

From Liberation Theology to (Liberationist) Peace Studies

Practice, Reflection and the Generation of Scholarship*

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Abstract

*This article illustrates liberation theology's evolution and method and argues that its approach to bridging the gap between theory and practice serves as a complement and challenge for conceptualizing the dynamic and fluid relationship between scholarship and practice in peace studies. The 1971 publication of *A Theology of Liberation* made Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez one of the most influential scholars and theologians of the 20th century, but the process that led to this publication rests upon the day-to-day reflective practice of its author. Gutiérrez' commitment to pastoral practice, especially among poor communities, raises questions about whose and what kind of knowledge is privileged in the academy, about the possibility of sustainably sourcing wisdom from local communities and about the necessity of scholars to locate themselves within the realities and among the communities they study. Given the affinity between liberation theology's inductive method and the elicitive approach in some currents of peace studies, the article places its emphasis on the convergent contributions of Gustavo Gutiérrez and John Paul Lederach and draws information from personal conversations with both authors. As a whole, the article contributes to the burgeoning and necessary dialogue between peace studies and theology.*

Keywords: liberation theology, theory, practice, peace studies, religion.

1 Introduction

Liberation theology, from its humble beginnings in the slums of Lima, Peru, has traversed oceans, languages, religions and politics to engage the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless. The death of liberation theology has been

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predicted and announced by some observers (Cardinal Newman Society, 2014), but as Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez says, “no one has invited me to the funeral” (Author’s Interview [AI], 2014). Others announce the re-emergence of liberation theology (Cooper, 2013) or emphasize the dynamic connection between liberation theology and Pope Francis’ bold vision for a poor church (Yardley and Simon, 2015). And still others argue that we need to move beyond liberation theology as it currently stands so that it can regain the “rebellious spirit of its youth and once again rebel” (Petrella, 2008: 4). Leaving aside predictions about liberation theology, one aspect is certain – it is still influencing and generating passionate responses from both admirers and detractors.

Published in 1971, Gustavo Gutiérrez’ *A Theology of Liberation* is the classic text that graduated the nascent theology into the halls of academia and bestowed upon him the often used title of “father of liberation theology” (Brown, 1990: 1). While many have engaged and continue to engage with this text and with other liberation theologians that further developed this theological movement and its ideas, fewer scholars have engaged with the roots of this theology and the organic process of its development.¹

In the following, we will explore some of the roots, contexts and pastoral practices that cultivated and contributed to the emergence of liberation theology, especially through the work of Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez. Paulo Freire’s words that “thought and study alone did not produce *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*” (Freire, 2010: 37) can be said about liberation theology as well, for it was, and is, the ongoing result of much historical commitment, especially among the poor. If we can better understand the methodological relationship between pastoral practice and liberation theology, we will be in a better position to analogously engage questions of the role of practice in the academic field of peace studies. As peace studies continues to diversify its interlocutors, and as it continues to engage with the discipline of theology, there is mutual benefit in an ongoing dialogue between these two fields.

This article will begin with biographical information on Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez in order to emphasize the critical relationship between great insights and particular lived experiences. We will then demonstrate how Gutiérrez’ reflection upon the poverty of his particular context gave rise to the key theological insights at the centre of liberation theology, and thus to the scholarship found in his book, *A Theology of Liberation*. At this point, we will raise questions about the methodological approach of liberation theology and about how the necessary interdependence of practice and theory is an ongoing challenge for both theology and peace studies if they are to be at the service of humanity beyond the academy. It is in this latter section that we will engage peace studies more directly, with the acknowledgement that this is but a first step in a much-needed dialogue between these diverse but normatively committed fields.

1 Selected bibliographies of liberation theologians or liberation theology can be found at: <<http://liberationtheology.org/books-videos/liberation-theologies-bibliography/>> or at <<https://www2.bc.edu/james-bretzke/LiberationTheologyBibliography.pdf>>.

