**Ecclesiology in Liberation Theology**

The focus of liberation theology is the de facto historical-existential experience of a particularly marginalized and/or oppressed group. Its focus is on praxis—faith in action—rather than metaphysics. It as a theological methodology which examines traditional and conventional faith traditions so as to discern how the traditions (operative theologies, institutional structures) themselves may have contributed to and serve to perpetuate situations of marginalization and oppression—as well as to discern how the selfsame traditions may have elements and aspects within them that can facilitate the liberation of the marginalized and/or oppressed.

We will examine liberation theology and its place within ecclesiology through the lenses of Latin American and Feminist Liberation Theologies.

**Latin American Liberation Theology**

Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928-) and Liberation Methodologies

Liberation Theology marks a new way of doing theology which emerged in the 1970's-1980's CE, an approach to theology from the underside/concrete setting of history; i.e., from the vantage point and experiences of those persons who experience systematic oppression and suffering in their local situation:

An oppressive situation is identified and analyzed for its root causes. Liberation Theology is context specific, taking its cue from the suffering of a particular oppressed group and born out of their experience. Recognition of oppression and suffering, in turn, gives rise to a sense of outrage that this ought not to be. This outrage is deemed a religious experience for it impels the judgment that the situation is against the will of God and it awakens within the moral conscience a determination to resist. Liberation Theology is a theological method which makes extensive use of social analysis toward the changing of unjust structures—*critical reflection on praxis*.

The Christian Tradition is analyzed to see if it may have contributed to the oppression under consideration. Additionally, the Christian Tradition is searched for elements which might yield a new understanding and new practice which would be liberating via a **Liberationist Hermeneutical Mediation**.

What does Scripture have to say about the situation? How might religion have contributed to the situation? Focus is on the theme of human liberation presented in the Scripture:

- Paradigmatic event of the Exodus
- Humility of the Incarnation
- Jesus’ central teaching regarding the Kingdom of God
- Jesus’ own example and associations
- Communitarianism of the Trinity


Liberation Theology is directed toward *praxis*—critical action done reflectively. Practical engagement with the forces of oppression is intrinsic to doing Liberation Theology.
Theology that is highly aware of the social nature of human existence—our relatedness to others is an essential aspect of each of us as individuals, as are the structures which determine our relatedness.

The social nature of sin is accentuated, as is the social nature of grace.

An emphasis is placed on realized eschatology as an anticipation of the Kingdom of God; this worldly focus which sees acts of justice as manifestations of God’s saving will.

The Peruvian theologian and priest, Gustavo Gutierrez, has written what many consider to be the seminal work within Liberation Theology, A Theology of Liberation. The text outlines key dimensions of a liberationist methodology:

- **Theology is to have a historical-existential starting point**
  - Commitment to the poor, oppressed, and marginalized
  - Context-/experience-specific
  - Seeks to address injustice
  - Fluid and open to change

- **Ecclesiology is to be marked by the primacy of base ecclesial communities**
  - Sees the Church as a Spirit-led pilgrim
  - Emphasis is on Church as the People of God

  The notion that the Church is a sacrament is accentuated for it implies the Church’s ability to express God’s saving designs for humanity; i.e., the liberation of humankind in history.

  The Church has a prophetic role of denunciation of oppressive realities, and is called to disassociate from unjust realities.

- **Christian ethics is to be characterized by a preferential option for the poor**
  - Exemplified by God and Jesus
  - Poor as agents of their own liberation
  - Committed action in the social, political, and economic spheres

- **Christian ethics is to be attentive to social sin via social analysis**
  - Systemic institutional sin
  - Economic, political, social, etc. patterns and structures which perpetuate injustice

- **Christian ethics is to be praxis-orientated**
  - Faith is to be put into action if social conditions are to be transformed
**Liberation Christology**

The realization that justice is an intrinsic dimension of Christology has been the movement’s main focus. Gutierrez recognizes that Jesus’ preaching, lifestyle, and message had political implications:

Liberation Theologians are critical of the mysticism of the dead Christ, which tends to legitimate suffering as the will of God....

They are also critical of the glorification of the imperial Christ who rules in heaven and has set up authorities on earth to rule in His name and, thus, be obeyed as such.

However, Liberation Theologians find in Jesus one who is on the side of the downtrodden and one who calls oppressors to conversion. Note the Beatitudes, feedings, healings, preferences, etc.

The cross reveals that God is on the side of the one unjustly killed, not the rulers. The cross shows that God is in solidarity with those who unjustly suffer. The Resurrection reveals God’s ultimate vindication of those who suffer.

