is ready to make for violence than is the average nonliberationist nonpacifist" (287). Yoder emphasizes the same point differently in *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution* (Elkhart, IN: Co-Op Bookstore, 1983), 533. Therefore, Yoder does not fit the categorization in which Robert McAfee Brown places some critics who believe the liberationists glorify violence (See *Theology in a New Key* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 110), for Yoder admits of a pacifist strand within the liberationist tradition (see *Roots*, 64). Perhaps Yoder's interests in the liberationists stem from the fact that they might be people "within majority Christianity . . . who at least begin to ask fundamental questions, even though their being in a majority position may keep them from following those questions to their natural conclusions" (*The Priestly Kingdom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 89). Part of this tendency to ask fundamental questions stems from the methodological approach of the "hermeneutic circle" espoused by

Juan Luis Segundo (See *Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976), 8ff.).

5. The use of "appraisal" in this context is purposeful; this work does not intend to be a "comparison" or a "mutual corrective of one to another." Hence, Yoder's positions will be considered as primary, but operating this way will require a certain degree of attentiveness in order to attempt a certain degree of fairness. The problem of broad generalizations in studies of comparison is exemplified in a recent chapter by George Hunsinger devoted to Karl Barth and liberation theology in *Disruptive Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). By reverting to the category of "controlling passion," Hunsinger myopically places Barth within the controlling passion of loving and fearing God above all else while placing liberation theology (as exemplified by Gustavo Gutiérrez) within the passion "to love one's neighbor as oneself" (54). This is a most unfortunate example of reductionism that I believe both Barth and Gutiérrez would find intolerable.

6. See Phillip Berryman's *Liberation Theology* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), particularly Chapter 1, for a general overview of these conditions. Gutiérrez labels this process as the oppressed becoming "the agents of their own destiny" (*A Theology of Liberation*, xxix).

7. *Ibid.*, xiii.

8. Christopher Rowland, "Introduction: the theology of liberation" in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3-4.

9. The fact that the Roman Catholic Church was and is involved to some degree in the unjust conditions of Latin Americans is not seriously disputed, for as Gutiérrez mentions, "People are also more keenly and painfully aware that a large part of the Church is in one way or another linked to those who wield economic and political power in today's world" (*A Theology of Liberation*, 40); nevertheless, it is remarkable that priests within Catholicism were willing to take this step of acknowledging some of their own faults. Robert McAfee Brown attributes the actions of these liberationist priests to the fact that they did not want to be "puppets" in such a system any more and to the tradition of social teachings in the Church (*Makers of Contemporary Theology: Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980), 14-15).

10. Gutiérrez states that *Mater et Magistra*, *Pacem in terris*, and *Gaudium et spes* "all stress the urgency of eliminating the existing injustices and the need for an economic development geared to the service of humankind" (*A Theology of Liberation*, 22). References to the social encyclicals are rampant throughout the works of the liberationists and the documents arising from ecclesiastical conferences.

11. The reference to "Marxist categories" includes the existence of classes, the inevitability of class conflict, the necessity of a revolution by which to establish a society governed by the disenfranchised majority (in Marx, the proletariat; in liberation theology, the poor), and the epistemological primacy of praxis. Much of this Marxist usage is implicit rather than explicit, as when Gutiérrez states, "the social praxis of contemporary humankind has begun to reach maturity," ". . . the political arena is necessarily conflictual," and ". . . our understanding of history – that is, a liberating praxis" (*A Theology of Liberation*, 30, 31, 32, respectively). The ensuing exploration of the Marxist categories within liberationist thought should not be taken to imply that a Marxist agenda is the same as the liberationist agenda. Hence, this exploration is not trying to dismiss these categories or the usage of them by the liberationists but is trying to analyze these categories (as all tools should be) in order to evaluate their functional role.

12. José Porfirio Miranda states that "There is no doubt that the encyclicals take their diagnosis of society from Marx . . ." (*Marx and the Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1974), xiii). Certain elements of such a diagnosis include the presence of classes and the inevitability of the class struggle. Nevertheless, the hints offered by the Magisterium, which had little in the form of programmatic substance, might have created the possibility for the praxis-oriented program of the liberationists; in this regard, the latter might have thought that the Magisterium did not go far enough in its statements.

