

## **“Liberation Theology”**

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Angela Herrera  
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I came across a surprising claim when I was in seminary. It caught me off guard, stopped me momentarily in my trajectory. My trajectory, you have to understand, started in a working class neighborhood—which is to say lower class, by US standards. My family lived in a mobile home with rotting floors and a license plate in the front window. It was parked in a mobile home park in a tiny town in Oregon, where we rented a small lot. When the wind blew, the siding flew off.

I was also born with an inability to suffer fools gladly—really unfortunate when you are ten years old and all of the fools seem to be adults—lordy, I had a reputation for backtalk. And from an early age I was filled with anger, a righteous anger, about oppression. I saw it all around me, all the time. Oppression of women by men, of brown neighbors by white neighbors, and of our whole social class, which, when I was a teen, I slipped lower and lower into.

I was filled with the kind of anger that happens when *the world as it is* is not *the world as it should be*. Not an impotent, chaotic, misdirected kind of anger (most of the time). A creative, generative kind of anger that burned in my heart for many years. But while it was there, it got into a conversation with Love—capital L now, the kind that can turn your life around, and it did, and it eventually led me into the ministry. The Unitarian Universalist ministry.

I had gone to the Unitarian church during my childhood, so this was my spiritual home, and—it was clear to me—it was the path to a vocation of blessing, loving, and liberating. The only work I could imagine doing, in the only faith tradition I could imagine belonging to. And so imagine my surprise when I picked up one of the required texts for UU seminarians, and read these words about liberation by Paul Rasor, who at the time was Director of the Center for the Study of Religious Freedom at Virginia Wesleyan College and one of the most visible contemporary liberal theologians. He wrote:

Religious liberals often respond positively to liberation theology when they first encounter it. This makes sense because liberation theology is concerned with many of the things liberals are also concerned with, such as overcoming

oppression and working for justice in the world.... What is often difficult for liberals to see is that liberation theology is not friendly to liberal theology.<sup>1</sup>

Say what? And he went on:

[Liberation theology] is not part of the liberal theological tradition. Instead, it operates as a profound critique of liberal theology.

The two are incompatible? That's not what *I* thought. Perplexing, right? And unsettling. Let's flesh this out.

When Rasor says "liberation theology," he is referring to a distinct theological tradition: classic liberation theology, in the vein of theologians Gustavo Gutierrez and James Cone. Gutierrez is a theologian and a Dominican priest who now teaches at the University of Notre Dame, and is regarded as the founder of liberation theology. Growing up in Peru, Gutierrez witnessed that 60% of his country was poor, and 82% of those lived in extreme poverty. When he became a priest, he observed that the church's priorities were out of touch with this reality.

Christians and others had come to see poverty as a misfortune, a personal shortcoming, or a lack of resources. Gutierrez, on the other hand, could see that while luck or personal improvement or charity might help individuals out of their impoverishment, these things would never be able to end the larger problem of poverty, because they do not address the systems of oppression that keep creating more poor people.

Gutierrez couldn't imagine that Jesus wanted us to simply feed people, while keeping them far away from the source of food and the means to get there. It is not enough that Christianity is based on a bible in which Jesus blesses the poor—is that teaching manifest, and is it given the priority it deserves in light of the immense suffering in the world? One of the truths Gustavo Gutierrez wished to emphasize the most is that faith and life are not separable.

In the 1970's, he wrote a book, called A Theology of Liberation, in which he argued, based on the bible, that while God's love is universal, God especially stands with the poor. God, Gutierrez says, abhors poverty and suffering.

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<sup>1</sup> Rasor, Paul. Faith Without Certainty. Skinner House: Boston, 2005.

Think of the prophet Amos in the Hebrew bible, who says he has heard the voice of God, and God is angry with the people of Israel for “buying the poor with silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.”<sup>2</sup> Think of sweatshops, where the poor literally make sandals for the rest of society, in exchange for barely, barely scraping by.

Gutierrez argued that God’s will is that systems of social inequality be dismantled, and that this should be one of the top priorities of the Church as a global institution.

Not everyone within the Catholic church appreciated Gutierrez’s critique and his vision. The Vatican set up a gathering of Latin American bishops for the express purpose of condemning Gutierrez and theologians like him, especially because liberation theology was associated with socialism, which the Catholic church has long been against. But they were unsuccessful. The bishops wouldn’t condemn him. And even when other liberationist priests were excommunicated or even killed, Gutierrez squeaked by. Liberation theology made sense to many in Latin America.

Since then, there have been some new developments. Liberation theology, though it is always very contextual, has broadened. James Cone was a black American liberation theologian whose writings reflect the pressing issue in *his* context: the oppression of black people by whites. He died just last year. I feel lucky to have gotten to hear him deliver a lecture once. It was called “The Cross and they Lynching Tree” He was a great theologian and a great preacher.

