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MINDFUL, LIBERATING SOCIAL ACTION:
GUSTAVO GUTIERREZ AND THICH NHAT HANH

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Abstract

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GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ AND THICH NHAT HANH

By Nathan Todd Digby

This dissertation is designed to enrich North American Christian social activism by weaving together the insights of Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez and Vietnamese engaged Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh. Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh both write from the perspective of the poor and suffering in their contexts and both make suggestions as to what a fitting response to suffering should be. However, because their cultural contexts and religious trainings are different, they appropriate different tools for their investigations. Bringing their analyses together offers a richer understanding of human suffering and points to a vision of sustainable social activism and solidarity with the Third World poor.

I begin by looking at the relationship between poverty and human suffering in general. Next, I examine Gutiérrez´s understanding of *el mundo del pobre* and argue that it provides a unique angle on human suffering, thereby making it relevant to theologians outside of Latin America. I explore Gutiérrez´s understanding of the divine "preferential option of the poor" and his vision of "solidarity with the poor." Taken together, these two concepts call North American Christians to a new spirituality of solidarity which entails a radical break with the values of their culture. Nevertheless, Gutiérrez does not explain what a commitment to the Latin American poor might look like in the daily spiritual lives of middle-class or affluent North Americans.

To this end, I investigate Nhat Hanh's understanding of suffering and vision of sustainable social action. By positing ignorance as a constituent factor in all human suffering, Nhat Hanh demonstrates that the suffering of the poor is inherently connected to the suffering of the rich through global systems of oppression. I show how Nhat Hanh's vision of "interbeing" can give a radical meaning to Gutiérrez's vision of solidarity for First World activists. Finally, I propose a variety of spiritual practices, based on the mindfulness techniques of Nhat Hanh, that I believe can help North Americans to understand suffering in a deeper way, to recognize the influence of economic and cultural structures in their lives, and to live out a long-term commitment of solidarity with the poor.

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For Paty and Olivia, the loves of my life

and

para todos aquellos que sufren, sean pobres o ricos

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The first seeds for this work were planted in me long ago, before I had even heard of either Gustavo Gutierrez or Thich Nhat Hanh. When my somewhat-idealistic parents made the decision to adopt into our family three children of mixed racial heritage, they did more than provide me with allies and accomplices for the escapades of my youth; they sensitized me to the reality of racial prejudice and taught me to stand alongside the victims of discrimination. To them, and to my siblings, I give my love and thanks.

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learn from Buddhist teachers with confidence and grace. I am grateful to Buddhism scholars Sara McClintock and Tara Doyle, without whose patience and encouragement this dissertation would not have been written. Additionally, I want to thank all the wise teachers at the Drepung Loseling Institute, the Atlanta Soto Zen Center, and the Shambhala Meditation Center of Atlanta for showing me how to meditate and to pay attention to my life.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: POVERTY AND SUFFERING

You ask me what poverty is. It is here, staring you right in the eye. Look at me! I live alone. I do not have enough food. I have no decent clothing and accommodation. I have no clean water to drink. Look at my swollen legs. I can't get to the dispensary, which is too far for me to walk. I have to walk a mile to catch a bus. I cannot see well. I can no longer do any farming. So don't ask me to tell you what poverty is. Just look and see for yourself.

Grandmother from Fiji, *Christianity, Poverty and Wealth*

Of poverty and suffering at least two things can be said—both are problematic and both are widespread. Neither are new phenomena. History records that human societies have always had their poor. Likewise, human life has been ever marked by pain, anguish, and distress. What are new are the degrees of intensity that poverty and suffering have reached worldwide. The twentieth century, for all its technological advancement and unprecedented economic growth, has left more than one fifth of humanity in "absolute poverty."[1] More people than ever before are dying of starvation, malnutrition, inadequate sanitation, and polluted water. Not only do people have less, but they are crueler to one another. Never has the human race seen such massive oppression, such unabashed hoarding and exploitation of resources, such widespread self-inflicted slaughter. Genocide, holocaust, and human-induced environmental destruction have now eclipsed natural disasters in their ability to dehumanize, to starve, and to kill. As one

[1] As will be analyzed below, there is disagreement about how global poverty should be measured. The "one-fifth" measurement is moderate at best. Others calculate that one half of the world is poor. [See Michael H. Taylor and Konrad Raiser, *Christianity, Poverty and Wealth* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2003), 1.] For the "one-fifth estimate" see Paul M. Kennedy, *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1993). For a highly detailed analysis of the variations of poverty across the globe, see United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Indicators," in *Human Development Report 2007/8: Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 219-354.

author writes of the modern era, "History shudders, pierced by events of massive public suffering."[2] The cries of the poor and the suffering ring out louder than ever across the earth.

Just as poverty and suffering are not new, neither is human concern for those who experience them. The ancient Confucian philosopher Mencius claims that "all people have a heart that cannot bear to see the suffering of others."[3] People are naturally impelled to respond when others are in pain. Accordingly, religious traditions throughout time have offered various ways to cope with these problems, both theoretically and practically. Nevertheless, the horrific intensity of poverty and human suffering in the last century has pressed many religious people to revisit how they understand the nature of suffering and how they respond to it. Two significant and innovative figures responding to contemporary suffering are the Peruvian Catholic priest Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Gutiérrez writes from the perspective of the poor in Latin America, Nhat Hanh from his experience of the dreadful violence of the Vietnam War. Both thinkers reinterpret the classical perspectives of their traditions in order to make sense of the current experience of suffering in their communities. In so doing, both figures find resources in the contemplative aspects of their traditions that intimate what a fitting response to suffering might be. I contend that, while the conclusions and suggestions of Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh are each appropriate to their

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[2] Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 1.

[3] Mencius 2A: 6. This statement comes amid an ancient parable in which Mencius posits that any human being, upon seeing an infant teetering on the edge of a well, would *naturally* be compelled to reach out and rescue the child. He argues that, in part, that which makes humans human is an innate desire to help those who suffer. This parable is retold in Paul F. Knitter and Muzaffar Chandra, *Subverting Greed: Religious Perspectives on the Global Economy* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 1-2.

contexts and adequate in their own right, much can be gained by bringing them into conversation with one another. That is to say, a richer, more complex understanding of the nature of suffering and a more multifaceted vision of how one might respond can be had when these two thinkers are brought into dialogue.

The present study is designed to construct a kind of enriched Christian social activism, one fed by the wisdom of both Gustavo Gutiérrez and Thich Nhat Hanh.[4] In many ways, I imagine this project being something of a "next step," a continuation of the work begun by Gutiérrez. In his later work, Gutiérrez has been clear that his early use of Marxist categories to understand the nature of poverty can be enhanced by incorporating different analytical tools coming from a variety of perspectives.[5] I believe that engaged Buddhism, as conceived by Thich Nhat Hanh, offers fertile tools, not only for a richer understanding of suffering, but also for a more sustainable vision of how North American Christian social activists can develop peace and live in solidarity with the poor. This argument will unfold primarily through a comparison of the understandings of suffering and the suggestions for social action put forth by Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh. The central goal of this descriptive, comparative undertaking will be to develop a theological basis for sustained social action and to articulate spiritual practices that foster its endurance.

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[4] It may be the case that Buddhists could learn something from Gutiérrez and that constructing an enriched Buddhist social activism would have merit. However, for me as a Christian to suggest what Buddhist activists need to learn seems ungracious work. For this project, I hope to construct a vision of Christian social activism that is both contemplative and activist. Though nourished by comparative theological work, I imagine the natural audience for this enterprise to be Christian pastors and other actors interested in spiritually-centered social transformation.

[5] Other thinkers have also picked up Gutiérrez's suggestion and have attempted to interpret his concept of "the poor" using critical tools from such disciplines as ethnic studies, feminist theory, queer theory, border thinking, comparative legal theory, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralist social theory. Very few, however, have employed tools from other religions.

To begin, however, a few words concerning how poverty and suffering relate to one another merit attention.

1. Poverty: An Initial Look

How one conceptualizes the issues of poverty and suffering in large part determines how one envisions a proper response to them. As a way of setting the stage, it is important to ask what it means to be poor.

Poverty is most commonly understood in material terms. It is a condition of lack, a deficiency in the essential necessities of life—adequate food, water, clothing, and shelter.[6] This definition is often broadened to include the absence of proper access to certain social goods designed to support the proper care of one's body within a communal milieu, such as access to education, health care, employment, and land. One's ability to attain employment and health care, for example, has a direct effect on one's ability to acquire food, water, and shelter. In modern life, poverty is expressed most frequently in economic terms. A person's capacity to obtain life's basic necessities is increasingly dependent upon the ability to purchase them. People generally have access to medical care and schooling when they have the economic earnings that make such access possible. For example, the "poverty line," as conceptualized in most countries, is a financial measurement calculated upon personal income in relation to a judgment of the minimum amount necessary to maintain an acceptable life. First and foremost, then, poverty is understood as a shortage of economic or material goods.

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[6] Hunger Project, *Ending Hunger: An Idea Whose Time Has Come* (New York, N.Y.: Praeger, 1985).

Understood in this way, poverty is clearly an enormous global problem. There is currently a large and heated debate among those who measure poverty concerning whether the state of poverty worldwide is getting better or worse. On one side of the conflict are proponents of unrestrained free market capitalism and the World Bank's structural readjustment programs. These actors use the World Bank's notion of "extreme poverty"—living on less that one dollar per day—as a working definition of poverty and claim that worldwide poverty has decreased by half since the early 1980s.[7] On the other side are those who claim that poverty should be understood as the absence of those essentials necessary for a life reasonably free of hunger, disease, and exposure. These analysts claim that World Bank measurements belie the actual situation of the poor, whose ability to live a decent life has been made categorically worse by the forces of globalization.[8]

Statistical information is easily manipulated along political and ideological lines. Moreover, numerical reasoning tends to overwhelm and immobilize those whom it convinces. It is difficult for anyone to internalize a statement such as, "20,000 people die of starvation every day." Whether one believes those suggesting that global poverty is decreasing or those who say it is on the rise, both sides agree that it is still a tremendous

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[7] See Surjit S. Bhalla, *Imagine There's No Country: Poverty, Inequality, and Growth in the Era of Globalization* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 2002), and Martin Ravallion, *Poverty Lines in Theory and Practice* (Washington, DC: World Bank), 1998.

[8] See Sanjay Reddy & Camelia Minoiu, "Has World Poverty *Really* Fallen?" *Review of Income and Wealth* 53, no. 3 (Sept 2007): 484-502. For the heart of the dispute, see Sanjay Reddy and Thomas Pogge, *How* Not *to Count the Poor! A Reply to Ravallion* [memeo] (New York: Bernard College, 2002) and Martin Ravallion, *How* Not *to Count the Poor! A Reply to Reddy and Pogge* [memeo] Washington DC: Development Research Group, World Bank, 2002); both available at www.socialanalysis.com. For an alterglobalization perspective on the current state of the poor see Jerry Mander, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, and International Forum on Globalization, *Paradigm Wars: Indigenous Peoples' Resistance to Globalization* (San Francisco: University of California Press, 2006) and Sarah Anderson, *Views from the South: The Effects of Globalization and the WTO on Third World Countries* (Chicago: International Forum on Globalization, 2000).

dilemma. Without overly relying on statistics to depict the total situation of the poor, some are mentioned here as a reminder that a distinctive feature of poverty in the twentieth century is its massive global presence.

- Today 1.2 billion people live in "extreme" poverty, surviving on less that one dollar per day. Almost 3 billion people, half the world's population, live on less than two dollars per day.[9]
- In Palestine and Colombia, 60 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. In the Philippines, it is 75 percent.[10]
- 1.2 billion people are without access to safe water and 2.6 billion without access to adequate sanitation.[11]
- 854 million people worldwide are undernourished.[12]

[9] These figures come from the World Bank and are the numbers most frequently cited by economists. [See The World Bank, *World Development Report 2000/1: Attacking Poverty: Opportunity, Empowerment, and Security* (Washington D.C.: The World Bank, 2000), 3.] The World Bank defines "extreme poverty" as living on less than one dollar a day and "moderate poverty" as living on between one and two dollars a day. A dollar, for these statistics, actually refers to a system of floating exchange rates called "purchasing power parity," which is based on the notion that people in different countries should be able to buy roughly the same amount of goods for a given sum of money. The World Bank contends that people earning between one and two dollars a day should be able to meet their basic needs, while forgoing things such as education and healthcare. For such persons, the loss of a job or any significant health issue would threaten their survival. Disregarding the criticisms that there is no real purchasing parity between countries—that is, that what it takes to buy food and clothing is not the same in all countries—and that the World Bank's measurements grossly underestimate the actual numbers of the poor, according to their estimates, still half of the world lives in poverty.

[10] Taylor and Raiser, 1.

[11] United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2006: Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), v.

[12] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *State of Food Insecurity in the World 2006* (Rome, Italy: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006), 8.

- Every day, nearly 16,000 children die from hunger-related issues—one child every five seconds. Almost all of these deaths occur in developing countries.[13]
- Calorie deficiencies and poor nutrition cause almost one in three people to have disabilities or to die prematurely.[14]

These numbers conspire to paint a grim picture of material scarcity for the poor who live, overwhelmingly, in the world's developing nations. Yet poverty is a much more complex reality than a simple absence of material goods. To live in poverty is to be affected not just physically, but also emotionally, socially, and psychologically as well. The poor often find themselves excluded from the social and cultural mainstream. Michael Taylor, professor of Social Theology at the University of Birmingham, UK, writes, "There are barriers excluding the poor not only from work and opportunities to make a living but from generally sharing in the life of society. They have no social standing, no voice, no social ties with the better-off. They are isolated, alienated and marginalized from wider society, and do not see themselves as part of it."[15] Ostracized from the mainstream, the poor become their own subculture, a de facto social group to the extent that they are despised by other social groups. Their very status as outcast

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[13] Black, Robert, Morris, Saul, and Jennifer Bryce, "Where and Why Are 10 Million Children Dying Every Year?," *The Lancet* 361(2003): 2226-2234. For an analysis of how gender affects these deaths, see UNICEF, *State of the World's Children 2007—Women and Children: The Double Dividend of Gender Equality* (New York: UNICEF, 2006).

[14] World Health Organization, *Turning the Tide of Malnutrition: Responding to the Challenge of the 21st Century* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2000), 7.

[15] Taylor and Raiser, 4.

defines them as a collective. As we shall see below, Gustavo Gutiérrez terms this relegated marginality as "the world of the poor."[16]

The social exclusion of the poor is compounded by a psychological aspect of poverty—a type of self-imposed separation. Living day-in day-out without the basic necessities of life can have a powerful effect on one's state of mind and sense of self-worth. Besides the understandable stress stemming from the continual fight to survive, many poor speak of their low self-esteem, "their loss of dignity, their humiliation, their feelings of inadequacy and even their sense of shame."[17] In short, many poor are embarrassed by the squalor of their lives, by their old and dirty clothes that result from living in homes with dirt floors and without access to sanitation or running water. They become reluctant to face the ridicule of mainstream society and intentionally choose not to intermingle or to retrieve the few benefits which some societies afford them.

2. The Poor and the Other

One is never poor in a vacuum. That is to say, even while the poor are often marginalized from conventional society, they are nevertheless intricately bound to it. This is because poverty is fundamentally an issue of power. The poor rarely have the means to change their situation. They have neither the social influence that wealth affords nor the personal conviction that their actions can make a substantial difference to

[16] See, for example, "Complejidad del mundo del pobre," in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *La densidad del presente* (Salamanca: Ediciones sígueme, 2003), 101-104. In other works he terms it, "El mundo del otro. El mundo del pobre, del oprimido, de las clases explotadas." (The world of the other. The world of the poor, the oppressed, the exploited clases.) See Gustavo Gutiérrez, "El mundo del otro," in *La fuerza histórica de los pobres* (Salamanca: Ediciones sígueme, 1982), 61-64.

[17] Taylor and Raiser, 4.

their financial circumstances. The poor in general feel that their condition is natural and unavoidable. To the extent that the political and legal systems of a society are designed to advantage those who have the power to change them, the poor, who lack such power, are constantly victimized by others. They depend upon others to tell them where they may live, what kind of work they may do, and, ultimately, what they are worth as human beings. Many poor may never know or even meet those who write the laws concerning who has access to medical attention, education, or cultivatable land, but their lives are, nevertheless, connected to these others.

Philosopher Michel Foucault points out that power is fundamentally a relational issue.[18] Power is not a substance which one may possess, not something acquired and held in isolation. Rather, it is manifest in the various maneuvers, techniques, and tactics of control in which people participate. One might envision power as a giant web of relationships, a complex matrix across which dynamics of liberation and oppression operate. In this sense, poverty can be viewed as the side-effect of relationships of social hegemony. People who are poor, without access to essential material necessities or the social goods that impart them, are inextricably connected to those who have such necessities and goods.

A key feature of poverty then is its relationship to wealth and power. Poverty is not equally distributed across the globe. Some eighty percent of the world's poorest

[18] The relational character of power is a common theme in Foucault's work. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 92-94; Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, vol. 1, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et.al. (New York: New Press, 1997), 288-292; and Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routeldge, 1999), 152.

people live in the southern hemisphere.[19] Northern countries, which contain merely one-forth of the world's people, maintain five-sixths of its wealth.[20] Moreover, the second half of the twentieth century has seen the gap between the richest and poorest countries widen rapidly. Simply put, as the poor get poorer, the rich get richer. This is true not only between countries, but also within them. In South Korea the wealthiest twenty percent have up to as much as forty times the assets of the poorer eighty percent. The poorest twenty percent of the people in Colombia make approximately two percent of the gross domestic product, while the richest twenty percent collects sixty-six percent.[21] As smaller numbers of people gain control of the world's resources, greater numbers are left with almost nothing.

Social inequality, however, is not just an issue of the rich verses the poor. There are varying levels of marginalization within any stratum of society, even within the world of the poor. Some poor find themselves more vulnerable than others. Often the most victimized groups can be identified by gender and race. Throughout the world, women work harder and are paid less than men.[22] In the United States, people of color are significantly poorer than their Caucasian neighbors. In every country in Latin American,

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[19] See "Inequality and Exclusion" in Rob van Drimmelen, *Faith in a Global Economy: A Primer for Christians* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1988), 15-17.

[20] See Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 64.

[21] Taylor and Raiser, 2.

[22] Paul Knitter refers to this as the "feminization of poverty." [See, Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions*, 64.] Keenly attuned to the marginalization of women in particular, Gutiérrez dedicates a chapter in his book *The God of Life* to the situation of those who are "doubly oppressed" and are "the least of the least." [See Gutiérrez, *The God of Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 165.] He sees in Mary, the mother of Jesus, a model of one who suffers greatly and explains that it is her very suffering that endears her to Latin Americans.

the native indigenous communities are by far the most oppressed. Sexism and racism are clearly determining factors of poverty. Moreover both phenomena, deplorable as they may be, fundamentally link the very groups they seek to distinguish. Sexism and racism differentiate people by contrasting them: women are different than men, blacks are different than whites, indigenous persons and *mestizos* are different than the pure bloods of their conquerors. This type of essentializing makes "the other" a part of the very definition of oneself. That which makes a single, dark-skinned *Quichua* woman in Ecuador poor is in part the fact that she is not light-skinned and male. The situation of the world's poor, especially its female and darker-complexioned, is intrinsically related to the perceptions and behavior of the world's rich. This analysis has serious implications for those with privilege, a point to which we will shortly return.

3. Poverty and Human Suffering[23]

Suffering is most simply understood, at least in the West, as any type of physical or mental distress. Suffering includes bodily pains such as toothaches and broken bones, as well as negative psychological experiences, such as frustration, grief, fear, and despair. From this view, poverty entails a fair amount of suffering in both its physical and mental facets. The short-term and long-term term affects of starvation, malnutrition, illness, and disease that result from poor sanitation and inadequate access to health care yield a high measure of physical pain. Moreover, the psychological wear of living in a constant state of deprivation can cause a great deal of mental anguish, ranging from sadness, anxiety,

[23] An investigation of the fundamental nature of human suffering is a central goal of the conversation proposed in this dissertation. To that end, I leave a deeper description of its features and causes to my dialogue partners in later chapters. The purpose of this section is to underscore the relationship between poverty and suffering.

anger, and panic to shame, humiliation, loneliness, and self-hatred. In short, to be poor is, most often, to suffer.[24]

Not all human suffering is the result of poverty—a wealthy, emotionally contented person can be hit by a car. Nevertheless, the relationship between poverty and suffering cannot be reduced to a simple "X is a subset of Y" description, as if poverty were merely one type or one cause of suffering. In many instances, suffering can lead to poverty. A severe injury can consume all of a person's financial resources. A mental breakdown or severe depression can result in the loss of a job. The heartbreak and humiliation that arise from a broken relationship can produce the same kind of self-imposed isolation and loneliness so characteristic of those in poverty. When poverty is understood in its broader sense to include social, emotional, and psychological dimensions alongside its material aspects, distinguishing whether poverty results in suffering or if suffering produces poverty can be difficult. The two intertwine; each both causes and is affected by the other. This is especially the case for society's most vulnerable groups: women, children, the elderly, and persons of color.

Suffering is less quantifiable than poverty. There are no large-scale global initiatives established by international institutions, such as the United Nations, designed to measure or combat global suffering per se.[25] The absence of such projects is due in

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[24] Knitter frankly states that the "statistics on the low or inferior economic status of nations or groups do not constitute mere 'facts' for us to imbibe with our morning coffee along with the baseball scores. These figures represent, rather, a huge, throbbing mass of human suffering. As the liberation theologians tell us with sobering simplicity: poverty kills, poverty murders, poverty *is* violence." Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions,* 59.

[25] There have been at least two nascent initiatives attempting to measure human suffering. First, in a 1988 article in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology,* Dr. Ralph Siu proposed that suffering could be gauged in quantitative units he called "dukkas." [See Ralph Siu, "Panetics—The Study of the Infliction of Suffering," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 28, no. 3 (1988): 6-22.] Shortly afterwards, Siu founded the International Society for Panetics and published *Panetics Triology* [Ralph Siu, *Panetics Triology,* 3 vols.

part to the ambiguous nature of suffering and to the common belief that "everyone suffers." Nevertheless, many analysts concur that global suffering is on the rise. In an albeit less than scientific study, theologian Paul Knitter divides suffering into four categories: (1) suffering of the body—due to poverty; (2) suffering of the earth—due to abuse; (3) suffering of the spirit—victimization; and (4) suffering due to violence.[26] Knitter contends that in each category, global suffering and humanity's awareness of it are increasing. There are more emaciated and malnourished bodies; higher levels of species loss, deforestation, air pollution, and ecosystem destruction; more dehumanizing legal systems, economic policies, and international arrangements that treat escalating numbers of people as instruments to be used and discarded for the economic gain of a few; and higher numbers of military conflicts being fought with ever more lethal and indiscriminate weaponry. If there is truth in Knitter's examination, then the state of global suffering is reaching new and startling proportions.

What is striking in Knitter's description is that each form of suffering arises in part because of the interconnections between people. That is, suffering, even personal mental suffering, stems at least to some extent from the actions and perceptions of others. Just as no one is ever poor in a vacuum, at a fundamental level, people do not suffer in

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(Washington DC: International Society for Panetics, 1993).] that further promote this theme. Since his death in 1998, the International Society for Panetics has admitted to being unable to measure suffering and has questioned the efficacy of their earlier quantitative approach. Second, in 1987 the Population Crisis Committee released the "International Human Suffering Index," which compared 141 countries according to several indicators of human welfare: life expectancy, infant immunization, clean drinking water, daily calorie supply, secondary school enrollment, rate of inflation, GNP per capita, political freedom, communication technology, and civil rights. Soon afterwards, the index was criticized for correlating suffering with population growth and for reducing suffering to criteria closely akin to poverty. See Allen C. Kelly, "The 'International Human Suffering Index': Reconsideration of the Evidence," *Population and Development Review* 15, no. 4 (December 1989): 731-737.

[26] See Knitter, "The Faces of Suffering," in *One Earth, Many Religions*, 58-67.

isolation from others. On one hand, this is of course a truism—few people live completely alone as if in Hobbes' hypothetical "state of nature." Because we exist in a world populated by others, we suffer in the presence of others. On the other hand, however, suffering seems to have an interweaving character; it stems from and leads to connection with other people.

Feminist scholars have shown the interlacing nature of various systems of oppression (i.e. the "isms:" sexism, racism, classism, speciesism, and one may include homophobia).[27] Sexism and racism, for example, function similarly in the conscious and unconscious stereotypes held by oppressors and in their culturally conditioned tendency to over or undervalue certain groups. Knitter claims that the origin "of the spectrum of human and ecological suffering is. . .for the most part, the result of *human decisions*, the result of what some human beings, those who have the power, decide to do to other human beings."[28] The roots of much mental and physical suffering are related.

However, if the causes of suffering are related, so too is the suffering experienced by those who endure it. Suffering spreads out, unfolds, and makes itself known in different forms. Mental stress manifests itself physically in the body in the form of aching muscles and stomach ulcers. Debilitating physical injuries affect one's state of mind and sense of self-worth. Discrimination against women ultimately hurts men and children as well. While Knitter associates poverty with the suffering of the body, the first

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[27] See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984). Many ecofeminist theorists go further to suggest that there are fundamental connections between *all* forms of oppression. See Carol J. Adams, *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992); and Maria Mies and Vananda Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publications, 1993).

[28] Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions*, 63.

of his categories, it seems quite clear that poverty is also related to violence, victimization, and ecological destruction (the other three), as both cause and consequence. Poverty and suffering are intricately intertwined, such that hard and fast distinctions between them falter under the weight of deeper examination. Perhaps in everyday parlance, when poverty is seen as plain material deficiency, one might argue that poverty is of lesser concern than is human suffering in general, whose scope includes a wider array of afflictions. However, when the social and psychological contours of poverty are explored, the distinctions between poverty and suffering begin to blur.

Another direction from which to approach the question of measuring human suffering is to ask if there are some groups of people who suffer more than others. Surely all people experience physical pain and mental distress in their lives, but it merits query whether there are some people who suffer daily, intensely, as a way of life. Latin American liberation theologians answer this question with a resounding, "Yes—it is the poor." The people who struggle day in and day out without enough to eat, who are marginalized by their societies, victimized and abused by their neighbors, oppressed by their governments and their colonizers, exploited by their employers, and forgotten in the pages of history are those who suffer most. They are the despised and rejected *pueblo crucificado* (crucified people).[29]

This project recognizes that the awareness of new levels of poverty and human suffering in the world have prompted some religious persons to reexamine their traditions in an attempt to make sense of contemporary suffering. In the last forty years, one such search for meaning has come from within Latin American Christianity in the form of

[29] Liberation theologians often refer to the poor as *el pueblo crucificado*. As an example, see Ignacio Ellacuría, "El pueblo crucificado" in *Cruz y resurrección* (Mexico City: CRT, 1978), 48ff.

liberation theology. Latin American liberation theologians contend that to understand suffering, one must listen first to those who suffer. They point out that the majority of the suffering poor live in the Third World (not in the countries in which most Christian theology has been written) and reinterpret Christianity from the point of view of *el reverso de la historia* (from the underside of history).[30] Following their cue about listening first to poor of the Third World, this project turns to the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the founders of liberation theology and a recognized spokesperson for the Latin American poor.

4. Liberation Theology and Gustavo Gutiérrez

Of all the people associated with Latin American liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez's name lies at the top of the list. A theologian and Roman Catholic priest from Peru, Gutiérrez first used the concept of liberation theology in 1968 in a meeting with the poor residents of Chimbote, a rural fishing community in Peru. His seminal book *Teología de la Liberación* was published in 1971, initiating a veritable transformation in the way Christian theology is done. Still considered the fundamental text of liberation theology, this book challenges not only the way First World theology is constructed but, by proxy, the way First World Christians act as social agents in the world.

Gutiérrez is principally concerned with the suffering of the poor in Latin America. In his native Peruvian context Gutiérrez sees a collective of outcast and forgotten people—people who do not have enough to eat, who are chronically unemployed or underpaid, and who suffer both institutional and personal violence as a way of life. Thus,

[30] See Gutiérrez "Teología desde el reverso de la historia," in *La fuerza histórica de los pobres*, 215-276.

he asserts that the most atrocious human suffering can be understood in part through socioeconomic terms. He argues, "The lot of the poor, in a word, is suffering."[31] Asking why poverty exists to the extent that it does in Latin America, Gutiérrez turns to the social sciences and the work of Marxist sociologists, especially Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Falleto.[32] Following such thinkers, Gutiérrez placed principal blame on the global capitalist economy in his early work. He suggested that the underdevelopment of Latin American countries was closely linked to the development of other industrialized countries in the North. The dynamics of international capitalism are such, he explained, that the wealth generated at the center inherently produces social imbalance, political tension, and poverty at the periphery.[33] Hence, the suffering of the South is in great part a result of its dependent relationship with the North, a by-product of the North's advancement.

In more recent years, Gutiérrez has consented that the theory of dependency, while still an important tool, is an inadequate one for a full understanding of the complexity of poverty worldwide. He recognizes that oppression can occur in a variety of relationships, whose vectors cut through more than just the social classes of a society. He now invites analysis from a variety of human sciences, including, among others, psychology, ethnology, and anthropology. In his own work, however, he continues to look predominantly at socioeconomics and suggests that the free markets of global

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[31] Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," in Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 236.

[32] See Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Falleto, *Dependencia y desarrollo en América Latina* (Mexico City: Siglo veintiuno, 1969).

[33] See Gutiérrez, "La teoría de la dependencia," in *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas*, 6a. ed. (Salamanca: Ediciones sígueme, 1974), 118-125.

neoliberalism and free trade agreements produce even higher levels of suffering for the poor.[34]

As a theologian, Gutiérrez reads the reality of the poor in Latin America in light of the biblical understanding of poverty. Here he contends that the whole bible, from Cain and Abel forward, through the story of the Israelites in Egypt, and into Jesus' life and teachings in the gospels, witnesses to God's special love and predilection for the weak and the oppressed. While God loves all of creation, the bible reveals that there is a particular divine tenderness for the marginalized (i.e. the hungry, the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the imprisoned, the enslaved, the outcast, and the abused). He calls this divine partiality God's "preferential option for the poor" and suggests that, while it is a central theme for Christianity in general, it is *the* most significant theological concept for liberation theology and for the church in Latin America. If God's distinctive favor lies with those who suffer, then the particular duty of the Christian is to work toward their good and their liberation from suffering.

For Gutiérrez, the key to working toward the liberation of the poor lies in solidarity with them. The life of discipleship for all Christians, both the rich and the poor, involves solidarity with the suffering poor. For the poor, solidarity involves gaining a new sense of their own worth and their rightful claims on society. Solidarity with the poor, for the poor, is conscientization—gaining a raised awareness of their own plight and unmasking their suffering caused by unjust economic, social, and political

[34] Gutiérrez, "Liberation Theology and the Future of the Poor," in Joerg Rieger, ed., *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 97-123. He also suggests that the postmodern critique of metanarratives, while appropriate for denouncing dogmatic and totalitarian thinking, has promoted an attitude of cultural relativism and individualism—a kind of "anything goes" sensibility—that results in an enormous indifference to the plight of the poor. When valuing a plurality of interpretations becomes more important than the utopia of alleviating suffering, then the poor become the first victims.

systems. For the nonpoor, solidarity implies a determined effort to enter into the actual world of the poor, to deeply listen to their experiences, to identify with their situation and with their suffering, and then to speak and act in opposition to the forces that have led to their affliction.

5. Implications for North American Christians

From the beginning Gutiérrez has been clear that his liberation theology is a theology by and for the poor of Latin America. His books are dedicated to them, his writing addresses them, and his social activism has been on their behalf.[35] The institute where he lives and works, *Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas*, attends to the needs of his impoverished neighbors in the Lima neighborhood of Rímac. Though many Latin American poor have neither the access to nor the ability to read his writing, his articulation of the concepts of solidarity and protest are meant to inspire, affirm, and motivate the poor to consider themselves as active subjects of history.

When Gutiérrez has taught in Europe or the United States, he has emphasized his role as a spokesperson for the lived reality and theological perspective of his primary audience, the Latin American poor. He has not taken it upon himself to speak for the poor in other contexts or to become a spiritual director to the industrialized rich. Gutiérrez's vision of social change is not founded upon teaching oppressors to quit oppressing. Rather, he sees in recent popular movements arising from within

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[35] Gutiérrez has spent much of his time working with *comunidades cristianas de base*, which are small groups of Christians from poorer classes who meet throughout Latin America to familiarize themselves with the circumstances of their exploitation, to generate a sense of solidarity to fight such exploitation, to study the bible, and to seek to give account of God's action in the world. See, Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Poor and the Church in Latin America* (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1984).

marginalized groups in Latin America the action of God on their behalf. As the poor gain a new awareness of their situation, they, with God's help, become agents for the transformation of society and for the arrival of the Kingdom of God. His is a bottom-up, rather than a trickle-down, liberation.

As is appropriate to his position, Gutiérrez has, therefore, directed much more of his attention to how the concepts of solidarity and protest apply to the poor in Latin America than to what they mean for Christians in the industrialized world. Yet much of his work places the cause of poverty and suffering at the feet of global economic, social, and political systems which necessarily include other classes and countries. This means his theology has, by proxy, serious and strong implications for Christians in the North who are charged with active participation in sinful structures of oppression. If God is especially on the side of the poor, what does this mean for the rich? If Christ is the liberator of the oppressed, who is Christ to the oppressors and how might Christians amidst their ranks take part in God's liberating action?

Gutiérrez's focus on the suffering of the poor in Latin America points to a deeper truth that one person's suffering is intimately and intricately bound up with everyone else's. Poverty and suffering do not happen in a vacuum. The implications of Gutiérrez's work suggest that the liberation of the poor and oppressed is necessarily dependent upon the liberation of the rich and the oppressors and vice versa. Both the oppressed and their oppressors need a new awareness of suffering and a deeper understanding that the "other" is always intrinsically a part of one's own context. I contend that at its heart, Gutiérrez's notion of solidarity calls for a renewed focus on the

interdependent character of life and on the web of relationships in which the oppressed and oppressors both live.

Within North America, responses to Gutiérrez and to liberation theology have been mixed. In the United States, strong opposition arose within the political establishment to anything associated with Marxism.[36] Within North American Christianity many simply overlooked Latin American liberation theology as something having nothing to do with the United States. A common sentiment has been that the United States should first get its own house in order by attending to the poverty within its own borders. Yet in a country where the suffering of the poor is not nearly as obvious as it is in Latin America, the demands of Gutiérrez's call for solidarity seemed too radical. After all, didn't Jesus say the poor would always be with us?[37]

Among other North American Christians, especially those predisposed to social justice causes, Gutiérrez's focus on the suffering of the poor initially found strong sympathy. Nevertheless, even for them the enormity of trying to effect the structural change of a global economic system seemed too overwhelming. A fervent desire to help the poor soon shifted to critical, if not cynical, despair. Social ethicist Sharon Welsh

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[36] See John Meagher, "Liberation (?) Theology (?) for North America (?)," in Deane William Ferm, ed., *Liberation Theology North American Style* (New York: International Religious Foundation, 1987), 13-26. Parts of the American political establishment outright rejected Gutiérrez's liberation theology. In 1982 a working group convened to sketch out U.S. policy toward Latin America in the event that Ronald Reagan was elected president. In its confidential report, it discussed the need to fight liberation theology. In that same year, the Institute for Religion and Democracy was established for the express purpose of curtailing aid given to liberation theologians and "popular" Christian groups in Latin America by North American Christians. See Francois Houtart, "Theoretical and Institutional Bases of the Opposition to Liberation Theology," in *Expanding the View: Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Future of Liberation Theology*, eds. Marc Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 113-125.

[37] See Matt. 26:11.

suggests that this tendency to devolve into pessimism and inaction is a particular problem for middle-class activists:

> This inability to persist in resistance does not appear to be a universal problem, however. The temptation to cynicism and despair when problems are seen as intransigent is a temptation that takes a particular form for the middle class. This does not mean that those who are poor or working class are not damaged by or susceptible to despair. That is obviously not the case. But the despair of the affluent, the despair of the middle class has a particular tone: it is a despair cushioned by privilege. It is easier to give up on long-term social change when one is comfortable in the present—when it is possible to have challenging work, excellent health care and housing, and access to the fine arts. When the good life is present or within reach, it is tempting to despair of its ever being in reach for others and resort merely to enjoying it for oneself and one's family.[38]

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite argues that Americans refuse to take liberation theology seriously because the implications of the economic analysis on their way of life are too demanding. She contends that the United States suffers from a powerful false consciousness epitomized by a "pervasive ideology of complacency."[39] In the end, the result of Gutiérrez's critique of the suffering-producing systems of oppression that incriminate North Americans has been, for North American activists, an early agreement with his analysis, followed by a "failure of nerve" to do something about it.[40]

Gutiérrez contends that the ultimate motivation for social action, for solidarity with the poor, and for commitment to their liberation, arises neither from social analysis nor from human compassion, but from a spirituality that is grounded in God's gratuitous love. Since God has a special tenderness for the poor, those who love God owe the poor

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[38] Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 41.

[39] Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "On Becoming a Traitor: The Academic Liberation Theologian and the Future," in Joerg Rieger, ed., *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 22.

[40] Welch, 40.

a particular tenderness as well. He speaks of the importance of prayer and silence and of having a daily encounter of friendship with the poor. He also speaks of the duties of discipleship and the ethical requirements of being a follower of Jesus, which include a commitment to the poor. However, he pays little attention to *how* tenderness for the poor is developed within a person, particularly within the North American social actor. Nor does he explain what a commitment to the Latin American poor might look like in the daily spiritual lives of middle-class or affluent North Americans. I argue that the thinking of Thich Nhat Hanh, as well as being helpful in an analysis of suffering, is also insightful for *how* the affluent or middle-class activist can make a daily commitment to the poor. Better said, Nhat Hanh, in his engaged Buddhism, offers several suggestions for how to change personal attitudes, how to develop peace, and how to cultivate what Gutiérrez calls "spiritual poverty."[41] At its heart, Gutiérrez's work calls for a new spirituality. I contend that Nhat Hanh can help provide the content of that spirituality.

6. Engaged Buddhism and Thich Nhat Hanh

Thich Nhat Hanh provides a productive conversation partner for Gutiérrez. Having lived through the horrific cruelty of the Vietnam War, Nhat Hanh also writes from the perspective of the poor and suffering in his country. Like Gutiérrez, Nhat Hanh believes that the alleviation of suffering begins with a raised consciousness of suffering. Like Gutiérrez, he saw that the concrete physical suffering of his people was directly connected to systems of violence and oppression which involved other more powerful nations. Attempting to address suffering at this source, Nhat Hanh has spent the better

[41] Gutiérrez understands spiritual poverty as an attitude of the heart, an interior disposition of nonattachment to worldly goods. His use of this concept is analyzed in detail in chapter 3.

part of the last forty years writing for and working with what Gutiérrez might call the "rich" or the "oppressors." In his concentrated attention to this audience, he has articulated a number of Buddhist themes and formulated a variety of spiritual practices that I believe can help the "oppressors" live deeply into solidarity with the poor in a sustainable way.

While Gutiérrez sees the most acute suffering concentrated in the world of the poor and oppressed, Nhat Hanh contends that everyone suffers, even those with economic advantage and political power. It may be that those who experience hunger or direct physical violence contend with a more immediate, concrete type of suffering than those with wealth and relative physical security. Thus, it is right to turn our attention to the former. However, when attention is directed to "the world of the poor" in a deep way, one sees that such suffering is a result of the suffering and illusion in "the world of the rich." For Nhat Hanh, the suffering of all reality is intimately interconnected and it is misguided to attend to the suffering of only one side.