Gutierrez envisions liberation and salvation as flowing from the following:

- Social analysis—scientific examination and analysis of societies, economics, politics, etc., so as to diagnose issues, problems, and structural causes
- Utopian imagination and hope—alternative visions for a better future so as to inspire and facilitate change and create new just relations among peoples
- Faith providing the religious basis for hope

**Leonardo Boff (1938–): The Holy Spirit and Church in Liberation Theology**

Jesus, in the liberationist perspective, revealed how God continues to unfold His saving activity in history in and through human acts of peace, love, and justice.

Liberationist Pneumatology explores how Jesus’ paradigmatic example becomes internalized and appropriated by human beings; i.e., how does the salvation revealed in Jesus become a part of human life and history?

The Holy Spirit (*Ruah Yahweh*) is the means by which God’s power remains immanent in history:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creation</th>
<th>Jesus–Baptism</th>
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<tr>
<td>Moses/Elders/Joshua</td>
<td>Apostles–Pentecost</td>
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<td>Samuel/David</td>
<td>Ezekiel–Dry Bones</td>
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The Spirit of God always acts to give life and to serve a public function. It is this selfsame Spirit at work within our lives—via the Spirit—that God is existentially and actually experienced in our lives. The Spirit functions in relationship to human freedom; the Spirit draws freedom in history and society toward liberation.

Sin pertains to human freedom. It is the bondage of human freedom to itself within itself; i.e., turned in upon itself and bound by selfishness and egoism; i.e., extended beyond itself toward others only for the sake of using others for one’s self.
The effects of sin are acts which treat others as objects or things, as having no value in and of themselves; i.e., acts injurious to others. As we are aware, such tendencies can be exacerbated via institutional structures.

What the Holy Spirit does is assist us in directing our freedom toward the following:

- **Personal health**: The Spirit frees the human spirit from itself; enabling us to overcome selfishness and egoism; freeing us to be open to self-transcendence
- **Just social relations**: Self-transcending freedom enables us to go outside of ourselves in love and service toward others
- **God**: When one’s freedom is liberated, one comes to understand that one’s freedom and history are leading toward God

In short, the Spirit is God’s presence and power within human existence is drawing freedom out of itself in love, opening up a new horizon of human possibilities.

If it is via our freedom extended outward in love that God’s saving action via the Spirit is actualized in history, then it follows that as we participate in the work of social justice we are united with God.

Boff, in his work, *Ecclesiogenesis*, applied Liberationist teachings to the Church itself (especially the Church of Brazil, his homeland).

Historical-critical approaches to the Scripture (embraced by Vatican II) have yielded awareness that the Church historically emerged post-Resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, the Church is the result of the action of the Spirit; the Spirit led the process of the Church’s unfolding via supplying the early Christians with *charisms* / gifts that gave rise to and sustained the life of the apostolic communities.

This process continues today. Hence, Boff focuses on base ecclesial communities as the Spirit’s means to re-invent the Church.

Seen as founded by the Spirit, rather than as instituted by Christ, new possibilities are opened up for ecclesial structures and practices. If the Church emerged under the inspiration of the Spirit subsequent to the Resurrection, then ecclesial structures ought not to be viewed as permanently instituted by the historical Jesus or as existing by divine right and, therefore, unchangeable. Rather, as the product of the Spirit’s inspiration, new structures are possible as the Spirit continues to give life to the Church. Such structures can be wide-ranging and variant depending upon the needs of a particular community. The emphasis is to be on grassroots churches over and above attention on the hierarchal structures of the Church.

Furthermore, the Church has always acknowledged the *senus fidelium* and the hierarchy as vehicles for truth. However, in recent centuries the tendency has been to accentuate hierarchical authority while minimizing the sense of the faithful, an example of institutional/structural oppression. Combining Pneumatology with Vatican II’s teachings on the People of God, Laity, etc., such a structure of domination and power in the Church ought to be changed.

**Juan Luis Segundo (Uruguay, 1925-1997) and Tissa Balasuriyz (Sri Lanka, 1924-)**: *Liberation Sacramentology*

In many ways, the movement advances the social dimension of the Church and the sacraments introduced at Vatican II in profound and powerful ways.
At the heart of theology, particularly Eucharistic theology, is the notion of service, the Eucharist as a means to raise consciousness about the need for and necessity to form communities dedicated to the liberation of the oppressed.

