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# Liberation Theology of Disability and the Option for the Poor

## Comments

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## **Liberation theology of disability and the option for the poor**

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### **Abstract:**

A liberation theology of disability provides a spiritual discourse that unites a critical analysis of the economic dimensions of disability oppression with an appreciation for the lived experience of disabled persons. This paper builds from prior liberation theology scholarship and the Catholic theological concept called the preferential option for the poor to articulate a liberation theology of disability marked by critical social analysis, humility, hope, and love.

**Keywords:** Liberation theology of disability, preferential option for the poor, religion and disability, spiritual discourse

### **Introduction**

For the Lord loves his people,  
and he adorns the lowly with victory (Psalms 149:4).

"It would be difficult to make a revolution without the Bible"  
(Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch in Boff & Boff, 1987, p. 34).

The popularized version of the Marxist company line rejects religion as an illusory opiate that anesthetizes progressive political activity by averting the eyes of the oppressed from the realities of their lives toward the glory of other-worldly pursuits. Seemingly, revolutionary politics and religion don't mix. To the contrary, Cornel West (1999, p. 373) contends that "Marx and Engel understood religion as a profound human response to, and protest against, intolerable conditions." This mingling of spirituality and protest has been demonstrated in recent years by Christian revivals seeking liberation and justice for oppressed people in Latin America, Africa, and other nations. Religion, as a vital strand of the cultural lives of many oppressed peoples, can be inseparable from political agency and progressive possibilities. In troubled times, spirituality and faith can fortify critical understanding of human action and

history, directly addressing the lived experience of disabled persons within complex social dynamics of power, access, and privilege.

In this paper, I will attend to the experiences of people with disabilities as an oppressed class through an articulation of a liberation theology of disability. The academic literature on liberation theology and disability is lamentably thin. Yet a comprehensive and cogent liberation theology of disability has been offered by Eiesland (1994). Her book *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* must be a beginning place and building block for any effort to craft a liberation theology of disability. Specifically, I will supplement Eiesland's conceptual architecture with an essential element from Latin American liberation theology, an emphasis on what Roman Catholic theologians call a *preferential option for the poor*. This phrase first arose and gained popular usage at the now-famous conferences of Latin American bishops in Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979). The general concept is that God holds a special love, a preferential love, for the poor and those who suffer social injustice (Curran, 2002; Dorr, 1983; Dorr, 2000).

I will present a spiritual discourse that engages the centrality of capitalist economic oppression within the cultural and subjective lives of disabled persons. By drawing from a spirituality and mode of ecclesial activity that transcends the bounds of human history while also confronting the most crucial and pressing social concerns of the day, a liberation theology of disability brings a unique sense of hope and conviction to the radical disability rights cause. This perspective displays the ways that the religious and the social, the spiritual and the political, are entangled, inseparable to any who take seriously the rights and humanity of people with disabilities.

In presenting these ideas and visions to a readership that is at least nominally secular, this paper intentionally blurs traditional boundaries between the social and conceptual geography of secular social analysis and theological meditation. Following the path of the Latin American liberation theologians, I propose that a theology that treads bare earth within the problems and possibilities of everyday life must rely on useful and thoughtful analyses of the social world, uniting traditionally secular modes of critical, social analysis with religious narratives and lived faith.

I will begin with a brief introduction to the basic concepts of Latin American liberation theology. The Latin American theologians have articulated the most comprehensive distillation of an emancipatory Christianity. Then I will examine Eiesland's (1994) liberation theology of disability. Her work provides a good introduction to the specific application of liberation theology within the lives of disabled persons as an oppressed people. Her other theological scholarship addresses important concerns about the inclusion of disabled persons within theology and ecclesial activity (e.g. Eiesland & Saliers, 1998), intentionally connecting the goals and actions of the disability rights movement to a renewed Christian faith. But I will focus explicitly on her book (1994) *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* as the most complete articulation of a liberation theology of disability.

From that theological foundation, I will then explore the *preferential option for the poor*, a central concept in liberation theology that, at first glance, has little to do with disability. By

examining the close relationship between disability and poverty in both wealthy and poor nations, I argue that the *option for the poor* speaks directly to the oppression of disabled persons around the world through a deep engagement with the centrality of economic distress and vulnerability in the disability experience.