Nhat Hanh contends that the physical and mental suffering that arises from economic lack and social marginalization are not altogether different from the physical and mental suffering experienced in other situations. Simply put, suffering is suffering. All sentient beings will experience physical pain; they will all encounter what they dislike, be separated from what they like; and they will all experience loss, dissatisfaction, and frustration when things in their lives change. Thus, he writes, "I do not think God wants us to take sides, even with the poor. The rich also suffer, in many cases more than the poor! They may be rich materially, but many are poor spiritually,

and they suffer a lot. . ..I am certain that those with the highest understanding will be able to see the suffering in both the poor and the rich."[42]

Nhat Hanh is very interested in addressing social injustice and working for social transformation. He admits that global capitalism has resulted in much suffering and oppression for the poor, especially the poor in the Third World.[43] However, for Nhat Hanh, the root of the problem rests not in global capitalism itself, not in unjust systems of oppression, but in the wrong perceptions people have about themselves and about reality in general that give rise to such systems. For Nhat Hanh, the root of most suffering lies in our ignorance of life's basic interdependency, in the illusion that individuals are fundamentally separate from one another. Such ignorance gives rise to the variety of human afflictions—cravings, attachments, anger, fear, prejudice, wrong views, etc.—which in turn produce unjust policies, discrimination, poverty, and suffering. He contends that "wrong perception is the real criminal."[44] While Gutiérrez turns to the social sciences and structural analysis to uncover the causes of acute suffering, Nhat Hanh turns to Buddhist psychology to reveal the origin of such oppressive structures.

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[42] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 79-80.

[43] Nhat Hanh sounds very much like Gutiérrez when he writes, "To accumulate wealth and own excessive portions of the world's natural resources is to deprive our fellow humans of the chance to live. To participate in oppressive and unjust social systems is to widen the gap between rich and poor and thereby aggravate the situation of social injustice." See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993), 119-120.

[44] See Thich Nhat Hanh, "Interbeing: An Interview with Thich Nhat Hanh," interview by the editors of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, in *A Lifetime of Peace: Essential Writings by and about Thich Nhat Hanh*, ed. Jennifer Schwamm Willis (New York: Marlow & Company, 2003), 165. While affirming that most suffering comes from wrong perceptions, Nhat Hanh also affirms that our perceptions have roots as well and that, in this sense, there is no final culprit. While wrong perceptions prevent people from having what he calls "Right View," in an ultimate sense, all views and all perceptions are misguided. From the standpoint of ultimate reality, all views are wrong views. This idea is analyzed in more detail in chapter 4. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 52-56.

At issue is the very notion of taking sides or that there are even sides to take. Nhat Hanh pushes his readers to move beyond the dualisms of North/South, rich/poor, oppressor/oppressed, and powerful/powerless to see that every person, every being, is inextricably linked, even made up of everyone else. Nhat Hanh sees the Buddhist teaching of Interdependent Co-Arising (*pratitya samutpada*), the teaching of cause and effect or of the fundamental interrelatedness of all reality, as the foundation of all Buddhist study and practice.[45] In his work, he renames this teaching "interbeing" and suggests that all life "inter-is;" it is made up of non-life elements. Even "wealth is made of non-wealth elements, and poverty is made by non-poverty elements."[46] For Nhat Hanh, there is no fundamental separation between the world of the poor and the world of the rich because they each are a part of one another. If the dominant theme of Gutiérrez's work has been "the preferential option for the poor," the dominant theme of Nhat Hanh's has been "interbeing."

Thus, for Nhat Hanh the notion of solidarity is built into the very fabric of reality. The key to changing unjust social systems is for humans to understand themselves for who they really are and to understand reality for what it really is. "Once we understand, our life will change accordingly and our actions will never help the oppressors strengthen their stand. Looking deeply does not mean being inactive. We become very active with our understanding."[47] Nhat Hanh argues that wisdom and compassion are inseparable. That is to say, when one becomes deeply aware of the interrelatedness among all things

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[45] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching,* 221.

[46] Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life,* ed. Arnold Kotler (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 98.

[47] Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ,* 81.

and of the connections between the lives of the oppressing and the oppressed, compassionate action and lifestyle changes will inevitably result.

Chapter 4 of this dissertation analyzes Nhat Hanh's notion of interbeing with particular attention to what it means for the relationship between what Gutiérrez calls the rich and the poor. It points to pivotal themes that undergird the spiritual practices which Nhat Hanh designs to enhance one's awareness of interbeing. Nhat Hanh suggests that the real starting point for any lasting social change must be with the individual, with increasing her or his internal peace and consciousness of reality. To this end he proposes a variety of mindfulness techniques designed to help one be more aware of self and reality in daily life.[48] These mindfulness techniques range from a whole host of daily meditations, to taking vows, doing conscientious work, going on retreats, writing letters, keeping altars, engaging in deep listening, cultivating insight, making ethical commitments, generating compassionate energy, dealing with negative formations, and forming communities of resistance, just to name a few.

Gutiérrez contends that theology is a *second* act; it is a critical reflection on historical praxis done in the life of faith. The *first* act is one of silence, prayer, and commitment. Nevertheless, his vision of this first act is usually confined to a description of its nature in communities of the poor in Latin America. He gives virtually no guidance

[48] It has often been suggested that Thich Nhat Hanh writes less about Buddhism than he does about meditative practice and the development of mindfulness. [See Trevor Carolan, "Mindfulness Bell: A Profile of Thich Nhat Hanh," in *A Lifetime of Peace*, ed. J. S. Willis, 218.] Virtually all his books have meditations designed to increase mindfulness in daily life. See in particular, Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*, rev. ed., ed. Rachel Neumann (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987); Thich Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Violence in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community, and the World* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Mindfulness*, trans. Mobi Ho. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975); Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*; Thich Nhat Hanh, *Present Moment Wonderful Moment: Mindfulness Verses for Daily Living*, trans. Annabel Laity (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988); and Thich Nhat Hanh, *Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living*, ed. Arnold Kotler (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1992).

to how this first moment is developed, nurtured, or sustained, particularly for those in the North. I contend that Nhat Hanh's suggestions for meditation and spiritual practices are helpful to Northerners in the development of this first act, particularly as it relates to creating solidarity with the poor. Nhat Hanh has suggested that people can only really know themselves and, thus, effect lasting social change, when they see those who suffer.[49] With this in mind, he contends that North America is the most difficult environment in which to practice the kind of mindfulness it takes to see those who suffer.[50] I argue that, if what Gutiérrez does is "theology," the critical reflection which comprises the *second* moment, then what Nhat Hanh does is give practical suggestions for the *first* moment, for how the life of faith may be transformative for self and for the world.

7. The Main Goal of this Project

The central aim to the present work is to take seriously Gutiérrez's notion of God's "preferential option of the poor" and his call to solidarity with the oppressed. Writing to and for poor Peruvians in the 1970s who were involved in lower-class liberation movements, Gutiérrez suggested that the most important question for theology

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[49] Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 125. In 1964, Nhat Hanh founded the *Tiep Hien* Order (the Order of Interbeing) in Vietnam. To structure the life of that order, he suggested fourteen precepts, which include guidelines such as: (1) Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact, visits, images, and sounds. (2) Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. (3) Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety. (4) Take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts. (5) Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Practice mindful breathing to come back to what is happening in the present moment. See Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Commentaries on the Tiep Hien Precepts*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987).

[50] Nhat Hanh, *Lifetime of Peace*, ed. J. S. Willis, 168.

at that place and time was, "How are Christians to live their faith, their hope, and their love amid a conflict that takes the form of class struggle?"[51] Much of his pastoral and academic work since that time has been in response to this question. As a North American distanced in space and time from those circumstances, I might reformulate the question as, "How are Christians to live their faith, their hope, and their love for their neighbors from within the culture and perspective of empire and privilege?" Seeing reality through the lens of Marxist concepts and dependency theory was important to Gutiérrez in the conscienization of the poor. Nevertheless, in an invitation to expand his thinking, he has said, "If some other kind of analysis should improve on the one I am now using, then, it seems to me, it will enrich my understanding of a situation that is one of wretchedness, injustice, and oppression."[52] The present study hopes to take this summons seriously by bringing his work into contact with the engaged Buddhism of Thich Nhat Hanh.

In some sense then the intended audience of this work is Christian social activists in countries of the industrialized North. This project is one way of honoring Gutiérrez's work by responding from a context that is different from his own. However, since the method of investigation will rely upon an analysis of suffering from both Christian and Buddhist perspectives, this study may prove of interest to social activists from a variety of perspectives. Paul Knitter has suggested the suffering of the world could (and should) be the basis for interfaith dialogue. This project affirms his proposal and attempts something of a diagnosis of and prescription for human suffering from both a Christian

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[51] Gutiérrez, in Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM), *Liberación: Diálogos en el CELAM* (Bogotá: Secretariado general del CELAM, 1974), 89-90.

[52] Ibid., 88.

and Buddhist perspective. To accomplish this goal I first look at the context out of which Gutiérrez's liberation theology arose and argue that Gutiérrez's vision has value outside of his particular context. This is the subject of chapter 2. In chapter 3, I examine Gutiérrez's vision of poverty and suffering and explore several key themes related to his vision of solidarity with those who suffer. After setting the stage with a clear understanding of Gutiérrez's view, chapter 4 considers Thich Nhat Hanh's context and his vision of both human suffering and that which comprises an appropriate, sustainable response. Finally, in chapter 5, I attempt a "weaving together" of the wisdom of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Thich Nhat Hanh to construct a kind of enriched Christian social activism. After pointing to similarities and differences I find relevant to North American Christian social activists, I suggest a variety of spiritual practices that I believe could be helpful in sustaining a long-term commitment to solidarity with the poor.

CHAPTER 2

GUTIÉRREZ'S CONTEXT AND PRESENT UTILITY

We have learned to see the great events of the history of the world from beneath—from the viewpoint of the useless, the suspect, the abused, the powerless, the oppressed, the despised. In a word, from the viewpoint of the suffering.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

In North America, Latin America liberation theology is often associated with the time and place in which it arose. Central and South America in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were a turbulent locale. The world was caught in a dramatic ideological contest in which the lives of those who supported either capitalism or communism (or neither) were at risk, depending upon which place on the planet one found oneself. In Latin America, the United States supported right-wing military dictatorships in Argentina, Chile, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Brazil, among others, each of which employed wide-ranging techniques of repression including detention, torture, kidnappings, and assassinations.[53] The entire continent was awash in suffering, fear, and death. When Gutiérrez wrote about the suffering of his people, many North American Christians, at least those who were sympathetic to his message, became concerned about the political and economic happenings with their neighbors to the South.

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[53] Much research has come to light about terror tactics used in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. Of particular interest is information about "Operation Condor," a CIA-supported multinational intelligence campaign designed to stamp out popular or leftist resistance to conservative governments. Though the actual numbers of persons affected by Operation Condor may never be known, there is documentation that at least 50,000 persons were murdered, 30,000 disappeared, and 400,000 incarcerated. See Patrice McSherry, "Tracking the Origins of a State Terror Network: Operation Condor," *Latin American Perspectives* 29 (2002): 36–60; John Dinges, *The Condor Years: How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terrorism to Three Continents* (New York, N.Y.: New Press, 2004); and Martín Almada, *Paraguay: La cárcel olvidada, el país exiliado* (Asunción: Intercontinental, 1993).

Yet times have changed. The Berlin Wall has fallen. The giant Russian bastion of communism has ceded its torch to a fragile and aging island ninety miles south of Miami which, as it turns out, also appears on the verge of revising its communist stance. The killings carried out under Operation Condor have run their course. China is slowly opening its economic gates to the influence of the West and transnational corporations. In the eyes of many, Gutiérrez's liberation theology was a fad, a contextual theology, a way of speaking about God meant to minister to a particular people in a specific time and place that have come and gone. Even some of Gutiérrez's own writings seem to suggest this. However, since times have changed, so the sentiment goes, of what use is Latin American liberation theology to people in the twenty-first century First World? Gutiérrez has been made passé by a shifting global situation.

This line of reasoning has been used by both friends and foes of liberation theology alike. Neoconservative opponents of liberation movements gloat that capitalism has won the day and that socialist revolutionary processes were nothing but a flash in the ideological pan, the temporary birthing pains of the true "capitalism revolution."[54] In theological circles, some critics view liberation theology as an assault on "social unity" and express relief that things can return to a more amicable mode, despite whether or not such a prior state of social harmony actually existed.[55] Many proponents of liberation theology admit that their dreams for true social change are gravely diminished and that their passions have waned. Some have described the current situation of "capitalism

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[54] See Peter Berger, *The Capitalist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Michael Novak, *Will It Liberate? Questions about Liberation Theology,* 2d ed. (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1991); and Amy Sherman, *Preferential Option* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992).

[55] Edward Lynch, "Beyond Liberation Theology," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 6/1-2 (1994): 151.

without alternatives" as "the dark night of the poor."[56] Without completely giving up hope, Nicaraguan Jesuit priest José María Vigil laments that "a process of disenchantment and disillusionment has taken place. Here [in Latin America] also people have ceased believing in progress, not classical modern 'progress,' but rather progress as the capacity of humanity to take control of history, or, more concretely, the capacity to overcome age-old injustice and poverty. The most dizzying euphoria has been replaced by the worst disenchantment: there is no way out....The project of the poor is an external factual infeasibility in this hour of history."[57]

It deserves mention, even if only as a passing response, that the recent wave of left-leaning candidates elected to high office in Latin America might bring Gutiérrez's liberation theology once again into vogue.[58] Nevertheless, this line of reasoning, or any interpretation which treats Gutiérrez's work as a contextual theology only and thus allows it to be dismissed, is a misunderstanding of what is at truly work in liberation theology. At its heart, liberation theology is not simply an articulation of the special interests of a certain group; it is not limited to the theological perspective of the Latin American poor. Instead, at its deepest levels, it provides a new vantage point for human suffering in general, which is common to all. Ultimately, one person's suffering is connected to everyone else's. When Gutiérrez writes about social life and suffering *desde abajo*

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[56] See Franz Hinkelammert, "Capitalismo sin alternativas? Sobre la sociedad que sostiene que no hay alternative para ella." *Pasos* 37 (1991): 15 and José María Vigil, "What Remains of the Option for the Poor?" in *SEDOS Bulletin* 27, no.3 (1995): 94.

[57] Vigil, 92-94.

[58] At the time of writing, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chili, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Venezuela have presidents who were elected on socialist or populist platforms. On April 20, 2008, Fernando Armindo Lugo Méndez, once a Roman Catholic bishop and outspoken advocate of liberation theology, was elected president of Paraguay.

(from the underside), he provides an insightful new angle on a predicament shared by the oppressed and their oppressors alike.

Unfortunately, in North American academic circles, Gutiérrez's work has been appreciated largely as a pioneering contextual theology. German-American theologian Joerg Rieger attributes this in part to the language of "advocacy scholarship," popular among contemporary intellectuals.[59] When Gutiérrez paid attention to the suffering in his community he freed others to pay attention to the suffering in theirs. We now speak of a plethora of liberation "theologies," such as feminist theology, queer theology, black theology, womanist theology, Asian theology, *minjung* theology, *mestizo* theology, *mujerista* theology, and Amerindian theology. Even those who are strong champions of Gutiérrez's theology have argued that North Americans need not transfer his theology to their country, but instead should create their own focus.[60] Certainly much good is done by way of these various theologies. At their best each can highlight an insight similar to Gutiérrez's. The problem, however, is that seeing Latin American liberation theology as a contextual theology implies that it is meant for the people of a particular class, a view which allows others in the theological enterprise to pass it over as inapplicable to their own work. It has long been the case that seminary courses in black theology or the African-American Church are most often attended by black students.[61] Classes in Asian

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[59] Joerg Rieger, *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 125.

[60] Robert McAfee Brown, a longtime advocate of Gutiérrez's work, suggests that "ours must have its own focus: instead of dealing with the rights of *mestizos*, we will deal with the rights of Native Americans; instead of relying on Mariategui we will cite Frederick Douglas or Walter Rauschenbusch." Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 75-76.

[61] Rieger makes this comment about courses at Southern Methodist University. See Rieger, 125.

theology appeal to Asians; courses in Roman Catholic thought are popular among Catholics.

Against the popular reading of Gutiérrez as a contextual theologian, I suggest that his hermeneutical principle of the "preferential option for the poor" points to the hub of suffering itself, which is present in all contexts. Gutiérrez's work underscores the deeper truth that one person's suffering is intimately and intricately bound up with everyone else's. When Gutiérrez's theology is treated as a contextual theology, it can quickly lead to indifference for those whose context is not Latin America. However, the implications of Gutiérrez's work suggest that the liberation of the poor and oppressed is necessarily dependent upon the liberation of the rich and the oppressors and vice versa. Both the oppressed and their oppressors need a new awareness of suffering and a deeper understanding that the "other" is always intrinsically a part of one's own context. Rather than being a theology only appropriate for one context, Gutiérrez's liberation theology shows the interrelatedness of all contexts and, in so doing, proves its relevancy for all theologians.

I argue that at its heart Gutiérrez's notion of solidarity calls for a renewed focus on the interdependent character of life and on the web of relationships in which the oppressed and oppressors both live. To make this argument, it is important, ironically, to know something about Gutierrrez's life and the context from which he writes. While Gutiérrez is often described as the "father of liberation theology," he contends that "all liberation theology originates among the world's anonymous, whoever may write the

books or the declarations articulating it.'[62] Gutiérrez understands himself as one who comes from amidst the poor of Peru and, because of his academic and theological training, is able to serve as their spokesperson to a world that scarcely grants them voice. Thus, to authentically understand his articulation of suffering requires an acquaintance with Gutiérrez's Peru, with the history of Latin America, and with the millions of poor who inspire his work. This chapter first reviews the historical, cultural, socio-economic, and religious worlds out of which Gutiérrez's liberation theology arose before turning to a more personal biography of his frequently conflictive interaction with the Roman hierarchy.

1. Colonialism, the Church, and Bartolomé de Las Casas

Almost half the people of Peru live in poverty.[63] Like many in neighboring nations in Latin America, Peruvians live in a country where most of the wealth and usable land are owned by a small number of powerful elites and by foreign multinational corporations. Unemployment, illiteracy, and disease rates are high. This is the concrete reality of life in Peru, and it is the inheritance of a long history of perpetual repression and domination which dates back to the arrival of Spanish *conquistadors* in the sixteenth century. Before the appearance of Francisco Pizarro and his soldiers in 1532, Peru was inhabited by the largest empire ever known in the Americas, the Inca. Yet within ten years that empire was decimated, its people enslaved, and the whole territory claimed as a

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[62] Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella, *The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Underside of History: Papers from the Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians, Dar Es Salaam, August 5-12, 1976* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978), 250.

[63] See Instituto nacional de estadística e informática, *Perú: Perfil de la pobreza según departamentos, 2004–2006* (Lima: INEI, 2007), 9-11.

part of the Spanish Viceroyalty of Peru. What Pizarro did in Peru, Cortez did in Mexico, Valdivia did in Chile and in like kind, the Spanish Crown did to almost all of the so-called New World.

The Spanish conquistadors, seeking gold, honor, and new lands for their king, demolished civilizations and savagely eradicated those who opposed them. Their hunger for wealth was rapacious and occasioned the widespread abuse of the native Indians who were cruelly treated as instruments for the attainment of affluence. Hand in hand with the conquistadors came Spanish missionaries who, in large part, supported the conquistadors' work. Pope Alexander VI gave Spanish king Ferdinand II jurisdiction over most of the new continent in exchange for a guarantee that Christianity would be promulgated. Franciscan missionaries first arrived in the New World in 1500.[64] What began was a long history of conquest and forced religious conversion. In each new area they occupied, the Spanish established the semi-feudal social structures of medieval Europe in which "obedience to the great king of Spain and submission to the King of Heaven were demanded as one single act."[65] For the most part, the Spanish treatment of the native Amerindians was barbaric. Christian missionaries used a selection of Aristotle's writing on slavery to argue that some species were naturally inferior to others and to insist that even those indigenous peoples who surrendered to the church could be sold, traded, or

[64] The partnership of the Spanish church and state in the colonization of the Americas was rooted in Spain's contention that it had been chosen as God's instrument to save the world. See Enrique D. Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation (1492-1979)* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 41-61.

[65] José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 5.

butchered as livestock.[66] Christianity was used to ensure the subjugation and control of the "subhuman" masses.

In his writing Gutiérrez often revisits this tarnished history of the church because for him "releer la historia quiere decir *rehacer la historia"* (to reread history means to remake history), to retell it from the subversive point of view of those who were oppressed.[67] Gutiérrez attempts not only to remember those who suffered tragically and have been forgotten, but also to find internal resources to criticize the contemporary oppression of the poor. Once such resource is the sixteenth-century slave-owning landholder-turned-Dominican priest, Bartolomé de Las Casas.[68]

Las Casas followed Christopher Columbus from Spain to Hispaniola where he was granted a large plantation on which to use and convert the native Indians. For the better part of a decade, Las Casas lived like most of the other Spanish *encomenderos*, seeking to get rich quick by forcing slaves to work in his mines and occasionally

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[66] One such vocal contender was the Spanish theologian Sepulveda who claimed that "in prudence, invention, and every manner of virtue and human sentiment, they [the indigenous peoples of Hispaniola] are as inferior to Spaniards as children to adults, women to men, the cruel and inhumane to the gentle. . .finally, I might almost say, as monkeys to human beings." [Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 293.] See also Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), 195.

[67] Gutiérrez, *La fuerza histórica de los pobres*, 32.

[68] Las Casas is one of "three individuals [who] exercised a profound influence on Gutiérrez's understanding of the poor and their liberation." [See Eddy José Muskus, *The Origins and Early Development of Liberation Theology in Latin America: With Particular Reference to Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 2002), 23.] Gutiérrez has been a leader in the present-day rediscovery of Las Casas. He named the institute he founded in 1974 for the promotion of democracy and the preferential option for the poor after Las Casas (*Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas*) and frequently cites him in his writings. For Gutiérrez's treatment of the Spanish colonization, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Dios o el oro en las Indias: Siglo XVI* (Lima, Perú: Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas, 1989). For his specific work on Las Casas, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *En busca de los pobres de Jesucristo: El pensamiento de Bartolomé De Las Casas* (Lima, Perú: Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas, 1992).

participating in exterminating wars against the indigenous of the islands.[69] However, after hearing the preaching of several Dominican friars who opposed the harsh treatment of the indigenous people, Las Casas began to repent their exploitation. Ultimately, he relinquished his *encomienda*, took priestly vows, and became a leading defender of the Indians, both on the island of Hispaniola and to the Spanish king himself. Gutiérrez writes:

> The commitment to the poor implied for him to abandon his privileged position and to break away from the circle of social relations that it carried. This abandonment of class is the authentic condition of a transformation that does not wish to remain in an idealistic mode, which is purely inward and of spiritual pretence. To continue holding the encomienda, it would have meant to deny in practice what he proposed himself to preach.[70]

Las Casas worked relentlessly on behalf of the Indians who he saw as people with innate human dignity. He viewed their exploitation and oppression as the result of the idolatry of the Spanish, whose greed put the Indians in the same position as "the poor" spoken of in the bible. He even equated the suffering of the Indians with the suffering of Jesus saying, "In the Indies I left behind Jesus Christ, our God suffering affliction, scourging, and crucifixion, not once but a million times over."[71] Nevertheless, Las Casas's work did

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[69] *Encomiendas* were sections of land given to conquistadors as concessions or payment for favors. *Encomenderos* were the Spanish landholders in charge of making the land produce. The native inhabitants of the *encomiendas* were considered property that came with the land and could be treated as menial laborers or personal slaves. The *encomienda* system was a principal tool in the Spanish colonization of the Americas. See Lewis Hanke, *La Lucha por la justicia en la conquista de América* (Buenos Aires: Editorial sudamericana, 1949).

[70] Gutiérrez, *Dios o el oro en las Indias*, 145. The English translation of this text can be found in Muskus, 26.

[71] Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, edición de Agustín Millares Carlo (Mexico City: Fondo de cultura económica, 1951), 511b.

not hold back the overwhelming push for conquest and colonization which continued relatively unabated until the nineteenth century.

Gutiérrez's recovery of Las Casas is important in at least three aspects. First, Las Casas argues that "the poor" of the bible have contemporary correlates—the oppressed indigenous of Latin America. If the bible reveals that God had special affection for the poor of its day (i.e. the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the hungry, the naked, and the prisoner), then God must also have had a certain preference for the suffering natives in Las Casas's time and for the contemporary suffering of the poor. Moreover, Las Casas is clear that the suffering of the Indians includes not only their economic status as serfs and slaves, but also the psychological impact of this existence in terms of their humiliation, belittlement, and degradation. Alexander Nava writes of the Amerindians in Las Casas' time that the "impact of their suffering extend[ed] beyond mere physical death and includes spiritual death."[72] On Las Casas's coattails, Gutiérrez connects the corporal, emotional, and spiritual suffering of his people with suffering poor of the bible.

Second, since the beginning of history, or at least the beginning of recorded history, the suffering of the most marginalized persons in Latin America has been both directly and indirectly connected to the spiritual disposition of others. For Las Casas, the true evil was not any particular incident of abuse; it was that the Spanish had lost their spiritual center. They had become idolatrous, replacing their allegiance to God with an allegiance to money. Las Casas writes, "It would be far more accurate to say that the Spaniards have sacrificed more to their beloved adored goddess Codicia ["greed,"

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[72] Alexander Nava, *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutiérrez: Reflections on the Mystery and Hiddenness of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 96.

"covetousness"] every single year that they have been in the Indies after entering each province than the Indians have sacrificed to their gods throughout the Indies in a hundred years." Their lust for gold had made them "captives and slaves of money" who "must do what their lord commands."[73] Blinded by greed, they could not see the Indians as fellow children of God. At issue in the suffering of the poor were not only the exploitative structures of the *encomienda* system, but also the spiritual well-being of the oppressors. If Gutiérrez's association of the Amerindians of Las Casas's time with the contemporary Latin American poor holds true, then part of the cause of their suffering lies in the spiritual condition of those who oppress them.

Third, the liberation of oppressors from captivity comes about through real encounters with the oppressed. Las Casas argued that the theologians championing the *encomienda* system had never been to the New World and did not see the suffering of those whom they oppressed. Only when Las Casas opened his eyes to those whom he afflicted did he renounce his participation in the system. Gutiérrez argues that only through the retrieval of the voices of the marginalized (heard in Las Casas) and through actual relationships with the poor can modern-day oppressors be free.

2. Shifting Colonialisms, Capitalist Imperialism, and Developmentalism

In the early nineteenth century, Latin America experienced a wave of revolutionary movements for independence from Spain. Until then political power lay mostly in the hands of the *peninsulares,* the ruling elite from Spain, although some power had passed to the *criollos*, those of Spanish lineage but born in the Americas. The

[73] Gutiérrez, *Las Casas*, 178, 439.

economic resources of the colonies were exported and used for the benefit of the Spanish crown rather than for the welfare of the local populace. In the early 1800s, groups of *criollos,* inspired by the revolution of the British colonies in North America and by Napoleon's seizure of Spain, began to demand more economic and political freedom from the *peninsulares*. They claimed independence for themselves, for the native Amerindians, and for the *mestizos* of mixed ancestry. Several wars broke out across the colonized continent which proved successful in gaining political liberty from Spain. Latin America celebrated a sense of its own identity.

However, the triumph was more illusory than real. After the demise of overt political colonialism, a more covert economic colonialism quickly took its place. The first to assume the reigns of domination was Great Britain who had supplied aid to many of the revolutionary forces in the wars of independence. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Great Britain had experienced rapid industrialization and was eager to export its newly manufactured products abroad. British capitalists soon established what came to be known as "neocolonial" agreements with many countries in Latin America. Under these arrangements, Latin American nations supplied raw materials to England who, in turn, furnished the equipment, railroads, and ships for their extraction and exportation. The deal was a good one for Britain's capitalists; they provided the manufactured goods and technology to "develop" Latin America, whose abundant natural resources quickly made them rich. Gutiérrez contends, however, that the rhetoric of such "development" models of economic expansion was misleading. While the new political leaders in Latin America were themselves Latin Americans, as the new political elites, they were much more concerned with securing their own power through the economic resources of

foreign investors than they were interested in improving the welfare of their own citizenry. The outcome of neocolonialism was that Latin America, as a whole, remained impoverished and became dependent upon European economies.[74]

Though Great Britain was the first to move into the power vacuum created by the departure of the Spanish crown, the United States was not far behind. In 1823, the US declared its interest in Latin America through the Monroe Doctrine, which argued that any European involvement in the new nations of the Americas would be deemed a "manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States."[75] Economic agreements for the creation of sugar plantations quickly followed suit (again, ostensibly as neighborly support for Latin America's "development") and the US began constructing its own railroads to remove the natural resources of its Southern neighbors.

The Monroe Doctrine allowed the United States more than just economic control over much of Latin America. While the doctrine was supposedly designed in part to protect the political autonomy of the newly independent nations, by justifying military intervention into the region, it gave the US de facto political control as well. In 1895, the US intervened when Britain tried to enlarge the territory of Guinea by moving into Venezuela. Soon after, in 1898, the US initiated the Spanish-American War to protect its hegemony in Cuba. In 1903, it began work on the Panama Canal, which made its economic and military investments all the more efficient. In 1904, the United States passed the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine which effectively allowed it to intervene in Latin America at will. This policy was used to justify the U.S. intervention

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[74] Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación,* 118-125.

[75] Herbert Matthews, "Diplomatic Relations," in *The United States and Latin America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 144-147.

in Nicaragua in 1912, in Haiti in 1915, and in the Dominican Republic in 1916. The very policy which was supposed to protect Latin American stability and independence established a strong dependence on the United States.

The first half of the twentieth century saw the neocolonial relationships between Latin America and the United States shift increasingly into the hands of multinational corporations. Spokespersons for such companies continued to argue that what Latin America needed to rise from poverty was the infrastructural development they could provide.[76] Then in the 1950s, a wave of optimism swept through Latin America concerning its ability to become economically self-sufficient.[77] Following World War II, international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Agency for International Development, and the Alliance for Progress began to suggest to Latin American elites that the causes of their stunted economic growth lay in the fact that it was dependent upon foreign trade. What these countries should do, so it was suggested, was begin a process of "inward development," which consisted of industrialization, technological development, and the extension of internal markets. Roughly speaking, this was the path that the industrialized nations of the First World had followed. With the help of financial aid and technical knowledge from the "developed" nations, Latin America's "traditional," "transitional," or "underdeveloped" societies could become fully modern and independent. This model also advocated that Latin American nations acquire particular cultural advancements such

[76] Gutiérrez calls this time period the "big boom" of international capitalism. See Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor*, 84.

[77] Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 114.

as democratic governments, a larger middle class, higher literacy rates, more advertising, and higher levels of mass consumption.[78]

This development model strongly influenced the economic policies of almost every Latin American country. Gutiérrez argues, however, that by the mid 1960s, it had become clear that the development model could not live up to its promises.[79] The intricacies of international capitalism were such that no Third World nation could simply parrot the former trajectories of their First World counterparts.[80] To imagine that they could was to ignore the social, cultural, and political evolution of the Latin American continent. After ten years of so-called development, the situation of the poor and the oppressed in Latin America was worse, not better. Instead of experiencing political stability and better economic equality, Latin America found itself facing more repression,

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[78] This pattern of development was also advocated by the United Nations in its "Decade of Development" and was given widespread appeal by Walt Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: a Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

[79] See Guterriez, *Teología de la liberación,* 117. Cadorette argues that the deficiencies of the development model derive in part from its aggrandizement of rhetorical capitalist values. While capitalism purports to instill self-determination and freedom, these virtues are inherently contradicted by the callous reification of labor that capitalistic competition creates. In the end, strict capitalism uses the value of freedom and liberty as ideological tools to justify class stratification and oppression under the guise of progress. See Curt Cadorette, "The Origins of the Crisis: Capitalism and Ideology," in *From the Heart of the People: The Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer Stone Books, 1988), 13-18.

[80] Gutiérrez contends that, in Latin America, the freedom and democracy experienced by the First World "*se mantenía[n] a un nivel abstracto y a-histórico*" (they remained at an abstract and non-historic level). [See Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación,* 117]. In Peru, the developmental model meant that the government spent its aid money building factories for textiles and other goods in Lima so that its natural resources could be converted to manufactured goods to be sold internationally. Peasant *campesinos,* living a semi-feudal agricultural lifestyle, were encouraged to move to the city to work in the factories. The thinking at that time was that, if the *campesinos* could be induced into capitalist production, then the lure of money and individual achievement would make them more efficient workers and, thus, less poor. This is the basic argument of "trickle-down" theories and supply-side economics. In reality, what happened was the creation of huge urban slums of working-class poor who no longer had the support that their traditional communities and subsistence agriculture provided them. Led to believe that it was their conventional ways of living that had caused them to be poor, many Peruvians found themselves destitute, desperate, and now indebted to factory managers whose real concern was pleasing the elite factory owners, rather than providing for their suffering employees. As such, many Peruvians began to see themselves as "*mendigos sentados en una banca de oro,* beggars sitting on a golden pew." See Cadorette, 13.

political dissent, and a greater economic gap between the poor and the rich. No large middle class had developed. While some financial aid was received in the form of loans, its sum was paltry in comparison to the amounts of money that multinational corporations and international investors were taking out. Finally, instead of encountering higher levels of democracy, right-wing military dictatorships were coming to power. In response to the crisis of the development model, Latin American governments devised *seguridad nacional*, which in English has come to be known as the "national security state."[81]

3. The National Security State and Dependency Theory

In the mid and late 1960s, following the failure of the development model, many Latin American governments sought to take control of their countries' predicaments by instituting higher levels of autocratic and military control, limiting personal freedom, and granting even more power to multinational corporations. *Seguridad nacional* can be seen as a comprehensive worldview which values the existence and survival of the nation-state, protected by professional soldiers, above all other values. Belgium-born Brazilian priest José Comblin defines the tenets of the national security state in Latin America as "integration of the whole nation into the national security system and the polity of the United States; total war against communism; collaboration with American or American-controlled business corporations; establishment of dictatorship; and placing of absolute power in the hands of the military."[82] *Seguridad nacional* brought with it more than two decades of severe punishment for any person or institution that was viewed as a challenge

[81] For a clear articulation of the concept of *seguridad nacional*, see José Comblin, *The Church and the National Security State*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979).

[82] Ibid., 54.

to the state. Thousands of people across Latin American were labeled as "communists" and were imprisoned, kidnapped, tortured, and killed.

Gutiérrez's liberation theology was born in this economic and political environment. Developmentalism, rather than bringing the Latin American masses out of poverty, proved to be a pretext for a capitalist system which necessarily entrenched working classes in destitution. This context highlighted for Gutiérrez the particularly social and systemic character of human suffering. Although maybe not the final cause of all suffering, political and economic systems have a huge influence on the physical and psychological well-being of a people, so much so that one cannot truly understand human suffering without giving attention to the economic and structural systems in which it arises. Thus, the need for more adequate analytical social tools became clear.

One such set of tools came from a Marxist-inspired analysis of class. In their book *Dependencia y desarrollo en América Latina,* sociologists Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Falleto articulated the theory of "dependency" as an alternative interpretation to the development model of the First World.[83] In short, what dependency theory argues is that the principle cause of Latin America's poverty lies in the very nature of its relationship with its more industrialized neighbors and the capitalist character that relationship takes. They argue that capitalism itself and the accruement of capital that it supports are based on an unequal mode of exchange which benefits those at the "center" at the expense of those at the "periphery." Thus, the riches generated in the industrialized countries of the North inherently produces social imbalance, political tension, and poverty at the periphery. The development of the center is closely linked the

[83] See Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Falleto, *Dependencia y desarrollo en América Latina* (Mexico City: Siglo veintiuno, 1969).

underdevelopment of the periphery. The dynamics of dependency were easily seen in most Latin American countries in the 1960s. Local elites, looking for personal gain and trusting in foreign economic models, made choices that impoverished their citizenry. So while modernization was supposed to improve the well-being of the people of Latin America and bring them greater levels of freedom, since it was based on the needs of center countries for natural resources and cheap labor, it actually made the peripheral countries of Latin America even more dependent on the North.

In his early work, Gutiérrez placed great stock in the theory of dependency as a way to understand the systemic causes of suffering and economic disparity. He argued that the "situation of dependence is the basis for a *correct* understanding of underdevelopment in Latin America" whose countries are "from the beginning and constitutively dependent."[84] Dependency theory was clearly superior to the all-too-easy "blame-the-poor" perspective of particular developmentalists who viewed Third World underdevelopment as a consequence of cultural shortcomings and social backwardness. Moreover, dependency theory championed the rising social consciousness of the poor by suggesting that the way out of poverty lay in putting faith in the populous itself, rather than accepting socio-economic models and values imported from abroad.

Nevertheless, Gutiérrez was strongly criticized by the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church for his use of dependency theory which, so it was argued, was based on a Marxist (and therefore atheist and non-Christian) view of social conflict.[85] Although

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[84] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed. with new introduction, trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 51-52. Emphasis mine.

[85] This criticism, which surfaced from many sources and continued for years in different forms, seems to me to be more the defensive reaction of the hierarchy to the perceived threat of a loss of power

the arguments of many of his critics were based on false assumptions and misunderstandings of his view, Gutiérrez nonetheless has had to dedicate much time and ink to refuting them.[86] On the one hand, this refining process has helped Gutiérrez to be clearer about his use of the social sciences. On the other hand, I argue that the large backlash to his use of dependency theory ultimately has led him to deemphasize it and to put more energy into other less politically polemical issues within liberation theology. The shift away from dependency theory changes the accent of his work and risks forfeiting an early intuitive disposition that stressed the interdependent nature of the causes of suffering.

4. Humble Beginnings, Vatican II, and the Latin American Episcopal Conferences

To speak of the context from which Gutiérrez frames his liberation theology, one must attend to not only his economic and political environments, but also to his personal and religious environments. It is appropriate then to pause the discussion of dependency

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than an accurate appraisal of either Gutiérrez's position or dependency theory in general. Marx contended that "the industrially more developed countries only present the less developed with an image of their own future." [See Karl Marx, *Capital* I, 17; quoted in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 60]. This is actually more akin to the vision of the development model which the theory of dependency rejected. Moreover, as Gutiérrez points out, dependency theory "is held by prominent theoreticians who do not regard themselves as Marxist. Nor may we overlook the fact that representatives of Marxism have severely criticized the theory." [See Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Theology and the Social Sciences," in *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, 60.] What can be said is that most social scientific thought in the 1960s and 1970s dealt, in some way, with categories articulated by Marx, such as the importance of history and humanity's ability to produce and be produced by it. For a description of liberation theology's relationship with Marxism, see Rebecca S. Chopp, "The Conversation with Marxism," in *The Praxis of Suffering*, 16-19.

[86] Robert McAfee Brown writes, "From 1983 through most of 1985, Gustavo had to devote most of his time to replying to these and subsequent charges, frequently by going to Rome (at his own expense) to defend himself in person and clarify from his own writings what he actually meant." See Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: 1990), 137.

theory and review, even if only briefly, the conflictive relationship between Gutiérrez and the Roman Catholic Church.

Gustavo Gutiérrez was born in 1929 in a poor neighborhood of Lima, Peru. His family was *mestiza*—part Spanish, part Quechuan Indian. When he was twelve years old, Gutiérrez came down with a severe case of osteomyelitis, which kept him confined to a bed or a wheelchair for six years. This traumatic experience persuaded him to study medicine, which he did for two years at *La Universidad San Marcos* in Lima. After this time, however, his interests shifted to theology and a desire to become a priest, so in 1950 he moved to Santiago, Chile to study philosophy at the seminary. At the time, it was the policy of the Catholic Church to send promising ordinands from Latin America to universities in Europe to finish their ecclesial formation. From 1951 to 1960, Gutiérrez took what Robert Brown has called "The Theological Grand Tour," studying at universities in Belgium, France, and Rome.[87] In 1959, he was ordained as a priest, and in 1960, he returned to Lima to teach at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. When he returned to his homeland, the severe hardships of the Peruvian people, now put into contrast by almost a decade in Europe, were compelling to Gutiérrez. Concisely put, "The Theological Grand Tour simply did not fit the South American reality."[88]

Gutiérrez began to seek out ways to reread and refashion the theology he had learned in Europe in a manner that could account for the poverty of his people. As Juan Luis Segundo, a Jesuit priest from Uruguay, has proposed, the point of departure for all

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[87] Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: An Introduction,* 24. My biographical information about Gutiérrez is highly indebted to Brown's excellent work.

