

**JOHN WESLEY – A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION**

**by**

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## **John Wesley – A Theology of Liberation**

### **(Summary)**

There is without doubt as much criticism of Liberation Theology as there is understanding regarding the need for a theology which seeks answers to the effectiveness of the Christian witness, against a background of mounting poverty, the oppression of woman and continued discrimination by one race against another, worldwide. Many scholars struggle with the revolutionary and often hostile nature and methodology of Liberation Theology.

This paper attempts to enter into a conversation between the theology of John Wesley and Liberation Theology. The theology of John Wesley had a tremendous impact on social, political and economic areas of the Eighteenth century England. It was in many ways a revolutionary theology.

This paper takes as a standpoint, the need for praxis with regard to Christian witness and therefore seeks to argue that there may be common ground between Wesleyan Theology and Liberation Theology.

### **Key Terms:**

John Wesley, Liberation Theology, Latin American Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, Black Theology, Reformation, Revolutionary Theology, Methodism, Praxis, Christian Witness.

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## **Chapter One:**

### **Introduction:**

There is little doubt that theology or ‘doing’ theology has been the domain of the scholar or academic. In other words, often theology is seen as an academic exercise by which, in one way or another, via such skills as hermeneutics, the development of doctrine, the systematic or non-systematic formulation of theological ideas has been laid down. This has often led justly, or unjustly, to the point where criticism is levelled against theologians in that they are often involved in academic exercises which are far removed from the reality of the world as context. It may be asserted that whilst theologians continue to argue and deliberate areas such as methodology, constitution and valid influences within the theological conversation, issues such as the need for praxis still are in dire need of attention.

De Gruchy in *Doing Theology In Context* (1994:2) highlights the core of the problem in this regard by differentiating between the terms ‘studying’ and ‘doing’ theology:

It all sounds so academic. The advantage of using the phrase ‘doing’ theology is that it indicates that theology is not simply something one learns about through reading textbooks or listening to lectures but through engaging in doing theology in particular contexts and situations.

But perhaps one needs to take this a bit further and to assert that it is not only academics who engage in theological conversation, but in fact any one who attempts to answer questions raised by their faith journey and witness in the world and in a broader sense recognize that theology is in no way reserved for the Christian faith only. In this regard, Madges in *Faith, Religion & Theology – a contemporary introduction* (1998: 286) is also helpful: ‘Theology is a dynamic conversation involving three basic partners: a religious tradition, a person and a contemporary situation.’

It is not in the scope of this paper to engage in detail the questions or areas that these statements open up, but dialogue will remain essentially within the Christian faith. Madges *Faith, Religion & Theology – a contemporary introduction* (1998: 294) asserts: ‘All persons of mature faith engage in theological reflection at some time or another. Although this personal ‘theologizing’ is different from the work of the professional theologian, it is

no less a form of theological thinking.’ Thus from this view one can construe that theology is not just a matter of the head, but ‘entails theory and practice, understanding and living’ (Madges, *Faith, Religion & Theology – a contemporary introduction*, 1998: 291.)

In the light of the assertions made above, it seems that within the theological conversation there exists an interesting and necessary dynamic between Christian witness and Christian study. This is not a new concept; in fact, it could be argued that this tension has existed from the very first encounter that the disciples had with the teaching and ministry of Christ. Some post modern scholars such as Min (1989) in his book, *Dialectic of Salvation* have referred to this tension as the dialectic between theory and praxis.

With this in mind this paper seeks to engage the theology of John Wesley and Liberation Theology in dialogue in order to highlight common ground between the two theologies with regard to the need for praxis within a theological conversation

There are many reactions when one mentions the term Liberation Theology, but to be fair these reactions may vary from total disagreement or rejection to views which consider Liberation Theology as too conservative.

Malachi Martin (1987: 57) once described Liberation Theology in the following way:

The Marxist baby was wrapped in the very swaddling clothes of ancient Catholic terminology. Words and phrases laden with meaning for the people were co-opted and turned upside down. The historical Jesus, for example, became an armed revolutionary. The mystical Christ became all the oppressed people, collectively. Mary the Virgin became the mother of all revolutionary heroes. The Eucharist became the bread freely made by liberated workers. Hell became the capitalist system. The American president, leader of the greatest capitalist country, became the Great Satan. Heaven became the earthly paradise of the workers from which capitalism is abolished. Justice became the uprooting of capitalist gains, which would be 'returned' to the people, to the 'mystical body' of Christ, the democratic socialists of Nicaragua. The Church became that mystical body, 'the people', deciding its fate and determining how to worship, pray, and live, under the guidance of Marxist leaders.

However understood, the term Liberation Theology, since its first public debut in the late 1960's, arguably has invoked intense discussion and, in many ways, has impacted on the theological conversation.

Perhaps one of the most significant attributes of Liberation Theology is that while most theological controversies tend to be restricted to the theological classroom at Seminaries, this can hardly be said of Latin American Liberation Theology. According to McGovern (1989: ix), Liberation Theology has stirred public controversy almost from the outset and, he argues, 'It continues to evoke passion, especially among its enemies.'

There are various issues to be highlighted with regard to the field of Liberation Theology. Firstly, Liberation Theology has tended to be divided into different schools of thought. However, McGovern (1989, xv), asserts that 'those who divide Liberation Theology into different currents or groups usually imply value judgements, considering some types 'acceptable' and others not.' Without going into much detail (this shall be covered later in the paper) it may suffice to say that although differences in style do exist, most Liberation theologians tend to view their theology as a common venture.

Secondly, whilst the first public writings and exploration of Liberation Theology came from the Latin American experience, in more recent times Black Theology and Feminist Theology have also been placed under the broader field of Liberation Theology. Although widely accepted as such, often theologians from these various fields within Liberation Theology have tended to write within their own parameters without too much conformity to Liberation Theology *per se*. So perhaps, in a broader sense, Liberation can be classified as one school of thought encompassing different ways of expression and inclusive of all theologies which seek to liberate the poor, oppressed and those who perpetuate such poverty and oppression. Put another way, 'The function of theology as critical reflection on praxis has gradually become more clearly defined in recent years' (Gutierrez, 1973: 6). This raises a crucial issue with regard to Liberation Theology: consensus when using the term Liberation Theology. In other words, is there common ground other than liberation motifs and with other views within the theological field as a whole?

In highlighting briefly here some of the criticism levelled against Liberation Theology, the purpose of this brief foray, whilst not complete, has been to

indicate some of the concerns raised with regard to Liberation Theology. It may also be fair to say that Liberation Theology has, over the years, been linked to the theories of Karl Marx. This criticism has not always been entirely fair, but understandable, as some Liberationists forward the view that one of the root causes of poverty worldwide has been ascribed to areas such as capitalism. Marxism essentially sees the solution in class domination in the overthrow of capitalism.

Liberation theologians have perhaps found Marxist analysis useful in determining the root cause of poverty and misery in Latin-American, but McGovern (1989: xi.) argues that Marxist ideology has a very restricted role in Liberation Theology: 'Concern for the poor arises from a profound Christian motivation.'

In order to facilitate dialogue in light of its title, this paper takes as its prolegomena that Liberation Theology is that part of the theological conversation as a whole which encompasses the development of Liberation Theology and includes such fields as the Latin American experience, Feminist and Black Theology. It is hoped that this statement will unfold empirically as the conversation develops and that the question of the place of

Liberation Theology within the broader field of theology will emerge more clearly.

There are also varied reactions with regard to contemporary views on Methodism, from attempts to formulate 'pure' Methodism, to those who link Methodism to Liberation imperatives. In raising the question of Methodism in post modern theological thinking, Vincent (1965:1). states the resistance to making changes and adaptations: 'such is the invariable reaction to attempts to bring reality into modern Methodism'. Whilst this cry was uttered in the 1960s it may well ring true for many Methodists today. Granted, Vincent was essentially addressing theological issues such as the Doctrines of Assurance and Holiness and some related theological questions, none the less his views help to point out that theology is a dynamic conversation and even within established theologies there tends to be movement related to context and time period. In other words, 'in so far as theology is an attempt to understand the reality from the perspective of faith in God, it not only has to grapple with the sources for such faith in God, but also has to seek to understand human nature as well as the nature of the world in which we live' (De Gruchy in *Doing Theology In Context*, 1994: 7). This is evident in most examinations of theological development.

Issues such as time period, social and political influences and religious structures all play a role in the assay of theological views. This is not to say that all scholars will agree with this statement, rather some may argue about the extent to which such factors influence the conversation and even reject certain areas of influence such as Marxism, certain areas in philosophy and psychology.

Wesleyan Theology or Methodism has not escaped examination. As Williams (1960: 3) asserts, some see Methodism as ‘long on organization and short on theology,’ and further, ‘Contemporary Methodism is showing signs of renewed theological examination and of a concern to re-examine her original theological tradition.’ Some scholarship may reject any notion of a link between Methodism and Liberation Theology, yet closer examination in this paper will perhaps point to the impact, if any, of Methodist praxis with regard to social, political and economic areas of 18th century England and this examination will hopefully reveal the theological contributions which led to Wesley being labelled a social reformer and, as such, enabled Liberation Theologians, particularly brothers and sisters in Latin America who have extended this approach still further. In their Liberation Theology they have sought to remove both the dependence of the poor upon the rich and of Christian theology itself upon those who are economically

comfortable. They have begun to search the writings of John Wesley for support.

This paper seeks to engage the theology of John Wesley with Liberation Theology. It is hoped that in this conversation common ground between the two theologies with regard to issues such as the need for praxis as a continuation of the theological conversation will come to light. In other words, this paper is an attempt at dialogue in a dynamic that shows that theology is a ‘critical reflection on praxis’ (Gutierrez, 1973: 6) and that ‘compassion lies at the heart of the authentic Christ-following life. Any spiritual experience – whether it be one of solitude and silence, prayer and fasting or worship and celebration – which does not result in a deeper concern for our suffering neighbour can hardly be called Christian’ (Hudson 1999: 73). In order to do this however, it may be sagacious to look at the background of Methodism and Liberation Theology and some of the factors which precipitated and influenced their formation.

Most studies on Methodism will focus on areas such as the background of England or the life of John Wesley. To remain in these areas will be to lose some of the rich conversational heritage that is found in historical

theological movements such as the Reformation. Therefore it may be helpful to examine the impact, if any, that such movements had in the religious, social and political arenas of the times and to rediscover the theological heritage of such a great liberation movement for today. In light of this I shall begin to look briefly at the Reformation in general and the English Reformation in particular. It must be said, in the context of this paper, that this examination is not to have an in-depth study of the Reformation, but to lay some ground work for the discussion between Wesleyans and Liberation Theology.

## **Chapter Two.**

### **The Reformation**

Arguably, one of the greatest of all revolutions was the 16th-century religious revolt known as the Reformation. This stormy, often brutal, conflict essentially separated the Christians of Western Europe into Protestants and Catholics. So far-reaching were the results of the separation that the Reformation has been called a turning point in history. In many ways it is considered to have ushered in the Modern Age because once people's religious unity was destroyed they began to think in terms of their own regional interests. From the diversity of those interests arose new political, social, and economic problems and beliefs.

It needs to be said from the outset that any study of the Reformation is as complex as the many facets which give rise to its beginning, the factors which influenced it and the impact it had on world history. This point is

highlighted by Hillerbrand (1969: 1): ‘The first comment to be made about the Reformation of the sixteenth century is that the history of Reformation scholarship during the past four hundred years is almost as exiting as the history of the period itself.’

However, one should not underestimate the impact of the Reformation on world development, for example:

1. The term ‘modern way’ which has taken the place of the way in which scholarship refers to the movement known as ‘nominalism.’ Nominalism, in its briefest understanding, asserts that universal understanding of concepts is unnecessary. This is a complex concept, but it is of importance to note that thinkers in this regard shaped theological thinking and influenced the Reformation and beyond. These thinkers held that humans could initiate their justification by ‘doing their best’. So, the ‘modern way’ held that most necessary soteriological resources were located within human nature. One can see the impact of such thinking on the ideas of the Reformers, but not all scholarship ascribed to these views. For example, Gregory developed a soteriology, or doctrine of salvation, in which is found an emphasis on the need for grace upon the fallen-ness and sinfulness of humanity, upon the divine initiative in justification and upon divine predestination. ‘According

to several twentieth century interpreters of humanism, the movement embodied the new philosophy of the Renaissance, which arose as a reaction to scholasticism. Thus it was argued that the Renaissance was an age of Platonism whereas scholasticism was a period of Aristotelianism' (McGrath, 2001: 40). Whilst this understanding is rather ambitious, it serves to highlight the impact that such views have on the Reformation and which continues to impact on theological thought today. This has special bearing on this paper as part of the reason for a brief look at the Reformation and to highlight its influences particularly on Wesleyan theology.

2. In his paper on revitalisations in American society, William McLoughlin lays ground work for an overview of the impact that the Reformation had in the world in general and American life in particular. His views will be included and dealt with later in this paper, but his comment that 'the Protestant theologian speaks of great awakenings or revival times as divine manifestations of concern for the 'salvation of Adam's children from the bondage of Satan,' as signs of 'the coming Kingdom of God on earth,' or as 'a kairos' (the invasion of the temporal by the eternal) (McLoughlin 1978: 8), serves as indication of the ongoing impact that Protestantism has on the theological conversation.

Like any study of revolutionary movements, there are varying thoughts on issues such as its sources and interpretations. For a period of time it was considered essentially an ecumenical conversation between Catholics and Protestants and, in a sense, this view dominated most studies on the Reformation, as Hillerbrand (1969: 3) asserts: ‘the assessments of the consequences of the Reformation differed drastically on both sides. Catholics saw the reformation as the great cause of the Secularization of the West, while Protestants hailed it as the dawn of the modern world.’ Some of these views are still prevalent today and can at times continue to dominate the theological conversation: as Dickens argues in the face of growing differences of its impact and its causes, the Reformation ‘is a window on the West, a major point of access to the developing Western mind through the last five centuries. By any reckoning, the Reformation has proved a giant among the great international movements of modern times’ (Dickens and Tonkin in Lindbergh 1996: 1).

However, in recent times, there have been other developments in the study of the Reformation. In particular, the development of Liberation Theology has led to an examination of the Reformation as a source of inspiration as Shaull (1991: 43) asserts: ‘The Lutheran Reformation was a tremendous

force for liberation in sixteenth century Europe. But can it contribute to a New Reformation today, transforming the church into a force for liberation in our world. I believe that it can.’ Whilst it is not the scope of this paper to examine the Reformation in much detail, the importance of a brief overview of developments and studies with regard to the Reformation for this paper, lies in illustrating the difficulty in:

- (1.) Turning to complex historical developments to support particular theological views.
- (2.) Defining theological views according to certain patterns or periods.
- (3.) Forwarding arguments for changes within complex religious, economic, social and political spheres.
- (4.) The need for theology in particular to examine its impact on praxis with regard to economic, social and political spheres.

In other words, in the scope of this paper, a brief look at the Reformation serves to highlight the complex nature and dynamic between theology as a process and a product. As Madges (1998: 285) asserts: ‘It involves practice as well as theory.’

## **2.1 A Contemporary view of Reformation Study:**

The field of Reformation study is broad, but it may be of value to note that there are differing views of the Reformation, in areas such as its value and impact and the reasons for its spread are as complex as its nature. George is helpful in identifying three areas of concern regarding contemporary Reformation scholarship namely periodization (cf. George, 1988: 15), political, social and economic interpretations and the Reformation as religious initiative.

(a). The Problem of Periodization i.e. placing the Reform movement into a time frame, has less bearing on this paper, but still has some relevance as it helps one to understand the difficulty of defining specific theologies within specific periods. In other words posing the question of whether sighting specific theological thought, its impact and influences to specific periods is possible? A further difficulty is that historians often use the specific events to denote a shift or movement in cultures. McLoughlin (1978: vii) argues that 'historians measure cultures both by the way they endure ebbs or enervations and enjoy flows and revitalisations.' This is especially relevant when one attempts to define specific theological standpoints and confine them to specific fields within the theological conversation.

It may be fair to highlight that often one particular theologian may be considered in a specific field of theology, whilst others may confine the very same to another field. This has particular bearing, for example, on Wesley, whose theology was not always generally considered hugely significant, but has in recent years come to more prominence. This difficulty is more apparent when one considers differing views within Wesleyan interpretations and understanding which will be dealt with in more detail later.

Bearing in mind the working definition for this paper that doing theology has to do with a person, a religious tradition and a contemporary situation, the problem of periodization brings into the debate the two views used for discussions in this paper, Liberation Theology and Wesleyan Theology.

It seems at first glance that Wesleyan Theology, considered by some as rival theology, falls within the conventional view that theologians study transformations in individual outlook and behaviour. This view is furthered by McLoughlin (1978: xiii), who argues that 'Revivalism is the Protestant ritual in which charismatic evangelists convey 'the Word' of God to large masses of people who experience what Protestant call conversion, salvation, regeneration or spiritual; rebirth', whereas in Liberation Theology the

emphasis on study of transformations seems to be one which centres more on cultural outlook and behaviour. McLoughlin asserts:

Awakenings – the most vital and yet most mysterious of all folk arts – are periods of cultural revitalizations that begin in a general crisis of beliefs and values and extend over a period of generation or so, during which time a profound reorientation of beliefs and values take place. Revivals alter the lives of individuals; awakenings alter the view of a whole people or culture.

Liberation Theology would thus in a sense be likened to an awakening which, McLoughlin argues, are accompanied by religious revivalism. The discourse of this paper will hopefully lead to a clearer understanding of this view.

(b). There is little doubt that the Reformation has been linked to areas of political, economic and social concern. George (1988: 17) asserts that politically it was during the Reformation that there was also a serious attempt to make the Holy Roman Empire a viable force and the differences in the success of the Reformation in Europe can only be understood in the light of the political histories of these countries. The social issues regarding the Reformation have been investigated in much detail and a fuller picture is

now emerging: that of witchcraft, the impact of printing, the ethos of urban life and changing family structures. All of these impacted on the religious impulses of the age. Shaull (1991: 27) concurs with this thought as he argues that

much of theology of the medieval church contributed to the sacralization of this social order and thus served to give legitimization to it. God, conceived of with the aid of philosophical categories taken from the Greeks, was understood as the Supreme Being, and this divine reality descended into the cosmos and society through hierarchal structures.

Due to the influences of the Renaissance and dissatisfaction with the corruption in both church and state, the development of European culture contributed to the separation of the church and state by a process which has become known as the Secularization Hypothesis. In its simplest understanding this was a separation of church and state. Peter Berger, an eminent Lutheran sociologist, discusses with great insight the crucial role which Protestantism played in the development of secularization:

Protestantism may be described in terms of an immense shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in reality. The sacramental apparatus is reduced to a minimum and even there divested of its numinous qualities...The Protestant

believer no longer lives in a world ongoingly penetrated by scared beings and forces. Reality is polarised between a radically transcendent divinity and radically fallen humanity that is devoid of sacred qualities (Berger 1967: 111).

However, this understanding does little to answer the question about the dynamics between religion and social, political and economic spheres. The third area of concern in George's view may add some insights.

(c). George (1998: 18) also asserts that the Reformation was essentially a religious event; its deepest concerns theological. For him 'our primary focus is neither the political, social nor strictly church historical dimensions' and a study of the Reformation has to do with the study of four major reformers, namely Luther and Zwingli the first generation and Calvin and Menno the second. This view is reinforced by Lindberg (1996: 9) when he asserts that 'religion and theology are central to understanding the Reformations.' The implications for theology, according to George (1998: 19), are found in an understanding that 'the reformers that we study are both our fathers and our brothers in the community of the faith.' In other words, a study of four reformers linked to the Reformation in one understanding, may not necessarily be seen to address particular issues such as predestination, infant baptism or Christ's' presence in the Eucharist (some of these are considered

to be removed from contemporary issues such as racism or oppression), but also serves to be relevant to these same contemporary issues and to enrich the theological conversation in general.

## **2.2 Back ground of the Revolt:**

There is little doubt about the significance of Martin Luther's nailing of the 'ninety five theses' to the church door in Wittenberg. It remains one of the most significant turning points in history against the back ground of church domination in the lives of the people it served. However, it must be noted that the challenge to the church came from another direction as well – from the newly rising European urban middle class. This was a prosperous, free-thinking and literate group. Eventually their position seemed to be galvanized around the teachings of the Genevan reformer, Calvin.

