

Preaching Praxis, Producing Peace:
The Role of Liberation Theology in Peacebuilding

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Faith (noun):

- 1) belief and trust in and loyalty to God
- 2) belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion
- 3) firm belief in something for which there is no proof
- 4) complete trust.

~ *Webster's Dictionary, 2007*

“Faith is a principle of action and of power, and by it one can command the elements and/or heal the sick, or influence any number of circumstances when occasion warrants.”

~ *New Testament; Jacob 4: 4-7*

“True faith always moves its possessor to some kind of physical and mental action; it carries an assurance of the fulfillment of the things hoped for. A lack of faith leads one to despair, which comes because of iniquity.”

~ *Chapter 10; Book of Moroni*

While liberal conceptions of state-building have long emphasized a clear separation between religion and politics, there is no better place to start this discussion than by examining the crucial role of “faith” in peace-building projects worldwide. Faith, as an idea that drives real world action – and particularly in its connection to iniquity – is particularly relevant to peace-building theory and practice. As such, throughout the following paper I ask readers to conceptualize peacebuilding as a faith-based project in several senses. In the context of liberation theology churches as sites of peace-building activism, the connection between faith and peace is rather obvious. However, there is an underlying idea that peace-building – in both the literature and in common sense – is conceptualized as an exercise in progressive trust-building. A sense of security comes from faith, and simultaneously, peace-building cannot begin without faith. In an ongoing cycle, with faith comes security (perhaps at the individual level) which leads to more peaceful surroundings, which helps reinforce one’s faith, which spreads to the community, and around we go. Crucial to the distinction between negative and positive peace, there must be faith in peace itself – that a community who has witnessed only violence must believe in this elusive peace and, furthermore, social justice and changes towards more equitable power relationships. In this light, I propose that all peacebuilding projects in post-conflict moments of transition, whether formally religious-based or not, are based in faith.

Without undermining the importance of faith, this paper explores how Liberation Theology provides a site in which *praxis* (real world, active practice) is emphasized as a legitimate synthesis between religion and politics. Specifically, peace-building goals are accomplished through a combination of theoretical emphasis on preaching social justice with a significant practical focus on grassroots praxis. Overall, I argue that Liberation Theology must be effectively incorporated into the growing body of peace-building research, as it is crucial to understanding how successful projects are unfolding in many post-conflict states. From its Marxist roots, to its current (yet under-developed) overlap with Feminist IR theory, Liberation Theology must be considered by IR scholars as a progressive and creative way to address inequity as the fundamental root of conflict in deeply religious, war-torn societies. As evidence, this paper uses the post-civil war cases

of Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, wherein many Catholic and Protestant churches are proving their influence as sites of state reconstruction and the re-distribution of socio-political power. In conjunction, both clergy and congregation are building stable peace as grassroots actors – whose contribution has been understudied in favor of institutional and “top-down” approaches to peace-building.

Therefore, while this paper illuminates the inextricable connections between Liberation Theology and peacebuilding, it also asks important epistemological questions about whose knowledge is considered “valuable” in the field of IR, and critiquing how this valuation affects the scholarship we produce and the consequent attainment of peacebuilding goals. Moreover, there is an embedded critique of liberal conceptions of “state building” as religious sites are shown as offering security, trust, consistency, community, identity and a sense of political participation in locations where the “state” cannot – at least until it is re-built into something less fragile.

A Theology of Liberation: From Struggle to Peace

In 1971, Gustavo Gutierrez published *Teología de la liberación*, which represented the movement of liberation theology from communal “buzz” to marked scholarship. Gutierrez’s seminal work mixed ideas from Vatican II’s reformulation of the Catholic Church to be less hierarchical with the realities of political-economic struggle in Latin America. Not only was Gutierrez’s book crucial in marking formal change in theology, its focus on praxis foreshadowed the challenges soon coming (from a variety of oppressed groups) to traditional social science theories and methodologies. Throughout the 1980s, liberation theology enjoyed a prominent and exciting place in various “First” and “Third world” academic fields (from anthropology to sociology and political science) and theological circles worldwide. Furthermore, in practice, the religious-based movement for social change scattered the globe, resonating across Africa and Asia, while maintaining strong roots in its base communities across Central and South America.

