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Justice According to Reinhold Niebuhr and Gustavo Gutiérrez

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The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

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Abstract

Reinhold Niebuhr and Gustavo Gutiérrez were two influential theologians. Niebuhr was a Protestant neo-orthodox theologian and Gutiérrez was a Catholic liberation theologian. Both tackled the theological topics of justice and reformation. Niebuhr and Gutiérrez came to similar conclusions on these topics although they shared no explicit connections. Despite this, these two thinkers are not widely compared in scholarship. There is an academic tradition of treating Catholicism and Protestantism separately. This tradition could explain why the similarities between the two are overlooked. This essay explores the beliefs of Niebuhr and Gutiérrez on justice and reformation to demonstrate the similarities and argue that these theologians merit more extensive comparison.

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Background: Niebuhr</i>	6
<i>The Origin of Oppression: Niebuhr</i>	9
<i>Liberation/Reformation: Niebuhr</i>	14
<i>Utopia: Niebuhr</i>	20
<i>Background: Gutiérrez</i>	23
<i>The Origin of Oppression: Gutiérrez</i>	25
<i>Liberation/Reformation: Gutiérrez</i>	29
<i>Utopia: Gutiérrez</i>	33
<i>Conclusion</i>	36

Introduction

Justice is a common theological theme. Many great thinkers have grappled with what justice looks like within Christianity. Reinhold Niebuhr and Gustavo Gutiérrez both presented their ideas on Christian justice and reformation. Reinhold Niebuhr was an influential theologian in the 1930s through the early 1970s.¹ His ideas on justice and reform were greatly influenced by his experiences with World Wars I and II and his upbringing in the Lutheran Church.² Niebuhr criticized theologians for speaking out against the war because they were resistant to the use of violence.³ Niebuhr thought that all injustice and oppression would require coercion. Niebuhr believed that sometimes coercion required violence. Because he insisted that violence was not inherently immoral, entering World War II was a just response by America.⁴ Niebuhr understood that sin was the root of injustice. He also believed in free will, and that all things – including societal institutions – were created by human free will. For this reason, he argued that since oppressive structures were created by humans, they could also be changed and overthrown by humans.⁵ Niebuhr insisted that fighting against these systems of oppression was a Christian's responsibility. He understood that this would also include coercion, and sometimes violence, and he was very cautious of this, advocating strategy. He demanded that any type of reformation or revolution required thorough evaluation to ensure that coercion and violence would not be done

¹ Richard Wightman Fox, "Reinhold Niebuhr's 'Revolution,'" vol. 8 (*The Wilson Quarterly*, 1984), 7.

² Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr a Biography*, 41; Roger Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology: From Reconstruction to Deconstruction* (Downers Grove, Inter Varsity Press, 2013), 347; Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 295.

³ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 295.

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 3.

⁵ Dennis L Thompson, "The Basic Doctrines and Concepts of Reinhold Niebuhr's Political Thought," vol. 17 (*Journal of Church and State*, 1975). 287; Charles T Mathewes, "Reading Reinhold Niebuhr Against Himself," vol. 19 (*The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 1999), 72.

in vain.⁶ Although Niebuhr necessitated political action, he maintained that sin would always be present in humanity, and therefore a perfect utopia would never be possible. He believed that humanity would be better if it strove for perfection, even if it is never attainable. He thought utopianism to be naïve and that it bred complacency. He was very critical of this idealism, urging Americans to adopt a more realistic and practical form of Christianity.⁷

Gustavo Gutiérrez was a Peruvian Roman Catholic Priest and the father of liberation theology. He studied theology immensely in Europe, but came to realize that metaphysical theology was impractical.⁸ He believed that knowledge is only as valuable as its practicality. He wanted his theology to have a direct relation to and impact on the world.⁹ He focused intensely on how to solve the problem of poverty. Gutiérrez also thought that sin was the root of oppression. He believed in free will and also viewed that social constructs were created by humans and could consequently be overthrown by humans.¹⁰ Gutiérrez believed that this social change should come from the collective action of the oppressed. The job of the liberation theologian is to work in solidarity with the oppressed.¹¹ Gutiérrez redefined utopia to make it a practical process toward a perfect society instead of an impossible ideal.¹²

Reinhold Niebuhr and Gustavo Gutiérrez share a great number of similarities in their ideas on justice and liberation. Despite these similarities, they are not widely compared to one another. This essay will explore both of these theologians' ideas on the origin of oppression, the

⁶ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 170.

⁷ Thompson, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Political Thought," 287.

⁸ Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 22-24.

⁹ Edward J. Echeverria, "Until Justice and Peace Embrace: A Review Article," vol. 20 (*Calvin Theological Journal*, Nov. 1985), 219.

¹⁰ Yangkahoo Vashum, "Liberation as a Theological Theme: Exploring the Theme of Liberation in the Works of Some Selected Theologians," vol. 19 (*The Asia Journal of Theology*, Oct. 2005), 37.

¹¹ Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 5..

¹² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, ed. 15 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), 135.

process of liberation/reformation, and utopia. The resemblances between Niebuhr and Gutiérrez's beliefs on these topics are undeniable. Within the field of theology, Protestantism and Catholicism are often treated separately. This could be an explanation as to why these two thinkers are not often discussed together. It could simply be an oversight due to their denomination labels. In this essay, Reinhold Niebuhr and Gustavo Gutiérrez's beliefs on the issue of justice will be thoroughly examined to demonstrate the irrefutable parallels in their thoughts.

Background: Niebuhr

Reinhold Niebuhr's allegiance to the Lutheran church, serving at Bethel Church, and his experiences from World Wars I and II affected his theology greatly. Niebuhr was a Protestant theologian. He was the son of German immigrants, living from June 21, 1892 to June 1, 1971. He grew up in a Lutheran Church in Lincoln, Illinois, comprised mainly of German immigrants, that was pastored by his father.¹³ He followed in his father's footsteps and attended the same seminary as him, Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. In 1920, Niebuhr became the pastor at Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, Michigan. His congregation was largely African American and many worked on the assembly line at the nearby Ford automobile factory. During Niebuhr's time at Bethel church, he witnessed how easily and often large companies exploit their workers by overworking and underpaying them.¹⁴ This experience influenced his theology by highlighting the injustice that laborers experienced at the hands of industrialists. He

¹³ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr a Biography* (Pantheon Books, 1985), 7.

¹⁴ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr a Biography*, 41; Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 347.

believed that unless workers owned the rights to the goods that they were producing, exploitation will always exist. Eventually he came to think that the only solution to poverty in America would be socialism.¹⁵

Niebuhr is typically classified as a neo-orthodox theologian, although he rejected this label. Neo-orthodoxy is a Protestant theological movement that was influenced by World War I and World War II. The rival movement, liberal theology, was optimistic about the progress of societal morality. But the horrors of WWI and the Holocaust of WWII forced some theologians to reevaluate the notion after the “genocidal century.”¹⁶ These events made it evident to the neo-orthodox theologians who abandoned liberal Protestantism that immorality and inhumanity still existed in the world. While there is a lot of variety in the beliefs of theologians identified as neo-orthodox, the common bond among this group is that they all push back against the idealism of Protestant liberalism.¹⁷

Liberal theologians were too idealistic for Niebuhr. He was frustrated that liberals refused the violent action necessary in order to stop the atrocities of World War II. Niebuhr argued “if [liberal theologians] had their way, the United States would sit on the sidelines of WWII ‘loving’ both sides while millions of Jews and others died in the Holocaust.”¹⁸ These frustrations led Niebuhr to be very praxis-focused in his theology. Niebuhr believed that Christians should be obedient to a set of moral ideals, but he also believed that those ideals should have a practical application in the world.¹⁹ Niebuhr understood theology to be realistic and applicable, not abstract and idealistic. This is why he sought to be a political activist.²⁰

¹⁵ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 347.