[88] Ibid.

liberation theology is the conviction that "the world should not be the way it is."[89] In the face of extreme injustice and suffering in Peru, Gutiérrez began to plumb both scripture and tradition to see how the church might respond. What emerged from his investigation was the certainty that, although the bible reveals a God who is wholly on the side of the poor, for most of its history, the institutional church has not only been associated with the power holders and power mongers, it also, in fact, had often given theological corroboration to systems that oppressed the poor. Because the Roman Catholic Church is structured hierarchically, its theology was almost always structured "from above," by the winners of history, the privileged, the wealthy, and the bourgeois. The powerless of history were often simply neglected, their point of view passed over as unimportant, and the reality of their enslavement and suffering trivialized by the "spiritual" liberation from sin they receive in Jesus Christ. In the pages of history and in much of dominant Christian theology, these people are simply nonpersons; they are marginalized to the point of absence.

One way the church implicitly justified systems of oppression in its theology was to separate the spiritual realm from the temporal, worldly realm. By doing so, the church kept Christian faith, which it allotted the highest importance, detached from and above the daily, lived realities of its believers, which received far less attention. A telling example of the Church's resistance to considering the modern world in which its adherents lived can be found is Pope Pius IX's 1864 "Syllabus of Errors" which claimed, "If anyone thinks that the Roman Pontiff can and should reconcile himself and come to

[89] Ibid., 51.

terms with progress, with liberalism, and with modern civilization, let him be anathema.'"[90]

So then, it came as a shocking change when, in 1962, Pope John XXIII convened Vatican Council II in order "to open the windows of the church to let in fresh air from the outside world."[91] For some years, successive popes had dealt increasingly with issues of modernity, worker's rights, progress, and economic injustice through their social encyclicals. However, by the early 1960s, the rapid pace of change in the modern world and the sharp realities of life could no longer allow the church simply to ignore what went on outside its walls. The Council, which convened all of the church's bishops, met in Rome from 1962 to 1965 and initiated a new relationship of dialogue and active engagement with the world. The full span of the changes initiated by Vatican II is too expansive to be explained fully here. Suffice it to say that the previously clear division of the spiritual and temporal spheres was markedly blurred and the church donned a new, even radical, attitude of involvement with history.[92]

This new engagement was welcome news to many Latin American bishops in whose countries harsh right-wing dictatorships had taken power. One of the mandates of

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[90] Cited in Arthur McGovern, *Marxism: An American Christian Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1980), 92.

[91] Joseph Gremillion, ed., *The Gospel of Peace and Justice: Catholic Social Teaching Since Pope John* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), 1. Paul Knitter describes the move even more dramatically, saying, "Pope John XXIII was not just opening long-locked windows in the Roman church, he was knocking through walls and indirectly calling for reconstruction of old models and practices." Paul Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 5-6.

[92] For the basic sixteen documents produced by the Council, see Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Company, 1996). Of particular interest to Latin American liberation theologians was the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*), pp. 163-282. When Gutiérrez was put on trial in Rome by the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, he made frequent reference to this work to show that his theology was, in fact, very much in line with the church's official teaching.

Vatican II was that regional conferences of bishops be held to communicate and relate the meaning of the Council's teachings to issues in local areas. In 1968 *El Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* (the Council of Latin American Bishops, known by its acronym CELAM) assembled in Medellín, Colombia with the specific agenda of doing just that: addressing issues of human rights and exploring how the church's new attitude might help transform the human societies of Latin America. Many bishops, however, viewed their directive as misguided and paternalistically Eurocentric, given their current realities, and instead proceeded to do the opposite—to transform (or reinterpret) the Council's teachings in light of the Latin American experience. CELAM II, as the Medellín conference is known, produced sixteen theological documents which, among other things, describe the unjust realities in Latin America in terms of internal class tensions and marginalization, which are exacerbated by the continent's economic, cultural, and political dependency on foreign powers. In order to explain this situation of dependency, the bishops advanced the concept of structural and "institutionalized violence:"

> Due to a structural deficiency of industry and agriculture, of national and international economy, of cultural and political life, "entire towns lack necessities and live in the kind of dependency that hinders every initiative and responsibility, as well as every possibility for cultural advancement and participation in social and political life," thus violating fundamental rights.[93]

The thrust of this description is that the social injustice experienced in Latin America was the result of inherently violent social systems, structures, worldviews, and values which

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[93] The central texts of the Medellín conference can be found in La Segunda conferencia general del episcopado Latinoamericano, *La Iglesia en la actual transformación de América Latina a la luz del Concilio Vaticano II*, vols. 1 y 2 (Bogotá: El secretario general de CELAM, 1968). The above block quotation comes from the document entitled "Paz," paragraph 16 (p. 72 in the aforementioned text). Translation mine.

involved their countries' relationships with foreign nations and, in particular, with the United States. Without pulling punches, the bishops place the responsibility for institutionalized violence in the hands of those who have more wealth, culture, and power. Moreover, they suggest that those who do nothing to address this violence but are content to remain as bystanders to its destructive force are also participants in and, thus, perpetrators of the violence; they are also responsible for the oppression of the powerless. In a final section on "Pastoral Conclusions," the bishops call all Christians to denounce the unjust actions of world powers that work in opposition to the self-determination of weaker nations.

How much of the language of these documents was drafted by Gustavo Gutiérrez may never be known.[94] What is known is that he served as an official "theological advisor" to CELAM II, was a member of at least two subcommittees, and composed the two major speeches of the co-president of the conference, Cardinal Juan Landázuri Ricketts of Peru. A month before CELAM II, Gutiérrez presented at another conference a proposal for a "theology of liberation." Certainly it is due to his attendance at the Medellín conference that many liberation concerns appear in its documents. Furthermore, it was due to his public and vocal presence at the conference that many conservatives began to regroup and mount opposition to his views.

The history of internal friction, tactical infighting, and deception in the intervening years between the CELAM conference in Medellín in 1968 and its subsequent meeting in Puebla, Mexico in 1979 reads like a modern day *telenovela*. After

[94] James Nickoloff claims that "the influence of Gutiérrez in the final statements of Medellín is irrefutable." See James B. Nickoloff, "Introduction" in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings*, ed. James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003), 4.

Medellín, Rome appointed Archbishop Alfonso López Trujillo, a known conservative who later penned two books attacking liberation theology in general and Gutiérrez in particular, to be the new general secretary of CELAM.[95] A barrage of articles, reviews, pamphlets, and interviews criticizing Gutiérrez's theology began to appear. In the months leading up to Puebla, a number of bishops accused López Trujillo of manipulating CELAM through the dissemination of unfair literature, the appointment of only conservatives to leadership posts, and the exclusion of liberation theologians from preparatory meetings.[96] Indeed, once the Puebla conference began, "theological advisors" were denied access to the seminary where the conference was held and Rome granted López Trujillo permission to appoint supplementary bishops with voting power. Nevertheless, in defiance of López Trujillo's wishes, the more progressive bishops attending the conference brought along their theologians and social scientists anyway. About forty of these advisors, including Gutiérrez, rented a house and prepared eighty-four position papers to help their bishops who, when they could, left the seminary to seek advice. Moises Sandoval reports that as much as twenty-five percent of the final Puebla document was composed by these uninvited guests.[97] The resulting Puebla text both

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[95] López Trujillo's arguments against Gutiérrez, though interesting in their own right, are not different in substance from the (slightly) more refined arguments put forth by Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith who, as we shall see below, also singled out Gutiérrez in his attacks on liberation theology. López Trujillo's position can be found in Alfonzo López Trujillo, *Liberation or Revolution?* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1977). For a concise but balanced description of López Trujillo's objections, see Francois Houtart, "Theoretical and Institutional Bases of the Opposition to Liberation Theology," in *Expanding the View*, eds. M. Ellis and O. Maduro.

[96] Of particular interest is "El documento de consulta," the preliminary document circulated by López Trujillo designed to set the agenda and outline appropriate issues for discussion. Gutiérrez wrote a long response to and dissection of the document, which was later published as chapter 7, "Sobre el documento de consulta para Puebla" in Gutiérrez, *La fuerza histórica de los pobres*, 133-168.

[97] The list of those intentionally excluded from Puebla includes the likes of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, Hugo Assmann, Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Ellacuría, Raúl Vidales, Enrique Dussel, Pablo

disapproves of liberation theology and, at the same time, promotes many of its central themes. Both López Trujillo and Gutiérrez claimed it as a partial victory.[98]

5. Conflict with Rome: Marxism and the Social Sciences

After the Puebla conference, Gutiérrez came under official investigation by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, the branch of the Roman hierarchy responsible for preserving the purity of orthodox theology.[99] From the outside, the subsequent sequence of events seems almost comical, though it cannot have been so to Gutiérrez. Current Pope Benedict XVI, known then as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Prefect for the Congregation, traveled to Lima hoping to procure a condemnation of Gutiérrez by the Peruvian episcopate. When this failed, the Peruvian bishops were called to Rome for a week-long "discussion" of liberation theology. When, again, the bishops refused to categorically reprove Gutiérrez, Ratzinger wrote a series of essays and held interviews with the mass media in which he argued that liberation theology constitutes a

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Richard, and José Comblin—almost all of the leading proponents of liberation theology. See Sandoval's account in *Puebla and Beyond,* Eagleson and Scharper eds. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979).

[98] One of the aforementioned progressive bishops was Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, El Salvador. Although originally a conservative, his perspective changed as a string of liberation-minded priests, nuns, and laypeople in El Salvador were serially raped and murdered by U.S. financed death squads. When Romero appealed to the US to stop financing terrorism and publicly suggested members of the army refuse to murder their countrymen, he was shot and killed while saying Mass. Gutiérrez and others attended his funeral. When the crowd was leaving the church after the service, right-wing forces began firing on the crowd. In the ensuing chaos, Gutiérrez was swept back into the church where he administered last rites to a woman who had been shot. For an excellent study of Romero's life and circumstances, see James Brockman, *The Word Remains: The Life of Oscar Romero* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1982).

[99] The Sacred Congregation was originally known as the Holy Office of the Inquisition.

"fundamental threat to the faith of the church."[100] Afterwards, Ratzinger released a document entitled, "Ten Observations on the Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez."[101] Although these observations were strongly refuted by a variety of sources from both within and outside Latin America, by 1984, they reappeared as a formal publication of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith entitled, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation.'"[102]

The critique of Gutiérrez contained in the "Ten Observations" and the "Instruction" merit at least brief attention as context and influence upon Gutiérrez's thinking. The aim here is not to rehash old arguments but to show the nature of the attack on Gutiérrez and suggest that, although much of it was unwarranted, it affected his use of dependency theory. In general, the arguments against liberation theology were that it uncritically accepts a Marxist interpretation of history that leads to a reductionist and selective rereading of the bible. This, in turn, posits a "temporal messianism," which mistakes human political justice with the final kingdom of God and suggests that this kingdom comes through political struggles for liberation rather than through the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Ratzinger argued that to accept any part of Marx's philosophy

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[100] These interviews have been published as Joseph Ratzinger and Victorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985). The above quotation is on p. 175.

[101] The full text can be found in Alfred Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), document #37.

[102] The full text of the "Instruction" can be found in Hennelly, document #45. For a lively response from another liberation theologian, see Juan Luis Segundo, *Theology and the Church: A Response to Cardinal Ratzinger and a Warning to the Whole Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1970). For a refutation of the Ten Observations by an international consortium of Catholic theologians (including Edward Schillebeeckx, David Tracy, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Hans Kung, and Karl Rahner, among others), see Hennelly, documents #38 and #44.

unavoidably leads one to embrace all of his ideology.[103] This meant for Ratzinger that Gutiérrez ultimately saw "class struggle," rather than God, as the dominant force in history and that he implicitly agreed with Marx's view that violence and hatred (i.e. the hatred of the lower classes for the upper classes) rather than God's love are what motivate social change. Finally, if one uses the concept of "class struggle" to analyze the church, the consequence will be to see a "church of the poor," which struggles over and against the church hierarchy and the structures it has created. Gutiérrez seemed dangerous precisely because he presented "a challenge to the sacramental and hierarchical structure of the church, which was willed by the Lord himself. There is a denunciation of the members of the hierarchy and the magisterium, as objective representations of the ruling class which has to be opposed."[104]

These arguments have been reviewed *ad infinitum* by a variety of commentators. Gutiérrez has had his day in court and, in the final analysis, it seems that Ratizger and his fellow critics, swept up in the revolutionary language of those decades, were attacking an invention of their own making. As Gutiérrez once commented, "In [my] works it is not possible to find the points criticized by the 'Instruction.' [The] 'Instruction' may be useful. But it is not a description of present Latin American liberation theology."[105] Despite being subjected to countless theological interrogations by a variety of Vatican

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[103] "No separation of the parts of this epistemologically unique complex [Marxism] is possible." See "Instruction," VII, 6 in Hennelly.

[104] "Instruction," IX, 13 in Hennelly.

[105] Gutiérrez made this comment in an interview with Fed Herzog, quoted in Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: An Introduction*, 148.

tribunals, Gutiérrez was never officially censured. For the purposes of this study, we may leave the issue with the summary of Francois Houtart:

> To put it briefly, the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith considers that to start with class analysis would have as a consequence a triple theological reductionism: it is opposed to the transcendence of revelation expressed in God's Word, it is opposed to the redemption, which has already been achieved, and it is opposed to the concept of the church as mystery, the consequence being quite logically a rejection of the hierarchy. If we read Gutiérrez carefully, such a reductionism cannot be found.[106]

Nevertheless, after years of attack for using dependency theory as a way to understand part of the social dynamics of poverty in Latin America, Gutiérrez now uses it less and less. From the beginning Gutiérrez used the idea of dependency cautiously, as a description of current realities, rather than enthusiastically, in order to promote a particular ideology.[107] Gutiérrez's goal was never to find a scapegoat for the suffering of his people, a facile shifting of blame to the rich countries of the North, but instead as part of an authentic search for the actual causes of contemporary suffering.[108] To this end, the social sciences proved a better resource than the theological teachings of the church. It was almost inevitable that some Marxist categories would be used because almost all social analysis at the time in Latin America and abroad, done by both Marxists and non-

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[106] Houtart, in *Expanding the View,* eds. M. Ellis and O. Maduro 114-115.

[107] "Dependency is an obvious fact….A theory has been developed to explain it, but the theory is tentative and self-critical….Liberation theology takes the fact of dependency into account and cannot possibly avoid also taking the theory of dependency into account. It does so in a critical way." Gutiérrez, *Truth,* 59.

[108] Gutiérrez writes, "A fundamental point has become clear: it is not enough to describe the situation; its *causes* must also be determined." [Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation,* xxiii.] As I point out in more detail in chapter 4, Gutiérrez's method here bears a striking resemblance to that of the Buddha in the first and second Noble Truths, to first recognize and describe the reality of suffering and then to search for its origin. Gutiérrez's more polemical statements about the rich actually derive from his biblical exegesis, not from any Marxist vision.

Marxists, used Marx's idea.[109] Yet as Gutiérrez has remarked, "The use of this analysis has had it's price, for although the privileged of this world can accept the existence of human poverty on a massive scale and not be overawed by it…problems begin when the *causes* of this poverty are pointed out to them. Once causes are determined, then there is talk of 'social injustice,' and the privileged begin to resist."[110]

6. From Context to Contexts: Dependency and Interdependency

In some sense, every context is unique. Each provides its own distinctive vantage point to life; each both reveals and disguises something of truth. Gutiérrez's context is no exception and it has helped him to understand human suffering and its causes in a particular way. His birth into a culture whose self-understanding has been irrevocably shaped by its history of colonialism helped him to see that the suffering of his people has been connected to other cultures' desire for wealth and power. His indigenous heritage and early incapacitation by illness attuned him to the felt reality, the lived experience, of suffering. His exposure to life in Europe showed him that other realities are possible and his training in theology gave him the analytical tools to critique and propose a response to suffering. His desire to understand the causes of suffering sensitized him to the reality of dependency in its economic, political, cultural, and psychological aspects. His appreciation of dependency theory helped him understand the popular and socialist

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[109] "The very pervasiveness of Marxist ideas in Latin American political and intellectual movements makes some use almost inevitable." Arthur McGovern, "Dependency Theory, Marxist Analysis, and Liberation Theology," in *Expanding the View*, eds. M. Ellis and O. Maduro, 88.

[110] Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation,* xxiv.

movements for liberation taking place in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s.[111] The new theological vision of Vatican II led him to see these popular movements as "signs of the times," evidence of God's action in history.[112] This new ecclesial consideration of history helped him to envision sin as not only personal, but also structural—embedded in social and economic systems. He began to reread the bible with sensitivity to the victims of such systems and, by holding human suffering very close, discovered in his tradition what is key to his understanding of the nature of suffering itself: God's preferential option for the poor. Finally, his awareness of suffering and commitment to live among those who do brought him to his conviction that solidarity with the poor is the indispensable response to suffering.[113]

Gutiérrez's vision of suffering and solidarity points to the heart of suffering itself, which transcends his context and experiences. In this sense the value of his theology is not limited to the special interests of the Latin American poor. It is instructive for all those who grapple with how to address suffering. Yet it was his unique context that shaped his vision. One might argue that, through his lived experiences, the veil of

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[111] Curt Cadorette argues that the insights of dependency theory helped the poor of Latin America become conscious of their own oppression and contributed to their irruption into history, their "Copernican revolution" from being nonpersons to being subjects of their own destiny. See Cadorette, 25.

[112] The phrase "signs of the times" was introduced by Pope John XXIII when he suggested that the church, in general, and the second Vatican council, in particular, learn to discern "the signs of the times." This attitude of attention to the world outside the church as the realm in which God works became descriptive of Vatican II as a whole and the phrase "signs of the times" was picked up and used by popes Paul VI and John Paul II and maintains a somewhat prominent place in the rhetoric of many liberation theologians. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, Rolando Ames, Javier Iguiñiz, and Carlos Chipoco, *Sobre el trabajo humano: Comentarios a la encíclica "Laborem Exercens"* (Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas, 1982).

[113] The contours of Gutiérrez's notion of suffering and solidarity are discussed in the following chapter. The point here is that it was the collective experiences in Gutiérrez's context that led him to declare that neutrality, passivity, and indifference in the face of suffering are not options for Christians. Active participation is required. He writes, "I have been criticized for saying that when faced with a situation of this magnitude, neutrality is impossible… Perhaps it is this very last point—living in the situation—that makes the difference in outlooks." Gutiérrez, *Truth*, 75-78.

affluence became thinner; the pacifying and conditioning lens of privilege was wiped clean.

Although Gutiérrez does not make this point explicit, I contend that his thinking actually points to the interdependent nature of suffering. For the poor and oppressed to be liberated from suffering, their rich oppressors need to be liberated as well—liberated, among other things, from the false vision of independence and self-aggrandizement that prosperity often brings. At its heart, dependency theory points to something much deeper than an economic issue; it is a spiritual problem. As was the case in the days of Bartolomé de Las Casas, the Spanish needed to be liberated for the Amerindians to be liberated. The conquistadors' addictive desire for wealth created a spiritual myopia and prohibited them from seeing their fundamental union with the natives they were abusing. In more recent times, the national elites in Latin America have been so seduced by the wealth and power that the capitalist system affords them that they have been deaf to the wailing of the poor and blind to the suffering that their actions help produce. Even farther removed, but no less culpable, the citizens of the "center" countries in North America and Europe have had their moral perceptions twisted by the economic and cultural systems in which they live, such that they cannot see their involvement with the suffering of their neighbors at the periphery.

After years of attack, Gutiérrez does not develop these implications of dependency theory. His goal has never been to give spiritual direction to the rich. In his later writings, Gutiérrez has recognized that, by itself, dependency theory is an inadequate tool for understanding "the internal dynamics of each country or of the vast

dimensions of the world of the poor."[114] On the one hand, the nature of the economic relationship between countries has changed with dizzying speed with the advent of globalization and large-scale international trade agreements. On the other hand, social analysis itself has evolved to include more detailed attention to the causal roles that gender, race, sexuality, culture, and psychology play in human suffering. Even within economically disenfranchised communities in Latin America, poverty and suffering are not equal. As mentioned in chapter 1, female, homosexual, and more darkly-complected persons are more vulnerable to victimization. In response to this reality, Gutiérrez has called for the refinement of diagnostic tools and the development of new ones:

> There is no question of choosing among the tools to be used; poverty is a complex human condition, and its causes must also be complex. The use of a variety of tools does not mean sacrificing depth of analysis; the point is only not to be simplistic but rather to insist on getting at the deepest causes of the situation, for this is what it means to be truly radical. Responsiveness to new challenges requires changes in our approach to the paths to be followed in really overcoming the social conflicts mentioned earlier and in building a just and fraternal world.[115]

The move to include other analytical tools by which to deepen ones understanding of poverty and suffering is a wise one. As will be developed in chapter 4, Thich Nhat Hahn's vision of *pratitya samutpada* (interdependent co-arising) is instructive on this point. Not only can Nhat Hanh's perspective enrich Gutiérrez's natural intuitions, his recommendations for spiritual practices can also help those in the position of privilege—in this case the North American middle class—to have the fortitude to live into Gutiérrez's radical call for solidarity and the insight to see it connected to their own spiritual well-being. Gutiérrez's vision of the liberation of the poor is that, through a

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[114] Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation,* xxiv. See also Gutiérrez, "Liberation Theology and the Future of the Poor," note 12, in Joerg Rieger, ed., *Liberating the Future*, 106.

[115] Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation,* xxv.

process of conscientization, the poor and suffering themselves irrupt into history and seek new forms of communal life in which their value as persons is recognized and appreciated. However, just as the dominant theology of privilege treats the poor as absent or passive, so too, in an opposite way, does an extreme focus only on the Latin American poor ignore the corrective measures that their neighbors to the North might take.

To see Gutiérrez's liberation theology as only relevant to those living in Latin America is to fail to appreciate the apostle Paul's insight that "the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.'"[116] When those in a position of privilege begin to pay attention to the suffering of their neighbors, they hold a mirror up to themselves and may begin to see a clearer path to their own liberation. In the final analysis, every context is God's context and we are all a part of it. To realize that the whole body suffers together allows authentic solidarity to arise. Theologian Rebecca Chopp has argued that "feminism is not somehow just about women: rather, it casts its voice from the margins over the whole of the social-symbolic order, questioning its rules, terms, procedures, and practices."[117] Neither is Gutiérrez's liberation theology just about the poor in Latin America, though it is them to whom he hopes to give voice. Gutiérrez's notion of God's

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[116] Paul's description of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians is so instructive that a longer citation bears inclusion: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." See 1 Cor. 12:21-26 NRSV

[117] Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 16.

"preferential option for the poor" and its demand for solidarity can give all Christians, even all social activists, a deeper understanding of suffering and a clearer vision of how one can respond. To these concepts, we now turn.

CHAPTER 3

GUTIÉRREZ'S THEOLOGICAL THEMES

We can all become conscious of our innate poverty. What happens is that those who are poor of material goods are in a situation which allows them to obtain this consciousness more easily. In contrast, those rich in material goods harden their hearts through their attachment to riches. With the heart hardened, the consciousness remains gravely inhibited, as if by a crust or a steel armor. The poor, almost spontaneously, feel solidarity with other poor people, with all those who suffer, while the rich become more egoistic....The poor live the communal calling more easily. The rich need to become poor to be able to enter the Kingdom Of Heaven.

Leonidas Proaño, *Creo en el hombre y en la comunidad*[118]

Personally, the meaning of my life is not liberation theology; it is to be close to my people, to participate in their struggles for liberation and for a just world, and to share their faith and hope.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Gutiérrez: Joy of the Poor Confounds the Powerful"

Gutiérrez's liberation theology offers insight into the fundamental nature of human suffering in the form of both a diagnosis of its causes and a prescription for its mitigation. Nevertheless, the term "suffering" is not central to his writing. Instead, Gutiérrez focuses his attention on what it means to be poor. As was pointed out in chapter 1, the relationship between poverty and suffering is both complicated and deep. While poverty is most commonly understood as the condition of those who lack material

[118] Leonidas Proaño (1910-1988) was the leading voice of liberation theology in Ecuador. As the bishop of Riobamba, a city in the central Ecuadorian highlands, he was affectionately known as "*el obispo de los pobres*" and "*el obispo de los indios*" ("bishop to the poor" and "bishop to the indigenous"). He was a colleague of Gutiérrez and was with him at the CELAM conference in Medellín. As such, though loved throughout the country by indigenous communities, he was distrusted by the government and the conservative Catholic hierarchy. He was jailed, along with 16 other Latin American bishops, by Ecuador's military dictatorship in 1976. In 1986, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work with Andean Amerindian communities. The above translation of his words is mine. [See Leondidas Proaño, *Creo en el hombre y en la comunidad: Autobiografía*, 3a ed. (Quito: Corporación editoral nacional, 1989), 18.] To my knowledge none of his works have been translated into English. For a festschrift in his honor, see Francisco Enriquez Bermeo, ed., *Leondidas Proaño: El obispo de los pobres* (Quito: El editorial conejo, 1989).

resources, even a superficial study of Gutiérrez's work reveals that, when he speaks of the Peruvian poor, he has something much more profound in mind than simply their limited access to or want for funds. As a theologian, Gutiérrez turns to the bible to find an interpretive lens through which to understand the contemporary suffering of Latin America's vast lower classes. What he discovers there is a rich and evolving notion of poverty which is indispensable to the gospel message of salvation. Thus, an intense focus on poverty lies at the heart of his entire theological project, shaping not only his vision of the current suffering of Latin Americans, but also his understanding of human suffering in general. This vision of "the poor" forms his proposal for how theology should be done and, at its most profound levels, provides the essential basis for how human life should be understood.

The first step, then, in an attempt to distill Gutiérrez's vision of suffering, is to excavate his understanding of poverty and its relationship to human suffering. Unfolding the contours of poverty, in both its contemporary and biblical meanings, reveals something of its causes, as well as suggests how conscientious people should respond to it. This chapter examines a series of theological themes important to Gutiérrez's perception of poverty and solidarity before turning to his view that theological reflection is always a "second act" which follows the previous moments of contemplation and silence in the life of faith.

1. El Mundo del Pobre

Liberation theologians counsel that if one is to understand suffering, she must start by looking at those who suffer most—those who experience it in its most tragic,

atrocious, and daily manifestations. Certainly one may identify toothaches and hurt feelings as a type of suffering, but it is not to these that Gutiérrez points. He is concerned with grinding inhumane suffering, the kind experienced by those who know lack as a consistent and inescapable feature of their lives. For Gutiérrez, this kind of brutal misery is found in its most intense forms in what he calls *el mundo del pobre* (the world of the poor).[119] This is a world in which monetary shortage is a dominant but by no means exclusive characteristic. Gutiérrez writes of *el mundo del pobre*:

> We are dealing with a veritable universe, in which the socio-economic aspect of poverty, while fundamental, is not the only aspect. Ultimately, poverty means *death*. Food shortages, housing shortages, the impossibility of attending adequately to health and educational needs, the exploitation of labor, chronic unemployment, disrespect for human worth and dignity, unjust restrictions on freedom of expression (in politics and religion alike) are the daily plight of the poor. The lot of the poor, in a word, is suffering. Theirs is a situation that destroys peoples, families, and individuals; Medellín and Puebla call it "institutionalized violence."[120]

For Gutiérrez, to be poor means not only to have unfulfilled economic needs but to find oneself in a particular social location as well. That is to say, to be poor is to be part of a collective. In his early work, Gutiérrez often used phrases such as "dominated peoples," "exploited social classes," "despised races," and "marginalized cultures," and pointed to the subjugated status of women to describe what he meant by "the poor."[121] His aim in doing so was not to write a dictionary-worthy definition of poverty (he does this as well, as we shall examine below), but to give his readers a sense of the living reality of those

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[119] This idiom makes its way into nearly all of Gutiérrez's writings. For representative examples see Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo: En el itinerario espiritual de un pueblo*, 2da ed. rev. (Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas, 1983), 186-188; Gutiérrez, *La densidad del presente*, 178-179; and Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, 9-11.

[120] Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," in I. Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis*, 236.

[121] See Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, xxi.

whom his writings attend. Having grown up within *el mundo del pobre*, Gutiérrez has a deep sense of the communal features of poverty from his own experience and now seeks to speak on behalf of the world of the poor. While his academic writing is beyond the reach of many whom he calls "his people," these Peruvians are, nevertheless, always present in his works, through their stories of hope and aguish. For Gutiérrez, "The isolated poor person does not exist."[122] Obviously in the final analysis, "the poor," as a collective, are comprised of poor individuals, but they are individuals whose self-identity is bound up with a feeling of belonging to an oppressed people and a concordant sense of inter-group solidarity. The white male college student from Canada who loses his wallet while traveling through Lima, though now economically undersupplied, would not fall into Gutiérrez's sense of poverty, since he is not categorically unimportant in the eyes of larger society.[123]

Gutiérrez regularly emphasizes that the poor live in world apart. At times he calls it an "alien world" or a "foreign land."[124] In so doing he draws parallels between the experience of dispossession of the Jewish people in Egypt and Babylonia and the collective reality of oppressed groups in Latin America today. At other times he calls it "the world of the other," drawing on language reminiscent of that employed by Emmanuel Levinas.[125] Nevertheless, there is a key difference in their understandings of

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[122] Gutiérrez, *The Poor and the Church*, 9.

[123] With this view, Gutiérrez himself is not poor. He writes, "I am not poor because I am not *in-significant* since I am a priest. This must be said straight out. I try to live with the poor, but as a priest and a theologian I would be lying if I said that I was someone insignificant in my country… It is best to acknowledge things as they are and then try, with a certain humility, to live close to the poor." See Gutiérrez, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings*, 145.

[124] See Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo*, 20-25.

[125] Gutiérrez, *La fuerza histórica de los pobres*, 61-64.

"the other." For Levinas, the other is an individual, a person, a stranger, a *thou* who, in a face to face encounter, relativizes one's own egocentricity. The sheer strangeness and essential differentness of "the other" refuses subsumption by one's own interpretive categories. Though "the other" "may inhabit a world that is basically other than mine and be essentially different from me," ultimately everyone inhabits her own world and anyone can function as an "other" to everyone else.[126] For Gutiérrez, the "world of the other" is a collective space. The world of the poor may disrupt the "being at home with oneself" for the rich in much the same way that the face of Levinas's "other" disrupts the egocentric satisfaction of the individual self. However, for Gutiérrez, the poor are not "other" to each other; they are companions whose shared identity is founded upon the reality that they live the same world and experience the same oppression. The poor have a sense of innate solidarity and kinship that originates in a sense of class, sex, race, or culture.

Three points arise with the recognition of the collective nature of poverty. First, to be poor involves a certain kind of living. Poverty means more than just not having. The world of the poor is full of people with skills and gifts, dreams and possibilities. Very often the poor have their own language, their own way of seeing the world, their own set of values, which arise out of their culture, sex or race, and their own sense of humor. Despite the experience of oppressive suffering, the poor often know deep joy and find reason to laugh, even in dire circumstances. Gutiérrez emphasizes this point saying:

> It is important to remember this—to be poor is a way of life. It is a way of thinking, of loving, of praying, of believing and hoping, of spending free time, of struggling for a livelihood. Being poor today also means being involved in the

[126] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 13.

> battle for justice and peace, defending one's life and liberty, seeking greater democratic participation in the decisions of society.[127]

Second, the collective character of poverty suggests a particular self-understanding. The identity of the poor rests not only in their lack of funds, but also in their very "nonidentity" or absence in the eyes of the rich. The poor are the ignored byproducts of a socioeconomic system built upon their very status as "nonpersons." The poor are the exploited, the oppressed, the marginalized, the despised, the ignored, the proletariat deprived of the fruits of their labor and stripped of their status as human beings. They are a collective precisely because they are rejected and cast out by "persons," the rich. One may notice that each of these often-employed terms (exploited, oppressed, marginalized) finds its meaning only in relationship to its foil (the exploiter, the oppressor, the marginalizer). These monikers are more accurate descriptors of a particular relationship between the rich and the poor than they are of economic holdings. To be poor is to be on the losing end of a relationship with the rich. What really makes "the poor" poor, for Gutiérrez, is the collective identity they gain through their common suffering, a suffering inflicted upon them by others.[128]

Third, to be part of the world of the poor means not only that one is defined by the rich, but also that one is *in conflict* with them. This conflict need not be intentional or even conscious; it is built into the very structures of society that contribute to the

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[127] Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," in I. Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis*, 236.

[128] Peruvian author José María Arguedas has called this communal identity through inflicted suffering "*la fraternidad de los miserables*" (the fellowship of the wretched). [See Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo,* 38]. References to Arguedas can be found in many of Gutiérrez's books. Evidence of this natural fellowship fills the pages of Leonidas Proaño's autobiography. See the particularly heart-wrenching story he tells of a conversation had with a group of Andean peasants in Proaño, *Creo en el hombre y en la comunidad,* 215-219.

impoverishment of the poor. Gutiérrez argues that a perception of social injustice inevitably leads one to struggle against it. "That is why talk about the poor means talk about poor people who are fighting for their liberation."[129] The world of the poor is, among other things, a battleground for social justice and human rights. When Gutiérrez writes of the poor in Latin America, he has in mind the many popular movements of the lower classes struggling to obtain basic rights and human freedom: women struggling for the right to vote, Amerindian communities fighting for access to land, former African slaves seeking admission to public schools, etc. These marginalized communities, which have been either absent from or of little importance in the pages of history, after becoming conscious of their oppression, have joined together to become a new powerful force. The poor have irrupted into history; the formerly absent have become actively present; those who were previously considered objects have become subjects of their own lives and agents of their own destiny. For Gutiérrez, the irruption of the poor is "the most significant fact in recent years in the political and ecclesial life of Latin America."[130] The conscientization and resultant solidarity of the poor make them a powerful social group, which Gutiérrez considers in no way accidental. When the anonymous poor find their voice, their subversive memories of suffering and agony shake the very foundations of the comfort enjoyed by the privileged.

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[129] Gutiérrez, *The Poor and the Church*, 9. This small booklet was published in 1984. In 1993, Gutiérrez reworks this same argument for an encyclopedia of concepts in liberation theology. In this reworking, he argues that to be poor involves "committing oneself to the liberation of every human person" [Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," in I. Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis*, 237]. Though this shift in tone (from "the liberation of the poor" to "the liberation of every human") is never deeply explained, one may interpret here a tacit opening in his thinking to a central claim of this dissertation, that the liberation of the poor necessarily involves the liberation of the rich.

[130] Gutiérrez, *La fuerza histórica de los pobres,* 176.

The rupture of the old dialectic opens up the possibility for a radically new way of life. Gutiérrez sees this as evidence of God's liberating action in the world. Nevertheless, neither God nor *el mundo del pobre* can be adequately understood in intellectual terms or through the written word. In an interview Gutiérrez once said, "I feel that words can express this world [the world of the poor] only very partially. And so, perhaps, there is a certain reticence about trying to write on a reality that with each passing day appalls me more."[131] For Gutiérrez, to truly understand suffering, one needs much more than a definition of the term; one must become a part of the world of those who do. To contemplate the notion of poverty is far less unsettling than being face to face with the poor. To conceptualize (or write about) suffering is more impersonal than creating friendships with the flesh-and-blood people who suffer.

2. Three Meanings of Poverty

Despite his hesitance, Gutiérrez feels forced to tender a conceptual definition of poverty. Poverty is an ambiguous term, both in the bible as well as in contemporary parlance. In modern-day use, poverty is normally understood as a degrading and, therefore, negative reality, which is rejected by conscientious people. There are many humanitarian groups which, without any religious foundation, struggle to raise people out of poverty. At the same time, in some Christian circles, particularly in monastic circles, poverty is viewed as a spiritual virtue, along with chastity and obedience. Poverty is considered a vocation to which God calls people. In other Christian circles a vague and sentimental belief in "spiritual poverty" is uplifted as a kind of interior disposition of

[131] Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Gutiérrez: Joy of the Poor Confounds the Powerful," interview by Mario Campos, *Latin America Press* (10 May 1984): 3.

nonattachment to material goods. This follows a questionable exegesis of the "the poor in spirit" found in the beatitudes of Matthew. Along this line of reasoning a materially wealthy person can be spiritually poor—that is, indifferent to or unconcerned with her holdings—while a monetarily poor person can be highly attached to riches. These contradictory meanings have generated a certain ambivalence about and even a romantic indifference to this plight of the poor. To blend these different notions of poverty is, in Gutiérrez's words, "*Jugar con las palabras…y con los hombres*" ("To play with words…and with people").[132] To combine the actual, subhuman, degrading condition of real poverty with an abstract spiritual virtue, in the end, only serves to justify the status quo. So with creative theological acumen, Gutiérrez explores the bible and suggests a threefold understanding of the term poverty.[133]

Material Poverty—A Scandalous Condition

With lengthy and careful exegesis Gutiérrez argues that in both the Old and New Testaments "real poverty" or "material poverty" is understood as an indecent and disgraceful condition that is against the will of God. The words in Hebrew and Greek which mean "poor" also mean frail, indigent, weak, humiliated, bent over, wretched, beggar, the one who waits, the one who lacks, the one who does not have that which is

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[132] Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 368.

[133] Gutiérrez first suggested this tripartite understanding of poverty in a course he taught at the University of Montréal in July 1967. Afterwards, it was accepted at both the Medellín Episcopal conference in 1968 and the Puebla conference in 1979. James Nickoloff contends that this alone "ensured Gutiérrez's stamp on the subsequent history of the Roman Catholic Church and its theology." See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings*, 291.

necessary to subsist, and the one forced to beg.[134] The poor are embodied by the leper, the orphan, the stranger, the widow, the hungry, the naked, the sick, the blind, the mutilated, the jailed, the disposed of the land, the slave, and the exploited. The biblical image of poverty is that of a state of oppression which is rejected by God and the prophets, by the nation of Israel and by Jesus. The poor are the personification of injustice against which God's wrath is directed. Gutiérrez contends that poverty, as understood in the bible, does not come about by accident, through fate, or by God's will; it is the result of the actions of others. The poor are poor because they are the victims of those with wealth and power. These are the wicked whom the prophet Isaiah accuses: "Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!"[135] In Gutiérrez's reading, the bible does not so much describe poverty as point a finger at the people who are to blame.

In theological terms Gutiérrez delineates three primary reasons why material poverty must be rejected. First, the very heart of the Mosaic religion repudiates it. God made herself known to the Hebrews through Moses who led them out of exploitation and slavery in Egypt and into a land where they might live lives worthy of human beings. Second, poverty contradicts the theological anthropology and the divine mandate found in the book of Genesis. Human beings are created in the "image and likeness" of God and they are instructed to "dominate the earth." Despite the contemporary recoil of environmentalists at this image, behind it lies a vision of human beings as creative

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[134] For Gutiérrez's exegesis of the Hebrew words *rash, êbyôn, dal, ani, anaw,* and the Greek term *ptokós,* see Gutiérrez, "Significación Bíblica de la pobreza," in *Teología de la liberación,* 369-381.

[135] Isa. 10:1-2 NRSV

subjects who transform nature through productive work. Yet for those in poverty, work is not an expression of divine freedom; it is a dehumanizing exploitation which belittles the image of God in the poor. Finally, the bible understands human beings as a "sacrament," or sign of God. To oppress humans is to insult God; to uplift them is to please God. God is best known in human encounters with one another. Gutiérrez suggests that poverty is "an expression of sin," a "negation of love," an evil and "scandalous condition" which is "incompatible with the coming of the kingdom of God, a kingdom of love and justice."[136] According to Gutiérrez, this is the dominant line of thinking about poverty in the bible.

Spiritual Poverty—Spiritual Childhood

The same terms used to describe poverty as evil are also used in a secondary sense. The author of the book of Zephaniah, in reaction to the decadence and idolatry of the religious leadership in Israel, foretold that God would come to punish those who had rebelled. Speaking on behalf of God, the prophet writes:

> For then I will take away out of the midst of thee thy proudly exulting ones,
> and thou shalt no more be haughty in my holy mountain.
> But I will leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people,
> and they shall trust in the name of the LORD.[137]

In this strain of thought poverty takes on a spiritual meaning; to be poor is to be humble and to wait for the coming of the Messiah. Poverty, in this sense, is the opposite of pride and arrogance. The poor are those who trust in God absolutely to provide for them.