Liberation Theology has many definitions; however, Nadeau’s wording provides an excellent basis for this paper’s connections to peace-building:

“Liberation Theology is a response to the phenomenon of poverty. It works not only to improve the social, economic, and environmental conditions of poor communities, but to eliminate the structures that produced poverty in the first place. It is a kind of ethos, world view, that promotes the idea of being satisfied with having enough food, a comfortable shelter, good health, and meaningful work in the context of a caring community.”¹

It is therefore, obviously compatible – if not at many times, indistinguishable – from peacebuilding. Paradoxically, however, liberation theology was initially used as a site of political revolution. Borrowing from Levine, within the scholarship on liberation theology, we find four basic themes: 1) concern with history and historical change; 2) a return to biblical sources; 3) stress on the poor, and a related emphasis on doing theology

¹ Kathy Nadeau, “Cultural Resources for Theologies of Liberation: Local Responses to Global Challenges” in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2002, 1.

in a way which enhances the value of everyday experience and the insight of average people; and 4) close and complex relations with Marxism.² While all four themes are embedded and elaborated throughout the course of this paper, it is the “close and complex relations with Marxism” that explain liberation theology’s oft-cited connection with violent revolution – and which require new conceptualization in order to understand how liberation theology has moved from a theoretical and practical site of revolutionary violence to a thriving site of peacebuilding.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a cycle of military coups across South and Central America created an environment ripe with oppression and resistance. In almost every case, from Brazil to Peru, the church adopted a formal line of opposition to repressive states consistently violating human rights.³ This messaging from Rome was inculcated at the grassroots level, translating into several military takeovers seeking legitimization from the church for their state reforms – and, in the case of Peru in 1968 – the religious justification was received. Thus, as other Latin American Christian communities watched the Peruvian regime change, the connection between theology and real world action became much more than politically-infused preaching from the pulpit. And, for a majority of people living in repressive and poor conditions with no peaceful solutions being offered to release them from the structural economic oppression of which they were newly aware, it was not surprising that the “liberation” part of liberation theology became deeply synonymous with revolution.

As Belli’s historical study of Central America demonstrates, in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, “there is a direct line from basic Christian communities’ pastoral work to the popular organizations to a Marxist guerrilla organization.”⁴ However, despite the attention given to the Nicaraguan case, and its over-stressed Marxist roots, the Sandanista takeover was actually quite distinct in liberation theology’s ability to galvanize the people to revolution. Once again, the prioritization of the religious cannot be undermined. In cases of liberation theology, the “Christian” part is the most significant part – the political goals unfolding from the values of service and the sense of community are products of the religious base. While I would argue the religious and political processes are mutually constituted, there is danger in seeing them as *equally* constituted. Interestingly, beyond the end of the Cold War, it has been argued that diminishing of the religious importance lent to a decline in liberation theology scholarship over the past twenty years. However, as Levine has persuasively argued, the death of liberation theology as a location for progressive and important scholarship was claimed prematurely; a false claim largely due to a misunderstanding of what liberation theology is about combined with a misreading of the situation “on the ground”.⁵ Is it

² Daniel H. Levine, “Assessing the Impacts of Liberation Theology in Latin America” in *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2, Spring, 1988, 244.

³ Klaiber, Jeffrey L. Klaiber, “Prophets and Populists: Liberation Theology, 1968-1988” in *The Americas*, Vol. 46, No. 1, Jul., 1989, 7.

⁴ Evidence of these connections includes CEPA and the Sandanistas in Nicaragua, the Federation of Christian Peasants of El Salvador, and the Committee for Peasant Unity in Guatemala. See: Humberto Belli, “Liberation Theology and the Latin American Revolutions” in *The Politics of Latin American Liberation Theology: The Challenge to U.S. Public Policy*, Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth (eds.), Washington Institute Press: Washington, 1988, 216.

⁵ Daniel H. Levine, “On Premature Reports of the Death of Liberation Theology” in *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 1, Winter, 1995, 105-131.

likely that American scholars had more interest in Central American revolutionary causes when their resources were entangled in the area? Of course. However, was this strategic angle the only reason liberation theology took hold of so many scholars across such a variety of academic disciplines? It is highly doubtful.