Key themes of Liberationist Sacramentology include the following:

- Understanding the sacraments as functions of the Church (their meaning as understood within the historical context of a Christian community)
- Emphasizing the prophetic dimension of the sacraments (a call to unity against complacency, tolerance of injustice, and sin)
- The historical efficacy of the sacraments (sacraments are meant to nurture and sustain faith; faith is a commitment of one’s life which plays itself out in praxis; hence the sacraments have their primary efficacy in the way persons lead their lives—this efficacy is, thus, historical)

Such themes are born out of the overarching shift in world view which stresses human consciousness within history...a world view that liberation theologians contend is in harmony with that of Jesus: Incarnation; Our Father; Love Command...

Among liberation theologians, Juan Luis Segundo and Tissa Balasuriya have dealt with the sacraments in the greatest detail; therefore, we will focus on their works, *The Sacraments Today* and *The Eucharist and Human Liberation*, respectively.

Segundo maintains that the meaning behind the sacraments has been distorted over the years as a magical conception of the sacraments has come to dominate due to the emphasis on *ex opere operato*. Underlying such a magical perspective, Segundo argues, is an operative dualism which tends to distinguish the sacred from the profane, the religious from everyday life. A magical understanding emerges as God’s activity is understood to be limited to the activity of certain rites which effect salvation, but do so independent of that which occurs in history:

*Magic is a matter of looking for divine efficacy in certain procedures without any relation to historical efficacy.*

When God’s activity becomes limited to activities independent of worldly activities, Segundo believes that the meaning of the sacraments becomes distorted.

A related problem, according to Segundo, is the notion of community which accompanies such an understanding of the sacraments; the Christian community comes to be deemed valuable simply because it dispenses the sacraments, and its relationship to human history is of little concern. Segundo believes that such a community fails to embody the historically real communities of the New Testament which emphasized mutual concern among members and concern for the world.

Segundo describes sacramental efficacy in such a manner as to accentuate their ability to create communities which will, in turn, be sacraments, themselves. In short, the efficacy of the sacraments is to be measured by the extent to which they are able to help create communities which are true to the Gospels’ call to service. As a result, Segundo calls for a change of focus from the sacraments as means of individual salvation to sacraments as means of communal formation.

The grace communicated by the sacraments ought to be seen as grace which will enable the community to be a serving and liberating force in history.
Note parallels to reforms of Vatican II...

The task of restoring the appropriate meaning of the sacraments begins by returning to Scripture.

The Hebrew Scriptures reveal to us a God who is concerned, active, and brings to realization the redemption and salvation of His people as a community within their historical context—Exodus!

The prophets make it clear that worship of God and liturgical activity within communities that do not actively work for peace, justice, and righteousness is not only efficacious, but is offensive and repugnant to the Lord!

The example of Jesus in the New Testament reveals that he, too, understood liturgical activity within this context (Matthew 5:23-24) as His ministry is dominated by concern for just relationships between human beings.

The Eucharist is seen to be the supreme symbol of Jesus’ self-offering to secure this very end—the giving of oneself for the cause of human liberation, redemption, and salvation.

The Eucharist completes and fulfills the Passover celebration of God’s liberation of humanity. Celebration within the context of a meal is significant for the meal in Jewish thought was an event which rendered persons equals.

Furthermore, the central action of Jesus within the meal, as it was throughout His ministry, was His act of sharing—giving of Himself for the sake of others.

The foot-washing of John’s Gospel only accentuates more powerfully Jesus’ link of the Eucharist with the act of service.

Furthermore, consider how, although John’s Gospel is the latest written, rather than preserve the formula of the rite, it provides the account of the foot-washing. Could it be that John was conveying the importance of what the rite/sacrament is to signify over above the performance of the rite per se?

Also consider how Jesus first has the disciples engage in three years of ministry before introducing them to the Eucharist...

Consider how St. Paul responds to the Corinthian community when they celebrate the Eucharist in a manner which fails to see the meaning behind the eating of the meal...

Furthermore, in Paul how his emphasis was on how the Eucharist enabled the community to become the Body of Christ; the building of a community based on sharing and service was indicative of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and bore upon the sacrament’s efficacy.

The likes of John Chrysostom and Augustine reveal how, for the early Church, the Eucharist was a social act that explicitly demanded service to others in order for it to be authentically celebrated.
Many liberation theologians see the fourth century as a key transition period within the life of the Church, which led to theological developments pertaining to the Eucharist which compromised the community and service emphasis that had hitherto dominated Eucharistic understanding.