¹⁶ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 295.

¹⁷ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr a Biography*, 220-225.

¹⁸ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 357.

¹⁹ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr a Biography*, 60.

²⁰ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 349.

Niebuhr was additionally frustrated with the inaction of the Lutheran Church. The Lutheran Church doctrine posits that the Kingdom of God and the earthly world are two distinct realms. Lutherans say that the two should not be confused with one another, while also pressing that Christians take action in the earthly world. Lutherans also believe that all actions a Christian takes in the public sphere should also be motivated by their faith.²¹ This attitude frustrated Niebuhr in conjunction with the inaction of liberal theologians. He believed that the role of a Christian was to be a politically active. Niebuhr did not want Christians to be split between the secular world and the religious world. Instead, the Church should cease being politically neutral and make action against oppression its main objective.

Niebuhr's grievances were intensified by what he perceived to be the hypocrisy of the Lutheran Church. The Lutheran Church had a history with helping those suffering from poverty that goes back as far as 1522. The Lutheran Church insisted that these acts were not done to earn salvation – because it is a gift – but rather out of Christian love.²² Niebuhr's ideas on justice aligned with Lutheran tradition. However, when he served in Detroit, he was exasperated that local churches were not doing anything to stop the exploitation of the Ford workers.²³ Niebuhr's praxis-oriented theology was the result of his frustrations with hypocrisy in the Lutheran Church and liberal theology.

²¹L. DeAne Lagerquist, "Being Lutheran in Public: Contributions to Social Capital in the Midwest," vol. 74 (*Anglican and Episcopal History*, 2005):102-103.

²² Lagerquist, "Being Lutheran in Public," 105.

²³ Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr a Biography*, 41.

The Origin of Oppression: Niebuhr

Oppression and injustice were pressing topics for Niebuhr. After he witnessed the exploitation of Ford workers and the horrors of World War II, he was compelled to explore the theological themes of oppression and injustice and what Christians are called to do.²⁴ Three important aspects of Niebuhr's thoughts on injustice are the importance of history, the corrupting nature of power, and the existence sin.

For Niebuhr, one of the most important things for social justice work was understanding the root of the oppression. He especially believed that it is important to understand the particular history of a specific injustice. He did not consider that one could effectively wipe out injustice unless one understood why the injustice came to be in the first place.²⁵ This is why he was so critical of American's conflict with the Soviet Union. In *The Irony of American History* (1952), Niebuhr criticized how Americans sought justice and peace without understanding the history of injustice and unrest in the Soviet Union. This view aligns with that of liberation theologians who argued that before one can begin to liberate the oppressed, he or she must immerse themselves in the culture and history of the people to fully understand their grievances. Only after this immersion with the oppressed should action be taken. Niebuhr pointed out how Americans refused to evaluate the history of tyranny in the Soviet Union. Americans did not comprehend the complex history in the Soviet Union that led to this tyrannical regime that they were fighting against. Americans foolishly hoped that they could "move the pattern of history toward the desired goal of peace and justice" without this understanding.²⁶ He insisted that without this

²⁴ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 295; Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr a Biography*, 41.

²⁵Chris Simpson, "Losing My Religion for Lent: Niebuhr and Gutiérrez on Theology as Self-Critique." Vol. 6 (*Stone-Campbell Journal*, Fall 2003), 230.

²⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3.

knowledge, one system of oppression could be replaced by another. If one cannot understand what caused the oppression, one is more likely to create a new system that is potentially crueler than the former.

Niebuhr put this system into practice when evaluating the situation of the African American. In *Man's Nature and His Communities* (1965), Niebuhr examined stoic universalist humanism in the context of American racial oppression. Universalism is the idea that all peoples and races are exactly similar. It minimizes the differences between social and ethnic groups. Niebuhr argued that in an ideal world, this could be true.²⁷ All peoples would be seen as the same, and discrimination based on race or ethnicity would not exist. However, he argued that this would never be possible because of the histories that contribute to racial and ethnic identities. He pointed out that throughout history, people have used cultural and ethnic differences to discriminate.²⁸ He contended that all of the cultural differences between white Americans and African Americans “are not innate but historically contingent.”²⁹ The differences are not biological, but rather the result of the histories of colonization, slavery, and segregation. He did not think that the majority of Americans would come to this realization so he stressed that the situation of African Americans required “the assertion of political authority by the politically and culturally integrated community thereby insuring human rights for all its citizens.”³⁰ Niebuhr intimately experienced and understood the oppression of African Americans through his work at Bethel church.³¹ He communicated the unique history that has led to this oppression, and after presenting his ideas, he suggested a solution for this community to reform society. Although

²⁷ Kenan Malik, “Universalism and Difference: Race and Postmodernists,” vol. 37 (*Race & Class*, 1996), 3.

²⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man's Nature and His Communities: Essays on the Dynamics and Enigmas of Man's Personal and Social Existence*, (New York: Scribner, 1965), 93.

²⁹ Niebuhr, *Man's Nature and His Communities*, 95.

³⁰ Niebuhr, *Man's Nature and His Communities*. 98-99.

³¹ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr a Biography*, 41.

Niebuhr asserted that the specific context of oppression is crucial to the solution, he also argued that the root of almost all injustices is the corruption of power.

Niebuhr firmly maintained that power was the root of oppression. In the modern world, that power is the result of wealth. Niebuhr persuasively argued that “all through history one may observe the tendency of power to destroy its very *raison d’être*.”³² In *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), he claimed that democracy made it so that wealth is synonymous with political power. Before democracy, if certain people had military status, were of royal blood, or owned land, then they would also have political power.³³ On this subject, once again his experience of the exploitation of Ford automobile workers proved to be formative. He wrote “we have previously seen that inequalities of privilege are due chiefly to disproportions of power and that the power which creates privilege need not be economic but usually is.”³⁴ Through capitalism, Niebuhr asserted that those who own the means of production are easily able to exploit the masses since they do not have equal power. Niebuhr pointed to Henry Ford, who was overworking and underpaying his factory line workers, some of whom were member of Niebuhr’s congregation. As Niebuhr observed, exploitation happens often— since it is profitable— which will yield even more power to those who already monopolize power. This is why he emphasized that “maintaining that disproportion of power in society is the real root of social injustice.”³⁵ These disproportions of power not only create, but also sustain injustice. He also drew a parallel between the function of economic and political injustice.

Niebuhr insisted that political leaders hoard power over the masses in the same way that companies do. He wrote that “every social group tends to develop imperial ambitions which are

³² Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 11.

³³ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 14-15.

³⁴ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 114.

³⁵ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 114.

aggravated, but not caused solely by the lusts of its leaders and privileged groups.”³⁶ Echoing his critiques in *The Irony of American History*, he claimed that political leaders manipulate the public into supporting actions that would provide even more power to those who are already in positions of authority. He wrote, “this social inequality leads not only to internal strife but to conflict between various national communities, by prompting the more privileged and powerful classes to seek advantages at the expense of other nations.”³⁷ Although Niebuhr was very critical of political leaders, he was not prodding the general public towards anarchy.³⁸ Niebuhr’s realism will be discussed further later on in this paper, but Daniel Rice, professor at the University of Wisconsin, summarizes Niebuhr’s position well by stating:

Against naïve utopian ideals he also emphasized the ever-present role of power and conflict in national, international, and even personal life. Niebuhr appreciated the role of diverse centers of power in society as contributing to the overall balance of power key to preventing tyrannical government. And he even acknowledged the unavoidable role of elites or oligarchies in the organization of social life.³⁹

Niebuhr believed that the ideal or perfect governing body would never be achieved because of the presence of sin. However, he was still appreciative of accomplishments achieved by these flawed governments. However, he strongly fought against nihilistic or pessimistic attitudes. He believed sin to be inevitable and a large contributor to injustice, while insisting that individuals fight against it because of the possibility of free will.