The sixteenth century in Western Europe represented the propitious moment and the right place for the emergence of a new theology grounded in the Christian faith. It was a time of rapid social change. The Feudal system was eroding, the Renaissance, its influences and the ongoing changes in cultural and social forces all contributed to an environment of change. It was a time when toleration was seldom thought of and almost never practised.

Even though there may have been unhappiness with regard to abuses and excess of the civil and religious rulers, most offered a more passive resistance. In fact, despite the seemingly decisive opposition that Protestantism was to bring later, there was at the time division as to whether or not it was permissible to actively resist civil and religious authorities. John Knox, for example, agreed that people should revolt against tyrannical authorities, even going as far as to permit deposition and execution. Zwingli also recognised that resistance was legitimate if a civil ruler ordered the squelching of true religion. Luther essentially saw the church and state as two separate institutions whom God had ordained. Each tended separate business, the church as the bearer of church discipline and the state as bearer of civil authority. Peter Martyr Vermigli, an English reformist, advocated a strong role for the church in matters of state. He defined a magistrate as a person elected and of God, to defend the peace. He further spoke of civil governments as having their efficient cause in God.

One cannot underemphasise, and much has been written on, the control that the church played in the lives of the people in social, economic and political spheres and it is within this context that the Reformation begins to impact as a revolution. However, with these changes came, on the one hand, a fear on

the part of peasants as the security afforded them by the feudal system was being replaced with the unknown: the very ground under their feet which had existed for centuries was giving way and everything which they had known and trusted was now being called into question. On the other, the bourgeoisie, a new emerging class, was excited by the promise of a new society in which they could grow free from the bonds of the past.

### **2.3 Further Reasons for the Reformation**

The Reformation was partly an outgrowth of the Renaissance. During the 1300s and 1400s much of European commercial wealth – in competition with the traditional wealth of rural landholdings – was bound to upset the economic arrangement. Bankers, merchants, industrialists – who congregated along key trade centres--did not fit easily into the older social order. Though certainly their guilds and unions attempted to formalize their wealth, in fact their wealth was dynamic and always subject to a rapid shift in fortunes. The success of their labours was related to the wisdom of investment decisions that they made. To prosper, they needed a free hand – and a mind open to new and ever changing opportunities. During the 1400s this group sat uneasily under the traditional rule of medieval church and crown. Medieval feudal dues in the form of agricultural and military service

owed to the lord were cumbersome and, at times, counterproductive to the larger success of this new urban entrepreneurial class. It was inevitable that these towns would become centres of resistance against the medieval land-based social system. Indeed, in case after case these rising towns and cities were able to receive from the traditional local princely or priestly lord new charters which granted them (i.e. the commercial elite or oligarchy that ran these towns) a tremendous degree of self-government in exchange for the payment of taxes in currency. This was because money was becoming more important than land in girding the military might of a local ruler – and the princely and priestly ruler's in fact preferred monetary payments over land service from their vassals. While land assessments and service obligations might feed their courts and fill their armies with men-at-arms, only money could buy them the new luxuries and the new military technologies that traditional land-based service could not.

Although the Reformation swept through all Western Europe, the most dramatic events of this great religious revolt took place in Germany. It was in Wittenberg, Saxony that Luther posted his list of propositions (95 theses) in 1517 and burned the papal bull in 1520. A year later he was condemned

by the Diet of Worms. In 1525 German nobles encouraged by Luther, put down the Peasants' Revolt.

Another great event in the Reformation occurred in 1529, when the word Protestant was first used formally. In Germany the Diet of Speyer decreed that changes of religion must stop and that the authority of the Catholic Church be restored. However, the Lutheran minority in the Diet signed a protest against that decree. From this protest comes the modern term for the religious denominations of Protestantism. The fury and suffering of war added to the turmoil of the Reformation through the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648. Time and again Charles V fought to uphold the Holy Roman Empire and the Catholic Church against the claims of France and the German princes, but he needed their aid as he battled the Muslims who had advanced to the doors of Germany. Then he fought the Schmalkaldic War (1546–1547). Although he defeated the Protestants, he could not turn back the movement of the Reformation. Peace treaties, however, followed the religious wars. The most important of these was the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. By that treaty Charles V was at last forced to grant to the ruler of each German state the right to choose Catholicism or Lutheranism. The state's religion was still imposed by the ruler, but the treaty gave a temporary

religious peace to Germany. The Lutheran faith spread chiefly in northern Germany and in Scandinavia. The Swiss were influenced early by Huldrych Zwingli, but like the French and Dutch they drew their Protestantism from a movement led by John Calvin a generation later. From this grew the zealous work of John Knox, who brought Presbyterianism to Scotland.

The English Reformation began in 1533 when Henry VIII broke with the pope, who had refused to annul Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon. The introduction of Protestant doctrine in the Church of England, however, did not take place until 1549, during the reign of Edward VI. In the light of these statements it may be prudent to look briefly at arguably the most prominent Reformer, Luther and discuss a few areas regarding his contribution to the Reformation.

### **2.3 Luther and the Reformation:**

Many scholars have sighted Luther as the father of the Reformation and the reasons for his rebellion have been studied in great detail. Some such as Shaull have found in Luther a revolutionary: 'Luther brought about a grand process of liberation. He will always be a necessary point of reference for all who seek liberation and know how to struggle and suffer for it' (Boff in Shaull 1991: 25.) Others have sighted him as existentialist, 'When we call

Luther an existential theologian, we mean that for him concern for God was life and death matter, involving not merely one's intellect but one's whole existence' (George 198: 54). Without dealing with these statements in much detail, they serve to point out the difficulties already raised in this paper that different theological views may find support in the life and work of Martin Luther.

Whilst some have seen Luther in the light of his contribution to the liberation of domination and social structure, others have argued that there is little doubt that Luther, like many others, was essentially obsessed with living at peace with God. Behind his defiant actions was a long personal pilgrimage, one based on a deep desire to unburden himself of a profound sense of guilt and personal condemnation before God's judgment. For Luther, a personal breakthrough occurred as the message sank into the head of this Augustinian professor concerning Paul's teaching (Galatians and Romans) about divine Grace and forgiveness received through the simple faith of the believer – and not through the demands of any religious law or requirements of a religious system. So 'liberated' was he that he felt that his discovery had to be brought to the world. His continuous search through the discipline of the Church and his study of the Bible moved him to anguish as

he found he could not achieve his goal. His journey into the Psalms and Epistles of Paul brought him to a place where something extraordinary broke through to him. He discovered that God who demands justice is a God who forgives. Luther discovered the unlimited mercy of Jesus Christ crucified. The question of justifying oneself to God was thus solved by God. This discovery brought about a great liberation in Luther and those who responded to this message, that they no longer had to fear for their salvation; they were free from the burden of enslavement to rules and regulations and they were freed from the domination by priests or political rulers. Some scholars may refer to this as antinomianism, but this was never Luther's intention; rather it was that at the heart of God's activity is the forgiveness of sins and the gracious offer of new life to those who dare to trust and respond. Thus life can be lived fully and dynamically in this milieu as a daily response, in gratitude for this gift.

Scholars such as Shaull have argued that the liberation of the people of the sixteenth century with regard to the Reformation brought about a new understanding of God: (a). God forgives and sets people right. Christ is not only for us but in us, supporting and giving us life every day in spite of our failures and limitations. (b). God is a personal God who approaches us

directly not through intermediaries. (c). Overwhelmed by the love of God, the believer is set free to love others.

By this stance Luther set in motion forces that have profoundly affected the struggles for oppressed people to this day. He made it possible for Christians to question and undermine the claims of secular rulers that their authority was somehow sacred and must be respected uncritically (Shaul, 1991: 31.)

It must be noted that because of Luther's deep conservatism and the limitation of his vision of reform solely to the context of an ongoing, though theologically reformed, agrarian medieval religious order, that Luther's movement remained confined to a highly rural, still medieval north-central Europe and further that it had almost no impact in any of the rapidly developing European urban areas.

Classical reformation studies in the broadest sense may have difficulty with the linking of the Reformation to liberation concepts. This problem will be dealt with later in the paper but, at this point, it may suffice to note that, strictly speaking, Liberation Theology takes as its prolegomena that theology is critical reflection on praxis. However, McGovern is helpful – ‘All theology involves reflection on scripture and formulating its message in a more systematic way, using different concepts such as salvation and

redemption. In order to be relevant, theology must also address questions drawn from life's problems' (McGovern, 1989: 31).

Thus it does seem that any simplistic view of the Reformation is not possible. The controversies regarding factors such as the era and the terms used to interpret it are a paper on their own but Hsia in Lindberg is helpful with regard to the capaciousness of the subject of the Reformation and its theology:

that there is an understanding, judging the movement from Luther to social history. This latter does not only reflect recent historiographical development and does not conflict with the earlier approaches of intellectual historians concerned with the biography and theology. Rather it asserts that the religious changes of the sixteenth century were fundamentally important in shaping the history of Europe and the wider world up to the modern age, and it defines as territory for exploration that area in which religious ideas and rituals impinged upon the structures of everyday life (Hsia in Lindberg 1998: 13).

Having laid out a brief scope of the Reformation and highlighted certain areas of interest for the sake of this paper, one cannot underestimate the

impact of the Reformation and continues to have within the theological conversation. The intention of this brief look at the reformation has been to highlight some difficulties with regard to what extent theology should and does impact on areas of world development.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1953: 31) writing from his prison cell in Nazi Germany, despite his physical incarceration poses philosophically a question which may lie at the heart of this paper –

one wonders how it was that Luther's action led to consequences which were the exact opposite of what he intended, and which overshadowed the last years of his life and work, so that he doubted the value of everything he achieved. He desired a real unity both for the Church and Western Christendom, but the consequence was the ruin of both. He sought the "Freedom of Christian man" and the consequence was apathy and barbarism. He hoped to see a genuine social order free from clerical privilege and the outcome was the Peasants Rebellion and soon afterwards the gradual dissolution of all real cohesion and order in society.

From this brief overview of the Reformation, for the sake of this paper and the dialogue between Wesleyan and Liberation Theology, we now turn to a brief look at John Wesley.

## **Chapter Three**

### **The Theology of John Wesley**

When one looks at any theology of 18<sup>th</sup> century England, there is one name that comes to mind which can and should not be omitted in terms of the impact on the theological conversation namely, that of John Wesley. Arguably, one of the great Christian thinkers, Wesley's theology developed and impacted like few in his time.

This chapter, in order to stay true to the theme of this paper and given that any in depth study of Wesleyan theology is a paper on its own, will look very briefly at some philosophical influences in 18<sup>th</sup> century England; an overview the life of John Wesley; look briefly at the context within which Wesley 'did' his theology and briefly look at Wesley's Order of Salvation.

Much has been written about the life and theology of 18<sup>th</sup> century England by scholars such as Hempton, who will be dealt with later, particularly with regard to its historical, social and religious spheres. Scholars from different fields may return to a study of this period in an attempt to capture the essence of a dynamic time of change and development. Historians find rich areas of tradition, sociologists find often revolutionary patterns of behaviour and theologians search for sovereign remedies for religious success. According to Tuttle (1978: 70), ‘the beginning of the 18th century was a breeding ground for theological schizophrenia.’ He goes on to identify two schools of thought prevalent in 18<sup>th</sup> century England.

On the one hand was the Platonic school of thought which held that reality had to do with ideals – ‘Since reality had to do with ideals not perceivable by sense experience, understanding came (deductively) by faith. In a phrase – faith leads to reason.’ (Tuttle, 1978: 72.)

Platonic philosophy centres on the existence of two worlds: the world of ideas and forms, and the world of objects & things. Both make up the whole of reality. Forms are what we normally identify with the term ‘properties’: beauty, or being beautiful, largeness, or being large. They are distinguished

from things that *have* properties: chairs, books, persons. Objects are the concrete articles in our own world which we use to cook, drive, or flush. They are made up of matter, but have attributed to them qualities of forms. Therefore, the matter which makes up the chair is defined or ruled by the form of the chair. ‘Chair-ness’ (or any design which holds up a sitting individual, is portable, normally seats one, etc.) is what sets this matter off to be recognizable as a chair. The wood or metal that is made of could also be fashioned into a hat, a boat, or a lamp. What distinguishes Plato’s theory is that while we use, enjoy, and appreciate the concrete objects in our world, it is truly the world of ideas which is greater still; it allows us to create useful and beautiful and elaborate objects. Each single Form is always distinguished from the many things which ‘participate’ in it. There are many beautiful things, but they all share in one Form, Beauty. Properties are what we also call universals, as opposed to particulars.

Plato developed this understanding through a long process, best encapsulated in his allegory of the cave, which spoke of enchained prisoners in a dark cave, only allowed to see ‘shadows’ of the ‘real’ and bright world outside. Once freed through their intellects, they see reality in full colour, depth, and clarity. To Plato, the more ‘perfect’ something is, the more ‘real’ it also is; most of the world we see around us breaks, deteriorates, and is

flawed. It is the universal categories which never break or deteriorate, and they are, by definition, never flawed.

Plato's epistemology then, is rooted not in the observance of this dark and broken world, but in contemplating the realm which is unaffected by accident, tragedy, or selfishness. The perfect world of ideas is where we should begin our truth, knowledge, ethics, and theology. This belief is often associated with a *priori* knowledge: it does not begin with observance of the world around us, but may be found independently in the mind which is freed enough of its earthly fetters. Plato's influence is to be found in the classical understandings of God especially with regard to the notion perfection.

Whilst it is not the intention of this paper to go into detail, it may be for the sake of later discussion, suffice to say that in Platonic understanding, to be perfect is to be unchanging and self sufficient.

Secondly, the Aristotelian model by which held that reality had to do only with those things perceivable by sense of experience – 'Since matter was the only reality; one had to reason one's way to faith. In a phrase, reason leads to faith' (Tuttle, 1978: 71). Aristotelian philosophy basically begins at the other pole to Plato: only through observance and comparison of the world around us can we begin to understand it. Aristotle affirmed his teacher's

two ultimate categories: Forms and Objects [Universals and particulars], but found a different way for moving between the two. Our use of the senses is not to be discounted as a way of knowing, since the primary kind of being *is* substance. By observing, categorizing, and determining causality in this substance, we are well on our way to understanding concrete reality and the reality of forms; we are also on the way to the beginnings of modern science. This *a posteriori* approach employed by science and brings together many different objects whose definitions are different but are related focally to one thing. Concrete similarities are correlated between those different objects, and thus arrive at the common Form or ‘essence’ which defines them. And it is in the study of human beings that we find their essence is a soul – which is not simply matter – and which also exhibits the Form that makes them up. Universals are unforgiving and immovable; therefore, the study of immovable substance (theology) counts as first philosophy. To Aristotle, universals still remain the only perfect and worthy goals of knowledge; we must simply arrive there by different means. It was Thomas Aquinas who was the strongest medieval proponent of Aristotelian thought and logic, and alone tremendously influenced the increase of scientific investigation and observation.

These schools's of thought have had a sustained influence in all disciplines and particularly on theological devolvement and are still evident today.

Another influence on 18<sup>th</sup> century England which is worth mentioning in this paper is Enthusiasm. Hempton (1984: 20), in his book, *Methodism and Politics in British Society 1750-1850*, asserts –

Enthusiasm became such a powerful reality in 18th century and nineteenth century England that the comparative decline in spiritual excitement in the twentieth century (at least in advanced western countries) has forced many theologians into an historical pilgrimage to discover the elixir of earlier Protestant success.

However, his views may be seen in the light of discourse on, amongst others, a reaction to Hal vy's views who, in a simple understanding, asserts that England was spared a violent counterpart to the French revolution by the wide spread Revival that included Wesleyan theology.

There is little argument about the significant role that Methodism played in 18<sup>th</sup> century England. Semmel (1973: 3), on the impact of Methodism, asserts –

most liberal, secular minded historians have judged Methodism to be a reactionary movement, a protest against

the Enlightenment and reason, and have seen polity, discipline and doctrine in this spirit; denominational historians while stressing the comforting qualities which Methodism brought to its followers have appeared, if only explicitly, more or less to accept this assessment.

There are serious questions posed by those who study Wesleyan theology and its contribution to praxis with regard to social, political and economic issues. Douglas Meeks (1985: 14) cites the essence of this debate:

Can Methodist theology contribute anything to Christian mission in the worldwide situations of injustice and oppression? If it can what does this mean for the mission of the Methodist churches in the Northern and Southern hemispheres? If it cannot, where does this leave Methodism? Hopelessly locked into the cultural forms and institutions of the North Atlantic community?

These questions could constitute a paper on their own as the field is fairly broad, but being true to the theme of this paper let us continue to look briefly at some contemporary issues in order to facilitate the dialogue between Wesleyan and Liberation theologies. It must be stated right from the outset that many attempts have been made to compress Wesleyan theology into different motifs such as perfection or love, but ‘any such

attempt to see Wesleyanism through a single lens runs the risk of distorting or excluding important strands of doctrine' (Taylor in Carter 1983: 55).

Most studies of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and his theology begin with an overview of the context in which he operated. As with most examinations of theological thought, context plays a significant role and even more so with Wesley; firstly as he is not regarded narrowly as a systematic theologian 'nor was he, in the broad sense of the term, a systematic theologian' (Davies & Rupp 1965: 147) and secondly, as Hempton (1984: 25) concludes, Wesley's writings are drawn by Professor Rupp, against militant zeal, intolerance, the charismatic excesses of revivalism and faulty logic of faith and conduct. There are strong views by some scholars, such as Thompson, that assert that Wesley and his associates were guilty of promiscuous opportunism and were hardly systematic in their approach.

Writing in this vein, Williams (1960: 13) states 'we still hear it said that John Wesley was not really concerned with theology.' This view, he argues, is based on the idea that Wesley was more concerned with sincerity than with Doctrine. Tuttle (1978: 10), when discussing Wesley as theologian, asserts: 'Like most theologians Wesley was remarkably consistent, yet

appears contradictory if proper perspective is not given to the man whose life stretched across the entire 18th century'; and further,

John Wesley was to become a great theologian, but theology was not his greatest strength. John Wesley was to become a great preacher, but preaching was not his greatest strength. Wesley most significant contribution to the 18th century and to the church as a whole lies in his exceptional ability to organize people into the kind of body that would sustain both them and the Movement called the 18th century Evangelical Revival" (Tuttle, 1978: 69).

According to Hempton (1984: 24), A.C Outler 'turns his grudging admission that Wesley was hardly a theologian's theologian into an unexpected triumph by describing his subject as a great folk theologian'; Tuttle (1978: 74) refers to Wesley as 'High Church\Puritan\mystic'. These commentaries denote an interesting dialectic and it is perhaps in this light that one needs to examine the life and theology of John Wesley.

So it seems, given the broad range of reactions to Wesleyan theology, that any serious study and understanding of Wesley and his theology needs to begin with a look at the context of 18<sup>th</sup> century England. Before looking at greater length at the English political, social and religious context, let us

briefly examine some contemporary areas regarding this man whose life and theology impacted on 18<sup>th</sup> century England in particular and who left an indelible mark on the theological conversation. This overview is by no means complete and later in depth discussion in this paper may help to enlighten and bring a clearer understanding and insight to the theology of John Wesley.

### **3.1 A Contemporary Overview on the life of John Wesley:**

John Wesley was the primary figure in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Evangelical Revival and founder of Methodism. Wesley was born in Epworth, England, to Samuel and Susanna Wesley, one of 19 children. Although both his grandfathers distinguished themselves as Puritan Nonconformists, his parents returned to the Church of England where his father, for most of his ministry, held the livings of Epworth (1697 – 1735) and Wroot (1725 – 1735). Wesley spent his early years under the careful direction of his remarkable mother, who sought to instil in him a sense of vital piety leading to a wholehearted devotion to God.

Wesley was educated at Charterhouse, a school for boys in London, and then Christ Church, Oxford, where he received the BA degree in 1724 and the MA degree in 1727. Although a serious student in both logic and religion,

Wesley was not to experience his 'religious' conversion until 1725. He was then confronted with the dilemma of what to do with the rest of his life. He decided (through the influence of his mother, a religious friend, and the reading of Jeremy Taylor and Thomas a Kempis) to make religion the 'business of his life'. He was ordained deacon (1725), elected to a fellowship at Lincoln College, Oxford (1726), and served as his father's curate at Wroot (1727 – 1729). He then returned to Oxford and became the leader of a small band of students organized earlier by his younger brother, Charles.