And so, the question becomes: *Where do we go from here?* First and foremost, it is necessary to step back and draw important connections between religion and peacebuilding more widely. Undeniably, in all post-conflict states, religion remains central to the formulation of issues and events. Appleby's overall argument "is not that religion is an uncomplicated or entirely benevolent presence in international relations, but that evidence exists to warrant a serious and comprehensive testing of the following claim: As advocates of justice and architects of the social conditions necessary for the cessation of hostilities and the sustaining of peaceful relations among peoples, religious actors represent a powerful source of political stability and economic prosperity in the post-Cold War world."⁶ Appleby also makes a useful point concerning the counter-factual nature of studying religious peacebuilding as opposed to violent action. In his words, "Demonstrating the effectiveness of such groups is akin to proving a negative: no one knows exactly how many lives have been saved by their efforts, however, most observers agree that the level of intercommunal violence and the death toll would be far greater in the absence of their efforts."⁷ While I fully agree with Appleby's statement, I contend that there is in fact much positive, empirical evidence of peacebuilding activities and real world results to be documented. Evidence of successful peacebuilding must be indicated with factual (opposed to counterfactual) measurements. IR scholars need to take this agenda seriously, connect peacebuilding theoretical literature with real world, positive practices that can be seen, that are really happening and can, therefore, be evaluated and critiqued as a serious academic endeavor.

In delineating the key differences between religious terrorists and religious peacemakers, Nepstad points out that while terrorists see religion as an end in itself, the peacemakers view religion as a means to an end. "For religious peacemakers, therefore, the goal is spiritual enlightenment and truth – not only for individuals but also for society as a whole. This is not to be confused with religious terrorists' desire to establish a religious government or culture but rather to integrate religiously inspired principles of justice and respect for all people into the fabric of society."⁸ From this religious worldview, a practical space for positive-sum negotiations between "self" and "other" can arise, which, importantly for IR, shifts power away from a competitive and conflicting zero-sum game. Working from Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement, Nepstad argues that rather than being "protectors of the truth" who are willing to sacrifice people in order to preserve a certain religious view as socially dominant, we should be "pursuers of truth."⁹ To be clear, this is not a post-modern idea where there is no subject, no truth and, therefore, no agency. In fact, this approach is more constructivist and very useful

⁶ R. Scott Appleby, "Religion and Global Affairs: Religious 'Militants for Peace'" in *SAIS Review*, 18.2, 1998, 42. Available through the Johns Hopkins University Press or at cpn.nd.edu

⁷ Appleby, 41.

⁸ Sharon Erickson Nepstad, "Religion, Violence, and Peacemaking" in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2004, 301.

⁹ Nepstad, 2004, 300.

for real-world peace negotiations and peacebuilding projects, wherein both sides remain open to listening and synthesizing their versions of the truth.

Overall, while the body of scholarship linking peace making with religious actors has flourished, there is a difference when we move from official religious leaders helping negotiate “positive-sum” peace agreements to the long-term community-based peacebuilding processes. In reviewing the peacebuilding literature, there is a relatively small group of scholars producing work on “religious peacebuilding” a process of increasing levels of human security driven by deep-seated theological motives and carried out in religious sites. However, even within this small pool of scholarship, there are three glaring omissions. First, the importance of women as active agents of peacebuilding and communal change continues to be grossly under-studied. Second, the continued link with Marxism as “the” political-economic base of struggle for liberation theology clergy and laity is outdated. Third, and closely related, is the need to address the very real critique that liberation theology “failed” – or that attention to it declined – because of the tendency to subsume Christianity into Marxism. In my view, these are all issues that, if confronted in a creative fashion, will form the springboard for a newly invigorated approach to studying liberation theology and peacebuilding.

The Feminist-Gramscian Infusion

Working through what I call a “feminist-Gramscian” framework, the potential for liberation theology as a site of peacebuilding theory and practice awakens from its supposed slumber of irrelevance. Recent work in liberation theology communities demonstrates evidence that while the patriarchal and Marxist elements become less pronounced, the result is not a disappearance of liberation theology, but rather a profound change that is better analyzed with feminist and Gramscian theory. For example, John Kater’s dynamic 2001 article, “*Whatever Happened to Liberation Theology?*” explores new directions for theological teaching and practice in Latin America. Interestingly, he flags two key forces that will shape the future of liberation theology in the twenty-first century: women and neo-liberalism. Let us explore each of these in turn.

Women and Gender in Liberation Theology

In order to make a convincing argument that liberation theology has taken a feminist turn, let me first define the parameters of what a “feminist” approach means. For the scope of this paper, my intention is to draw important connections between feminist theory, changing gender relationships and the link between dismantling patriarchal spaces and increasing peacebuilding. A feminist approach entails a multi-layered argument, almost in concentric circles. At its most broad, a feminist analysis considers the two following points:

- 1) A worldview that considers gender as a fundamental, hierarchical social ordering principle, valuing women's experiences as valid empirical evidence.¹⁰

¹⁰ Peterson and Runyan, 256.

