

Research Article

Defining Poverty in Liberation Theology: Poverty as Religio-Historical Realidad

George Harold Trudeau* 

Divinity, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, The United States

Abstract

Poverty is a complex, embodied reality comprising the existential, social, material, and spiritual. This paper draws from liberation theologies from North and South America, defining poverty as a religio-historical *realidad*. Martin Luther King Jr. observed a disembodied spirituality in many American churches who remained apathetic or antagonistic during the Civil Rights Movement. Conversely, James Cone reversed the issue by providing a theological system which utilizes hyper-materialistic presuppositions. By examining the broader Liberation tradition, a more robust theological definition of poverty can be construed. Systems of poverty are systems of death, whereas enrichment are processes of life. Embodiment was used during colonial Christianity as a market identity in order to justify conquest. Liberation theologians reclaim creatureliness in their fight against poverty, and fight for restored identity. Each section of the paper addresses major trajectories within the broad Liberation tradition. North American liberationists analyze poverty from the perspective of racial oppression enforced through visible bodies. South American liberationists created a systematic, biblical definition of poverty while primarily addressing economic exploitation. Feminists addressed their male-dominated worlds addressing quality and quantity of life issues. Both North American and South American theologians agree that Christ identifies with the poor and understands their plight. In the end, Christ is understood as a liberator who is Lord over the material, spiritual, personal, and social.

Keywords

Poverty, Poor, Realidad, Embodiment, Liberation Theology

1. Introduction

When Martin Luther King Jr. critiqued American religion for its hyper-dualistic temperament, he did so from an embodied religious tradition. King criticized ministers who hold to a “completely otherworldly religion” rooted in a false dichotomy of “bodies and souls” [19]. His public defense for embodied religion was a snapshot of how African-American Christianity assesses poverty and injustice. The disembodied nature of “white” Christianity is almost paradoxical given that race was defined through white and black bodies during the

Atlantic Slave Trade. Jennings clarifies how colonial Christianity “drove an abiding wedge between the land and peoples,” classifying people groups into racial categories within a colonial framework [18]. Embodiment and land becomes secondary in the new diaspora for “*displaced* slave bodies, will come to represent a natural state” to be relocated in a spiritual “Christian identity” [18]. Embodiment becomes a market concern while the Christianization of the enslaved provides their new identity. In spite of their white supremacist

*Corresponding author: georgehtrudeau@gmail.com (George Harold Trudeau)

Received: 18 January 2024; **Accepted:** 26 January 2024; **Published:** 2 April 2024



Copyright: © The Author(s), 2024. Published by Science Publishing Group. This is an **Open Access** article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

context, King and other Civil Rights Christians practiced an embodied Christianity sustained during slavery and Jim Crow. King's critique simultaneously opposed religious moderates who downplayed the role of faith-filled social action, and anticipated (perhaps unintentionally) the emerging New Left who utilized secular means of activism and Marxist analysis. James Cone's theology, informed by secular, leftist movements, would reverse the problem of disembodied faith with a hyper-materialistic system of thought that is not reflected in the broader tradition of Liberation Theology.

2. Disembodiment, Embodiment, and Materialism

While not a social gospel in name, religious segregationists embraced misguided forms of social justice and embodied life, believing that segregation of the races was God's created order. They promoted social action that reinforced government segregation. One of the key motivators against the Civil Rights movement was that integration would result in miscegenation. According to Hall, fear of race mixing was an "anxiety" rooted in the "Old South" which persisted during the Cold War Era [16]. Miscegenation was a distortion of God's creation and an evil to their sense of embodied life. Preserving segregation protected the races from being "mongrelize[d]," as well as "an overreaching federal government" [16]. Advocating for segregation through local and state government promoted their vision of a just society—segregated communities without interference from the federal government.