This band, dubbed the 'Holy Club', would later be called 'Methodist' for their prescribed method of studying the Bible and for their rigid self-denial which included many works of charity. During this period (1729 – 1735) both John and Charles fell under the influence of the non-juror and mystic William Law. Although Wesley confessed that at that time he did not understand justification by faith (seeking instead justification by his own works-righteousness), it was during this period that he formulated his views on Christian perfection, a hallmark of Methodism.

Although Wesley was not a systematic theologian, his theology can be described with reasonable clarity from the study of his published sermons, tracts, treatises and correspondence. In essence, Wesley's theology, so akin to the Reformation, affirms God's sovereign will to reverse our 'sinful, devilish nature', by the work of his Holy Spirit, a process he called 'prevenient', justifying, and sanctifying grace (grace being nearly synonymous with the work of the Holy Spirit).

This state of affairs has led many to view Wesleyan theology from revival to evangelical to liberationist. During this century there has been an increased emphasis upon the social dimension of the Methodist witness. In 1908, inspired by a theology of the social gospel proclaimed by the Baptist, Walter Rauschenbusch, the Methodist Episcopal Church set forth the Methodist Social Creed. It became the nucleus for a similar statement adopted by the Federal Council of Churches. More recently our brothers and sisters in Latin America have extended this approach still further. In their Liberation Theology they seek to remove both the dependence of the poor upon the rich, and of Christian theology itself upon those who are economically comfortable. They have begun to search the writings of John Wesley for support.

True, for some it may be unthinkable that Wesley would have echoed in his day the revolutionary demands of the liberationist. True, he seems never to have used even the phrase 'social gospel', though he did speak approvingly of 'social religion' and 'knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness' (Outler, 1991, 56). Wesley's constant emphasis upon the dangers of riches makes many of us in a wealthy society very uncomfortable. Yet, even more intense than his condemnation of luxurious living and non-consecrated wealth is his passionate concern for the poor. Wesley demonstrated this concern primarily in various forms of Christian philanthropy rather than in social reforms. He seems to have regarded social service as a more natural and inevitable outflow of Christian love than using the somewhat tainted weapon of politics.

In a letter to his friend Mr. Blackwell, Wesley says, 'I had no desire for several years to concern myself with temporals at all' (Letters in Hulley 1987: 93), but Rogal argues further that 'as time passed his understanding of religion as loving God and your neighbour forced him into a position where the temporal concerns of other people began to play an increasingly significant role' (Rogal in Hulley 1987:93).

Thus it seems as though there can be little doubt that Wesley's social practices were the necessary outcome of his social principles and that his philanthropy sprang from his theology, but in order to more fully appreciate his theology it may be appropriate to briefly examine the context in which he 'did' his theology. It must also be noted that this area of study is very broad and is a paper on its own; however, for the sake of this paper some important areas will be touched on. In other words – 'before we can discover John Wesley's originality we must first place him in his context' (Davies & Rupp 1965: 83).

### **3.2 English Society in the 18th century:**

Much has been written about the decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century

and it has been noted that Wesley's early public ministry coincided with a period of political stability characterized by a single party government, a comprehensive patronage network, a shrinking electorate and harmonious relations between king and parliament over the choice of ministers (Hempton 1984: 42)

but, for the sake of this paper and the length, only a broad overview of 18<sup>th</sup> century England will be given.

Davies and Rupp (1965: 5ff) set out some useful insights into the context in which Wesley was born and lived. Among some of them are:

1. Some turning points in English and European history had been passed. In 1686 Fontenelle had brought in France his famous book on the plurality of Worlds – a book which marked a creative stage in the development of the popular exposition of science. In 1687, Sir Isaac Newton published his Principia, the work which established the victory of the seventeenth scientific revolution and vindicated – against a French school which followed Descartes – that particular combination of the mathematical and experimental methods which we associate with modern science. In 1694-1695 the establishment of the Bank of England and the National debt brought finance into every structure of government.
2. A number of important general developments in Holland, England and France were starting to change transform the character of life, society and civilization. Englishmen were starting to be stimulated by the Dutch in their use of technology and economic methods.
3. By the opening of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the great political conflicts between Protestantism and Catholicism had for the most part, been

played out, but had left in England a recurring politico-ecclesiastical 'No-Popery' complex which was to make a signal appearance in the life of Wesley.

4. From a religious perspective, the interest in other continents led men to see their society, their civilization and even their religion with a greater degree of relativity than before. Christianity itself was no longer absolute and the stage was set for the emergence of views such as Deism. As has been seen in the second chapter, the reformation played a significant role of European religious and social development but at the same time one must proceed cautiously when looking for support from the Reformation as a whole in English development. In England non conformity reflected these changes and all these factors and others helped to swell the Great Secularization. According to Heitzenrater (1995: 2), there existed an interface between religion and politics in England. McGrath (2001: 78) asserts that there was little relation between the English Reformation and the German Reformation. 'In Germany there was a protracted struggle between the Lutheran and Roman catholic as each attempted to gain influence in a certain region.' In England Henry VIII simply declared that there would only be one Christian body within England. It may be argued

that part of the reason for the Lutheran struggle, as has been shown in previous chapters, may be attributed to a view that sees Luther as wanting to reform the Catholic Church and not necessarily setting out to begin a new movement later to be referred to as Protestant.

5. According to Semmel (1973: 7), ‘The lower ranks of the 18<sup>th</sup> century France and England were exposed to great social and economic dislocations, accompanied by a disorientation of the traditional family structure. Such changes produced widespread and profound anxiety and one argue with Tocqueville, religious revolutions.’

18<sup>th</sup> century England provided thus a context of wide ranging religious and social factors into which John Wesley and his group of Methodists conversed. In order to gain a more systematic method and clarity of his theology, one may highlight some more prominent areas found in his writings, letters, notes and journals. In this one would hope to lay a foundation for discourse which will help to assist the dialogue between Liberation Theology and Wesleyan theology.

### 3.3 Wesley's Order of Salvation (*Ordo Salutis*):

Williams (1960:39) lays out a process gleaned from Wesley's theology and placed into an order of salvation (*ordo salutis*). It must be stressed at the outset that this order is not intended to be numerical or chronological. Neither is it intended to dictate the only way in which God's salvation works in the world. Rather the purpose is for clarity and explanation only, to place into some kind of systematic form Wesley's Theology. Bonino (1975: 53) is helpful in illuminating Wesley's ongoing conversation of the 'order' of salvation or liberation and the dialogue between justification and sanctification, 'but in the dialectics of his piety and his preaching, the all-consuming concern is with the grand plan – the order of intention.'

Williams (1960: 40) asserts that 'Wesley's definition of salvation is given in the sermon on the text – *Ye are saved through faith*. This is as much an Aristotelian view as referred to by Tuttle. Wesley defines salvation as free and unmerited – 'All blessings which God has bestowed upon man are of His mere grace, bounty or favour: His free, undeserved favour; favour altogether undeserved; man having claim to the least of His mercies' (Sermon I).

For Wesley salvation is not only for eternity but can be attained even if for brief moments of Christian Perfection on earth. This has led some to view his theology as experiential; others have cited Wesley's well documented disagreement with the doctrine of Predestination and others have asserted a 'battle' against 'speculative' Antinomianism but, according to Semmel (1973: 29), 'it was, however, the doctrine of justification by faith, so overwhelmingly a part of that 'Protestant' feeling to be found among the great numbers of Englishmen, which was to possess the emotional force required to convert England.' Davies (Davies & Rupp 1965: 149) asserts that this view would limit our understanding as

'the Wesley's did include "feelings" in "experience" but "feelings" in their sense not ours. And they meant much more by experience than mere "feelings" even in their sense. They meant the whole work of God done in their souls and the souls of all believers and the important thing about it was that it was the work of God not that they experienced it.'

There is a need consider Wesley's understanding of salvation and grace, even though it may seem for a moment that we are losing sight of the theme of this paper, because Wesley's theology needs to be viewed holistically. The following examination of Wesley's understanding of Grace is integral to

an appreciation of his holistic theology and to ensure that we do not fall into the trap of isolating parts which suit particular arguments.

### **3.3.1 Preventive Grace**

Preventive or preventing grace for Wesley describes the universal work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of people between conception and conversion. Original sin, according to Wesley, makes it necessary for the Holy Spirit to initiate the relationship between God and people. Bound by sin and death, people experience the gentle wooing of the Holy Spirit, which prevents them from moving so far from 'the way' that when they finally understand the claims of the gospel upon their lives, he guarantees their freedom to say yes. This doctrine constitutes the heart of Wesley's Arminianism. Williams (1960: 41) cites Grace as follows: 'the central focus of Wesley's theology is on the saving work of Christ and the human appropriation of that work' and, further, that 'man cannot move himself toward God, being entirely dependent on God's enabling grace. But he also insisted that man is responsible for his own salvation, being free to accept God or reject Him.' Hulley (1987: 68) highlights Wesley's views towards 'free-will' or, more to the point, 'unaided free-will.' The argument, he

asserts, applies specifically to the debate on moral choices made by those who were not Christian but he concedes to Wesley's argument that 'Natural free-will, in the present state mankind, I do not understand; I only assert that there is a measure of free-will supernaturally restored to every man, together with the supernatural light which enlightens every man that comes into the world.' In discussing the Methodist synthesis Snyder (1980: 145) asserts that

basic to all else in Wesley was his tenacious hold on both the total sovereignty of God and the freedom of human beings to accept or reject God's call and to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the work of salvation – both in individual believers and in the world.

Whilst these arguments may point toward an attack on Luther and Calvin's doctrine of election, 'Wesley is quite clear in his own mind as to the source of his doctrine of salvation, as we have seen. He claims to derive it immediately from Scripture and from nowhere else at all' and, further –

this claim is repeated time and time again in all Wesley's writings and is not unjustified. In a larger historical perspective we can of course say that Wesley repeats with modifications the Protestant interpretation of Scripture and that is, even if we ourselves believe it to be in principle the right one, is in the last resort only one of several possible interpretations (Davies & Rupp, 1965: 148).

There are many paradoxes and seemingly unsatisfactorily sides to Wesley's arguments such as his views on conscience and his definition of sin and grace. In his examination of Wesley's views Williams asserts that Wesley deals with conscience under his doctrine of prevenient grace. Here Wesley sees that this 'faculty' which is inherent in every man, is in fact something given by God. 'Thus because God is directly at work even within the natural man, man is responsible; not because he is naturally free to do God's will but because he resists God's grace. This grace is not enough for man to turn away from sin; rather 'prevenient grace marks the beginning of God's work of salvation and this grace is present in all men.'(Williams 1960: 42ff.)

This understanding of grace differs from the common grace that John Calvin spoke of, in that 'due to Calvin's doctrine of unconditional election, common grace plays no part, finally, in God's plan of redemption. By contrast, Wesley saw prevenient grace as the first step in God's redeeming work, even though people could (and most would) reject this grace' (Snyder 1980: 145.)

At the same time, Williams (1960: 43) argues that Wesley's definition of sin, in terms of original sin, is total: under these terms no man can ever cease to be a sinner in this life. But Wesley looks at man not only in this absolute sense but also in terms of his immediate relationship to God. In this sense man can be at the same time a sinner (as measured by absolute standards) and yet sinless (if he consciously uses the grace God is giving him). This view can only be understood when one recognises that Wesley has this double definition of sin and the response by the sinner to God's grace brings a further gift of grace.

This brief overview of Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace does little to settle problems but the idea is to give some important insight and groundwork for questions relating to Wesley's social witness to be discussed later in this paper. Perhaps Snyder best sums up this discussion –

Wesley was as fully conscious as the earlier Reformers were of God's grace. But he had a deep optimism of grace that formed the foundation for his emphasis on the universal atonement, the witness of the Spirit and Christian Perfection. He saw God's grace so fully abounding that no one could set limits on what God Spirit might accomplish through the church in the present order (Snyder 1980: 146).

### **3.3.2 Justifying Grace**

As Prevenient grace, as asserted above, leads to a further gift a grace, in Wesleyan theology the ‘next’ step in the order of salvation is justifying grace. Justifying grace describes the work of the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion in the lives of those who say yes to the call of Prevenient grace by placing their faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Wesley understood such conversion as two phases of one experience. The first phase, justification, includes the Spirit attributing or imputing to the believer the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The second phase, the new birth, includes the Spirit launching the process of sanctification or imparted righteousness. These two phases identify, in part, the Wesleyan distinctive. Here he combines the ‘faith alone’ so prevalent in the Protestant Reformation (Wesley insisted that he and Calvin were but a hair's breadth apart on justification) with the passion for holiness so prevalent in the Catholic Counter-Reformation.

Wesley, according to Williams (1960: 57), holds to the view that

the natural man is a man not aware of the working of God's grace in him. He is in what the Scripture represents as a state

of sleep...utterly ignorant of God, knowing nothing concerning Him as he ought to know...because he is asleep; he is, in some sense at rest. Because he is blind, he is also secure...He sees not that he stands on the edge of the pit, therefore he hears it not...

This edge of the pit is examined by Davies (Davies & Rupp, 1965: 150) when he states that 'Wesley, of course, takes the story of Adam and Eve as literal history' and, further,

When we say that man was created in God's image, we mean that he was created in God's natural image, that is, he was created a spiritual being, with understanding and freedom of will; also in God's political image, that is, with the right and power to govern this lower world in which we live but chiefly in God's moral image, that is, with love as the sole principle of all his tempers, thoughts and actions, and living in perfect holiness.

But this free-will was to be his undoing:

Wesley saw the will as essential to the image of God. God had given men and women a will, either to serve him or rebel. Now because of sin, the will was under bondage. People chose evil rather than good. Salvation therefore meant restoring the image of God and freeing the will to do God's will. By grace, men and women could will to serve God (Snyder 1980: 144).

Thus by responding to God's grace and repenting, the righteousness of Christ is imparted to sinful humanity. It is important to note that for Wesley, repentance or conviction of sin, 'is always previous to faith and it is in his description of this repentance and its fruits, as normally a necessary condition of faith...' (Williams 1960: 59).

These statements point out some difficulties in his theology but, for the sake of this paper and its theme, it may suffice to say that after 1738 Wesley began to be dissatisfied with the traditional Protestant position concerning man's position before justification. This position regarding the merits of good works is countered in his thinking by his emphasis on prevenient grace because 'he believed that the way justification by faith was being interpreted alone was encouraging people to underestimate the importance of responding to God's grace through a sincere sorrow for sin and a desire for amendment and so was resulting in antinomianism' (Williams 1960: 61). This view is not without its tensions but, without getting into a lengthy debate for the sake of this paper, Snyder (1980: 147) points to valuable

insight by highlighting Wesley's stress on both inward and outward holiness as 'evident of this balance doctrine and experience.'

This brings us to a further gift of grace, sanctifying grace.

### **3.3.3 Sanctifying Grace**

Sanctifying Grace describes the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers between conversion and death. Faith in Christ saves us from hell and sin for heaven and good works. Imputed righteousness, according to Wesley, entitles one to heaven; imparted righteousness qualifies one for heaven. It is here that Wesley goes to great lengths to describe his views on Christian perfection. According to Bonino (1975:52) 'Wesley gained from Luther a doctrine of 'sanctification by grace through faith.'

The process of sanctification or perfection culminates in an experience of 'pure love' as one makes progress to the place where love becomes devoid of self-interest. This second work of grace is described as the one purpose of all religion. If one is not perfected in love, one is not 'ripe for glory'. It is important, however, to note that this perfection was not static but dynamic, always improvable. Neither was it angelic or Adamic. Adam's perfection was objective and absolute, while Wesley's perfection was subjective and relative, involving, for the most part, intention and motive.

Although Wesley talks about an instantaneous experience called ‘entire sanctification’ subsequent to justification, his major emphasis was the continuous process of going on to perfection. Perhaps first learned from the early church fathers like Macarius and Ephraem Syrus, this emphasis upon continuous process was enforced by Wesley to prevent the horrible expectation of backsliding. Wesley soon learned that the only way to keep Methodists alive was to keep them moving. This same concept of continuous process was later polished by the influence of mystics like Francois Fenelon, whose phrase *moi progressus ad infinitum* (my progress is without end) greatly impressed Wesley and became a major tool for the perpetuation of the Evangelical Revival. The watchword for the revival became: Go on to perfection: otherwise you cannot keep what you have.

Prevenient grace, therefore, is a process. Justifying grace is instantaneous. Sanctifying grace is both a process and instantaneous. Although Wesley's theology went through some subtle shifts later in life (for example, he placed more and more emphasis on good works as the inevitable fruit of saving faith), this is fairly representative of Wesley's theology throughout. Generally speaking, Wesley was essentially a practical theologian. In a very practical way his theology was geared primarily to his own needs and to the

needs of those given into his care. According to Snyder (1980: 147) ‘this leads to the aspect of Wesleyan emphasis with perhaps the greatest potential impact for the church today. Wesley saw the connection between experience and structure.’

The way in which Wesley’s thinking led to a ‘social holiness’ is a major concern of this paper. It all began with the New Testament, of course. The Lord Jesus Christ had taught Wesley to say, ‘Our Father’ and the fatherhood of God implied the brotherhood of man. Wesley’s favourite epistle challenged him, ‘that the one who loves God should love his brother also’ (1 John 4:21) and Wesley’s comment on this verse carefully defined the term ‘brother’ as ‘everyone, whatever his opinions or mode of worship be, purely because he is the child and bears the image of God. Bigotry is properly the want of this pure and universal love.’ Our Lord’s two great commands were to love God and to love your neighbour – the latter defined by the parable of the Good Samaritan as anyone in need. In 18<sup>th</sup> century England the distinctions between rich and poor were as outrageously visible as in first century Palestine, and one’s most needy neighbours were obviously the poor.

The coin of Christianity was two-sided for Wesley and was meant to be spent in two ways: in securing and maintaining personal salvation and in serving one's neighbours. Both separately and jointly these formed the unity of living to the glory of God, of doing God's will.

According to Baker (1985: 3), for a time John Wesley toyed with the idea of a separated Christian community modelled on early Christian communism when 'all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common.' His comment on Acts 2:45 exclaims wistfully: 'It was a natural fruit of that love wherewith each member of the community loved every other as his own soul. And if the whole Christian Church had continued in this spirit, this usage must have continued through all ages.' Wesley never quite forsook this dream and during his last three decades he encouraged 'The Community' formed by his followers for social service in London.

Soon after the development of his United Societies in 1739, however, he deliberately set aside any plans to organize Methodist monastic. He maintained in one of his sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, that 'Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it (Wesley, 1980: 237).

He realized that we must come to terms with the society in which we live, with all its faults. In turn this implied dealing seriously with the problem of money – gaining it, saving it and spending it as good stewards exercising stewardship to the glory of God. Speaking of Wesley's radical rejection of surplus accumulation, according to Hempton (1984: 115), Outler claims: 'On no other single point, save only faith and holy living, is Wesley more insistent, consistent – and out of step with the bourgeois spirit of his age.'

Thus, Methodism's ministry to society was, in Wesley's view, inseparable from the preaching of salvation by faith and he sought to make this clear in the major documents in which he introduced his societies to a sceptical and often antagonistic public. In *The Character of a Methodist* (1742) he states that a Methodist is not distinguished from others or even by the proclamation of salvation by faith alone.

'A Methodist,' Wesley claims, 'is one who has the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him, one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with his entire mind, and with all his strength' (section 5). After expounding the spiritual implications of this (largely from 1 Thessalonians 5: 16–18), Wesley continues and,

while he always exercises his love to God by prayer without ceasing, rejoicing evermore, and in everything giving thanks, this commandment is written in his heart, that 'he that loveth God loves his, brother also' and he accordingly 'loves his neighbour as himself; he loves every man as his own soul' (section 9). Wesley continues in this vein through the second half of his pamphlet, making it clear in section 16 that a loyal Methodist 'does good unto all men-unto neighbours, and strangers, friends, and enemies.'