### **Introducing Liberation Theology**

God is in the poor, not only mysteriously suffering with them, but also actively rejecting their painful present – proclaiming, demanding, stirring up a new future to transcend this time of oppression. Thus, for the poor, the God of Jesus is the God who is courage, the God who is fantasy, the God who is hope, the God who is utopia, the God who is liberator, who intervenes salvifically in history as the One who wishes to establish justice and rights of the poor (Lois, 1993, p. 180-181).

Latin American liberation theology (e.g. Boff & Boff, 1987; Ellacuria & Sobrino, 1993; Gutierrez, 1973/1988, 1984, 1997; Segundo, 1976) begins from three assumptions about the place of God in human activity. First, eschatological concern for human salvation in an afterlife of divine justice is viewed as inseparable from God's deep interest in justice and community within the lived world. The hereafter and human history are not severable within the narrative of the Reign of God across all time (Sobrino, 1993). The traditional "distinction of planes" (p. 36, Gutierrez, 1973/1988) theology counterposing a religious sphere of salvation and other-worldly concern to a less important temporal sphere of worldly concern inhabited now is false and misleading. History and eschatology, this life and the life hereafter, are united within "the kingdom of God in the midst of humankind" (Boff & Boff, 1987, p. 9).

Second, as the divine Lord of history/post-history, the love of God is evidenced in concrete acts of partiality and preference. A traditional theological position explains the universality of God's love through a notion of ahistorical detachment and equitable love. Essentially, the concept says that a distant God who fails to take sides in the conflicts and concerns of human history loves all persons and groups equally. This notion is flawed because human history is rife with social division, political inequality, and painful injustice; concrete, lived situations where selfishness, greed, and insensitivity often overshadow love, fraternity, and peace. Universality in specific situations of oppression can only be demonstrated through God's opposition to injustice in lived history, through God's deep and abiding love for the victims of social degradation. In this sense, God is not against the rich or the powerful but is preferentially for the poor and the powerless in their quest for a society of liberation, justice, solidarity, and equality.

Third, a theology of liberation springs from a practical reading of both the Bible and the lived social context of the moment, interpreting the Scriptures and the historical situation each in light of the other. This creates a theological mediation based in a hermeneutic circle of understanding that revolves between the scriptural life and teachings of Jesus Christ and the experience of God in lived experience (Boff, 1993; Segundo, 1976). In this way, liberation theology is often described as a bottom up approach to theology, a practical faith that is generated and applied within the specific context of daily life. Gutierrez (1984) uses the

phrase "We drink from our own wells" to explain the way that liberation theology arises from a concrete experience of faith within the context of one's own life and community, thereby fashioning a spirituality focused on the social needs and challenges faced within the distinct scope of that experience.

### **Exploring *The Disabled God***

In *The Disabled God*, Eiesland (1994) creates a liberation theology of disability that begins with the concrete experiences of disabled individuals. She writes from her own subject position as a disabled woman, and she explores the biographic narratives of Diane Devries (e.g. Frank, 1986) and Nancy Mairs (e.g. 1984; 1986; 1990). Working from the rich experiential font of three disabled women, Eiesland repositions physical disability within the narrative scope of ordinary lives, of human struggle bearing bodily uniqueness yet enveloped within the broader normality of human experience. Her goal in the repoliticization of the body and of experiences of disability is access to the mainstream of American Christianity; more specifically, her focus is access to the church buildings, sanctuaries, spiritual ceremonies, and systems of belief where Christian community occurs and resides.

Eiesland's work is a protest and a challenge to Christian congregations in the United States to open their doors, hearts, and minds to both disabled believers as well as the social model of disability that replaces stigma with agency, medicalization with political struggle.

People with disabilities will accept no less than the church's acknowledgement of us as historical actors and theological subjects and its active engagement in eliminating stigmatizing social practices and theological orientations from its midst (Eiesland, 1994, p. 67).

Her political goals are focused mainly on social change within the Christian church itself, attempting to remove architectural, social, and theological barriers to full and equal participation. Eiesland's version of the liberation theology of disability, while attending wholeheartedly to the crucial issue of access to Christian life, is limited in three important ways.

First, her work primarily delivers a vision of spiritually-based politics to church and religious activity without fully addressing the implications of an emancipatory Christianity to the multiple prejudices and oppressive circumstances faced by disabled persons in the broader society. In this sense, her theology tends to hold a micro-focus on achieving justice within ecclesial activity rather than envisioning a more ambitious, utopian application of Christian action and faith to the larger cultural struggle for equality, freedom, economic sustenance, and dignity.