2 Practice: *Pastor* and Theologian

Born in 1928, Gustavo Gutiérrez grew up in a household keen on learning and education. Physically active as a young boy, he was afflicted with osteomyelitis at age 12 and would remain in a wheelchair until the age of 18. During those 6 years unable to walk, Gutiérrez read much from his father's library and particularly enjoyed the piercing profundity of Pascal's *Pensées* (AI, 2014). In the introduction to a collection of Gutiérrez' spiritual writings, Daniel Groody writes that "his own illness over time sensitized him to the physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering of others, and it would teach him much about hope and joy, as well as compassion and solidarity" (Groody, 2011: 22). It is in these years where we encounter the first significantly formative experience that will influence Gutiérrez' future methodology for doing theology: the experience of suffering as a critical departure point for theologizing.

Gutiérrez' formal studies include medical school in Lima, Peru (1947-1950), and philosophical and theological studies in Belgium, France and Rome (1951-1960). In 1960, he returned to Peru as a young priest and began to work with students at the Universidad Católica in Lima, especially through the Unión Nacional de Estudiantes Católicos (UNEC) – the National Union of Catholic Students (Tovar, 1991). As a medical student 13 years prior, Gutiérrez had already been involved with UNEC and its social and political action initiatives, and upon his return from Europe, he began a series of ministries that encompassed university students, workers and parishes (AI, 2014). It is important to note that since the late 1800s, many of the Catholic social concerns in Europe focused on workers and worker rights (Leo XIII, 1891), and as Latin America too entered into a process of industrialization, workers' concerns became a primary focus for the Peruvian Catholic Church and for Gutiérrez who served as a chaplain (Kristenson, 2009; Reátegui, 2013). This pastoral work in the community was complemented by more academic work in the university, where he became a part-time lecturer teaching classes that incorporated the ideas of philosophers, writers and poets as diverse as Camus, Marx, Arguedas, Luis Buñuel, Ingmar Bergman and others (Brown, 1990: 25). Gutiérrez' priestly duties of sacramental formation, theological reflection on scripture and spiritual accompaniment of those entrusted to his care would fill the rest of his daily life and work throughout the 1960s and beyond.²

In June 1960, Gutiérrez gave a lecture titled "What is UNEC?", which sought to better integrate theological perspectives with UNEC's social and political activity. At the heart of his lecture was the necessity to distinguish between church and politics while not separating the two. This required a nuanced theological understanding of the role of the laity (non-ordained Catholics) in relation to social activism so that individuals and communities could prophetically respond to the needs of the times while not confusing their social and political work with

2 Although the concept of accompaniment has been present in Gutiérrez' work from the beginning, in the past few years it has become more prominent. For example, his recent 2013 book with Dr. Paul Farmer is titled, *In the Company of the Poor*.

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their Christian identity, or worse, reduce the church simply to political parties or movements (Tovar, 1991). This theological lecture marked the beginning of a series of ongoing theological encounters between UNEC and Gutiérrez throughout the 1960s. In 1964/65 Gutiérrez lectured on the “pastoral ministry of the church”, in 1966 on “human history and salvation history”, in 1967 on “faith and commitment and faith and ideology” and then again in 1967 on “poverty in the bible” (Tovar, 1991). In the latter 1967 lecture, Gutiérrez began to formally distinguish between different kinds of poverty (e.g. real poverty and spiritual poverty), a distinction that would influence both the documents of the 1968 conference of Latin American Bishops held in Medellín, Colombia, as well as his 1971 work, *A Theology of Liberation*.³

3 Reflection: Poverty – Not for Imitation but for Transformation

Poverty is a key category in liberation theology and its centrality is directly connected with Gutiérrez’ experience and reflection *with* and *among* the poor. In the late 1950s, while Gutiérrez was still in Europe finishing his studies, he read a book titled, *En el Corazon de las Masas* (In the Heart of the Masses) by René Voillaume.⁴ This book left a deep impression upon him, not because he agreed with it, but because his experience among the poor clashed with the book’s spiritualized notions of poverty. In short, Voillaume presents a vision for his religious order that is focused on living among the poor as they live – in poverty. The spirituality the author advocates does not focus on addressing and eradicating poverty through works of justice and service, but rather is focused on breaking down the power differences between the poor and the members of his religious order simply by these men and women living among them as ‘poor’. In a 1958 talk given in Brazil by Voillaume, he echoes his book’s message:

Is it not normal that these too [the poor] should have their religious, and that a founder should have desired that his religious should belong to the class of the poor, and should make all the sacrifices that this involved? For everything about their lives must harmonize – their housing, their dress, their food, and above all their hearts and minds. (Voillaume, 1958)

While on the surface the ideal of harmonizing the lives of these religious men and women with the lives of the poor seems admirable and perhaps worthy of imitation, it casts a shadow Gutiérrez quickly discerned. Imagine it, Gutiérrez says,

3 The 1968, Medellín Conference became a watershed moment for the Latin American Catholic church because it sought to interpret and adapt the broader message of Vatican II held in Rome from 1962-1965 to the particular realities of Latin America, a region marked by extreme poverty and conflict. For a sociological examination of the relationship between the Medellín conference and liberation theology (Smith, 1991).

4 This section is based on personal conversations with Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, but brief mention to Voillaume’s book, *En el Corazon de las Masas*, is made in a 14 September 2008 interview by Angel Dario Carrero in the Mexican newspaper, *EL Semanal*. <www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/09/14/sem-angel.html>.

white, tall, middle-class men and women from Europe and other parts of the world choosing to live poor lives among the poor. What were the poor themselves going to think? That being poor must be *good* since they have sacrificed so much to live like them and try to be one of them (AI, 2014). In our conversation, Gutiérrez mentioned that he still has the book by René Voillaume with notes on the margins, and that in those margins he began to clarify the often confused and conflated meanings of poverty that fail to distinguish between real poverty and a more biblical notion of spiritual poverty.⁵ For Gutiérrez, the real or material poverty that subjugates masses across the world is always an *evil* and is against the God of life who does not want human persons to suffer (Gutiérrez, 1991: 121). Spiritual poverty, on the other hand, must be understood as openness to God's will in our lives, an openness that always directs us towards solidarity with the poor and suffering *in order to struggle against* the violence of real poverty in which the poor live.⁶ Spiritual poverty in its full biblical sense cannot be confused with a 'spiritualized' notion of poverty that fails to focus its gaze upon the suffering of history in order to transform it.

Gutiérrez' familiarity with real poverty and his own reflective ministry among the poor, not for imitation but for transformation, provided him with the necessary insights to clearly reject a conflation of spiritual and real poverty – a conflation that always carries the danger of perpetuating real poverty by spiritualizing it. As Gutiérrez himself says in another interview: "Voillaume would say that we must be poor. Yes, very good, but for what? What's the meaning of it? It's not simply for my own sanctification. One had to question what meaning it had for the other" (Carrero, 2008). Without self-reflexivity and an intimate contextual knowledge and practical commitment to the poor other, one risks perpetuating the very violence and oppression against which one is theoretically working.

This brief narrative of Gutiérrez' notes on the margins illustrates a strand of the historical evolution of liberation theology, but as a metaphor, it can also apply to the current relationship between peace studies and theology for this relationship is still in a marginal and nascent state. Despite the arduous work that remains in order to bring these two fields closer together, Gutiérrez' understanding of the necessity of self-reflection and the tensions that can arise when abstract ideas are detached from concrete situations has a parallel in the work of John Paul Lederach and his elicitive approach for peacebuilding. In brief, both authors advocate a constant and relationally focused resourcing of the local reality for theoretical insights. The conceptual link between these two authors seems ripe for a more sustained exploration at a future point, especially when one considers the use of poetry and metaphor that both employ to illustrate the methodological dimensions of their work. In describing the elicitive approach, Lederach writes that the approach aims at "discovering ways to catch fish in our own

5 For a more in-depth analysis of this confusion and conflation of spiritual and real poverty, see Gutiérrez (1988) *A Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 162-173.