A year later Wesley took the same Methodist social principles which he had thus announced to the general public and summarized them as General Rules for his own people. Although he claimed there was only one condition for Methodist membership, 'a desire... to be saved from their sins', he insisted that for continuance in the society this must be confirmed by steady behaviour befitting such a desire: avoiding evil, doing good, and attending upon all the ordinances of God. Wesley provided an all-embracing understanding of 'doing good':

By doing good... as they [Christians] have opportunity... of every possible sort and as far as is possible to all men: To their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick, or in prison. To their souls, by instructing,

reproving, or exhorting all they have any intercourse with...  
(Wesley in Hulley, 1987: 62.)

For Wesley the most immediate thing (whether or not it was in the long run the most important) was caring for bodily needs – there was no point in making even the most eloquent evangelical appeal to a starving man!

Wesley's *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists* (1749) was again roughly divided into halves, the first devoted to spiritual principles and practices, the second to the social. He showed how the Methodist social principles were being worked out in practice, usually with an eye to similar precedents in the early Christian church. Hulley (1987: 71) cites Wesley as seeing works as important:

he considered that they could be seen as the expression or fruit of our faith, perhaps even proof of our faith: he also believed that an absence of works put question mark behind any claims to faith and according to his reading of Matthew 25, any hope of salvation.

The essential function of his stewards, for example, was ‘to send relief to the poor’, with the added rule: ‘Give none that asks relief either an ill word or an ill look. Do not hurt them, if you cannot help’. Soon the stewards found it difficult to keep in touch with all the sick, especially since none of these ministries was confined to Methodists only. At a general meeting of his

London society, therefore, Wesley called for voluntary 'sick visitors' and sent them out by couples into 23 divisions of the city.

Medical care for the poor then forced itself upon Wesley's attention, and he 'thought of a kind of desperate expedient', and began the first free clinic and dispensary in London. He also sponsored a poorhouse (financing it by faith), in which he housed 'nine widows, two poor children, two upper servants, a mal'd and a man', as well as a school both for basic education, for spiritual training and for reaching the parents. Another venture which was of immense social assistance was Wesley's 'lending fund', from which he was able to rescue some people from debtors' prisons and to set others up in honest work. He appealed for financial aid to this cause by an adaptation of a line by George Herbert: 'Join hands with God to make a poor man live'.

This varied social ministry was not unique to Methodism, but it was characteristic and several of Wesley's social ventures were pioneering experiments of great value. None of these, or his later developments, formed a blueprint for saving society.

Wesley believed in the leading of the Holy Spirit as he pursued the call to serve his contemporaries. He had no carefully thought-out scheme for social

renewal, no political programme for Methodism. Nevertheless, he did also urge the honest, diligent, and caring exercise of voting upon the minority who possessed that privilege and he was ready to cooperate with other influential leaders, even in the world of politics.

Wesley's most noteworthy effort in this field was his lifelong campaign, first, to improve the lot of the black slave and then to banish from the earth what he called 'the execrable villainy' of slavery itself, 'the scandal of religion...and of human nature' (Letter to William Wilberforce, Feb. 24, 1791). Even on his deathbed, because Wesley loved the God whom he was going to meet, he continued to love his brothers and sisters also.

### **3.4 A 'Social' Theology:**

It must be stated once again that the preceding work of this paper is very brief and in many ways it could raise more questions than answers. This is partly due to the length limitations of this paper but also to remain faithful to the theme which it seeks to examine, albeit briefly.

A.C. Outler (1991:34ff) outlines three phases that Methodist studies have taken. Phase one being an introspective phase:

Left to themselves, the Methodists proceeded to evolve a cluster of stereotypes that we know so well and which have shaped our own images of him: the hide-bound father, peerless mother, young Jacky marked off as “special brand plucked out of the burning”, the Holy club, Aldersgate, the great evangelist taking the world for his parish, the invincible debater – and of course above all the founder of Methodism. – Wesley studies, Phase one was, therefore the scholarly aspect of a denominationalism preoccupied with itself and its founder.

Phase two has seen the emergence of a different kind of Wesleyan scholar whose ‘thought has been touched quite lightly by Wesley himself’ (Outler 1985: 9.) These scholars have helped to lift Wesley out of his Methodist matrix. This is relevant in two ways for this paper. Firstly the general indifference to the history of Christian thought as a whole. The other is the biased reading of Wesley so that the separated parts do not quite match his whole.

The third phase ‘would not propose to repudiate the positive residues of Phases one and two – although such a phase would be less interested in the Wesley-Methodist symbiosis and more concerned with ecumenical theology and praxis.’ This is the ongoing theme of this paper.

It seems then that Wesley's theology needs to be taken in its entirety if it is to be of value to social awareness. The ongoing struggle with Wesley seems to be in trying to establish what was at the heart of his social responsibility. It must be noted that Liberation theologians may have difficulty in identifying with Wesley (and others of the Reform movement) as they may consider the historical developments of the Protestant movement in particular as part of the oppressive and dominating forces against which they seek 'Liberation'. Wesley, not unlike Luther, was a man who sought a deeper understanding of God. Luther convinced of his need to atone before God and Wesley who sought to 'know' this God, were men whose theology impacted in their respective eras and beyond.

There seems to be at the core of their theology, first and foremost, a deep desire to 'respond' to God and from that point evolved their impact on their respective 'worlds'. It is, of course, naïve to think that these worlds were independent of one another. They were in fact the same world but of different eras. Put another way, both were products and played a significant part in world development. Wesley like Luther was a man for his time. 'Time' here, being the context in which they found themselves.

Wesley, who never deviated from his goal to save souls, showed us that this salvation could never remain a private personal experience. Having been restored to relationship with God, man is now free to be in relationship with others. Only how can one be in relationship where material wealth separates people from one another? Put another way, 'In all these affairs he did not see himself as a social reformer, BUT love reveals my neighbour, my responsibility' (Tutu 1983:102) and, further, 'anything that portends harm to people, that appears to threaten the general welfare, causes him to rise in their defence...He wrestles with problems that are immediately and clearly before him: hunger, poverty, sickness, the past and the present states of the Kingdom' (Rogal in Hulley 1987: 93).

Thus it seems that in one sense Wesley, like Luther, was not first concerned with social issues, but their faith journey took them into the heart of authentic Christian witness (this view is not without its problems). Of greater concern is the development of humanity in terms of what is referred to as 'progress'. As has been shown, neither Wesley nor Luther was independent of his context, and the very issues which their theology attempted to deal with became a source of oppression and domination. Put another way, it seems that there were consequences for the brave positions

that both these men took but, at the same time, this has led to freedom of expression and individualism which has dominated the centuries ever since: the positive side being the Bible as the instrument for God's revelation but, on the negative side, the 'stuckness' that developed in scholarship which focused on academic issues like trying to apply Wesleyan 18<sup>th</sup> century theology in contemporary situations or contexts.

In Wesley's time according to De Gruchy (1989: 75) 'Wesley himself was deeply concerned and sensitive to the needs for social reform in England...The same however can not be said of his followers.' Part of the reason may be that Wesley himself never intended for Methodism to be a church as such but 'continues to believe that Methodism should be simply a society of Christians, each loyal to his own church or denomination, meeting together to fear God and work righteousness' (Pollock 1989: 245).

Another reason may be found in the understanding that whilst it is the way of scholarship to attribute significant areas of the theological conversation, revivals and religious elixir, there remains little attention given to cultural, social and political influences – 'I wonder how many people would ascribe the growth of early Methodism, and its influence, to its very real grappling

with those major societal issues that were timely and pressing in the community?’ (Callahan 1983:8). It is clear that systematic theologians may argue that this is the domain of the historian or sociologist. This would hold true if systematic theology focused on issues of academic debate without searching for a theology which sought to address questions of praxis which could impart an understanding of the earthly Kingdom of God. It is hoped that this question will be highlighted in the debate between Wesleyan and Liberation Theology.

It does seem that like Wesley, what is needed for his followers, is not another new understanding but rather recognition that any theology built on past contributions and dynamic will better be able to deal with contemporary issues. Scholarship, nay Christendom, cries for new ways in which God’s revelation is breathed into the world, yet persists in focussing on areas of academic debate. What is needed perhaps is not another new way of understanding Wesley (or Luther) but a way bringing Jesus’ concern for the poor, the lost and the oppressed into the theological conversation, not because it attempt to deal with contemporary social concerns but because

Compassion lies at the heart of the authentic Christ-following life. Any spiritual experience – whether it be one of solitude and silence, prayer and fasting or worship and celebration –

which does not result in a deeper concern for our suffering neighbour, can hardly be called Christian (Hudson 1999:73).

This view is not echoed in the theology of the Liberationists in such precise terms but ‘to speak about the presence of grace – whether accepted or rejected – in all people implies, on the other hand, to value from a Christian standpoint the very roots of human activity’ (Gutierrez 1973: 151). Thus Wesley’s understanding of grace leads the believer to care for others in the sense that justification becomes the first step toward the Kingdom of God through the process of sanctification to perfect love. Without this step we revert back to the debate between good works, predestination and election. Quite clearly the debate has been thorough and exhaustive, yet the context within which this theology takes place is dynamic. No wonder there are serious questions as to Wesleyan relevance today. Not all see these in the same light as Smit (2001:10) asserts: ‘...Theology can only come alive when it is practiced in the arena where a community of faith encounters its context.’

To understand Wesley’s theology from a holistic point of view is to engage not only in the theology of grace but also of praxis. Wesley’s order of salvation makes room for God to reach to the marginalised and offer them the gift of salvation, which in turn compels all to work toward a social

structure which makes room for the dignity of all. We care for the ‘outer’ beings, not because they are in need but because they are authentically human beings made in the image of God. Thus Wesley was able to say that, whilst he had differences in opinions with others

Are we not thus far agreed? Let us thank God for this, and receive it a fresh token of his love. But if God loveth us, we ought not to love one another. We ought, without these endless jangling opinions, to provoke one another to love and good works. Let the points wherein we differ stand aside: here are enough wherein we agree, enough to be the ground of every Christian temper of every Christian action (Outler 1985: 498).

However, some words of caution are needed here: Methodists need to know exactly where they stand. Social witness and concern arise out of a response by the believer to God’s grace. Without this response

neither our faith nor our works justify us, that is, deserve the remission of our sins. But God himself justifies us, of his own free mercy, through the merits of his son only. Nevertheless, because we by faith embrace the promise of God’s mercy and of the remission of sins, therefore the scripture says , that faith does justify, yea, faith without works ( works V111: 326).

## **Chapter Four**

### **Liberation Theology**

#### **‘Theology as Critical Reflection on Praxis’**

As has been stated previously in this paper, the term Liberation Theology has varied reactions in scholarship circles. There is an understanding that this theology is more a movement that attempts to unite theology and sociopolitical concerns than a new school of theological theory. There are differing views as to what defines a Liberation Theology. At its broadest understanding Liberation Theology arose in the third world--specifically Latin America--where it was recognized that one's view of God and his action in the world can be profoundly altered by one's praxis or experience

of life. The God of the wealthy is rather different from the God worshipped in the barrios or slums of the major cities in such countries as Peru or Brazil. This idea that one's view of the gospel is shaped by one's location in life has taken firm root in certain groups in the United States, and specifically among blacks and women. Therefore it is more accurate to speak of Liberation Theology in the plural, for these theologies of liberation find contemporary expression among blacks, feminists, Asians, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. McGrath (2001: 115) is helpful,

the term Liberation Theology could in theory be applied to any theology which is addressed to or deals with oppressive situations. In this sense, feminist theology could be regarded as a form of Liberation Theology as the older term 'women's liberation suggest. Equally, Black Theology is unquestionably concerned with the issue of liberation. However the term is used to referred to a distinct form of theology, which has its origins in the Latin American situations in the 1960's and 1970's.

This having been said, the most significant and articulate expression to date has taken place in Latin America. Theological themes have been developed in the Latin American context that has served as models for other theologies of liberation. Often Liberation Theology is seen as the image of a political theology, the concept of a theology of revolution, even the picture of a Marxist "theology." But what most miss is the fact that at the roots of

Liberation Theology is a profound Christian *spirituality*. Indeed, without this foundation it would not be truly a *theology*. And though the spirituality is articulated and illuminated by the theology, the spirituality itself comes out of a new Christian *experience*, an experience of faith which is also “praxis” of faith. In turn, liberation spirituality motivates and accompanies Christian experience, so that it becomes more and more imbued with the Spirit of God, its source. Latin American Christianity, in the post-Vatican II age, has not only given birth to a new model of church, new pastoral approaches, even a new theology; it has engendered a new spirituality.

Liberation theologians maintain that Christian belief and practice ranges along a continuous scale between two forms, one at each end. At one end of this scale is the kind which in effect serves the establishment that is those in authority such as a government, and this kind, teaches that reward will be a better life in a life to come. Liberation theologians advocate the second kind of Christianity, at the other end of the scale. They emphasize compassion and leadership in the struggle against oppressors, in the struggle for a better life here and now in this life.

Davidman (1991, 15) concludes that Christianity is struggling forward towards its roots in response to the social and economic problems of global

humanity at the present time. This view is furthered by Boff (1987: 60) as he argues that

It would seem that 'political theologians' will have to provide themselves with a sufficiently developed critical awareness of society in order to gradually be able to withdraw from the grossest naiveties, unmask current ideologically, appraise theoretical 'novelties – in a word, 'get a solid idea' of the socio-historical conjecture in which we are situated. Even more than a critical awareness, it would be preferable for 'political theologians' to possess a (critical) science, whose theoretical domain will enable them to be genuine producers of knowledge rather than simply consumers.

Theologians from Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish ranks have embraced Liberation Theology as the answer for a secular society. While they vary in the degree to which they espouse Marxist ideology or in the religious terminology they employ, all liberation theologians share one common ground: They abandon some or all of their traditional, orthodox teaching. Perhaps most frightening to more fundamentalist inclined scholars, is that many young theologians are never exposed to any substantive theology in which God and the Scriptures still reign as absolute.

Liberation Theology has also been understood as the prophetic response to oppression. When most people hear of "Liberation Theology," they think of

revolution. Actually the revolutionary situation had already existed and a theology followed once the liberation concept in a spiritual sense was understood. The oppression existed and then came the prophetic experiences through the political context they found themselves in. As the prophets denounced the injustices, they began a process of understanding the way that the Kingdom of God was being fulfilled through the poor and oppressed. A theology of an oppressed culture emerged as theologians saw the relationships with the struggle for liberation throughout God's people in the Bible and through history. The Flood, the crossing of the Red Sea, the cross and the Jerusalem Council are all parts of the liberation process toward the kingdom of peace, love and justice.

The theology of liberation shifts the emphasis toward liberating praxis in a strongly socio-political sense. Liberation Theologians do not create the conflict; it is recognized and denounced in that context of oppression. The socio-political aspect of eschatology is also an important recurring theme in the theology of liberation. Justice and judgment both begin at the house of God and this is a theology of action. The process of liberation as it is going on now implies the need of the Church to make a choice between the mark of the beast or the seal of God and speaking the truth is no longer an acceptable substitute for doing the truth.

With this brief overview of Liberation Theology, which is by no means complete but serves to maintain the theme of this paper, some concepts have been highlighted which need to be examined briefly such praxis, method and hermeneutics before looking briefly at the three schools of thought, Latin American Experience, Feminist Theology and Black Theology, which for the sake of this paper will be included and defined as Liberation Theology.

#### **4.1 Praxis**

The exposition of the word 'praxis' is exhaustive and complex. It is not the intention in this paper to examine it in much detail but rather to point out various understandings with regard to the relationship between theory and praxis. Some scholars use the term to denote among others, a course of action. According to De Gruchy (1994: 12)

Praxis is a German word which is usually translated into English as 'practice.' But when used in theology and other disciplines, it means action which arises out of and contributes to critical reflection.

Hence in this understanding, the word praxis is to emphasis the connection between theological reflection and Christian mission in the world. N òzo sites praxis as "of Greek origin, deriving form *prasso*, to work or execute."

The exposition of the word is further compounded as Boff (1987, 156)

questions the understanding of the concept of praxis, "However it can be

wondered how praxis can be the subject of an epistemological discussion.” And further that inclusion of the term praxis in his laying out of an epistemological framework for political theology is important because it ‘is of overwhelming concern” in this regard. He does however concede that his use of the term praxis does not constitute a systematic exposition and cannot form a balanced whole.

For some scholars, such as Gutierrez, praxis means more than the application of theological truth to a given situation. It means the discovery and the formation of theological truth out of a given historical situation through personal participation in the Latin American class struggle for a new socialist society.

## **4.2 Theological Method**

One of the areas which cause some of the greatest criticism with regard to Liberation Theology is that of methodology. It would seem that most Liberation Theologies methodology has to do with experience. For the Latin Americans it is identifying with the poor, with feminist Theology it is the experience of women and with Black theology it is taken from black experience.

Gustavo Gutierrez (Gutierrez, 1973: 8) defines theology as "critical reflection on historical praxis." Doing theology requires the theologian to be immersed in his or her own intellectual and sociopolitical history. Theology is not a system of timeless truths, engaging the theologian in the repetitious process of systematization and apologetic argumentation. Theology is a dynamic, ongoing exercise involving contemporary insights into knowledge (epistemology), man (anthropology), and history (social analysis).

Ruether ( 1983:12), argues that the principle of experience which is important to Liberation Theology has been treated as though it is unique to Feminist theology” in particular but this is misguided because “ what have been called objective sources of theology; Scripture, and tradition, are themselves codified collective experience.” Ruether goes on to argue that ‘the uniqueness of feminist theology lies not in its use of the criterion of experience but rather in its use of women’s experience, which has been entirely shut out of theological reflection in the past.’”

Cone (1999: 7) asserts that

the black intellectual community is becoming increasingly suspicious of Christianity because the oppressor has used it as a means of directing the oppressed away from any concern for present inequalities by emphasizing a heavenly reality beyond time and space.

Whilst this brief look at some thoughts regarding the different methodology of Liberation Theologians and by no means complete, Boff ( 1987: 24) is helpful in highlighting the danger of “Theological purism, rejecting the ‘intrusions’ of other disciplines within the theological field of operation, corresponds in the area of epistemology to the *sola fides* attitude in the area of dogmatic.” And further “What is this self styled ‘methodological purity’? Indeed, where is this ‘pure theology’?”

This brings us to another area of criticism with regard to Liberation Theology, hermeneutics.

### **4.3 Hermeneutics**

Once again it must be stressed that the field within this discussion is broad but for the sake of this paper some of the areas will be touched on very briefly. Putting down an exact definition of the term hermeneutics can be as complex and intriguing as the very thing that hermeneutics seeks to explore. The traditional understanding of the term is for the most part simplistic; a discipline that undertakes interpretation. Traditionally the term refers to interpretation of the Bible. Regarding this view there are various ways in which interpretation is approached: ‘some writers like to call it the science

of interpretation; others prefer to speak of the art of interpretation' (Kaiser & Silva, 1994: 15). Some scholars see interpretation as depending on the nature of the material under study (Anderson, 1957: 655). But is hermeneutics reserved only for biblical studies? Silva (Kaiser & Silva, 1994: 5) argues that no course is given at high school on how to interpret the newspaper. Gadamer in Linge (1973: xii) asserts "Hermeneutics has its origin in the braches in intersubjectivity. Its field of application is comprised of all those situations in which we encounter meanings that are not immediately understandable but require interpretive effort." Sontag (1982: 58), argues that art does not need interpretation because "None of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory when art knew no need to justify itself, when one did not ask of a work of art what it said because one knew (or thought on knew) what it did" and further "Interpretation is a radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought too precious to repudiate by revamping it." Silva (Kaiser & Silva, 1994: 15), however poses the question which any study of hermeneutics must attempt to answer: "Why should the Bible readers be expected to study principles of interpretation?"

Without going into too much detail in this paper, Dirkie Smit (Smit in Maimela & König, 1998: 297) identifies specific "conflicts of interpretation" with regard to hermeneutics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. : "the conflict between

*explanation and understanding*; the conflict over the question *what we do when we read*; the conflict over the question who may read the Bible; the *responsibility* of reading the Bible; and the conflict over the question *what the Bible is.*”

For the purposes of this paper some areas of interest will be highlighted in each area of conflict as defined by Smit.

#### **4.3.1 The Conflict between explanation and understanding:**

He defines the fundamental problem in this conflict as “ all these methods are attempts to ‘explain ‘, to analyze, to dissect, to study, the biblical text but is it enough?”