Second, in light of the tendency to focus on an attenuated form of ecclesial justice, Eiesland does not engage the liberation theological priority of the option for the poor. Her theology renders a somewhat middle-class version of liberation that underplays the frequently dire economic dimensions of the experience of disability. Building from the life narratives of three disabled women who are college graduates, her analysis does not fully attend to

economic oppression as an undeniable component of the experience of the vast majority of disabled persons in the United States and around the world.

Third, she attempts to craft a Christology that renders God as a person with a physical impairment. Her basic notion is that the historical Jesus suffered great physical wounds in the experience of dying on a wooden cross. When Jesus Christ rose in three days, his body then bore the marks of physical impairment due to the ordeal. With a dose of imaginative license, the historical Jesus is turned into a disabled man. The worthy goal is to unite Jesus Christ and disabled persons under one cultural and experiential umbrella, to equate the contingency and frailty of the historical Jesus to the lived vulnerability and struggle of disabled persons. In this goal, this theology succeeds provisionally despite the imaginative leap required by her theological vision of a resurrected Christ with physical impairments.

Building from Eiesland's important theological work toward a more politically and economically compelling brand of liberation theology requires that we appreciate the deep connection between the experiences of oppression lived by disabled persons and the historical life of Jesus Christ. Through an investigation of shared experience of economic poverty and disability, we may link the life of Jesus Christ as a poor man and the experiential history of disabled persons in the shared ground of economic distress. The liberation theology emphasis on the option for the poor provides the theological tradition for the exploration and appreciation of that shared territory.

### **Roots of the option for the poor**

The theological notion of the *preferential option for the poor* first arose in the writings of Latin American Catholic bishops in the 1968 CELAM (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano) conference in Medellin. It was later reconfirmed in the 1979 CELAM conference in Puebla. The Latin American bishops put forth a theology that broke with Western theological traditions by asserting that the divine and universal justice of God is not static and ahistorical. God's loving justice takes on specific features within temporal and historical application, varying depending on social and political context. Additionally, those specific features are best understood from the position of those persons living within the social and political context in question.

This stance on justice and history opened the door to create a Latin American theology particular to the situation of severe economic disparity and suffering in Latin American nations. Thus, while God's love and concern is universal, that love holds a special focus and emphasis for the victims of social and economic injustice. Drawing extensively from the Scriptures (with particular emphasis on the Exodus story; see Lohfink, 1987), the radical contention put forth by the Latin American bishops is that political opposition to the social structures of an oppressive economic system occurs within a lived Christian praxis of deep love and solidarity with the poor. In this interpretation, "the marginalized are the primary recipients of the gospel" (O'Brien, 1992, p. 83); the teachings of Jesus are the good news for the poor and oppressed.

The option for the poor consists of and is enacted through a critical social analysis of sociopolitical realities based in a loving solidarity with those who live on the underside of those oppressive realities. The term "option" can be misleading in this usage, allowing one to believe that a Christian may select or not select this aspect of faith without serious consideration or consequence. This could not be further from the truth. The term "option" in this regard indicates intentionality, purpose, commitment, a considered choice of faith and action within dire circumstances.

Dorr defines the option for the poor as

a series of choices, personal or communal, made by individuals, by communities, or even corporate entities such as a religious congregation, a diocese, or a Church...to disentangle themselves from serving the interests of those on the 'top' of society and begin instead to come into solidarity with those near the bottom (1983, p.4).

The resulting theological concept is an active, committed orientation to Christian faith and human living that integrates solidarity with the experiential subject position of the oppressed and the theological yearning for justice in this world. This unifies practices enacting justice and love in present time with an eschatological trajectory of divine justice and God's love beyond this world. Concretely, to opt for the poor is to act against the social structures, ideologies, and cultural practices that create and sustain poverty. The option for the poor is a counter-hegemonic, divine love active in real time; a solidarity with a dissenting God and His subjugated people.

### **Disability and the option for the poor**

People with disabilities are the poorest, most isolated group in the poorest, most isolated places (Charlton, 1998, p. 43).

Theorizing the option for the poor in application to people with disabilities requires a practical connection between the experience of poverty and the oppression faced by disabled persons. An examination of this issue must begin by asking: What does *poverty* have to do with *disability*? How is it possible to extend the theology of the *option for the poor* to a specific application attending to the oppression of disabled persons?