6 In 1967, Gutiérrez was invited to a conference on "The Church and Poverty" in Montreal, Canada, and also to teach for a few weeks on this same topic at the University of Notre Dame, in South Bend, IN. It is in the midst of these events that he further clarified the biblical notions of poverty in contrast to those of Voillaume.

ponds ... seeking resource and root in the cultural context itself" (Lederach, 1995: 55). Similarly, Gutiérrez' groundbreaking 1984 book, which elaborates the spirituality that undergirds liberation theology, is titled, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*. In this book, Gutiérrez emphasizes that one must tap into one's well of experience and daily work, into one's cultural roots where God is to be found, and from there find the nourishment for engaging in the more abstract activity of theological reflection. Whether it is catching fish in our own ponds or drinking from our own wells, both authors insist that the more formal academic activity of generating scholarship must be grounded in particular people and contexts, and from there, deeply embedded in reflective practice, say a word about peace and/or God.

4 Scholarship: Theologian and Pastor

Until the late 1960s, one could argue that Gutiérrez was primarily known as a pastor and secondarily as a theologian.⁷ As the influence of his ideas grew, he came to be identified almost exclusively as a theologian, and secondarily as a pastor. But Gutiérrez' theology is so grounded in pastoral ministry – in practice – that it is difficult if not impossible to separate liberation theology from that ecclesial practice from which it arises. Before further examining liberation theology's method, let us briefly finish the biographical journey that leads to the 1971 publication of Gutiérrez' book and then mention the strategic programmes that arose to disseminate and support the work of liberation.

In the mid-1960s, Gutiérrez helped establish an organization for Catholic priests of Peru who were concerned with the economic, political and religious crises affecting the country. The organization's name was the Oficina Nacional de Investigación (National Research Office) – ONIS – and, in their 12-year existence, they actively analysed the social circumstances of Peru vis-à-vis their pastoral work, networked with social and political leaders, and mobilized vowed religious and ordinary Christians to participate in various pastoral and socio-political processes of change. Three particular spheres of concern included rural areas, the universities and parishes (Jo, 2005: 77-96).

Throughout the 1960s – the "Decade of Development" as labelled by the United Nations – theologians had attempted to reconcile both the theory and practical struggle of social and economic development with classical categories of theology.⁸ In an attempt to further define this relationship, ONIS asked Gutiérrez in 1968 to present on a 'theology of development', but he refused to continue speaking of development and instead presented on a 'theology of liberation'.

Gutiérrez' insightful decision to make a linguistic and conceptual shift from the term 'development' to the term 'liberation' has left an indelible mark on theological history. The reason for the shift, he says, is because the category of devel-

7 Although, because of Gutiérrez' participation as an observer in Vatican II, he was already on the radar of international theologians and in March 1964 he participated in a conference organized by Iván Illich in Petrópolis, Brazil, to explore the question of theology in Latin America.

8 For Gutiérrez' brief analysis of this decade of development and of economic dependency theory, see Ch. 6 of *A Theology of Liberation*, titled, "The Process of Liberation in Latin America."

opment with its primary focus on socio-economic progress did not create sufficient space for theological reflection. Liberation, on the other hand, is a biblical term that is a synonym for 'salvation', which is a classical category in theological discourse. Gutiérrez' understanding of liberation includes three interrelated levels that cannot be separated and that cover the spectrum from historical socio-political liberation to liberation from sin and unto God (Gutiérrez, 1973: Ch. 2). Before Gutiérrez, other theologians or religious activists had tried to capture the profound link between theology and social commitment in their own categories, as the Princeton theologian and missionary Richard Shaull tried to do with his emphasis on revolution (Roldan, 2011). Gutiérrez distanced himself from the label of a 'theology of revolution' because he says it "sought to Christianize a political act" (Carrero, 2008).⁹ In other words, the label could be easily used to justify political revolution and violence in the name of Christianity. While there is certainly an intimate relation between church and politics, the two are not interchangeable.