Niebuhr’s beliefs on sin are complex but greatly contributed to his ideas of injustice and reformation. He understood that “sin is not necessary to the nature of things but it is inevitable.”⁴⁰ Despite this inevitability, he maintained that “it is not in the nature of man to sin:

³⁶ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 18.

³⁷ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 49.

³⁸ Mathewes, "Reading Reinhold Niebuhr Against Himself," 71.

³⁹ Daniel F. Rice, "The Fiction of Reinhold Niebuhr as a Political Conservative," vol. 98 (*Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2015), 62.

⁴⁰ Thompson, "The Basic Doctrines and Concepts of Reinhold Niebuhr's Political Thought," 287.

man sins in freedom.”⁴¹ He believed that sin was a paradox and “that is why the Bible expresses it in a story.”⁴² The story of the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis was not taken literally by Niebuhr, but he did think that all humans have sinfulness within. He explained that “the paradox is that sin is inevitable but not necessary.”⁴³ Everyone has an internal sinfulness, but no one is guilty unless they act upon it. In other words, sin is a conscious choice.⁴⁴ Traditional Calvinists would have appreciated his stance that sin is an inevitable choice that all humans will make. Humans have the free will to not choose sin, but Niebuhr contended that humans will unavoidably make purposeful wrong choices. With this in mind, he insisted that “in sin could be found the explanation for the immorality of society.”⁴⁵ Sinfulness is a choice. Injustices result from people making sinful choices, and that is why it is a moral imperative for Christians to counteract these motives to restore justice. Injustice is the result of human action, thus it can be reversed by human action even if it requires violence or war to do so.⁴⁶

Since injustice is created by free will, it can be reformed through free will. Niebuhr believed in human freedom, although he considered that some limitations exist. He wrote “man indeed is always the creator and agent in history; but this reveals that his creative freedom is limited to the limits of man as a creature.”⁴⁷ Niebuhr held that humans are limited by their mortality and sinfulness. Perfect love and perfect justice would never exist. Even with these limitations, he insisted that human action to reform injustices is a requirement because people will never achieve godly love because of sin. But social justice work is the closest

⁴¹ Thompson, “The Basic Doctrines and Concepts of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Political Thought,” 288.

⁴² Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 354.

⁴³ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 354.

⁴⁴ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 354.

⁴⁵ Thompson, “The Basic Doctrines and Concepts of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Political Thought,” 287; Mathewes, “Reading Reinhold Niebuhr Against Himself,” 72.

⁴⁶ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 355.

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature and His Communities*, 82-83.

approximation.⁴⁸ Despite being sinners, humans are commanded to love their neighbors. This belief was present in the Lutheran Church, but Niebuhr did not view that the Church's actions supported it.⁴⁹ When Niebuhr served at Bethel Church he witnessed laborers being overworked and underpaid at the Ford automobile factory. It was a large issue in the community that many Churches spoke out against. However, Niebuhr became frustrated that churches were not taking meaningful action to stop the exploitation.⁵⁰ To Niebuhr, godly love necessitates fighting for the rights of all people. Such justice must be carried out in very specific ways in order for it to be meaningful and long-lasting.

Liberation/Reformation: Niebuhr

Niebuhr did not present a direct path to justice. Instead, he offered an exhaustive set of guidelines. Niebuhr insisted that each specific instance of injustice or oppression would require a different series of actions to abolish it. For this reason, he did not make any sweeping declarations about how Christians should fight injustice. He recognized that there are many ways to execute this poorly, so he evaluated some of the more problematic paths. Niebuhr emphasized the importance of collective action and the inevitable use of coercion that sometimes necessitated violence.

Niebuhr held that collective action was key to social reformation. He claimed that “the justice which we have established in our society has been achieved not by pure individualism,

⁴⁸ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 358.

⁴⁹L. DeAne Lagerquist. “Being Lutheran in Public: Contributions to Social Capital in the Midwest.” Vol. 74 (*Anglican and Episcopal History*, 2005), 102-103.

⁵⁰ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr a Biography*, 41; Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 347.

but by collective action.”⁵¹ Although oppression and injustice often strip the individual of his or her power, Niebuhr contended that as a whole the oppressed have the power to change. He wrote, “even that portion of society which suffers most from injustice may hold the power responsible for it.”⁵² He believed that the oppressed as individuals had far less power than their oppressors, but collectively they could fight back. Because Niebuhr thought nations to be self-serving, he maintained that “only the most political pressure” would cause change.⁵³ The masses have the power, but only if they are aware of their power and if they work together. This is why Niebuhr also asserted that we should “make those who suffer from injustice more conscious of their rights in society and persuade them to assert their rights more energetically.”⁵⁴ Niebuhr enthusiastically believed in social reform stemming from those who have suffered from oppression. He also maintained that this change would not come about peacefully or passively.

Niebuhr strongly argued that coercion was a necessary and unavoidable part of social reform. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he reasoned that democracy itself is inherently coercive, so it would be impossible to create justice within this system without also using force.⁵⁵ Niebuhr was very critical of pacifists who were morally opposed to coercion or violence in any capacity. He insisted “radical prejudice never can be wiped out by preaching against it.”⁵⁶ Coercive action is necessary because “all social co-operation on a larger scale than the most intimate social group requires a measure of coercion.”⁵⁷ To avoid coercion because of moral aversion would be much more sinful in the eyes of Niebuhr than to use coercion to fight against injustice. Since coercion is inevitable in the fight against injustice, “it becomes a matter of

⁵¹ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 10.

⁵² Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 31.

⁵³ Niebuhr, *Man's Nature and His Communities*, 89.

⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 31.

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 4.

⁵⁶ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr a Biography*, 119.

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 3.

responsibility to use it in violent or non-violent forms as the situation dictates.”⁵⁸ It is our moral responsibility to fight for justice. Avoiding justice because of an aversion to violence or coercion would be ignoring our responsibility as Christians to combat oppression.

Niebuhr advocated for a just violence. He explained that force is necessary in societal conflict resolutions, but he qualified that extreme use of violence or extreme aversion to violence would only worsen unjust situations. Extreme violence could cause more harmful scenarios than whatever is being fought against. Completely refusing to use violence would allow oppressive systems to continue existing. He argued that remaining complacent within an unjust system is equivalent to being an active participant in the system. For this reason, he claimed that we should use force to solve societal problems, but in addition we should enforce the moral intelligence that would help maintain justice by holding those in power accountable. That is why he asserted “the role of the church was to place itself resolutely between labor and capital, preaching patience to the former, sacrifice to the latter ,and justice to both.”⁵⁹ Niebuhr proposed that the Church become a mediator, preventing both extreme violence and passive complacency. He recognized that some Christians were opposed to political action because they were resistant to violence. He attempted to coax the Church into action by arguing that violence is not immoral, contrary to what many Christians believed.⁶⁰

Niebuhr insisted that violence cannot be intrinsically immoral, and for this reason, as a principle, it should not be opposed. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he wrote that “one error is the belief that violence is a natural and inevitable expression of ill-will and non-violence of

⁵⁸ James F. Childress, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Critique of Pacifism." vol. 36 (*The Review of Politics*, 1974), 480.