Liberation theologians speak of *the poor* both narrowly and broadly (Gutierrez, 1993; Boff & Boff, 1987). The narrow emphasis creates an intense, unrelenting focus on the concrete reality of suffering and death that is central to the experience of chronic, widespread poverty in Latin America. Daily survival is the primary goal in this situation of material despoliation.

The broader interpretation of "poor" allows these theologians to address the dimensions of oppression that go beyond material destitution and social class asymmetry, attending to the suffering and needs of all persons who are harmed and silenced by the structures that perpetuate extreme economic and political disparity. For example, Gutierrez (1997, p.72) defines the poor as "the non-persons, the 'insignificant ones,' the ones that don't count either for the rest of society and – far too frequently – for the Christian churches." Dorr (2000, p.



259) defines the poor as "the untouchables in the public world," those who are rejected from the social community and the economic nexus of power.

Within the broader interpretive framework, Guitierrez (1993) and Boff & Boff (1987) address the double oppressions of gender, race, and ethnicity (in particular, indigenous peoples) within the Latin American context. These "group oppressions" (Young, 1990, p. 181) couple economic structures and cultural biases to produce reified social hierarchies that press specific groups beneath the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Surprisingly, or perhaps not surprisingly given the invisibility of disabled persons in the majority (Third) world (e.g. Charlton, 1998; Ghai, 2001), the Latin American liberation theologians do not mention disability as a form of double oppression that links tightly with poverty. This lacuna notwithstanding, they have opened the door to the integration of poverty and disability within a theology of liberation through their elaboration of social identities such as gender, race, and ethnicity as cultural bases for oppression and economic degradation.

If we interpret *the poor* narrowly to mean persons who live in extreme economic poverty, deprived of the basic material necessities of living, then our question is whether the disabled populations in the minority, affluent world (e.g. North America, Western and Northern Europe) and the majority, poor world (e.g. Latin America, Africa, much of Asia) are generally living in economic poverty. Attempts to understand the connection between disability and poverty around the world are complicated by issues of disability definition and varying cultural interpretations of what constitutes impairment and disability. Additionally, poverty itself occurs at greatly varying levels depending on the degree of economic development and role of (or lack of) a welfare state in different countries.

In the following two sections, I will briefly examine the relationship between poverty and disability in the affluent countries and the poor nations of the world. Despite the methodological obstacles, it will become increasingly clear that, in both the industrialized Western countries and in the so-called developing nations of the world, "people with disabilities are usually among the poorest of the poor" (Department for International Development, 2000, p.6).

### **Poverty and Disability in Affluent Countries (Minority World)**

In the affluent countries, an initial understanding of the relationship between poverty and disability may be gathered through analyses of employment/unemployment and levels of government-supported income provision. These advanced capitalist countries have employment markets that present limited access for disabled workers and welfare systems that often provide some level of income and other benefits for people with disabilities who are unemployed or underemployed.

Keeping in mind that unemployment, underemployment, wage levels, vocational rehabilitation systems, and welfare income provision vary to some extent across advanced capitalist countries; the situation in the United States provides a useful case example of the relationship between disability and poverty in the affluent nations. According to the 2002 Current Population Survey in the United States, 20.8 percent of all non-institutionalized

civilians aged 18-64 who report a work limiting health problem or disability are employed. Of this low number, many are working part-time or low status jobs that pay less than a living wage (Kaye, 2003).

One might theorize that the booming economy in the United States during the 1990's had stagnated by 2002, yielding lower levels of employment for all workers and unusually low levels of employment for disabled workers. A closer look at available data dispels this faulty hypothesis. Even during the robust national economy of the 1990's, the overall employment rate of disabled adults actually dropped from 24% in 1994 to 22% in 1999. Overall rates of employment for non-disabled adults rose from 77% to 80% during the same years (Kaye, 2001). One person's boom is another person's bust.

One might anticipate that the landmark 1990 American with Disabilities Act outlawing disability-based discrimination in hiring and employment would lead to more jobs and better jobs for disabled Americans. A thorough analysis of this reasonable hypothesis in light of two large, national employment databases tracking employment during the 1990's found

no improvement in the overall employment rate of working-age adults with disabilities. There is no question that the employment picture remains bleak for the population with disabilities as a whole, and no amount of further analysis can repair the dashed hopes of those still awaiting signs that barriers to employment have largely been removed. (Kaye, 2003, p. 1). Prospective workers with intellectual disabilities or significant mobility impairments had the greatest difficulty finding and maintaining employment (Kaye, 2001).