2) While understanding how the world works is an important and necessary first step in academic research, this must be accompanied by a commitment to transforming gender and related hierarchies.¹¹ Thus, feminist research combines theory with the empirical study of current social practices, all informed by a normative agenda based on emancipation and equality.¹²

Translated within the scope of this paper, this perspective allows for the necessary focus on how women are negotiating and challenging previously patriarchal religious spaces in order to successfully build peace and create areas of feminist activism. Empirically, the feminist direction in liberation theology is, perhaps, unsurprising in light of Kater's claim that "we must recognize that in base-communities all over Latin America, women are the majority presence. Although our brother priests resist it and lament the absence of men, the reality is that they depend almost solely on women for the majority of the church's activities."¹³ Moreover, Rosemary Ruether's extensive and persuasive work on the importance of feminist liberation theology churches makes the case for "a ministry of function rather than clerical caste" which is better able to draw on the skills and gifts of a variety of community members. In cases of post-conflict rebuilding, it could not be more evident that "lumping all ministry into an ordained caste means that many of the community's needs go unmet, since no one person possesses all these skills and gifts."¹⁴ Fundamental to successful peacebuilding, Ruether outlines the needs of a creative church community, including "community organizers that can critically analyze the structures of social oppression and organize the community for social change."¹⁵ When the theology and praxis of liberation theology churches is put through a gendered lens, "liberation" takes on a meaning deeply rooted in a freedom from all oppressive, hierarchical structures – namely, patriarchy.

In a direct challenge to the patriarchal, masculine conception of the state criticized by feminist IR scholars as competitive and conflict-driven, women's effective agency and feminist scholarship within sites of liberation theology could offer something akin to a Kuhn paradigm shift in both IR-based conceptions of power and peacebuilding as well as within the patriarchal hierarchal church. Arguably, women have historically been a deeply presenting an increasingly active force, perhaps it is not surprising that power is As women dominate the peace work of churches across Central America (and, in fact worldwide¹⁶), feminist movement in Christian base communities and grassroots projects is only increasing as the legacy of liberation theology continues in peacebuilding. as we increasingly witness the replacement of an androcentric theory and practice with "truly

¹¹ I chose to focus on these axes of power because they relate directly to my research, however, it is noted that power is also unevenly distributed based on other categories of identification, including race, class, nationality, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, and levels of "formal" education.

¹² Sprague, 2005, 3.

¹³ Kater, 2001.

¹⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, The Church as Liberation Community from Patriarchy: The Praxis of Ministry as Discipleship of Equals, Keynote address at the Women's Ordination Worldwide Second International Ecumenical Conference at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. July 22-24, 2005. Available at www.cnwe.org/wowtalk.doc

¹⁵ Ruether, 2005, 8.

¹⁶ See: Mary Ann Cejka and Thomas Bamat (eds.). Artisans of Peace: Grassroots Peacemaking among Christian Communities. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003

human scholarship and knowledge” inclusive of all peoples, genders, races, and cultures.¹⁷

Therefore, while it is important to remember that men do make up the overwhelming majority of combatants and political leaders who perpetuate violent conflict in every case worldwide, if we are to shift the study to peacebuilding only, then it is necessary to find a context in which cases are contextually comparable. This point is what sets the rationale for the following focus on Central American post-civil war peacebuilding; specifically, liberation theology grassroots peace projects in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. As the Guatemalan case prominently reveals:

“With women comprising the bulk of survivors of the war, they have been more likely than men to gather in associations such as CONAVIGUA and GAM to organize around their needs and confront perpetrators of the violence...women in Guatemala were more likely to work for peace in groups and to engage in confrontational forms of peacemaking than were men. On the other hand, men, who more often had received training as catechists and Delegates of the Word, were more likely than women to cite religious motivations for their peacemaking activities.”¹⁸

In the context of this study, “confrontational forms of peacemaking” was a category developed for statistical testing – but, for my purposes, its definition is qualitatively significant in that it stresses building relationships with the “other” or “enemy” rather than mere avoidance. In other words, the development of “positive peace” or peacebuilding opposed to settling for a negative peace or “absence of violence”.