⁵⁹ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr a Biography*, 71.

⁶⁰Jonathan H. Ebel, "Undersold and Oversold: Reinhold Niebuhr and Economic Justice," vol. 95 (*Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2012), 412.; Simpson, "Losing My Religion for Lent," 223-224.

goodwill, and that violence is therefore intrinsically evil and non-violence intrinsically good.”⁶¹

Violence itself does not carry any morality. It is the motivation behind the violence that determines its morality. He proclaimed that “nothing is intrinsically immoral except ill-will and nothing is intrinsically good except good-will.”⁶² Niebuhr did not want certain actions, like war or violence, to be permanently labeled as immoral because he viewed that certain injustices necessitated war or violence. For Niebuhr, motivation, in general, was more important than the action itself. Therefore, if violence is used to fight oppression and restore justice, then it becomes just.

Niebuhr did not believe in maintaining a strict set of morals, but that morality is dependent on the circumstances. Niebuhr argued that “every action resolves a certain competition between values in which one value must be subordinated to another.”⁶³ When deciding between being complacent with oppression and a brief period of violence to create a new just system, violence was more morally attractive to Niebuhr. “If a season of violence can establish a just social system and create the possibilities of its preservation, there is no purely ethical ground upon which violence and revolution can be ruled out.”⁶⁴ Niebuhr clearly established that violence is a morally viable option for Christians in the fight against injustice. He did not advocate for it as a first response. Instead, he perceived it to be a last resort, while also advocating for coercion. It was important to him that Christians did not refuse this option, especially if violence was the only solution. Niebuhr expressed his apprehensions about violence, but he still maintained the following opinion: “Violent conflict may not be the best means to attain freedom or equality, but that is a question which must be deferred for a moment. It is

⁶¹ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 171-172.

⁶² Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 170.

⁶³ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 174.

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 179.

important to insist, first of all, that equality is a higher social goal than peace. It may never be completely attainable, but it is the symbol for the ideal of a just peace..⁶⁵ Violence caused apprehension for many Christians in regards to social conflict. Niebuhr saw this from liberal theologians during World War II. He wanted to eradicate the idea of violence being immoral, so that Christians would not feel apprehension, but instead could actively fight injustice.⁶⁶

Even though Niebuhr advocated for a just violence, he exercised precaution when suggesting this strategy. He required that actions need to be thoroughly analyzed. He also cautioned his readers to be careful that only unjust components of the system would be removed.⁶⁷ He contended that “if a revolution can destroy social injustice and preserve equal justice, much might be forgiven in the methods which it employs.”⁶⁸ Violence may be necessary and justified, but he also warned not to be flippant about its use. Violence should only be an option when it would be used to establish justice.⁶⁹ He wrote that “Christians...[are] still called to ethical and political action – despite evil that they are bound to commit in the course of trying to do good.”⁷⁰ Despite these caveats, Niebuhr maintained that fighting injustice in whatever capacity is the moral responsibility of Christians.

In addition to Niebuhr’s concerns about the use of violence, he also worried about the reformation of society. For him, any kind of liberation or revolution could only be valuable if it resulted in a more peaceful and just order. He wrote in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, that:

The inertia of society is so stubborn that no one will move against it, if he cannot believe that it can be more easily overcome than is the actual case. And no one will suffer the perils and pains involved in the process of radical social change, if he cannot believe in the possibility of a purer and fairer society than will ever be established.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 234-235.

⁶⁶ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 295.

⁶⁷ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 167.

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 192.

⁶⁹ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 192.

⁷⁰ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr a Biography*, 91.

⁷¹ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 221.

Humanity will not move towards justice and peace if each system of oppression – after a period of violence and revolution – is replaced with a different system of oppression. Such a never-ending cycle of violence and oppression would create complacency and apathy in the masses. Since Niebuhr strongly believed in the power of collective action, this cycle would destroy all hope of justice. This is why he heavily cautioned that extreme and careful consideration be taken when reforming society.⁷²

Niebuhr claimed that the oppressed should be the ones to shape society. He believed that they would be the group best suited to evaluate if a particular societal system was oppressive.⁷³ He also warned that if violence is used, “its terror must have the tempo of a surgeon’s skill and the healing must follow quickly upon its wounds.”⁷⁴ If the revolution is long and bloody it will be easy for the public to lose sight of the ultimate goal of justice. Niebuhr also insisted that these social changes come about quickly. He disliked the notion of a gradual movement towards justice. He warned that incremental change would also cause people to become complacent and eventually stop asserting their rights. He thought that more drastic change was necessary.⁷⁵

Niebuhr specifically expressed his concerns when talking about America’s conflict with the Soviet Union in *The Irony of American History*. In reference to the Cold War, he asserted that mass destruction would be detrimental to everyone. He claimed that there would be hardly anything left of society if a nuclear war were to occur. He also pointed out that “the victors would also face the ‘imperial’ problem of using power in global terms but from one particular center of authority, so preponderant and unchallenged that its world rule would almost certainly

⁷² Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 21.

⁷³ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 157.

⁷⁴ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 220.

⁷⁵ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 219-220.

violate basic standards of justice."⁷⁶ Americans were criticizing the tyranny of the Soviet Union without considering that going to war and forcing democracy on the Soviet Union would be equally tyrannical and would not be just or liberating. They were not considering that whatever governing body that replaced the Soviet Union could be even worse. Americans furthermore were not thinking of restructuring the Soviet Union, which Niebuhr believed was a crucial part of fighting injustice. Although Niebuhr never gave a template for social justice, his most prominent plea is that all actions for the sake of justice be thoroughly evaluated.⁷⁷

Utopia: Niebuhr

Niebuhr believed that his views on utopia would motivate people into action. Niebuhr criticized the idea of a far off and perfect society that he believed would never be attainable.⁷⁸ Niebuhr condemned idealists who imagined this perfect society because he thought that this would create a disconnect from reality and would discourage the public from action because utopia is unobtainable. Naïvely believing in utopia would only discourage the public. Niebuhr contended that liberal theologians should be more realistic about the human condition and maintained that although utopia will never be possible, we should still work towards a more promising future, even if it is unattainable.

Niebuhr understood that utopia was not possible because of the existence of sin. He wrote in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* that peace “will never be fully realized” on earth.⁷⁹ Niebuhr believed in a sin that was widespread and largely undetectable. Niebuhr maintained that sin was

⁷⁶ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 2.

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 2-4.

⁷⁸ Rice, "The Fiction of Reinhold Niebuhr as a Political Conservative," 62.

⁷⁹ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 21.

the cause of injustice on earth and that sin will always exist as long as humans have free will, therefore injustice will always exist. And sin could explain immorality.⁸⁰ Niebuhr was far from nihilistic though. He believed that injustice was the result of sin, but since sin is an unavoidable part of humanity, injustice will always exist, though it should actively be fought against.⁸¹

Niebuhr insisted that society will never be perfect, but it can progress if we work towards a better society, even if we never attain the 'perfect' society. He valued progress over perfection. He also viewed that extreme idealism would also prevent societal progression, so he advocated for realism.