Like Gutierrez, Cone defines liberation theology as one in which God is primarily concerned with the poor and the weak in society. While all God’s children are beloved, saints and sinners alike, God is on the side of justice and anti oppression. God stands with the poor and the oppressed—whoever they are.

Cone says, “[Black liberation theology] is not *just* for black people in a narrow sense of that term...it is an understanding of the gospel that sees justice for the poor as the very heart of what the Christian gospel is about and the heart of what God is doing in this world.”

Now, this focus on a personal God who is active and involved in history is one of the things Rasor is concerned about. When it comes to the question of whether there is a God, liberal religion sometimes takes the stance of that agnostic bumper sticker: I don’t know and you don’t either! But liberation theology is not a squishy enterprise.

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<sup>2</sup> Amos 8:6

Razor also raises the issue of who our theology is directed at, or speaking to. He argues that liberal theology's conversation partner has always been what another theologian called religion's "cultured despisers."<sup>3</sup> Cultured despisers: educated people who view religion with suspicion, as though it were dishonest, superstitious. Meanwhile, liberation theology speaks directly to the poor and oppressed. It's *their* theology.

It does this because power is not given up easily. No powerful people in history has dismantled its systems of oppression without enormous pressure from the oppressed. Think of the American civil rights movement, or the farmworker movement. Think of the feminist movement. We have some way to go in these areas.

Liberation theologies encourage the oppressed to take the situation into their own hands, with the courage that comes from knowing the universe's highest power is on their side.

This is related to another critique Razor lobbs at us: that religious liberals tend to favor moderation, gradual change. *Let's not go crazy*. Or sometimes we get caught up in thinking things through so much, and debating the finer points and worrying about what we don't understand well enough that we end up stuck in the mud of our own process. Not always, but you know what I mean. A little less conversation and a little more action, right? But big change is scary. Especially for the privileged, who would have to change the most.

Razor points out that, when it comes to helping our neighbors, liberalism seeks to "level the playing field" by creating programs of social uplift, while liberation theology sees this as too individualistic an approach because it does not address the underlying social structures, such as class inequality, that perpetuate poverty and despair.

Another difference, Razor says, is that liberals look inward for religious authority, while liberation theology looks to scripture (external authority), and looks at it through the lens of poverty. When you are an underdog with little credibility, speaking truth to power, this is a good strategy, drawing on the authority of a text that the oppressor claims to believe in.

And finally, Razor says, when it comes to deciding whether a theology is a good one, liberal theology's biggest test is reason. Does the theology hold up to the latest discoveries of science? If not, then it isn't acceptable. But in liberation theology,

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<sup>3</sup> (Schleiermacher)

reason is never an end in itself. Liberation theology's final test is praxis--- the practical application of the theology in the world. It is pragmatic. What effect does the theology have on humanity? Is it liberating? If so, then it's "true" in the only way that really matters.

Now... there's a lot of truth to Rasor's claims. As we imagine the liberal church of the future, and how it is different from the twentieth century, we could learn a lot about the tradition we have inherited by paying attention to Rasor's descriptions. But I've got a bone to pick with him. His assessment of liberalism and of liberation theologies is incomplete.

First of all, new voices have challenged the stereotype that liberating theologies depend on a God who acts in history or that they require outside authority, like scripture. Take William R. Jones. He wrote the book called, Is God a White Racist? In stark contrast to the black liberation theologians before him, Jones argues that a personal God acting in history on the side of the oppressed is not only unnecessary, but might actually reinforce racism by playing down the role of human beings. There is no evidence God is on the side of the oppressed, he says. If God were, why would the oppressed still be struggling? He makes a case for humanist liberation theologies, meaning they have to acknowledge that it is humans who systematically inflict oppression on others, and that humans are responsible for stopping.

Meanwhile, although it may be advantageous for debates within the Christian church, Renee K. Harrison, a theologian at Howard University, also says that the authority of scripture is not essential to liberation theologies. She applauds theologians Donna Freitas and Stephanie Paulsell, who encourage women to start with their personal experience—and not necessarily scripture— as a grounding for feminist liberation theologies. Rasor does not take feminist liberation theology into account, yet it may be that liberalism's non-hierarchical ways are more compatible with it than classical liberation theology is.

It could be argued that dependence on outside authority actually perpetuates oppression. The Catholic Church itself has a hierarchical worldview. God is the father, and Christ is head of the Church, which is led by the Pope, who is head of the priests, who minister to families traditionally headed by men, and so on. The feminist critique is that oppression is *built in* within such a structure. It's inherent to the hierarchy.

And what about Rasor's characterization of liberalism?