Finally, the generalizability of feminist grassroots religious peacebuilding projects extends far beyond Central America. In fact, important liberation theology networks of feminist peacebuilding are thriving, albeit with many challenges, in a sort of transnational network. For example, following the United Nation’s Decade for Women, the World Council of Churches declared 1988-98 the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women. Moreover, the *Women’s Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians* continues connecting Christian feminist theologians from Latin America, Africa and Asia.¹⁹ Examining the local practice of such groups is an easy place to begin theorizing religious women as active peacebuilding agents, as each regional group identifies and creatively addresses specific issue areas of human security in their community. Specifically, the African sub-set of this Association has developed a project to open discussion and counseling within their religious communities in order to change the fear of HIV/AIDS throughout the continent. Arguably, this willingness to address the transmission and treatment of the virus in a

¹⁷ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1983, xx.

¹⁸ Kuldip Kaur, “Guatemala: The Challenge of Peacebuilding in Fragmented Communities” in *Artisans of Peace: Grassroots Peacemaking among Christian Communities*, Mary Ann Cejka and Thomas Bamat (eds.), Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003, 63.

¹⁹ For a useful historical discussion see: Ursula King, *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, London, SPCK, 1994.

religious setting is radical compared to the Vatican's formal ignorance of HIV/AIDS as a real security issue for all Africans, but, particularly for women.²⁰

From Marxist Roots to Gramscian Reality

One of the major critiques of liberation theology originated from Rome with the Pope charging proponents for reducing Christianity into a Marxist struggle. This criticism was later incorporated into the later debate about the supposed "failure" or decline of liberation theology in both scholarship and practice throughout the 1990s. Notably, there are convincing arguments for the perspective that liberation theology offered a religious gloss for a political-economic struggle less about emancipating the poor from their dire conditions, and more concerned with playing out the power struggles of the Cold War super-powers. Furthermore, returning to Kater, he rightly states "There is nearly universal consensus among theologians who have been part of this movement that the misery and oppression which provided the impetus for its development not only remain; in fact, they have worsened."

With the signing of the U.S-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in August 2005, there is no question that neo-liberalism is a force with which liberation theology peace-building movements will continue to negotiate. However, in the words of historian Arturo Piedra:

"We still don't understand how, theologically speaking, we can define or explain this big monster, neo-liberalism. In the past we used to say, 'Organize a guerrilla movement. Organize the unionists. Organize a popular movement.'...We've had guerrilla movements, we've organized unions, we've had popular movements, and we still couldn't defeat capitalism. In the 1980s we had an elaborate and sophisticated theory. Now we just say, 'We don't know.'"²¹

Furthermore, the induction of CAFTA brings a new puzzle to Central America that has already been highlighted in other free trade agreements: higher levels of employment do not promise a better quality of life. For women in particular, entering the paid labour force actually creates a double-burden with the unpaid labour of housework and child care constituting a "second shift" once returning home from a (poorly paid, exploitative) shift at their new job. In fact, there is a "triple burden" placed on most women in post-conflict states, as volunteer peacebuilding work is yet another "shift" in their busy lives of subsistence. Pointedly, placing peacebuilding projects in religious contexts has made this work – alongside child care – the most meaningful and important work many women have in their lives. While many neo-liberals claim everyone should be happy their "boat has been lifted" it is clear that having a paid job has, in most cases, not resulted in a meaningful work experience. Paradoxically, it has been in the constant struggle to resist economic oppression – in all its forms – that most of the world's poor have found

²⁰ Rosemary Ruetherford, *The Church as Liberation Community from Patriarchy: The Praxis of Ministry as Discipleship of Equals*, Keynote address at the Women's Ordination Worldwide Second International Ecumenical Conference at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. July 22-24, 2005.

²¹ Arturo Piedra, quoted in Alexa Smith's *Latin American Christians Reshape Liberation Theology*, 1999. Available at: Villagelife.org

meaning. Locating this meaningful political resistance in religious sites has, unsurprisingly, merely accentuated its personal importance.

However, before moving on to this point of meaning, let us be clear that Marxism unequivocally provided liberation theology with useful theoretical and practical tools. Marxist theory helped shift conceptions of poverty and exploitation away from “the will of God” and into more structural terms. Clearly, this overlapped with Christianity’s age-old preaching of the “preferential option for the poor” but, more significantly, provided a springboard out of theology and into action. Poverty as a form of structural inequality and oppression infused these churches with an element of social critique and, consequently, empowered clergy and laity to view themselves as active agents who could change their social positioning. Interestingly, this conception of “self” is closely related to a rather libertarian perception of “God” as a force with agency rather than a paternalistic figure without dynamic relationships with humanity. As Cejka and Bamat summarize in their seven-case data analysis:

“Peacemakers expressed belief in an agentic God – that is, a God who acts in their lives in creative, liberating, and salvific ways. Perhaps the hope required to persevere in peace-making at the grassroots can only be sustained by faith in such a God. This God is understood to work through them and even sometimes through random events to bring about peace, enabling them to feel that they are not alone and not solely responsible for the outcomes of their efforts.”²²

From all of these threads, what is perhaps most important in weaving the picture together is using a Feminist-Gramscian framework to better understand the debate between agency and structure. Longstanding disciplinary debate concerning the primacy of either structure or agency can, in some ways, be transcended by acknowledging the mutual interaction and co-constitution of both forces. Emphasizing the interconnection between patriarchy and class as the two primary structural constraints on individual lives (and, as the world’s poor, mainly the lives of women) certainly echoes the decades-long position of Marxist feminists. However, the added value provided by a feminist-Gramscian position is twofold. First, their emphasis on agency in both an individual and collective sense through *praxis* opens space for dismantling oppressive structures and, thereby for social change. Second, there are important knowledge claims in a similar hermeneutical position underlying liberation theology, whereby poor people have privileged insight into reality and, because of this knowledge, appear less as objects of the Church’s actions or programs and more as active agents of change.²³

Consequently, liberation theology’s connection to violence and class-based revolution was short-lived because that was a distortion of its emancipation effect. Real freedom does not come through regime change, but from a deeper struggle for human

²² Cejka, 2003, 24-25.

²³ Levine, 245. At this point, it is crucial to recall that Marx himself believed in structural change through agency. In Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*, he writes: “The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstance and upbringing, and that therefore, changed men are changed products of other circumstances and upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances, and that it is essential to educate the educator himself.”²³

security and stable peace. Structures are not dismantled from above, for a regime change in name only does nothing to change the people within the state itself, but merely reproduces the same dominance-related “power-over” conceptions that reinforce status quo oppression and structural violence. It is, therefore, in peacebuilding that liberation theology can truly find long term traction – in both scholarship and practice. For, as Chiappari argues in the case of Guatemala, liberation theology’s politics were actually too progressive for its time.²⁴ Emphasizing protection for those who were voiceless, from Mayan indigenous, to women, children and the environment, was far too progressive in the Cold War era where liberation theology first manifested. Therefore, as scholarship tries to catch up and liberation theology itself adapts to its successes and challenges, a feminist-Gramscian infusion is part of the equation, but also, in order to move forward, we must explore the actors involved in the daily struggles of peacebuilding praxis. The real “experts” have never been in the clergy or writing to a First World academic audience; the peacebuilding experts, and the focus of a liberation-based movement, is (and has always been) at the grassroots level.

In short, both feminist and Gramscian theory point to the “structures” of class and gender as oppressive social forces, yet, these bodies of work have yet to be interconnected under the subfield of peacebuilding and located in liberation theology churches as sites of practice. With women doing 2/3 of the world’s work, yet owning less than 1% of the world’s property²⁵, any philosophy – religious or political – that claims to address the poor should be prioritizing women as their key players. Furthermore, the structure of patriarchy has also been convincingly linked to inequities in gendered education, health and meaningful work. These are similarly concerns of human security, and as feminist liberation theologians have noted – “to eliminate the structures that produce poverty in the first place” is to work towards the elimination of patriarchy. Keeping the feminist-Gramscian infusion close at hand, I turn to explore grassroots activism as the level of analysis where this theoretical argument unfolds in real world praxis – and, importantly, the epistemological claims resulting from such an analytical move.

Peacebuilding Praxis and Knowledge from the Bottom-up

“The criteria of any theology are its practical consequences,
not its theoretical assumptions.”

~ Gustavo Gutierrez

While a feminist-Gramscian infusion is crucial for understanding the “political” dimensions of liberation theology as a site of peacebuilding, there is a complementary argument running through this paper. In order for religious sites – including, but not limited to, liberation theology – to be analyzed to their full potential, political scientists cannot lose the religious dimension. The long-standing liberal separation of religion and politics has translated into a dichotomous separation of two inextricably linked

²⁴ Christopher L. Chiappari, “Toward a Maya Theology of Liberation: The Reformation of a ‘Traditional’ Religion in the Global Context” in *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2002, 62.