Moderates on Civil Rights shifted concerns from the public square to spiritual matters in a manner that was more consistent with their anti-modernist tradition. One example of a moderate stance toward segregation was the evangelist, Billy Graham. Swartz accounts how "Billy Graham cautiously promoted racial integration in the South as the civil rights movement gained momentum" [27]. Famously, Graham desegregated his Jackson, Mississippi crusade on the basis that segregation was unscriptural. The reason for his cautious support of Civil Rights is complex, but one reason for his timidity was the apolitical nature of Evangelical ethics. After the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy, "fundamentalist evangelicals devoted much more time to congregational life, holy living, and missionary work than to partisan politics" [27]. By avoiding partisan politics "Evangelical apoliticism" was "often overshadowed by a much louder ... far-right fundamentalism" [27]. Despite this, Graham's apoliticism was selective as would become apparent in Nixon-era politics. Generally speaking, racially moderate evangelicals remained resolved on soul-winning as a preparation for the next world with a curtailed interest in enriching life in the present. Preaching the gospel to the world was more important than marching for civil liberties because social action was associated with the Social Gospel. Evangelical magazine *Christi-*

anity Today, "condemned civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. as a disrupter of societal order" [28]. In sum, Evangelicals adopted an otherworldly, disembodied religion at the expense of racial injustice and biblical truth. However, there was a new movement developing in American discourse that was embracing implicit forms of hyper-materialism.

Unlike the racial moderates and segregationists, the New Left was marked by a desire to push against the societal order. The New Left went beyond Civil Rights era protests which opposed militancy, favoring "nonviolent resistance towards oppression," and "organis[ing] through the Church and Church-based ministries" [30]. Non-violent direct action was based on the Sermon on the Mount ethics taught by Jesus and the method applied by Mohandas K Gandhi. King and the Black Church used their religious foundation to protest segregation. By contrast, the forefront leftist organization, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), was based within academia and embraced militant activism. As the Vietnam War persisted, so did growing militancy and activism within SDS [26]. Many within the SDS were radicalized by "amping up the revolutionary tone of their rhetoric, using more Marxist-sounding phraseology" [26]. Appealing to a pseudo-Marxist tradition, the radical left-wing advanced for social change through a materialistic lens rather than a spiritual one. So then, the different ideological bases of the Civil Rights protests (which were primarily religious) and New Leftist protests (which were primarily academic) produced two different protest ethics—nonviolent and militant action.

Black institutions also saw a rise in Marxist rhetoric and militant activism. A tangible shift from the religious ethic of King to a secularized form of protest can be seen in the "Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC)'s transformation from a non-violent, integrationist organisation into a militant, separatist, Black Power movement" as well as the affiliated Black Panther Party [30]. Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panthers were "extremely critical of white liberalism" in favor of Marxist ideology [29]. Even white liberals were complicit in the economic exploitation of lower-class African Americans revealing their participation in racist oppression. Carmichael addressed the "the economic forms of institutionalized racism," especially in the ghettos [29]. While James Cone did not adopt all the secular ideologies of the Black Power movement, the core tenets of his theology are based on subjective and materialistic presuppositions.

Cone's underlying materialistic presuppositions can be seen in his assertion that revelation is the sum of social interaction. Bradley observes his "anthropology begins and ends with the experience of the human person in relation to other persons, not as a creature created by a triune God" [4]. Even revelation is "filtered through human experience," as opposed to being a self-disclosure from God [8]. This means "social perceptions determine theological questions and conclusions" [4]. The driving motive of using Marxism as an interpretive system is to protect "the black church from white

theology and white oppression” [4]. Just as the Black Power movement prioritized a socioeconomic lens over the Christian lens of the Civil Rights movement, so Cone sidelined the supernatural nature of humanity and the Bible in favor a secularized religion of Black Power. In the final analysis, Bradley concludes that Cone’s method has the same problem as his white oppressors: “using socioeconomics to drive one’s theological reflections” [4]. The market-driven materialism of Conian theology distorted the biblical unity of embodied, spiritual life discussed within the larger Liberation tradition. J. Deotis Roberts and South American theologians, for example, used more careful biblical exegesis to arrive at their conclusions on poverty and injustice. By examining the broader Liberation tradition of the Americas, one can find a thorough definition of poverty that corresponds to a spiritual-embodied anthropology.