Even when disabled adults in America have been able to find and keep work, their wages are consistently lower than non-disabled peers. During the 1990s, the average wages of full-time workers with disabilities were 81 cents for every \$1 earned by comparable, non-disabled workers. Even if influential factors like type of occupation, level of education, and length of work history are statistically controlled, full-time disabled workers' salaries still amounted to only 86 cents for every dollar in salary earned by comparable non-disabled workers (Kaye, 2001).

Given the discriminatory, often inaccessible climate of employment, many disabled adults in the United States live primarily on federal income support in the form of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). SSDI is income provision for disabled persons who have worked for a required number of years prior to unemployment. SSI supports disabled persons who did not accumulate a work record prior to experiencing unemployment. According to the International Center for Disability Information (2001), the average annual benefit for persons receiving SSDI in 2001 was \$9270. The federal poverty level for a household of one during 2001 was \$8590 in the 48 contiguous states (Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Therefore, the federal government provided disabled adults with an average income that was a scant 7.9% above the poverty level. Notably, average SSDI payments for women lagged behind payments for men by more than \$200 per month. Disabled women were supported at an average annual income 7.7% below the poverty level. In some cases, a person may receive income from both SSDI and SSI. Also, these programs allow recipients to work and earn some income under

guidelines that reduce federal support in exchange for earned income. It is apparent that economic deprivation and disability are closely related within the United States. Without fully conflating poverty and disability, it is safe to say that a vast number of disabled Americans live with very limited economic resources.

The second half of exploring the relationship between disability and poverty requires a similar analysis in poor countries of the world. It is in the majority world that we find the poverty-disability nexus to be even tighter and more distressing.

### **Poverty and Disability in Poor Countries (Majority World)**

In the poorest countries of the world, particularly where there is no benefit system, being among the poorest has more severe implications of life or death than in richer countries (Yeo, 2001, p. 5).

Given the prevalence and severity of poverty among the disabled populations in the poor countries of the Third World, access to jobs and income support are typically not immediate objectives. Simple survival within a landscape of extreme material deprivation is the daily goal.

Disabled persons are estimated to make up approximately 15-20% of the poor within the poorest nations (Elwan, 1999). Inadequate or nonexistent health care and rampant malnutrition contribute to high levels of illness-related impairments that are preventable in the more affluent nations. In the poorest countries, disabled persons are often economically marginalized even in relation to the general population. "It is frequently observed that in low-income countries, the disabled poor are among the poorest of the poor" (Elwan, 1999, p. 16).

Although living conditions, cultural understandings, and political situations vary across majority world countries, Ghai's (2001) description of the lives of people with disabilities in India provides a brief capsule of the poverty/disability experience in Third World nations. One third of the world's absolute poor live in India. Disabled persons make up a large portion of the most destitute. According to Ghai (2001, p. 28), "60 million disabled people...live outside the ambit of mainstream India. Their lives remain mired in patterns of helpless cynicism, political inertia and poor social innovations ..." In the urban slums and isolated villages, the care and support of disabled children and adults is a family matter that occurs without government sponsorship or funding.

Many scholars (Elwan, 1999; Yeo, 2001), including Ghai (2001), articulate some version of a Third World model of chronic poverty, impairment, and disability. Generally, the material and cultural conditions of absolute poverty – including weak healthcare and dangerous living conditions – contribute to high rates of impairment or physical anomaly. For example, polio and blindness (caused by glaucoma or infections) are leading causes of impairment in Third World nations. Environmental barriers such as negative attitudes and stigmatizing religious beliefs as well as structural obstacles such as nonexistent vocational rehabilitation services, inadequate roads and transportation, and the lack of good-paying jobs relegate persons with impairments to lives of vulnerability, dependency, and invisibility. Disability often traps a

person at the fringes of social and economic activity, a life combining social rejection and economic marginalization.

It is clear that the social and political position of the disabled population in affluent and poor countries renders this group nearly inseparable from *the poor*. This is not to say that poverty and disability are synonymous, for there are undoubtedly middle class and wealthy disabled persons. What we can conclude is that the linkage between disability and poverty is sufficient such that no meaningful discussion of either concern can take place without the inclusion of the other.