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[136] Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación,* 375.

[137] Zeph. 3:11b-12 ERV

When the gospel of Matthew says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit,"[138] Gutiérrez understands this to suggest that the poor are blessed precisely because they are those who are open to and waiting for the Lord. At its core, spiritual poverty is not about material wealth; rather, it refers to an outlook which finds sustenance in nothing other than God's will. To be poor in this sense is to be like a child; it has "the same meaning as the gospel theme of spiritual childhood."[139] The prophet Jeremiah refers to himself as poor and needy when he thanks God for rescuing him from his persecutors.[140] In the book of Isaiah, when God promises to create a new heaven and a new earth in which the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, God says, "But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word."[141] In the final analysis, poverty, as utter dependence on God and the absence of self-sufficiency, is the interior attitude of Jesus.[142]

Gutiérrez notes that the greatest confusion about the meaning of poverty for Christians stems from their interpretation of Luke's version of the beatitudes which states, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"[143] rather than, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," as is expressed in the book of Matthew. Some exegetes have found in Luke a tacit idealization of a material poverty, a type of canonizing of a

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[138] Matt. 5:1a NRSV

[139] Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación,* 377.

[140] Jer. 20:13.

[141] Isa. 66:2b NRSV

[142] Christ's disposition of spiritual childhood or spiritual poverty is a point underscored by German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. See Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship,* rev. ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963).

[143] Luke 6:20 NRSV

social-economic class, as if the materially poor have a guaranteed access to heaven because they exist in a condition of suffering that was imposed upon them. For Gutiérrez this contradicts the message of individual freedom contained in all the gospels. He suggested that Jesus does not mean to say that the materially poor are blessed because they will enter the kingdom of God in some future life. When theologians in the church have suggested this interpretation, what they really have meant is, "Accept your poverty because later this injustice will be compensated for in the Kingdom of God."[144] Gutiérrez claims, on the other hand, that what Jesus meant is that the poor are blessed *because* the kingdom of God has already begun. The eradication of the exploitation and oppression of the poor has already started; God's vision of justice, community, and fellowship has entered the world through Jesus. The poor are blessed because Christ feeds the hungry and gives sight to the blind. Contrary to other interpretations, Gutiérrez contends that Jesus rejects materially poverty. The poor are blessed, not because they suffer, but because their suffering is coming to an end.

Poverty as Solidarity and Protest

Gutiérrez suggests that if the above two understandings of protest are held together, a deeper understanding of the biblical message of poverty becomes clear. Material poverty is to be rejected; an attitude of utter openness is to God affirmed. Of course, there is a connection between the two. Those who rely totally on God put little stock in the accumulation of wealth. Yet this truth is of secondary consequence; the real

[144] Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 380.

meaning of spiritual poverty goes much deeper than the absence of economic goods—it is the entire interior stance of a person before God and things.

The best example of the synthesis between these two biblical meanings of poverty is found in the attitude of Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul suggests that Jesus' attitude was one of voluntary impoverishment: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Jesus willingly takes on material poverty, exploitation, and oppression, sinful though they are, not to laud them or idealize them but to protest against them. Gutiérrez writes:

> Poverty is an act of love and liberation. It has redemptive value. If the ultimate cause of human exploitation and alienation is selfishness, the deepest reason for voluntary poverty is love of neighbor. Christian poverty does not make sense except as a commitment of solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer misery and injustice. The commitment is to witness that these are evil, the fruit of sin and the rupture of communion. It is not a matter of idealizing poverty, but rather of taking it on as it is—as an evil—to protest against it and to struggle to abolish it.[145]

For Gutiérrez, to be with the poor, one must be struggling against poverty. To take on poverty is an expression of love for God and neighbor that rejects all forms of oppression and suffering. Material poverty should not be assumed for its own sake or for selfish reasons. Rather, Christians are called to imitate Christ who took on the sinful condition of poverty in order to create solidarity with those who suffer from sin and to liberate them from it. Solidarity is much more than a theological concept; it is a way of life, a way of thinking and acting, which separates one from the normal values of one's social class. Gutiérrez observes that in the early Christian community "no one claimed private

[145] Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 383.

ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common."[146] This was done not because poverty had innate value, but for the opposite reason—so that no one of them was poor. In the first century this was not a romantic or lofty religious value; it was a political act. The same is true today and Gutiérrez calls Christians to be "with the oppressed" and "to be against the oppressor."[147] Christian poverty is solidarity and protest.

This definition of poverty presages two important points which we shall soon consider in more detail—solidarity and God's preferential option for the poor. However, it should be noted that each of these ideas relies on a theological understanding of poverty. Gutiérrez is clear that spiritual poverty is an aspect of Christian vocation, not a part of the contemporary non-Christian understanding of what it means to be poor. To be materially poor is to suffer. Gutiérrez is fond of stating, as a penetrating, abridged definition of poverty, that, "La pobreza significa muerte, muerte injusta y temprana" ("Poverty means death, unjust and early death").[148] The poor die before their time from hunger, from bullets, and from curable illness left untreated. The poor die because those with privilege fear losing their advantage and power. In Latin America, the poor (women, Amerindians, oppressed classes, etc.) experience not only physical death, but "cultural death" insofar as the powerful "seek to do away with everything that gives unity and strength to the dispossessed, making them easier prey for the machinery of

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[146] Acts 4:32 NRSV

[147] Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 385.

[148] For examples of this summary, see Gutiérrez, *La densidad del presente*, 179; Gutiérrez, *La fuerza histórica de los pobres*, 98; Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo*, 21; and Gutiérrez, *The Poor and the Church*, 10.

oppression."[149] Poverty destroys people, families, cultures and nations. It is with this vision of poverty that Gutiérrez claims, "There is no greater challenge to our language about God than the suffering of the innocent…poverty and its consequences are the great challenge of our time."[150]

3. Going to the Causes

From the beginning Gutiérrez has been clear that "it is not enough to describe the situation [of poverty]; its causes must be determined."[151] His ultimate goal is not to write theology or to understand biblical poverty; it is to be a pastor to the suffering poor of Latin America.[152] To do this, it is critically important to seek "doggedly" an understanding of the origins of the situation of the Peruvian poor. As mentioned in chapter 2, Gutiérrez is aware that poverty is a complex reality whose causes are varied. In addition, one's view of poverty shifts when different analytical tools are used.[153] However, when one's lens is focused on the suffering masses (rather than, for example,

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[149] Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo,* 21.

[150] Gutiérrez, *La densidad del presente,* 49-50.

[151] Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation,* xxiii.

[152] In a frank interview, Gutiérrez once stated, "I have always believed that my work as a priest is essentially pastoral, fundamentally that of accompanying the lives and the journey of the people and of trying to preach the Gospel out of this experience. Circumstance has led me to express in writing some reflections on this experience. But I want to insist that I have never frankly and honestly considered my writing to be the most important part of my work…I feel very much absorbed in my pastoral work, engulfed by it and by the cruel situation lived by the poor. I have always wanted to make my life a life of daily close contact and shared experience, a shared journey and shared hope, with the poor." See Nava, 11.

[153] Gutiérrez writes, "It is not a matter of choosing between instruments. As a complex human condition, poverty can only have complex causes. We must not be simplistic. We must doggedly plunge to the root, to the underlying causes of the situation. We must be, in this sense, truly radical." Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," in I. Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis*, 239.

on an individual's toothache), socio-economic structural analysis is necessarily implied.[154]

For liberation theologians in general and for Gutiérrez in particular, it is undeniable that much catastrophic human suffering results from the international system of dependent capitalism. As a general rule, capitalism, based on competition, is by its nature exploitative. Subjected to this system throughout their long history of colonization, the poor in Latin America experience suffering over which they have very little control. The "center" or "dominant countries" of the United States and Europe set the contours of international trade in Latin America. They impose technology, the terms of commerce, levels of internal income distribution, particular concentrations of land ownership, and cultural values on the "peripheral countries" who become dependent upon the ebbs and flows of dominant markets. For example, when the United States experienced a recession in the 1980s, the economies of every Latin American country were affected.[155] When middle-class Americans experienced an economic pinch and quit buying gourmet coffee, hundreds of *campesinos* in Ecuador, Columbia, and Brazil, whose sole income derived from growing coffee beans, took the hit. Every time there is a change in the global market and the US tries to encourage local production by imposing tariffs on internationally produced goods, those who suffer the most are the Third World poor.

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[154] José Míguez Bonino and Clodovis Boff both suggests that the use of social sciences and structural analysis are a necessary and "constitutive part" of liberation theology. See José Míguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 45 and Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987), 30.

[155] See The World Bank, *The World Bank Annual Report 1987* (Washington D.C.: The World Bank, 1986), 32.

Gutiérrez is clear that dependency theories cannot explain the totality of suffering in Latin America. Nevertheless, the relationship that these Southern countries have with their neighbors to the North is the proverbial "bull in the china shop"—the major, constitutive cause of suffering. The structures themselves oppress the weak. As such, intermittent handouts from the wealthy to the impoverished can never be a lasting solution. Human suffering is at its worse among the poor, not by accident or by fate, but because the system in which everyone lives is designed to benefit some at the expense of others. For Gutiérrez, the target then becomes to interpret and understand the root cause of such repressive structures. Why have those with power constructed systems of oppression? Here the social sciences and dependency theory have exhausted their utility. For a deeper understanding of the structures of oppression, Gutiérrez turns to the bible.

Through a biblical interpretative lens, Gutiérrez contends that anything that denies the humanity and dignity of God's human creations must be seen as sin. Dependency capitalism breaks the natural relationship of friendship that should exist between people and with God. Hence, "The sin of the world, which Christ came to heal, reaches its culmination in our time in social structures which exclude the poor (the immense majority of the world population) from participation in the benefits of creation."[156] Gutiérrez affirms the Medellín document which claims that Christ brings liberation "from the slavery to which sin has subjected them—hunger, misery, oppression, and ignorance,

[156] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Density of the Present: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), 154.

in a word, injustice and hatred."[157] One can no longer only envision sin as personal shortcoming; it is also social and structural.

Gutiérrez sharpens both his analysis and his language when he takes up another biblical lens: idolatry. Within the pages of scripture Gutiérrez sees an underlying dialectic between life and death, between liberation and slavery, and between God and mammon. Idolatry means "putting one's trust in something or someone who is not God."[158] The usual culprits are money and power. To put one's trust in either of these, rather than the God of life, results in many human victims because "the yearning for money and power stops at nothing" and "the god of idolatry is a murderous god."[159] Social structures are not only sinful, they are idolatrous; they arise out of the greed of the wealthy. Gutiérrez writes:

> Jesus Christ ranks money as an antigod and sets before us the inescapable choice of following one or the other, it is the final analysis, because the worship of mammon entails shedding the blood of the poor.
>
> This is precisely what has happened in the various concrete forms of exploitation and oppression of the poor in the course of human history. When the poor are oppressed and their rights trampled underfoot, their blood is shed; this is against God's will. The idolatry of money, of this fetish produced by the work of human hands, is indissolubly and causally connected with the death of the poor. If we thus go to the root of the matter, idolatry reveals its full meaning: it works against the God of the Bible, who is a God of life. Idolatry is death; God is life.[160]

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[157] La segunda conferencia general del episcopado Latinoamericano (Medellín), "Justicia," in *La Iglesia en la actual transformación de América Latina,* paragraph 3.

[158] Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, 49. The dialectic between the God of life and idols of death is the dominant theme of this book.

[159] Ibid., 53.

[160] Ibid., 55-6.

Two points stand out in Gutiérrez's discussion of idolatry: (1) one must choose between God and the idol, and (2) the choice is made known in the realm of practice. Gutiérrez emphasizes and reemphasized the first point with brutal clarity. Before all humanity there is a choice between dependency on God and dependency on that which one can own and acquire. The choice is unequivocal and unavoidable. There is no middle ground, no neutrality, no simple appeal to ignorance or disinterest. The choice is an existential one upon which, in the bible, one's very salvation hangs. Faced with the present-day suffering of the poor in Peru, Gutiérrez contends:

> The choice is clear. Either we detach ourselves from what is going on, under the pretext that it is not our direct responsibility; we restrict ourselves to poetic requests that all become one; we draw back in fear and claim to be above the oppositions found in Peruvian society today; but then we have summoned death and joined its party, as the Book of Wisdom says, at the very moment when we claim to be making no choice. Or we set aside disdainful neutrality and are usually present when the forces opposed to the reign of love and justice are every day aggressively violating the most elementary human rights; then we are beginning to act as friends of life.[161]

Given the present-day reality of human suffering in the world of the poor, the choice between life and death is a choice between siding with the poor in a rejection of structural oppression and complacently enjoying the benefits of privilege, which come by the blood of those who suffer. In the introduction to *The God of Life,* Gutiérrez makes it clear that he hopes his book will reach a wide readership. There is no doubt to whom the finger of blame is directed; the guilty are the idolaters who are willing to let the poor suffer while enjoying the spoils of a sinful system. Christians from any social class in any nation are called to be in solidarity with the suffering and to protest actively against unjust policies and laws.

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[161] Ibid., 63.

Furthermore, Gutiérrez reads in the bible a demand for action. The privileged cannot sit on the sidelines (or in their padded sanctuary pews) and simply say "here here!" but make no substantive change in their lives.[162] To side with the poor is an action as much as a spiritual disposition. It is not a verbal affirmation. Both idolatry and solidarity are meted out in the sphere of human behavior. Deeds speak more truthfully than words. This was the very point made by Bartolomé de Las Casas in his critique of the Spanish conquistadors. They came under the guise of sharing the gospel of Christ with the Amerindians, when in fact their actions revealed their allegiance to greed and death.

In his attempt to root out the causes of human suffering in Latin America, Gutiérrez placed the lion's share of blame on socio-economic structures that oppress the poor. After noting that such analysis often produces resistance, "especially if the structural analysis reveals the concrete, historical responsibility of specific persons," he moves away from a discussion of causes to the explicitly theological theme of God's preferential option for the poor.[163] I contend that a further layer of excavation needs to be done. The choice between life and death, between solidarity with the poor and privilege at their expense, is not as easy and balanced as it seems. Las Casas once suggested that "if we were Indians, things would take on a different color for us."[164] One can assume that among the conquistadors there were some who actually believed they were helping

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[162] For Gutiérrez, the poor cannot sit on the sidelines either, but his injunction is not directed at them. He sees that the poor have already taken the initiative and are irrupting into history.

[163] Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," in I. Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis*, 237.

[164] Gutiérrez, *The Density of the Present*, 160.

the Indians. To label them as evil and idolatrous alone is too simple. At its heart, the issue is one of distorted vision. The conquistadors were blinded by wealth. Underneath an analysis of oppressive structures must be an investigation of the spiritual myopia that gives them birth. This subject will be revisited in chapters 4 and 5.

4. Poverty and Suffering

With a better sense of how Gutiérrez understands poverty, it now merits query as to how he understands the relationship of poverty to suffering. As mentioned above, Gutiérrez spends considerably less time on the topic of human suffering. As a theological theme it receives less attention than poverty does. In his writings the word "suffering" occurs frequently, but usually in a litany of words describing the reality of the poor.[165] Phrases such as "the suffering of the poor," "the daily suffering of the poor," and the Christian vocation to pay attention to the "persistent and increasing suffering of a marginalized people" are very common.[166] The initial impression one gets is that Gutiérrez sees the term "suffering" as a general, blanket descriptor for the reality of the materially poor. The world of the poor is suffering; to suffer is the plight of the poor. The myriad experiences undergone by those who are poor—hunger, oppression, marginalization, lack of housing, insufficient access to education or health care, unemployment, and disrespect—are all examples of suffering. The question arises, however, whether or not Gutiérrez understands the full reality of the world of the poor as

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[165] Since Gutiérrez writes in Spanish the word he actually uses is "*sufrimiento,"* which is, for all practical purposes, equivalent to the English term "suffering." Other Spanish words he uses for suffering are *"padecimiento"* and *"dolor."*

[166] These should be considered as representative examples. See Guutiérrez, *The God of Life,* 149; Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo,* 177; and Gutiérrez, *La densidad del presente,* 45.

suffering. Is the innate sense of solidarity and community among the poor considered suffering? Is their "way of thinking, of loving, of praying, of believing and hoping" included in his understanding of human suffering? Some excavation is required.

Job and the Problem of Theological Language

In two places (or in reference to two issues), Gutiérrez uses the term "suffering" in a more explicit and intentional way. The first concerns the efficacy of theological language, of speaking about a loving God in light of the reality of human suffering. Gutiérrez dedicates a book to this theme, *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente*, and suggests that "human suffering, the commitment to it and the questions it raises about God are in fact a point of departure and a central theme in the theology of liberation."[167] In this work Gutiérrez focuses specifically on a particular type of suffering—the suffering of the innocent—and uses an exegetical examination of the biblical book of Job as a launching pad for his argument that all theological language must begin with silence and must arise from within a framework of "concrete commitment to the poor and all who suffer unjustly."[168] Gutiérrez sees in Job an archetypal model of consciousness-raising among the poor. Job suffers many afflictions through no fault of his own. This experience opens him to the reality of all those who suffer innocently and moves him to protest against such suffering.

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[167] Gutiérrez, *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente: Una reflexión sobre el libro de Job*, 6ª ed. (Salamanca: Ediciones sígueme, 2006), 19.

[168] Ibid., 102. Gutiérrez concedes that innocent suffering, the type experienced by those who suffer through no fault of their own, presents the greatest problem to theological language and he resigns himself to stay focused to this issue. In the introduction to this work, however, he points out that "we must not forget the responsibility of those who may be the cause of the evil suffered by the innocent." Ibid, xv.

Of interest is the way in which Gutiérrez speaks about poverty and innocent suffering together. He claims that "poverty and unjust suffering are in fact the situation of the majority in Latin America."[169] Job, through his suffering "shares the lot of the poor," dedicates himself to "help other sufferers," "makes a commitment to the poor," and is in "solidarity with the marginalized and suffering of this world."[170] Solidarity with the poor is understood as "communion in suffering" and as a "commitment to the alleviation of human suffering, and above all to the removal of its causes as far as possible, [and] is an obligation for the followers of Jesus."[171] Gutiérrez seems to draw no hard and fast line between poverty and human suffering. Instead, he uses the terms almost interchangeably. Although a central theme of his literary corpus is "solidarity with the poor," here he speaks indistinguishably about "solidarity with those who suffer."[172] In his treatment of theological language, Gutiérrez does not offer a three-part understanding of the nature of suffering. Yet he does seem to suggest that the poor are the prototype of human suffering; they are its essence, its clearest example. For Gutiérrez, to penetrate the nature of human suffering, one must deeply understand the reality of *el mundo del pobre*.

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[169] Ibid., 210-211.

[170] Ibid., 120-121.

[171] Ibid., 219.

[172] Perhaps it is indicative of how Gutiérrez understands human suffering and poverty that his chapter entitled "The Suffering of Others" contains two subsections: "The Lot of the Poor" and "The Way of the Wicked." See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2007).

Joy in the Midst of Suffering

On at least two occasions Gutiérrez writes about suffering in relation to joy. As an introductory note, it is important to remember that when Gutiérrez speaks about human suffering, he does not do so in the abstract; he does not define it conceptually, as some theoretical notion that never touches ground. Instead he calls the shots as he sees them, from within the concrete context of Latin America. Nevertheless, to see his analysis as limited to Latin America is to shortchange profoundly its utility for all those who wrestle with how to respond to suffering.

In his book about the spirituality of the poor in Latin America, *Beber en su propio pozo,* Gutiérrez observes that "the believing poor have never lost their ability to have a good time, to celebrate in spite of the harsh conditions of their lives."[173] Human suffering includes elements of joy. For people of faith, much of this joy is the result of the hope that suffering can be overcome. When the suffering poor become conscious of their circumstances and begin to organize themselves to change their reality, the weight of suffering lightens and becomes slightly more bearable. In another text Gutiérrez clarifies that suffering is different from sadness. "Sadness is the withdrawing into oneself which is situated on the border of bitterness; suffering, on the contrary, can create in us a space of solitude, a space for gaining personal depth."[174] The lives of the poor are not necessarily marked by sadness (although they may certainly feel sad); rather they are marked by suffering and pain.

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[173] Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo,* 173.

[174] Gutiérrez, *La densidad del presente,* 126.

The reality of the suffering experienced by the poor defies easy description. There can be faith, hope, and joy, but these are experienced within a whole chain of interweaving afflictions that present a picture of suffering. Gutiérrez writes:

> There are a thousand little things: lack of every kind, the abuse and contempt that the poor suffer, lives tormented by the search for employment, incredible ways of earning a living or, more accurately, a crust of bread, mean quarrels, separations of family members, illnesses not found at other levels of society, infant undernourishment and death, unjust prices for products and commodities, total confusion about what is necessary for themselves and their families, delinquency springs from abandonment or despair, the loss of one's own cultural values.
>
> Small things, perhaps, when taken in isolation and looked at in the abstract, but as human sufferings they take on vast dimensions and demand a radical rejection.[175]

Human suffering is manifest in a myriad of little things, some physical some mental. One may focus on the minutia of individual experiences, but Gutiérrez underscores the importance of seeing the bigger picture of human suffering. Together these various afflictions reveal that much suffering is not only unjust, it is social; that is, experienced within the matrix of those who are continually oppressed. The great suffering of our day is found within the world of the poor. More than just social, for Gutiérrez, suffering is structural—it is caused by "conditions of death" that are "entrenched in the entire social order."[176]

Gutiérrez does not argue that political and economic systems are the only cause of human suffering, but he does suggest that one cannot truly understand suffering without giving attention to its social and structural elements. To understand the most atrocious suffering, one must recognize that it is not of one person's own making; it is systemic—it is caused by those with privilege who refuse to relinquish their grasp on money or power.

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[175] Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo*, 172.

[176] Ibid., 171.

From the countless little instances of hardship or misery, "We have a picture of suffering and death. Worst of all: the suffering and death are inflicted by the unjust hand and the greedy heart."[177]

What is the relationship between poverty and suffering? For Gutiérrez, they are intricately intertwined. Just as poverty is complex and difficult to define, so too is the nature of suffering ultimately mysterious and difficult to define. Too much academic attention to definitions and the distinction of terms misses actual contact with the mystery of suffering—it sterilizes the reality of the subject and allows the academic to retreat into a safe space of juggling labels. Borrowing language from José María Arguedas, Gutiérrez contends that paying attention to "human suffering at the personal and social levels, to poverty and marginalization" keeps one from "swimming in the rubble."[178] When one touches the reality of suffering, that which is superficial or secondary disappears. Intellectual exercises remove one from the world of the poor and the suffering. For Gutiérrez, both poverty and suffering arise and take their meaning in the social milieu. Both stem from and involve oppressive relationships with other people. While Gutiérrez does not use these words, his vision of human suffering reveals its fundamentally interdependent nature. Though manifest in many little afflictions, suffering stems in great part from misaligned relationships with other people and from a lack of spiritual clarity. Poverty and suffering, whatever their individual circumstances may be, are not just socio-economic problems; they are spiritual ones. The path out of

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[177] Ibid., 172.

[178] Gutiérrez, *La densidad del presente*, 126.

suffering will involve deep insight into the relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed. Moreover, this insight can only arise in solidarity with others who suffer.

5. Preferential Option for the Poor

We now turn the corner from Gutiérrez's vision of suffering in light of the bible and the poverty of Latin America to an investigation of how he suggests conscientious people respond. To do this one must once again turn to the bible. In his careful exegetical exploration of poverty, Gutiérrez discovers that the God of the bible has a special affection and tenderness for the poor and oppressed. In the story of Cain and Abel, God prefers Abel's sacrifice, not because it is better than Cain's or because Abel is somehow more deserving than Cain, but simply because Abel is the younger brother, the "last" in the family hierarchy of importance. In a similar fashion, throughout the bible, God reveals a divine predilection for those who suffer—the widow, the orphan, the child, the hungry, and the oppressed. God's sides with the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, not because they are better than the Egyptians, but because they are abused. The witness of the prophets again emphasizes God's preference for the socially marginalized. The teachings of Jesus show God's partiality for the weak and outcast in even more glaring relief: "Let the little children come unto me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs;"[179] "The last will be first and the first will be last;"[180] and "Blessed are you who are poor….Blessed are you who are hungry….Blessed are you who

[179] Matt. 19:14 NRSV

[180] Matt. 20:16 NRSV

weep."[181] Gutiérrez terms this divine predilection the "preferential option for the poor." As a biblical theme it was accepted in both the Puebla and Medellín documents and has been incorporated into the corpus of Catholic social thought.

Gutiérrez is careful to emphasize that God loves all people and that divine grace is meant for all of creation. The biblical message is one of "both-and:" God's love is universal and God has special tenderness for the oppressed. Gutiérrez writes, "The very term *preference* obviously precludes any exclusivity; it simply points to who ought to be the first—not the only—objects of our solidarity."[182] The reason Christians are called to live in solidarity with the poor is, first and foremost, not because the poor hold any moral superiority. The world of the poor is full of people with good and bad virtues; there are liars and thieves among the poor. To romantically envision them as all spiritually righteous victims is a mistake. It is not the poor themselves who are all good and meritorious, it is God. Since God has freely chosen to given preference to the suffering, Christians must do the same.

By the word "option" Gutiérrez means a commitment or decision that is freely made. God has chosen to share divine love with the poor gratuitously and, in so doing, has made the voluntary option for the poor a demand put upon all Christians. Gutiérrez clarifies that "this option for the poor is not optional in the sense that a Christian need not necessarily make it, any more than the love we owe every human being, without exception, is optional."[183] Both the rich and the poor are called to make daily decisions

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[181] Luke 6: 20-21 NRSV. See Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," in I. Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis*, 235-250.

[182] Ibid., 239.

[183] Ibid., 240.

that involve them with the world of poor. Clearly, this is a steeper challenge for the rich, who may withdraw into their private, privileged lives without the constant reminder of poverty. The poor too, however, must opt for the poor, for their sisters and brothers who suffer because of their race, class, sex, or culture. To escape the cruelties of oppression by resorting to drink or by accepting socially imposed stereotypes about one's inferior status is to reject the requirement that God places on our lives. In the end, the real motivation for solidarity with the suffering cannot be based on social analysis or on stirring sentiments of compassion for the poor. God's special tenderness for the poor makes a claim on the lives of Christians and demands that solidarity with the world of the poor exercise primacy in both thought and action.

I contend that deep insight into the world of the poor reveals that it profoundly involves the world of the rich. Gutiérrez, like many Western thinkers, envisions his universe through a set of antithetical dualisms. Reality is divided into twos: rich/poor, oppressors/oppressed, North/South, life/death, etc. This is a natural perspective for anyone who interprets the world through biblical categories, since many such dualisms are frequently employed in Christian scripture. Many of the teachings of Jesus are couched in these terms. The beatitudes in Luke say not only, "Blessed are you who are poor…who are hungry…[and] who weep," but "woe to you who are rich…who are full…[and] who are laughing."[184] When Gutiérrez says that Christians most hold together God's preference for the poor with the universality of God's love, he is being generous. Alongside God's special tenderness for the oppressed comes a warning to and condemnation of their oppressors. Not only shall the "last be first," but the "first shall be

[184]Luke 6:20-26 NRSV

last." Gutiérrez is not interested in a witch hunt for the wealthy, but the same texts he uses to show God's preference for the materially poor says, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."[185] The demand incumbent upon all Christians takes on a particular tone for the rich. Gutiérrez celebrates that the poor are doing their part for the poor by asserting their God-given worth and making themselves active and creative subjects of history. The rich, in many cases, make less effort.

For Gutiérrez, Christians should side with the poor and suffering in such dualisms. Yet to enter the world of the poor and to ask about the structural causes of their suffering immediately bring one back to the rich and powerful who put such structures in place. Getting to know the world of the poor is an important first step, but what one discovers there is that the rich are not absent in the world of the poor; indeed, they are very present. The privileged and powerful not only control the socio-economic mechanisms that produce the world of the poor, it is their will to oppress and exclude that defines the poor. The poor may be anonymous in the world of the rich, but the rich are much less anonymous in the world of the poor. *El mundo del pobre* is not as set apart as Gutiérrez seems to suggest. It may be that a wealthy landowner does not speak to or know the names of his anonymous and underpaid workers, but one can rest assured that his workers know his name. The little bread they can buy depends on it.[186] To abandon

[185] Matthew 19:24 NRSV

[186] Living in Ecuador, it is striking to me how very knowledgeable even the very poor are about United States politics. I have had countless conversations with neighbors who have no more than a forth-grade education but who know the names of U.S. presidents, secretaries of state, and foreign policy advisors and are well versed in policy changes in the United States. What happens in the US has a large impact on their lives. In the United States, most conversations about Ecuador include reminding people that it is in South America and that it is not a part of Mexico. To date, I can remember no conversation with family members or colleagues in the US who have known the name of even one Ecuadorian president.

one's class and enter the world of the poor lead one back, almost immediately, to consider the role of one's class.

As a counterpoint to seeing the world through antithetical dualisms it is helpful to consider another option. Much of Chinese philosophy envisions the universe as an interplay between two complementary though opposite forces: yin and yang. Although distinct in important ways, each side depends on the other for its very existence. Yin cannot exist without yang, nor yang without yin. They are like two sides of a mountain—different, but each completely dependant upon the other. For example, day is impossible without night, the idea of masculinity inconceivable without that of femininity. Central to the understanding of yin and yang is the notion that each element contains its opposite within itself, within its own nature. At the heart of yin lies an element of yang and vice versa.[187] I suggest that the world of the poor has a similar relationship with the world of the rich. At the heart of what it means to be poor lie the actions and attitudes of the rich. Gutiérrez's insight that one must enter the world of the other and that it should be done consciously rather than blindly is correct. When we enter the world of the poor we seek to see the world through their eyes, understand it from their perspective, feel their suffering, and become one with them to whatever degree that may be possible. However, more often than not, coming to know the poor is a journey of self-discovery; it reveals one's own hidden assumptions and tacit stereotypes, as well as one's values, priorities,

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[187] The analogy between the yin-yang relationship and the worlds of the poor-rich can only be taken so far. The relationship between yin and yang, especially as conceived in Taoism, is an essentially harmonious one in which one element eventually evolves into its opposite. Both Gutiérrez and I see inherent conflict built into the relationship between the worlds of the rich and the poor. There are deep, structural reasons why the poor cannot naturally flow into being rich. However, the notion that apparent dualisms are not completely separate but, in fact, contain their opposites (i.e. the rich are very present in the world of the poor) is a helpful corrective to the superficial assumption that world of the poor is fundamentally detached from that of the rich. For a discussion of the relationship between yin and yang, see Da Lui, *T'ai Chi Ch'uan and Meditation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 4-9, 28-33.

and pain. Consciousness-raising is a necessity for the liberation of both the poor and the rich.

6. Sin and Liberation

The principle aim of this dissertation is a deeper understanding both of human suffering and of how conscientious people might respond to it. For Gutiérrez, this aim must be conceived within the all-encompassing arc of the relationship between sin and liberation. Latin American liberation theologians have criticized the ecclesial hierarchy of perverting the biblical notion of sin by overly spiritualizing it, making it a singularly individual, private, and interior reality. Individuals must repent of their personal sins, so says the church, to be forgiven and to achieve eternal salvation, the final liberation from sin. In an attempt to provide a balanced vision of sin, liberation theologians stress that sin is also a social and historical fact. Ultimately, to sin "is to refuse to love one's neighbors and, therefore, the Lord himself…[it is] a breach of friendship with God and others."[188] The real-life absence of love and fellowship between human beings is sin. Economic structures and political systems that exploit, oppress, and dominate particular classes, races, and sexes, evidence the social and intra-historical nature of sin.

One should recognize of course that, on one level, the church was right—sin is personal. It is an egoistic withdrawing into oneself that denies authentic relationship with others and with God. Yet this personal alienation has concrete manifestations in the historical and social sphere that cannot be separated from their underlying cause. Sin is much more than just an obstacle to happiness in the afterlife; it is the root cause of the

[188] Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 66.

tangible barriers between people. Therefore, to reject sin is to reject both the self-centeredness which fractures an individual person and all the socio-political consequences of that fracture.[189]

The affirmation of the church, and of Gutiérrez, is that Christ came to liberate people from sin. The problem is that when only the personal, spiritual nature of sin is considered, one's understanding of the work of Christ also becomes overly spiritualized; it becomes an otherworldly reality. Thus the classical question of the church has been about "saving" as many people as possible. Salvation became a numbers game of how many pagans, Jews, or Amerindians could be converted to the true and saving faith. For Gutiérrez, this is an extremely limited and overly quantitative view of salvation. If sin is ultimately the alienation of people from God and from each other, then salvation should be considered as the "communion of human beings with God and among themselves."[190] Salvation is not just an otherworldly affair; it can take place here and now in any instance of fellowship, solidarity, and love. There is no special salvation above or beyond history. Gutiérrez argues, "Hay una sola historia" (history is one); human history and salvation history cannot be separated.[191] The redemption brought by Christ applies to every dimension of human existence, personal and social, historical and eternal. Salvation is the qualitative journey of humanity that brings them to their fulfillment, to authentic

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[189] Gutiérrez's hope is not to reject the church's teaching, but to deepen it. In another work, he writes that "sin is a rejection of the gift of God's love. The rejection is a personal free act.…Only the action of God can heal human beings at the root of the self-centeredness that prevents them from going out of themselves.…The breaking of friendship with God is the action of a free will." [Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, 136-7.] In chapter 5, I return to the notion of free will in connection with the Buddhist notion of *pratitya samutpada*. If all of existence is conditioned and interdependent, the will itself must be so as well.

[190] Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 197.

[191] Ibid., 199.

communion and love. The work of Christ, in which all Christians are called to participate, is to liberate human beings from sin and all its consequences: hatred, injustice, oppression, and any situation which denies humans their innate dignity and creative potential.[192]

For Gutiérrez, liberation from sin is a rejection both of egocentricity and of oppressive social structures; one cannot happen without the other. Real liberation must be a "radical liberation, which necessarily includes a political liberation. Only by participating in the historical process of liberation will it be possible to show the fundamental alienation present in every partial alienation."[193] Recognizing that this claim will ruffle feathers, Gutiérrez delineates three levels of liberation.

Social-Political Liberation

This type of liberation is the most obvious and first to be addressed. It concerns all those systemic and structural modes of oppression that are embodied in unjust laws, policies, and ecclesial organization. This is the liberation for which the poor masses of Latin America clamor. It may be that unjust social structures arise from distorted attitudes about certain races, classes, or groups, but these attitudes will not change while such structures are in place. The aim of this level of liberation is to eliminate the "proximate causes of poverty and injustice."[194] Gutiérrez gives much attention to this

[192] The long-standing Christian debate about the salvation of non-Christians is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Gutiérrez, however, hints at his opinion when he says, "Persons are saved if they open themselves to God and to others, even if they are not clearly aware that they are doing so. This is valid for Christians and non-Christians alike—for all people." Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación,* 196.

[193] Ibid., 237.

[194] Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free,* 130.

initial kind of liberation for two reasons: first, because the church has traditionally given it the least attention and, second, because in Latin America, unjust social structures represent the glaring and immediate impediment to the full personhood of the suffering poor. In Gutiérrez's summation, the full liberation of humanity can only take place in a society "based on respect for others, especially the weak and least important. . .a society in which the hunger for bread will disappear." The bible envisions a "qualitatively different society in which the needs of the poor are more important than the power of the privileged. . .the goal will no longer be to incorporate more individuals into a consumer society but to change the way in which human beings are viewed."[195] Liberation from structures of oppression, while not sufficient in itself, is a critically important aspect of liberation.

Liberation of the Human Person

For full personhood, new social structures are not enough. There must be an interior liberation alongside the exterior one. Here Gutiérrez points out that prolonged suffering carries with it a psychological dimension that intimately affects how one understands oneself. If a new society is to be constructed, it must be done by agents who see themselves as capable of shaping their own destiny and who feel responsible to and for their neighbors. Many times in human history, the oppressed have felt that their suffering was meant to be, that it was ordained by God's will. Church teaching has, at times, affirmed this perspective. That which results is despair and apathy among the poor and delight among the rich, who celebrate God's "providence" by creating structures to

[195] Ibid., 131.

assure there privilege. For Gutiérrez, any true liberation must include a vision of humanity that is not shaped by opposition and conflict. People must be creatively oriented toward the future such that they can continually create new horizons of solidarity and ever-evolving ways of being human. A more equitable social-political matrix helps to bring about this personal change but does not ensure it. [196]

When Gutiérrez writes of this second level of liberation, he does so with a sense of hope. In the mass movements of the poor irrupting into history he finds evidence that this level of liberation is taking place among the oppressed. They no longer merely accept themselves as victims to the winds of fate, but as qualified subjects of their own lives. In fact, he warns poor Latin Americans, alive with revolutionary fervor, not to be seduced by the vision of rich countries which deem themselves central to human history. This brief warning contains potent insight for North American social activists. Gutiérrez notes that there are some conscientious people in the North who are becoming aware of "new and subtle forms of oppression in the heart of advanced industrial societies."[197] These conscientious Northerners protest the enslavement of wealth, not of poverty. At

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[196] Moritz Thomsen, an American Peace Corps volunteer who lived in a village on the Ecuadorian coast for four years in the mid-1960s, has an admittedly less hopeful vision of the poor than does Gutiérrez. He does not see the poor becoming active subjects of their own destiny. His description of the situation of the poor, therefore, is an accurate example of the vision of themselves from which the poor need to be liberated and is helpful in understanding Gutiérrez's second level of liberation. Thomsen writes: "Living poor is like being sentenced to exist in a stormy sea in a battered canoe, requiring all your strength simply to keep afloat; there is never any question of reaching a destination. True poverty is a state of perpetual crisis, and one wave just a little bigger or coming from an unexpected direction can and usually does wreck things. Some benevolent ignorance denies a poor man the ability to see the squalid sequence of his life, except very rarely; he views it rather as a disconnected string of unfortunate sadnesses. Never having paddled on a calm sea, he is unable to imagine one. I think if he could connect the chronic hunger, the sickness, the death of his children, the almost unrelieved physical and emotional tension into the pattern that his life inevitably takes he would kill himself.

In South America the poor man is an ignorant man, unaware of the forces that shape his destiny. The shattering truth—that he is kept poor and ignorant as the principal and unspoken component of national policy—escapes him." See Moritz Thomsen, *Living Poor: An American's Encounter with Ecuador* (London: ELAND, 1987), 173.

[197] Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 53.

issue for Gutiérrez is not an analysis of oppression in the North. Instead he is concerned that the poor in Latin American not try to replicate this Northern protest, for wealth is not the problem of the poor in Latin America. He claims that "the context in the rich countries, however, is quite different from that of the poor countries" and that to imitate them would be "to fight against windmills."[198] With this cautionary caveat, he leaves his discussion of the problems of the wealthy and returns his attention to the plight of the poor.

I contend that prolonged privilege also carries with it psychological ramifications and that the wealthy, like the poor, need a new vision of themselves as capable of changing their own destiny. I do not mean here that the rich should shape social structures for their selfish benefit; this is the vision from which they need liberation. I am concerned with the situation of the North American social activist. Many good-hearted Northerners have agreed with Gutiérrez's analysis about the sinful nature of present oppressive social structures but have felt powerless to make structural change. Inside this hopelessness is a tacit, if more secular, reappearance of the same fatalistic vision of God's will that Gutiérrez condemns. If Gutiérrez is correct that what is needed is a new vision of the human person capable of shaping her own destiny, this is as true for North American Christians as it is for the Latin American poor.[199]

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[198] Ibid.

[199] In a gesture which seems to confirm Gutiérrez's agreement with my argument, he cites a section of the Puebla document in a footnote which bears recitation in full: "But the dignity of truly free human beings requires that they not let themselves get locked up in worldly values (Mt. 4:4; Luke 4:4; Deut. 8:3), and particularly in material goods. As spiritual beings, they must free themselves from every sort of servitude to these things. They must move on toward the higher plane of personal relations where they encounter themselves and other human beings (Puebla no. 324)." See Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free,* footnote 107, p. 192.