When analyzed in the broader Americas, Liberation Theology corrects how Westerners view poverty through their integration, or reintegration, of physical and spiritual realities. Rather than viewing poverty as a materialistic, economic reality; or an inconvenience to the body that is of no concern for the soul; liberationists view poverty on the basis of historical *realidad*—or reality.¹ Poverty is a reality connected with all areas of life including political corruption, social violence, racial caste, economic exploitation, and basic necessities. Life itself is multi-faceted, encompassing daily needs, community, *fiesta*, and spiritual practice. Enrichment, then, is practiced within an embodied reality, measured by a life-and-death framework.² In fact, a “concern for life itself as the criterion for judging economic institutions,” is a unique “contribution from liberation theology” [10]. By combining biblical theology and economic (often Marxist) analysis, liberationists combine Christian spirituality and dialectical materialism to recapture embodied religion.

To understand poverty as religio-historical *realidad*, North and South American theological streams will be examined and integrated together. Each strand of liberation theology addresses different contextual aspects of theology. Vuola argues that “Each liberation theology, whether black, feminist or Latin American, is characterized by its distinctive viewpoint,” but they share a “commitment to social justice” [31]. So then, variances in poverty definitions signify distinct contextual realities each theologian tries to address. Three key areas of divergence emerge when defining poverty. First, South America does not share the same history of race when defining collective identities, leaving African Americans to address the poverty of their ascribed status to a greater degree. Second, rights themselves are viewed individualistically in

the North while the South views rights collectively. Lastly, enrichment is viewed on a basic-necessities front and a quality-of-life front depending on the degree of one’s poverty. When analyzed through a religio-historical *realidad* lens, poverty is a historical look at how systems of death developed in order to create life-giving systems in their place, while concurrently laboring for Christian formation and ultimate kingdom realization.

3. North America: Poverty as Racial Oppression and Distorted Self-Worth

North American Liberation Theology is embedded in the history of race-based discrimination. The visibility of blackness means that “[b]lack bodies are the ever-visible counterweight of a usually invisible white identity” [18]. Invisible whiteness and white supremacy are made visible in Black Theology for the purpose of dismantling hierarchy. James Cone defines poverty on racial lines as a hierarchy reinforced by capitalistic exploitation. He observes, “the right of businessmen to pursue without restraint” “is extolled by Western capitalistic democracies” [7]. White supremacy deteriorates black people both economically and existentially. Black Power is “an attitude, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness” [7]. Therefore, poverty is an existential disposition of low self-worth. After generations of being treated as lesser, he speaks into African American’s existential poverty by emphasizing a religion based upon “black freedom, black self-determination,” where black people see themselves as “human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny” [7]. Even the name Black Theology is evidence that understanding liberation requires an understanding of race.

Black bodies became signifiers of inferiority and servitude during colonization. The English colonizers had “less interaction with non-White racial groupings” than Spaniards who had previous exposure to the Moors, and kept strict anti-miscegenation laws which made their racial categories more stable [25]. As a result of the institution of slavery and segregation, race became an “ascribed status” that could be easily enforced through visible bodies [25]. By keeping the races separate the colonials could more easily force Africans to assimilate: for “[c]ultural assimilation and segregationist mentality are always bound together” [18]. By comparison, the *mestizaje* (or miscegenetic) nature of Latin America, “allows for the construction of race as an achieved status” because of the instability of its racial groupings [25].

Cone’s existential affirmation is blackness is rooted in the black ontology of Christ while his critic, Roberts, argues for a self-worth based on creation. The key difference is each theologian’s understanding of race and Christology. Ultimately, Cone’s definition of blackness is based on victimhood and an over-spiritualization of poverty. Anthony Bradley’s book *Liberating Black Theology* states how Conian theology rein-

1 Realidad is the Spanish word for reality. Latin American Theology shifts theology from abstract reflection to a practice that moves through history and society. The idea of historical reality is heavily gleaned from Ignacio Ellacuria’s works. Unlike North American concepts of reality which can be heavily materialistic, Latin American understanding would encompass all of life, death, and spirituality. Maria Clara Bingemer, *Latin American Theology: Roots and Branches*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2016), 13-14.