13. The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith has issued two statements concerning liberation

theology: *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"* (*Libertatis Nuntius*) (1984) and *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (*Libertatis Conscientia*) (1986). The former document defies the notion of the Magisterium's usage of Marxist categories by beginning its analysis of the human condition from a strong hamartiological basis and proceeding to chide the "insufficiently critical manner" in which concepts are borrowed from Marxist thought given the fact that "the ideological principles come prior to the study of the social reality and are presupposed in it. Thus no separation of the parts of this epistemologically unique complex is possible. If one tries to take only one part, say, the analysis [of social reality], one ends up having to accept the entire ideology" (VII, 6). Naturally, this assessment of the liberationists' appropriation of Marx is not without protest. One notable example of such protest is Juan Luis Segundo's *Theology and the Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), in which he states that "I understand that my theology (that is, my interpretation of Christian faith) is false if the theology of [*Libertatis Nuntius*] is true – or if it is the only one" (14). Obviously, Segundo is protesting not only against the charges of Marxist appropriations by liberationists but against all of the generalized references in the document to "deviations" from the faith. Additionally, Gutiérrez does not think these charges made by *Libertatis Nuntius* apply to him (See "Criticism Will Deepen, Clarify Liberation Theology" in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, Alfred T. Hennelly, S. J., ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 423).

14. See *Roots*, 71-72. This line of thought is pursued by Yoder along the lines of the analysis made by James Gustafson in *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978). Of course, this is a generalization that cannot be pushed too far since many Protestants have a confidence in a "wider wisdom" (whatever that might be). Another way of describing what I believe Yoder and Gustafson to be advocating is to say that Protestants and Catholics approach and appropriate Scripture differently in their theological methodologies, a point which Gustafson explicitly makes (29). The issue of a "wider wisdom" raises the broader notion of what Yoder's views might be in relation to natural theology. Yoder states that natural theology usually functions as a "vehicle on which value judgments could be introduced into ethical discussion without needing support in revelation," and although Yoder would admit that there is an "ordering" that is true in the world by virtue of its relation to the Redeemer, he states that "historical study shows that it has been possible to understand under *order of nature* just about anything a philosopher wanted" (*The Christian Witness to the State* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 33). Yoder mentions that natural law is often used in justifying war (*Original Revolution*, 134) and in relativizing the ethical impact of Jesus (*The Royal Priesthood*, 114).

15. This "willingness to hear the voice of God in the signs of the times" is especially evident in the documents of Medellín (See *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation: Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops*, 2 vols. (Bogotá: Indo-American Press, 1970), 2:38).

16. I am partially indebted to the work of Scott Williams, a peer of mine at Duke, concerning issues of translatability in Yoder for this point. The works of particular importance within this discussion revolve around Yoder's *The Christian Witness to the State*, where he proposes the use of "middle axioms" (32 ff.), and *The Priestly Kingdom*, where he proposes the use of the "interworld transformational grammar" (56). The function of the former for Yoder is that they "will translate into meaningful and concrete terms the general relevance of the lordship of Christ for a given social ethical issue" (*The Christian Witness to the State*, 32) while the latter functions to aid in the discernment of "what will need to happen if the collision of the message of Jesus with our pluralistic/relativistic world is to lead to a reconception of the shape of the world, instead of to rendering Jesus optional or innocuous" (*The Priestly Kingdom*, 56). The presence of these terms in Yoder's work is sparse; therefore, they cannot attain a status beyond the functional usage Yoder seems to foresee in their appropriation. Nevertheless, their presence do indicate that Yoder was willing to adopt (at least during the initial stages of engagement) a certain set of pre-existent terms within the world in order to reconfigure and adapt their usages to make the gospel and its ramifications intelligible.

17. "This analysis of the situation is at the level of scientific rationality. Only a radical break from the status quo, that is, a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution that would break this dependence would allow for the change to a new society . . ." (Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 17). The use of "scientific" is problematic because of its connotations of "truth;" more appropriate would be the use of "theory," although the liberationists would probably not revert to this option given their excessive dependence on these categories for their entire program. Although it can be said that the liberationists use Marxism as "an instrument of social analysis" (Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, 66; emphasis mine), it seems from the evidence that Marxism is the *primary* instrument of social analysis for many of the liberationists.

18. It seems that Yoder attributes this readiness to employ Marxist terminology to the novelty for the liberationists to consider moral involvement as testing truth. Yoder believes that this methodological assumption is apparent in various strands of Protestantism, but for the liberationists such a notion is radical given the manner in which theology is structured and pursued in their contexts. See *Roots*, 62ff.

19. Of course, this term was employed and popularized by Paulo Freire. For a discussion of the background and range of meaning of this term in relation to liberation, see Freire's "Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating" in Henelly, *Liberation Theology*, 5-13.