Niebuhr defined two different types of utopianism, both of which were problematic for him. Hard utopianism "justifie[s] cruelty in the name of its moral goals."⁸² This utopianism does not evaluate the consequences of their actions, as he insisted. Hard utopianism will sacrifice the lives of many for a utopia that Niebuhr believed would never arrive, thus losing those lives and causing suffering in vain. Soft utopianism on the other hand is like the utopianism of liberals. Soft utopianism would insist that action must be taken to achieve an ideal, but not have any practical action to get there. He strongly urged liberals to take on a more realistic ideology about conflict in the world.⁸³

Liberal theology's idealism is what prevented them from advocating for war against Germany, which Niebuhr viewed as their greatest flaw. Liberals believed that "if enough Christians worked for peace hard enough, peace would break out all over," but Niebuhr realized this was unrealistic and impractical.⁸⁴ Liberal theology believed that the Kingdom of God could

⁸⁰ Thompson, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Political Thought," 287.

⁸¹ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 21.

⁸² Roger L. Shinn, "Realism, Radicalism, and Eschatology in Reinhold Niebuhr: A Reassessment," vol. 54(*The Journal of Religion*, 1974), 412.

⁸³ Shinn, "Realism, Radicalism, and Eschatology," 412-413.

⁸⁴ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 351-352.

be brought to earth "by peaceful persuasion without conflict or coercion... Niebuhr advocated Christian realism, the idea that sinful human beings cannot bring about God's Kingdom or even achieve anything perfect, but they can with God's help approximate God's Kingdom in partial achievements of justice"⁸⁵ Niebuhr, unlike liberals, did not believe that human action could create utopia or God's Kingdom. He asserted that the society that liberals were envisioning could only come about through divine action, which humans are incapable of achieving.⁸⁶ For that reason, he believed it foolish to believe that human action—especially peaceful human action—could bring about the Kingdom.

Despite his beliefs, Niebuhr still insisted that social justice work should be done. He was focused on a pragmatic view. He combated the idealistic views that liberals had about the realities of conflict so that they would be impelled into political action. Niebuhr attempted to convince liberals to be more realistic in terms of human self-interest and the corrupting nature of power in societies and governments.⁸⁷ Niebuhr wanted liberals and idealists to know that utopia would never exist. Humans will always act selfishly. This self-interest is magnified with economic and political power. Niebuhr tried to move liberals out of their idealism without pushing them into nihilism. He emphasized the importance of balance not only for social justice but for "every aspect of human life."⁸⁸ The world will never be perfect because of the existence of sin. However, that does not mean that social justice work does not have value, but rather that social justice work is the best way that humans can express Christian love in a sinful world.

⁸⁵ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 356.

⁸⁶ Vashum, "Liberation as a Theological Theme," 342; Simpson, "Losing My Religion for Lent," 226.

⁸⁷ Thompson, "The Fiction of Reinhold Niebuhr as a Political Conservative," 65.

⁸⁸ Leslie A Murray, "An Anti-Utopian Utopia: Reinhold Niebuhr and István Bibó," vol. 75 (*Encounter*, Sum 2015), 42.

Christians are charged with fighting injustice but he did not believe that this would be “breaking through to a new form of society.”⁸⁹

Background: Gutiérrez

Gustavo Gutiérrez’s educational background influenced his theology and led him to believe in the practical application of theology. He was born June 8, 1928 in Lima, Peru.⁹⁰ He was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1959 after completing seminary at Catholic University in Santiago, Chile.⁹¹ He was sent on the Theological Grand Tour and studied in Belgium, France, and Rome for nearly a decade.⁹² Once he returned to South America, he realized that what he had learned was too metaphysical to be applied to the Latin American situation. He believed that the purpose of theology is to change the world. So he began “unlearning” all he had studied in order to discover a theology that would be applicable to the situation of poverty.⁹³

Liberation theology is a movement that was initiated by him in 1968.⁹⁴ Gutiérrez inaugurated liberation theology with “the bible of the movement,” *A Theology of Liberation* (1973).⁹⁵ Liberation theology is a lifelong commitment to those who suffer from oppression for the purpose of ending social inequities.⁹⁶ Gutiérrez pushed back against what he perceived to be the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church.⁹⁷ Catholicism teaches abstract individualism, which

⁸⁹ Fox, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Revolution,” 90; Craig Campbell, “The New Meaning of Modern War in the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr,” vol. 53 (*Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1992), 688.

⁹⁰ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 22.

⁹¹ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 22-24.

⁹² Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 24-25.

⁹³ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 24-25.

⁹⁴ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 507.

⁹⁵ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 507.

⁹⁶ Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 3.

⁹⁷ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 507.

places importance on the individual's spiritual transformation.⁹⁸ The Catholic Church fosters this belief through its various sacraments (communion, confession, baptism).⁹⁹ This individualist focus caused the Catholic Church to neglect human agency in worldly institutions. Individualists argue that personal transformation is how God works to improve the world, instead of believing in the power of collective action. They think that fervent prayer and trust in God is all that is necessary in order for God Himself to come and reconcile the world of injustice.¹⁰⁰

Gutiérrez held that the Church should actively fight against systems of oppression, but he came to realize that the Church in Peru was contributing to and participating in these systems.¹⁰¹ The Catholic Church participated in alleviating suffering through acts of charity. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) declared that all persons have the right to necessary earthly goods. They went so far as to say that the Church should alleviate poverty even if it means taking from the rich. Gutiérrez did not consider that acts of charity were sufficient. Gutiérrez conceded that aid is a method that the Catholic Church had used to try to help the poor, and it could tend to their immediate needs, whether that be through providing clothing, food, shelter, water, or medical care. However, charity neglects the systemic problems that cause these needs and it belittles the ability of the poor to have agency in their liberation against their oppressors.¹⁰² For this reason Gutiérrez called for two responses: collective action of the oppressed and radical revolution. Gutiérrez considered that true liberation is when the oppressed work together to change systems of oppression.¹⁰³ He insisted that the church must work *with* the oppressed, not *for* the oppressed. He contended that working with and on behalf of marginalized people is an act

⁹⁸ Joseph Fichter, "Restructuring Catholicism," vol. 38 (*Sociological Analysis*, 1977), 158.

⁹⁹ Peter W. Williams, *America's Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-first Century*, ed. 3. (University of Illinois Press, 1990), 60-62.

¹⁰⁰ Fichter, "Restructuring Catholicism," 158-159.

¹⁰¹ Brown. *Gustavo Gutiérrez*. 28.

¹⁰² Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 4

¹⁰³ Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 5.

of loving God.¹⁰⁴ Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians after him called for a radical revolution to end oppression as opposed to “gradual reform of social orders.”¹⁰⁵ Although they did not advocate for violence outright, they recognized that the revolutions they called for would likely be accompanied by some form of violence.¹⁰⁶

Gutiérrez’s theology was largely responding to Catholic tradition. Catholicism was individualist and focused too much on spiritual transformation and the afterlife.¹⁰⁷ Little focus was placed on the physical world and its suffering, and what little focus there was involved charity work.¹⁰⁸ Gutiérrez reacted against this. He believed that the Church was called to make dramatic change in the physical world. Gutiérrez did not completely denounce the focuses of the Catholic Church, but he insisted that social revolution to end injustice should be an equal priority.¹⁰⁹

The Origin of Oppression: Gutiérrez

Gutiérrez was compelled to explore the ideas of injustice and liberation after witnessing churches supporting dictators in Latin America, such as Juan Velasco Alvarado and Francisco Morales Bermúdez.¹¹⁰ Gutiérrez understood that the Church should always oppose injustice, even if this meant Christians would have to support a violent revolution.¹¹¹ As the father of

¹⁰⁴ Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 4

¹⁰⁵ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 514.