2 A further discussion on life and death can be seen in section 4.

forces a victimology complex due to tying black and oppression as inextricable identities [4]. Cone states that “all oppressed peoples become his people” [6]. Since Christ incarnated as a Jewish person under Roman occupation, he identified unconditionally with the oppressed. Therefore, Christ becomes black in the present day since to be black is to be oppressed: “He *is* black because he *was* a Jew” [8]. Cone essentializes blackness and poverty linking someone’s value to their level of suffering.

Roberts’ affirmation of self-worth, against a backdrop of impoverished esteem, is rooted in creation rather than hamartiology. Echoing the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, he declares, “We know we are ‘somebody.’ God created us as ‘somebody’” [22]. Even Roberts’ premise that liberation precedes reconciliation presumes that race and oppression are not bedrock identities [23].³ When considering Christ’s relationship to the black community, he asserts that Christ is symbolically or mythologically black but “the Christ to which the black Messiah points is above culture” [9]. In other words, Jesus meets individuals in their social location. Race is not an essential identifier of being human. To further show this, Roberts recognizes and gleans from the Third World, which is to say developing countries. Roberts wants black theologians to “humanize relations between the West and the Third World” [6]. He views the poor through a multi-cultural lens incorporating their views in his theological development.

Cone and Roberts’ definition of poverty is socio-religious, meaning that they are just as concerned with addressing self-worth as they are with class uplift. Racism and classism are imbedded with one another and their discrimination powers are enforced through the visibility of black bodies. Humans participate unconsciously in evil economic systems that have historically been incentivized to exploit black people. He cites the example of Methodists who softened on the issue of slavery for market motive. For when “cotton became king, the churches allowed the change in social reality to influence a change in their religious views” [8]. Since White Theology has been corrupted by economic motive, Black Theology must revive religious discourse through demonstration of human dignity. Cone’s interest in class goes only so far as it relates to race but the second generation of Black Theology would cultivate a richer understanding of the interplay of race and class.

Cornel West’s 1979 essay, “Black Theology and Marxist Thought,” marked a new chapter in Black Theology that addressed social uplift with greater emphasis. Hopkins recounts how West’s understanding of Marxism allowed for an “objective method and analysis,” that could recast the poor as “working people” [17]. In his 1982 book *Prophesy Deliverance!* he argues for an Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity which utilizes a prophetic, Christian worldview, rooted

in “dialectical historicism,” and “Afro-American humanism” [32]. His brand of Christianity employs a deep contextual understanding and embraces the marginality of being a black, prophetic Christian. A prophetic Christian is one “whose focus is on coping with transient and provisional penultimate matters yet whose hope goes beyond them” [33]. When critiquing economic structures, he does so using “social theory and political praxis of progressive Marxism,” but his Marxism is informed by Christian humanism [32]. In this sense, West’s Black Theology is doubly marginal for he brings the dialectical materialism of Marxism into Christian theology in order to enhance class analysis and uplift. He is also a marginal Marxist because of his spiritual import of Black Christian ethics which rejects anti-humanism, totalitarianism, and materialism.

4. South America: Poverty as Life and Death

When the Bishops of Medellin and Gustavo Gutierrez defined poverty, they were not as concerned with race as they were with the legacy left by colonialism and economic exploitation. As Nesson argues, the “original ethical impulse” of Liberation Theology was to address poverty from an “economic” lens [20]. However, the South American theologians were also assessing poverty from a biblical lens. It was Gutiérrez who “first gave a systematic definition of poverty” using Christian Scripture [31]. Poverty is firstly defined as a spiritual virtue that all people of faith must attain, and secondly an evil socio-spiritual reality that should be detested. Gutierrez calls spiritual poverty a “spiritual childhood” and a “precondition for approaching God” [14]. When discussing poverty as a social status, it is broken into two subset definitions—voluntary and involuntary.