Moving from this examination of the relationship between disability and poverty, our next task is to explore a broader interpretation of the option for the poor that includes disability. This involves providing an outline of the basic dimensions of a preferential option for disabled persons.

### **Dimensions of the option for disabled persons**

O'Brien (1992) has articulated four specific dimensions of the option for the poor that provide an understanding of tremendous theological and practical depth. These dimensions are: *evangelical simplicity*, *existential solidarity*, *transformational analysis*, and *institutional challenge*. In this section, I will explain these dimensions and adapt them to our purpose of detailing an option for disabled persons.

O'Brien describes *evangelical simplicity* as a "detachment from wealth and privilege proposed by the Gospels" (1992, pp. 80-1). This social justice stance is based in an intense awareness of the inequitable distribution of resources and goods in society and around the world, and a brutally honest appraisal that the wealth and status of the few is related structurally and morally to the deep poverty and powerlessness of the many. Additionally, this requires not only a critical intellectual disposition but also a practical refusal to participate in the dominant consumerism and meritocratic individualism of Western culture. Rather than embracing the illusory Western preoccupation with independence and individual achievement, evangelical simplicity involves "a personal belief and personal witness to the radical dependence of all living things on the beneficence of God" (O'Brien, 1992, p. 81). This countercultural recusal of the achievement-oriented, material society that seems to provide security and comfort favors instead a radical solidarity between all persons as equal and fragile creatures who are essentially dependent on God.

When applied specifically to the option for disabled persons, evangelical simplicity includes not only a deep personal commitment to the interdependence of all persons. It also includes a critical understanding of the fragile and universal nature of both independence and dependence; of the way that all persons rely on one another and the physical environment to provide the material means and social support necessary for so-called independent activity; of the temporary, provisional, and unstable nature of physical capacity and independence in a world of calamity and hope; of the underlying, oft-hidden or unacknowledged dependencies

and relationships between all persons that provide the supportive structures of both possibility and oppression.

*Existential solidarity* requires that one live in a space of profound relationship to all persons, recognizing the deep level at which all humans are connected, unified under and through God. For upper middle-class academics or professional persons of the First World who have "never in reality heard the voice or the cry of the poor" (O'Brien, 1992, p. 83), this recognition begins with an understanding that one's cherished and often elevated perspective is skewed by the cultural baggage of privilege and limited by a circle of regular conversation consisting primarily of like minds and similar discourses. The impediments of standpoint, experience, power, and social affiliations have served as obstacles to knowing and relating to the poor.

The theologian or academic of the dominant nations must be freed by a profound act of humility to the realization that she can and must learn from the poor. "For the poor, open to God from the 'underside of history', have a particular experience of God, which ... compliments hers and acts as a corrective to overvaluing it..." (O'Brien, 1992, p. 83). The primary vehicle of solidarity with the poor is listening and learning, attending closely to their words, bursting the parameters of one's customary perspective through full connection with marginalized persons speaking from the underside of history. "To speak for the poor is first of all to speak with them; to speak with them is to create conditions under which they can speak for themselves." (O'Brien, 1992, p. 83).

Likewise, the non-disabled professional or academic may only find solidarity with the disabled community through intentional acts of humility that involve a valuing of relationship and a quieting of one's self-serving assumptions about ability and disability. The experience of disability, while possible within the future of one's life narrative, is presently beyond the scope of the non-disabled person's understanding (e.g. Shapiro, 1993). Further, the conceptualizations of disability that fill one's daily work are marked by ableist cultural assumptions. The goal of humility is to critically dampen one's own preeminent, privileged voice, to open oneself to hearing such that oppressed others may speak.

The need for *transformational analysis* – a deep form of critical social analysis seeking root causes of pervasive, enduring forms of injustice -- springs both from the Christian emphasis on living ethically within a complex, social world and from the assumption that the structures and processes of social world are not readily apparent to the casual observer. To the contrary, the casual observer is overrun with naïve understandings proffered by the dominant discourses of the historical moment, ideological renderings produced by the media, government, the economic marketplace, and other powerful institutions of modern life. Within this casual view – "the illusion of common sense" (O'Brien, 1992, p. 85) – poor, disabled, and marginalized persons are typically hidden from view and silenced from conversational access. "Here theology requires a necessary sociopolitical hermeneutical mediation to deal with sociopolitical reality, just as it would require a psychological hermeneutical mediation to deal with the dynamics of personal spiritual growth" (O'Brien, 1992, p. 84).