First of all, to say that liberalism's conversation partner has always been "cultured despisers," and has not included oppressed people, is to ignore the reality that

- at least half of UU's are women,
- and that we have quite a bit more economic and cultural diversity than is generally acknowledged in the collective We,
- and that many of the people who come into our sanctuaries today are not "despisers" looking for a refuge from orthodoxy. Many of us are unchurched folks, looking for a faith that can bring meaning to our lives; looking for a transformative, life changing kind of faith.

Many of the Unitarian Universalists I know want to get, not despise, religion. We just want the theological breathing space to get it in a way that feels honest. For some of us, this honesty comes through the freedom to think and ask questions about God or no God.

For others, it is honoring our own *experiences* of the Sacred. Not having to try to fit them in someone else's theological box. Not having to have them scrutinized to death. Scrutiny, whether it is from a skeptical rationalist or a skeptical fundamentalist, is still scrutiny. Here, there are multiple ways of knowing. Rational, metaphorical, narrative, emotional, experiential. All are part of a faith that is whole and honest.

Next, to claim that liberal theology's final test is reason (or any other abstract concept) is perplexing to me. It does not account for the deep restlessness I've witnessed in this and other UU congregations to do something that matters, to address the injustices that we are bound up with and that are hurting our souls. We, too, are a pragmatic people, frustrated by ineffectiveness and subject to a deep, existential discomfort when faced with only partial answers.

Our theology is one about being deeply interdependent. One in which we can come to understand, as Rasor hopes we will, that not only are we connected to the "other" —as in other human beings— we are completed in the other. Whoever, wherever they are. "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me." That's humanist wisdom.

If only we knew what to do, and could get over our fear.

Any shortcomings religious liberals' have in confronting and working to end oppression are more likely to be related to socio-economic dynamics and worries

about giving away comfort—in other words, the limitations of human nature—than the nature of liberal religion.

So my bone to pick with Razor is that he is referring to historical Unitarian Universalism and historical liberation theology, and does not flesh out completely enough what is essential within them. It's a new world now. And there is a lot at stake. So what does a Unitarian Universalist theology of liberation look like?

Unitarian Universalist minister Patricia Jimenez says that liberating theologies must include both denunciation of what is oppressive, and annunciation of what the future will be.<sup>4</sup> "Telling what the future will be is an opportunity for us to dream," she says.

One thing we can say is that it is essential for any theology of liberation have a perspective in which oppression is viewed as against the will or highest order of the universe. Whether that highest order involves a God or not, oppression is the opposite of its fulfillment. I read a quote that said, "Oppression is the presence of the absence of god." Oppression is the presence of the absence of God. An interesting way to put it.

Another way to put it (a more humanist way) is that oppression and injustice prevents the full flourishing of life and of the human spirit. And since whatever happens to one happens to all, the impact of oppression is to diminish the oppressor's humanity as well as others.

Since it is difficult for those on the side of privilege to generate among themselves the courage and sustained sense of urgency required for re-balancing power, the inclusion of the oppressed—as audience, speaker, and actor—is also necessary to a theology of liberation. The increasing multiculturalism and the awareness of who is already present within our denomination is an important step in this direction.

A systems perspective (meaning a commitment to systemic change) is also essential, and it must place responsibility for action in human hands. A service model will not suffice, because services delivered from privileged to underprivileged people do nothing to change the larger systems that create more oppression and suffering.

It isn't that lending others a helping hand is always wrong. Sometimes it is absolutely necessary. In New Mexico we know that people in the desert need water,

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<sup>4</sup> Jimenez, Patricia. "Latino and Latina Perspectives." Soul Work. Skinner House: Boston, 2003.

AND we need to fix the US's broken immigration system, right? But by itself, without systemic change, service is inadequate.

Finally, a sound liberation theology must begin with the assumption that all theologies are biased—meaning they reflect the context and level of privilege of the people who hold them.

This is the shortfall of the first liberation theologies, which did not recognize the oppression perpetuated by their own hierarchical church structure. And it is why I think it's so important to take Rasor's critique of liberalism to heart, and continue to reflect on how who we are, and our location in society, limits our capacity to dream of liberation and equality. How it affects the way we interpret the texts we hold sacred.

In Unitarian Universalism, our sacred texts are diverse. Our texts include old ones, like the Bible, which, like the name of God, has been overused and misused to the point of being almost unrecognizable. Some of us struggle with that one. Our texts also include art and poetry and nature and the living text of our lives, in which we can read and reread our own stories and they ways they intersect with others, and be struck with new understandings of them that we never imagined before.

Our first principle is respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The seventh is respect for the interdependence of the web of life. Bold and ancient wisdom, meant to be lived now.

Ours is a big tent faith. But it is not a weak faith. Therefore, may our faith continue to challenge and embolden us and give us courage. May we deepen in commitment and love, until (as it was said in our responsive reading this morning, #464)

*Compassion is wedded to power*

*and softness comes to a world that has been harsh and unkind.*

And until true liberation is achieved.

May it be so.