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Tools for Salvation

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Tools For Salvation

The ongoing, persistent, and unequal nature of suffering leads to the question of “Why do people suffer?”. I do not mean this simply in the sense of, “Why do terrible things happen to good people?”. Rather, “Why is there so much that exists in society that allows for the oppression of others?” Christian theology offers a way to respond to these questions. One general line of response has been the idea that liberation theologians call “integral liberation.” Integral liberation is the “single, all-encompassing salvific process” that is characterized by three distinct levels of meaning: “political liberation, human liberation throughout history, and liberation from sin and admission to communion with God” (Gutierrez 103). The pursuit of all three levels of liberation must be simultaneous to effectively struggle against injustice. This requires overcoming selfishness to build love among people, to inevitably progress toward salvation (Gutierrez 104). However, using the idea of integral liberation as a paradigm only responds to the question of the meaning of suffering in limited ways, as it generates a hierarchy that defines people by limited and essentialist parameters and encourages a dualistic and secular understanding of the human-divine relationship.

Critiquing these hierarchical systems is an indispensable part of a larger project of responding to the question of the *meaning* behind the persistence of oppression and subjugation. This is where we begin to understand how Christian traditions define people, their experiences, and their relationships within the world and each other. Furthermore, to understand the effects of tradition is to develop concepts and ideas to remedy them. I will argue that an understanding of the human-divine relationship grounded in solidarity, understood as both dynamic and dignified, can mitigate the limitations of the more standard view of “integral liberation.”

I will develop this argument by evaluating and synthesizing the arguments of the liberation theologians Gustavo Gutiérrez and Ivone Gebara and the critical theorists Audre Lorde and Houria Bouteldja. I will use these thinkers to critique the dualistic and essentialist features of the theological discourse of integral liberation. To explain and expose dominant understandings of this theological tradition, I first draw on the work of Gutiérrez and Gebara to give an example of a component of said tradition and explain the consequences of maintaining it. I then draw on the critique of essentialism and dualism in the work of and Bouteldja and Lorde to illustrate a way of understanding the human condition in relation to a divine reality, or salvation, which can address the hierarchies implicit within the integral liberationist view. I conclude by re-imagining our experiences as humans in relation to divinity and how that carries implications for the theological understanding of salvation. Understanding salvation by establishing and maintaining solidarity, rooted in the erotic and dignity, can undermine these hierarchies by creating a situation of constant reflection and evolution. I show that salvation, understood as a description of the human participation in an infinite or transcendent reality, lies in this process.

The Limits of Integral Liberation as a Theological Perspective

Biblical and theological tradition justifies various concepts that maintain hierarchies that have the illusion of being moral and just. For instance, Gustavo Gutiérrez analyzes the formation of solidarity, our relationship with one another or connection with each other, through commitment to the poor, in ways that end up justifying core hierarchies. He interprets solidarity as demanded by biblical texts and Christian tradition. The biblical idea of the preferential option for the poor prompts this understanding of solidarity, which then leads to his discussion of “integral liberation.” Like many liberation theologians, Gutiérrez interprets biblical texts to clearly show that God has

a preference for the poor. For example, he uses the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis to define this concept. In Genesis, God prefers Abel to Cain, not because he believes him to be better, but because he preferred the sacrifice of Abel to that of Cain. Cain refuses to acknowledge this preference, so God kills him (151). This means that Cain fails to grasp the idea that one must combine the notion of God's gratuitous love with the option for the poor to achieve solidarity. Therefore, Cain fails to know God by rejecting a relationship with the poor, inevitably rejecting justice, which is key to integral liberation. This then leads to negative implications for the nature of one's relationship with God and the concept of the human condition.