The phrase 'theology of liberation' quickly gained ground in the coming months and years. In the fall of 1968, Gutiérrez attended the Latin American Bishops' Conference at Medellín where he became a primary author of the Medellín document on peace and heavily contributed, often through back channels, to the document on poverty.¹⁰ Within the official Medellín documents, one finds multiple references to 'liberation', a sign that the phrase had now reached the highest authoritative ecclesial documents of Latin America. A year later, Gutiérrez (1969: 167) was again invited to present on a theology of development, this time in Switzerland, and again he spoke about a theology of liberation.¹¹ His presentation in Switzerland already has the structure of what will eventually become the 1971 book. In 1970, Gutiérrez presents at a theological conference in Colombia, and in 1971, the material was published in Spanish as *Teología de la liberación, Perspectivas* (*A Theology of Liberation, Perspectives*). Around this time Miguel d'Escoto, the Maryknoll priest, future UN diplomat and future foreign Minister of Nicaragua during the Sandinista years, happened to meet Gutiérrez while in Peru and asked permission to translate and publish the book in English. Gutiérrez' book became the first book published by Orbis Books in 1973 and apparently the one with the most sales to date (Carrero, 2008).

While Gutiérrez did not set out to write a book, a book nonetheless emerged from his various theological reflections upon the pastoral crises of his country

9 For a bibliography of the theology of revolution, see Ch. 3, footnote 5 (p. 188) in the 15th anniversary edition (1988) of *A Theology of Liberation*. Also, Gutiérrez and Shaull would go on to publish a collection of lectures centred on the theme of theology and revolution in the 1977 book, *Liberation and Change*.

10 In the Medellín document on peace, violence is contextualized within notions of structural sin and peace is tied to the work of justice. See Medellín document, part II, pp. 7-12. <www.celam.org/doc_conferencias/Documento_Conclusivo_Medellin.pdf>.

11 The presentation was for SODEPAX (Committee on Society, Development and Peace), for a November 1969 conference titled, "In search of a theology of development". Although Gutiérrez asked for the title of his presentation to be changed to reflect the emerging concept of liberation, the collected essays from this meeting still bear the original title of his lecture, "The Meaning of Development".

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and in Latin America. These reflections, as we have seen, were driven and sustained by an ongoing commitment to respond to the needs of parishes, university students, rural populations, workers, and the poor and oppressed of Peru. After the book's publication, Gutiérrez expanded his commitment to ministry, to the transformation of society and to education in various strategic ways. For example, in 1972, he began an annual 'School of Theology' for lay people, a school that still continues to operate every February for two weeks. At its height in the mid to late 1970s, Gutiérrez says that over 2,000 people would attend (AI, 2014). The two-week classes would provide different tracks for different levels of theological expertise. For individuals who had no formal schooling and for whom this was the first time studying theology, there was a theological track that was taught in very accessible language. Gutiérrez fondly remembers indigenous leaders from the poor rural mountain communities who would travel long distances for the classes and who would take copious notes of the lectures. As he says, their villages had entrusted these individuals with the opportunity to learn theology, and there was a responsibility to return to their villages to share the knowledge.

In 1974 Gutiérrez helped establish the Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas (IBC), a centre that would become the backbone for the plethora of liberation initiatives that had emerged and which were to emerge in the coming years. From its inception, the centre has focused on publications, workshops, skills training, conferences, and that which supports the formation and strengthening of Christian communities, social organizations, university students and civil society, all from the perspective of a preferential option for the poor (IBC, 2015). Over 40 years later, the IBC is a veritable non-profit institution with journals, magazines, a radio station, development and democracy programmes, university immersion programmes, international solidarity programmes, theological workshops, environmental and intercultural initiatives, human rights education and many more initiatives, all under the motto: "Working with you for a world without forgotten ones" (IBC, 2015). One can say that for Gutiérrez, the 'theory' of *A Theology of Liberation* is only properly understood when it is grounded in the practice from which it arose. To this day, Gutiérrez spends one semester teaching at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, USA, and the rest of the year immersed in pastoral work in his home country of Peru.