#### **4.3.2 The conflict over the question who read the Bible:**

Here he identifies a problem: “if it is true that the presuppositions of the readers are important, then the question that we are will also be important! Then obviously different people will read interpret understand appropriate the same texts in different ways because they are different people.”

#### **4.3.3 The conflict over Reading:**

“The realisation that our context, that the question who we are plays an important role in biblical hermeneutics, has gradually shifted our attention to

a next question, namely, the question: *what we are doing when we read the Bible?* What does ‘reading’ mean? Why does our context or location or place or horizon influence our readings? What do we do with and to the text that we read?”

#### **4.3.4 The responsibility of Reading:**

Here Smit defines interpretation, writing and preaching of the Bible as a social activity with social consequences.

#### **4.3.5 The conflict over the Bible:**

Smit asserts here that there is a coming together of all the above conflicts into the question of approach as some see the Bible as a religious book and others do not and these options amongst others play a significant role as to how the Bible is interpreted.

However understood, what is of value in the preceding discussion on hermeneutics, Liberation Theology accepts the two-pronged challenge of the Enlightenment. These two critical elements essentially shape Liberation Theology's biblical hermeneutic. The first challenge comes through the philosophical perspective begun by Immanuel Kant, which argued for the autonomy of human reason. Theology is no longer worked out in response to God's self-disclosure through the divine-human authorship of the Bible. This

revelation from "outside" is replaced by the revelation of God found in the matrix of human interaction with history. The second challenge comes through the political perspective founded by Karl Marx, which argues that man's wholeness can be realized only through overcoming the alienating political and economic structures of society. The role of Marxism in Liberation Theology must be honestly understood. Some critics have implied that Liberation Theology and Marxism are indistinguishable, but this is not completely accurate.

Liberation theologians agree with Marx's famous statement: hitherto philosophers have explained the world; our task is to change it. They argue that theologians are not meant to be theoreticians but practitioners engaged in the struggle to bring about society's transformation. In order to do this Liberation Theology employs a Marxist-style class analysis, which divides the culture between oppressors and oppressed. This conflictual sociological analysis is meant to identify the injustices and exploitation within the historical situation. Marxism and Liberation Theology condemn religion for supporting the status quo and legitimating the power of the oppressor. But unlike Marxism, Liberation Theology turns to the Christian faith as a means for bringing about liberation. Marx failed to see the emotive, symbolic, and sociological force the church could be in the struggle for justice. Liberation

theologians claim that they are not departing from the ancient Christian tradition when they use Marxist thought as a tool for social analysis. They do not claim to use Marxism as a philosophical world view or a comprehensive plan for political action. Human liberation may begin with the economic infrastructure, but it does not end there.

The challenge of the Enlightenment is followed by the challenge of the Latin American situation in formulating Liberation Theology's hermeneutics of praxis. The important hermeneutical key emerging out of the Latin American context is summarized in Hugo Assmann's (1975, 14ff) reference to the epistemological privilege of the poor. On a continent where the majority is both poor and Roman Catholic, Liberation Theology claims the struggle is with man's inhumanity to man and not with unbelief. Liberation theologians have carved out a special place for the poor. The poor man, the other, reveals the totally Other to us (Gutierrez, 1983: vii). All communion with God is predicated on opting for the poor and exploited classes, identifying with their plight, and sharing their fate. Jesus 'secularizes the means of salvation, making the sacrament of the 'other' a determining element for entry into the Kingdom of God' (Leonardo Boff, 1986: 55).

Liberation Theology holds that in the death of the peasant or the native Indian we are confronted with the monstrous power of the negative.

We are forced to understand God form within history mediated through the lives of oppressed human beings. God is not recognized analogically in creation's beauty and power, but dialectically in the creature's suffering and despair. Sorrow 'triggers the process of cognition,' enabling us to comprehend God and the meaning of his will (Bonino, 1975:32). Combining post-Enlightenment critical reflection with an acute awareness of Latin America's conflict-ridden history results in several important theological perspectives. Ruether (1983, 14) argues that "no new prophetic tradition ever is interpreted in a cultural vacuum." Sontag (1982: 32) puts in another way, "What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more and to feel more."

#### **4.4 Latin American Experience**

There is a groaning in the universe of the need to be free. Latin American Liberation Theology emerged surrounded by profound economic, cultural, and religious upheavals. It began in the sixties among ordinary Christians who felt called by their faith to work for and with the poor. This was a concrete way of living out faith in the God of Moses and Jesus which understands the gift of salvation as intimately bound up with the struggles of the oppressed for liberation in history. Any theology which does not directly relate to and contribute to the liberation of the oppressed - despite its other

possible virtues - is lacking in useful Christian theology. Christianity's message of salvation is one of liberation from sin and the consequences of sin that enslave humanity. Berryman (1987: 14) asserts that

Institutionally, moreover, the church was disproportionately serving the privileged, since priest and sisters were concentrated in the larger cities, often in Catholic schools for the rich.

This view is reinforced by Gutierrez who sites the classical positions of theology as wisdom of a biblical and spiritual nature but also as isolated from the world, platonic and Neo-Platonism and as rational knowledge that is, theology as an intellectual discipline, the fruit of the encounter between faith and reason.

There are at least four major factors that have played a significant role in the formulation of Latin American Liberation Theology.

**4.4.1** First, it is a post-Enlightenment theological movement. The leading proponents, such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Juan Segundo, Jose Miranda, are responsive to the epistemological and social perspectives of Kant, Hegel, and Marx. According to Hennelly (1995: 9) Segundo and Gutierrez “are the most significant leaders in the genesis and evolution of the Latin-American Liberation Theology and their influences continue to this very day.”

**4.4.2** Second, Liberation Theology has been greatly influenced by European political theology finding in J. B. Metz and Jurgen Moltmann and Harvey Cox perspectives which have criticized the historical and individualistic nature of existential theology.

**4.4.3** Third, it is for the most part a Roman Catholic theological movement. With notable exceptions such as Jose Miguez-Bonino (Methodist) and Rubem Alves (Presbyterian) Liberation Theology has been identified with the Roman Catholic Church. After Vatican II (1965) and the conference of the Latin American episcopate (Celam II) in Medellin, Colombia 1968, a significant number of Latin American leaders within the Roman Catholic Church turned to Liberation Theology as the theological voice for the Latin American church. The dominating role of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America has made it a significant vehicle for Liberation Theology throughout the South American continent.

**4.4.4** Fourth, it is a theological movement specifically and uniquely situated in the Latin American context. Liberation theologians contend that their continent has been victimized by colonialism, imperialism, and multinational corporations. Economic ‘developmentalism’ has placed so-called underdeveloped Third World nations in a situation of dependence, resulting in the local economies of Latin America being controlled by

decisions made in New York, Houston, or London. In order to perpetuate this economic exploitation, liberationists argue, the powerful capitalist countries, especially the United States, give military and economic support to secure certain political regimes supportive of the economic status quo.

These four factors combine to bring about a distinctive theological method and interpretation with regard to an understanding of the term Liberation Theology. As has been stated for the sake of this paper despite the difficulties of placing theological ideas into particular forms, it may be taken to include other forms of theology which seeks to ‘liberate ‘ the oppressed such as Feminist and Black Theology. It is hoped that foundations for this stance will become apparent as the conversation continues for all forms of theology which seeks to liberate the poor and oppressed has to do with Christian Spirituality and thus is qualified to fall under the general term theology.

## **5. Feminist Theology**

The term feminist has different connotations and forms (as has the term theology) and the discussion is long and exhaustive, but for the sake of this paper, some important areas will be covered.

The sources and origin of feminist theology have its roots in the movement for the emancipation of women as Carr (1988: 5) asserts

there is abundant evidence that the two successive movements in the quest for the emancipation of women- the first in the nineteenth century, the second in the twentieth- have had a deep impact on women in Christian churches. Whether that impact comes from the direct and organised action of women in the churches or as a ripple effect created by the secular women's movements, the self-understandings and roles of women in the churches have visibly shifted.

According to Loades (1990: 1), there are three main types of Feminism:

- (a.) the liberal tradition, concerned with the equal rights of woman.
- (b.) Marxist feminism concerned with economic autonomy of woman.
- (c.) Romantic Feminism which celebrates the emotional; and the natural to counteract the prevailing emphasis on the rational and the technical.

Lerner (1986: 236ff.) takes this view further

at its most minimal, then, feminism is a movement that seeks to change for the better for woman, justice for them; thus feminism can mean a doctrine of social and political rights, an organization for working for those rights, the assertion of the claims of woman as a

group and the body of theory they have created and the recognition of the necessity of long term social change

Over the past decades the voice of the feminist, who are not only women, has begun to unite if not physically but in spirit. Fiorenza (Fiorenza & Copeland, 1996: 1) asserts that “in the last decade, many different feminist theological voices have emerged around the globe so that it is inappropriate to speak of feminist theology in the singular.”

It is important to mention that within the feminist movement there are differing approaches, claim on sources and expression.

Carr (1988: 9ff) forwards the view that there is difference between mainline Christian feminism and two other religious approaches. On the one side of the spectrum there is a conservative or fundamentalist approach in which the use of biblical injunctions around women’s subordination are followed and “to encourage then to find ‘total womanhood’ in subjecting themselves completely to their husbands every whim.” Carr goes on to argue that these tendencies are to be found in Charismatic movements as well as other Christian fundamentalist movements. On the other end of the spectrum is the so called revolutionary pole, in which “radical feminist analysis is used to criticise the biblical tradition and the churches in a single-minded way that

finds Christianity, its male God and savior figure and its male dominated structures hopelessly irredeemable.”

The argument that women forward in feminist theology is that their theology is taken from the experience of women, who for the most part have been excluded from the theological conversation. But even this view is not without its problems as there are within Feminist Theology different ways of understanding. Nunes in Fiorenza & Copeland (1996: 6) asserts that there are varying understandings of Latin American and ‘third world’, “taking a stance very close to that of ‘leftist’ tendencies, they regard feminism a ‘bourgeois and First World’ movement, so questioning its applicability to our situation.” But is helpful further by asserting that

nevertheless among women closest to the feminist groups, this discussion is posited in a different form, and they speak of the need to develop their own theological discourse, one that addressed the questions raised by their own feminist movement directly

This very briefly highlights the difficulties of generally ascribing theological views to specific theologies. But what is of importance for this paper is the link between the theological ‘experience’ of women and Liberation Theology with regard to methodological level of “tying theological reflection to the experience of faith community rather than to dogmatic

discourse” (Nunes in Fiorenza & Copeland, 1996: 7) and the sources of Feminist Theology as seen by the impact of the Womanist movement.

One of the main areas of contention within Feminist theology is in the hermeneutical cycle of interpretation with regard to Scripture and tradition. Put another way “born and bred in a land of patriarchy, the Bible abounds in male imagery and language. For centuries interpreters have explored and expounded this male language to articulate theology: to shape the contours and context of the Church, synagogue and academy and to instruct human beings – female and male – in who they are, what rules they should play and how they should behave, “So harmonious has seemed this association of Scripture with sexism, of faith with culture that only a few have even questioned it” (Trible in Loades, 1990: 23.)

Ruether (1983: 13) argues that the past and present revelatory experience is demonstrated in western hermeneutical theological tradition

We must postulate that every great religious idea begins with a revelatory experience. By revelatory we mean breakthrough experiences beyond ordinary fragmented consciousness that provide interpretive symbols illuminating the means of the *whole* life. Since consciousness is ultimately individual, we postulate that revelation always starts with an individual

With out going into depth on the issue, one can sense that there already in this understanding a problem with feminism as a 'Liberation Theology' in the very strict sense of the word. Liberation Theology as a whole seeks to engage the structures that cause oppression and has less to do with the experience of the individual.

With regard to praxis, there has been in the Roman Catholic tradition, a shift towards the Ordination of woman (Field-Bibb). Vatican 11 has arguably cleared that way for this

*Every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race , colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated As contrary to God's intent. For in truth it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are not yet being universally honored. Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right and freedom to chose a husband, to embrace a state of life, or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men”(Gaudium et Spes 29.)*

David Tracy in Loades (1990: 91), asserts that

there can be little doubt that feminist thought has been a major challenge across disciplines, including philosophy and theology. Indeed the focus has shifted the historical side of all disciplines from a

more familiar concern with historical context to a more exact concern with 'social location' as necessary elements in any analysis of historical context.

This has placed upon theology in particular the challenge that any serious historical study can no longer ignore gender issues.

According to Aruna Gnanadason (in Fiorenza & Copeland, 1996: 75), the 1993 Re-imagining Conference held in Minneapolis, in the context of the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Woman, has generated huge controversy. It was here that women were able to

re-imagine community, the earth, ministry, traditional church doctrines, Jesus and God – from the context of women's life experiences in an unjust, patriarchal world... At the heart of these reactions and attitudes lies a 'theological problem'. The church has been unable to acknowledge the patriarchal violence that has existed and continues to exist in our societies.

Thus it is clear that Feminist Theology is not just an expression of women but is in fact as with other Liberation Theologies one of *spirituality*.

## **6. Black Theology**

Whilst recognising that any discussion with regard to Black Theology is vast and represents a paper on its own, but for the sake of this paper and its theme, we will take a brief look at some areas within Black Theology.

A Black Theology of Liberation was/is succinctly contextual and defined by and birthed from the human situation of Blacks in the United States but has not remained there for example in South African Black theology rose in the middle of the 1970s in response to Apartheid and in dialog with the Latin American theologies of Liberation. In this understanding, Black theology is also called Contextual theology which remains a theology of struggle and of liberation from oppression.

Black Theology emerged primarily from the wounds of oppression and persecution inflicted by the dominant white society in America. Thus, the contextual theology of Black liberation is not an abstract revelation that is independent of human experience; rather, it exemplifies a revelation of God in the human situation with God as the liberator of the poor and disenfranchised, empowering blacks to break the chains of bondage in pursuit of true freedom.

The purpose, then, of black theology is to interpret God's activity in regards to the oppressed black community, believing that Jesus Christ is not abstract

but is precisely at work within the black community. God takes sides and is unabashedly for blackness, which in essence represents all victims of oppression who desire to physically survive a hostile environment and ultimately achieve liberation from whiteness.

In sympathy with other Liberation Theologies, for Black Theologians, faith is the ability of a community to perceive God's revelation through His interaction with human history. Consequently, revelation and faith, in the biblical perspective, are inseparable. Faith is necessary for humans to recognize God's action within our history and is subsequently demonstrated as an existential element of revelation through the response of the community to God's act of liberation.

But this understanding is more than merely a reconstructing of systems, as some have argued but rather, Black theology acknowledges that all human beings are sinners, but it denies the reflections and prevarications that whites spew forth as being the sin of blacks. Blacks alone can speak about sin from within a black perspective and apply it. Sin is basically the condition of estrangement from the source of significance, meaning, and purpose in the universe, which is found, in essence, inside the oppressed community—the

black community. It is refusing one's obligation to be grounded in God's liberating activity, alienating one's self from the source of true humanity in the world, exacerbating human oppression and total misery.

Sin, thus, is concrete and not abstract. Furthermore, sin within the black community is a loss of identity; it is accepting the world as it is and relinquishing the definition of one's identity by deferring to the dominant white solutions for the "black problem."

Hence, according to Black Theologians, Black Theology is a spirituality which is derived from the Black experience and at the same time seeks to 'liberate' other races from their sin of oppression of black people in particular and all in people in general.

However there are very real dangers in this regard as Roberts (Cone & Wilmore, 1993: 117) asserts that

the goal of Black Theology determines its means. If the Black Theologian addresses only black people, he is limited to that end. His concern will be liberation. Whites will be considered only in a negative frame of reference – they are the oppressors

Also to be taken into account is difficulties with regard to the methodology of Black Theologians with regarding areas such as theodicy.

Without going into detail, William Jones in Cone & Wilmore (1993: 141)

sights three difficulties with regard to the methodology of Black Theologians: Cone, Washington and Cleavage.

(1.) On the basis on their own presuppositions, the point of departure for black theology must be the question: Is God a white racist?

(2.) Accordingly, a viable theodicy, one that refutes the charge of divine racism, must be the edifice of black theology.

(3.) The theodicy's of the above theologians leave the issue of God's racism essentially unresolved. Consequently the remainder of the theological system lacks adequate support.

These difficulties are again highlighted by the hermeneutical (or lack thereof) application by Black Theologians. Cone & Wilmore (1993: 155) assert

although it is difficult to find any examples of exegetical or expository writings by Black biblical scholars on what became of the major themes of Black theology, it is nevertheless true that ordinary Black ministers and laity who attempted to articulate theology of liberation from a African-American perspective, did so with the help of a few familiar texts from both testaments that deal with the judgement of the great prophets against the rich and powerful who crush the poor; justice for the widow and the orphan; liberation for the captive and the slave; the ministry of Jesus to the poor and those outside the precincts

of conventional piety; the fact that God is no respecter of people and that at the judgement the last shall be first and the first last.

This brief look at the three most notable forms of theology which have in recent times fallen under the broader term of Liberation Theology is by no means complete. The purpose has been to highlight some of the difficulties and the difference themselves with Liberation Theology in particular and theology as a whole. This leaves many more questions than answers but it may be helpful for this paper next to examine some areas of theological interpretation and critique of Liberation Theology as a whole.

## **7. Theological Interpretation**

Liberation theologians, in the strictest sense of the word, believe that the orthodox doctrine of God tends to manipulate God in favor of the capitalistic, oppressive social structures.

This claim as has been shown can also take into consideration all those who have had similar experiences. They claim that orthodoxy has been dependent upon ancient Greek notions of God that perceived God as a static being who is distant and remote from human history. These distorted notions of God's

transcendence and majesty have resulted in a theology which thinks of God as "up there" or "out there."

Consequently the majority of Latin Americans, women and Black people have for the most part, become passive in the face of injustice and superstitious in their religiosity.

Liberation Theology responds by stressing the incomprehensible mysteriousness of the reality of God. God cannot be summarized in objectifying language or known through a list of doctrines.

God is found in the course of human history. God is not a perfect, immutable entity, "squatting outside the world." He stands before us on the frontier of the historical future (Assmann, 1975: 14). God is the driving force of history causing the Christian to experience transcendence as a "permanent cultural revolution" (Gutierrez, 1983: 4). Suffering and pain become the motivating force for knowing God. The God of the future is the crucified God who submerges himself in a world of misery. God is found on the crosses of the oppressed rather than in beauty, power, or wisdom.

Despite difficulties with methodology and interpretation, for the Liberationist, the biblical notion of salvation is equated with the process of

liberation from oppression and injustice. Sin is defined in terms of man's inhumanity to man.

Liberation Theology for all practical purposes equates loving your neighbor with loving God. The two are not only inseparable but virtually indistinguishable.

God is found in our neighbor and salvation is identified with the history of 'man becoming.' The history of salvation becomes the salvation of history embracing the entire process of humanization. Put another way "the hermeneutics of liberation questions the word of God without anticipating the divine response" (Boff, 1986: 33.)

Biblical history is important insofar as it models and illustrates this quest for justice and human dignity. Israel's liberation from Egypt in the Exodus and Jesus' life and death stand out as the prototypes for the contemporary human struggle for liberation. These biblical events signify the spiritual significance of secular struggle for liberation.

The church and the world can no longer be segregated. The church must allow itself to be inhabited and evangelized by the world. "A theology of the Church in the world should be complemented by a theology of the world in the Church" (Gutierrez, 1973: 54).

Joining in solidarity with the oppressed against the oppressors is an act of "conversion," and "evangelization" is announcing God's participation in the human struggle for justice.

The importance of Jesus for Liberation Theology lies in his exemplary struggle for the poor and the outcast. His teaching and action on behalf of the kingdom of God demonstrate the love of God in a historical situation that bears striking similarity to the Latin American context.

The meaning of the incarnation is reinterpreted. Jesus is not God in an ontological or metaphysical sense. Essentialism is replaced with the notion of Jesus' relational significance. Jesus shows us the way to God; he reveals the way one becomes the son of God. The meaning of Jesus' incarnation is found in his total immersion in a historical situation of conflict and oppression.

His life absolutises the values of the kingdom, unconditional love, universal forgiveness, and continual reference to the mystery of the Father but it is impossible to do exactly what Jesus did simply because his specific teaching was oriented to a particular historical period.