The need for an adequate "sociopolitical hermeneutical mediation" brings us to seek a dialogue between the emancipatory social analyses offered by liberation theology and by secular Disability Studies. A thorough investigation of these two intellectual and practical traditions would simultaneously mine the commonalities while noting and learning from the tensions and gaps in between, thereby seeking a "sociopolitical hermeneutical mediation" – a mode of critical social analysis driven by a theological concept of social justice in a world of inequality and oppression – appropriate to a transformational understanding of a preferential option for disabled persons.

*Institutional challenge* emerges from a social application of Martin Luther's phrase *simul justus et peccator* emphasizing the fact that human social organizations are morally ambiguous, perpetuating conditions of both human justice and oppression. One must begin with the assumption that one's own institutions – church, school, government, and so on – are inevitably tied in some way and to some extent to systems and structures of oppression that marginalize the poor, that dehumanize people with disabilities. This brings one to embrace the "need for institutional self-criticism" (O'Brien, 1992, p. 87), for a thorough application of the "sociopolitical hermeneutical mediation" to the very institutions in which one lives, works, and often thrives.

A serious institutional challenge would involve a deep and on-going critique of the wide variety of social systems – education, rehabilitation, research – devised by a non-disabled majority *for* the disabled minority without significant involvement of disabled persons (e.g. Danforth, 1997; Oliver, 1992; Skrtic, 1991, 1995). This challenge would embrace the positive contributions of these systems, organizations, and professions while demystifying the self-celebrating rhetoric that often conceals the many ways that so-called helping systems and professionals are deeply entangled with the complex cultural hegemony that maintains the oppression of people with disabilities.

### **Conclusion: Further Questions**

The initial premise of this paper was that a liberation theology of disability might be deepened by adding the Catholic notion of a preferential option for the poor. As with many theoretical formulations and practical proposals, the result often raises as many questions as it resolves. In conclusion, I would like to briefly put forth three questions (of the many) that this liberation theology of disability provokes: an *experiential* question, an *ecumenical* question, and a *political* question.

The *experiential* question asks us how solidarity of existential and practical dimensions can be forged between persons who have lived the oppression of disability and those who have not. Additionally, given the struggles, misunderstandings, and inequities within the various sub-groups that (attempt to) unite within the disability community, this question asks how a genuine solidarity can also be created across the dividing lines of the many disability identities (e.g. physical disability, intellectual disability, psychiatric disability, etc.). Liberation theology, in a simultaneous stroke of naiveté and utopian hope, calls us to form filial bonds of understanding and love despite vast differences in our personal and political

experiences, despite wide disparity in our relationship to economic and cultural privilege. This is an enormous, daily challenge.

The *ecumenical* question asks how a liberation theology of disability as a combination of spiritual tradition and political movement might inform, augment, and dialogue with other Christian and non-Christian faith traditions toward the practical goal of the emancipation and empowerment of disabled persons. This question invites persons of various faith traditions to bring their intellectual and cultural resources to the table in a dialogue that springs from both spirituality and political necessity, finding common ground within practical activities while also expressing and sharing differences of belief and priority.

The *political* question is broad and multiple, asking for the lived enactment of a liberation theology of disability in relation to concrete issues and concerns within the lives of disabled persons in one's immediate community and across the world. For example, within my own United States, this immediately brings me to ask how an option for disabled persons propels action regarding the failure of the Americans with Disabilities Act to open doors of employment, community-based housing, and educational opportunity. The celebration of the passage of the landmark ADA has long been replaced with a sad awareness that the application of the law within the court system, corporations, and educational institutions has merely continued oppressive circumstances (Krieger, 2003). Activists who worked so hard to pass the legislation are left with a new challenge to revive the law as an active lever of social reform within the broader, ableist culture. How does a liberation theology of disability breathe life and spirit into our understanding, solidarity, and action in this regard?

Liberation theology offers us a unique combination of hopeful patience and edgy intolerance, a focus on the long historical and eschatological road to justice under the Reign of God united with a profound sense of the urgency of our presence and action in the here-and-now. It may be that this unique combination of staying power and practical exigency, a unification of social analysis and critical action over the spiritual and lived dimensions of history/post-history, is the most important contribution of a liberation theology to cause of justice.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>While I explore one strand of Christian theology in this paper, I maintain the value of an open dialogue across the many faith traditions and secular theories, seeking points of political alliance and practical application in the cause of social justice.

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