20. Is the Marxist revolution similar to the revolution called for by the liberationists? This question is important to consider, given the plethora of references to "revolution" in some of the liberationists' writings. Gutiérrez is willing to go as far as to state, "In Latin America, the Church must place itself squarely within the process of revolution, amid the violence which is present in different ways. The Church's *mission* is defined practically and theoretically, pastorally and theologically, in relation to this revolutionary process" (*A Theology of Liberation*, 75-76). Although Gutiérrez makes similar statements in his other works, he nevertheless states that liberation theology is not a theology of development, revolution, and violence (See *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983), 61). Gutiérrez feels that it is sufficient to state that liberation theology "has its point of departure precisely in an involvement with that [revolutionary] process and attempts to help make it more critical of itself . . . [by situating] liberating political commitment within a perspective of the free gift of Christ's total liberation" (*Ibid.*) How the Church is to maintain her identity while engaging in this process is ambiguous.

21. "Any recourse to the Word of the Lord as well as all references to contemporary theology will be made with reference to this praxis" (Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 79). The referent to the kind of praxis seems to be one which is committed to the process of liberation.

22. "But once the evident course of history is held to be empirically discernible, and the prosperity of our regime is the measure of good, all morality boils down to efficacy. Right action is what works; what does not promise results can hardly be right" (*The Priestly Kingdom*, 140). Therefore, the inordinate emphasis on effectiveness is one of the problems Yoder would have with starting with the praxis of liberation as derived from the conditions of the Latin American populace because such an emphasis would resort to violence to accomplish the desired goals.

23. This commitment to the poor is considered the first act from which theology follows; this sequence is affirmed both by Segundo (*Liberation of Theology*, 71ff.) and Gutiérrez (*A Theology of Liberation*, 9ff).

24. Yoder would label such actions as being "theocratic" in the sense that "it finds the locus of meaningfulness in the course of the history of a society or of the world at large and calls upon the church to discern God as the agent of that movement and upon Christians to join God in bringing it about" (*The Royal Priesthood*, 90).

25. *The Priestly Kingdom*, 76. Yoder in this context is speaking about the process by which violence came to be legitimated in Christendom, but the point is still relevant in this context.

26. Yoder hints at the need for arguing the relevancy of Marxist terms within the liberationists' framework in *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, 534.

27. Yoder clearly states this flexibility in his discussion in witnessing to the statesman when he says, "Then we would wrongly understand the witness to a person in authority as a sort of second best, as if we had first called him to believe in Jesus Christ, and then when he had said he would not, we would go on to plead, 'Well, all right then, but will you please at least be decent and honest?' What we ask of him does not cease to be gospel by virtue of the fact that we relate it to his present available options" (*The Christian Witness to the State*, 25).

28. *The Christian Witness to the State*, 8.

29. *The Politics of Jesus*, 140-141.

30. *The Christian Witness to the State*, 8-9.

31. The liberationists will admit that sin is the ultimate source of poverty, injustice, etc. (See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 24ff.); how much harmartiology figures into their overall program, however, is another consideration that is debatable.

32. Within this move, Yoder identifies at least three assumptions: 1) "that the relationship of cause and effect is visible, understandable, and manageable, so that if we make our choices on the basis of how we hope society will be moved, it will be moved in that direction," 2) "that we are adequately informed to be able to set for ourselves and for all society the goal toward which we seek to move it," and 3) "that effectiveness in moving toward these goals which have been set is itself a moral yardstick" (*The Politics of Jesus*, 229-230). Gutiérrez in his work exemplifies to a degree these characteristics, yet he avoids a total program in that he considers "the concrete measures of effecting the denunciation and the annunciation [to] be discerned little by little" (*A Theology of Liberation*, 155).

33. Yoder sees some of the marks of Constantinianism as being that civil government "is the main bearer of historical movement . . ." and "the place of the church or of persons speaking for Christian morality (including academic theologians) is that of 'chaplaincy,' i.e., a part of the power structure itself" (*The Priestly Kingdom*, 138). Because of the status of the church, new ethical questions come to the fore, including "Can you ask such behavior of everyone?" and "What would happen if everyone did it?" (*Ibid.*, 139). Gutiérrez is aware of the term "Constantinianism" and finds the social influence of the Church as a given reality that must be affirmed by casting her lot with the oppressed and exploited (*A Theology of Liberation*, 151). Yoder explicitly states that he believes that some liberation theologians "lay themselves open" to the Constantinian temptation (*Roots*, 72-73).

34. *The Original Revolution*, 155.