On one level Jesus irreversibly belongs to the past, but on another level Jesus is the zenith of the evolutionary process. In Jesus history reaches its

goal. However, following Jesus is not a matter of retracing his path, trying to adhere to his moral and ethical conduct, as much as it is re-creating his path by becoming open to his "dangerous memory" which calls our path into question.

The uniqueness of Jesus' cross lies not in the fact that God, at a particular point in space and time, experienced the suffering intrinsic to man's sinfulness in order to provide a way of redemption. Jesus' death is not a vicarious offering on behalf of mankind who deserve God's wrath.

Jesus' death is unique because he places in history in exemplary fashion the suffering experienced by God in all the crosses of the oppressed.

Liberation Theology holds that through Jesus' life people are brought to the liberating conviction that God does not remain outside of history indifferent to the present course of evil events but that he reveals himself through the authentic medium of the poor and oppressed.

## **8. Theological Critique**

One of the strengths of Liberation Theology is in its compassion for the poor and oppressed and its conviction that the Christian should not remain passive

and indifferent to their plight. Man's inhumanity to man is sin and deserves the judgment of God and Christian resistance. Liberation Theology is a plea for costly discipleship and a reminder that following Jesus has practical social and political consequences.

Liberation Theology's as with other theologies is not without its problems, often seen form a historical development of hermeneutics, stemming from an application of principles which are often described as reductionistic and refers to relativism. According to Min (1989: 60ff), "Christian faith is objectively bound with scripture as its *norma normans*."

The task of hermeneutics Min argues further is to bridge the distance of twenty centuries in interpreting and making relevant the original sense of the written Scripture, "In this regard Liberation Theology has been suggesting the method of a hermetical circle or dialectical interaction for biblical interpretation" (Min, 1989: 65.)

By this is meant the circle between the Word of God and Scripture; between creation of meaning and acceptance of meaning; between structure and meaning; between past and present and between technique and interpretation. It may be helpful to briefly see what is meant by these circles (Min, 1989: 60ff.)

By the first circle is meant, that the Word of God is not simply identical with Scripture.

Scripture is not only the *norma normans* i.e. authenticated as the Word of God by the community of the faithful, as witness the history of tradition criticism and the process of canonisation. Strictly speaking, then, the Word of God is found neither in the letter of Scripture nor in the spirit of the community. It is precisely between these two, in their mutual dynamic relationship, in a back-and-forth that is never perfectly objectifiable.

The second circle,

the meaning of Scripture cannot be created arbitrarily as is the case with hermeneutic improvisation or perceived purely passively as semantic positivism would have it...the true meaning can be deciphered only in the sustained dialectical relationship between creation and perception, between reader and text, between questions and answers

In the third circle

the autonomous structure of the letter of the text must first be explained and grasped before one can comprehend or understand its sense and meaning

The fourth circle is that between present and past

The meaning of the text is not exhausted by the 'original;' meaning at the time of its composition....The meaning of the text is in a real sense the history of its interpretation

The fifth circle is that of hermetical technique and interpretation

The essentially dialectical nature of the preceding circles makes it plain that it is impossible to construct a technique of interpretation whose application to a text would uncover and exhaust once and for all its ultimate meaning and foreclose all further questions in advance, which is a dream and an illusion of hermeneutical positivism. The meaning of a text cannot be fixed once and for all. By the same token, however, the meaning cannot be purely arbitrary and it is the function of a hermeneutical technique to 'fix spatial limits of the appearance of meaning or sense

Liberation Theology condemns forms of tradition that attempts to use God for its own ends in oppressive interpretations and actions.

However it may be argued that when a conception of God is determined by historical situational interpretation, this refers to a radical secularity in absolutising the temporal process, making it difficult to distinguish between theology and ideology.

The term Ideology however is a complex concept but it may be sufficient for this paper to assert that part of the criticism of Liberationist Theology lies in certain understandings as Kim in Deist, Scheffler and Steyn (1988: 153) asserts that Marx opposed the philosophical idealism represented by Hegel and the material inversion represented by Feuerbach and in Marxist understanding “the concept of ideology is used for the attacking the bourgeoisie and is therefore aggressive.”

Kim is helpful by arguing that “ideology in its active form, however advocates social change on the basis of the systematic criticism of existing society.

These views have been alluded to earlier in this paper, that Marxism may be a useful tool in identifying the class struggle that is being waged in many Third World countries, but questions arise whether the role of Marxism is limited to a tool of analysis or whether it has become a political solution. For example West (1982: 55) argues that black theology has been a source of on-going critique of the white supremacist system that the black community has struggled against in the United States and has provided a safe space for black affirmation, community-building, and support.

It may be argued that the anti-racism and black affirmation put forth by black theology is insufficient to the liberation of blacks due to its inability to describe, confront, and address the socioeconomic inequalities inherent in a capitalist system, therefore, what Liberation Theology in general and black theology in particular, lacks is a social theory that can grapple with the exploitation and injustices inherent in a capitalist economic system.

West proposes a dialogue between prophetic black theology and progressive Marxism, which he believes possesses a social theory and political project that addresses the injustices of capitalism and has the ability to link such institutional evils to other forms of systemic oppression such as racism and sexism.

As was stated previously in this paper, often the links to Marxism have been negatively sited as Min (1989: 15) asserts

ever since the emergence of Marxism as a theory and as a social and political movement in the nineteenth century, the relation between Christianity and Marxism has been one of unbending hostility.

While it may be argued that Liberation Theology rightly exposes the fact of oppression in society and the fact that there are oppressors and oppressed, difficulties are found in giving this alignment an ontological status.

Again Min (1989: 25) is helpful,

Marxism is not simply a social theory or merely a philosophy of history. In its own self-understanding it is more a socio-historical movement for the practical realisation of certain ideals, a movement self – consciously rooted in history and seeking to transform that history

Here it may be argued that all theology has in some way over the centuries ascribed to some or other philosophical concept or concepts. This may be true also in the case of the Liberationist and Marxism, but some theologians understand sin and alienation from God as a dilemma confronting both the oppressor and the oppressed.

Liberation Theology's emphasis upon the oppressed can give the impression that the oppressed are not only the object of God's concern but the salvific and revelatory subject.

Gutierrez (1973: 150) is helpful in highlighting that in terms of theological thought there has been a tendency to focus on “the universality of salvation and on the other, the visible Church as mediator of salvation.”

This process he refers to as the quantitative extensive aspect of salvation. He goes further to assert that what is need is a qualitative and intensive approach to replace the quantitative and extensive one

salvation is not something otherworldly, in regard to which the present life is merely a test. Salvation – the communion of men with God and the communion of men among themselves – is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it and leads to a fullness in Christ (Gutierrez, 1973: 151).

It may be argued that Liberation Theology stirs Christians to take seriously the social and political impact of Jesus' life and death but fails to ground Jesus' uniqueness in the reality of His deity and that Liberationists claim that Christ is different by degree, not by kind, and that his cross is the climax of His vicarious identification with suffering mankind rather than a substitutionary death offered on behalf of humankind to turn away the wrath of God and triumph over sin and death.

Ruether (1983: 119) however argues that “Jesus’ messianic proclamation centers on his interpretation of the tradition of a coming Reign of God.”

For Ruether, this hope rests not in nationalism but rather in the freeing of marginalised groups within the Jewish world of his day. “Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom is neither nationalistic nor other –worldly. The coming Reign of God is expected to happen on earth as the Lord’s Prayer makes evident.” In this understanding Jesus resists the world’s attempts to make Him a coming king but rather adopts the symbol of servant, “Jesus uses the term servant for

himself and his disciples in a prophetic-religious sense, presupposing a special relationship to God (Ruether, 1983: 126.)

There is little doubt that Liberation Theology has brought to the attention of scholarship the need for *action* or praxis.

Liberation of the poor and oppressed is not only a divine imperative but the obligation of the entire world. Those called to liberation realize a conscientious participation in their common calling and offer a meaningful and fruitful challenge to Christians everywhere. The very living of Christian faith involves the creation of a new world with peace and justice fertilized by Christian hopes.

For some picture an entire church working for the establishment of those value structures endorsed by the gospel including liberation, justice and love. This view is not without its problems as Min (1989: 68) asks 'Could theology link itself so closely with praxis especially with the political praxis of and for a particular group, without being 'partisan' or 'classist.'

However it could be argued that for too long theology focused heavily on individual faith and family and ignored the Biblical notion that kingdom salvation involves liberation from oppressive economic and political structures as well.

Liberation theologians have emphasized that unity among Christians is only a myth so long as there are oppressed and oppressors within their ranks. As Min puts it “faith as praxis is not blind activism but contains truths whose meaning is indeed universal, not reducible to their meaning for contemporary history” (Min, 1989: 65.)

This understanding of liberation is thus a complex process and for a liberation theologian it has human, historical and political dimensions of salvation.

Again Min (1989: 72) is helpful to the epistemological value of the Liberationists perspective of the oppressed

Here I think it is essential to introduce a distinction not always made clear by Liberation Theology, between two senses of ‘praxis’ – between praxis in the empirical sense of particular actions and opinions and praxis in its ‘disclosive’ function – i.e. in the relatively priori or quasi-transcendental sense of the perspective or horizon of the oppressed that is generated ion the process of praxis in the empirical sense

This brief discussion by no means completes but serves to aid the theme of this paper, a dialog between the theologies of Wesley and Liberation Theology. As the Protestant Reformation began as a revolt against corrupt practices in the Roman Catholic Church stressing the personal convictions

and was more in tune with the modern age than Roman Catholicism, so the Liberation Theology is also a manifestation of a new worldwide movement for human emancipation. It constitutes a different timely phenomenon and strives to implement the full realization of a human being in harmony with the Nature and for the believer, in harmony with the Christian message.

In Liberation Theology, the basic method of interpretation becomes dialectical model between written Scripture and contemporary history.

Min (1989: 66) asserts that Boff advocates “a correspondence of relationships model, bound to one another by creative fidelity.”

According to this model

the relationship between the message of Jesus and his context corresponds to the relationship between the message of the New Testament and its context which in turn corresponds to the relationship of the post biblical tradition and its varying historical contexts, to which the relationship between our message and our context should correspond (Min 1989: 66.)

This differs from ‘traditional methods’ as meaning is determined by the author it is discovered by readers. Only after the meaning has been discovered by the reader can it be applied to the current situation.

Clodovis Boff (1986: 13ff) puts the perspective of Liberation Theology as such: The theology of Liberation seeks to demonstrate that the kingdom of God is to be established not only in the soul – this the individual personal dimension of the kingdom- and not only in heaven – this is the trans-historical dimension – but in relationships among human beings as well. In other words, the kingdom of God is to be established in social projects, and this is its historical dimension. In sum, Liberation Theology is a theology that seeks to take history and Christian's historical responsibility seriously.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Towards a Christian Witness**

If 'doing' theology is not to be held exclusively in the hands of the 'professional' theologian and is a dynamic conversation involving a person, a religious tradition and a contemporary situation, where does that leave the theme of this paper, essentially a dialogue between Wesleyan and Liberation Theology?

Firstly, it seems clear from the preceding chapters that in terms of authentic theological conversation, there exists a spirit of interaction and dialogue rather than one of single determinate.

Secondly, context is a significant factor when examining and forwarding theological views as Carter (1983: 107) asserts

whatever the theological tradition in which a Christian theologian works, that theologian must take cognizance of the ferment that characterises the present social, religious and intellectual scene. The

degree to which a theologian is in direct dialogue with the present milieu depends in part on his or her reason for doing theology, on the methodology and on the particular theological tradition form which he or she speaks

Thirdly, it remains a challenge to place theological views within given determinisations. This is partly due to the dialectical nature of theological conversation. This no more so highlighted in this papers combining of the three ‘traditional’ types of theology which are paced under the broader term of Liberation Theology. Part of the reason for this move in this paper is to avoid the minefield of relativism, which is quite apparent when one takes each of these three types of theology on their own.

Fourthly, as is alluded to in the preceding chapters, it remains a difficult process to determine the exact reasons for shifts in social and political emphasis and especially when attempting to determine the *one* impact that a particular *one* person had. Brian Gaybba (Maimela & König, 1998: 28) puts it another way “..it is only a decadent theology that continues to repeat past ideas without consideration for present needs or concerns.”

It must be stated that these and the following assertions are indeed papers on their own but for the sake of this paper and its length, they will not be expounded on. It remains the prerogative of this paper to examine the

relationship between theory and praxis and therefore a good place to start may be the relationship between a revival and an awakening as asserted by McLoughlin (1978) in his book *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform*:

### **1. Revivals and Awakenings:**

The most common understanding of the term 'revival' is a reawakening of religious fervour. For example there is a view by scholarship which has sited the Reformation as a revival, in other words a religious event but it seems clear however, from the brief look at the Reformation in this paper, the impact on social and political spheres in Europe and England in particular, that there were other factors aside from the brave rebellion by one man (Luther) which allowed for a shift in an entire continent.

Scholars from different disciplines agree that there was indeed a great shift in both religious and secular dimensions, the word secular here used in the context that "secularization is the process whereby human life is viewed increasingly by cultural and social experience and less by the perspective of the divine" (Carter, 1983: 25).

But as to what caused that shift is still an open debate. Granted it remains difficult for scholarship to be able to separate with great success the exact

reasons and causes for such a shift because with regard to theology, the context has influence in the way that people reflect on their faith and that attempting to determine precise causes raises methodological difficulties. This left on its own would create a dilemma for scholarship in general and theologians in particular with regard to defining and formulating periods of intense religious fervour and activity, commonly known in Protestant language as revivals. McLoughlin (1978: 11), is helpful in this dilemma, by asserting that there are distinct differences between a revival and an awakening

awakenings , the most vital and yet the most mysterious of folk arts – are periods of cultural revitalizations that begin in a general crisis of beliefs and values and extend over a period of generations, during which time a profound reorientation in beliefs and values take place. Revivals alter the lives of individuals; awakenings alter the world view of a whole people or culture

This definition stands in contrast to scholars such as Fogel and Baker who in common generally speaking assert that a cycle or revitalisation begins with a phase of religious revival, propelled by the tendency of new technological advances to outpace the human capacity to cope with ethical and practical complexities that those new technologies entail. The phase of religious revival is followed by one of rising political effect and reform,

followed by a phase in which the new ethics and politics of the religious awakening come under increasing challenge and the political coalition promoted by the awakening goes into decline. These cycles overlap, the end of one cycle coinciding with the beginning of the next.

However this paper argues that from the brief study of the Reformation and the Wesleyan revival in this paper, that there were cultural, social and political and religious crises taking place and the combination of these shifts led to socio-eco-political and religious changes. Yet over the past centuries theological scholars have tended to define the Reformation in terms of a religious event and have placed Reformers, such as Luther, Calvin and Zwingli as the ‘patron saints’ of these shifts.

This may have happened for various reasons:

Firstly, the development of theology as an empirical discipline.

This is a legacy of Protestantism, as scholars free from the rigid bounds of the Roman Catholic Church and the papacy, recognised the importance of higher education in the development of its scholarship.

At the same time the spirit of the Reformation was to challenge existing dogmas and found resonance with movements such as the Enlightenment.

This however, also had a defining effect on the way in which theology was formulated and with little choice, was beginning to be left to the 'professionals.' This legacy continues within Protestant thinking today. It could be argued that unless there is a revival within theological thinking particularly Protestant, it will (and has) lost its ability to be relevant to those sections of the general population of the world who are not in a position to understand and be affected by 'professional' theology. Perhaps it is a weakness of Protestant theology that it continues to seek one 'gifted' theologian who will bring revival in the mould of Luther and Wesley as De Gruchy (1989: 75) asserts "Wesley's personal example gave much weight to his influence ..."

Secondly, the influences of the secularization hypothesis, clothed essentially in the Protestant\Catholic debate, allowed people to live the way of life of essentially a middle class and thus 'perceive the gospel message as a message to do primarily with the spiritual growth and development of the individual Christian' (Shaull, 1991: 63.)

Thus Protestantism, whilst emphasising the centrality of the Bible to theology, has also moved the responsibility of social witness in to the domain of the individual.

Thirdly scholars turn to historical impacts and religious ‘successes’ in order to glean some sort of formula for success. This seems rather strange as has been seen in the case of Luther and Wesley that they did not set out with the intention of impacting entire generations nor did they assume that their theology was definitive, but rather were placed in these roles later by scholarship. The dilemma now is that Protestants are in a sense, losing their ability to revolutionise their thinking in terms of current difficulties facing the Christian Church today and they have become entrenched in the same lack of dynamism from which they sought to reform.

As with all great revivals, what is needed is the awakening of Christian witness, not only as individual but as collective custodians of the Kingdom of God on earth. Academically, all theology needs to remain dynamic using preceding theological development as building blocks upon which to witness in contemporary society. Put another way

While we Protestants have been struggling, without too much success, to preserve the authority of the Bible and to experience its power to transform our lives and our communities, an extraordinary thing has been happening elsewhere. Groups of Roman Catholics especially in Latin Americas have directly experienced the authority and power of

the Bible, just as the Reformers did, by doing today what the equivalent of what was done in the sixteenth century (Shaull, 1991: 64.)

This being said however, it could be argued that there are shifts and movements which have led to new ways of ‘doing’ theology but most scholars would agree that a return to a theology which centres the church alone as instrument for authentic Christian witness or one which continues to dominate the interpretation of Scripture, would signify the holding of the status quo with regard to the stuckness of Christian witness.

Put another way, “What we need therefore is a model that can abstract the causes, functions and results of such reorientations from the Protestant revivalism that originally characterised them” (McLoughlin, 1978: 7.)

One model to achieve this abstraction is to be found in the understanding of dialectical relationship as a means for formulating confessions of faith and reforming religious traditions.

If one is to examine closely the causes of movements such as the Reformation and Wesleyans, then one discovers, amongst others, a dialectical relationship between the religious and ‘secular’ aspects, the

dialectical relationship with regard to formulation of confessions of faith and between the understanding of salvation with regard to praxis and theory. For example, Luther as has been indicated, was intent on separating Church and State, but as has been shown in the brief study of the Reformation, this is not possible but rather that exists a relationship of influences which led to the Reformation.

This raises a question of theology as an empirical science. If doing theology is dynamic, can it be subject to rules of formulation and if so to what extent? Feyerabend (Feyerabend, 1975: 14) is helpful in this regard

the idea of a method that contains firm, unchanging and absolutely binding principles for conducting the business of science meets considerable difficulty when confronted with the results of historical research. We find then that there is not a single rule, however plausible and however grounded in epistemology that is not violated at some time or another

The value for this paper of this statement lies in the questioning of the whether or not the revivals as referred to remain solely in the domain of religion or whether there were awakenings which combined with religious movements brought about significant shifts in social, political and

economic spheres and to what extent this is to influence the future theological conversation.

McLoughlin (1978: 8), is helpful in this regard by forwarding a new definition of awakenings

I propose therefore to view the five great awakenings that have shaped and reshaped our culture since 1607 as periods of fundamental ideological transformation necessary to the dynamic growth of the nation in adapting to basic social, ecological, physiological and economic changes. The conversion of great numbers of people from old to a new view (a new ideological or religious understanding of their place in the cosmos) is a natural and necessary aspect of social change

This view contains the dialectical relationship between religion and social change. This discussion is not complete but for the sake of this paper and its length, let us allow a brief dialogue between Wesleyan and Liberation Theology in order to demonstrate albeit briefly how this dialectical approach may enrich the theological conversation.

In order to facilitate meaningful dialogue the approach will be systematic in nature using a typology based on the working definition of theology for this paper, **(2) A person (3) A religious tradition and (4). A contemporary situation**, in a dialectical relationship.

## **2. A Person**

The term personhood is a complex one and has definitive influences on theological formulations, for example, if Wesley's theology, taken in his context 18th century England and that his understanding of grace is needed to place it in a holistic way, to better understand his theology and particularly his understandings of social witness one has to grasp his anthropology. The same can said of Liberationists in their formulations, that attention is given to the understanding of personhood. These examinations are a paper on their own but for the sake of this paper a brief look at Wesley's world view should suffice.