According to Liberation Theology, God's gratuitous love is unexpected and freely given without personal motivation, like ultimate altruism. Gutiérrez describes love in terms not "of cause and effect but of freedom and gratuitousness... in a complete and unconditional way: without payment of any kind of charges and without externally imposed obligations that pressure them into meeting the expectations of the other" (171). However, there is a degree of separation between God and the people that reveals a dualistic structure in Gutiérrez's thought. He separates the divine and the material world. Gutiérrez states, "one might think that one should prefer the poor out of the human compassion. Such compassion is very important but is not the ultimate reason... if I talk of poverty, it is first of all because I am a Christian... the preference stems from God's goodness and it stems from God's gratuitous love..." (145-146). He is implying that the reason that we seek to achieve this love is because of God. God is the ultimate reason and is the embodiment of the love that we must achieve. He considers God as supreme and separate in his love for us and his connection to us, while simultaneously upholding the idea that people should be able to achieve this component of solidarity to reach divinity. When we fail to gain this divinity by replacing the option for the poor with one of punishment and capitalistic concepts focused on those who deserve

and do not deserve blessings, then there is no connection to God (172). Gutiérrez laments the fact that for some people capitalism and the idea of meritocracy replaces the gratuitous and preferential love of God evident in biblical and Christian traditions. In doing this, he projects divine standards on a conditional situation. Gutiérrez expects people to act in a way that is not human; they must participate in and embrace poverty to encounter the divine being, therefore, to encounter salvation. By separating the humanity of people and the poor from their ability to form a relationship with God, he unintentionally creates a paradox that complicates his goal of integral liberation.

Gutiérrez references the 1979 Puebla Conference, which further establishes integral liberation as the active participation and “capacity to take charge of ourselves,” or our abilities to free ourselves from sin to create community (156). The absence of integral liberation is the presence of sin, by which Gutiérrez means a rupture of our relationship with God. The relationship with God is something to be achieved and is therefore something that can be damaged. This sets up the preferential option for the poor as a condition of salvation. Through integral liberation, people must craft solidarity with each other and with the poor to maintain their own relationship with God. Though this response to the suffering of the poor appears morally just, Gutiérrez’s dualistic understanding of the relationship between people, God and the poor prevents him from getting to the root of the problem—that is, the hierarchies that subjugate the poor—and instead, creates a paradoxical situation where subjugation can exist by failing in the pursuit of political liberation. By using the preferential option for the poor in a way that is static and disconnected from the dynamic fluidity of communities’ experiences with hierarchical relationships, Gutiérrez makes an absolute claim about solidarity. This notion of solidarity grounds Gutiérrez’s understanding of integral liberation and, ultimately, salvation. However, a sustainable understanding of solidarity in the present context requires that hierarchies be dismantled.

Gutiérrez's perspective will not allow us to dismantle hierarchical systems because dualism is a component of the hierarchy he critiques. It is ineffective to try to solve a problem with the tools that were meant to build it.

Gutiérrez tries to remedy the toxic consequences of this theological tradition by redefining sin. He implies that sin was initially misused to instill fear, and he reimagines it as a guide, stating that a relationship with God must be something built, and sin is a rupture in that relationship (156-163). He argues that "our experiences in the framework of commitment to the poor and oppressed of Latin America are sending us back to the fundamental ideas in the gospels. It could not be otherwise. These experiences are suggesting new approaches and raising new questions. But at the same time the biblical message is challenging our experiences and shedding light on them" (Gutiérrez 161). To him, sin is the guide to bring people back to the fundamental messages of the bible, which are still crucial to the crafting of new approaches in meeting the demands for a relationship with God. In this way, the Bible functions for Gutiérrez as a universal framework of what not to do. Gutiérrez believes that sin, partnered with grace is the key to fighting for liberation to eliminate systems of oppression within society to reach an ideal form of humanity. Grace is the state of seeking salvation through the pursuit of integral liberation at another level (171).

For Gutiérrez, integral liberation is the only way to respond to sin and truly form a relationship with God: anyone who desires to seek God must follow a certain set of parameters that define particular human experiences. This perspective neither sufficiently acknowledges our personal or cultural components that may influence that relationship, nor recognizes the dynamism or the complexity of the human condition, or alternatively, life. Thus, Gutiérrez's argument is limited in relation to possibilities for meaningful change, once again crafting an inhuman concept that perpetuates hierarchies. Gutiérrez's framework of sin and grace does not easily permit one to

reflect on the ways that we actually experience life, blocking our capacity to enact change. Though he tries to reconcile the damaging nature of the concept of sin by redefining how it is interpreted and used, Gutiérrez's argument leans towards a static form of essentialism by failing to acknowledge or understand the dynamism that is present within reality by making universal claims like "the human person is destined to total communion with God and the fullest fellowship with all other persons... to sin is to refuse to love, to reject communion and fellowship, to reject even now the very meaning of human existence" (Gutierrez 153).