Liberation from Sin and Communion in Love

The third type of liberation is perhaps the most radical and most theological: the work of Christ. Christian theology has long affirmed that God's grace alone can overcome sin and that this is precisely what Christ did through his life, death, and resurrection. Through Christ, humanity has been freed to find full self-realization on a transcendent level. For Gutiérrez, two points stand out. First, the manner in which divine grace is offered to humanity—in the person of Jesus Christ—is important. Jesus liberates precisely because he is "Dios hecho pobre," (God become poor). Gutiérrez writes of Christ:

> He was poor because he was born in a social milieu of poverty, because he chose to live with the poor, because he directed his gospel preferentially to the poor, because he lashed invectives against the rich who oppressed and despised the poor, and because before God he was spiritually poor.[200]

Liberation from sin comes from God by God's becoming poor. The church reduces the radicality of this act by saying that God took on the "human condition." What God truly did was take on the depth of human suffering by becoming *Cristo pobre* (the poor Christ). Jesus was in constant conflict with the rich and powerful of his day that oppressed the poor: the Roman authorities and the Jewish religious elite.

A second important point lies in the content of the liberation offered by Christ. This liberation is not merely *freedom from* oppression, but is also *freedom for* communion with God and others.[201] Liberation is not a final end in itself in an

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[200] Gutiérrez, *La fuerza histórica de los pobres,* 24.

[201] See Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación,* 67 and Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free,* 138-139. In another text, he elaborates that "freedom from" refers to "freedom from sin, from selfishness, from injustice, from need," while "freedom for reminds one of the reason for this freedom: love and communion." Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo,* 140.

anarchistic fashion, but must be directed to love and service; it is both a gift and a task. God becomes radically open to humanity by taking on human suffering. This divine aperture, God's self-communication, breaks down human selfishness and sets people free to love their neighbors, to be radically open to their neighbors' problems and in radical solidarity with their lives.

Gutiérrez distinguishes these three levels of liberation for the sake of clarity, but he is careful to emphasize that they are never actually separate. They are not parallel or chronological, but three aspects of one integral liberation. To focus only on the social-political liberation results in horizontal and shallow social programs to meet short-term needs. To focus only on the personal liberation of oppressive attitudes overly spiritualizes liberation such that the cruel reality of human suffering is evaded. The liberation of Christ embraces the whole of human life, in all its various dimensions. In the final analysis, the three levels of liberation should be seen "interdependent" and "three levels of meaning of a single, complex process."[202]

Once again, as was the case with his appreciation for dependency theory, Gutiérrez reveals an affinity for finding connections between people. The structural causes of human suffering link the rich and the poor, as does his vision for liberation from suffering. The question that remains in play, however, is how his vision of community and solidarity comes about. Gutiérrez is clear throughout his writing that "the true agents of this quest for unity are those who today suffer oppression

[202] Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, 140.

(economically, politically culturally) and struggle to become free."[203] What then is the role of the oppressors?

7. Solidarity with the Suffering

If the question at hand is how conscientious people should respond to human suffering, the quick and easy answer from Gutiérrez's point of view is this: live in solidarity with them. There is no other way authentically to bring about liberation. However, as we shall see, solidarity is neither quick nor easy. To distill what Gutiérrez has in mind by the term solidarity requires sifting through the facile catch phrases such as "paying attention to the poor and suffering" and "living in solidarity with the poor." While Gutiérrez refers to solidarity in all of his works, the actual character of solidarity receives greatest attention in *The God of Life* and *Beber en su propio pozo* (*We Drink from Our Own Wells*). As the title of this second volume indicates, when Gutiérrez writes about solidarity, he does not prescribe a particular action or a step-by-step process for cultivating solidarity. Rather, his aim is to describe the spiritual experience of the poor in Latin America. He writes about what he has learned from the bible while trying to be close to the needs of the suffering. That said, I believe that much of what he has learned can be very useful for North Americans.

Solidarity as Friendship

In general, solidarity is a question of entering the world of the poor and making it one's own. This is more than a provisional infiltration or a temporary penetration; "it

[203] Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación*, 210.

means remaining in that universe. . .being one of its inhabitants, looking upon it as a place of residence and not simply work."[204] To be in solidarity with the poor means to make their hopes and interests, their struggles and suffering, one's own and to begin to see the world as they do. Better yet, to be in solidarity is to begin to *feel* the world as they do. This implies an entirely embodied shift in the experience of oneself in relation to God and to other people. In the introduction to *The God of Life,* Gutiérrez quotes a character in one of Arguedas's novels who says, "I feel God differently."[205] To be an oppressed Peruvian woman who suffers "abuse in body and dignity" is to have a different experience of God than that of the powerful. To enter the world of the poor is a myriad of interlocking sights and sounds. It is to hear babies crying through the night and know that there is no money for medicine. It is to feel lethargy and exhaustion before noon due to years of protein starvation and to have a well-fed stranger call you lazy. It is to work a whole day laying bricks or digging ditches and to realize that you were paid less than the value of one day's bread. It is to try to sleep each night to the wafting stench of your neighbor's latrine. It is to have an infected tooth and to contemplate pulling it out yourself with pliers because dentists do not treat those without insurance. It is to see the world through the witchcraft of your ancestors and the faith of your people. It is to dance with abandon, to laugh big belly laughs in spite of it all, and to sing loud songs to a world that continually ignores your voice.

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[204] Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo,* 186.

[205] See Gutiérrez, *The God of Life,* xv. This same phrase has been picked up by Latin American feminist theologians. See Consuelo de Prado's article "I Sense God in Another Way," in Else Tamez, ed., *Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989).

Gutiérrez admits that solidarity with the poor is no easy task. This is true not only because of the internal complexities of the world of the poor, but also because of the fact that one will always experience internal resistance to a change of worldview. There is implied in solidarity a certain reorientation, even rejection, of the values impressed upon a person by his culture and ego. This is not to say that one should neglect or abuse oneself in a one-sided effort to be someone else. Gutiérrez writes, "Solidarity with others does not demand an imbalance in personal life."[206] What it means is that the interior axis around which one finds personal balance moves; it is realigned such that its pivot point lies closer to those who suffer.

One helpful metaphor that Gutiérrez uses to describe solidarity is *friendship*. On the one hand, Christians are called to "remember the poor" which, in Latin America, means "to keep in mind the overwhelming majority of the population."[207] Yet there is something intangible and almost academically artificial about trying to relate to the anonymous masses. Their anonymity is part of the problem. Hence, Gutiérrez underscores that solidarity must include authentic friendships with real people. He writes of solidarity:

> It is a work of love that implies a personal handing over of oneself and is not limited to merely fulfilling a duty. It is a work of concrete, authentic love for the poor that is not possible apart from a certain integration into their world and apart from the bond of real friendship with those who suffer despoliation and injustice. Solidarity is not with "the poor" in the abstract but with human beings of flesh and blood. Without love and affection, without—why not say it?—tenderness, there is no true gesture of solidarity. Where these are lacking there is an impersonality and coldness (however well intentioned and accompanied by a

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[206] Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, 139.

[207] Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo*, 185.

> desire for justice) that the concrete poor will not fail to perceive. True love exists only among equals.[208]

Equality then is an essential component of both friendship and solidarity. At various points, Gutiérrez speaks of being "friends of life," "friends of God," and "friends of the poor."[209] What he has in mind is a restructuring of relationships from one that is hierarchal—master/slave, rich/poor, wise bishop/ignorant peasant, etc.—to one on a par. Even this does not quite capture it, for we are still left with the image of two equally ranked contenders. In the warmth of friendship, all dualistic categories fracture and give way to a feeling of sibling-like closeness and companionship. Obligation becomes opportunity and willing reciprocity replaces reluctant responsibility. Gutiérrez draws upon the biblical image of "partner" (Greek: *koinonon*) and "brother" to help flesh out what he means by friendship.[210] Of course, to see those who suffer as friends involves no small amount of personal transformation, since a natural tendency is to try to distance oneself from other people's pain. Gutiérrez is clear, however, that "our Christian life is judged by our ability to make others our friends. We are not committed to the poor and oppressed, for example, unless we are friends with them."[211]

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[208] Ibid., 157-8.

[209] See Gutiérrez, "Friends of God, Friends of the Poor," in *The Density of the Present,* 147-156.

[210] Gutiérrez's exegesis of the biblical book of Philemon is extraordinary, showing how Paul's particular use of certain words breaks down the inherent hierarchical structure in his language. See Gutiérrez, *The God of Life,* 132-136.

[211] Ibid., 134.

Solidarity as a Spiritual Path

A second metaphor that Gutiérrez uses to describe solidarity is that of a spiritual journey or path. To be a part of the suffering poor is a way of life, but to be consciously attentive to the poor is a different thing. Even the poor themselves need to become attuned to the suffering of their neighbors. Gutiérrez references Nikolai Berdyaev's statement, "If I am hungry, that is a material problem; if someone else is hungry, that is a spiritual problem."[212] To be in solidarity is to set off on a spiritual path of ever-deepening personal aperture to the reality of suffering. The journey, however, is not a trail of tears, a type of forced march to self-discovery; it is an expedition through which the capacity of one's heart for both compassion and joy expands. Gutiérrez calls on the imagery of the Israelites who wander through the desert in search of God. For us, as for them, true liberation is a process, one that involves no small amount of internal reorientation. With unfolding levels of meaning, Gutiérrez also recalls the imagery of St. John of the Cross who speaks of the soul's journey through the "dark night."[213] He is clear that in the consciousness-raising spiritual journey of Latin Americans there have been many twists and turns. "No path is traced out in advance in its every detail," he writes. "Rather it is a way that is established in the very going."[214]

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[212] See Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo,* 155, note 24.

[213] For examples of both the preceding images, see Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo,* 112-132. For Gutiérrez, the "dark night" is the passage through material and spiritual poverty. Though outside the scope of this dissertation, a comparison of John of the Cross and Thich Nhat Hanh would also produce a fruitful dialogue. For example, see John of the Cross's statement, "Until slumber comes to the appetites through the mortification of sensuality, and until this very sensuality is stilled in such a way that the appetites do not war against the spirit, the soul will not walk out to genuine freedom, to the enjoyment of union with its Beloved." John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* I, 15, 2, in *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, rev. ed., trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriquez (Washington D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications, 1991, 153.

[214] Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo,* 14.

At times, Gutiérrez's image of spiritual path gives way to the image of "spirituality" itself. This shift is appropriate, lest one believe that solidarity is simply a means to arrive at a deeper spiritual life. To be in solidarity with the suffering itself is a "spirituality."[215] Here Gutiérrez's experiences with the Latin American poor offer signposts for North American social actors. He contends that while there is no *one* way to be a Christian, "Every spirituality is a way offered for the greater service of God and others."[216] The great spiritualities of the Christian tradition never coerce people to particular action. Rather, they free people to love God and neighbor more deeply. If greater freedom to love is a central characteristic of the spiritual path, one might imagine that people enter the path at different trailheads. It very well may be that the starting point for oppressed *campesinos* in Ecuador lies in collective protest against unjust national restrictions concerning who has the right to water and land. Yet when one is not a participant of the daily struggle of these groups, it is hard to feel a part of it all. Perhaps the on-ramp to the path for the privileged lies in the effort to see that the *campesino's* struggle involves them as well. Better said, maybe that which liberates the privileged from their spirit-binding egocentricity is the recognition of themselves—as both oppressor and oppressed—in the *campesino's* struggle. That which inhibits their ability to love and serve others is a blinding spiritual myopia rooted in the egocentric self.

As co-travelers on the path to deeper love and service, both the rich and the poor can nurture each other. For the rich, solidarity is not simply a matter of seeing the world through the lens of poverty and suffering; it is a whole-bodied sharing and mutual

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[215] One is reminded of Thich Nhat Hanh's claim that peace is both a journey and a destination. See Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*.

[216] Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo*, 135.

enrichment between friends. There have been those who have misinterpreted solidarity to mean that one should leave behind his former spiritual traditions. For Gutiérrez, this betrays a kind of spiritual avarice which eventually "turns against the distrustful owners: their spiritual riches spoil and lose their value when kept '*bajo el colchón*'" (under the mattress).[217] If solidarity then can include a meeting of spiritual traditions, I believe that practices and perspectives of Thich Nhat Hanh can not only help open the rich to deeper love and service, but also help the poor see their suffering in a different way.

Solidarity as Discipleship

Gutiérrez finds in the grand scheme of the bible a dialectic between gift and demand. God's gratuitous love for humanity is manifest in the poor Christ who announces the coming of the communal kingdom of God. This freely given divine love requires that followers of Christ do as he did—become spiritually poor in solidarity with the weakest members of society in a protest against the inhumane suffering of material poverty. A third important metaphor for understanding solidarity is discipleship. Followers of Jesus are those who, in friendship with him, seek to live as he did and to continue his work in the world. Thus understood, a follower of Jesus is a "witness to life."[218] There is a risk, however, that this definition falls short of the radicality of Jesus' calling. To witness means more than just to speak. Jesus' life was a series of concrete acts for the benefit of the poor and suffering. He gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, health to the leper, and mobility to the lame. These concrete actions reveal that the

[217] Ibid., 53.

[218] Ibid., 72.

kingdom of God that Jesus announced was in fact irrupting into history, a kingdom "meant first and foremost for the poor and then, through them, for every human being."[219]

In Latin America, where death-dealing social systems tyrannize the poor, to witness to life takes on a particular tone. To be a disciple of Jesus (meaning to be in solidarity with the poor), entails a certain assumption of material poverty on the part of the disciple. One cannot be in solidarity with the world of the poor from a lounge chair perched on the palace terrace or from the comfortable cul-de-sac of isolated, middle-class suburbia. Voluntary poverty is a vital element of discipleship, but not its only one. Gutiérrez clarifies:

> Accepting poverty is indeed a manifestation, and a very important one, of spiritual childhood, but discipleship is not limited to this. Discipleship means, above all, an openness to the gift of God's love and a preferential solidarity with the poor and oppressed; it is in this context and in this context alone, that it makes sense to choose a life of poverty. Real poverty is, after all, not a Christian ideal but a condition required today of those who seek to be in solidarity with the really poor, with the unimportant folk—that is, those who lack the necessities of life, which their dignity as human beings and children of God requires.[220]

To be a disciple requires more than a change in economic status; it requires the behavior and an attitude of mercy.[221] To flesh out the notion of mercy, Gutiérrez turns to the Hebrew term *hesed*, which connotes far more than mere pity for those who suffer. *Hesed* means, above all else, "An ability to enter into the sufferings of others so as to feel and

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[219] Ibid., 70.

[220] Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, 122.

[221] Gutiérrez writes, "Mercy is a behavior required of the followers of Jesus. . . .The mercy called for is a deep-seated attitude and not a mere formality. It is what makes us disciples of Jesus. In the final analysis it is upon this that judgment will be passed." Ibid., 124.

see things as they do."[222] To be merciful is to identify oneself with the situation of the suffering. To be merciful is to be "compassionate" which, as Gutiérrez explains, "means to be capable of 'feeling with' God and other human beings."[223] The relationship between Gutiérrez's first two notions thus becomes clearer. Disciples of Jesus take on voluntary material poverty with an interior attitude of spiritual poverty and mercy.

Solidarity as Rupture and Conversion

In Gutiérrez's discussion of the spiritual journey of the Latin American church, he recognizes that true solidarity with the suffering has demanded of them a break with a former way of being. All people, even the poor, by nature of social conditioning and individual greed, participate in deviant practices that oppress others. We have all ingested ways of thinking and acting that deny our fundamental unity as siblings to each others and as children of God. On the one hand, Gutiérrez and others found it necessary to disassociate themselves from flowing along with the prevailing social system. However, the rupture of which he speaks is not just a separation of self from certain practices or systems; it is also an interior shift that "involves the entire person as a corporal being."[224] As one might imagine, such a change will inherently affect the entire network of relationships of which an individual is a part. The rupture is both personal and social.

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[222] Ibid., 201, note 16.

[223] Ibid., 138-9. Gutiérrez admits that discipleship can be "costly." Thomsen gives content to this cost saying, "You can't move in too close to poverty, get too involved in it, without becoming dangerously wounded yourself." [Thomsen, *Living Poor,* 277.] I return to the notion of compassion in the following chapter on Thich Nhat Hanh.

[224] Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo,* 148.

Fundamentally what Gutiérrez is describing is a break with sin. When he looked for the causes of the suffering of the oppressed masses in Latin America, he found social and structural roots. Here he contends that "it becomes necessary for us to examine our own responsibility for the existence of unjust 'social mechanisms.'"[225] Latin American Christians, so he tells, were forced to recognize their own participation in sin, to repent, and to ask for forgiveness. They were compelled to make a break so radical that they could abandon their previous social milieu and enter *el mundo del pobre*. In theological terms, this whole-bodied turning away from sin is called conversion.

If it is true that Latin American Christians are called to admit their participation in systemic oppression of the poor, it is all the more true for North Americans. Yet the recognition of one's own culpability is difficult in an environment shielded from regular contact with the poor. Because North Americans usually do not have daily dealings with masses of suffering people, especially the poor Latin American majority, their exposure is often limited to what they read in a newspaper and to any intellectual consideration that these provoke. In most cases, this has prompted passing feelings of pity or high-browed political conversations about the need for change that rarely touch the lives of those who suffer. From Gutiérrez's analysis it seems that part of the break that is necessary for well-meaning, North American Christians includes a break from facile liberalism, from a political correctness that sounds right with words but involves no real conversion of self to the poor. Such rhetoric, unfortunately, usually serves to make its users feel better in the moment and, as such, actually keeps them farther from the world of the poor by alleviating the impetus for radical change. Fortunately conversion need not be the

[225] Ibid., 149.

lightening turn-about experience that it is often made out to be. Gutiérrez reports that in the experience of Latin Americans "conversion is not an act that is realized once and for all. It implies development, even a painful one, that is not without uncertainties, doubts and temptations to turn back on the road that has been traveled."[226] Even the Hebrew slaves were tempted to return to Egypt.[227] In chapter 5, I argue that certain Buddhist meditation practices can aid in sustainable development of a continual conversion to the world of the suffering.

Solidarity as Gratuitousness: Gift, Contemplation and Action

Lest the radical demand of solidarity be misunderstood, Gutiérrez is careful to emphasize that, first and foremost, the very ability of human beings to live in community with one another is a gift. Quoting 1 John 4:19, "God first loved us," Gutiérrez contends that "everything starts from there."[228] God's love, which is the very source of human life, leaves its imprint on all of human existence such that one can only escape this fact through willful ignorance. At the deepest core of their reality, humans are made for love, by Love itself. The loving character of the Creator so fills all of creation that human beings only achieve their true fulfillment by loving others. Moreover the love of God comes to humanity as a gift; it is unmerited, completely gratuitous. The freely-given quality of God's self-communication marks human life so profoundly that deeply conscientious humans feel led to respond to God's initiative by gratuitously loving God

[226] Ibid., 144.

[227] See Num. 14:4

[228] Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo*, 164.

and others in return. The only authentic response to God's love for us is utter gratitude to God and the desire to live that same type of love with others. Gutiérrez writes, "Gratitude is the space of that radical self-giving and that presence of beauty in our lives without which even the struggle for justice would be crippled."[229]

For Gutiérrez, the foundation of any contemplation of God must be God's gratuitous love.[230] The experience of God's unwarranted love exceeds the ability of human words to express and contemplative people are reduced to silence and simplicity in its presence. Contemplation and silence in the presence of God are the wellspring from which springs our movement toward solidarity. Gutiérrez contends:

> A true and full encounter with our neighbor requires that we first experience the gratuitousness of God's love. Once we have experienced it, our approach to others is purified of any tendency to impose an alien will upon them; it is disinterested and respectful of their personalities, their needs and aspirations. The other is our way for reaching God, but our relationship with God is a precondition for encounter and true communion with the other. It is not possible to separate these two movements.[231]

All liberating praxis must start from a sense of gratitude and love. Clearly in the Christian story there is the notion of duty and obligation. Yet in the final analysis, these must give way to that which lies beneath them: the human response to the love of God. Contemporary circumstances and the suffering of the poor put the stamp of urgency on Christian action and demand that love become an effective force in history. However, when this action moves outside the realm of loving one's neighbor, it can no longer be called liberating.

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[229] Ibid., 165. See also Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación,* 205-6.

[230] He writes, "Unless we understand gratuitousness, there will no contemplative dimension in our life." Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo,* 166.

[231] Ibid., 169.

Solidarity as Spiritual Poverty

Here Gutiérrez returns to the biblical notion of the poor as those who are radically open to and waiting for God. To be spiritually poor is to be humble, dependent, and childlike. Spiritual poverty does involve a certain detachment from material goods, but it is a detachment based on concern for the suffering other. An attitude of spiritual poverty "is obligatory for every Christian;" it is "required for entering into the world of the poor" and is "an indispensable condition for solidarity."[232] Voluntary poverty, without a sense of protest against material poverty, has no meaning. Worse, it can become a kind of masochistic game-playing that destroys the God-given dignity of the human person, like the flagellant who is fascinated by the sight of his own blood. Herein lies a danger for North American social activists who take up aspects of material poverty—for example, food deprivation in the form of fasting—in the name of so-called solidarity with the poor. When one fasts without knowing actual people who go for days without food or whose bodies are stunted from a lifetime of nutrient deficiency, it often becomes an exercise in ego-inflation, an experiment in endurance. Rather than creating a sense of humility and compassion for others, it generates a false sense of solidarity, undergirded by pride. This is the opposite of what Gutiérrez has in mind by spiritual poverty.[233]

Truth be told, any sort of voluntary deprivation can only be an approximation of true suffering due to the simple fact that there is choice involved. One can always simply give up the discipline and return to his privilege. This is not the case for the world of the poor whose circumstances necessitate their suffering. Gutiérrez observes that "the will to

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[232] Ibid., 184, 190.

[233] One is led to consider Siddhartha Gautama's experience of deprivation and his eventual affirmation of "the middle way."

live in the world of the poor can therefore only follow an asymptotic curve: a constantly closer approach that can, however, never reach the point of real identification with the life of the poor. Not even surrender of their lives brings individuals to that goal, despite the ultimacy of the witness they give."[234] The forced reality of the poor will almost always overload one's capacity to be in solidarity. Voluntary poverty does have role to play, but only insofar as it deepens one's ability to be a friend to the poor and serves as a protest against the evil of material poverty.

Solidarity as Passage through Solitude into Silence

For Gutiérrez, the transformation of self from egocentricity and dominant thinking takes one to the core of what it means it be human. The makeover is revolutionary; it involves internal fracture and conversation to a new, deeper way of being. It uncovers a different way of relating to other people, to money, to power, and to social systems. Yet the journey to the depths of human life is not all sunshine and daisies. Any true spiritual journey will have moments of wilderness and darkness. Gutiérrez writes that for many Latin American Christians the journey toward solidarity and community has taken an unexpected turn, "a passage through the deep and painful experience of profound solitude."[235] There are moments of great difficulty. Gutiérrez reports that "there is fear of dying, which is no small thing, but also fear of weakening, of thinking unduly of oneself, of beginning to consider other and less costly forms of commitment."[236] There

[234] Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo*, 188.

[235] Ibid., 191.

[236] Ibid., 194.

are moments of loneliness and being alone with God that are almost impossible to put into words. Paradoxically, there are also moments of deep joy. However, for Gutiérrez, the experience of solitude is a necessary one, as it is that raw loneliness—that experience of self without all the comforting psychological props that support the false self—that gives rise to the awareness of and hunger for community. The journey to authentic community with others and communion with God inevitably crosses the wasteland of solitude.

In one sense, the solitude which Gutiérrez describes is a classic component of the Christian spirituality; it is mysticism at its finest—that razor's edge balancing act that is both empty and full, both beautiful and terrifying.[237] Gutiérrez spends little time focusing on the mystical element of the journey toward solidarity though; he is concerned that to do so will distract his readers from the importance of attending to real-life suffering in the present.[238] One can understand his hesitation. For much of Christian history to cultivate a relationship with God obscured the reality of other human beings. The spiritual life was about an individual's absorption into the Divine; spirituality was a private, interior experience of personal perfection that reduced the importance of the transitory world. For Gutiérrez, this focus on mysticism underemphasizes the critical aspect of community life. Hence he is careful to clarify that the solitude of which he speaks has nothing to do with individualism. In individualism, "there is a large measure of intentional withdrawal

[237] One is reminded of Rilke's poem "Duino Elegies" where he writes that "beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure.... There is night, when a wind full of infinite space gnaws at our faces. Whom would it not remain for—that longed-after, mildly disillusioning presence, which the solitary heart so painfully meets?" See Rainer Maria Rilke, "The First Elegy," in *Duino Elegies*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Boston: Shambhala Publication, 1992).

[238] Nevertheless, Gutiérrez recognizes, in passing, the connection between suffering and mysticism. He writes, "By unknown paths, the experience of oppression has turned out to be fertile ground for the mystical dimension of Christian life." See Gutiérrez, *La densidad del presente,* 187.

aimed at keeping oneself in the peaceful waters of privacy."[239] Solitude, on the other hand, is a preparatory stage; it creates a disposition and a yearning for community in its fullness. Life lived in community and in commitment to the marginalized are channels through which the fundamental meaning of human life becomes known. Communion with God and with others is the quintessential heart of existence. Gutiérrez claims that "the experience of forgotten and mistreated people has proved to be fruitful for the two great dimensions of Christian life: mysticism and human solidarity."[240]

In his early work, Gutiérrez was concerned with the function of theological language. For much of Christian history theology was understood as the discipline whose role was to authoritatively explain revealed truth and to condemn heresy. As such, theology was of primary importance. As the "queen of the all sciences," it explained the essence of the natural world. However, in a move that made liberation theology controversial, Gutiérrez argued that theology is a second order discipline. According to his reading of the bible, that which is primary is Christian life lived through faith. God calls humanity to a lifestyle of charity, mercy, and service to others. Right praxis comes before right speaking.[241] Gutiérrez argued that theology does not produce correct living; it reflects upon it. Hence, he defined theology as "critical reflection on praxis."[242]

In his later writings, Gutiérrez's language evolves. He continues to see the task of theology as a reflection upon Christian life, but his use of words like "action,"

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[239] Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo,* 196.

[240] Gutiérrez, *La densidad del presente,* 59.

[241] Gutiérrez defines the praxis of Christians as "their active presence in history." See Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación,* 27.

[242] Ibid., 26.

"behavior," and "praxis" give way to words like "silence" and "contemplation." Gutiérrez observes "sin silencio no hay hablar verdadero" (without silence there is no true speech).[243] This shift however is not a negation of his earlier focus on praxis; it is a deepening of it. In another text he writes:

> Contemplation and practice together make up what we call the *first act;* theologizing is a *second act*. One should first situate himself in the terrain of mysticism and practice; only afterwards is it possible to have authentic and respectful discourse about God. To do theology without the mediation of contemplation and practice would be outside of that demanded by the God of the Bible. The mystery of God comes to life in contemplation and in the practice of God's design for human history; only in the second instance can this life inspire appropriate reasoning and relevant speech. . . .The first moment is *silence*, the second stage is *speech*."[244]

Gutiérrez is not suggesting that contemplation must precede action. In his vision, these two are part of the same moment. They feed one another, fold in upon one another, and together make up the first stage of silence before God. One places oneself before the Lord both in acts of solidarity with those who suffer and in prayerful meditation. At its heart the moment of silence is the moment of love, connection, and commitment. In silence one touches "depths and regions that are ineffable" but which lie at the very hub of human existence. These three—love, connection, and commitment to those who experience human suffering at its deepest levels—are the keys to a sustainable vision of solidarity with the poor. Shortly before her death, Simone Weil said that "truth emerges from silence."[245] If this is correct, then an indispensable step for North American social

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[243] Gutiérrez, *La densidad del presente*, 42.

[244] Gutiérrez, *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente*, 16. Translation mine.

[245] Gutiérrez references this quotation from Simone Weil without giving its source. [See Gutiérrez, *La densidad del present*, 67.] Nevertheless, there are many places in her writing to which he might refer. For an example, she writes, "When the intelligence, having become silent in order to let love invade the whole soul, begins once more to exercise itself, it finds it contains more light than before, a greater aptitude for grasping objects, truths that are proper to it. Better still, I believe these silences

actors in the fostering of sustainable solidarity with the poor and suffering is the cultivation of silence as both contemplation and action. I believe Thich Nhat Hanh can help this cultivation.

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constitute an education for it which cannot possibly have any other equivalent and enable it to grasp truths which otherwise would forever remain hidden from it." See Simone Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, trans. Arthur Willis (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), 59.

CHAPTER 4

NHAT HANH'S CONTEXT AND MAJOR THEMES

Listening attentively to practitioners in the West during retreats with Thay Nhat Hanh, I have learned that children here, even though most do not suffer from hunger, suffer greatly from psychological, physical, and sexual abuse inflicted by alcoholic or mentally disturbed parents and other adults… I now see that this kind of suffering can be even greater than the suffering due to the lack of food.

Chan Khong, *Learning True Love*

All life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny.

Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*

Like Gustavo Gutiérrez, Thich Nhat Hanh writes from the perspective of the poor and suffering of his country and has, at times, made it his goal to speak on behalf of those whose voices are absent at history's tables of power. He, like Gutiérrez, seeks to use his tradition to interpret the present-day face of suffering and to analyze the role that social systems play in effecting such suffering. He too has been considered a spiritual pioneer by some and as a radical threat by others, specifically by the conservative Buddhist hierarchy in Vietnam and by the Vietnamese political establishment.[246] Nhat Hanh, like Gutiérrez, has experienced suffering in both its personal and cultural manifestations. He has lived through material deprivation and imprisonment, has lost family members and friends to violence, has been oppressed by Buddhists within his tradition and by government officials in his homeland, and has lived in forced political exile for almost

[246] Annabel Laity observes that Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama are the "two best known Buddhist monks and teachers in the world today." [See Annabel Laity, "If You Want Peace, You Can Have Peace," in Nhat Hanh, *Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 1.] Nhat Hanh's conflictual relationship with the Buddhist and political establishments in Vietnam are reviewed in further detail below.

forty years. Like Gutiérrez, Nhat Hanh has had moments of withdrawal into the ivory tower of academia which have honed his sense of communal responsibility. Unlike Gutiérrez, Nhat Hanh's social sensitivities were forged amid the atrocities of active warfare and falling bombs. Perhaps it is because of this that his early attention was directed more to the immediate context of the concrete suffering that surrounded him than to the historic oppression and material poverty of his people. Nevertheless, such oppression has been long present for the poor of Vietnam.[247]

In his attempt to understand the causes of war in Vietnam, Nhat Hanh saw that the concrete suffering of the Vietnamese people was closely dependent upon systems of oppression which included other more powerful nations. To attend to the roots of war that lie in these richer countries, Nhat Hanh has spent the last four decades working with and writing for those who Gutiérrez might call the "oppressors."[248] In his work, he reformulates a number of traditional Buddhist teachings and spiritual practices so that they are more useful to American and European readers. Hence Nhat Hanh makes an excellent conversation partner for Gutiérrez, not only because of his close attention to human suffering, but also because of his concentrated focus on helping oppressors live in solidarity with those who suffer. Nhat Hanh has said that "he is who he is because of

[247] Nhat Hanh has observed that "peasants…constitute up to 90 per cent of the country's population." [See Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 2, 48.] In the last 150 years, Vietnam has been colonized by, occupied by, or at war with Chinese, French, Japanese, British, and American forces. See Ann Aldén, *Religion in Dialogue with Late Modern Society: A Constructive Contribution to a Christian Spirituality Informed by Buddhist-Christian Encounters* (New York: P. Lang, 2006), 121.

[248] Aldén calls Nhat Hanh's principle audience "modernity's successful…the well-educated and financially strong Euro-American group of people who participate in his retreats and buy his books." See Aldén, 119.

what he has lived through.'"[249] Therefore, before turning to the thematic contents of his work, it is helpful to know something of his contextual roots and life story. This chapter will briefly review the historical and religious context of Nhat Hanh's activism before turning to his vision of suffering and his suggestions for its alleviation.

1. Western Colonialism and Buddhist Reform

Thich Nhat Hanh was born October 11, 1926 into a situation of political turmoil and social change.[250] Vietnam at that time was part of what was known as French Indochina, having been colonized by the French in a string of military seizures taking place from 1859 to 1885. Interested in the revenues to be gained from the exportation of indigo, tea, tobacco, and coffee, the French introduced a plantation system to cultivate and control large sections of land and their populaces. From the beginning of the French conquest, the Vietnamese people made strident calls for independence and self-government. Having suffered almost a thousand years of Chinese occupation, the Vietnamese cultural self-understanding included the vision of themselves as a strong and vibrant people, who live in the shadow of a massive empire, whose domination should be

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[249] See Annabel Laity, "If You Want Peace, You Can Have Peace," in Nhat Hanh, *Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings*, 2.

[250] Thich Nhat Hanh's given name was Nguyen Xuan Bao. He was born in South Vietnam and was the son of a low level government official. [See Sallie B. King, "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam: Nondualism in Action," in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in* Asia, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996), 322.] "Nhat Hanh," which means "one action," was the name he took upon receiving full ordination as a Buddhist monk. "Thich" is a transliteration of the Sakya clan name (the clan of Siddhartha Gautama) and is used in Vietnam as a title given to all Buddhist nuns and monks. See Sister Anabel Laity, "If You Want Peace You Can Have Peace," in Nhat Hanh, *Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings*, 1.

resisted.[251] In an effort to gain greater compliance from the people, the French government instituted radical changes in the political and educational traditions of Vietnam. The Confucian system of academic examinations to select political leaders (Mandarins) was replaced by a modern, Western educational system which promised to its matriculants "milk in the morning and champagne in the evening."[252] Before the French conquest, the influence and activities of Catholic missionaries were restricted by Vietnamese emperors who were suspicious of the Europeans' intentions in a country whose religious background included a synthesis of Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist traditions. After the conquest, all restrictions against Catholicism were lifted and it was promulgated widely. Several failed uprisings took place during French domination to resist and expel Catholic missionaries who, in the eyes of the people, promoted "the religion of the Westerners [that] was introduced by them to facilitate their conquest of Vietnam."[253]

When Nhat Hanh was a young teenager, colonial instability gave way to war and famine. In 1940, when Nhat Hanh was thirteen years old, France surrendered to Germany in World War II and Japan, an ally of Germany, occupied Vietnam in order to exploit its natural resources for military campaigns in the Pacific and South Asia. Led by

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[251] Vietnam was under Chinese control from 111 BCE to 938 CE. Even during the following period of independence, Chinese pictograms were used as the official written language in Vietnam and the Chinese political doctrine of Confucianism was used to structure the social and educational hierarchy of the nation. Nhat Hanh writes, "The people of Vietnam have a history of over three thousand years and have often fought valiantly to defend their independence from invasion from the north. Their sense of national independence is strong and their patriotism has been a great advantage against invading forces, having many times helped defeat the Chinese and Mongolian armies." See Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, 20.

[252] Ibid, 14.

[253] When the French first sent warships to Vietnam, it was under the guise of addressing the incarceration of French missionaries. Ibid., 17, 20.

Ho Chi Minh, a national liberation movement ousted the Japanese in 1945. This prompted the French, reenergized after the end of World War II, to attack Vietnam again in order to regain control its former colony, thereby starting the First Indochina War, which lasted from 1946 to 1954. Previously in 1945, an estimated ten percent of the Vietnamese population died due to a famine that resulted from the previous years of warfare. The First Indochina War further decimated the land and people of Vietnam. Such was the backdrop of Nhat Hanh's early life and his decision to become a Buddhist monk.

At sixteen years of age, Nhat Hanh became a novice monk at the Tu Hieu Pagoda in the central Vietnamese city of Hue. His training in Buddhism was in the Lieu Quan School, a local branch of the Lam Te (Rinzai, Bamboo Forest) Zen Buddhist School, and included a combination of Mahayana and Theravada teachings.[254] After a year of novitiate studies, Nhat Hanh began formal studies at the Bao Quoc Buddhist Institute. Here he received monastic instruction in its traditional and conservative form. Having been exposed to Western educational systems by the French in his early years, Nhat Hanh viewed his Buddhist training as somewhat outdated and old-fashioned. While deeply indebted to his teachers at the Institute, he believed their practices did not take into proper account the current reality of the Vietnamese people who were suffering under war and

[254] The history of Buddhism in Vietnam is interesting and unique. As early as the first century of the Common Era, Buddhists arrived to Vietnam by sea from India and by land from China. While the Thien (Zen) and Pure Land sects became most popular in the North, Theravada Buddhism became prevalent in the South, through the contact of the Khmer people with Theravadins in Cambodia and Laos. In 1963, the various schools of Mahayana and Therevada Buddhism joined with one another to form the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. [See Arnie Kotler, "The Life of a 'Lazy Monk," *Shambhala Sun* (March 1998), 49 and Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, 4-6.] For a deeper description of Nhat Hanh's dharma lineage, see Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine, "All Buddhism Is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing," in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher S. Queen (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 36-38.

foreign oppression. He writes, "I had become a monk because of my ideals of service and compassion, but I was deeply disappointed that I had not found the opportunity to express those ideals in the monastic life as we lived it then."[255]

After receiving full ordination in 1949, Nhat Hanh suggested to his superiors at Bao Quoc that the traditional curriculum be expanded to include a stronger study of literature, Western philosophy, science, foreign languages, and "other subjects that could help us understand our society and the contemporary world."[256] When this proposal was denied, Nhat Hanh and five others left the institute in Hue and moved to Saigon to continue their studies in science and Western philosophy at Saigon University. In so doing, they aligned themselves with a reform movement within Vietnamese Buddhism that, beginning in the 1930s, sought to revitalize Buddhism and make it more appealing to youth and younger generations. At that particular moment in Vietnam's history, Buddhism had a great deal of social currency with the Vietnamese people. Buddhist monks had joined the Royalist Resistance Movement in the 1880s in their effort to oust the French invaders and gave the movement much of its moral force. Though their attempt to expel the colonizers was unsuccessful, the fact that the French called the local resistance "The Monks' War" linked Buddhism and nationalism in the minds of the people. By the late 1930s, there were calls to see Buddhism as the "true national

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[255] Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace*, 8-9.

[256] Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love: The Practice of Looking Deeply in the Mahayana Buddhist Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1996), 58. It is interesting to note that after exposure to European education, both Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh proposed the use of the social sciences as tools to better understand the current suffering of their people. Both scholars experienced strong resistance to their proposed reforms from the conservative hierarchies within their respective traditions.

religion" of Vietnam and many young monks sought to apply its teachings to every facet of modern life: culture, politics, economics, and social welfare.[257]

While in Saigon, Nhat Hanh made a name for himself as an exceptional writer and teacher. In 1950, he helped found the An Quang Buddhist Institute, which would become the leading center for Buddhist Studies in South Vietnam and a hub of Buddhist social activism. He published a number of works in which he argued that Buddhism must always be able to change if it wants to retain its vitality. It is not enough, he suggested, to focus on suffering in general. If Buddhists want to relieve the suffering of others, they must seek to understand and enter into the specific form of suffering that occurs around them. This can only be done when one investigates deeply the causes of such suffering. Traditionally, if someone wanted to cultivate the spiritual practices necessary for this kind of investigation, he would go to a monastery. However, in times of war and social upheaval, when people are struggling just to survive, this traditional approach is simply unfeasible for many people. Nhat Hanh argued that a way should be found for Buddhism to help those living in the modern world.[258]

This view earned him the reputation of being a "radical" among older Buddhist teachers who could not understand why he was so popular among younger students.[259]

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[257] See Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1994), 335.

[258] The argument that Buddhism needs to be able to change in order to address current social conditions appears in many of Nhat Hanh's early writings. As an example, see Nhat Hanh, *Aujourd'hui le Bouddhisme*, trans. (from Vietnamese) Le Van Hao (Cholon, South Vietnam: La Boi, 1965). Thomas Merton reviews this book in his *Mystics and Zen Masters*, characterizing its contents as "a militant criticism of traditional and conservative Buddhism." Summarizing Nhat Hanh's view, Merton suggests that "Traditional Buddhism, formal, rigid, doctrinaire, is sterile, fit for the museum, irrelevant in the modern world." See Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1967), 286.