¹⁰⁶ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 514.

¹⁰⁷ Peter W. Williams, *America’s Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-first Century*, ed. 3. (University of Illinois Press, 1990), 60-62.

¹⁰⁸ Brown. *Gustavo Gutiérrez*. 28.

¹⁰⁹ Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 4

¹¹⁰ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 507.

¹¹¹ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 514; Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 40.

liberation theology, Gutiérrez argued that injustice is the result of sin, and so it is important to understand its root, as well as the oppressive nature of poverty.¹¹²

Like Niebuhr, Gutiérrez also insisted that injustice is rooted in sin. He also believed that the existence of free will creates injustice and therefore is an integral part of liberation. In his *Essential Writings* (1996), Gutiérrez explained that since humans have free will, all things about humanity and society are caused by free will. All social constructions – including systems of oppression – were made by humans. These systems are not the result of God’s divine will. Therefore, these systems can be deconstructed.¹¹³ Since all things are created by human will, the possibility of change exists. Gutiérrez demanded that action be taken against oppressive systems. However, he did not believe that a liberated society can be achieved through a singular brief period of change, but rather through a “permanent cultural revolution.”¹¹⁴ In other words, liberation is a process that needs to be repeated. Oppression takes many forms, and a single revolution will not end all oppression. Liberation is a commitment to ensuring human rights.

Gutiérrez supported these claims through his biblical interpretation. He referred to St. Paul in Galatians 5:1 which reads, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” He insisted that freedom, in this context, is the absence of sin, which Christ gave through the crucifixion. Thus oppression is a form of sin.¹¹⁵ This passage, for Gutiérrez, commands individuals to liberate others from sin. Not doing this would be neglecting the call to love our neighbors and therefore would be opposed to the call to love God. Since he established that oppressive structures do not happen by chance, but are the result of human action, Gutiérrez asserted that we have the power and the

¹¹² Olson. *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 507; Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 5.

¹¹³ Vashum, “Liberation as a Theological Theme,” 37.

¹¹⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, and James B. Nickoloff, *Essential Writings*, (First Fortress Press, 1996), 186-190.

¹¹⁵ Vashum, “Liberation as a Theological Theme,” 335.

commandment to liberate the oppressed even if it requires radical action.¹¹⁶ He insisted that “the work of Christ is presented simultaneously as a liberation from sin and from all its consequences: despoliation, injustice, [and] hatred.”¹¹⁷ Injustice is the direct result of sin, and it is the responsibility of Christians to fight against its manifestations.

As a liberation theologian, Gutiérrez strongly believed in understanding the particular root causes of injustice. Criticizing pacifists, he maintained that “Christians cannot pretend that conflict does not exist.”¹¹⁸ Ignoring injustice is ignoring the call to action given by God. The first step in liberation is acknowledging the existence of injustice.¹¹⁹ Like Niebuhr, Gutiérrez believed that “these inequalities are caused by a type of relationship which often has been imposed upon them.”¹²⁰ The oppressed are forced into a system that minimizes their power and maintains the injustice. Because of this, Gutiérrez proposed an approach “paying special attention to the root causes of the situation and considering them from a historical perspective.”¹²¹ This is similar to the stance that Niebuhr took when evaluating the situation of African Americans.

Gutiérrez goes on to say that one needs to understand the history of the specific instance of injustice to change it and this requires political action. Again, he asserted that liberation is the Christian’s responsibility because “this radical liberation is the gift which Christ offers us.”¹²² Although he does acknowledge that “it is a process which occurs historically *in* the liberation, yet liberation will not conquer the very roots of oppression without the coming of the Kingdom,

¹¹⁶ Gutiérrez, Nickoloff, *Essential Writings*, 192.

¹¹⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 90.

¹¹⁸ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 95.

¹¹⁹ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 95.

¹²⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 13-14.

¹²¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 49.

¹²² Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 103.

which is above all a gift.”¹²³ Christ has given humanity the gift of liberation, therefore it is our responsibility to use this gift by fighting injustice.

Gutiérrez is most concerned about the oppression of poverty. He offered three discoveries about the conditions of the poor. The first is that poverty is “something to be fought against and destroyed, not something to be accepted or condoned by occasional acts of charity.”¹²⁴ Gutiérrez was very critical of charity. He insisted that “intermittent generous actions to alleviate the need temporarily” contribute to the oppression.¹²⁵ Gutiérrez maintained that when the Church focuses on charity instead of the system which creates the need for charity, it is an active participant in the oppressive structure. Not taking action is equivalent to participating.¹²⁶ The second discovery Gutiérrez made is that “poverty is not accidental but structural.”¹²⁷ This is why he believed in radical revolution, because poverty is “the inevitable result of sinful structure.”¹²⁸ This is also why the role of the Church is crucial. Since poverty is an active and intentional oppression, political action is justified and required. The final discovery is that “the poor are a social class.”¹²⁹ From his analysis, Gutiérrez concluded “that in order to serve the poor one must move into political action.”¹³⁰ Gutiérrez claimed that helping the poor would also mean preferential treatment for them. Those in poverty are already marginalized from society. Gutiérrez argued that serving the poor requires specialized treatment.¹³¹ Poverty is intentional and malicious. It is a systematic oppression that was created by those in power, and its abolition requires the action of

¹²³Páraic Réamonn, "Liberating Theology: Gustavo Gutierrez," vol. 54 (*New Blackfriars*, 1973), 568.

¹²⁴ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 32.

¹²⁵ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 32.

¹²⁶ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 32.

¹²⁷ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 32.

¹²⁸Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 32; Simpson, “Losing My Religion for Lent,” 223-224.

¹²⁹ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 32.

¹³⁰ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 32.

¹³¹ Olle Kristenson, “Universality and Particularity: A Contribution to the Interpretation of Gustavo Gutiérrez’ Theological Reflection with a Focus on the Preferential Option for the Poor,” vol. 99 (*Svensk Missionstidskrift*, 2011), 94.

all. Gutiérrez challenged the Church to evaluate its participation in this system, urging it to take deliberate action against poverty.

Gutiérrez also defined three different types of poverty: material, spiritual, and biblical understandings of poverty.¹³² Material poverty relates to lacking resources or goods. Spiritual poverty is “not having access to certain cultural, social, and political values.”¹³³ This is why he considered the poor a social class. Their lack of resources excludes them from cultural, social, and political knowledge. Third, the biblical understanding of poverty is “an interior attitude of unattachment to the goods of this world.”¹³⁴ Gutiérrez contended that Christians are biblically poor if they do not believe in their agency in the world and they reject the moral necessity of political action. Gutiérrez insisted that Christians are called to reject poverty because “to accept poverty and injustice is to fall back into the conditions of servitude which existed before the liberation of Egypt. It is to retrogress.”¹³⁵ Progress towards the kingdom is crucial to Gutiérrez and hence why he viewed liberation as the most important task for humanity.

Liberation/Reformation: Gutiérrez

Gutiérrez, unlike Niebuhr, gives a relatively clear guideline to the process of liberation. Since he believed that all liberations should be particular to the oppression, his guidelines are not specific.¹³⁶ He insisted that liberation begin with the collective action of the oppressed once they are inspired by the Gospel to fight against their oppressors. Second, he contended that liberation

¹³² Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 56.

¹³³ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 163.

¹³⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 164.

¹³⁵ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 168; Simpson, “Losing My Religion for Lent,” 232.

¹³⁶ Vashum, “Liberation as a Theological Theme,” 334.

requires action and radical revolution. This broad template encompasses all of liberation theology.