Voluntary, Christ-like poverty is when someone assumes the “conditions of the needy of this world in order to bear witness to the evil” [5]. Involuntary poverty “is a ‘lack of the goods of this world necessary to live worthily as men.’ It is ‘evil’ and often the ‘fruit of injustice and the sin of man’ [5]. When viewed from a biblical lens, Gutierrez observes that the word poor in the Bible carries the connotations of “[i]ndigent, weak, bent over, wretched” to express “a degrading human situation,” that is “contrary to the will of God” [14]. Early South American liberationists understand the objective nature of poverty through biblical revelation, but they do not fully flesh out the subjective nature of poverty. As Vuola argues, they “[speak] about ‘the poor’” in a “homogeneous context,” but they do not take into “account the fact that poverty affects people differently depending on factors like their gender or race” [31]. Comparatively, Black Theology, Womanism, and later-stage South American theology shifted concerns for the poor from objects to subjects. By exploring the existential nature of poverty, both in terms of race and gender, Liberationists articulated the many ways people’s self-worth can be

³ Roberts asserts that the “two main poles of Black Theology” are “[l]iberation and reconciliation” and that more naturally moves from “one to the other.” J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2005), 8.

distorted.

While the original penning of *A Theology of Liberation* did not address race, Gutierrez comments on racial mores in Latin American countries. He expresses in the 1988 preface, “One of our social lies has been the claim that there is no racism in Latin America. There may indeed be no racist laws as in some other countries, but there are very rigid racist customs that are no less serious for being hidden” [14]. He harkens back to the arrival of the Spaniards and Portuguese who destroyed indigenous cultures due to myths of superiority and inferiority. With the accomplice of the church, “[t]he culture of the native people was likewise decimated, submerged beneath that of their conquerors” [20]. So then, if South America was not immune to systems of racism why did Liberation Theology fail to address its existence?

As stated before, race in Latin America was and is an achieved status rather than the ascribed status of the enslaved in North America. Due to the *mestizo* phenomenon of Latin America, many “racial groupings are based less on the biological physical features and more on an intersection between physical features and social features such as economic class, dress, education, and context” [25]. In other words, cultural practices play a larger role in identity than race in Latin America. In the earliest period of colonial history, the tripartite identity of South America was being forged. As Cuban-American theologian Gonzalez reflects, a “new race was being born,” in Latin America, “one that included elements from” “the Indo-American, the European and the African” [11]. The three streams of cultures immediately began to intersect. Historian Arana observes, by the 1700s, “when the Liberator [Simon Bolivar] was born,” “Venezuela had 800,000 inhabitants, of whom more than half were mestizo or mulatto” [1]. Race-mixing began early in Latin American history making racism, as is understood from a segregated perspective, difficult to enforce through visible bodies. Today, two-thirds of the Latin American population is currently mixed-race solidifying the *mestizo* identity [1].

The ethnic complexity of Latin America was created by a process of transculturation which could more easily preserve traditions from the indigenous and African peoples. By that measure, it also makes racism more implicit as observed by Gutierrez. Ortiz originally coined the term transculturation to better define the hybridity of Cuban identity. Prior to Ortiz, many understood Latin American identity as a process of acculturation. He explains, “acculturation really implies... the loss or uprooting of a previous culture” in place of a new identity [21]. However, Latin America did not accept wholesale European culture. Ortiz explains the uniqueness of Cuban history saying, “The real history of Cuba is the history of its intermeshed transculturations” [21]. The intermeshing began with the natives who came into contact with an “unbroken stream of white immigrants” from Iberia and slaves from West Africa [21]. As a result of interracial contact, “they had to readjust themselves to a new syncretism of cultures” [21]. Each stream of peoples changed what it meant to be

Cuban. Cuban is native, European, and African and it is also none of those cultures. Gonzalez confirms that being *mestizo* “is to belong” to several realities “and at the same time not to belong to either of them” [11]. This is to say to be Latin is to be *mestizo*—a transculturated, displaced, ethnically complex reality, containing a syncretism of several cultures.