The concept of personhood was important to Wesley as Maddox (1994: 25) asserts

the survey of Wesley's understanding of the Christian worldview began with his convictions about God because for him, God was the foundation and focus of both Christian life and belief. Given his assumptions that God is a relational being, the obvious set of convictions to take up next are thus concerning human nature and human condition. Indeed one could easily structure Wesley's overall theology around the dynamics of the Divine –human relationship

Wesley saw three dimensions of the image of God in humanity, according to Maddox (1994: 28): the natural image, the political image and the moral image. Speaking strongly against nominalists influence in this regard, Wesley proposes that humanity is not capable of saving his/herself and has no initiative in his or her salvation. Therefore everything is initiated by God by His grace.

However, Truesdale in Carter (1983: 128), in light of Wesley's relationship between doctrine and experience, asserts that "In Wesleyan theology affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity is not fundamentally grounded in theological and philosophical speculation but in the character and content of the Christian communities redemptive encounter with God."

It may be argued that Wesley ascribed to the Aristotelian philosophical content of the 18th century England with regard to personhood, but in his Biblical understanding of origin, he trends toward a dialectical view with the Platonic model, as he states:

None of our senses, no not the sight itself, can reach beyond the bounds of this invisible world. They supply us with such knowledge of the material world as answers all the purposes of life. But this was the design for which they were given, beyond this they cannot go.

They furnish us with no information at all concerning the invisible world. But the wise and gracious Governor of the worlds both visible and invisible has prepared a remedy for this defect. He hath appointed faith to supply the defect of sense; to take us up where sense sets us down and help us over the great gulf. Its office begins where that of sense ends. Sense is an evidence of things seen, of the visible, the material world and the several parts of it. Faith on the other hand is the ‘evidence’ of things not seen; of the invisible world...faith is an evidence of the existence of that unseen thing in my own soul.

Without this I should be in utter uncertainty concerning it. I should be constrained to ask the melancholy question – ‘Hear’st thou submissive but a lowly birth, some separate particles of finer earth?’ But by faith I know it as an immortal spirit made in the image of God; in his natural and moral image; ‘an incorruptible picture of the God of glory (Works, 1978: 232.)

For Wesley, humanity is prevented from reflecting the image of God because of their sinfulness as Harper asserts

For some sin is the inability of human beings to be obedient to God but for Wesley sin was not some mysterious spiritual entity which attached it self to human nature like a barnacle attaches itself to the hull of a ship. Instead Wesley spoke of sin in relational terms. His classic definition is that sin is very voluntary breach of the law of love (Harper, 1983: 29.)

Therefore in authentic Wesleyan understanding, a person cannot claim to be 'right' with God whilst relationship with others is affected by the support of structures which cause the oppression of others.

A relationship with others is equated to the relationship with God because for Wesley, as has been shown, God's concern is for the world and its salvation. Wesley was well aware of this dialectical relationship and because of this he is often referred to as being not concerned with systematic theological formulation. One of the reasons for this may be in his understanding of the need for a dynamic way of formulation that lends itself to the movement of understanding and development.

It is perhaps here more than anywhere else where Wesley and the Liberationist meet. For the Liberationist, the break down of relationship, between the rich, poor, men, women and between races, are the keys to understanding sin in humanity. For example, in Black Theology, personhood is related to relationship. In the same way that one finds being made in the image of God as existing in a structure of relationships, as Boer (Boer, 1990: 9) asserts, "in four basic relationships – to God, to fellowman, to the world and to themselves" and Christ's redemptive work is to restore relationship.

Feminist Theology highlights critical areas of this relational view in that an institution such as the church that makes a stand against morally corrupting practices, for example, issues regarding pornography and its consequences on the morality of the world and exploitation of women, must also level critique at its own institutional forms and traditions which also exploits women. Carr (1988:131) puts it another way

the more common feminist experience that values both sides of the traditional dualism relates more closely to the Gospel norms. For the nature /culture polarity can readily be transported to biblical and theological ideas of the limitations of human creature hood or finitude and the transcendence of human freedom and spirit. Both are dimensions of human personhood, experience and action

For Wesley original sin is of utmost importance with regard to the state of humanity with regard to their relationship with God and with others and how God by His grace restores that relationship through Jesus Christ, as he states

all who deny this, call it 'original sin' or by any other title are but heathens still, in the fundamental point differences heathenism from Christianity. They may, indeed, allow that men have many vices...But here is the *shibboleth*: is man by nature filled with all manner of evil?

Is he void of all good? Is he wholly fallen? Is his soul totally corrupted? Or to come back to the text is ‘every imagination of the thoughts of his heart only evil continually?’ Allow this and you are so far a Christian. Deny it and you are but a heathen still” (Sermons II: 223.)

Truesdale in *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology* (Carr, 1983, 207) in dealing with Wesley’s anthropology asserts

Since the political image was marred by the Fall, humanity has a result formed a great variety of marital, domestic, national and perhaps also ecclesiastical organisations that have tended to divide rather than unify humankind

He goes on to argue that “the perfect political order cannot be realised short of its execution in and through the revealed political image of God in Jesus Christ” (Truesdale in Carr: 1983: 209.) Whilst this may sound very much like Protestant revival language, Liberation Theology has risen to the awakening of the need for global transformation of structures that emphasise the oppression of ordinary people. Jose Comblin (1990: 8), argues that

the concrete model of the new Christian community is found mainly in the Third World. We are still far from being able to say that the actual institutions called local or regional Christian churches to be found in the Third world are built entirely on the basis of community.

But in the midst of these churches have sprung living developing Christian communities, in Latin America, Asia and Africa. The boundaries of these Christian communities do not coincide with the boundaries of the institutional church. It is for the ecclesiologists to determine these boundaries. Here it is necessary to point out that the new person proclaimed by Jesus and the New Testament already has a concrete basis and does not belong to the world of ideas alone.

Without these Christian communities, the church would not be in a position to proclaim the Pauline new human being. It would be speaking of a fictitious thing, irreality rather than historical reality.

After all, historical realities, and the real concrete meaning of Christian discourse, including that of the texts of the New Testament, are constituted by the Christian communities

Man's political image is reflected in the creation of woman who complemented man and thus together the man and the woman formed the basic indispensable unit of all society, the 'family'

Whilst there seems to be common ground between Wesley and the Liberationist in this regard, caution must be exercised as Williams (1960: 48) states that for Wesley, "the moral image, however, is the image proper...The real image of God in man - that which separates him from the animal world beneath is not so much his capacities as his relation to the Creator." It was partly Wesley's understanding of experience which allowed the Methodist movement to create an environment conducive to

moral empowerment and partly because he was a man of tradition, a mystic and a puritan, his own spiritual search for assurance, in a society dogged by the oppression of moral decay, that led him in steps of the revolutionary, to make his faith a living active action in the world. He was a man of both theory and practice.

It is with regard to personhood and its consequences that differences between Wesley and the Liberationists begin to enter a clearer, more defined dialectical relationship. Comblin (1990: 10) argues that Today's Christian community rejects individualism as it rejects collectivism." The dialectic is based upon the presumption that both Wesley and the Liberationist seek to establish an understanding of the 'Good news' which Jesus declares in Mark 1: 15.

In the most common Wesleyan understanding of the term 'good news' is to found in the justification of sinners through faith by grace. This has been interpreted and applied by scholarship as an onus on the individual. In other words salvation as a process begins with the individual and included in this process then is the responsibility toward others. However as has been shown Wesley most significant contribution to the theological debate

lays in his ability to organise (praxis) people into a community of faith that could impact on their contemporary situation, in this case 18<sup>th</sup> century England.

For the Liberationist the first salvic act is concerned with others namely the oppressed. Another way of putting it is that these understandings are two sides of the same coin. The overriding concern with regard to salvation rests not only with the individual but with the world. The kingdom of God, both Wesleyan and Liberationist would agree is not to found in the individual but in the community structures in which people live and move. This builds on the understanding that Luther is also considered an existentialist as his concern for God was not merely intellectual but with his entire existence. This would be taken to mean that God was not merely reasoned in the mind of a person but also lived in the life of a person. In other words in a person's relationship with God and the world.

It may be true to assert that both Wesley and Luther would agree with Liberationist with regard to being morally correct means one cannot support structures that contribute to the oppression of people.

Liberationists do not claim that working toward the breakdown of

structures are in any sense equated with good works and readily accept the Protestant teachings of divine grace but argue that it is humanities application and enforcement of oppressive structures that need reform more importantly the reform of a spirituality that indirectly or directly supports such oppression.

A question may be asked as to the way in which structures can be reformed. The answer may be found in a dialectical relationship.

In terms of praxis, the fourteenth century and 18th century Europe, as has been shown in this paper, there were similarities in manner in which structures were changed dialectically due to cultural awakenings of which revivals became a part. The dialectic then is not only to be found in empirically but also with regard to the practical issues of Christian witness. Wesley himself, in amongst his social witness, found himself embroiled in theological debates which were part of the growth and understanding of the Christian faith.

These debates were essentially as a result of the development of the theological conversation, the Reformation and the birth of Protestantism and in a sense very necessary part of formulation of the theological conversation at the time, for example, his doctrine of scriptural holiness

can be seen essentially in the light of the ongoing Catholic\Protestant debate. However Methodists have tended to develop a 'Methodist model' based on the theological formulations of Wesley's time instead of allowing the contemporary situations to enrich current Methodist ethos. This as has been shown as a typical Protestant ethos. Liberation Theology offers Methodism and theology in general a way forward in this regard.

Liberation Theology does not spend much energy in re-examining traditional theological debates rather Liberationists forward different ways forward in order to allow effective Christian witness, to proclaim the Kingdom of God at hand. This means as Maddox (1994: 29) asserts "Wesley's most fundamental conviction about human life is that we are created and dependent beings. Our very existence and all our faculties are gifts of God's grace...." And in this understanding it is God who initiates salvation, therefore any argument that wants to take into account the good works / faith debate with regard to Liberation Theology, needs to first take into account that Liberationist do not forward that praxis is entirely human initiated. Williams sighting Wesley offers a clearer perspective: "we are still able to use our capabilities for creative social purposes, but actions which are good when judged by objective social or moral standards are

religiously corrupt when they issue from a life separated by God  
(Williams, 1960: 49.) For the Liberationist, the relationships which God  
intended are free from domination and subjugation and therefore any  
relationships which facilitate these forms of sin are deemed to be evil and  
not from God

The new Christian community therefore represents an authentic  
victory over relationships of domination and subjugation. Here there  
is no domination of the strong over the weak, of the slave-owner over  
the slave (Comblin, 1990: 11.)

This understanding is under girded in Wesleyan thought by a distancing of  
himself from “the intellectualist tradition that was gaining dominance in  
Western psychology” (Maddox, 1994: 30) which saw the need for reason to  
control emotions in human action. For Wesley, as was mentioned earlier,  
was concerned with the order of intent and he “equated the will with the  
affections” (Maddox, 1994: 31.)

This love was not a love by which is meant that one person cares for the  
other without some sort of direct intervention in their circumstances.

According to Harper in Williams

Wesley’s theology of love was not sentimentalism” and “the loss of  
moral image spells totally depravity for humanity because separation  
from God and the substitution of self –government in place of

acceptance of the Lordship of God means that the good capacities of man are twisted from their true course and used for a wrong purpose (Williams, 1960: 49.)

In a sense as was asserted by Williams earlier in this paper, there may be a need for Methodists to re-examine their theological traditions.

Wesley's overriding concern was not as Luther, who sought in his personal life to find a place of Assurance, which gave rise to his stand against the church who seemed to dilute God's gift of forgiveness, rather Wesley was more concerned with living out a life of righteousness. This would be in line with the Liberationist who argues that a structure or support of a structure that encourages oppression and domination of any kind cannot be from God. Therefore any theology which encourages oppression directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally has moved away from understanding true relationship with God.

A key to understanding Wesley in this regard is in his view on the effects of conversion. Wesley as is seen in previous chapters taught that there are several effects of salvation – the restoring of relationship between man and God.

For Wesley human beings are justified by faith, this is in keeping with Protestant Reformers and the saints of the ages. In his understanding

however an emphasis on grace is added: this is what God does for humanity because they are incapable of saving themselves, “the plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins,” (Works 5:57.)

At the same time human beings experience a second effect: new birth. Wesley called this ‘renewing our fallen nature’ (Works 6:71.) here the moral image which was destroyed by the Fall is restored. By this humanity is restored to the completeness God intended before the Fall.

A common misunderstanding of this concept is to mean that human beings are able to be sinless but Wesley in his sermon “The Scriptural Way to Salvation”, argues

hence it may appear the extreme mischievousness of that seemingly innocent opinion that there is no sin in a believer, that all sin is destroyed, root and branch, the moment man is justified. By totally preventing that repentance which follows justification, it quite blocks up the way to sanctification. There is no place for repentance for him who believes there is no sin either in his heart or life. Consequently, there is no place for his being perfected in love to which repentance is indispensably necessary

For Wesley, true salvation was in action and not merely intellect, in fact to the point where differences in interpretation, hermeneutics were often

given less focus in preference of praxis with regard to true Christian witness. Liberationists do not claim that the only understanding of sin is with regard to the support of oppressive structures but claim that past understandings of sin are part of theological development of the conversation and are accepted as such but that there are new definitions needed in order to fulfil the divine imperative of the ushering in of the Kingdom of God. In other words, embracing the concept that theology is a process and a product.

There are arguments that Wesley's Aldersgate experience was the springboard to Christian action but as can be seen he and his followers were involved in Christian action long before Aldersgate. The Liberationist may argue that ever since, scholarship has lent itself to understanding this concept rather building on the foundations lay down by it.

However that this way of "Methodism" was radical and came into conflict with existing structures and understandings of faith which threatened to create an elite class of Christian, is evident in the way in which Wesley was banned from pulpits and often attacked physically. Thus he shared a similar theological 'fate' to Luther and the Liberationists of today in that his understanding led him to seek to speak and act, directly or indirectly,

against the oppression of humanity particularly with regard to structures which reinforced such oppression.

For both Wesley and the Liberationist, to be made in the image of God implies the capacity to be in relationship with God, each other and the rest of creation and that sin, which needs the redemption of Christ, is ‘every voluntary breach of the law of love’ ( Telford Letters, 6:322).

This has resonance with Black Theologians like Tutu in Battle (1997: 35) who states

*Ubuntu*, a term which refers to a person who is welcoming, who is hospitable, who is warm and generous, who is affirming of others, who does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for this person has a proper self assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole and know that they are diminished when another is humiliated, is diminished, is tortured, is oppressed, is treated as if they were less than who they are.

This view in Black Theology is not understood as relativism but rather a genuine seeking to explore God’s revelation through created order and to establish universal value of dignity to all humanity. This is only possible to apply in a general sense, if one recognises the impact and need for reform of Aristotelian influences of the concept of universals. Liberation Theology, whilst not necessarily complete, is part of the movement away from fixed

immovable concepts of faith to an understanding of the dialectical nature of theology. Thus the nature of the contemporary situation today in which the theological conversation takes place is one in which the concept of universals is being questioned. Evidence of the move toward lesser emphasis on the concept of universals is found in the modern thinking of society as a being in post – Christian era, the Global village and inter faith dialogue.

This may raise the issue of relevance of these assertions to the rest of the theological conversation, but scholars such as Mosala (De Gruchy, 1989: 87) point out the influence on the development of theological thought for example, the doctrine of justification is not unique to Methodism, but rather that inherited it from Lutheranism and in this regard sites Wesley as a theological opportunist.

Whilst this may be true to some degree, what Wesleyan /Liberation Theology dialogue can bring to the development of the theological conversation is an understanding that personhood is not an intellectual, individual exercise but rather a relationship concept based upon a dielectic between, amongst others, reason and action, ideas and tradition, philosophy and praxis, theology and other disciplines, confessions of faith and theological development and between God and creation.

### 3. A Religious Tradition

Without going into the semantics of the term 'religious tradition', it is the scope of this paper to remain within the Christian faith but it must be highlighted that this term also applies to other faith's such as Muslims, Hindu and Buddhism. Although the following discussion is a paper on its own, in terms of reference for this paper certain areas will be highlighted. Smith in Taylor (1998: 269ff) in his article, RELIGION, RELIGIONS, RELIGIUS, offers a comprehensive look into the development of the concepts found in his title. Without going into too much detail there are various points Smith raises which are of value to this paper as far it lays down some ground work for the term religious tradition used in this paper:

- "The term 'religion' has had a long history, much of it prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, irrelevant to contemporary use" (Smith in Taylor, 1998: 269.) This is, amongst others, partly due to the development of scholarship beyond the Reformation; partly to the need for 'religion', particularly post Reformation 'religion', to formulate definitive confessions of faith and partly due to the introduction of 'classes of religions.'

- “Religion is an anthropological not a theological category”

This view is based on the view that “it (religion) describes human thought and action, most frequently in terms of belief and norms of behaviour” (Smith in Taylor, 1998: 269.)

As has been asserted in Wesley’s time, 18th century England, there were essentially two streams within the Christian faith namely Catholic/Lutheran and Protestant. Wesley was raised within the Anglican tradition and as has been shown in this paper essentially a product of sixteenth century England. Although much influenced by his Puritan home life, he later found himself in conflict both physically and intellectually with his Anglican peers.

As Williams (1960: 141) asserts “In the ecumenical encounter the doctrine of the Church has become the focus of our deepest differences and so far we have been unable to reconcile our divergent views” this is highlighted by De Gruchy in Willis & Welker (1999: 103) “since the sixteenth century, Reformed theology has interpreted its understanding of Christian faith and praxis in response to a variety of challenges within different historical contexts.”

However the Liberationists argue that the church as a tool for the proclamation and teaching on the Kingdom of God has become a structure of oppression, either supporting by means of instruction, the upholding of the status quo and the indifference to the plight of the oppressed.

Whilst it may seem to church leadership necessary to maintain the core values of the faith as expressed in the Apostles creed and other confessions of faith, there remains a question mark as to the validity of their support of oppressive structures.

Take for example the question of Ordination. While it is not in the scope of this paper to go into detail, what is of interest to this paper in this regard is the question of the biblical support of Ordination.

Whilst most Protestant leaders will support Biblically the notion of Ordination, Liberationists may question the validity of Ordination of per say around gender issues but far more around whether Ordination is a support of the oppressive tendencies, willingly or unwillingly of the church. The very instance of different understandings taken from Scripture within traditional churches with regard to Ordination speaks of a dialectical relationship. And it is this relationship which allows dialogue, albeit not without reservation. However the essence of the debate within the

Reformed theology in this regard is focused around amongst others, the symbols or confessions of faith defined by a religious tradition.

Wesley's theology and action within Methodist understanding was as much concerned with the doctrines of pre-election, justification by faith and other doctrinal issues as it was with the moral concern for the oppressed. Much focus however has been placed on the doctrinal debates and the role of Scripture within the formulation of such doctrines.

Take for example the historical debate around the church.

Wesley sees "The visible church is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached and the sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinances in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same" (Wesley in Williams, 1960: 141.)

As with Protestant tradition, for Wesley, the Church is not a form bound with the substance but is the indispensable instrument of a church whose nature is identical with its mission. As opposed to the Catholic tradition which according to Williams falls on the "due administration of the sacraments – the ordinary means whereby God increases faith" (Williams, 1960: 142.)

For the Liberationist, as with Luther and Wesley in their time, the emphasis with regard to the church is linked to a vehicle of reform. Put another way “the major challenge with which Christians of all traditions are confronted today is the struggle for ‘justice, peace and the integrity of creation” (De Gruchy in Willis, 1999: 104) and this view has led liberationists such as Gutierrez (1973: 101) to point out that the church in Latin America is “ghetto church” and further that

the Latin American Christian community came into being during the Counter Reformation and has always been characterised by its defensive attitude as regards the faith.

This posture is reinforced in some cases by the hostility of the liberal and anti-clerical movements of the nineteenth century and more recently by strong criticism from those struggling to transform the society to which the Church is so tightly linked

In two chapters of this paper, there is a resonance of this view with both Wesley and the Reformation. Whilst it may be pointed out that these struggles were grounded in areas such as interpretation and doctrine, there remains none the less an element of structural change. Few could argue the

impact of the reformation revolution and the Wesley revival upon church structures in particular.

This raises a question with regard to how reform of structures is possible.

A key to both Wesley and Liberationist content with regard to the potential impact on reform lies within their understanding of the contribution of laymen.