The communitarian aspect of the Eucharist began to give way and be subordinated to an understanding of objective real presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine.

The actions of sharing and service carried out by the community were also no longer seen as vital to Eucharistic efficacy.

Furthermore, ideas such as obligatory attendance as means of merit, ritualistic uniformity, etc. tended to accentuate the individual and otherworldly dimension of the sacrament rather than its communal and historical relevance.

A particular and powerful concern to many liberation theologians is the tendency for the Eucharist to not only accompany exploitation and manipulation of persons, but also to frequently be used to legitimate and justify it in the era of crusades and colonization.

Part of the theological/sacramental task of liberation theologians is the restoration of the earliest meaning of the Eucharist and the essential link between the sacrament, community, and service.

In the words of Dermot Lane:

_In so far as this liberating action for justice is absent from the Mass, to this extent we must say an essential element of the Eucharistic mystery is missing. This thesis that Christian action for justice is bound up with the celebration of the Eucharist is as important as the other basic doctrines of the Eucharist such as the real presence, the sacrifice of Calvary, the paschal meal, and the memorial._

In order for this reconnection between the Eucharist and justice to occur, participants must be alerted to the fundamental meaning of that in which they are participating; the Eucharist must raise the consciousness of those celebrating it to the responsibility for effecting social change that the Eucharist bestows upon them.

Liberation theology does not so much seek to compromise or challenge the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic species, but to explore the significance that precisely this presence has in the formation of a community called to service and justice—precisely because it is Christ who is made present!

The contemplative dimension of Eucharistic celebration is of paramount importance and is the prerequisite to the lived Eucharistic life—inner conversion precedes sharing of self and service to others.

_...the Eucharistic signs and symbols do not of themselves change social, political and economic structures; but they should change 700 million hearts and minds, grace them to admit the oppressions of which they are victims and for which they are responsible, inspire them to work for others for the coming of a kingdom characterized by justice and love._
Feminist Liberation Theology

Feminism is dedicated to consciousness raising. This involves four steps:
1. Women telling their stories
2. Analysis of patterns of oppression
3. Recognition that these patterns form the social structures (patriarchal) which shape our lives and color our gender analysis (androcentrism)
4. An understanding that the marginalization of women in social structures is linked to these patterns of oppression

In the theological context, feminism seeks to uncover the ways in which the Christian Tradition has been infected by the ideology of patriarchy. Within patriarchy maleness is defined as the norm, with women defined in terms of their relationships to men.

Some feminist theologians maintain that the Christian Tradition is so infected with patriarchy that it must be abandoned. This group of theologians is considered to belong to the Revolutionary school of thought. Their theological enterprise centers around the creation of worship groups rooted in sisterhood and devotions to the deity as goddess.

Other theologians seek to reform the Tradition by challenging patriarchal structures within Christianity and by attempting to reconstruct the Tradition by focusing attention on the role of women. This group belongs to the Reformist school of thought. Seeking to transform the Tradition via the inclusion and recovery of female voices, and by mining out its liberating elements, this school tends to be an inter-ecclesial enterprise.

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1938-): In Memory of Her, A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins.

Fiorenza takes the stance of a critical historian seeking to discover the role that women played within the history of the Church. Her principle tool is a hermeneutics of suspicion; the suspicion that the history of the Church, even found in its foundational documents, i.e., Scripture, is written from a male perspective. Such a perspective is also one which assumed patriarchal dominance and sought to perpetuate that dominance.

The task of feminist theology is to recover the repressed memories of the role of women in the early Church. A new hermeneutical center is necessary for this task.

Fiorenza proffers the women-church, a movement of women and women-identified men whose commitment and mission is one of solidarity with women who suffer the triple oppressions of sexism, racism, and poverty. It is women’s experiences of oppression and marginalization that grant them privileged status within this hermeneutical center. Such a hermeneutic calls into question church structures which are dominated by men and which tend to exclude women from meaningful participation.

What this women-church seeks is a usable past within the Scripture. Using the Bible as a prototype of liberation, the women-church accepts as inspired truth only that which pertains to matters of salvation, freedom, and liberation of all.

Inasmuch as element of Scripture fails to meet these three criteria, then it is not taken to be inspired. Within this hermeneutical framework the Bible is primarily a source for recovering the liberating impulse of God's action in the world.
Such an approach is considered to be a **pastoral theological paradigm**; the Bible offers a model of life and faith whose significance for today must be illuminated. It is argued that the Bible was written to address the needs of its hearers. The Bible’s role remains the same now. How can its prototypical messages be ascertained and reinterpreted so as to address the contemporary community’s needs?