Classism is a shared concern for North and South American Liberation theologies, and theologians within each region embrace varying degrees of Marxism. For instance, the Boff brothers and other Catholic theologians reject the materialism and atheism of Marxism, but they use it “purely as an instrument” to understand poverty [3]. Nevertheless, what North American intellectuals may call materialism and Marxism, South Americans call *realidad* or reality [2]. Daily living is a chief concern for developing countries and so ethics are assessed through what produces life and what produces death. Fitzgerald observes how tangible ethics and economics are in Latin America. Life is “expressed by work, land, house, food, health, education, family, participation, culture, environment, and even *fiesta*” [10]. *Fiesta* is a vital aspect of life for it provides a source of community and happiness during hardship. *Fiesta* recognizes “the realities of life are not merely economic” because life is not the sum of basic necessities [10]. Still, there is no dualism of spirit and body, “there is only a single reality of life or of death,” for when “a person loses their job or their land they lose life itself” [10]. To lose one of the aspects that sustains life—income, food, land, *fiesta*, community—is to inch toward death because humanity is a unity of body and soul. Therefore, the progressive Marxist method employed by West would be superfluous to many in the global South due to their immediate connection with life and death.

Viewing the poor through the lens of class materialism objectifies the poor as mere objects of charity and thus does not view life through *realidad*. Humanity is body and soul and Christ embodies full humanity. Boff argues the poor of society project “the disfigured image of God,” and the “Son of God made the suffering servant” [3]. Christ’s passion acts as a myth, or meaningful story, that the afflicted can identify with. For this reason, they are not just “persons who are socially oppressed,” they are “agents of history” [3]. Viewing the poor Christologically affirms their value in God’s eyes and re-centers the societal focus from the privileged to the least of these. True love of the poor is empowerment, reinstating the poor’s humanity in a world that seeks to use them for profit. Empowerment makes the poor “subjects of their own liberation” [3]. Synthesizing class analysis and biblical Christology is a way to see the material cause of poverty without reducing poverty as a formal cause. So then, classism is the main definer of poverty in South America and racism is of little concern because of the *mestizo* culture of Latin America. Yet, in the 1980s, the Boff brothers argued to expand the definition of poor beyond the “socio-economic aspect of oppression,” to include racial, ethnic, and sexual oppression [3].

The way racial solidarity is chiefly expressed in Latin

America is through advocacy for indigenous people groups and their connection to the land. Nesson argues how “unequal distribution of land in Latin America” is a chief justice concern. Its origins are rooted in the “uneven distribution of land” during “the colonial period following the Iberian conquest” [20]. During this time, many natives were uprooted and displaced, but not to the degree of the enslaved Africans who were separated from their land by the Atlantic Ocean. Many Latin Americans cite Bartolome de Las Casas (1474-1566) as a forerunner of activist Christianity that advocates for the poor, specifically the indigenous. Las Casas believed in the mission of the church to convert, “indigenous peoples in order to win their eternal salvation,” but “protested against the use of force” and “demanded that justice be included in the policy of the church toward the Indians” [20]. He rejected the “theology of conquest” of the Iberians and promoted “non-violent evangelization” [20]. In 1995, Gutierrez published *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* which was a theological biography on the faith and practice of Las Casas. Gutierrez calls for the church to embrace the missional-activist theology of Las Casas due to the pressing reality of death among the indigenous. He claims, “Today the native peoples, like the extensive black population of this continent, continue to see their lifestyles, their values, their customs, their right to life and liberty, trodden under foot” [15]. The church must become advocates of justice, in order to “forge a liberating evangelization of Latin America” [15]. Bingemer summarizes Latin American theology as a process of “see-judge-act” where one sees reality and evaluates it through the lens of Scripture: “From these two processes should then emerge a transformative strategy that can guide and inspire the political commitments and stances taken up by Christians” [2]. Since poverty is religio-historical *realidad*, Gutierrez links gospel proclamation with justice since the gospel changes the context by transforming individuals. He sees that spiritual enrichment works in tandem with liberating action.