[259] Although this often threatening term was applied to Gutiérrez and to Nhat Hanh by those in their respective traditions who were seeking to discredit them, in its truest sense, its use is quite appropriate

According to Chan Khong, a student and long-time colleague of Nhat Hanh, in the 1950s in Vietnam "all the young monks were fond of him [Nhat Hanh] and wholeheartedly supported his efforts to renew the teachings and practice, but the more conservative elders were not supportive of his innovations."[260] In lieu of pleading for their approval, Nhat Hanh moved forward with his attempt to communicate the relevancy of Buddhism to young people outside the traditional channels.[261] He wrote for and edited a variety of magazines, published several books, and founded an innovative monastic and artistic community, *Phuong Boi* (Fragrant Palm Leaves), where his ideas of "engaged" Buddhism or "Buddhism for the people" began to find further clarity. Resistance to his attempts to modernize Buddhism escalated until, in 1961, his name was removed from the membership list of the An Quang Pagoda, the temple at the institute he helped to found in 1950.[262]

2. The Vietnam War and the Suffering Poor

In 1954, the First Indochina War came to a close with the signing of the Geneva Peace Accords which divided Vietnam along the 17th parallel north, setting the former

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for both of them. The word "radical" comes from the Latin word "radix," which means "root." To investigate poverty or human suffering radically means to try to return to its source or "root."

[260] Chan Khong, *Learning True Love: Practicing Buddhism in a Time of War* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993), 29.

[261] Nhat Hanh has stated on many occasions that "more than anything else, I wanted to help renew Buddhism in my country, to make it relevant to the needs of the young people." See Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love*, 7.

[262] See Robert H. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2003), 76. For a detailed description of Nhat Hanh's often tension-filled relationship with the Unified Buddhist Church, see Sallie B. King, "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church," in *Engaged Buddhism: Liberation Movements in Asia,* ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 321-64.

colonial supporters in the South and communist nationalists in the North. In truth, these accords brought no end to violent conflict or strife in Vietnam. The appointed leader of the South, Boa Dai, was soon overthrown by Ngo Dinh Diem, who declared himself president and promised free elections. When such elections failed to take place, northern Vietnamese communists began a campaign of guerrilla warfare to overthrow Diem, who eventually was deposed and assassinated in 1963. Following his administration came several weak military governments in which communist supporters began to gain influence. This was particularly unsettling to the United States, which was actively engaged in an ideological struggle with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China concerning the spread of communism in various regions of the world. In 1965, U.S. military forces became involved in Vietnam in what has come to be known as the Vietnam War. The Americans eventually took over almost all military activities for the South Vietnamese Army before withdrawing in 1973.

The dominating presence of the United States and the cruelty of its exploits were particularly painful to the majority of the Vietnamese peasantry who took very little interest in either communism or anti-communism. Villages were razed, houses burned, women raped, farmland destroyed, and people displaced, all in a struggle that had almost nothing to do with the daily lives and aspirations of the Vietnamese people. In the context of such brutality, the vision of a revitalized Buddhism took on a new focus for Thich Nhat Hanh. While at first he had directed his attention to making Buddhism relevant to young people, he now began to concentrate on speaking for and helping those

who suffered most—the poor peasantry who found themselves victims of a fight that was not their own.[263]

This politicized position distanced him further from the conservative Buddhist hierarchy. At the behest of friends, Nhat Hanh accepted a fellowship to study comparative religion at Princeton University in 1961 and lectured on contemporary Buddhism at Columbia University. Nevertheless, when asked to return to Vietnam after the fall of Diem, he did so in 1964 and began one of the most socially active periods of his life. Upon his return to Vietnam, he immediately began work to establish Van Hanh University, a Buddhist educational institution based on the curriculum he had earlier suggested at Bao Quoc. At the same time he began founding several experimental villages whose purpose was to function as "models for social change."[264] In these communities, villagers were responsible for developing self-reliant forms of education, farming, and health-care enterprises. His work with these villages soon led to the founding of the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS), which trained unpaid Buddhist volunteers to relieve the suffering engendered by warfare for poor people, regardless of their political orientation.[265] Nhat Hanh observes, "In 1956, there were almost no monks and nuns in Vietnam practicing social service. Today many are doctors,

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[263] See, in particular, "American Soldiers: How the Peasant Sees Them," in Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, 63-68.

[264] Khong,, 60.

[265] The focus of the School of Youth for Social Service was on helping the poor in particular to rebuild and improve the lives. [See Khong, 70ff.] The initiative has often been called the Vietnamese Peace Corp. [See Robert King, 82.] In training his volunteers for the SYSS, Nhat Hanh emphasized the importance of relying on poor (not rich) people. "If you have too much, you don't rely on the support of the poor people. You might become arrogant or be cut off from your true resources." See Sallie King, "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church," in *Engaged Buddhism: Liberation Movements in Asia*, ed. C. S. Queen and S. B. King, 323.

nurses, teachers, day-care workers, and so on, practicing compassion and loving-kindness every day."[266] During this period, he also helped establish a publishing house through which he circulated a steady stream of books, articles, and poems highlighting the plight of the poor. Several of his works, including *Prayers for the White Dove of Peace to Appear*, were banned by governmental leadership in both the North and the South.

Perhaps one of the best known of his innovations during this time was the establishment of a new branch of the Lam Te School called the Tiep Hien Order, also known as the Order of Interbeing. The order was designed for religious and lay Buddhists alike who could make a commitment to a common life of social service. The charter of the order states that it be based on four principles: non-attachment to views, the direct experience of the reality of interbeing, appropriateness, and skillful means. Nhat Hanh explains that "inspired by the bodhisattva idea, the members of the Order of Interbeing seek to transform themselves in order to help change society in the direction of increased understanding and more compassion."[267] In February 1964, six leaders in the School of Youth for Social Service vowed to live according to the order's fourteen precepts and were ordained to the religious order.[268]

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[266] Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love*, 59.

[267] See Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, 17-19.

[268] The fourteen precepts, though long, bear inclusion here, since they represent the heart of Nhat Hanh's vision of sustainable social action. They are: (1) Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. All systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth. (2) Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Leave and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times. (3) Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness. (4) Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering by all means, including personal contact and visits, images, sound. By

What stands out from Nhat Hanh's activities in Vietnam in the 1960s is that the wartime suffering of the impoverished peasantry captured his attention. For him, it was they who suffered most and whose suffering demanded redress. There is no doubt that Nhat Hanh also suffered personally. He experienced material hardship, hunger, and personal deprivation due to war. His brother was killed; he contracted malaria from his work in rural communities; he was arrested and imprisoned for his "antiwar" activities; and there were assassination attempts on his life.[269] However, rather than driving him to

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such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world. (5) Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy and material resources with those who are in need. (6) Do not maintain anger or hatred. As soon as anger and hatred arise, practice the meditation on compassion in order to deeply understand the persons who have caused anger and hatred. Learn to look at other beings with the eyes of compassion. (7) Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Learn to practice breathing in order to regain composure of body and mind, to practice mindfulness and to develop concentration and understanding. (8) Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts however small. (9) Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize or condemn things that you are not sure of. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety. (10) Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts. (11) Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation which helps realize your ideal of compassion. (12) Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and to prevent war. (13) Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from enriching themselves from human suffering or the suffering of other beings. (14) Do not mistreat your body. Learn to handle it with respect. Do not look on your body as only an instrument. Preserve vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of the Way. Sexual expression should not happen without love and commitment. In sexual relationships, be aware of future suffering that may be caused. To preserve the happiness of others, respect the rights and commitments of others. Be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new lives into the world. Meditate on the world into which you are bringing new beings. [See Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*.] In recent years, Nhat Hanh has ceased calling these fourteen items "precepts" and has started calling them "mindfulness trainings." He has also reworded them so that, rather than beginning with admonitions (do not…), they begin with affirmations and commitments (aware of …we are determined to…). These changes were designed to make the precepts more palatable to Westerners who found the concept of "precept" to be too close to that of "commandment." See Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*, 90 and Nhat Hanh, *For a Future to Be Possible: Commentaries on the Five Wonderful Precepts*, rev. ed. (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1998), 10.

[269] See Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace*, 3; Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 41-42; and Nhat Hanh, *Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings*, 9.

self-concerned isolationism or escapism, his own suffering only opened him more fully to the suffering of others. Nhat Hanh explains:

> I grew up in a time of war. There was destruction all around—children, adults, values, a whole country. As a young person, I suffered a lot. Once the door of awareness has been opened, you cannot close it. The wounds of war in me are still not all healed. There are nights I lie awake and embrace my people, my country, and the whole planet with my mindful breathing.[270]

In Vietnam Nhat Hanh did not hesitate to go where the suffering was greatest. When seven workers in the School of Youth for Social Service were murdered for their work with the poor, Nhat Hanh "suffered tremendously."[271] He has written poems and plays as a way to honor their memory, saying, "When I write them [poems] I am trying to speak very simply for the majority of Vietnamese, who are peasants and cannot speak for themselves."[272]

Just as Gustavo Gutiérrez's context helped him to understand human suffering and its causes in a particular way (through class analysis and dependency theory), so too has Thich Nhat Hanh's. While it is the grinding oppression of poverty that characterizes life for the *campesino* in Peru, it was the falling bombs and ideological terrorism of war that shaped Nhat Hanh's view. He explains, "Coming from a background of such devastation and suffering, having experienced the French-Indochina War and the Vietnam War, I have the deep aspiration to prevent war from ever happening again."[273]

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[270] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching,* 5.

[271] Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace,* 104.

[272] Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action,* 60. See his one act play, "The Path of Return Continues the Journey," printed in Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action,* 12-36.

[273] Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace,* 4.

Ken Jones, an engaged Buddhist from England, has observed that issues of social services and poverty have received little attention, at least from Western Buddhists.[274] The same cannot be said of Thich Nhat Hanh who, as we shall see, has continued to hold the plight of the suffering poor of his country close to his heart.

3. Exile, Engaged Buddhism, and the West

In 1966, Nhat Hanh was invited by the Fellowship of Reconciliation to do a speaking tour of nineteen countries to present to the American people and to the Western World the perspective of the Vietnamese people who were neither communist nor anticommunist. The list of those with whom he met reads as a veritable "Who's Who" of global leadership. In the United States he spoke with members of the U.S. House and Senate, Secretary of State Robert McNamara, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, and peace activists such as Dorothy Day and Joan Baez, and spoke on national television and before a large crowd at Town Hall in New York. As his trip expanded he met with the Swedish and Canadian parliaments, the British House of Commons, the Queen of Holland, the Archbishop of Canterbury, French and Dutch cardinals, and Pope Paul VI.[275] Many of his hearers were deeply moved by Nhat Hanh's ability to speak on behalf of the poor of his country. Thomas Merton wrote that "he [Nhat Hanh] represents the young, the defenseless, the new ranks of youth who find themselves with every hand turned against them except those of the peasants and the poor, with whom they are working.

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[274] Ken Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism: A Call to Action* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 176.

[275] This paragraph is summarized from Sallie King, "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church," in *Engaged Buddhism: Liberation Movements in Asia,* ed. C. S. Queen and S. B. King, 323-324.

Nhat Hanh speaks for the people of Vietnam, if there can be said to be a 'people' still left in Vietnam."[276] After meeting with Nhat Hanh, Martin Luther King, Jr. came out publicly against the Vietnam War and, in 1967, nominated Nhat Hanh for the Noble Peace Prize.

While in Washington D.C. Nhat Hanh presented a "Five Point Proposal to End the War," calling on the United States government to:

1. Clearly state its wish to help the people of Vietnam establish a government of their own choosing.
2. End all bombing, North and South.
3. Announce a cease-fire and limit all actions to a defensive nature.
4. Remove all U.S. troops from Vietnam over the next several months.
5. Help reconstruct Vietnam with aid free from political and ideological strings.

On that same day, he was denounced by the government of South Vietnam as a traitor.[277] It was clearly unsafe for him to return home. His trip to the West, which was to last only a few weeks, began an exile which continues to this day.[278] By refusing to take sides with either the communists or the anti-communists in Vietnam, Nhat Hanh became an enemy to both. We have suggested that Nhat Hanh's context has had a strong influence on who he is and the work he does. In 1966, Nhat Hanh's context changed from one of daily life with the suffering poor of Vietnam to a life lived in geographical separation from them. For the last 44 years Nhat Hanh has lived in France, the land of his former

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[276] Thomas Merton, "Nhat Hanh is My Brother," printed in Robert King, 106.

[277] Khong, 84-85.

[278] In 2005, Nhat Hanh was given a visa to return to Vietnam for the first time in over four decades, for three months of teaching. Chan Khong reports that the government of Vietnam allowed him to return mainly because it wanted to be accepted into the World Trade Organization and saw his exile as an obstacle to that goal. See Khong, 270.

colonizers, and worked increasingly with Europeans and Americans, those whom Gutiérrez might call "the rich."

Even before his speaking tour Nhat Hanh had begun the hard task of interpreting the life of the Third World poor for Gutiérrez's "oppressors." He did so while teaching Buddhism at Columbia University a few years before and it was the very purpose of his 1966 speaking tour. His experience of colonization and war made it very clear to him that the lives and deaths of Vietnamese peasants were intricately and deeply connected to the perceptions and actions of people in the West.[279] In 1968, Nhat Hanh created in Paris an office of the Unified Buddhist Church to extend abroad the antiwar efforts of the movement. Soon afterward this office became the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation, whose mission was to communicate, as broadly as possible, the position of Buddhists and peasants in Vietnam. Though Nhat Hanh was officially barred from participating in the Paris Peace Talks, he and his colleagues worked to "supply information on the situation in Vietnam, send out speakers, put visitors in Saigon in touch with Buddhist social workers, and seek financial help for orphans of Vietnam."[280]

After the end of the war, Nhat Hanh was still denied a visa to return home. So he did what he could to remain as connected as possible to the poor of Vietnam. He and

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[279] When asked by an irate America peace activist why he did not stay in Vietnam to try to defeat the American aggressors, Nhat Hanh responded, "Sir, it seems to me that many of the roots of war are here in your country. That is why I have come. One of the roots is your way of seeing the world. Both sides are victims of a wrong policy, a policy that believes in the force of violence to settle problems. I do not want Vietnamese to die, and I do not want American soldiers to die either." Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*, 115.

[280] Marjorie Hope and James Young, *The Struggle for Humanity: Agent of Nonviolent Change in a Violent World*, Ch. 6 "The Third Way: Thich Nhat Hanh and Cao Ngoc Phuong" (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977), 212-215. See also Sallie King, "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church," in *Engaged Buddhism: Liberation Movements in Asia*, ed. C. S. Queen and S. B. King, 324-325. Nhat Hanh's efforts to infiltrate and influence the Paris Peace Talks, from which he was formally excluded, create an interesting parallel to Gutiérrez's efforts at the CELAM conference at Puebla, from which he was officially barred.

others with him established a meditation and retreat center in a dilapidated farmhouse south of Paris from which they could "continue to work on behalf of political prisoners in Vietnam and to ease the plight of the Vietnamese people, especially refugees and the very poor."[281] They named this hermitage *Les Patates Douces* (Sweet Potatoes), because in Vietnam, when people could not find rice, they ate sweet potatoes. Chang Kong explains, "It is the poorest food, and we knew we needed some way to stay in touch with the poorest people in our country."[282] At *Les Patates Douces,* Nhat Hanh wrote letters to his associates at the School of Youth for Social Service, encouraging them to maintain their work and not to succumb to fatigue or resentment. One such letter has been translated into English and published as *The Miracle of Mindfulness.*[283] This short book is one of Nhat Hanh's clearest statements about how social activists can sustain energy and dedication to their work without becoming overwhelmed by discouragement or anger. During this period large initiatives were organized to help the hungry in Vietnam, children made orphans by the war, and boat people attempting to escape persecution in the war's aftermath.

Being separated from his homeland was hard on Nhat Hanh. Nevertheless, it is his experience of exile in the West that has helped Nhat Hanh to see that the suffering of the Third World poor is connected not only to abuse from the First World rich, but also to the suffering and ignorance of the rich as well. He began to see that, while the suffering

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[281] Sallie King, "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church," in *Engaged Buddhism: Liberation Movements in Asia,* ed. C. S. Queen and S. B. King, 325.

[282] Khong, 171.

[283] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Mindfulness,* trans. Mobi Ho. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).

of the "poor and oppressed. . .is easy for us to see," there are "more subtle forms of suffering" and that "people with more than enough material comforts also suffer."[284] He saw that "affluent societies suffer from loneliness, alienation, and boredom, problems unimaginable" in Vietnamese peasant communities.[285] In his writings, dualistic ideas such First World/Third World, Europe/Asia, rich/poor, and home/exile were increasingly seen to have no inherent substance and gave way to concepts like interbeing, interdependency, and multi-rootedness. He began to suggest that "the suffering of everyone is reality. Rich and poor, North and South, black, yellow, red, and white is reality [*sic*]."[286] The experience of geographical separation from his cultural roots allowed Nhat Hanh to see that the rich of the West, although not in political exile, also experience separation from their roots. He writes:

> Our modern society creates so many young people without roots. They are uprooted from their families and their society; they wander around, not quite human beings, because they do not have roots. Quite a number of them come from broken families and feel rejected by society. They live on the margins, looking for a home, for something to belong to. They are like trees without roots. For these people, it's very difficult to practice. A tree without roots cannot absorb anything; it cannot survive. Even if they practice intensely for ten years, it's very hard for them to be transformed if they remain an island, if they cannot establish a link with other people.[287]

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[284] Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step,* 82; Nhat Hanh, *Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings,* 100.

[285] Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves: Journals 1962-1966,* trans. Mobi Warren (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 167.

[286] Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace,* 180.

[287] Nhat Hanh, *Lifetime of Peace,* ed. J. S. Willis, 276. While Gutiérrez highlights the marginalization of the poor by the rich, Nhat Hanh underscores the marginalization of the rich by political, economic, and social systems. He observes, "We have created a system that we cannot control. This system imposes itself on us, and we have become its slaves. Most of us, in order to have a house, a car, a refrigerator, a TV, and so on, must sacrifice our time and our lives in exchange. . . .We have created a society in which the rich become richer and the poor become poorer, and in which we are so caught up in our own immediate problems that we cannot afford to be aware of what is going on with the rest of the human family. We see images on TV, but we do not really understand our Third World brothers and sisters." See Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action,* 120-1.

In an effort to attend to the suffering they saw in the West, Nhat Hanh and Chan Khong began offering meditation and mindfulness retreats. It soon became clear that the *Les Patates Douces* farm was not large enough to accommodate all those who wanted to attend their courses. In 1982, another property was bought in southern France and the Plum Village Community was established. Once again, the name of the community reflects something of its purpose. In the early 1970s, Chan Khong and other leaders of the School of Youth for Social Service had hoped to establish a retreat center to train social workers in Vietnam to work with the poor, though this dream never came to fulfillment. They had planned to raise persimmon trees to support their work and call the community Persimmon Village. At Plum Village, the hope was to plant plum trees, the proceeds from which would "go to hungry children in Vietnam and other Third World countries."[288] At Plum Village particular attention is given to helping Vietnamese refugees and social workers find sustainability in their work with the poor.

Nevertheless, because of his continued interaction with the particular kind of suffering experienced in the West, in the last twenty years, Nhat Hanh has increasingly focused his energies on helping people find peace in their lives so that they may become effective agents of social transformation. Having met many social workers, environmentalists, and psychologists who were less successful in helping others because of their own internal issues, Nhat Hanh writes, "We should not try to help others in an effort to escape our own sorrow, despair, or inner conflict. If you are not peaceful and solid enough inside yourself, your contributions will not be useful. We must first practice mindfulness and grow compassion in ourselves, so that peace and harmony are in us,

[288] Khong, 216.

before we can work effectively for social change."[289] In more recent years, he has focused on community (s*angha*) building, monastic training, and presenting the teachings of the Buddha in language more accessible to people in the West.[290] These efforts are designed specifically to help Westerners overcome the isolationism and meaninglessness so common in modern societies and to develop skills to avoid burnout and mindfully sustain activism in their lives.

For some Westerners who consider themselves "engaged Buddhists," Nhat Hanh's more recent work with individual and *sangha*-based practices reflects a lamentable shift from his earlier political activism of the 1960s in Vietnam. After reviewing such criticism, Ken Jones, a founding member of the UK Network of Engaged Buddhists, concludes that Nhat Hanh's "emphasis on individual and collective mindfulness and non-partisanship can offer a valuable counter to the seductive pull of conventional activism, where it is all too easy to lose one's balance."[291] Whether or not one should mourn this evolution in Nhat Hanh's work is highly debatable. The fact that he came from a deep awareness of the suffering poor in the Third World and is now helping First World social activists find ways to sustain their social action makes him the ideal complement for North American Christian social activists left adrift by the harshness of Gutiérrez's call for solidarity. Indeed, as shall be argued below, Nhat Hanh's mindfulness practices can flesh out the meaning of such solidarity. Nevertheless,

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[289] Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace,* 59.

[290] For an excellent review of this work and the way in which Nhat Hanh newly presents traditional Buddhist teachings, see Hunt-Perry and Fine, "All Buddhism Is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing," in *Engaged Buddhism in the West,* ed. C. Queen , 36-38, 44-60.

[291] Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism,* 194.

because of such criticism of Nhat Hanh, the meaning of engaged Buddhism and social activism in general merit discussion, before turning to Nhat Hanh's vision of suffering and how one might respond to it.

4. Engaged Buddhism

In 1963, Thich Nhat Hanh published a book entitled *Engaged Buddhism* and has been widely credited with coining the term.[292] The idea of engaged Buddhism, at least as understood in the West, refers to the notion that the traditional practices and teachings of Buddhism can be directly applied to modern day concerns in the social, economic, political and, ecological realms. In general, engaged Buddhism can be understood as a twinning of social activism and Buddhist meditative insight, a sort of active involvement by Buddhists in contemporary social problems. In recent decades Western scholars have put much time and energy into finding a precise definition for the term. The *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* defines socially engaged Buddhism as:

> A reorientation of Buddhist soteriology and ethics to identify and address sources of human suffering outside the cravings and ignorance of the sufferer—such as social, political and economic injustice, warfare and violence, and environmental degradation. . .a new form of Buddhist activism that seeks to transform the self and the world through awareness and compassionate service. The walking-bodhisattva-as-activist is venerated alongside the sitting-Buddha-as-awakener as

[292] Some people have gone so far as to call Thich Nhat Hanh the "father of engaged Buddhism." [See Thich Nhat Hanh, "Interbeing: An Inteview with Thich Nhat Hanh," in *Lifetime of Peace,* ed. J. S. Willis, 167.] A wide consensus of scholars in the field of engaged Buddhism acknowledge Nhat Hanh's role in establishing this term. As examples, see Kenneth Kraft, "Prospects of a Socially Engaged Buddhism," in Kraft, ed., *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 18; Arnold Kotler, "Buddhism Must be Engaged," in *Radical Conservatism: Buddhism in the Contemporary World,* eds. Sulak Silvaraksa et al. (Bangkok: International Network of Engaged Buddhists, 1990), 135; and David W. Chappell "Radical Diversity in the Soka Gakkai," in *Engaged Buddhism in the West,* ed. C. S. Queen, 201.

> traditional disciplines and virtues of Buddhist practice are directed to the challenges of the modern world.[293]

This definition conveys the notion that engaged Buddhism is something relatively new. Kenneth Kraft argues that engaged Buddhists "concede that traditional Buddhism in the Asian cultural context has generally been politically passive."[294] He argues that Buddhists historically have focused their attention on the personal and universal realms, but have neglected detailed consideration of the social sphere. Following this line of thought, Christopher Queen invokes traditional Buddhists *yana*-language, suggesting that engaged Buddhism "is unprecedented, and thus tantamount to a new chapter in the history of the tradition. As a style of ethical practice, engaged Buddhism may be seen as a new paradigm of Buddhist liberation. . .a new turning of the wheel of Dharma—a new vehicle, or a fourth yana."[295] In a similar move, Ken Jones has suggested that the social awareness of engaged Buddhists should be considered as the "opening of the fourth eye." Drawing on the conventional practice of referring to an individual's spiritual awakening as "opening the third eye," Jones suggests that "to *open the fourth eye* is to be aware and knowledgeable of the social and cultural contexts of the Dharma—and particularly the

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[293] This definition was posted in an online conference invitation for academic papers. See Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism*, 178.

[294] Kenneth Kraft, "Wellsprings of Engaged Buddhism," in *Not Turning Away: The Practice of Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Susan Moon (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2004), 154.

[295] *Yana*, or vehicle, is a tradition metaphor in Hindu and Buddhist thought that has been used to distinguish the three broad approaches to the practice of Buddhism: Hinayana, the "lesser vehicle" (better known as Theravada Buddhism, popular in Southeast Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar); Mahayana, the "greater vehicle" (popular in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam); and Vajrayana, the "diamond vehicle" (popular in the Himalayan countries of Tibet and Nepal). [See Nancy Wilson Ross, *Buddhism a Way of Life and Thought* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980)]. The use of these taxonomies has been both questionable and polemical in Buddhist history, first, because they often elicit distinctions between the three approaches that are artificial and, second, because the term Hinayana has been used pejoratively by members of other groups. See Christopher Queen, "Introduction: A New Buddhism," in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. C. S. Queen, 1-2.

ethical implications of those contexts." Moreover, he contends that the opening of the fourth eye is something new for Buddhism; it is "a gift of modernity to the traditional spiritualities."[296] In the view of many, socially engaged Buddhism is a departure from traditional Buddhism made possible through Buddhism's encounter with the West.[297]

While all of the above scholars recognize their indebtedness to Nhat Hanh as an innovator within the movement and a prime example of an engaged Buddhist, Nhat Hanh makes no categorical distinction between engaged Buddhism and traditional Buddhism. On many occasions he has argued that "engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism. If you practice Buddhism in your family, in society, it is engaged Buddhism."[298] For Nhat Hanh, distinguishing engaged Buddhism from other types is unnecessary and redundant. In a 1983 Buddhist Peace Fellowship newsletter, he wrote, "Buddhism means to be awake—mindful of what is happening in one's body, feelings, mind and in the world. . ..If you are awake you cannot do otherwise than act compassionately to help relieve suffering you see around you. So Buddhism must be engaged in the world. If it is not engaged it is not Buddhism."[299]

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[296] Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism*, 113. He continues to argue that if the West has changed Buddhism, it is because the West itself is changing. Quoting Stephen Batchelor, he writes, "When Buddhism first appeared 'the Dharma was either obscured by the grid of reason or twisted by the dreams of romanticism. It required two World Wars, Hitler and Stalin, the threat of nuclear war and environmental destructions, and, in many cases, a hefty dose of LSD to render Europeans sufficiently humble to seek their lost spiritual center elsewhere.'" See Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism*, 120.

[297] David Loy, also suggesting that engaged Buddhism only arose after Buddhism's encounter with the West, writes, "Buddhism needs the contributions of Western modernity—such as democracy, feminism, and the separation of church and state—to challenge its institutional complacency and liberate its own teachings from such traditional social constraints." See David Loy, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 8.

[298] Arnold Kotler, "Breathing and Smiling: Traveling with Thich Nhat Hanh," *Buddhist Peace Fellowship Newsletter* (summer 1989): 22, quoted in Kraft, "Prospects of a Socially Engaged Buddhism," in Kraft, ed., *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence*, 18.

[299] Quoted in Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism*, 179.

This integrative view, one that sees continuity between traditional and engaged Buddhism, has not been popular among some Western proponents of engaged Buddhism who suggest that it "robs Engaged Buddhism of a sufficiently clear definition."[300] These critics seek to make a distinction between "hard" engagement (i.e. a service-based, results-oriented approach that focuses on structural, political change) and "soft" engagement (i.e. the attempt to engage one's mindfulness practice in all aspects of one's personal life, which include not only one's social activism, but one's work and family life as well). At issue for these critics is the fear that saying "all Buddhism is engaged" risks diluting the crucial involvement in social action and participation in social justice causes. Interestingly, Donald Rothberg, another scholar who distinguishes two poles of engaged Buddhism ("socially engaged" and "engagement in everyday life"), uses Nhat Hanh as an example of both types.[301]

In one sense, the desire to distinguish, separate, and define engaged Buddhism is a tangential terminological issue; what really matters is how persons respond to suffering in the world. There are many people who call themselves "engaged Buddhists" but make little effort to effect social change at an institutional level. Likewise, there are other Buddhists who dedicate their lives to the transformation of society, but shy away from the term as unsuitable and faddish. One may wonder if the need to differentiate and label Buddhism as engaged is more a product of Western academic thinking than it is of

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[300] Ken Jones, *The Social Face of Buddhism: An Approach to Political and Social Activism* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1992), quoted in Queen "Introduction: A New Buddhism," in *Engaged Buddhism in the West,* ed. C. S. Queen, 8.

[301] See Donald Rothberg, "Responding to the Cries of the World: Socially Engaged Buddhism in North America," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America,* ed. Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 266-86. One may assume Rothberg refers to Nhat Hanh's early work as "socially engaged" and his later work as "engagement in everyday life."

anything intrinsic to Buddhism itself. After all, the notion of engaged Buddhism is as much a social construction (i.e. without any self-existing essential nature) as is any other mental notion.[302] In another sense, however, that Nhat Hanh connects his social activism both with his traditional Buddhists roots in Vietnam and with Vietnam's war-torn context in the 1950, 1960s, and 1970s is indicative of his entire approach to the alleviation of suffering. Just as Gutiérrez's context helped him understand human suffering and its causes in a particular way, so too has Nhat Hanh's context affected his perspective.

If Gutiérrez's context helped him to appreciate dependency theory and to focus on the structural causes of poverty, Nhat Hanh's context helped him to see the linkage between the suffering of poor Vietnamese peasants and a war fueled by unhappiness, greed, and ignorance of people in larger, Western nations.[303] Nhat Hanh has continually suggested that "you have to train yourself to be an agent of peace and reconciliation wherever you are."[304] His later focus on mindfulness-based practices reflects the shift in his context (from Third World to First World) more than a dwindling of his resolve. In turning his attention to practices that help "the rich," Nhat Hanh has in no way abandoned his dedication to the Third World poor.[305] Rather, he sees that to help the Third World

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[302] Thich Nhat Hanh has said that "Bamboo Forest Buddhism is a kind of engaged Buddhism. . ..It can be applied in all aspects of life, political, social, and cultural." See Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine, "All Buddhism Is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing," in *Engaged Buddhism in the West,* ed. C. S. Queen, 37.

[303] Nhat Hanh contends, "Engaged Buddhism was a product of suffering and war—a lotus flower blooming in a sea of fire." See Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace,* 94.

[304] Ibid., 102.

[305] Nhat Hanh works to help not only the Vietnamese poor, but poor in many areas, including Latin America. For example, the proceeds from the Portuguese edition of *The Miracle of Mindfulness* go to help poor children in Brazil. [See Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, xi.] It is also revealing that even after having been away from Vietnam for over forty years, Nhat Hanh continues to wear his brown monastic garb. He explains that he does this "in order to identify with the peasants [of Vietnam], who also wear brown." Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, 11.

poor, one must also help the First World rich. To change one's focus according to one's audience and context is not desertion; it is wisdom. Nhat Hanh explains, "When I give a teaching in Vietnamese, it's quite different. I am aware that I'm addressing people with a background of a particular kind of suffering. Their suffering is not exactly the same kind of suffering which Westerners have had to undergo."[306] This very sensitivity to context and the suffering of the First World is the reason why Nhat Hanh can help First World Christians understand Gutiérrez's call to solidarity in a deeper and more productive way. To make this argument, we now turn to Nhat Hanh's vision of suffering.

5. The Truth of Suffering

As a Buddhist monk, Nhat Hanh has spent much time contemplating the nature and meaning of suffering. The Buddha himself used suffering and its mitigation as the experiential tools by which to communicate the insight of his awakening, saying over and over, "I teach only suffering and the transformation of suffering."[307] In teaching the meaning of suffering, however, Nhat Hanh often departs from the techniques common to other modern Buddhist specialists, who begin with an etymological explanation of the meaning of the Pali term *dukkha* before describing the three types of suffering.[308]

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[306] Nhat Hanh, *A Lifetime of Peace,* ed. J. S. Willis, 162-3.

[307] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching,* 3. When the term "the Buddha" is used in the section, it is meant to refer to Siddhartha Gautama, the North Indian prince of the Sakya clan in the sixth century B.C.E., rather than the semi-mythological images of other Buddhas found in certain Mahayana teachings.

[308] *Dukkha* is most often translated as "suffering" but is also at times translated as "misery," "sorrow," "pain," "discomfort," "dissatisfaction," and "unpleasantness." The theory of the three types of suffering divides *dukkha* into: (1) the suffering of suffering (ordinary suffering); (2) the suffering of change; and (3) the suffering of conditioning, and is taught by Buddhist masters in a variety of Buddhist schools. For examples see Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught,* rev. ed. (Bedford: Gordon Fraser, 1967), 19-20; His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama, *The Four Noble Truths: Fundamentals of the Buddhist*

Fearing that such approaches over-intellectualize suffering or overemphasize the importance of its pervasiveness, Nhat Hanh observes, "We have a tendency to make the words of our teacher into a doctrine or an ideology. Since the Buddha said that the First Noble Truth is suffering, many good students of the Buddha have used their skills to prove that everything on Earth is suffering. The theory of the Three Kinds of Suffering was such an attempt. It is not a teaching of the Buddha."[309] Nhat Hanh admits that "we all suffer to some extent," but the importance of this admission is not intellectual; it is experiential.[310] "According to Buddhist teaching, when you touch suffering deeply, you will understand the nature of suffering and then the way to happiness will reveal itself."[311] In this view, for all its destructiveness, suffering has a positive side as well; it is the means by which people become free to experience deep joy and peace. Many Buddhists also include suffering as one of the three Dharma seals, or universal "marks" of existence. Nhat Hanh, however, contends:

> To put suffering on the same level as impermanence and nonself is an error. Impermanence and nonself are "universal." They are a "mark" of all things. Suffering is not. It is not difficult to see that a table is impermanent and does not have a self separate of all non-table elements, like wood, rain, sun, furniture maker, and so on. But is it suffering? A table will only make us suffer if we attribute permanence or separateness to it. When we are attached to a certain table, it is not the table that causes us to suffer. It is our attachment…. I hope scholars and practitioners will begin to accept the teaching that all things are marked by impermanence, nonself, and nirvana, and not make too great an effort to prove that everything is suffering.[312]

Teachings (London: Thorsons, 1997), 50-57; and Lobsang Gyatso, *The Four Noble Truths* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1994), 18-20.

[309] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching,* 19.

[310] Nhat Hanh continues, "We all have some malaise in our body and our mind." Ibid., 9.

[311] Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 38.

[312] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching,* 22.

For Thich Nhat Hanh, those who seek to understand the nature of suffering should spend less time memorizing and accepting traditional teachings of Buddhism about the nature and origin of suffering and, instead, use their own experience and reason to understand it. He suggests:

> Another common misunderstanding of the Buddha's teaching is that all our suffering is caused by craving…If we use our intelligence, we can see that craving can be a cause of pain, but other afflictions such as anger, ignorance, suspicion, arrogance, and wrong views can also cause pain and suffering.…To say that craving is the cause of all our suffering is too simplistic.…If we have a stomachache, we need to call it a stomachache. If we have a headache, we need to call it a headache. How else will we find the cause of our suffering and the way to heal ourselves?[313]

To accept abstract definitions of suffering and its causes will not do. Let us call a spade, "a spade." As is true for Gutiérrez, Nhat Hanh contends that to understand suffering, one should understand its particular nature and specific causes. There are many kinds of suffering with many different roots. While it is a truism that everyone suffers, one must investigate particular types of suffering experientially, in their specific manifestations, to know how to respond to them. For the purposes of our conversation with Gutiérrez, let us turn to Nhat Hanh's understanding of how human suffering relates to poverty.

Poverty and Suffering

In chapter 3, I argued that Gutiérrez understands the poor as the prototype and clearest example of human suffering. The poor, in his understanding, are more than merely economically deprived; they are members of oppressed groups whose self-identity and worldview are guided by their group membership. Moreover, the lives of the poor

[313] Ibid., 22-23.

are beset by the regular experience of physical and mental distress. At times in his writings, Nhat Hanh sounds very much like Gutiérrez. He speaks of "helping the poor," of paying "attention to the poor and oppressed," and of the "sufferings of the poor," as if the poor comprised something of a social class or group.[314] Is this indeed Nhat Hanh's view? Who are the poor? What is the character of their suffering? Is their suffering different than that of others? Is it archetypal of human suffering in general? The style in which Nhat Hanh writes is less academic and argumentative than that of Gutiérrez. Instead, he tends to mix explanations of Buddhist philosophy with personal anecdotes and poetry in small vignettes designed as spiritual aids for his readers. While Nhat Hanh does not define poverty in an explicit way, one can gain an idea of how his view parallels and differs from Guierrez's through the stories he chooses to relate.

Like Gutiérrez, Nhat Hanh contends that the suffering associated with material poverty can be something horrendous. In *Old Path White Clouds*, Nhat Hanh tells a story in which the Buddha delayed giving a Dharma talk to an impatient crowd until after a hungry farmer was given food. In the words of Nhat Hanh, the Buddha explains to the assembly, "There is no greater suffering than hunger. Hunger wastes our bodies and destroys our well-being, peace, and joy. We should never forget those who are hungry. It is a discomfort to miss one meal, but think of the suffering of those who have not had a proper meal in days or even weeks. We must find ways to assure that no one in this world is forced to go hungry."[315] In fact, for Nhat Hanh, something akin to Gutiérrez's

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[314] Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations Toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 38.

[315] Nhat Hanh, *Old Path While Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha* (Berkeley: CA: Parallax Press, 1991), 423.

"world of the poor" was the very context in which the Buddha taught the First Noble Truth. He explains:

> In the Buddha's time, much more than in our own time, poverty and disease were the common lot for the majority of people. This situation is reflected in the First Noble Truth, "Life is suffering." Imagine a family with too many children, all of them frail and ill. There is a permanent shortage of food, no medicine and no means of contraception…. This is still common in many parts of our world, and both parents and children suffer.[316]

These words, written in English in a text published in 1987 in the United States, are clearly directed to Nhat Hanh's First World readers. The United Nations' "Human Poverty Index" reveals that Peru and Vietnam can both be considered among those "parts of our world" in which systemic poverty is "the common lot for the majority of people."[317] In this view, poverty belongs not so much to the individual as it does to the group, the majority, the peasant class. In much of his writing, because of his First World context and audience, Nhat Hanh focuses on the more subtle suffering of those with means. However, he is clear to describe the suffering of the marginalized poor, those who are powerless victims of larger systems of oppression, as "intense suffering" and "the worst suffering."[318] After describing the situation of one and two-year-old "boat people" orphans in a Hong Kong refugee camp who were classified as illegal immigrants

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[316] Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, 60.

[317] I have suggested that Gutiérrez's experience of systemic poverty shaped his view of suffering just as Nhat Hanh's experience of violence and warfare have shaped his. However, as Nhat Hanh explains it, the context in which the Buddha taught was more akin to that of Gutiérrez's than to his own. In contrast, Nhat Hanh suggests that Jesus lived in a time of extreme violence. He writes, "The society of India at the time of the Buddha was less violent than the society into which Jesus was born. …If the Buddha had been born into the society in which Jesus was born, I think he, too, would have been crucified." See Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 54-55.

[318] Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*, 125. With this language, Nhat Hanh describes the suffering of the poor masses that lost their homes, livelihood, and family members to a war not of their making. These poor were, as a group, powerless victims of an ideological struggle between the United States and China.

and sent back to Vietnam, Nhat Hanh observed, "When you see that kind of suffering, you know that the suffering your friends in Europe and America are undergoing is not very great."[319] The suffering of the truly disenfranchised can be very extreme.