For Wesley evidence of this contribution was to found in the class meeting, where members gathered to fellowship together around the Word; for the liberationists it, in apostolic youth movements which have radicalised their political options (Gutierrez, Bonino); the feminist movement, who have gathered together with common vision of woman's liberation from male dominated oppressive structures (Carr, Ruether) and the Black Liberation Movement, who have raised awareness and Black consciousness (Cone, Boesak.)

It is in this regard that theology as a whole needs to take cognisance, that an effective theological conversation is more complete when both 'trained' and 'untrained' theologians are included.

In other words an authentic theology entails both 'profession' and lay contribution. Often as is seen in the previous chapters, it is theory which informs practice and practice which informs theory in a dialectical relationship. An example of this may be found in the modern day 'cell church' where there is absence of 'trained' (Ordained) leaders under the guide of an ordained leader. Without forwarding or disagreeing with this concept, what is of importance for this paper is that there remains an opportunity for the development of theological conversation. In other words laymen contributing to the theological conversations they engage in fellowship and witness in the world.

This view is most succinctly expressed in Feminist theology where religious practices are seen as informed by the patriarchal practices of Middle Eastern culture as Ruether (1983: 14) states "no new prophetic tradition ever is interpreted in a vacuum." And is further strengthened by De Gruchy in Willis (1999: 65) as he states "no theology can ever be done in a vacuum; every theologian stands within some tradition, even if he or her stance is highly critical of that heritage."

It seems clear that theologians such as Luther, Wesley, Gutierrez and Ruether all stand in some religious tradition and that they all in one way or another seek to reform their religious heritage. The source of these reforms as has been shown is to be found in a dialectical relationship between awakenings and revivals in their respective eras.

A critical issue raised here, is with regard to the inability or unwillingness of a religious tradition to embrace the dynamic context with in which it expresses its confession of faith, leads to a moment in time when the crises which arise out of such tensions, politically, socially and economically, reach a turning point and a different tradition is borne. In other words it becomes increasingly difficult for scholarship particularly theologians to claim any one influence as a turning point at any particular time. Yet theologians as has been shown in this paper are inclined to claim religious 'credit' for awakenings. Without going into much detail, one way of countering this tendency may be to ensure that the theological conversation is influenced by both lay and trained theologians. Another would be found in the dialectical relationship between science and theology. This would require a dialectical outlook on existing religious traditions, more-over a reform in theological outlook.

This being said, as can be seen from previous chapters, this reform is not new in the life of a religious tradition. Min (1989: 146) is helpful in this regard

Who then are the agents of such transformation? The need for change always arise amidst social conditions which both generate such need and threaten to block its fulfilment. Some oppressed groups demand liberation; others regard such demands as a challenge to their privilege. Likewise some groups are more powerful than others in imposing their interests on the rest of society. It is under these conditions of opposing interests and differentiated power that social change are proposed, attempted and /or achieved. Individuals as individuals than can not be agents of social change....only a community i.e. individuals organised with a sense of interdependence for the realisation of a shared purpose and mobilised to acquire sufficient power to override the powers of opposing interests and impose their will on the rest of society- is capable of accomplishing such structural change

The acceptances of universal truths are a legacy of the theological conversation, as Hume in Smith (1998: 274) asserts

There is a universal tendency amongst mankind to conceive all beings like themselves and to transfer to every object those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted and of which they are intimately conscious... No wonder then that mankind, being placed in such an

absolute ignorance of causes and being at the same time so anxious concerning their future fortunes should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers, possess of sentiment and intelligence. The *unknown causes*, which continually employ their thought appearing always in the same aspect, are all apprehended to be of the same kind or species (as themselves). Nor is it long before we ascribe to them thought, reason and passion and sometimes even limbs and figures of men, in order to bring them nearer to resemblance of ourselves.”

At the same time there is a need to reform religious traditions responsibly in areas such as inclusivity and this may be one of the primary roles of the church, to make space for dynamic theological conversation and find a way forward for to avoid the absolutising of the Gospel message.

It is perhaps here then that the dialogue two theologies under discussion, albeit briefly, in this paper can be helpful in highlighting a way forward, although not complete. As has been made clear, theology as an empirical science cannot be formulated in a vacuum but needs to embrace its contemporary situation into which it speaks.

#### **4. A Contemporary Situation:**

Much has already been said in this paper regarding the various contexts in which the theological conversation has developed over the past centuries. For the sake of this paper a contemporary situation will be defined as a context.

As has been alluded to earlier in this paper, the preceding awakenings in fourteenth century Europe led to a revival in which new ways of social, political and religious thinking emerged, having the potential of transforming the world for the betterment of all mankind. This shift was labelled the Reformation.

There existed at the time a sense of belief in the fulfilment of this transformation. But over time the rising ideologies of capitalism and the liberal ideas of the Enlightenment along with certain understandings within Protestantism, as examined in this paper, in 18th century Europe, had begun to fall into the same trap of exclusivism which it sought to be free itself of and it seems that despite the Wesleyan revival, which spoke into and impacted as referred to earlier in this paper, has continued to follow a similar course.

There exists today an awakening to the opulence of capitalism and the structures which support its exclusive religious, political and social oppression but this awakening is not to mistaken for merely an eco-socio-political movement but rather a movement of the heart i.e. a deepened spirituality. Put another way, questions regarding the morality of wealth are seen as essentially a spiritual problem. But this awakening has similarities with the Reformation of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the Wesleyan movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in that particularly the Liberationist sees “the building up of a critical consciousness of mass poverty and unjust racist and sexist relations proceeds not only from class-consciousness, but also grows in the struggle for specific cultural, religious and ethnic identities” (Carr, 1988: 49.)

However it must also be noted that Liberationists taken on their own may fall into the trap of a universal understanding of how the Kingdom of God should look like. Another of saying this that the use of interpretation of Scripture, a methodology and an understanding of praxis with regard to all theology and in particular Liberation theology, must lead to a formulation of a universal inclusivity for all Christians.

One way that this can be made possible, for example, the very source of critical interpretation, in the case of Protestants, the Scriptures are encountered in a dialectical manner. Liberationists have attempted to offer a way forward in making theology a critical reflection on praxis. But to take this merely on its own, would mean to assume that there is only 'one' way i.e. the poor, women or racism. But as has been shown in this paper, there exists a dialectical relationship between the different 'forms' of theology, between traditional and 'modern' theologies. No theology is formulated in a sterile environment; there are many influences which play a part in theological formulation.

This state of affairs is compounded by an understanding of Scripture in areas such as the shaping of context and formulating Christian confession of faith or traditions. Without going into much detail, as these assertions raise many questions, it may suffice in this paper to give a short example, which is not complete, with regard to this view.

Take the story of the woman at the well (John, 4:4 ff).

To the Protestant theologian, generally speaking, this story has to do with salvation. Jesus offering all the gift of salvation. This would certainly be a

Wesleyan view. To the feminist it may be a story of the emancipation of women, to the Black person (or any other) who feels the pain of racism; it may speak of the Biblical and moral injunctions against oppression.

Yet none of these are found to be incorrect or misplaced. In a sense it is because of the dialectical nature of the story. An understanding of salvation is influenced by the contemporary situation at the time. In other words there is a universal dialectical value attached to this story. Salvation becomes the universal value out of which praxis is borne. However in a dialectical understanding, the praxis informs the value and the value informs the praxis.

A similar process may be applied to biblical traditions or confessions of faith. The reform process may be furthered by a dialectical relationship.

In terms of the working definition of theology for this paper, it appears that theology has focused in areas of the religious tradition and a person and has paid less attention to the contemporary situation.

Evidence of this is partly making theology a 'professional' science therefore limiting the input of ordinary people and subscribing to them rather than being enriched by their 'doing' theology because in terms of contemporary situations there is no one universal situation.

Another reason may be as has been alluded to in this paper, the looking back at moments of 'success' with regard to reform and attempting to use those methods for revival and reform today.

However what may be needed today is a way of reflecting and bringing about reform which embraces the different contemporary situations or contexts. Here the view of Thomas Merton (1971: IV) in discussing the task of monastic renewal points to a renewal of religious life is helpful

there is a big difference between a 'renewal' which requires active participation at every level and a reform which starts at the top with the action of superiors and reaches the subject passively through new laws and decrees to be accepted and obeyed. Ultimately of course, there must be new legislation. But it is understood that the legislation should be much more flexible and that it should leave room for a larger measure of self-determinations in communities where the subjects themselves will play a more active role in guiding their own communal destinies

A further reason for paying less attention to the contemporary situation has resonance with Marx's phrase of religion as the opium of the masses as it seeks to focus its followers on inward reflection and in so doing indirectly support oppressive political, economic and moral structures.

A way forward in this regard may be a focus on outward action, i.e. the engagement with different contexts and the participation in the Kingdom of God where all are encouraged to contribute to the theological conversation particularly with regard to the reform of structures. Put another way

This was not God's will for any person or group of people. God's provision in terms of the world's resources was more than sufficient for all if greed and selfishness could be overcome. Sin remained a root of the problem's renewed relationship with God, equal opportunity for employment, hard work and frugal living would see the worker improving his own lot and that of his family (de Gruchy 1989: 80)

And further this view is taken further by Gutierrez (1973: 252.)

What the Church needs today goes beyond authoritarian or desperate attitudes, beyond mutual accusations and beyond personal disputes, all of which are only an expression of an inviable situation and an attitude of personal insecurity; what it needs is a courageous and serene analysis of the reasons for these situations and attitudes. This courage and serenity will be the opposite of a facile emotionalism, which leads to arbitrary measures, superficial solutions or evasions but avoids the search for radical changes and untrodden paths. At stake in all this is the Churches faithfulness to its Lord

To show that this understanding is not 'new' but has foundations in other theological views and as was asserted in this paper, the difficulty of

placing theology into specific time periods, without going into detail:

Moltmann has suggested that the coming kingdom gives the church a society-transforming vision of reality as opposed to a merely private vision of personal salvation.

Metz has emphasized that there is a political dimension to faith, and that the church must be an institution of social criticism.

Bonhoeffer has issued a call to redefine religion in a secular context. His theology emphasizes human responsibility toward others, and stresses the value of seeing the world with "the view from below" - the perspective of the poor and oppressed.

Comblin (1990: 81) highlights this view in the Liberationist approach to gender

The norm of Christian behaviour with regard to the equality of the sexes consisted first of all in the conditions specified by Jesus for membership in the community of the Reign of God. But even more important were Jesus' own attitude and behaviour toward women. The Gospels emphasise Jesus' behaviour with women which are never accompanied by the least suggestion of male superiority. When it comes to marriage Jesus prescribes strict equality between the rights and duties of husbands and those of wives

Old Testament prescriptions favouring men over women owing Jesus explains to the hardness of people's hearts

In similar vein, Wesley also struggled with the movement of Christians away from social concern in terms of their Christian witness.

The Doctrine of Perfection, which for him meant that there needed to be a concern for social reform where conditions in society hindered spiritual growth, aside from creating "great difficulties for Wesley, both in seeking for adequate definitions and in seeking to avoid misunderstandings among both followers and friends" (Williams, 1960: 168).

The same cannot be said of his followers. "While the movement towards affluence with its various negative spiritual consequences had not been intended by Wesley, he was fully aware of what was happening and whenever possible he attempted to correct and warn against this phenomenon" (De Gruchy, 1989: 82.)

As Bell in De Gruchy (1989: 82) sites "Wesley observed that Christianity produces not only economic gain but indirectly economic effects adverse to the spirit of Christianity." This view serves as a challenge and a warning for the all who seek structural reform.

Could it be possible that once structures are changed to bring about the liberation of people from oppression and domination, that there will be a drifting away to towards another form of domination?

De Gruchy (1989: 85) is helpful in this regard, in terms of Christian action and witness in the world “there is a need for constant renewal and revival.”

One of the ways in which this can be achieved is if attempts are made by theologians to avoid the trap of pluralism by embracing a dialectical nature of theological dialogue.

The impact of the Reformation on the theological conversation in particular cannot be underdressed and as Collins (Stevens & Collins, 1993:141).puts it

While the Reformation rejected the two-level spirituality of the monastery, most Protestant spirituality has focused on either charismatic and “mystical” experience or the deeper life of outstanding Christian leaders, rather than exploring the holiness of the ordinary Christian in the totality of life

There can be little doubt that in terms of a present day context, the Christian faith faces challenges which are unsurpassed in previous generations. Poverty worldwide is on the increase, political unrest is at an

all time high and in many countries racism and prejudice is rife despite desperate attempts to reform. Whilst these are not new forces, the scale of increase coincides with the fast growing population worldwide.

Yet closer examination of the contexts of the past as shown in this paper reveals that the same cultural and social forces at work in the first sixteen centuries are still at work today.

There were models of oppression were evident as Adams (1973: 25) asserts

the decisive element in social action is the exercise of power and the character of social action is determined by the character of the power expressed. Power has always a double character: firstly, as the expression of Gods law and love; second, as the exercise of human freedom. To understand power as God's law and love is to understand it as Being. To understand it as human freedom is to understand it as response to the possibilities of being a response that is both individual and institutional. All response is therefore social action in this sense

However, as sited in this paper previously, there are fundamental issues regarding the Bible as authoritative source, the interpretation of such a source and the way in which the Bible as authoritative source is interpreted.

For Wesley, (Williams, 1960: 36) the context played a role with regard to the formulation of theology

Preach our doctrine, inculcate experience, urge practice, and enforce discipline. If you preach doctrine only, the people will be antinomians; if you preach experience only they will be enthusiasts; if you preach practice only they will become Pharisees; and if you preach all of these and do not enforce discipline, Methodism will be like a highly cultivated garden without a fence, expose to the ravages of the wild boar of the forest

For the liberationist

theological study has fulfilled different functions throughout the history of the Christian community, but this does not necessarily mean that they have been super ceded. Although expressed in different ways, the essential effort to understand faith has remained. Moreover, the more penetrating and serious efforts have yielded decisive gains, opening paths along which all subsequent theological reflections travel (Gutierrez, 1973: 4)

Some of the dangers with contemporary model of management both clerical and secular is that “the tendency to deal with outside threats by increasing central government. The church must continuously fight the “fleshy” predisposition to divide into two peoples – clergy and laity” (Steven & Collins 1996:142). And the classification of concepts of faith into ours and

theirs for example Smith asserts “ the most common way of classifying religions, found both in native categories and in scholarly literature, is dualistic and can be reduced, regardless of what differentium is employed to ‘theirs’ and ‘ours.’ Clearly this is a way of limiting the theological conversation as has been argued in this paper.

There are perhaps more questions raised in this paper in this regard than answers and it is accepted that the field needs deeper discussion, one way of dealing with this pitfall, as has been shown in this paper, amongst others, is a more defined relationship between lay and professional theologians, the reform of hierarchical structures in the church, the seeking of reform to traditional confessions of faith, the understanding of contextual differences and above a sincere examination of personhood as defined by Scripture. While a more thorough examination of this view may be needed, the length and scope of this paper leaves one with more questions than answers, the purpose has been to begin a conversation and this was made possible by a dialectical model of interaction between a person, a tradition and a contemporary situation.

## **5. Concluding remarks:**

One of the values of any theological dialogue is in the discovery that theology remains a dynamic conversation upon which theologians over the past centuries have developed. As a result there can be no definitive conclusion to this paper or the theological conversation in general but rather a hope that the conversation will continue; nor does this paper claim to have contributed anything new to the Wesleyan\Liberationist dialogue, but one of the challenges that springs from this dialogue with regard to theology as an empirical science is to be found in the movement from the 'professional' to a more inclusive model of theological formulation.

There are no easy solutions to this dilemma but clearly as shown in this paper, the theological conversation is enriched by understanding theological formulation as 'doing' rather than studying theology.

Wesley and Luther were theologians, as has been stated, whose stand was not for theology as an empirical discipline only but who interested in reforming the church and the world. It was later scholarship who has tended to make icons of their theological views. Wesley in particular never claimed that his theology was complete or definitive.

In contrast to studying theology, 'doing' theology entails the practical as well as the theoretical. In other words allowing the process to inform the theory and vice versa in a dialectical relationship.

An example of this process may be to allow theological students to be practically involved in different contexts and to allow them to reflect on their experience. Thus a more inclusive model of theological formulation will include an exposure to a variety of contemporary situations.

Another way may be a supervised practical dialogue between students of different faiths within a classroom scenario, where differences and similarities may be vocalised in a meaningful way.

At the same time theological students should be encouraged to participate in praxis with regard to the oppressed for example a poverty alleviation programme. This type of theological training may help in the developing within theological scholars a vision for praxis which allows theory to be informed by praxis and vice versa particularly with regard to the oppressed.

Whilst there is a real possibility that, as the example of Wesley shows, a theologian may be criticised as opportunist, a question that needs

answering with regard to this paper and its definition of the term theology then is theology as a conversation then not by its very nature opportunistic. This could be argued in the light of both Wesley and Luther whose influence was heightened by the awakenings of 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe and 18<sup>th</sup> century England.

A definitive answer to the impact of individual reformers on their respective eras is not possible but clearly different disciplines will forward different answers to this question. However not many will argue that there were a combination of factors which lead to the great revivals, amongst others, religious fervour and cultural awakenings and that these influences need to be seen as an example of dialectical relationship.

It may also be true that this paper has raised more questions than it does answers but then it has served its purpose, to create a space for theological reflection.

If theology is to be a tool of the church in its formulation of doctrine and confessions of faith, then it must begin to recognise, which in some cases it clearly has, the movement away of sighting definitive universals for the Christian faith and rather embrace the concept of dialectic such as between

the concepts of individualism and community as seen in the Wesleyan/Liberation Theology debate.

The dialectical relationship that is found in this dialogue is made possible because as this paper has shown, that revivals are not solely as a result of religious influences and that within the theological views of theologians there exists a dialectical relationship between their theory and practice.

There is a movement worldwide in which the traditional senses of 'separation', has begun to be bridged. One could argue that great strides have been made in the issues relating to women and racism but still what needs to be correlated is a reform of economic structures which oppress the poor.

If theology embraces the dialectical model of theological conversation then perhaps what can be discovered with regard to world economic structures is an understanding that a system such as capitalism is not necessarily the problem but rather the application and abuse of the system leads to the situation where it becomes a tool of oppression.

But clearly as was seen in the Reformation and Wesleyan era, the awakenings were not simply a matter of theology, ideology, economics or socio-political issues but a combination of all. Theology recognises that as

an empirical science one of its functions is to reflect on these issues as well as retain the foundations it developed upon. It is in a sense within the dialectical framework that one discovers both a process and a product of theology.

That there will continue to be awakenings and revivals is certain and theology is moving from the view that what essentially has worked in the past is not necessarily a recipe for future reforms. But these formulations are the guidelines in future conversation which should encourage development not curtail it. Theologians need to ask themselves, which indeed they do, whether the adoption of certain views is not indicative of the need for power and control.

This view may raise certain problems such as the formulation of such theology but a closer look at Wesley's and Luther's theological journey brings one to the conclusion that their theology was as much a product of their Christian action in the world as their contemplation of the Scriptures. In other words their theology was not only contemplative but also reflective. They oscillated between formulating theology and bold action, often taking action and later formulating theology.

In the light of this it seems strange that some scholars, as have been referred to in this paper, who tend to find problems with the Liberationist who indeed follow in some cases, a similar methodology to Wesley and the early Reformers, upon which much of present day theology has drawn, will overlook such issues. Liberationists refer to this state of affairs as the support of oppressive structures.

In order for this shift from definitive to dialectic to happen in a meaningful way, the teaching model to which most Catholic and Protestant churches may need to be examined in the light of facing these critical issues. Perhaps more emphasis is needed to place theological students in a frame of reference where they will have access to and formulate on 'lay' and 'revolutionary' theological thought.

To say that these views expressed in this paper may be a radical departure from the norm and may cause more question than answers may be true but at the same time this may be one way to embrace progress, as Lenin in Feyerabend (1975: 9) asserts

History generally and the history of revolution in particular, is always richer in content, more varied, more one-sided, more lively and more subtle than even the best historian and the best methodologist can imagine

Whilst theologians who are considered professional continue to debate issues regarding the intellectual nature of theology in the 'classroom', an exposure to a context removed from their own may enrich their understanding of God's revelation through the Scriptures as seen through the eyes of the oppressed and perhaps there may a discovery that all theology, as a tool of the church, is a critical reflection upon praxis in the light of the Kingdom of God.

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