In *Longing for Running Water* (1989), liberation theologian Ivone Gebara tries to avoid the binaries and hierarchies of Gutiérrez by describing salvation as the commitment to the process of conversion to the neighbor; it is the state of being committed to solidarity: "Conversion is a permanent process in which very often the obstacles we meet make us lose everything we had gained and start anew... we must break with... all that can stand in the way of a real, profound solidarity with those that suffer..." (Gebara 118). Salvation cannot exist without the maintenance of solidarity. This means a radical transformation of ourselves, from thinking and living in godlike terms, to thinking and living as Christ by shifting the perspective of integral liberation to that of connection to the neighbor--- the poor and oppressed. This shift is what links us to the *spirituality* of liberation, which is connection. We then strive and commit ourselves to liberate all people, realistically and concretely. The spirituality of liberation is the concrete addressing of hierarchical structures, an acknowledgement of the role solidarity plays within salvation without defining it and falling into elements of idolatry like dualism and essentialism. Gebara states that, "from this perspective, it seems that the centrality of Jesus opens us to the centrality of person, especially the outcast, and to the need to invest in what we could call our 'salvation' in the here and now" (180). Jesus is a symbol of love and connection, of relatedness and justice and awareness of human

suffering. She speaks of Jesus “as a center of loving energy among us” (181). He is an embodiment of the solidarity that we struggle to achieve and symbolizes a way of addressing the world around us. Part of this, “relatedness” is “the underlying fabric that is continually brought forth in the vital process in which we are immersed. Its interwoven fibers do not exist separately, but only in perfect reciprocity with one another--- in space, in time; in origin and into the future...the constitutive relationship of communion we have with all beings” (83). Furthermore, “it reflects a dynamic that is a component of our very humanness” (Gebara 85).

This seems to solve the problem of dualism, but her description of relatedness can be interpreted as vague. Her idea of innate human connection does not effectively define human experience to reach the purpose of solidarity. Gebara states that “we have the poignant experience, despite our limitations, of discovering our ability to intuit greatness of the mystery that we are and within which we have our being” (104). However, her claim that experience is everything does not recognize that some people will not develop that ability to intuit or, in other words, achieve the consciousness and awareness of the world and its people. Only in the experience of understanding connectivity, can we begin to experience divinity and consequently salvation. Further, experiences of relatedness may not lead all people to a political process of solidarity that could impact the conditions of the poor. This limits the tangibility of Gebara’s perspective by not addressing the problem of what happens when people choose not to acknowledge relatedness or have yet to discover their ability to intuit through their awareness.

Gebara also admits that the concepts of sin and grace define an ideal human form, separate from what exists in the present-day world in order to attain a relationship described in biblical texts (Gebara 32-34, 95-96). Gebara explains how essentialist ways of thinking close people off from closeness, compassion, and tenderness, and ultimately relatedness---the solidarity among people,

which allows for and justifies the existence of hierarchical worldviews and injustice. In Gebara's point of view, sin redirects the thoughts and motivations of people into individualistic ideals, destroying relatedness, therefore causing us to reject divinity within each other. This causes us to reject the true, flawed form of the human person, blocking us from the dynamism that makes up the human condition (Gebara 95-96). Once we make static claims, we then allow those in power to define sin, and give them the power to craft these social structures to dominate diverse groups of people and control their situations, by allowing them to define what the human person is. Gebara describes essentialism as beyond the multitude of emotions, the complexity of human expression, and human capacities and history, which inevitably leads to perpetuation of injustice (77). It perpetuates injustice by assuming that there is an ideal form of the human person, eliminating the diversity in which people experience life, therefore, erasing the disparities people face based on their differences. She acknowledges that by not prioritizing our dynamism and ignoring our multifaceted existence, we can fall into essentialism, the belief that one form of reality is universal for all (Gebara 30-34). We begin to define ourselves by a framework that reflects a God that is completely removed and superior to the actions and existence of humanity. This framework generates fear that causes us to withdraw from the dynamism of life and instills a static sense of the human identity by removing the human condition itself from serious reflection. In other words, sin is used as a fundamental guide to grace, which generates a negative idea of the human person and the relationship people have with God, creating an unrealistic and unattainable concept of the human condition.