Like Niebuhr, Gutiérrez argued that liberation must come from the collective action of the oppressed themselves. He noted that the biblical oppositions to violence are often cited to shame the oppressed into complacency. He addressed the common biblical objections to partaking in this kind of social conflict. One biblical objection to violence and conflict is that the call to love our neighbors means to love *all* our neighbors, therefore it would be wrong to actively fight against a group – even if that group is comprised of oppressors.¹³⁷ Gutiérrez combated this problematic pacifism by writing “the task is to establish peace and justice, which cannot be separated. Christians are called to love everyone; the reality of social conflict means not only affirming some persons, but opposing others and taking sides - all in the name of love.”¹³⁸ Like Niebuhr’s criticisms of pacifists, Gutiérrez accused the “peaceful” inaction to be just as violent and unjust as the system they are condoning and perpetuating with their silence.

Gutiérrez asserted that there “is something to be *done*.”¹³⁹ Gutiérrez was frustrated with the over-complacency of the Catholic Church. The Church believed that God’s will is so powerful and all-encompassing that humanity has little responsibility. They believed that everything happens according to God’s will – good and bad. The Church held that God will intervene in unjust situations if He sees fit, and hence humans have no control.¹⁴⁰ Gutiérrez resisted this notion. He believed that humanity is responsible to act against injustice. He maintained that the work of Christianity “is not to limit ourselves to affirming [God’s] existence; to believe in God is to commit our lives to [God] and to all people” with preferential treatment

¹³⁷ Simpson, “Losing My Religion for Lent,” 226.

¹³⁸ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 98.

¹³⁹ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 33.

¹⁴⁰ Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 4

for the poor.¹⁴¹ Although Gutiérrez asserted that this is the purpose of Christianity, he does not believe that these social changes should be done by the privileged on behalf of the marginalized, but rather that “the process of liberation requires the *active participation of the oppressed*.”¹⁴²

He summarized his view this way:

In liberation, the oppressed come together, come to understand their situation through the process of conscientization, discover the causes of their oppression, organize themselves into movements, and act in a coordinated fashion... then they work toward the transformation of present society in the direction of a new society characterized by widespread participation, a better and more just balance among social classes and more worthy ways of life¹⁴³

In this passage Gutiérrez plainly explained his proposed process of liberation. He consistently insisted that “true liberation will be the work of the oppressed themselves.”¹⁴⁴ He believed in the power of the people, like Niebuhr. Also similar to Niebuhr, Gutiérrez posited that since the oppressed were the ones who experienced oppression they should rebuild society.¹⁴⁵ Gutiérrez also maintained that the collective action of the oppressed will be the direct result of the Gospel. He asserted that the Gospel is incompatible with injustice because the resurrection is equivalent to liberation.¹⁴⁶ He contended that when the oppressed are exposed to the Gospel, “by the mere fact of hearing it they should perceive themselves as oppressed and feel impelled to seek their own liberation.”¹⁴⁷ Gutiérrez maintained the Catholic belief in spiritual transformation. The Catholic Church believed that this individual transformation is how God works in the world.¹⁴⁸ Gutiérrez agreed with this, but further argued that this transformation

¹⁴¹ Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 33.

¹⁴² Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 67.

¹⁴³ Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 54.

¹⁴⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 120.

¹⁴⁵ Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 5.

¹⁴⁶ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 153; Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 54.

¹⁴⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 153.

¹⁴⁸ Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 4

should inspire individuals into action. Gutiérrez held that this inspired action is how God works in the world, not just in the spiritual transformation alone.¹⁴⁹

Gutiérrez argued strongly for two of the main tenants of liberation theology: action and radical revolution. He insisted that social change required action, “it does not mean doing this from an armchair.”¹⁵⁰ This echoes Niebuhr’s cry for political action. Gutiérrez argued that acting with the oppressed for liberation is “the only way to have a true encounter with God.”¹⁵¹ He continued that “action towards another is at the same time an action towards God does not detract from its truth and concreteness, but rather gives it even greater meaning and import.”¹⁵² Political action is like an act of worship. It brings the individual closer to God and verifies the truth of the Gospel.¹⁵³ Gutiérrez clarified that this action must be political.¹⁵⁴ He did not apply this to charitable action because it does nothing to rectify the injustice.¹⁵⁵ Although Gutiérrez wrote mainly about the Latin American situation, he believed his theology to be universal.¹⁵⁶ Political action is the responsibility of everyone. This political action also applies to the situation of poverty.

Gutiérrez maintained that the solution to poverty is radical revolution. Like Niebuhr he believed that gradual change will not actually yield substantial change. Those in poverty require “a profound transformation, a *social revolution*, which will radically and qualitatively change the conditions in which they now live.”¹⁵⁷ Liberation theologians call for a radical revolution to end

¹⁴⁹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 153; Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 54.

¹⁵⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 12.

¹⁵¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 116.

¹⁵² Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 116.

¹⁵³ Echeverria, “Until Justice and Peace Embrace: A Review Article,” 220.

¹⁵⁴ Vashum, “Liberation as a Theological Theme,” 337.

¹⁵⁵ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 116.

¹⁵⁶ Réamonn, “Liberating Theology: Gustavo Gutierrez,” 565.

¹⁵⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 54.

oppression as opposed to “gradual reform of social orders.”¹⁵⁸ Change needs to happen quickly to avoid apathy and to ensure that rights will be secured as quickly as possible to minimize suffering.

Gutiérrez made it clear that he believed violence during a revolution is justified. He plainly stated that fighting injustice is the most important conviction of Christianity. For this reason, he did not think that violence was immoral in this context. He also emphasized the double standards of violence. He wrote, “let us by all means avoid equating the *unjust violence* of the oppressor (who maintain the despicable system) with the *just violence* of the oppressed (who feel obliged to use it to achieve their liberation).”¹⁵⁹ Oppression is violent. It is a malicious violence. Gutiérrez asserted that this kind of violence was not comparable to any form of it that the oppressed would inflict in their fight for liberation.¹⁶⁰ Gutiérrez was not advocating for or encouraging violence, but rather combating the pacifist arguments that morally shame the oppressed into complacency.

Utopia: Gutiérrez

Unlike Niebuhr, Gutiérrez believed utopia to be possible, but he thought that it would motivate action instead of creating apathy. Gutiérrez redefined the meaning of utopia to be an ideal vision for society rooted in reality. He saw utopia as fundamentally connected to reality and that it should serve as a blueprint. Utopia is an attainable goal for society, given reality, and presents a pragmatic path for society as to how to achieve it. Gutiérrez also thought that human

¹⁵⁸ Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 514.

¹⁵⁹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 64.

¹⁶⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 64.

action could bring the Kingdom of God to earth, so he considered that human action contributed to the realization of utopia.¹⁶¹

Unlike Niebuhr, Gutiérrez does believe that utopia is possible. Gutiérrez understood that utopia would be possible through the actions of people to move toward a better society.¹⁶² He envisioned that a liberated society would be comradely, prophetic, committed, free, joyful, contemplative, and utopian.¹⁶³ However, he did not think utopia was a far off idealistic concept as Niebuhr described. He instead asserts that “utopia, contrary to what current usage suggests, is characterized by its *relationship to the present historical reality*.”¹⁶⁴ He argued that utopia was not an ideal vision for society that is disconnected from reality. Instead he contended that utopia should be seen as a vision for an ideal society based on and in reality. This utopia “leads to an authentic and scientific knowledge of reality and to praxis which transforms what exists.”¹⁶⁵ This utopia avoided the apathy and inaction that Niebuhr critiqued, because Gutiérrez’s utopia was rooted in reality. This utopia “offers a religious symbolic system that can assert radical social agendas in ways which are clear and acceptable to people seeking new paradigms of change.”¹⁶⁶ This utopia provides a realistic vision of how society could be and practical steps to move towards the vision. Gutiérrez trusted that this motivates people to act more than idealistic utopias or not having utopia at all.¹⁶⁷ Gutiérrez required that utopia include aspects of denunciation and annunciation. Denunciation is rejecting the current situation. He understood that one had to actively refuse the current situation to acknowledge that a better, more just

¹⁶¹ Tom Moylan, "MISSION IMPOSSIBLE? LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND UTOPIAN PRAXIS," vol. 3 (*Utopian Studies*, 1991), 24.