5 Theology and Peace Studies: Practice, Reflection and Scholarship

So far we have explored the evolution of liberation theology and the essential role that pastoral practice played in the development of theological scholarship. In the coming sections, we will more formally explore methodological aspects of liberation theology and the challenges and questions it poses for the relationship between theory and practice. Where possible, we will engage analogues of these theological challenges in the field of peace studies. But in order to ensure the possibility for a fruitful encounter between theology and peace studies, let us first clarify what is meant by theology, and more specifically, by liberation theology.

As traditionally understood, theology is a *word* about *God* that arises from faith's search for understanding.¹² But certainly such reflection does not occur in a cognitive vacuum, for each believer is incarnate, socially embedded and living out her or his faith in particular ways in the complex matrix of community. Thus, Gutiérrez speaks of the need for theology to "think critically about itself, about its own foundations ... [and to have a] clear and critical attitude toward economic and sociocultural factors which condition the life and reflection of the Christian community" (Gutiérrez, 1996: 31). In a post-enlightenment society, any theological reflection that does not take into account a critical assessment of its own historical embeddedness and practices would not only be naïve but also liable to abuse for ideological aims. In accordance with Paulo Freire's process of *concientización*, Gutiérrez emphasizes the need for the oppressed to "reject the oppressive consciousness which dwells in them, become aware of their situation, and find their own language" from which they can speak of God (Gutiérrez, 1988: 57).

If one were to find an analogue here for peace studies, it would centre on the ongoing need for those living through violence and armed conflict to become agents of their own peace. This would necessitate the generation of their own language that can express their most profound experiences, as well as the need for contextually and historically situated analyses that include researchers' reflexivity about their own positionality. Both researchers and those living through conflict zones would need to engage critically their lived experience and reject ideologies that continue to generate violence in its multiple, often unforeseen forms. Furthermore, such a process of *concientización* and *liberación* in peace studies would require an active struggle to reevaluate the epistemological frameworks operative in academia and the ways in which certain types of knowledge are privileged, usually at the expense of the global south. While Lederach's elicitive approach to conflict transformation and peacebuilding has made a profound impact on the contemporary understanding of peace studies, especially since the mid-1990s, one can ask to what degree this approach has transformed the ways in which most scholarship in peace studies is actually generated. Perhaps not unlike liberation theology, an elicitive approach to peace studies has been codified by the academy and now lives in the reified sphere of academic discourse, more spoken about than practised as a means of theory generation, or, it is practised among peacebuilders on the ground but without sufficient feedback loops into the academy. John Paul Lederach writes that "the elicitive-oriented approach is built on drawing out and using what people bring you ... [and] understands language, metaphor, proverb, and story as resources, mechanisms, and approaches to conflict resolution," and I would add, to the generation of transformative scholarship (Lederach, 1995: 83). In certain academic circles, an elicitive approach to theology is condescendingly referred to as *pastoral* theology, a qualification that sees pastoral practice as a liability to the generation of scholarship rather than as a contribution and necessary step along the process of systematic reflection (Hennelly,

12 The traditional concept of 'faith seeking understanding' as the fundamental core of theology is reconfigured by some liberation theologians into 'love seeking understanding', for primacy is given to the praxis of love as the means of transforming a suffering world. (Sobrinho, 2012).

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1979: 88). Both in theology and in peace studies, there is an ongoing need not only to create space for critical languages that arise from local communities, but also to place these languages and experiences of suffering and violence at the centre of the discourse.