Like Gutiérrez, Nhat Hanh understands that to be poor is something more than mere material lack. In fact, time and again Nhat Hanh asserts that people with very few possessions can achieve a kind of happiness enviable to people in all classes. In one particularly vivid anecdote, Nhat Hanh recounts observing a young Vietnamese boy eating a bowl of rice on the front step of a local store during a rainstorm:

> He gazed at the rain and appeared to be utterly content, the very image of well-being. I could feel his heart beating. His lungs, stomach, liver, and all his organs were working in perfect harmony. If he had had a toothache, he could not have been enjoying the effortless peace of that moment. I looked at him as one might admire a perfect jewel, a flower, or a sunrise. Truth and paradise revealed themselves. I was completely absorbed by his image. He seemed to be a divine being, a young god embodying the bliss of well-being with every glance of his eyes and every bite of rice he took. He was completely free of worry or anxiety. He had no thought of being poor. He did not compare his simple black shorts to the fancy clothes of other children. He did not feel sad because he had no shoes. He did not mind that he sat on a hard stool rather than a cushioned chair. He felt no longing. He was completely at peace in the moment. Just watching him, the same well-being flooded my body.[320]

The monetarily deficient can be extremely happy. On another occasion, Nhat Hanh relates a parable in which the Buddha, after seeing the desperation of a farmer whose cows had strayed and whose sesame seed crop had been lost to insects, comments to his disciples, "Dear friends, do you know you are the happiest people on Earth? You have no cows or sesame plants to lose."[321] One can be happy in spite of (or even because of)

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[319] Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step,* 125-126.

[320] Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves,* 125-126.

[321] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching,* 35.

material poverty. While there is something collective about the experience of material poverty for Nhat Hanh, to conclude that he sees all those who are economically deprived or who are constituents of an oppressed group as "the suffering poor" is incorrect. What Nhat Hanh means by "the poor" is something other than all the inhabitants of certain lower economic strata. In *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, Nhat Hanh relates an episode in which a Vietnamese friend tried to offer him money. He recounts, "I tell him that even without money I am not poor. I paraphrase a haiku by Basho and tell him that even though the electricity has been shut off, the moon still shines in my window."[322] The poor are those who experience the kind of material lack that forces them to miss out on the joy and wonder available when life is experienced in its completeness. To be poor is to experience the myriad types of suffering that exist in the social context that Gutiérrez describes as *el mundo del pobre* (i.e. hunger, oppression, no access to medical care, electricity, etc.), while being unable to appreciate the marvel that is the moon.

For Gutiérrez, the word "suffering" is a blanket descriptor for the reality of the poor. To suffer is the plight of oppressed peoples and lower classes. For Nhat Hanh, many people in such groups do not suffer or, at least, do not suffer with the intensity that others do. The key difference between their views seems to be how each understands the cause of the suffering of the poor. Gutiérrez points to the social milieu as the plane upon which suffering takes its meaning, while Nhat Hanh points to the psychological milieu. The difference highlighted here is one of degree and should not be overemphasized. Both authors see the importance of the social *and* psychological roots of suffering. However, Nhat Hanh sees that the way out of suffering lies in a change of awareness

[322] Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, 155-156.

more than in a change of social structures. He writes, "True happiness does not depend on wealth or fame."[323] If one can still "see the moon" despite one's economic situation or social condition, then suffering becomes minimized. Poverty itself is not the culprit; it is the unenlightened mind. Quoting the Buddha's teaching on the Eight Realizations of Great Beings, Nhat Hanh writes that "poverty creates hatred and anger, which in turn create a vicious cycle of negative thoughts and actions."[324] Yet if poverty were understood in a deeper way, then it would not result in such negativity. The real wrongdoer then is ignorance:

> Out of ignorance and false views, people say and do things that create suffering for themselves and others. Anger, hatred, suspicion, jealousy, and frustration cause suffering. All these arise from a lack of awareness. People are caught in their suffering as if they were caught in a house on fire, and most of our suffering we create ourselves. You cannot find freedom by praying to some god. You must uproot the false views which are the root of suffering. You must find the source of your suffering in order to understand the nature of suffering. Once you understand the nature of suffering, it can no longer bind you.[325]

The poor are those who endure the whole host of physical discomforts associated with material deprivation and who lack insight into its true nature. Their suffering is twofold; it is social-material and psychological. Those bound by an erroneous vision of their material situation and who, therefore, do not experience the joy and peace obtainable through deeper insight are the truly poor.

Unfortunately, such insight (or enlightenment) is rare. This is why Nhat Hanh can call the suffering of the poor and oppressed "the worst suffering." In a general sense, the

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[323] Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds,* 513.

[324] Ibid., 430. Not only does poverty created anger, it can also eventually lead to war. See, Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 153.

[325] Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds,* 232.

oppressed poor experience human suffering with a particular intensity because their social and economic situation is compounded by the psychological anguish of inadequacy, humiliation, anger, sadness, and self-hatred. For Nhat Hanh, the heart of the negative psychological experience of poverty, like almost all negative psychological experiences, is rooted in ignorance. This ignorance "magnifies suffering by millions of times."[326] The Vietnamese peasants who lost their homes, employment, and loved ones to American bombs know a brand of suffering on a different plane than do the First World citizens whose government designed and dropped those bombs. So do the orphans and "boat people" created by the war. Yet the suffering of Americans and the suffering of the Vietnamese poor are not unrelated. Both sets of people are caught up in the same global economic and ideological systems that fuel their ignorance of each other and, at the same time, link them together. To understand and critique these systems is important.

Poverty, Dependency, and Systems Critique

In general, Nhat Hanh's analysis of poverty and suffering tends to be more individual and psychological than Gutiérrez's more collective and systemic view. However, the suffering of the poor can, and should, be tackled both socially and psychologically. Nhat Hanh therefore agrees with Gutiérrez that the suffering of the poor has much to do with the larger systems in which they are involved. One should call a spade, "a spade." The poor do suffer from systemic oppression. Describing the need for

[326] Nhat Hanh explains the power of ignorance to amplify suffering with the Buddha's story of a man struck by an arrow. "He will feel pain. But if a second arrow strikes him at the very same spot, the pain will be much more than just doubled. And if a third arrow strikes him at that same spot again, the pain will be a thousand times more intense. Bhikkus, ignorance is the second and third arrow. It intensifies the pain." See Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds*, 433.

Vietnamese people to invest capital in new Vietnamese industries (rather than in foreign companies that take the money abroad), Nhat Hanh writes, "The economy grows weaker every day. American aid is keeping the economy from falling apart, but in the process it is making Vietnam even more dependent."[327] In another text Nhat Hanh relates a story in which the Buddha advises King Pasenadi to love even the poor citizens of other kingdoms, not just those of his own jurisdiction. The Buddha counsels, "The prosperity and security of one nation should not depend on the poverty and insecurity of other nations. Majesty, lasting peace and prosperity are only possible when nations join together in a common commitment to seek the welfare of all."[328] Nhat Hanh weaves together the teachings of the Buddha with modern dependency theory analysis into an assessment of Western civilization that sounds very much like the critique of Gutiérrez.

Nhat Hanh's evaluation of current global systems does not use the loaded biblical labels of "sin" and "idolatry" that Gutiérrez's does. Rather, as is generally the case for Buddhism, Nhat Hanh appraises the situation through the lenses of physical and mental health. For example, he contends:

> A civilization in which we kill and exploit others for our own aggrandizement is *sick*. For us to have a healthy civilization, everyone must be born with an equal right to education, work, food, shelter, world citizenship, and the ability to circulate freely and settle on any part of the Earth. Political and economic systems that deny one person these rights harm the whole human family. We must begin by becoming aware of what is happening to every member of the human family if we want to repair the damage already done.[329]

Not only is our civilization sick, it is also mentally ill. Nhat Hanh explains:

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[327] Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, 145.

[328] Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds*, 274. See also pp. 522-523.

[329] Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 120. Italics mine.

> To accumulate wealth and own excessive portions of the world's resources is to deprive our fellow humans of the chance to live. To participate in oppressive and unjust social systems is to widen the gap between the rich and poor and thereby aggravate the situation of social injustice. Yet we tolerate excess, injustice, and war, while remaining unaware that the human race as a family is suffering. While some members of the human family are suffering and starving, for us to enjoy false security and wealth is a sign of insanity.[330]

Using the lens of sickness and health gives Nhat Hanh's critique of destructive systems a different tonal quality than that of Gutiérrez. Unjust economic systems do not benefit the rich to the detriment of the poor; they harm both the rich *and* the poor. They upset the natural balance of things, create lunacy and psychosis for both parties, and eventually destroy the natural world to which all humans belong. If the Third World poor find themselves powerless victims of anonymous political, economic, and military systems, so too do the First World rich. For Nhat Hanh, both the oppressed and their oppressors are robbed of their humanity. They are transformed into pawns, machines that mindlessly play their parts without seeing the larger reality in which all of humanity, both rich and poor, move together toward the cliff's edge of injury and self-annihilation. Writing to his First World audience, Nhat Hanh declares, "We feel forced to comply with the dehumanizing demands of society, and we bow our heads and obey. We eat, speak, think, and act according to society's dictates….We become cogs in the system, merchandise, not human beings….We, too, have become so accustomed to our way of life with its conveniences and comforts that we allow ourselves to be colonized."[331] Colonization, like all forms of oppression, lays claim to the actions and minds of everyone involved.

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[330] Ibid., 119-120. In this same text, Nhat Hanh argues that "individuals are sick, society is sick, and nature is sick." See p. 122.

[331] Nhat Hanh, *A Lifetime of Peace,* ed. J. S. Willis, 13.

For Nhat Hanh, there is truth in dependency theory. Global capitalism (and the social and political systems that often come in tow), while promising liberation to the poor of Third World countries such as Peru and Vietnam, actually robs them of their freedom and produces high levels of human suffering. Yet the poor do not suffer in isolation, for the rich are also slaves to the system. Dependency theory, while true, is an optic that highlights only one side of a dual equation. Both parties, rich and poor, are dependent upon each other and both are damaged by an economic system whose imposed values rob them of a vision of their deep connections to one another. Perhaps it is correct to say that dependency theory, when viewed in a deeper way, opens the door of understanding to a deeper vision of reality—that of profound and inescapable interdependency. With this in mind, Nhat Hanh counsels that "you have to work for the survival of the other side if you want to survive yourself." He continues:

> Survival means the survival of humankind as a whole, not just a part of it. And we know now that this must be realized not only between the United States and the Soviet Union, but also between the North and the South. If the South cannot survive, then the North is going to crumble. If countries of the Third World cannot pay their debts, you are going to suffer here in the North. If you do not take care of the Third World, your well-being is not going to last, and you will not be able to continue living in the way you have been for much longer. It is leaping out at us already.[332]

The North needs the South, the First World needs the Third World, the rich need the poor, and vice versa. The very existence of each depends on the other. For this reason Nhat Hanh contends that changes in economic policies or political leadership will never provide any real solution to the problems of poverty and human suffering. The issue is not one of substituting capitalism with socialism or communism. People will remain

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[332] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries of the Prajñaparamita Heart Sutra*, ed. Peter Levitt (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988), 37.

caught in the ideological yoke of any and every system. To make a real impact on poverty and human suffering, that which most needs to change is not the structures themselves, but humanity's relationship to those structures. Better stated, that which is needed is a change of consciousness. Nhat Hanh warns, "You may think that the way to change the world is to elect a new President, but a government is only a reflection of society, which is a reflection of our own consciousness. To create fundamental change, we, the members of society, have to transform ourselves."[333]

This change of consciousness requires a correction of the spiritual myopia described in our chapters on Gutiérrez. While Gutiérrez gives few suggestions on how the rich might accomplish this "inner revolution," Nhat Hanh has much to say.[334] He contends that "this change of consciousness. . .can be achieved by realizing the interdependent nature of reality, a realization that each of us can experience in a unique way. This kind of realization is not the result of any ideology or system of thought, but is the fruit of the direct experience of reality in its multiple relationships."[335] What is needed is a direct experience of interdependency, the experience that "wealth is made of poverty, and poverty is made of wealth."[336] After this experience, the artificial division

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[333] Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 67.

[334] The term "inner revolution" is borrowed from Robert Thurman, who describes the change of consciousness necessary as "coups of the spirit in which the power of negative impulses and emotions is toppled and we are freed to be as happy, good, and compassionate as we can evolve to be." He suggests that "the task before us now is to deepen our interconnectedness and free ourselves thoroughly from alienation. Then our unified consciousness can only improve each individual's sense of inextricable interconnectedness with all others, and we will never be caught in the destructive rampage inevitably unleashed by any form of alienation." See Robert Thurman, *Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Real Happiness* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1988), 26, 271.

[335] Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart: From Mindfulness to Insight Contemplation*, trans. Anh Huong, et. al. (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988), 76.

[336] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*, 37.

between the rich and the poor dissolves, not just conceptually, in the experiencing mind, but actually, in real life, through changes in the very way one lives a life. Nhat Hanh has observed that "you can be rich only when you can bear the sight of suffering. If you cannot bear that, you have to give your possessions away."[337] To experience deep interdependency is to realize that the suffering of the other is, in fact, one's own suffering. Then one quite naturally moves into a state very much akin to that described by Gutiérrez when he writes of "spiritual poverty" and "poverty as solidarity and protest." Since Buddhism itself aims to facilitate this direct experience of reality, Nhat Hanh contends that "the real Buddhist cannot be rich."[338] The same thing might be said about the real Christian. Before turning to the prevalent themes in Nhat Hanh's suggestions for spiritual practices, we continue our examination of his understanding of suffering.

Wealth and Suffering

If the poor are those who experience particularly "intense suffering" or "the worst suffering," what might be said of the suffering of the rich? How does the suffering of the poor differ from the suffering of the rich? One difference lies in the general sense of connectedness that the poor often possess. As discussed in chapter 3, Gutiérrez sees the poor as a group of oppressed individuals whose collective identity is bound up with their "non-identity," or non-existence, in the eyes of the rich. The poor have a feeling of belonging to an oppressed people and have a sense of inter-group solidarity with others in

[337] Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, *The Raft is Not the Shore*, 110.

[338] Ibid.

the same social conditions. Nhat Hanh observes that, in the First World, "the society is so different…people are not interested in each other. It's quite different from being in a village where everybody knows everybody…..everything seems to be different here [in the West]."[339] In poor Vietnamese communities, "you can see and feel the real problems faced by the peasants. Life is simpler here, and it fills my [Nhat Hanh's] heart with love…..I'm not romanticizing poverty, but I have seen affluent societies suffer from loneliness, alienation, and boredom, problems unimaginable here [in Vietnam]."[340] The poor experience a sense of community and solidarity rarely available to the rich.

Nhat Hanh has proposed that "there are many kinds of suffering," some of which are more obvious than others.[341] If the intense and obvious character of the suffering of the poor is due to their particular mixture of material deprivation and its accompanying psychological pains, the special nature of the suffering of the rich is of a psychological bent, in the absence of monetary need. All psychological suffering, for both rich and poor, is conditioned by a failure to understand the nature of reality, by ignorance.[342] The ignorance of the rich, however, is of a particularly nasty sort because of the heightened sense of self-sufficiency, independence, and separation that easy access to material comforts tends to create. Nhat Hanh is clear that people can be "entrapped not only by illness and unjust social conditions, but by the sorrows and passions they themselves

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[339] Ibid., 41-42.

[340] Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves*,167.

[341] Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 102.

[342] Nhat Hanh writes, "Human beings' three basic afflictions are craving, hatred, and ignorance. Ignorance (*avidya)*, the inability to understand reality, is the most fundamental of these." [See Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love*, 53.] In another text he writes, "Ignorance gives rise to a multitude of sorrows, confusions, and troubles. Greed, anger, arrogance, doubt, jealousy, and fear all have their roots in ignorance." See Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds*, 120.

created in their own hearts and minds."[343] These sorrows and passions stem, in large part, from in the erroneous perception of separateness. If, in general, "living beings suffer because they do not understand that they share one common ground with all beings," this is especially true for those whose vision of reality has been warped by privilege.[344]

Unfortunately, the skewed vision of the wealthy not only produces alienation and suffering for themselves, it also fuels their creation of the various economic, political, and social systems that cause havoc upon those they oppress. Writing to his First World audience, Nhat Hanh warns that "humankind suffers because many of us make other people suffer. We have created war a little bit everywhere. We want to consume so much and because of this we have created a lot of suffering for each other."[345] It is ironic that the various systems of oppression designed to serve the interests of their powerful creators actually enslave and oppress everyone involved. Even those in the First World who are conscious of the unjust disparity that current economic systems create find themselves, despite their best intentions, making modest compromises here and there that reinforce the oppression to which they object. Nhat Hanh gives a telling example:

> When medical students and nurses are about to graduate, they think very much of helping the poor—those who have not enough money to go to fully equipped hospitals, facilities like that. But after graduation, after a few years in their careers, many of them begin to act like machines and pay no more attention to the poor and oppressed. The nurses become irritated at poor patients. The doctors become insensitive to the sufferings of the poor. It's very sad. . .at one point you cannot love them anymore and you begin to treat them as you treat objects.

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[343] Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds,* 66.

[344] Ibid., 120.

[345] Nhat Hanh, *Going Home,* 186-187.

> I think such things happen frequently. Our goodwill, our intentions, play one role; social conditions play another. And there are the political and economic systems. If we try to do things faithfully, in accord with our best instincts, we have to go against all of these forces.
>
> If you are in power, they will try to bring you down. So, you make a compromise in order to be able to continue. You compromise to the point that you become like those whom you opposed before you came to power.[346]

Systems of oppression are deceptive creatures. In rhetorical terms, they usually promise greater freedom, opportunity, wealth, and justice. In actuality, they often provide material comfort to some, while denying it to others. Yet the luxury of the wealthy comes with a hidden price—the erroneous perception of self-sufficiency. There is little doubt that the feeling of independence and autonomy is initially agreeable. One feels powerful, in control of her life, capable of making change. Unfortunately, that which is initially agreeable is also seductive, and the privileged often end up doing what they can to maintain their power over others, from whom they feel deeply estranged. Nhat Hanh argues that "the feeling of alienation among so many people today has come about because they lack awareness of the interconnectedness of all things."[347] In the final analysis, self-sufficiency is an illusion; it is the defining characteristic of the spiritual myopia of the privileged.

I argue that if systems of oppression plunge the disenfranchised into poverty and oppression, they plunge the rich into a deeper and more treacherous ignorance. The ignorance of the rich is particularly perilous because, on the one hand, it is they who have greater system-making power and, on the other hand, because it is immensely difficult to correct. Nhat Hanh has called North America "the most difficult environment for

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[346] Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, *The Raft is Not the Shore*, 38.

[347] Nhat Hanh, *Present Moment Wonderful Moment*, 62.

practice."[348] By this he means that, in general terms, in the "overdeveloped" countries in the West, people are conditioned to believe that the answer to alienation and psychological suffering lies in escaping from reality, in anesthetizing oneself through work, drugs, food, consumption, television, or any number of other distractions. Such culturally-learned escapism may temporarily numb people to their own suffering and that of others, but it does nothing to actually alleviate suffering. Nhat Hanh writes, "Practicing meditation in this kind of society is very difficult. Everything seems to work in concert to try to take us away from our true selves. We have thousands of things, like videotapes and music, that help us be away from ourselves."[349] Modern First World societies, based on the illusion of independence, fuel a vicious cycle of distraction, isolation, exclusion, and violence. The wealthy become afraid of the poor, not only because they fear losing their privilege, but also because the presence of the poor forces the rich to touch the very suffering from which they are trying so hard to escape. The ignorance of the wealthy eventually enslaves both the rich and the poor. In a book co-authored with Thich Nhat Hanh, Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan observes that "the possessors of the earth, at least according to the Bible, very seldom change. It's a greater miracle than when the sinner repents or one of the lepers is healed or when the blind are given sight. We don't hear that many of the Jewish Sanhedrin or Roman curia or that a Pilate are converted or attain a new vision or illumination. Literally, they seem in the

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[348] Nhat Hanh, *A Lifetime of Peace*, ed. J. S. Willis, 168.

[349] Nhat Hanh, "Suffering is Not Enough," in Arnold Kotler, ed., *Engaged Buddhist Reader: Ten Years of Engaged Buddhist Publishing* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1996), 9. See also Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace*, 63-66.

Bible to have no future.'[350] Fortunately for the wealthy, this is not the last word. Thich Nhat Hanh has suggestions to make for overcoming ignorance.

Suffering and Mind

In the sections above an effort has been made to understand the relationship between poverty and suffering. In this endeavor many dualistic terms have been used: rich/poor, North/South, First World/Third World, overdeveloped/underdeveloped, material/psychological, etc. At this point, a feature of Buddhist epistemology, which has already been mentioned in passing, merits discussion in greater detail. It has to do with the relationship between reality and the thoughts used to interpret it. Reality itself, including everything in it, is dynamic, while the concepts we have about reality are static. That is to say there is a gap, a mismatch, between things, which are in a constant state of evolution, and the fixed mental notions humans use to interpret those same things. Nhat Hanh explains that "the world built of concepts is different from living reality. The world in which birth and death, good and bad, and being and nonbeing are opposed exists only for those who do not live an awakened life."[351] To this list, one could add all the conceptual pairs used above: ideas such as rich and poor and North and South only exist as distinct phenomena for the unenlightened mind.

At issue here is how the human mind understands the world. In Buddhist analytics, there are three states (or natures) of knowledge. In the normal, everyday mode of understanding, people interpret the world conceptually, through dualistic ideas and

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[350] Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, *The Raft is Not the Shore*, 2.

[351] Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys*, 81.

categories of thought. This approach cuts reality into distinct pieces, giving names and separate identities to each part. This discriminating style of knowledge, known as *vikalpa* (illusion-imagination), gives one a misleading and often dangerous vision of the world in which separate entities battle for limited resources. The deeper truth of reality is grasped only when *vikalpa* is destroyed. When that is done a non-dual vision of interconnection reveals itself. This way of knowing, *paratantra*, shows that nothing has a truly independent identity. All phenomena depend on each other for their creation; everything is caused and conditioned by everything else. For example, seen through the lens of *paratantra*, the rich and the poor depend upon one another; they comprise one another; their very identities include one another. Nhat Hanh writes:

> Let us look at wealth and poverty. The affluent society and the deprived society inter-are. The wealth of one society is made of the poverty of the other. "This is like this, because that is like that." Wealth is made of non-wealth elements, and poverty is made by non-poverty elements. . . .The truth is that everything contains everything else.[352]

The concept of "interbeing" is discussed in greater detail below. In this section, it is sufficient to observe, as Nhat Hanh does, that "all knowledge not based on the principle of paratantra is incorrect."[353] The final mode of knowledge, *nispanna* (perfect reality), presents things to the awakened person in the purest way, revealing a reality beyond all words and concepts. This non-conceptual approach divulges the "thusness" or "suchness" of reality and is sometimes spoken of simply as "wisdom."[354]

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[352] Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*, 98.

[353] Nhat Hanh, *Zen Key*, 132.

[354] This entire section depends on Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys*. See specifically pp. 131-133.

In my reading, Nhat Hanh's discussion of the three states of knowledge has at least three implications for a deeper understanding of human suffering. The first is that one must take great care when labeling certain experiences as "suffering." Indeed, one should take care when using any conceptual labels whatsoever. Words that divide up reality are just words; there is no real inherent existence in their references. In an absolute sense, there is no suffering, no happiness, no poor, no rich, no First World, and no Third World. To say that some people are poor or that some people suffer while others do not is to accept a superficial, dualistic reading of the situation. This is not to say that such concepts do not have their place; it is simply to recognize that all labels are mismatched with reality and that too much speculation about the nature of suffering can be a distraction from really experiencing and understanding it. When we rely only on concepts to understand reality, clinging to them as if they revealed the whole truth, we actually lose touch with the very reality we hope to understand. Then we are left with "an image of reality that does not coincide with reality itself."[355]

A second implication is that much human suffering results from the way we look at things. Reality itself is neither good nor bad, neither pleasant nor unpleasant; it is only perceived as such by people in their minds. Our limited vision of things—or in Buddhist terms, our ignorance—is the root of our experience of suffering. We imagine a world of separateness through our mental categories and create suffering for ourselves. This is not to say that the poor of Peru or Vietnam are simply living in a dream world of fictitious affliction. One cannot deny that tragedy exists. However, a limited vision of one's own suffering, which relies too heavy on its conceptual interpretation and is overly attached to

[355] Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love*, 41.

a *vikalpa* view, amplifies the experience of suffering. As Nhat Hanh remarks, "We are like an artist who is frightened by his own drawing of a ghost. Our creations become real to us and even haunt us."[356]

Nhat Hanh is clear that our experience of reality is not separate from reality itself. Experience *is* reality; the mind *is* world-creating. In other words, when ghosts are drawn, the fear and damage these ghosts inflict are very real. In *Cultivating the Mind of Love*, Nhat Hanh comments on the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, one of many scriptures found in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. The teaching he highlights from this sutra is that everything that exists, meaning the universe itself, is a creation of the mind. He writes, "Whether we live in the *saha* world filled with suffering, discrimination, and war, or whether we live in the Avatamsaka world filled with flowers, birds, love, peace, and understanding is up to us. The cosmos is a mental construction. If our mind is filled with afflictions and delusions, we live in a world of afflictions and delusions. If our mind is pure and filled with mindfulness, compassion, and love, we live in the Avatamsaka world."[357] Again, to say that the world is a mental construction or that suffering is a mental construction is not to say that they are fake. Mental formations are every bit as real as physical formations in Buddhist analysis. Fear, pain, sorrow, hatred, love, hope, compassion, and even birth and death are created by the mind. So too are war, environmental destruction, dependent capitalism, sexism, homophobia, racial discrimination, and all systems of oppression. When the deluded mind clings too heavily to its concepts and labels, it creates a world of suffering and hatred.

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[356] Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, 108.

[357] Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love*, 87.

Another way of approaching this same idea—that much human suffering originates in the everyday functioning of mind—is through the commonly used concepts of "inside" and "outside." In ordinary parlance, people often speak of the "world outside" or the "exterior world" to distinguish it from the "interior world" or mind. Yet this dualism begs the question, how separate are these two "worlds?" One's body pertains to the outside physical world, as do the human brain and central nervous system. All mental phenomena have physiological roots. In a very real sense, mind, with its variety of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions is part of the "outside" world. Upon closer analysis, one will see that everything belongs to the "outside" world. What meaning then does the term "outside" have? Outside of what? Neither is it the case, however, that the so-called "outside" world exists only in the mind as a kind of dreamy illusion, as if there were nothing outside of mind. Such conclusions only reinforce the false distinction between "inside" and "outside." The confusion in distinguishing between "outside" and "inside," between the "exterior world" and "mind" or, for that matter, between "poverty" and "wealth," lies in the habit of the human mind to cut up and separate a reality that is connected, interdependent and fluid. In a very real sense, suffering originates and can be stopped in the human mind.[358]

The third implication of recognizing that there are different ways of knowing lies, ironically, in learning how to use dualistic terms. To recognize that the everyday working of the mind is to divide and dissect reality does not mean that one should reject or deny this normal kind of knowledge. The key is to learn not to cling to concepts, not to place exaggerated trust in them. Nhat Hanh observes that "although Zen declares that

[358] See Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 43-45.

it is not based on words and concepts, it in fact manipulates words and concepts in order to reveal the reality that transcends words and concepts."[359] When we release our attachment to our notions and perceptions of the world, we can learn to use them skillfully and artfully. By transcending the static concepts of poverty and wealth, one can see that such terms can be useful, even essential. Nhat Hanh reminds his readers that becoming caught in dualisms such as "the oppressed" and their "oppressors," with the cries for justice, anger, and guilt that usually come in tow, is not the most helpful way to understand human suffering. The best way is to experience everyone else's suffering directly, as one's own. Quoting the *Vajracchedika Prajñaparamita*, Nhat Hanh observes that compassionate bodhisattvas try to free all beings from their suffering, while recognizing that no "beings" actually exist. "We must lead all these beings to the ultimate nirvana so that they can be liberated. And when this innumerable, immeasurable, infinite number of beings has become liberated, we do not, in truth, think that a single being has been liberated."[360] This is an example of the concept of "being" being used in a light and relative way. Bodhisattvas seek to lead people to nirvana, while being clear that there is no such thing as "liberation" or "nirvana." Contemporary social actors should take a similar attitude about both poverty and suffering. Even if one cannot define the concepts of "human suffering" or "poverty" in an absolute way, it does not mean one cannot act to address suffering and poverty. Such terms should be used skillfully and artfully. Thich Nhat Hanh's own writing about suffering is a superb example of such artistry.

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[359] Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys*, 139.

[360] Ibid., 110-111.

The Nature of Suffering

A central goal of Nhat Hanh's life is to alleviate suffering and help others learn to do likewise. Therefore, when he writes about suffering, his words are more practical than theoretical. That is to say, Nhat Hanh is less interested in defining suffering than he is in giving people tools by which to understand it and act. People in the First World have often been highly conditioned to run from the reality of suffering, either to overlook the suffering of others or to escape from their own suffering through any number of distractions. Suffering is considered so atrocious that it is blatantly ignored and exposure to it is fiercely resisted. Such resistance to suffering is like the artist scared of her own drawing of a ghost. Fear of suffering clouds the mind and obstructs one's ability to act. To counter this pervasive attitude Nhat Hanh often highlights the important, even holy, character of suffering. He writes, "Without suffering you cannot grow. Without suffering, you cannot get the peace and joy you deserve. Please don't run away from your suffering. Embrace it and cherish it…. The Buddha called suffering a Holy Truth, because our suffering has the capacity of showing us the path to liberation. Embrace your suffering, and let it reveal to you the way of peace."[361] Not only can suffering be holy, it can also be therapeutic; it is the mud out of which the flowers of love, compassion, and enlightenment grow.[362] Only when one experiences suffering does she

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[361] *Nhat Hanh, The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching,* 5.

[362] Writing specifically to Western Christians who might be tempted to pine for the Kingdom of God in which suffering does not exist, Nhat Hanh observes, "I think we need some suffering, all of us, in order to appreciate the happiness available to us. . ..love cannot exist without suffering. In fact, suffering is the ground on which love is born. If you have not suffered, if you don't see the suffering of people or other living beings, you would not have love in you nor would you understand what it is to love. Without suffering, compassion, loving-kindness, tolerance, and understanding would not arise. Do you want to live in a place where there is no suffering? If you live in such a place, you will not be able to know what is love. Love is born from suffering." See Nhat Hanh, *Going Home,* 162, 164.

acquire the determination to try to eliminate it. Undoubtedly, suffering is useless if one pays no attention to it. Yet if one looks deeply into the nature of his suffering, it can nourish compassion and responsibility. Suffering can propel one to practice.

For Nhat Hanh, suffering is more than just a motivator to action; it is deeply connected to happiness. Just as poverty and wealth are interdependent and should be understood in relation to one another, so too are suffering and happiness. Wonder, joy, and peace are as omnipresent as suffering; they are available to everyone who can see them. Nhat Hanh urges, "We must try to see the wonderful things in life like snowflakes, moonlight, bird songs and flower blossoms, and the dreadful things like hunger, disease, torture, oppression, and other forms of suffering."[363] Without the experience of hunger, cold, and loss, one could not appreciate the preciousness of having food, warmth, and gain.[364] In Nhat Hanh's view, the complementarity of suffering and happiness is true in even the most traditional Buddhist teachings on suffering. Nhat Hanh reflects:

> When I was young I was taught that the greatest sufferings were birth, sickness, old age, death, unfulfilled dreams, separation from loved ones, and contact with those we despise. But the real suffering of humankind lies in the way we look at reality. Look, and you will see that birth, old age, sickness, death, unfulfilled hopes, separation from loved ones, and contact with those we despise are also wonders in themselves. They are all precious aspects of existence. Without them, existence would not be possible. Most important is knowing how to ride the waves of impermanence, smiling as one who knows he has never been born and will never die.[365]

When Nhat Hanh writes of suffering, there is a sort of inclusive freedom in his language. Gutiérrez contends that the primary characteristic of the world of the poor is that they

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[363] Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, 11-12.

[364] See *Nhat Hanh, The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 4.

[365] Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, 102-103.

suffer. Certainly, Gutiérrez's "poor" experience moments of joy and happiness, but these are relatively insignificant within the dominant milieu of misery. One has moments of joy *in spite* of the harsh cruelties of life. Nhat Hanh, on the other hand, sees suffering and joy on more equal footing. They correspond with one another, even depend upon one another. He contends that "suffering is only one face of life. Life has another face, the face of wonder. If we can see that face of life, we will have happiness, peace and joy."[366] For Gutiérrez, the joy experienced by those who suffer is based in their sheer dependence on God and the hope that suffering will one day end—that one day oppressive social conditions will all be erased in the love of God. The joy of the poor is really nothing other than suffering mitigated by hope. For Nhat Hanh, this joy is not real joy; it is a kind of clinging to the possibility of real joy in the future. Such clinging substitutes a shadow of joy for the authentic joy available in the present moment. He writes, "When I think deeply about the nature of hope in the future, I see something tragic. . .If you can refrain from hoping, you can bring yourself entirely into the present moment and discover the joy that is already here."[367] Nhat Hanh's point is not to belittle the spiritual value of hope, but to help people put suffering into perspective. One does not have to escape oppression, attain wealth, or enter the afterlife to be free from suffering. Freedom is obtainable in the present moment.

Just as Nhat Hanh uses his discussion of suffering in a skillful way to help people alleviate suffering (rather than to define it in exclusive terms), so too does he use his discussion of the origin of suffering. Many times when writing to his First World

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[366] Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds,* 234.

[367] Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step,* 41.

audience, he indicates that ignorance is the cause of suffering. Yet at other times, depending on the topic at hand, he points to any number of things: perceptions, false beliefs, other people, social conditioning, one's genetic inheritance, violent films and television programs, overeating, eating meat, alcohol consumption, the way we live, technological civilization, international forces, capitalism, volition or will, craving, fear, anger, the desire to be happy, convictions, sense impressions, government, injustice, famine, political oppression, our inability to handle our own suffering, and many other things.[368] It is clear that, for him, "the seeds of suffering come from many directions."[369]

Gutiérrez is wise to try to find the root cause of the suffering of the poor in Latin America. The problem though, as Nhat Hanh sees it, is that to place blame on the rich (or on the social and economic systems constructed by them) is an oversimplification of the issue. The human mind has the tendency to look for causes, usually, so that it can identify who is at fault; the primary impulse is one of judgment. Nhat Hanh counsels that "in our minds we think very simply in terms of cause. We think that one cause is enough to bring about what is there. With the practice of looking deeply we find out that one cause can never be enough in order to bring about an effect. . . .The causes are actually infinite."[370] In the end, the whole cosmos is the cause of poverty and suffering, because everything that exists is conditioned by everything else. Everything depends on

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[368] This laundry list of causes is included to illustrate Nhat Hanh's practice of using language in a relative way to help people look deeply at their own situations and identify the sources of suffering for themselves. See Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*, 36, 70-71; Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds*, 114, 116, 152; Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 39, 83, 90; Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 31-35, 54; Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace*, 11-17, 77, 89; Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 83; Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys*, 153, 161; Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love*, 51; and Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, 65.

[369] Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 90.

[370] Nhat Hanh, *A Lifetime of Peace*, ed. J. S. Willis, 321-322.

everything else. From this perspective, the idea of blame becomes meaningless. "No one among us has clean hands. No one of us can claim that it is not our responsibility…..we are responsible for everything that happens around us."[371]

Perhaps another way to understand the contrast between Gutiérrez's and Nhat Hanh's visions of the causes of suffering (and, for that matter, to understand how Nhat Hanh plays with language) is to underscore the distinction between what Nhat Hanh calls the historical and ultimate dimensions of reality. He compares these two aspects of reality to waves and water. In the historical dimension, reality seems comprised of separate beings, beginnings and endings, ups and downs. Paying attention to this dimension, one might look out at the ocean and compare different waves, noticing that some are bigger or faster or more powerful or more beautiful than their neighbor waves, which seem smaller, slower, and weaker. In the ultimate dimension of reality, one sees that, while the waves may seem different from the surface point of view, they are actually all made of water; they are the same ocean. From the perspective of the water, comparing the waves makes little sense. The ocean itself subsumes and contains the beginning and ending of every wave. It is never more beautiful or more powerful (or for that matter poorer or more oppressed) than itself. Nhat Hanh suggests that much suffering results from paying attention only to the historical dimension. Suffering itself functions within the historical dimension. The ultimate dimension is free from suffering, just as the ocean is free from the judgments of its waves. To see the world through the lenses of rich and poor or oppressors and oppressed is like comparing waves. From the

[371] Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step,* 98.

ultimate dimension, such comparisons make little sense. People in the North and people in the South are all part of the same ocean—the same family of life.[372]

6. Interpenetration and Interbeing

Nhat Hanh's analogy of waves and water points to his principal proposal for alleviating suffering. By looking deeply at the waves, one may discern the water. By being consistently mindful of the historical dimension of reality, with its ample array of interpretive concepts and categories, one may see beyond it to the ultimate dimension, where such divisions dissolve. The goal here is not to transcend and eventually disregard the relative in favor of the absolute. Such a tactic would continue to accept a hard division between the historical and the ultimate. Instead, the aim is to understand how the historical and the ultimate relate to one another, even penetrate one another. This brings us to the discussion of the fundamentally interrelated character of reality.

In Buddhist teachings, all of reality is deeply and intrinsically interconnected. Nothing—no being, thing, thought, sensation, or formation—exists in separation from the rest. Rather, everything is caused and conditioned by everything else. Through the centuries, insight into this notion has been taught by Buddhists using a variety of conceptual tools. One tool, of course, is the notion of *paratantra* mentioned earlier in this chapter.[373] Another theoretical tool, *anatman* (nonself), stresses the point that

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[372] For examples of Nhat Hanh's wave/water analogy, see Nhat Hanh, *A Lifetime of Peace*, ed. J. S. Willis, 312-314 and Nhat Hanh, *Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings*, 88-92.

[373] *Paratantra* refers to the interdependent nature of reality. When the mind knows reality through the lens of *paratantra*, it sees past all dualistic concepts. As a way of knowing, *paratantra* pertains to the historical dimension of reality. Nevertheless, Nhat Hanh describes *paratantra* as "very close to living reality" and as "the very nature of living reality." See Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 88-89.

nothing has an eternal, non-changing essence. Because everything is made up of everything else, to affirm the existence of an everlasting soul or an intrinsic self (*atman*) in people or things that distinguishes them from other people and things is misguided.[374] A third conceptual tool, s*hunyata* (emptiness), like *anatman*, highlights that all things are ultimately empty of an independent self.

The lens through which Nhat Hanh most frequently teaches the fundamental interdependency of reality is his revision of *pratitya samutpada* or "Interdependent Co-Arising."[375] Interdependent Co-Arising reinforces the notion of deep interdependency from the standpoint of origin and cause: everything comes into being, arises, and is manifest, in dependence upon everything else. Everything is both cause and effect of everything else. In order to make this notion more comprehensible to contemporary hearers, Nhat Hanh renames it. He explains, "In early Buddhism, we speak of Interdependent Co-Arising. In later Buddhism, we use the words interbeing and interpenetration. The terminology is different, but the meaning is the same."[376]

Interpenetration means that things enter one another, that "this" is within "that" and that "that" is within "this."[377] For example, when one looks at a table, the tree and the carpenter are visible and when one looks at the carpenter, the tree and the table are

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[374] *Anatman* is recognized as one of the three Dharma Seals by both Northern and Southern transmissions. See Nhat Hanh's discussion of *anatman* in Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 133-136.

[375] Nhat Hanh contends, "All teachings of Buddhism are based on Interdependent Co-Arising. If a teaching is not in accord with Interdependent Co-Arising, it is not a teaching of the Buddha." See Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 226.

[376] Ibid., 225.