²⁵ This commonly cited statistic can be found throughout feminist IR literature, including Peterson and Runyan, 1999; J. Jindy Pettman; J. Ann Tickner, Gender and International Relations, 1999.

phenomena. Unfortunately, this false separation has translated into a Eurocentric scholarship that acknowledges the primacy of politics over religion; however, in the case of producing relevant peacebuilding analysis, the primacy of religion as interwoven with political action cannot be viewed as “lower class” scholarship. Just as liberation theology opened its religious doors to Marxist – and now feminist and even environmental scholarship – I think it is time for political scholarship to extend itself in good faith (no pun intended) to what religious theology and practice have to offer.

As the cases of South and Central America demonstrate, religious praxis has often taken violent forms in international politics; yet, the under-theorizing of grassroots level analysis misses the important counterpoint of peaceful praxis. However, if International Relations and, specifically, the sub-field of peacebuilding are going to take grassroots actors as a serious focal point, two key issues arise. First, deeply engrained epistemological ideas about who and where knowledge is produced – and consequently how this knowledge is valued – will need to shift. Second, and in close relation, this process of knowledge re-valuation means that scholars must sincerely try to see the world through the eyes of these newly deemed peacebuilding experts, and understand the sources of meaningful action from which they engage in changing and creating their community. Overall, there is a mutual devaluation of grassroots knowledge and of activism that prioritizes religious values over its political effect; in my view, this must be re-considered if IR wants to deeply understand the nature of post-conflict contexts.

Generally speaking, as a movement aimed at mobilizing and empowering the poor, it is not surprising that a significant amount of attention in liberation theology scholarship has been paid to grassroots activism. However, while many scholars discuss the importance of “the base communities,” (otherwise known as base ecclesial communities or CEB’s) these are primarily small, poor groups that gather regularly to read and comment on the Bible, and only occasionally act towards some concrete political end. Levine’s own wording makes this distinction clear; in his words: “ignoring links to other levels and focusing only on the base guts the potential transformative power of any grassroots initiative.”²⁶ Further still, with the exception of a small literature on *mujerista* theology and *Womanist* churches, women remain at the base of this “base”. Fortunately, in taking the feminist-Gramscian turn seriously and making the connection to peacebuilding projects, the role of women demonstrates strong spaces of activism and peacebuilding “expertise” in day-to-day provisions of human security and communal re-building.

While much work remains to be done in this area, it seems fair to claim that liberation theology churches can also be more openly horizontal in terms of who can become active agents than formal state-based positions of “power” that look to specific types of epistemic communities as “bearers of knowledge”. Of course, we must beware not to overly romanticize such spaces of activism, yet preliminary research shows women continuing to use liberation theology churches as sites of feminist peacebuilding activism across Central and South America.²⁷ As discussed in the first half of this paper, the

²⁶ Levine, 1988, 259. For a more explicit discussion of CEB’s in Central America, see 250-260.

²⁷ For specific cases in Columbia, see Hollenbach, 2007. My own fieldwork in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua also demonstrates empirical evidence of such activism. Although not yet finished, my research included seven months of ethnographic fieldwork, producing more than one hundred in-depth interviews with women (both nuns and laity) involved in peacebuilding projects throughout the area.

church is crucial in providing citizens with a sense of stability and security when their state is completely fragmented. Religious sites offer a place of continuity, of community, of empowerment and – not unimportantly – of hope.

Before concluding, it is important to quickly address recent claims that Protestant Evangelical churches are the rising site of activism in Central America; in many cases, the “surge” of evangelical Protestant base communities has been clearly positioned in the literature as if involved in a “competition” with liberation theology churches. However, there is support for Berryman’s argument “that despite claims by Catholic leaders that Protestantism represents an ‘alien invasion,’ in practice evangelical emphasis on charismatic power, miracles, healing, and in intense, direct experience is a lot closer to popular religion that most Catholics practice.”²⁸ In fact, my own research reinforces Berryman’s conclusions that liberationist Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism have much in common and, more to the point for peacebuilding, do not present competing or mutually exclusive communities of practice. For example, taking seriously the Christian emphasis on service and sacrifice, religious sites will offer a point of entry into studying peacebuilding. Reminiscent of John F. Kennedy’s statement, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,” I contend that religious peace-building demands the same shift away from a narrative concerning what citizens want from their transitioning state (rights, for example), towards a focus on what citizens can – and should – contribute to building peaceful and stable surroundings. This emphasis gains much of its traction in the preaching of values (namely, service) yet, while the grounding is theological, and the real world results are evident across cases both within Central America and beyond.²⁹