Mending Disruptions in the Essentialist Understanding of the Human Condition or Situation: An Analysis of Dignity and the Erotic

In contrast, critical theorist Houria Bouteldja, in *White, Jews, and Us* (2016), acknowledges the difficulty of avoiding hierarchy. In his analysis of secularism, Bouteldja describes secularism as a basic source of suffering: it “played hard to get... the immigrant... gave himself over to the taxation of sweat... to prove his skills...” (106). Secularism is a modern form of the prosperity gospel—that is, the belief that those who are good and productive within the established parameters of society are rewarded with good things in life. The belief that that being productive is what makes a person good and true at heart and shows that you are a human being that deserves success and blessings is at the heart of a secularist ethos. However, within this ideal of secularism, people of color are forced to prove themselves within Eurocentric, colonial notions of modernity, but are almost never able to achieve it because they rarely do not benefit from coloniality—the worldview of colonialism. Bouteldja puts this concisely: “Harki never became French, a luxury only Europeans can afford” (116). The outsider can only try to become secular by proving themselves within an impossible colonial standard: “the Arab man is miserable there, he will never be worth anything, even if he is the colonel Bendaoued himself” (Bouteldja 108). Success within a secular framework entails oppressed people work themselves to the bone: “When he was most elegant, the immigrant knew how to let himself die before retirement” (Bouteldja 106).

Bouteldja’s work accordingly introduces concepts that can allow us to use relatedness to prompt political processes of solidarity. Bouteldja’s notion of dignity makes a normative or ethical claim about relationships. Dignity is “the consciousness of itself and the consciousness of the other, of the finitude of these two, antagonistic poles... Dignity is in our ability to distinguish stars from sequins. All this artifice that white people saddle themselves with to maintain a distance to subjugate us” (Bouteldja 126). Dignity can push the concept of relatedness by focusing on the awareness that we are responsible for others. Together, the concepts indicate the relationship

people have with God while taking seriously the reality of suffering and oppression. Bouteldja acknowledges the full impact of hierarchies. Dignity is what gives people the ability to recognize the systems they do not benefit from, and once people gain awareness understanding of their situation, it is easier not to want or follow those systems that force people into poverty in the hierarchy. Bouteldja's concept of dignity stabilizes Gebara's concept of relatedness and can offer a lens to critique the essentialist notion of the human person within Gutiérrez's liberation theology.

Bouteldja also goes further than Gebara by describing solidarity in a way that makes a specific claim about human experience. She defines dignity as a struggle which builds consciousness. Dignity is the process of becoming aware through the human experience of struggle, and through that awareness, we generate solidarity. Having dignity is being a part of the 'decolonizing struggle,' which eradicates the Eurocentric constructs of hierarchy that she describes as "...this complex of vanity is born blasphemous theories on the superiority of white people over non-white people, on the superiority of men over women, on the superiority of humans over animals" (132). Dignity makes apparent how inappropriate hierarchy is in the context of the human situation. Thus, it puts "all men, back in their place, without any form of hierarchy...Thus white people take their place alongside all their brothers and sisters in humanity....," putting everyone on equal footing, allowing people to see that human beings are only humble creatures at are present within the world (Bouteldja 134). "For what are these white people doing above his head wiping themselves on him, walking all over him, when their destiny as taught in the bible, their own book, is *to return to ashes*" (Bouteldja 137). We are all connected, we are all the same substance and exist within the same world, all struggling to approach the infinite while we see ourselves as finite. This is what it means to have dignity, to struggle to remove ourselves from hierarchical standards and to become aware of our conditions within them. Simply defining experience, allows us to have

a more tangible understanding of the innate human connection between all of us, in relation to our human situation.