5. Feminism: Individualism and Collectivism, Quantity and Quality

North and South America responded to the predominately male-led Liberation movements with a female-centric theology. Feminist movements argue that women are impoverished by their lack of power in patriarchal societies. So then, a “poor person, who is also a woman, is doubly poor, since her female condition adds to her marginalized condition” [2]. In this sense, poverty is a lack of female influence over a male-dominated society. Women experience liberation when they see their value and integrate into positions of power. According to the Roman Catholic Church, women cannot be priests because they cannot represent Christ in the priesthood. Reuther observes that such a statement bars women from, “full participation in the Christian church” [24]. In one sense, limiting women’s role in the church is a discriminatory prac-

tice that is a holdover from the Roman Empire—an infringement on rights. In another sense, the church’s statement is an indictment on the value of women. She asks, “If women cannot represent Christ, in what sense can it be said that Christ represents women?” [24] If Christ is unable to represent women, can women really be saved? Christ, by contrast, invites “us into true partnership” and dismantles marginalization giving full participation in the church—including the priesthood [13]. Feminists needed to address their marginalized place in society by affirming their own self-worth and advocate for more rights in society and the church.

Womanists critiqued white feminists for neglecting racial issues, and therefore class issues. Jacquelyn Grant describes the womanist struggle as “tri-dimensional” comprising racial, sexist, and classist obstacles [13]. When considering black women’s poverty, theirs may be the deadliest because of their invisibility and intensity. She describes, that “while Black women are dealing with ‘survival’ issues, White women are dealing with ‘fulfillment’ issues” [13]. In this sense, the feminist movement was disconnected from the survival concerns of womanists and the developing nations because they were addressing quality of life without first addressing the quantity of life for their fellow sisters.

Similarly, the growing middle class of African Americans has created greater participation in corporate America, thus isolating themselves from the concerns of lower-class African Americans. Bradley citing Kee’s work *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology* summarizes the issue: “Blacks in America are no longer victims because they now assume a commonality of interest with whites” [4]. Today, the poor are oppressed by both whites and blacks who benefit from corporatism. Kee and Bradley are correct that the landscape has changed since the 1970s because of the growing black middle class. Concerns for many, but not all, African Americans operate on the ‘fulfillment’ liberating front rather than the ‘survival’ liberating front.

North and South American feminists give special focus to the female body further showing the embodied nature of poverty and justice. The female body is often “a source of discrimination and suffering” [2]. Sexual assault, job discrimination, lack of access to feminine products, and the burden of bearing children are linked to the female body. Women’s bodies are often blamed as the source of seductive and sexual sins [2]. As a result of these challenges, it is difficult for many women to see the beauty of their bodies when they appear to be more burdensome. Feminist liberationists draw a connection between how patriarchal society uses women and how it uses the earth. Ecofeminists recenter humanity as part of nature to create a “loving closeness with the earth” who is the “mother and giver of life” [2]. Not only will respecting nature lead to improved ethical use of the environment, but the poor will be dignified. The poor face greater danger during “ecological disaster” because they “have fewer means to protect themselves” [2]. Therefore, poverty is defined by proximity and vulnerability to disaster and abuse.

When considering feminism and womanism, a common thread is a more individualized view of rights which contrasts the familial-collectivist cultures of the South. Fitzgerald observes that because North Americans are “in the tradition of Cartesian individualism and an individual relationship to God,” notions of collectivist rights and sins “is a problematic notion” [10]. Rights and injustice are measured by how it flourishes individuals. Moreover, the Protestantism of North America, “fosters individual action and responsibility” and “individual salvation” making the roles of community secondary in religious matters [12]. For Latin Americans “moral aspects of life are necessarily communitarian” [10]. As stated before, poverty is viewed in a life-death matrix within a collectivist worldview. Since developing countries are more focused on access to increasing basic necessities, they are less concerned with increasing the quality of life as they are with the quantity of life. But survival and fulfillment liberating fronts do not have to work separately like the feminists and womanists since both are vital to enriching human lives.