35. Yoder clearly indicates that "many efforts to renew Christian thought regarding power and society remain the captives of the fallen system they mean to reject" (*The Priestly Kingdom*, 144). Hence, Yoder envisions what he terms an "alternative consciousness" in which "the experience of isolation/oppression/suffering/powerlessness . . . renews the community in its awareness that it is nonetheless worthwhile to go on living." "one learns to trust in the power of weakness . . . [and] to see through the weakness of power," a community depends on "an alternative narrative," and such a community hopes "when there is no reason to hope" (*Ibid.*, 94-95).

36. The issue of goals raises the notion of discernment, which already has been alluded to above. Suffice it to say that Yoder would caution that "we cannot 'go where the action is' until we know which action should be blessed and joined and which should be denounced" (*The Royal Priesthood*, 94).

37. ". . . the dilemma now confronting the whole [Latin American] continent [is]: to be for or against the system, or more subtly, to be for reform or revolution" (Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 76). This set of alternatives, of course, is severely myopic, for being complicitous with revolution to the extent of condoning and performing evil acts is in a sense precisely what the liberationists wish to avoid: being complicitous with evil ("But the kind of faithfulness that is willing to

accept evident defeat rather than complicity with evil is, by virtue of its conformity with what happens to God when he works among us, aligned with the ultimate triumph of the Lamb" (*The Politics of Jesus*, 238). The way this question is phrased also forces one to consider the divine role in these events; in other words, would this question forcibly make God's *patience* to be perceived as *complicity* because God does not take the immediate actions that the liberationists wish to see? See *Original Revolution*, 65.

38. Yoder pursues this same line of questioning concerning the concept of "freedom" when he questions if the liberationists' idea of freedom is sufficiently original, critical, and biblical. See *Roots*, 68.

39. *The Priestly Kingdom*, 211, n. 12.

40. As Yoder alludes to the point made by Reinhold Niebuhr, the irony of history is "that when people try to manage history, it almost always turns out to have taken another direction than that in which they thought they were guiding it" (*The Politics of Jesus*, 230). Such an observation presses the point that legitimate ends must be coupled with legitimate means (*Ibid.*, 237).

41. Yoder cites as an example Cuba, which up to Yoder's time had not proven itself to be more of a just society after the revolution of Castro (*Roots*, 65).

42. Yoder states quite lucidly that "liberation is *from* bondage and *for* covenant and *what for* matters more than *what from*" ("Exodus and Exile," 304). Yoder further asks, "Can the various 'fronts' and 'movements' which today call themselves 'liberation' point us with any confidence . . . to a constitutive event *following* the 'exodus' that will give substance to their separate existence? Or is not what is today called 'liberation' sparked and justified only by the wrongness of the oppression it denounces, while sharing with the oppressor many of his ethical assumptions about how to deal with dissent, about the use of violence, about the political vocation of the liberating elite?" (*Ibid.*) This shortcoming is one of the arguments against the liberationists by Michael Novak, who is led to believe that the liberationist program is at a "pre-theoretical stage" (See *Will It Liberate?* (New York: Paulist, 1986), 34).

43. *The Priestly Kingdom*, 92.

44. Yoder uses such terminology in relation to the Apocalypse. "To see history doxologically, in the metaphor of this cultic vision, is to describe the cosmos in terms dictated by the knowledge that a once slaughtered Lamb is now living" (*The Royal Priesthood*, 128). Yoder goes on to explain this process through nine points, but two points should suffice in this discussion: "To see history doxologically demands and enables that we appropriate especially/specifically those modes of witness which explode the limits that our own systems impose on our capacity to be illuminated and led" and "to be empowered and obligated to discern, down through the centuries, which historical developments can be welcomed as progress in the light of the Rule of the Lamb and which as setbacks" (*Ibid.*, 129, 132).

45. Yoder views the Gospel as having "to do with the reign of God among men in *all* their interpersonal relations, and not solely with the forgiveness of sins or the regeneration of individuals" (*The Christian Witness to the State*, 23; emphasis mine).

46. Yoder affirms this notion when he states, "Every strand of New Testament literature testifies to a direct relationship between the way Christ suffered on the cross and the way the Christian, as disciple, is called to suffer in the face of evil" (*Original Revolution*, 60). Even in the most difficult of circumstances, we are called to follow Christ, for, as Yoder mentions earlier, "it is especially in relation to evil that discipleship is meaningful" (*Ibid.*).

47. With each mutation of the Constantinian arrangement, Yoder points out that the "level of the church's capacity to be critical decreases as well" (*The Priestly Kingdom*, 144). Perhaps this loss of critical acumen is taking place here with regards to enemy-love, for "it is of the nature of the love of God not to let itself be limited by models or options or opportunities which are offered to it by a situation" (*Original Revolution*, 50).