¹⁶² Moylan, "MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?" 24.

¹⁶³ Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 93.

¹⁶⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 135.

¹⁶⁵ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 137.

¹⁶⁶ Moylan, "MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?" 30.

¹⁶⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 137; Murray, "An Anti-Utopian Utopia," 35.

society is possible. Annunciation is a vision for the future of society. Once one has rejected the current situation one has to envision the model society that would be based in reality. This utopia is this process. The process assesses the injustice and plans for a better civilization. This is a praxis-oriented utopia.¹⁶⁸ This moves people to action, which is another requirement of utopia for Gutiérrez.

Gutiérrez maintained that this process is how humanity contributes to the coming of the Kingdom. He claimed that eliminating injustice would be a sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God because the Kingdom and injustice are incompatible. He writes “the struggle for a just society is in its own right very much a part of salvation history.”¹⁶⁹ This is why Gutiérrez considered human praxis so important and why he promoted a utopia that “belongs to the *rational* order.”¹⁷⁰ Gutiérrez believed his realistic utopia will inspire human action to rid the world of injustice in order for the Kingdom to come.

Gutiérrez combined the individualist view of utopia with action. He thought that God will intervene in the world, but that He will do it through human action. The Gospel inspires individuals into practical action. Then they evaluate the present reality and deem it unacceptable according to the Gospel. Then they envision utopia, the ideal version of society based in reality. Then practical steps are laid out and taken to achieve this society. According to Gutiérrez, this process is God’s way of transforming the world until the Kingdom of God is brought to Earth.¹⁷¹ Gutiérrez maintained the Catholic belief in the power of God’s will, while also elevating the significance of human agency.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Moylan, "MISSION IMPOSSIBLE," 26.

¹⁶⁹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 97.

¹⁷⁰ Moylan, "MISSION IMPOSSIBLE," 26.

¹⁷¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 137; Murray, "An Anti-Utopian Utopia," 35.

¹⁷² Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 153; Boff, Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 54.

Conclusion

In summary, Reinhold Niebuhr and Gustavo Gutiérrez shared starkly similar ideas on justice and reformation. Both Niebuhr and Gutiérrez argued that the root of injustice can be found in sin. Both also believed that humans have free will and that human actions create systems of oppression. As a result, they both contended that all oppressive structures can be changed by human action. Both also thought that understanding the specific history of an oppressive structure is necessary before any attempt at reformation or liberation is made. The theologians insisted that coercion is necessary when fighting injustice, and both maintained that any social change needs to come from the collective action of the oppressed themselves. They both understood that in order for the process of liberation to be as swift as possible, and for the new system to not be oppressive, the oppressed should lead the revolution and rebuild afterwards.

The most notable divergence in Niebuhr and Gutiérrez's ideas on justice and liberation had to do with the notion of utopia. Niebuhr was very pessimistic about the possibility of a perfect society, whereas Gutiérrez redefined utopianism while advocating for it. Niebuhr considered utopia to be too idealistic for reality, and this disconnect would discourage people from action. He believed that everyone (liberal theologians in particular) should adopt a more realistic perspective. Since sin exists he did not consider that utopia will ever be possible through human action, but he did not think that one should simply give up. Niebuhr claimed that it is better to constantly strive constantly to improve society, even if perfection will never be reached. Gutiérrez, contrarily, argued that utopia played an important role in social justice work. He redefined utopia to be the ideal version of society based in reality. Because his utopia was rooted in reality, he thought that this provided clear steps for humanity to take in order to reach this

ideal version of society. Gutiérrez held that this version of utopia would inspire and motivate people into action, the opposite of Niebuhr's beliefs on utopia.

Reinhold Niebuhr and Gustavo Gutiérrez, although they differed in their beliefs, have numerous similarities with regard to justice and reformation. With this many similarities, it is hard to believe that these two theologians are not widely compared or grouped together in theological thought. There are many possible explanations as to why this could be, but one is that it is simply because Reinhold Niebuhr is Protestant and Gustavo Gutiérrez is Catholic. Since there is an irrefutable amount of similarities between Niebuhr and Gutiérrez's beliefs on this topic, the reason they are not compared could simply be because of an oversight due to their different religions.

If the only reason that Niebuhr and Gutiérrez have not been compared is because of their denominations this creates new research opportunities for scholars. It is likely that there are other Catholic and Protestant theologians who did not have an explicit relationship with or influence on one another—much like Niebuhr and Gutiérrez—but still shared ideas. Catholic liberation theologian, Jon Sobrino, was influenced greatly by Gutiérrez. Karl Barth, a Swiss Reformed theologian, impacted Gutiérrez's theology. There could be more significant connections between these two theologians, other than just Gutiérrez. This is one example of future research possibilities resulting from breaking academic tradition. This comparison between Niebuhr and Gutiérrez's ideas on justice can allow scholars to reevaluate denomination or theological labels in order to discover overlooked similarities. This also provides the opportunity to put Catholic and Protestant theologians in conversation with one another. There is potential for new, meaningful findings to be made if the academic tradition of treating Catholic and Protestant theology separately is broken.

This essay has demonstrated that denomination labels could be limiting theological scholarship. The terms Catholic and Protestant may be too broad to fully encapsulate a thinker's beliefs. After assessing the content of Niebuhr and Gutiérrez's works, it became obvious that there was an overwhelming amount of similarities that had not been acknowledged in academic theology. Labeling Reinhold Niebuhr as a Protestant neo-orthodox theologian and Gustavo Gutiérrez as a Catholic liberation theologian does not suggest that these men shared ideas to the degree in which they did. This research proves that there is academic value in making these unconventional comparisons, which could lead to significant breakthroughs.

This comparison between Niebuhr and Gutiérrez indicates that there could be more intersection between Catholic and Protestant theology than previously understood. The academic tradition of separating Catholicism and Protestantism indicates that Catholics and Protestants differ too much to merit comparison. The obvious overlap in Niebuhr and Gutiérrez's beliefs denotes that this may not be the case. Academic tradition may be hindering academic progress. If researchers set aside the traditional labels and evaluate the content of thinkers' works, then more similarities – like those of Niebuhr and Gutiérrez—may come to light.

Reinhold Niebuhr and Gustavo Gutiérrez came from two different realms of theology. Despite this, they shared ideas in regard to justice. Both believed sin caused oppression, that humans have free will, and that humanity is charged with doing social-justice work. Both thought that the involvement of the oppressed in liberation was crucial and that any kind of social revolution would require coercion or even violence. These parallels are not widely recognized, and a simple explanation is that it is because of their different denominations. This essay challenged the academic tradition of treating Catholicism and Protestantism separately to demonstrate that crucial connections are being overlooked. This comparison is just one example

of what could be revealed if scholars also break academic tradition to find intersections in Catholic and Protestant theology.

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