Hence, present experience, in part, determines the inspiration of a text, and informs their rewriting.

**Elizabeth Johnson (1941-): She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theology**

Johnson’s primary concern is how to properly speak of God. She notes that religious traditions have provided a variety of images, symbols, concepts, and judgments which seek to mediate something of the divine mystery.

Yet within Christianity, the experience of certain symbols has come to dominate (those which speak of God in male terms at the cost of others).

She asks if male symbols are the only ones which can represent divinity. Are women not also the image of God? The answer one provides to these questions has something to say, not only about women, but also about God.

Maintaining that women are also the image and likeness of God, Johnson argues that the dominance of male symbols for the divine, which characterizes the Christian Tradition, is oppressive for it legitimates patriarchal structures and relegates women and children to the margins. She also considers it to be idolatrous for it absolutizes a single set of metaphors and obscures the height, depth, length, and breadth of the divine mystery. Additionally, Johnson maintains that the maleness of Jesus has been used within the Tradition as a mode/paradigm of what it means to be human. This has been interpreted to mean that maleness is closer to what it means to be human than is femaleness.

Johnson’s feminist Christology is critical of the Tradition’s tendency to elevate this particular aspect of Jesus (His maleness) into a universal principle, for this has led to the notion that Jesus’ maleness reveals the maleness of God and that the only proper way to image God is via male images. In short, the maleness of Jesus is taken to be a pointer to the exclusive maleness of God. When God is characterized as male, this has repercussions for women; women find themselves to be less than the image of God and less close to the divine.

She proffers some practical examples to illustrate her point:
- Inclusive language debate
- Parables of the prodigal son vs. lost coin

Johnson proposes that both male and female images of God are equally valid. She justifies this claim by appealing to both Scripture—Sophia, God as Nurser, and Tradition (the incomprehensibility of the divine and the *via analogia*).

The current tendency of the Church comprises the teaching of the First Council of Constantinople which maintained that “what was not taken on, was not saved.”

Johnson interprets the ministry of Jesus as one unleashing a vision of liberating relationships, the antithesis of patriarchy. It is this loving and liberating power of Christ in the midst of oppressive evil which constitutes Him as Savior.
Jesus’ own example resists tendencies toward patriarchy and oppression:

- Preaching regarding the Kingdom of God
- Introducing the notion of God as Abba
- Jesus’ own associations with women and the disciple’s inclusion of them
- *Kenosis* of the cross
- Baptism replacing circumcision
- Women are the principle witnesses of the three principle mysteries of the faith: the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection

**Mary Daly (1928-)** is one of the leading feminist voices in the Revolutionary School; she has come to believe that the Christian Tradition is so infected with patriarchalism that women have no alternative but to abandon the Tradition and form their own goddess religion.

Spawned by the conviction that the Catholic Church has been a major instrument of female oppression throughout the centuries, Daly initially sought to blaze a trail for women’s equality and partnership within the Church. Her earliest work called on both sexes to transcend their differences so as to view one another’s equality. These efforts were short-lived, however, and she soon came to divorce herself completely from the hierarchal Church for she came to believe that the Church’s oppression of women was more than just a matter of female subordination, but also a matter of perpetuating a worldview based upon the “Supreme Phallus”; i.e., she came to believe that the Tradition colored the collective imagination of humanity with its exclusive focus on God in male terms.

At this point she began to call for a transformation of our concept of God; we must cease to anthropomorphize and objectify God altogether. She proposes not speaking of God as a noun but as verb, the active dynamic of all being.

Now, in her current state of life, she has become something “other than Christian” altogether; she deems herself a post-Christian as she sets off to redefine the Tradition in terms of the “life loving being of women and nature” by which women choose to be present to one another and determine the terms, for themselves, of their own self-acceptance.

Her post-Christian religion excludes men and advocates lesbianism as the ultimate means by which women offer themselves to one another free from male influence and approval.

Daly characterizes her efforts as ones of overcoming the “necrophiliac,” patriarchal, and sexist thinking of the Christian imagination with a “gynomorphic” imagination which seek to obliterate patriarchal language and define a new religious “galaxy” in which the Goddess is supreme, the outpouring of women’s own imaginative understandings of the deity.

Her ultimate condemnation of Christianity comes in her portrait of the cross as a distorted fabrication and her call for a goddess mythology. Likewise, she rejects the doctrine of the Trinity as an obliteration of the female.