Audre Lorde also warns against an ideal human-divine relationship that misunderstands the human condition of dynamism and leads toward essentialism. By defining the human condition with the concept of sin and grace, we lose access to what Lorde calls the “chaos of knowledge,” which can be understood as concrete human experiences that reflect the multidimensional components of life--- the dynamism of life that can catalyze change (Lorde 111-112). Lorde describes sin as fear and as being the “gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes a ruling obsession” (Lorde 56). The fear that sin generates turns the concept of sin into an obsession, not a guide, which retracts from the dynamism of life by leading to the rejection of oneself and the human situation. Lorde states “...when we live away from those erotic guides...our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need...” (58). The erotic, like the chaos of knowledge, is our dynamism. The external and alien form is the orientation towards deeper meaning in something that is outside ourselves and that is understood to be the perfect version of the flawed lives humanity lives.

This unattainable “perfect” form of the human person boxes diverse groups of people in the image of the patriarchal European ideal of living. People of color and the poor are forced into identifying with a lifestyle that was curated by elite, European men, one in which they do not fit. This then creates hierarchies, leading to those that are farthest from the ideal to experience the most injustice. Using sin as an interpretive key in this way is not radical; it is not actually inciting justice and change. It is still upholding static notions that allow for the perpetuation of injustice, which could be illuminated by Lorde’s idea that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (112). Using sin, a concept that has existed within patriarchal, classical theology

for so long, still grants power to those that utilize the concept of sin because they can still decide how they want to use it: “It means that only the narrowest parameters of change are possible and allowable” (Lorde 111). Lorde would consider such an orientation as “demanding the impossible from ourselves,” and “Such a demand incapacitates everyone in the process” (Lorde 54). Shifting the concepts we use to interpret the human person from sin and grace to the erotic and relatedness partnered with dignity would allow for embracing the chaos and radical change. Crafting a sense of interdependence would make change less scary to those that are not used to it. This would ensure that new tools are being made to craft an entirely new house. In “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Lorde describes the human condition as imbued with “ideas which are...nameless and formless about to be birthed, but already felt...an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling” (36-37). She connects this condition to the notion of the erotic, which she describes as “a resource within each of us... Firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (Lorde 53). Lorde argues that this hidden power is where true knowledge and wisdom lies, and therefore lasting action follows (Lorde 37). Because the erotic is part of us, it offers us the tools for ongoing critical reflection that can stimulate change within society.

Lorde’s discussion of the erotic remedies the vagueness of Gebara’s concept of relatedness. For Lorde, relatedness is solidarity that is grounded in the human condition. This acknowledges the dynamism of life, and allows for reflection and knowledge—that is, tools that lead to the dismantling of injustice. Lorde goes on to say that through embracing our condition, it charts a revolutionary demand and lays the foundation of the struggle for freedom (38). Salvation is an all-encompassing relationship. It is the condition of being a part of the human-divine relationship that is attained through embracing the human experiences of the erotic and relatedness through dignity.

It is something that is natural, something that is there, something that just *is*. It is a component of who we are, like how breathing is a component of living. Salvation is innate. Salvation lies in struggle, a component of the human condition that has always been present and will forever be present. It is the basis of human progress. Struggle to me is constant reflection, constant motion, and constant change. When we focus on salvation through the lens of the human experience and condition, we can overcome the hurdles of tradition.

Overall, salvation is our struggle to be in solidarity with others and to build a just and humane society; a struggle that never stops. Salvation is the point where we reach awareness and consciousness to reflect-- to constantly evolve and grow. Combining elements of dynamism through the use of the erotic and dignity to achieve and maintain relatedness has the potential to generate an ever-evolving environment where change is no longer feared but accepted and embraced. This is necessary to destroy the existing hierarchies that are present within our modern situation and to provide people with the tools they need to prevent them from gaining power again. As people, we must commit ourselves to the solidarity through the pursuit of the spirituality of liberation, to maintain a state salvation. To fight this ever-prolonged battle is to reflect, and to reflect is to understand more than the limited concepts of tradition; it is to understand that recognizing the dynamism of life allows us to achieve solidarity. When we reinforce it with dignity, a constantly evolving condition is created that allows us to realize salvation.

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