In light of the dominant deductive and syllogistic manner of doing theology in the first half of the 20th century, the theological approach advocated by Gutiérrez could be considered a new method and not simply a new area of focus. Gutiérrez writes:

The pastoral activity of the Church does not flow as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it ... A privileged *locus theologicus* for understanding the faith will be the life, preaching, and historical commitment of the Church. (Gutiérrez, 1988: 9)

In other words, theology is a secondary 'theory-generating' step that arises from reflection upon the primary transformative commitments of everyday life. This methodology is inductively based, located in the midst of the historical challenges of the times, while always interacting with the classical principles of theology. For liberation theology, the secondary step of reflection cannot be separated from the primary context of that reflection – one's historical commitments and struggles for liberation.

If we take the method of liberation theology as a vantage point, we may ask: upon what practice do peace studies' scholars reflect? This requires that we explore briefly the question of the role of practice in the field of peace studies. As the name implies, peace *studies* is an academic research-driven enterprise focused on the generation, assessment and theoretical application of these 'studies' to a given context, normally contexts marked by intense conflict and violence. In this field of studies, a rough division is made between scholarship and practice, and thus between scholars and practitioners. While these two categories seem to exist on opposite sides of a spectrum, it is perhaps more accurate to speak of scholars and practitioners as existing somewhere in a fluid and dynamic continuum (see Figure 1 of journal introduction).

On the practitioner side of the continuum, the movement towards scholar status is driven by the degree to which reflection is incorporated in the daily life/work of the practitioner and the degree to which this reflection generates and/or develops theory. On the scholar side of the continuum, the movement towards practitioner status is driven by the degree of engagement or concern with practice. As a broad field with a *normative commitment* to peace, both sides aim to work for the creation, sustainability and growth of this present yet ever elusive phenomenon through research, practice and education. But as a field of *studies*, peace studies is inherently predisposed to favour scholarship over practice inasmuch as theory has greater social capital in academia.¹³ A traditional understand-

13 An example of this is the difficulty or impossibility of experts in the 'practice' of peace studies to acquire tenure track positions in my own and other universities.

ing of the relationship between theory and practice in peace studies seems to imply a process of application, where primacy is given to the generation of theory or scholarship that is then applied. Such an approach fails to fundamentally challenge the dominant process or method by which knowledge is generated, and continues to replicate a devaluation of practice (see Figure 2 of journal introduction). Let us return to liberation theology and to the methodological discussion of theory and practice in theology to see what insights that discussion can provide for peace studies.

In the dynamic and fluid practitioner scholar spectrum, Lederach characterizes the category of practitioner–scholar in the following manner: “engaged practitioner with intentional reflection that also navigates into theory development and contribution to scholarship that attends both to practitioner needs and scholarship/research” (Lederach, 2014). Based on his pastoral commitments and his scholarship, Gutiérrez may locate himself on this rough model as a practitioner scholar, especially if we equate the notion of practice with pastoral work. The evolution of liberation theology presented in the first part of this article sufficiently demonstrates Gutiérrez’ engaged practice and the pastoral context from which his theoretical contributions arose. Furthermore, Gutiérrez’ focus on liberation is not only towards the poor and oppressed (attends to practical needs), but also towards the liberation of theology itself from the categories that perpetuate the oppression and/or invisibility of the poor in history (attends to theoretical needs). Gutiérrez writes that “a theology which has as its points of reference only ‘truths’ which have been established once and for all ... can be only static and, in the long run, sterile” (Gutiérrez, 1973: 13). Theology must be open to evolution and change as the realities on the ground shift. The tradition(s) of the church and the traditions of the discipline provide stability to theology, but they cannot replace the living Spirit found in the practices of communities of faith. Similarly, one can say that the classic theories and research approaches of peace and conflict studies provide stability to the field, but they must always be open to the dynamic and unlikely sources of knowledge that arise from the lived experience of violence and peace.