Related to my argument, consider the framing of Cejka’s statistical results across a seven-country case study: “A disturbing finding is that higher levels of motivation – practical, relational and ideological – were associated with lower levels of formal education.”³⁰ While her reasoning that this finding is “disturbing” makes sense (higher education is not producing peace-makers or inculcating a belief in peace as a real possibility), I contend there are deep epistemological claims being made here. If peacebuilding research is to ever move forward, it is absolutely crucial to start questioning the assumed correlation between “formal education” and “expertise” or “knowledge” in the case of knowing – through experience – what constitutes better peacebuilding practices. And, only from studying new sites of grassroots practice, which,

Furthermore, extensive use of participant-observation methodology corroborates the experiences revealed in most interviews. This data will be available in my completed dissertation, entitled “Catalysts and Cages: The Push-Pull Dynamics of Re-Constructing Gendered Identities in Women’s Grassroots Peacebuilding Projects.”

²⁸ Phillip Berryman, Suborn Hope: Religion, Politics, and Revolution in Central America, New York and Maryknoll: The New Press-Orbis Books, 1994, 157.

²⁹ See: Cejka, 2003; David Hollenbach, “Lessons from the wounded edge” in *The Tablet*, 11 August 2007, 8-9; John L. Kater Jr. “Whatever happened to liberation theology? New directions for theological reflection in Latin America” in *Anglican Theological Review*. Fall 2001; Ursula King (ed.). Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader. London: SPCK and Westminster Press, 1994; Jeffrey L. Klaiber “Prophets and Populists: Liberation Theology, 1968-1988” in *The Americas*. Vol. 46, No. 1. Jul., 1989, 1-15.

³⁰ Mary Ann Cejka, “God, Justice, Gender and the Enemy” in Artisans of Peace: Grassroots Peacemaking among Christian Communities, Mary Ann Cejka and Thomas Bamat (eds.), Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003, 28.

I contend, will be overwhelmingly feminist and religious-based, will International Relations gain newly relevant theories of peace. And, since there is no risk in ever being overly clear, let me again stress that feminist approaches emphasize gender equality, not the dominance of women; therefore, it is unsurprising that Cejka would find that while gender is an important analytical lens. In her words:

“At the grassroots level, however, it seems clear that gender differences are more nuanced. Caught up in the struggle to survive, women and men respond in ways and with gifts that are more similar than not. Perhaps the most important conclusion to draw from our gender research is that differences in men’s and women’s actions and motivations for peace are, in large part, determined by the specific cultural, economic, and political context in which they operate.”³¹

In 1988, Levine commented on the important base of grassroots activism as follows: “Where Marxist-Christian alliances do appear, as for example in Central America lately, at issue is more a set of practical grassroots cooperations, a unity “from below,” than the result of some general program (presumably inspired by liberation theology) to draw the two sides together in a common effort.”³² Twenty years later, the notable emphasis on grassroots activity pervades, however these movements are inspired and coalesced by specific turns in theory and practice. Aiming to explore this journey, it seems credible to draw complex connections between a feminist-Gramscian theoretical turn and grassroots *praxis* based in knowledge from practical experience.

The Appropriateness of Optimism

In order to bring this discussion full-circle, let me return to the idea of conceptualizing all peace-building projects as “faith-based” initiatives rooted in hope. As Pablo Richard, Director of Costa Rica’s *Ecumenical Department of Research* eloquently explains, the political dimensions of faith concern the construction of a new power, rather than a zero-sum game of taking political power. Richard identifies these spaces of political faith as the “traditional spaces” which have long been places of inclusiveness rather than exclusivity; namely, the family, the community, the neighborhood, the workshop, centres of labor, the local market and civil society groups of women, youth, Blacks and natives. Clearly, we cannot deny the empirical evidence of violence – in both physical and structural form – that remains endemic to post-conflict contexts, and we can admit there is still no alternative to the system. However, what is crucial is that there exists an alternative to the spirit of the system, which is lived in those already existing, traditional spaces of life.³³

As IR scholars are fully aware, peace is not a project or package that we can import, explain, implement and then enjoy. It is a process, or more accurately, multiple and interwoven processes, that are contextual and unfold over time in non-linear paths of “progress”. Most importantly, these processes are difficult. Yet, despite the setbacks,

³¹ Cejka, 30.

³² Levine, 1988, 247.

³³ Kater, 2001. See footnotes 88 and 91.

using liberation theology as a progressive site of peacebuilding has at infused meaning into the difficult lives of many who struggle daily for basic levels of human security.

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