48. *A Theology of Liberation*, 36ff. This term also is affirmed by Segundo (*Liberation of Theology*, 140ff.).

49. A Theology of Liberation, 36-37.

50. As useful as these points are, Gutiérrez is nevertheless not without his own dualisms; of particular importance here is the dichotomy he makes of action and thinking: "From the perspective of the theology of liberation, it is argued that the first step is to contemplate God and put God's will into practice; and only in a second moment can we think about God" ("The Task and Content of Liberation Theology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 28). Naturally, the questions must be posed as to what differences there are between "contemplation" and "thinking" for Gutiérrez and whether this distinction itself poses a "distinction of planes" that hampers legitimacy and faithfulness in enacting God's will.

51. Yoder's affirmations are found in *Roots*, 58, 66.

52. Yoder will go as far as to state that, "no biblically-oriented theology can fail in some sense, I would claim, to be a theology of liberation" (*Roots*, 67).

53. "The Old Testament, and the Exodus event in particular, show us two central elements completely fused into one: i.e., God the liberator and the political process of liberation . . . In no other portion of Scripture does God the liberator reveal himself in such close connection with the political plane of human existence" (Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 110-111).

54. The link between these two concepts is alluded to when Gutiérrez states, "The building of a just society has worth in terms of the Kingdom, or in more current phraseology, to participate in the process of liberation is already in a certain sense, a salvific work" (*A Theology of Liberation*, 46).

55. Hence, Yoder in "Exodus and Exile" proceeds in a manner similar to that which was proposed above as a way to engage the Marxist categories. Yoder states his purpose in appropriating the Exodus motif as facing "that liberation language in its own right . . . to test the legitimacy of its claim to be echoing a biblical message," and to see if there is any unjustified selectivity ("Exodus and Exile," 298).

56. Each of the subsequent five paragraph headings are taken from "Exodus and Exile," 299ff.

57. "Every portion of the Exodus account, difficult to interpret at other points, is clear in the report that the Israelites did nothing to bring about the destruction of the Egyptians. The only call to them was to believe and obey" (*The Politics of Jesus*, 77). Of course, this is in contradistinction to Gutiérrez's call for the poor "to see themselves as subjects of their own history [and] as being able to take their destiny in their own hands" ("The Task and Content of Liberation Theology," *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 21).

58. "Exodus and Exile," 301.

59. Yoder elaborates more fully his understanding of the Jewish community's role in diaspora in "See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun" in *For the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Interestingly, Gutiérrez touches on some of these themes in his *We Drink from Our Own Wells* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), which is a "spirituality" as distinguished from his other theologically programmatic works.

60. See Yoder's "Withdrawal and Diaspora" in *Freedom and Discipleship*, Daniel S. Schipani, ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 76-84.

61. An extreme example of this difference stems from Segundo's characterization of Jesus as being politically neutral (*Liberation of Theology*, 71) and his main interests being on an apolitical plane (*ibid.*, 111). Gutiérrez is much more complex about Jesus' political ramifications (*A Theology of Liberation*, 132) but nevertheless falls short of labeling Jesus' cross as paradigmatic.

62. *A Theology of Liberation*, 25.

63. *The Original Revolution*, 61.

64. One might think that the Zealot option elaborated by Yoder in *The Original Revolution* would be applicable to the liberationists. It seems Yoder could make this move since he speaks of the Zealot temptation (in relation to student groups) as proclaiming "that the only option for the Christian church is to 'take sides' with those forces which demand immediate social remodeling,

even at the cost if necessary of much bloodshed" (22). Gutiérrez is aware of the complex relationship between Jesus and the Zealots, and he elaborates quite effectively about the limitations of the Zealots (e.g., their exorbitant nationalism and their desire to see the Kingdom "as the fruit of their own efforts") (*A Theology of Liberation*, 131-132). Interestingly, Gutiérrez does not make a connection between the possible similarities between the Zealots and the liberationists.

65. Yoder is willing to affirm that the New Testament indicates, in continuance with the Old, that "God calls his people to a prophetically critical relationship to structures of power and oppression . . ." (*The Royal Priesthood*, 245). The role assigned to the prophetic here is seen as complimentary, and not in contradiction to, what was said above in relation to the same theme. Obviously, the liberationists have achieved some of these measures through the documents of the different bishops' conferences.

66. Some of these possibilities could include a closer examination of the interpretation of history, Christ's lordship, and the documents of the General Conferences of the Latin American Bishops (especially Puebla, which Yoder seemed to find favorable; see *Roots*, 73-74).