Echoing Antonio Gramsci, Gutiérrez advocates for theologians who are a new kind of ‘organic intellectuals’. Such theologians, he says, would be:

personally and vitally engaged in historical realities with specific times and places. They will be engaged where nations, social classes, and peoples struggle to free themselves from domination and oppression by other nations, classes, and peoples. In the last analysis, the true interpretation of the meaning revealed by theology is achieved only in historical praxis. (Gutiérrez, 1988: 10)

To detach oneself from lived historical commitment in one’s theological craft is perhaps to forgo the deepest theories that reflection can provide. Gutiérrez often repeats the maxim that there is nothing more practical than a good theory, and we could add that perhaps there is nothing more generative of good theory than sustained reflective practice. Furthermore, without sustained historical commit-

ment scholars forego what Gutiérrez calls ‘friendship with the poor’, and they risk engaging in what theologian Miguel de La Torre (2016) has argued is an unethical practice of plagiarizing the poor for our research.

Given Gutiérrez’ use of the term ‘praxis’, let us briefly say a word about this term. While related to practice, praxis has a long theological and philosophical history that transcends a simple notion of activism or action. Liberation theologian John O’Brien (1992) writes that at a first level, praxis refers to “doing, considered as reflective, purposeful, self-critical human performance, as distinct from mere making” (p. 107). At heart is a distinction between doing as mere technique or technical application and doing as a process of becoming subjects in history through self-critical reflection. Gutiérrez (1990) writes that the praxis of liberation “involves a transformative activity that is influenced and illuminated by Christian love” (p. 99). Thus, for the liberation theologian, praxis is the doing of love as a response to suffering, and it is from such doing that theology arises. Does the field of peace studies not also initially arise as a response to the world’s violent history of suffering? Such a response, it seems, necessitates a reevaluation of praxis in the academy, and in peace studies research and scholarship in particular.

6 Conclusion

We have examined the origins of liberation theology through an exploration of Gutiérrez’ practice and scholarship up to the publication of his seminal book, *A Theology of Liberation*. It is difficult to trace the impact this book and its ideas have had, for the impact has been nothing short of monumental. What started in the particular context of Latin America has migrated into countless cultures and traditions that have adapted the methods and insights of this theology for their own theological reflection. From Palestinian liberation theology, to gay liberation theology, to Dalit theology in India, to Minjung theology in Korea, to Black theology, to Feminist theology, to U.S. Latino/a theology, and to liberation ecologies – these and many more are the inheritors of the work and ideas of a person who located himself in the dynamic and generative nexus of practice and scholarship.

At the beginning of this article, we mentioned the critique that liberation theology is dead, a critique that reappears every few years as though to wish away its ongoing presence. If the various types of liberation theology mentioned earlier are any indication, liberation theology is alive and well, but it has diversified into ever more local contexts and scholarly disciplines beyond theology. Thus, it is now more appropriate to speak of liberation theologies and of a liberationist approach to particular fields of study. For example, within the area of peace psychology, one can find articles and books on a psychology of liberation. This sub-field traces its roots to the Salvadoran Jesuit and social psychologist Ignacio Martín Baró who was killed in 1989 by El Salvador’s repressive government (Montero and Sonn, 2011). In addition, one can turn to liberation sociology and its emphasis on research and activism (Feagin et al., 2015), or to an anthropology of liberation and its ongoing struggle to restructure the discipline by owning its colonial

past (Harrison, 2010). In all of these endeavours, there is a normative commitment to the generation of scholarship through engaged and relational praxis.

What can we say of a liberationist peace studies? In a world with complex layers of violence and the ongoing threat of war, liberation theology is strategically positioned to engage further with the field of peace studies. The thematic convergences are many, but the methodological commitments are yet to be explored at length. While the field of peace studies has a normative orientation in its research and practice, there is room to further refine the nature of this normativity. For example, what is the relationship between liberation theology's notion of a preferential option for the poor and the growing sense in peace studies of a preferential option for the local? Furthermore, does the field of peace studies, like theology as a whole, need to be liberated from certain methodological assumptions about what constitutes good research and scholarship? And if so, what is the process for this liberation? These and other questions are for another time. But perhaps the answer is not only a theoretical one, but lies somewhere in the liberative and dynamic process of practice, reflection and the generation of transformative scholarship.

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