6. Synthesis: Poverty as Relio-Historical Realidad

Liberationists recaptured an embodied Christian imagination for the purpose of enriching the whole person. Poverty developed through a religio-historical process which displaced Africans and natives impacting their spiritual self-value and view of Christ. Since the sword, chain, and cross were introduced in tandem to natives and Africans, Christ, the Jewish prince of peace, became Christ the European conqueror. Rather than use embodiment as a source of discrimination and dehumanization as during the Atlantic Slave Trade or land conquest; or devalue female bodies as sources of sexual sin only to be used for childbearing; Christian embodiment embraces our “creatureliness,” which is a totality of body, soul, and social life [18]. Since poverty is a multi-faceted process of death encompassing all of life, enrichment must be a multi-faceted process of life. Life’s needs are not met merely through basic needs or only soul care since life is a singular *realidad*. The church’s mission should be one of individual-social enrichment within an integrated spiritual-material framework, embodying the kingdom ethics of Jesus.

Author Contributions

George Harold Trudeau is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Arana, Marie. *Bolivar: American Liberator*. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2013.
- [2] Bingemer, Maria Clara. *Latin American Theology: Roots and Branches*. New York: Orbis Books, 2016.
- [3] Boff, Leonardo, and Clodovis Boff. *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Translated by Paul Burns. New York: Orbis Books, 1987.
- [4] Bradley, Anthony. *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2010.
- [5] CELAM II. “The Document on the Poverty of the Church,” in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*. Ed. Alfred Hennelly. New York: Orbis Books, 1990.
- [6] Cone, James. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. 40th Anniversary Edition. New York: Orbis Books, 2020.
- [7] ———. *Black Theology and Black Power*. 50th Anniversary Edition. New York: Orbis Books, 2020.
- [8] ———. *God of the Oppressed*. New York: Orbis Books, 1997.
- [9] Evans Jr., James H. *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology*. Second Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.
- [10] Fitzgerald, Valpy. “The Economics of Liberation Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- [11] Gonzalez, Justo. *The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures*. Westmont: IVP Academic, 2016.
- [12] Gooren, Henri. “Catholic and Non-Catholic Theologies of Liberation: Poverty, Self-Improvement, and Ethics Among Small-Scale Entrepreneurs in Guatemala City.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41: 1.
- [13] Grant, Jacquelyn. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*. Edited by Susan Thistlethwaite. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.
- [14] Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Translated and Edited by Sister Caridad Inda and Jon Egelson. New York: Orbis Books, 1988.
- [15] ———. *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*. Translated by Robert R. Barr. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003.
- [16] Hall, Matthew J. “Cold Warriors in the Sunbelt: Southern Baptists and the Cold War, 1947-1989.” *Thesis and Dissertations—History*, (2014). https://uknowledge.uky.edu/history_etds/17
- [17] Hopkins, Dwight N. *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*. New York: Orbis Books, 1999.
- [18] Jennings, Willie James. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

- [19] King Jr., Martin Luther. *Why We Can't Wait*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010.
- [20] Nesson, Craig L. *The Vitality of Liberation Theology: Missionary Church, Public Theology, World Christianity*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012.
- [21] Ortiz, Fernando. *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. Translated by Harriet de Onis. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- [22] Roberts, J. Deotis. *A Black Political Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974.
- [23] ——. *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2005.
- [24] Reuther, Rosemary Radford. *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*. Trowbridge: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.
- [25] Schaefer, Richard T. *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008.
- [26] Spector, Alan J. "SDS, the 1960s, and Education for Revolution," *Cultural Logic: A Journal of Marxist Theory and Practice*, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.14288/cllogic.v20i0.190902>
- [27] Swartz, David R. *The Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.
- [28] ——. "The New Left and Evangelical Radicalism." *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsr.0.0029>
- [29] Thill, Brian. "Black Power and the New Left: The Dialectics of Liberation, 1967." *Mediations* 23: 2, 2008. <https://mediationsjournal.org/black-power-and-the-new-left>
- [30] Trudeau, George Harold. "Martin Luther King Jr. and Liberation Theology: James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, and a Methodology of the Oppressed." *Heythrop Journal*, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.14277>
- [31] Vuola, Elina. *Limits of Liberation: Feminist Theology and the Ethics of Poverty and Reproduction*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002.
- [32] West, Cornel. *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
- [33] Cornel West, Edited by Louis Menand. "Prophetic Pragmatism," in *Pragmatism: A Reader*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.