[377] See Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 68; Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds*, 440; and Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 138.

there. The concept of table is penetrated by and contains the concepts of tree and carpenter. Without these, the existence of the table would be impossible. Interbeing is a step further than interpenetration. Interbeing means that "this *is* that" and "that *is* this." Nothing can simply *be* by itself. Everything has to *inter-be*; everything *inter-is*. The table *is* the tree and the tree *is* the table. Using the traditional Buddhist image of mountains and rivers, Nhat Hanh distinguishes interpenetration and interbeing:

> Meditators realize that all phenomena interpenetrate and inter-are with all other phenomena, so in their everyday lives they look at a chair or an orange differently from most people. When they look at mountains and rivers, they see that "rivers are no longer rivers and mountains are no long mountains." Mountains "have entered" rivers, and rivers "have entered" mountains (interpenetration). Mountains become rivers, and rivers become mountains (interbeing).[378]

Interpenetration and interbeing, like the concepts of *paratantra, anatman,* and *shunyata,* are tools that point to the nature of reality but are not reality themselves. They are meditation aids. When one meditates on interpenetration and interbeing, a change of consciousness results. "Former concepts of 'one's self' and 'objects' dissolves and they [meditators] see themselves in everything and all things in themselves."[379] That which a vision of interpenetration and interbeing communicates is not really grasped through words (despite the best efforts of this section), but through meditation on the way all things exist in dependence upon one another. Traditionally, insight into Interdependent Co-Arising was taught through meditation upon the relationship between twelve points or "links" in a "chain" of Interdependent Co-Arising.[380] For Nhat Hanh, however, there is

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[378] Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart,* 87.

[379] Ibid., 88.

[380] These links are: ignorance, volitional action, consciousness, mind/body, the six sense organs, contact, feelings, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, old age, and death. See Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching,* 221-249 and Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds,* 409-411.

nothing distinctive about these particular links or about the number twelve; one can teach one, two, three, four, or five, up to twelve links. What matters most is to let go of the credence the mind typically affords to divisive concepts and see the interweaving character of life.

Interestingly, since everything in the universe is interconnected, one can begin to see this dynamic interconnection by paying attention to almost anything. Nhat Hanh draws on an image from the *Avatamsaka Sutra,* Indra's net, to illustrate the endless intersections and interactions between all things.[381] In this image, Indra, one of the principal deities in the Rig Veda, has a net into which an infinite number of dazzling jewels are woven, each with an incalculable number of facets. Each brilliant gem reflects every other gem in itself and is itself reflected by every other gem. One can see the entirety of the web by paying attention to any one jewel. Looking deeply at a rose, one can see that its existence depends on the presence of manure and that, in fact, the rose is made of manure. Flowers and compost interpenetrate one another; they inter-are. The same is true for poverty and wealth and for the Third World and the First World. By paying close attention to these notions, one will eventually see that they are hollow and that each concept includes and is comprised of its alleged opposite. Nhat Hanh explains that "we are not separate. We are inextricably interrelated. The rose *is* the garbage, and the non-prostitute *is* the prostitute. The rich man *is* the very poor woman."[382]

As one might imagine, a deep understanding of interbeing is indispensable for the alleviation of personal suffering. Nhat Hanh contends that "having seen the reality of

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[381] See Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart,* 68.

[382] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding,* 38. Italics mine.

interdependence and entered deeply into its reality, *nothing can oppress you any longer*. You are liberated."[383] In another text, Nhat Hanh places in the historical Buddha's mouth the argument that "all suffering can be overcome by looking deeply into things."[384] A superficial understanding of this argument might lead one to believe that what the Third World poor really need is not help from the First World rich, but a heightened consciousness of their own nature and of the fact that there is little for the "other," the First World other, to do. While there is truth in the argument that the poor (and all people) need a deeper vision of their interrelatedness, the belief that there is little for others to do misses the actual implications of interbeing. When one sees interbeing as the heart of reality, the dividing lines between self and other begin to blur. Part of helping oneself is helping others, just as helping others helps oneself. Nhat Hanh writes, "We belong to each other; we cannot cut reality into pieces. The well-being of 'this' is the well-being of 'that,' so we have to do things together. Every side is 'our side'; there is no evil side."[385] Ultimately, every phenomenon in the universe is of intimate concern, from the smallest rock in the Andes to the movements of the stars in other galaxies.

For Nhat Hanh, sustainable social action is founded upon a deep vision of interbeing. When one consistently meditates on interbeing, a subtle but profound change takes place—one's sense of self widens to include other beings; one's sensitivity to the suffering of others becomes more acute; and compassion, the desire to alleviate the

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[383] Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, 49. Italics mine.

[384] Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds*, 233.

[385] Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*, 103.

suffering of others, naturally arises.[386] All the little ego-protecting fictions and stereotypes, which produce hatred and fuel inaction, begin to erode and love becomes possible. Love for others is not a spiritual obligation demanded by a higher power; it is a spontaneous instinct that develops when one sees past the separation between oneself and others. Nhat Hanh declares that love is automatic:

> In bringing to light the interdependence of all phenomena, the meditator comes to see that the lives of all beings are one, and he or she is overcome with compassion for all. When you feel this love you know that your meditation is bearing fruit. Seeing and loving always go together. Seeing and loving are one. Shallow understanding accompanies shallow compassion. Great understanding goes with great compassion.[387]

Insight into interbeing not only relieves one's own suffering, through the power of love and compassion, which naturally occur, it also can greatly relieve the suffering of others. Nhat Hanh compares the actions of those who deeply sense interbeing to the right hand that automatically and unthinkingly helps the left after one of its fingers has been hit by a hammer.[388] This automatic caring response is not social work; it is not the healthy hand helping the suffering one out of pity. There is no particular generosity or guilt involved. Rather, the right hand feels the pain of the left hand, as if it were its own, and simply responds to relieve its suffering.

When one sees that "the lives of all beings are one," the language of self and other, of friend and enemy, loses meaning. Nhat Hanh observes:

> When you are mindful, you realize that the other person suffers. You see her suffering and suddenly you don't want her to suffer any more. You know that there

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[386] The process of compassion naturally arising in the heart of the person who sees interbeing is described in many of Nhat Hanh's writings. For an example, see Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 70-77.

[387] Ibid., 72.

[388] See Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 66.

> are things you can refrain from doing to make her stop suffering, and there are things you can do to bring her relief.
>
> When you begin to see the suffering in the other person, compassion is born, and you no longer consider that person as your enemy. You can love your enemy. The moment you realize that your so-called enemy suffers and you want him to stop suffering, he ceases to be your enemy.[389]

The implications of Nhat Hanh's perspective on interbeing for First World social activists are paradigm-changing. When caught in the old, ego-centered pattern of rich-poor thinking, to really help the poor requires overturning the gigantic social, political, and economic systems that oppress them. The task is enormously overwhelming, especially since its completion is mainly for the benefit of someone else, the poor. With a vision of interbeing, one does not work on behalf of the poor, because the very idea of "the poor," as something outside oneself, has disappeared. Interbeing really means that there are no poor; there is no social work to be done; there is no compassion for the other. There is only a deep identification with those who suffer and a desire to relieve that suffering. This kind of dualism-destroying identification with the other is epitomized in Nhat Hanh's poem, "Please Call Me by My True Names:"

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow—
even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.

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[389] Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*, 34.

I am a mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am a frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.
And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands.
And I am the man who has to pay
his "debt of blood" to my people
dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.

My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up
and the door of my heart
could be left open,
the door of compassion.[390]

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[390] See Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1999), 72-73.

In this poem, Nhat Hanh identifies himself with plants and animals, with victims and their assailants, and with oppressors and the oppressed. He offers a perspective which has overcome the inherent human tendency to support only one side of any dispute. This is the ethical stance of interbeing: "not taking sides" or "nonseparation from all parties involved in conflict."[391] In the Vietnam War, Nhat Hanh and others in the Buddhist Struggle Movement refused to side with either the communists or the anti-communists. Again and again, he cautions his readers, "We cannot just blame one side or the other. We have to transcend the tendency to take sides."[392] This means oppressors should not side with their ilk out of convenience. It also means that they should not simply side with their victims out of pity. Nhat Hanh compares the suffering of humanity with wildlife shows on public television in which deer are ripped apart by tigers and frogs eaten by snakes. Most people, he suggests, "long for the well-being of the frog and the deer." He continues:

> In these situations, as meditators, we must remain very clear. We cannot take either side, because we exist in both. Some people can remain unmoved or even enjoy the sight of a tiger tearing apart its prey, but most of us, feeling its agony, take the side of the victim. If a scene like this were occurring in front of us, we would try to find a way to save the deer and the frog. But we have to be careful not to do this just to avoid our own anguish. We must also feel the pain of the tiger or snake deprived of food, and have compassion for them. All beings have to struggle to survive. The more deeply we penetrate into life, the more we see its miracles and the more we see its heart-breaking and terrifying events."[393]

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[391] This later description comes from Buddhism scholar Sallie B. King. See Sallie King, "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church," in *Engaged Buddhism: Liberation Movements in Asia,* ed. C. S. Queen and S. B. King, 344-346.

[392] Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step,* 115.

[393] Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart,* 73-74.

Not taking sides is a radical, difficult task. One might argue that Nhat Hanh's analogy of the wildlife shows should not be applied to the situation of the Third World poor. The tiger and the snake kill for their survival, whereas the First World oppresses out of greed and ignorance. Tigers and snakes do not systematically oppress all deer and frogs. Dependent capitalism, the liberation theologian might say, effects suffering on an entirely different order.

Or does it? In one of the very few instances in which Nhat Hanh writes about liberation theology, he claims:

> In Latin America, liberation theologians speak of God's preference, or "option," for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized. But I do not think that God wants us to take sides, even with the poor. The rich also suffer, in many cases more than the poor! They may be rich materially, but many more are poor spiritually, and they suffer a lot. . . .I am certain that those with the highest understanding will be able to see the suffering in both the poor and the rich.
>
> God embraces both rich and poor, and He wants them to understand each other, to share with each other their suffering and their happiness, and to work together for peace and social justice. We do not need to take sides. When we take sides, we misunderstand the will of God. I know it will be possible for some people to use these words to prolong social injustice, but that is an abuse of what I am saying. We have to find the *real cause*s for social injustice, and when we do, we will not condemn a certain type of people. . . .Everything depends on our understanding of the whole situation. Once we understand, our life style will change accordingly and our actions will never help the oppressors strengthen their stand.[394]

As a philosophical embodiment of the ethics of interbeing, "not taking sides" makes sense. However, earlier in this dissertation it was argued that Nhat Hanh *did* take sides during the Vietnam War—the side of the Vietnamese peasantry over their foreign assailants. Furthermore, Nhat Hanh clearly takes the side of compassion over anger, insight over ignorance, and peace over war. Does the divine preference for the poor,

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[394] Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 79-81. As should be clear, when Nhat Hanh speaks of the rich being "poor spiritually," he means that that their spiritual life lacks clarity, fulfillment, meaning, and purpose. This is the reverse of what Gutiérrez means when he speaks of "spiritual poverty," which is an orientation in which one is clear that fulfillment, meaning, and purpose come only from God.

described by Gutiérrez, clash in a fundamental way with the notion of not taking sides? Does God take one side or the other? What might Nhat Hanh mean by suggesting that not taking sides produces actions that "will never help the oppressors strengthen their hand?" Is it possible to take one side without blaming or judging the other side? These are questions which will be returned to in chapter five. Now we turn to Nhat Hanh's suggestions for responding to suffering.

7. The Practice of Mindfulness

For Nhat Hanh, there is no one solution to suffering. Since there are many kinds of suffering, there are, likewise, many appropriate ways to respond, depending on the particular type of suffering being experienced. Perhaps meditating on the ecological value of spiders or on the evolution of childhood fears could be helpful for someone suffering from arachnophobia, but it is less likely to help someone who is starving, since what that person needs is something to eat. Each kind of suffering must be seen deeply for one to know how to respond appropriately. For residents of the First World, where suffering often results from a particularly deep ignorance about reality and from subsequent, culturally-supported escapism, looking deeply can be especially difficult.[395] How does one see suffering deeply? How does one cultivate a deeper vision of interbeing? The concise answer, according to Nhat Hanh, is by "being mindful." If Gutiérrez's shorthand remedy to suffering is "solidarity," Nhat Hanh's solution is "mindfulness." Over the last 60 years, Nhat Hanh has published almost 80 books in

[395] Perhaps the most difficult task for people in the First World is to recognize that the way they live their lives is deeply intertwined with the lives of people in the Third World. Nhat Hanh writes, "It is difficult for people in the West to understand the situation in the Third World. It seems to have nothing to do with their situation." See Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action,* 110.

which he offers hundreds of suggestions for practices that can help mollify different kinds of suffering both in oneself and in the world. The thread that links these various practices together is mindfulness.[396] Even practices which do not have the nurturing of mindfulness as their primary goal should, according to Nhat Hanh, be done in a spirit of mindfulness. When volunteers in the School of Youth for Social Service performed their various wartime activities, such as delivering medical supplies and rebuilding bombed villages, they were trained to do so mindfully. Therefore, what is mindfulness?

The Nature of Mindfulness

Nhat Hanh has called mindfulness the "spiritual force behind all the great men and women of human history."[397] At first glance, mindfulness is simply Nhat Hanh's translation of the Sanskrit word *smriti*, which literally means "to remember." When one remembers to come back to the present moment, one is mindful.[398] Mindfulness is the "energy of attention," it is the ability to wake up from the seductive lure of memories from the past or anxiety about the future. Nhat Hanh has called mindfulness "the essential basis for healing and transforming ourselves and creating more harmony in our family, our work life, and our society."[399] When one is mindful or attentive, she is able to see through the blinding veil of ignorance and through useless suffering to notice the

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[396] Trevor Carolan contends that "what Thich Nhat Hanh teaches is not so much 'Buddhism' as steady perseverance in meditative practice. 'Deep listening,' 'deep touching,' 'deep seeing'—his interpretations of Vipashyana meditation," are central to his understanding of mindfulness. See Carolan "Mindfulness Bell: A Profile of Thich Nhat Hanh," in *A Lifetime of Peace*, ed. J. S. Willis, 218.

[397] Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys*, 27.

[398] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 64.

[399] Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Power* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 42.

joy and wonder available in the present moment. To draw on an earlier analogy, mindfulness is that which allows one to appreciate the marvel of the moon, to really "see" the moon or really "touch" it, even when the electricity has been cut off. Nhat Hanh elucidates this analogy, saying:

> When we have a toothache, we know that not having a toothache is happiness. But later, when we don't have a toothache, we don't treasure our non-toothache. Practicing mindfulness helps us learn to appreciate the well-being that is already there. With mindfulness, we treasure our happiness and can make it last longer....The cessation of suffering—well being—is available if you know how to enjoy the precious jewels you already have. You have eyes that can see, lungs that can breathe, legs that can walk, and lips that can smile. When you are suffering, look deeply at your situation and find the conditions for happiness that are already there, already available.[400]

Mindfulness is quintessentially consciousness expanding; it is waking up to reality and to oneself.

In *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching,* Nhat Hanh names seven miracles that come from mindfulness. They are: (1) to be present and touch the beautiful things in life; (2) to make other people fully present to you; (3) to "nourish" the object of attention by continually discovering new and wonderful aspects of it; (4) to relieve the suffering of others; (5) to look deeply at any object of attention (*vipashyana*); (6) to understand others; and (7) to transform the suffering in oneself and in the world.[401] The dynamic of mindfulness could be described this way: by paying greater attention to life, one can "see" its joys and sorrows in a deeper way. Seeing its joys and sorrows with sustained attention, one can understand them, appreciate them, and love them more fully. Understanding the interdependent nature of joys and sorrows, one is filled with

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[400] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching,* 41.

[401] Ibid., 64-67.

compassion for those stuck in suffering.[402] Compassion motivates one to act, to make the necessary changes to transform suffering into joy.[403] With mindfulness, one understands which actions produce more suffering and which generate more joy in a particular situation. With mindfulness, one can see whether or not the appropriate response to a specific instance of suffering is, for example, writing a letter to congress, having a long conversation with a friend, or simply taking an aspirin.

Mindfulness is the key to making suffering useful. Nhat Hanh has been clear that any suffering that does not nourish care and responsibility is useless. "Our suffering is holy," he contends, "if we embrace it and look deeply into it. If we don't, it isn't holy at all. We just drown in the ocean of our suffering."[404] With mindfulness, one does not become lost in suffering; instead, one sees "the nature of suffering *and* the way out."[405] Ideally, one should seek to be mindful every hour of every day. That is, whatever one is doing in any particular moment should be done with one hundred percent of one's attention. Rather than trying to multitask, "We must teach ourselves to unitask."[406] To be mindful at all times demands training and practice. In the beginning of mindfulness practice, one's tendency to fall into absentminded routines, known as one's "habit

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[402] Of compassion, Nhat Hanh suggests, "When you begin to understand the suffering of the other person, compassion will arise in you. . ..Compassion is the only energy than can help us connect with another person. The person who has no compassion in him can never be happy." Ibid., 91.

[403] Nhat Hanh observes, "Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting. Otherwise, what is the use of seeing? We must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then, with mindfulness, we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help." Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*, 91.

[404] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 9.

[405] Ibid, 38.

[406] Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Power*, 46.

energy," is usually stronger than one's mindfulness energy. For social activists, there is a habitual tendency to react to poverty and suffering from the conditioned perspective of the self and to experience anger, sadness, and frustration. In these circumstances, a rushed attempt to alleviate suffering can actually cause more harm than good. However, with steady perseverance in mindfulness, one's habit energy is gradually overcome and one is free to respond to life with wisdom and strength. With mindfulness, social activists and politicians can see "the truth about poverty, misery, and oppression. Such a person can find the means to reform the government in order to reduce the gap between the rich and poor and cease the use of force against others."[407] Hence, for Nhat Hanh, "Living each day mindfully is the very basis of spiritual practice."[408]

Where to Begin

Nhat Hanh is clear that large-scale social change is needed. The majority of the world's population lives in poverty and ignorance. Oppressive systems currently limit the freedom and potential of everyone within their reach. "Individual are sick, society is sick, and nature is sick."[409] The human family, as a whole, is suffering and nothing short of a new civilization, an awakened civilization, will do.[410] The question is how to launch a new civilization and where to begin.

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[407] Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds,* 247.

[408] Ibid., 148.

[409] Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action,* 122.

[410] Nhat Hanh articulates, "What we lack is *mindfulness of what we are, of what our situation really is*. We need to wake up in order to rediscover our human sovereignty. We are riding a horse that is running out of control. The way of salvation is a new culture in which human beings are encouraged to rediscover their deepest nature." See Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys,* 155.

For Nhat Hanh, effective social change can only be accomplished by mindful individuals who have achieved some modicum of mental health. So to change the world, one must start by changing herself. Even the most well-intentioned social activists should begin by being mindful of themselves—mindful of their bodies and of their minds, as well as of their motivations, their unidentified stereotypes, and their personal neuroses. For example, if one wanted to help the poor as a way of escaping his own guilt, sorrow, or some other inner conflict, it is more than likely that his efforts would be of little use. "We must first practice mindfulness and grow compassion in ourselves," Nhat Hanh writes, "before we can work effectively for social change."[411] The internal steadiness and personal peace that mindfulness can bring to the individual are essential for successful societal transformation. Without learning how to handle one's own suffering, there is not much one can do actually to assuage the suffering of others. Nhat Hanh explains it this way:

> Where can we begin the work of healing? Would we begin with the individual, society, or the environment? We must work in all three domains. People of different disciplines tend to stress their particular areas. For example, politicians consider an effective rearrangement of society necessary for the salvation of humans and nature, and therefore urge that everyone engage in the struggle to change political systems.
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> We Buddhist monks are like psychotherapists in that we tend to look at the problem from the viewpoint of mental health....Among the three—individual, society, and nature—it is the individual who begins to effect change. But in order to effect change, he or she must have personally recovered, must be whole. . ..From the mental health point of view, efforts for us to recover our humanness should be given priority.[412]

A note of caution is in order here. While the argument that one should begin by being mindful of oneself is characteristic of Nhat Hanh, so too is a suspicion of the actual

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[411] Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace,* 59.

[412] Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action,* 122-123.

separateness of self, society, and environment. Better said, the counsel that one should start by focusing on the self rather than on the "other" should not be taken too literally since it is based on an erroneous division of self and other. Part of healing the suffering of the "individual" is the realization that there actually is no individual. All beings inter-are. Indeed, when an individual becomes more mindful of herself, her thoughts, and actions, her whole lifestyle begins to change. Since she is intricately interconnected with everyone else around her, their lives begin to change as well. The whole of Indra's net begins to vibrate in the direction of increased consciousness and peace. A change in the collective consciousness then changes the situation of the individual, reinforcing the transformation she has begun. The influence of the self on the other and of the other on the self is multi-directional and mutually arising; it happens at the same time.[413]

In his writing, Thich Nhat Hanh himself models a non-literal appropriation of the advice to start with oneself. In another text he writes, "We must work on ourselves *and also* work with those we condemn if we want to have a real impact."[414] Additionally, he advises that "you do not have to wait until you achieve perfect peace and harmony before you engage in social action."[415] It seems that the admonition to begin with oneself is a reminder that an enlightened society will have to be populated by enlightened people, not merely structured with suitable political scaffolds. One danger to be avoided, then, is the launching of oneself upon the plane of social action with flurry and furor, without seeing deeply the myriad conditions (including oneself) which have brought a certain situation

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[413] See Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step,* 112 and Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2006), 54-55.

[414] Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action,* 66. Italics mine.

[415] Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace,* 59.

of suffering into being.[416] To try to change the world out of anger or indignation, even when it appears to be virtuous anger at injustice and oppression, simply will not do. All too often social action, motivated by frustration, discharges a bout of intense activity, which is soon followed by disappointment and burnout.

The other danger, of course, is what engaged Buddhist scholar Ken Jones has called "*manyana Buddhism*—the Buddhism of *mañana*, the Spanish word for 'tomorrow.'"[417] At this extreme, one postpones social action on behalf of others indefinitely, either because enlightenment has not yet been reached or, more detrimentally, because there seems to be less motivation. When one becomes more mindful of his own suffering and more aware of the joy available in the present moment, one is happier and therefore less provoked by the prick of suffering to act. A kind of self-insolating quietism can set in, which turns out to be just another, albeit more subtle, form of escapism. One can learn to "let-go" of his own suffering without sensing the deep suffering of others. It is to avoid this danger that Nhat Hanh places so much emphasis on being mindful of interbeing. Yes, one should begin by being mindful of the self, and one should continue that practice, in the words of Nhat Hanh, "until you see yourself in the most cruel and inhumane political leader, in the most devastatingly tortured prisoner, in the wealthiest man, and in the child starving, all skin and bones. Practice until you

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[416] The eleventh-century sage from Tibet, Milarepa, warns that social service is often unsuccessful: "Even without seeking to benefit others, it is with difficulty that works done even in one's own interest are successful. It is as if a man helplessly drowning were trying to save another man in the same predicament. One should not be over-anxious and haste in setting out to serve others before one has oneself realized Truth in its fullness; to be so, would be like the blind leading the blind. As long as the sky endureth, so long will there be no end of sentient beings for one to serve; and to every one cometh the opportunity for such service. Till the opportunity come, I exhort each of you to have but the one resolve, namely to attain Buddhahood for the good of all living beings." This excerpt is quoted in Jones, *The New Social Face of Buddhism*, 223-224.

[417] Ibid., 223.

recognize your presence in everyone else on the bus, in the subway, in the concentration camp, working in the fields, in a leaf, in a caterpillar, in a dew drop, in a ray of sunshine. Meditate until you see yourself in a speck of dust and in the most distant galaxy."[418] Mindful of the self, one sees that the self includes and involves the entire universe. Compassion for the self (that is, for the universe) then arises and motivates one to act.

Guideposts for Solidarity with the Suffering Poor

In the following chapter, I argue that the mindfulness practices of Thich Nhat Hanh can help flesh out the meaning of Gutiérrez's notion of solidarity and can give First World activists insight into how they might establish solidarity with the suffering poor in the Third World in a sustainable way. I also recommend several meditative practices to that end. What remains for this chapter is to highlight three general themes that will serve as pivot points for my argument. These three principles come to light in much of Nhat Hanh's writing and are apparent in and behind many of the mindfulness practices he promotes. Nhat Hanh asserts that "mindfulness can be nurtured in you by many different means" and that "any subject can bring about awakening if it is sown deeply into the ground of your being."[419] The suffering and ignorance of each individual are peculiar to that person. Everyone has been conditioned by the different experiences in their past. Some practices that Nhat Hanh recommends are more useful to certain individuals (for example, veterans, refugees, businesspersons, or children) and less useful to others whose obstacles have a different character. In selecting these principles, I have in mind the

[418] Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 120.

[419] Ibid, 118-119.

obstacles of First World social activists who desire to be in solidarity with the Third World poor.

The first mindfulness guidepost is to stay in touch with the suffering poor. This guidepost gravitates to Nhat Hanh's fourth mindfulness training which states, "Aware that looking deeply at the nature of suffering can help us develop compassion and find ways out of suffering, we are determined not to avoid or close our eyes before suffering. We are committed to finding ways, including personal contact, images, and sounds, to be with those who suffer, so we can understand their situation deeply and help them transform their suffering into compassion, peace, and joy."[420] To stay in touch with the suffering poor, one has to enter into their reality and, in some sense, *become* the suffering poor. Nhat Hanh explains that "when we want to understand something, we cannot just stand outside and observe it. We have to enter deeply into it and be one with it in order to really understand. If we want to understand a person, we have to feel his feelings, suffer his sufferings, and enjoy his joys."[421] If First World social actors desire to live in solidarity with the Third World poor, they will have to penetrate the world of the poor.

Nhat Hanh often talks about the importance of "entering" or "penetrating" a particular situation or person in order to be one with it. Such language raises a red flag for postmodern academics. Can one person really cross over to *be* someone else? Is it possible to adopt fully the perspective of another person? Nhat Hanh explains his sense of "entering" by recounting work he did in France some years ago to find European sponsors for Vietnamese orphans. From a committee in Vietnam he received a stack of

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[420] See Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace,* 93.

[421] Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step,* 100.

applications, each of which had some details of the life of a child and a small picture. His job was to translate the application into French so that sponsors could know something about the children to whom they were sending financial support. He writes:

> Each day I helped translate about thirty applications. The way I did it was to look at the picture of the child. I did not read the application. I just took time to look at the picture of the child. Usually after only thirty or forty seconds, I become one with the child. Then I would pick up the pen and translate the words from the application onto another sheet. Afterwards I realized that it was not me who had translated the application; it was the child and me, who had become one. Looking at his or her face, I felt inspired, and I became the child and he or she became me, and together we did the translation. It is very natural. You don't have to practice a lot of meditation to be able to do that. You just look, allowing yourself to be, and you lose yourself in the child, and the child in you.[422]

I contend that becoming "one" with another person—that is, actually feeling the world from her point of view—is one aspect of radical solidarity. When one "enters" the world of another or "enters" the poor, she is no longer merely a companion with shared interests or goals; she *is*, in some sense, the other. Only by becoming part of the world of the poor can one really understand the suffering experienced there. In attempting to enter the world of the suffering poor there is always the risk that the perspective one adopts as the viewpoint of the other is really just a projection of one's own stereotypes. One might believe, for example, that poor indigenous farmers in the Andes, abused by unfair governmental land distribution policies and a tariff-laden global market, suffer tremendously and must aspire to have a steady job in the city one day. An entirely fictitious universe of their suffering and desires could be mistakenly dreamt up when, in truth, many farmers feel a deep sense of pride at being able to cultivate and honor the land of their ancestors, however small their plot may be. Under these circumstances, the suffering of the farmer is clearly misunderstood and any affection that one generates in

[422] Ibid., 101.

response to his imagined situation is something different than authentic love. So while "entering" the world of the poor does not mean that one must physically walk the slum streets of Lima or Hanoi, it does mean that one needs some actual contact. Nhat Hanh suggests, "Try going to the other person to listen and talk to him or her, and you will discover right away whether your loving compassion is real. You need the other person in order to test. If you just meditate on some abstract principle such as understanding or love, it may be just your imagination and not real understanding or real love."[423] Thus, "A direct encounter is necessary to understand another's suffering."[424] Take note, however, Nhat Hanh says that the encounter must be direct; he does not say that it must be corporal. It is possible to sit next to someone on a bus every day for weeks without ever having a direct encounter. With mindfulness meditation, one can have a direct encounter across space and time. As Nhat Hanh explains, "Meditation is a point of contact. Sometimes you do not have to go to the place of suffering. You just sit quietly on your cushion, and you can see everything. You can actualize everything, and you can be aware of what is going on in the world. Out of that kind of awareness, compassion and understanding arise naturally, and you can stay right in your own country and perform social action."[425] When one gem on Indra's net is shaken, all the others move.

The second mindfulness guidepost to solidarity with the suffering poor is to nurture one's capacity for love and compassion. This guidepost closely follows the first and is related to Nhat Hanh's thirteenth mindfulness training: "Aware of the suffering

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[423] Ibid., 120.

[424] Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, 80.

[425] Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*, 126.

caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, we are committed to cultivating loving kindness and learning ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals. We will practice generosity by sharing our time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. We are determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. We will respect the property of others, but will try to prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other beings."[426] At issue here is the character of our response to a deep understanding of the suffering of others.

Nhat Hanh defines love as "a mind that brings peace, joy, and happiness to another person" while compassion is "a mind that removes the suffering that is present in the other."[427] All people have within them the power of deep love and authentic compassion. The reason why these are rarely or erratically experienced is that they are easily covered up by suffering. When one becomes very involved in his own suffering, it is difficult to have compassion for the suffering of another. Therefore, one's own suffering must be attended to and addressed, for the benefit of others. When one's own suffering is understood, one may "enter" another, and compassion will arise. Nhat Hanh explains:

> The essence of love and compassion is understanding, the ability to recognize the physical, material, and psychological suffering of others, to put ourselves "inside the skin" of the other. We "go inside" their body, feelings, and mental formations, and witness for ourselves their suffering. Shallow observation as an outsider is not enough to see their suffering. We must become one with the object of our observation. When we are in contact with another's suffering, a feeling of compassion is born in us. Compassion means, literally, "to suffer with."[428]

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[426] Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace,* 101-102.

[427] Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step,* 81.

[428] Ibid.

By suffering with the poor, a powerful energy is produced inside oneself. In Buddhist terms, this energy is called *bodhicitta* (the mind of love). This energy, fueled by the desire to overcome suffering for oneself and for others, empowers one to take dedicated, positive action. "This is why bodhicitta is so important," Nhat Hanh elucidates. "If we have the energy of love, if we have bodhicitta in us, then we will be filled with life. We will be strong; not afraid of anything because love will help us overcome all difficulties and despair."[429] By deeply penetrating the suffering of the Third World poor, one's *bodhicitta* is activated, giving one the energy and determination to act and to change the way one lives within systems of oppression.

The third mindfulness guidepost to solidarity with the Third World poor is to find ways to criticize and disengage from the present economic system. This guidepost centers upon the fifth and eleventh mindfulness trainings. The fifth reads: "Aware that true happiness is rooted in peace, solidity, freedom, and compassion, and not in wealth or fame, we are determined not to take as the aim of our life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure, nor to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry and dying. We are committed to living simply and sharing our time, energy, and material resources with those in need. We will practice mindful consuming, not using alcohol, drugs, or any other products that bring toxins into our own and the collective body and consciousness."[430] The eleventh mindfulness training states: "Aware that great violence and injustice have been done to our environment and society, we are committed to not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and to nature. We will do our best to

[429] Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*, 68.

[430] Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*, 94.

select a livelihood that helps realize our ideal of understanding and compassion. Aware of global economic, political, and social realities, we will behave responsibly as consumers and as citizens, not investing in companies that deprive others of their chance to live.'"[431]

When one becomes mindful of the many ways in which the lives of those in the First World are interconnected and intertwined with those in the Third World, one begins to see that every action, every thought, every purchase affects the lives of people both near and far. With the power of mindfulness, this realization leads one to examine his life and question the decisions he has made. Eventually, efforts to live a simpler lifestyle will be undertaken. At first these efforts will require deep mindfulness to break out of habit energies and to shake off the knee-jerk reaction to consume. Plainly put, one must learn to buy less and conserve more. Nhat Hanh argues that people living in the First World must try "to remain as free as possible from the destructive momentum of the social and economic machine, to avoid modern diseases such as life stress, depression, high blood pressure and heart disease. We must be determined to oppose the type of modern life filled with pressures and anxieties that so many people now live. The only way out is to consume less.'"[432] However, once the initial resistance to culture has begun, a wonderful truth becomes clear: a simpler lifestyle is a happier lifestyle. When one gives up the need to "keep up with the Joneses"—to have the latest gadgets, make the most money, or to perfect the most sculpted body—one realizes that one actually needs less money. One no longer has to keep running after possessions; she can work less and

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[431] Ibid., 99-100.

[432] Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, 37.

enjoy her free time more. Nhat Hanh concludes that "when we take the time to live mindfully, we will discover that living a simple life and consuming less are the true conditions for happiness."[433] Solidarity with the poor will involve disengagement from and a challenge to current unjust economic realities.

Upon this review of Thich Nhat Hanh's vision of suffering and how to respond, we are now prepared to bring the thinking of Nhat Hanh and Gutiérrez together in a more profound way. I contend that the perspective of each can enrich that of the other to produce a deeper understanding of the suffering poor and a more sustainable vision for how First World social actors can move into solidarity with the poor and work for a better world.

[433] Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace,* 70.

CHAPTER 5

ENGAGING LIBERATION: SUFFERING, SOLIDARITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The spiritual destiny of North America is intimately connected with the spiritual destiny of the people in Latin America. I am increasingly struck by the thought that what is happening in the Christian communities of Latin America is a part of God's way of calling us in the North to conversion. I even feel that knowing God in North America is no longer separated from the way God is making himself known in Latin America.

Henri Nouwen, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*

The holy man of our time, it seems, is not a figure like Gotama or Jesus or Mohammad, or a man who would found a world religion, but a figure like Gandhi; a man who passes over by sympathetic understanding from his own religion to other religions and comes back again with new insight to his own. Passing over and coming back, it seems, is the spiritual adventure of our time.

John Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth*

John Dunne's metaphor of "passing over" to another religion and then "coming back" to one's own, somehow changed by the experience, has been picked up by many scholars interested in interreligious dialogue and comparative theology.[434] The imagery is apt not only because it captures the thrilling sense of spiritual adventure that interfaith encounters can create but also because it conveys the sense of "odyssey" or transformative journey that comparative attempts to understand truth can entail. In many ways, Dunne's metaphor can be used to describe the structure of this dissertation. So far we have followed the first stage of Dunne's dialectic of departure and return. We have

[434] Dunne's metaphor has been one of, if not *the*, dominant metaphor for interreligious dialogue in Christian circles during the last thirty years. For examples of scholars particularly interested in Buddhist-Christian comparisons who use Dunne's metaphor, see James Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004); Paul Ingram and Frederick Streng, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986); and Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009).

"passed over" from the view of Christian liberation theology, as presented by Gutiérrez, to the perspective of Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism, and now we are ready to "come back" to explore how his insights can deepen or transform Gutiérrez's view. In other ways, though, Dunne's metaphor is problematic. In the relatively new field of comparative theology, how one understands the nature of a given project affects the project's structure and goals. Simply put: our metaphors matter. Therefore, before moving to the constructive core of this chapter, a word about metaphors and method deserves discussion.

1. Passing Over, Traveling With, or Conversation Partner

While Dunne's imagery of "passing over" to another religion and "coming back" to one's own provides a nice way of conceptualizing the psychological frame and procedural goals of the comparativist (particularly one interested in deepening her knowledge through exposure to another religious perspective), further reflection upon it reveals that the description is not quite right for this project. First, frankly, it is incorrect to say that the religious starting point of this project is Latin American liberation theology, since as a white, middle-class, Protestant American from the United States, I cannot honestly claim this perspective as my own. It is more appropriate, perhaps, to say that the theological springboard here is the outlook of North American Christian social activists, especially those inspired by Latin American liberation theology, for theirs is the undescribed context behind my analysis of Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh. Moreover, such socially committed Northerners have been targeted as the primary audience for this work. So the first stage of the "odyssey," using Dunne's imagery, is for this group (or their

perspective) to "pass over" into Latin American liberation theology and only then "pass over" into engaged Buddhism, somewhat like travelers with multi-city (multi-religious) airplane tickets.

However, even this (identifying a rather specific segment of North American Christianity as the beginning point), isn't exactly right either. When one asks who precisely are these North American Christian social activists, it becomes clear that, in some sense, this rather loosely defined group of adventurers is actually just my invention, a projection of myself used to give authenticity to this academic undertaking. In other words, at the end of the day, the religious starting point for "passing over" is none other than my own, personal interpretation of Christianity. More than that, the launching pad is me, my whole life, the thoroughly conditioned perspective I have acquired or developed over the course of my lifetime. Paul Knitter has argued that "all theology. . .is rooted in biography."[435] One wonders if it might not be more appropriate to say that all theology is rooted in "autobiography," because the way one views his life and the actions he takes based on that view are what give shape and meaning to that life.[436] This has clearly been the case for Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh; their own understandings of their contexts—of poverty, suffering, and war, as well as of their religious traditions—are extremely

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[435] Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), xiii.

[436] Several scholars of comparative theology have recognized the importance of autobiography in theology and have included their own personal experiences as part of their theological work. As examples, see M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994); Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Boseman To Benares* (Boston: Beacon, 1993); Francis Clooney, *Theology After Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993); and Judith Berling, *Pilgrim Through Chinese Culture: Negotiating Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1997).

important, even essential, to the shape and meaning of their retellings of Christianity and Buddhism.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith has pointed out that religions are not things; they are abstractions, labels used to group some people together while separating them from others.[437] If this is true, one cannot "pass over" into a religion. Rather, one passes over into someone's version of a religion. Better yet, one passes over into someone else's life, into the particular perspective that has been conditioned by that person's life events, culture, and religion. One might argue, then, that in this project I have passed over into the religious worldview of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Thich Nhat Hanh and now am ready to come back to my own, ready to integrate what I have learned by these visits. The value of this imagery is that it highlights the deeply personal nature of the comparative enterprise. As Francis Clooney has rightly pointed out, "Comparison turns out to be an event *within* the comparativist, who changes in the course of his or her effort to appropriate another tradition."[438] The disadvantage of this language is that it conveys two ideas, those of suspension and reversion, which feel untrue to this work. In Dunne's model, one is encouraged to suspend her own religious commitments, beliefs, and habits while travelling through a foreign religious landscape. After all, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." However, my own interest in liberation theology is what motivates this project; I have not suspended my sympathy or commitment to it in any way. Moreover, the notion of "coming back," which communicates some kind of reversion or return to a

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[437] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: New American Library, 1966), 7-8.

[438] Francis Clooney, "Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 529.

previous state, also feels inaccurate. To what does one "come back" if he has been changed by the encounter?

Perhaps a more appropriate metaphor is to say that Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh are not so much destinations to which I arrive and depart, but are fellow travelers or fellow explorers who are, like me, looking to understand human suffering and how to respond to it. Although we have all begun our explorations at different trailheads, in different contexts, we are united through the very fact that we are fellow seekers. By coming together in our search, as we have in this project, we can share resources, such as Gutiérrez's notion of divine preference or Nhat Hanh's view of interbeing. This metaphor recalls John Cobb's vision of interreligious dialogue as "mutual transformation" or what Raimon Panikkar termed "mutual fecundation."[439] In this comparative space, different perspectives cross-fertilize one another such that a new vision, something beyond that held by individual travelers before their association, comes into view.

As attractive as the notion of "mutual transformation" is, it doesn't quite portray the goals of this work either. I have stated throughout the present text that my goal is to continue the work that Gutiérrez started by deepening his thinking about suffering and response through an encounter with Nhat Hanh. Though there may be some ways in which Gutiérrez can contribute to Nhat Hanh's projects or to engaged Buddhism in general, those ways are not explored here, at least not in depth. Rather, Nhat Hanh's understanding of suffering and interbeing are plumbed for the benefit of North American

[439] See John Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, and Raimon Panikkar, "The Invisible Harmony: A Universal Theory of Religion or a Cosmic Confidence in Reality?" in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987).

Christian social activists. Simply put, the transformation envisioned by this project is not quite mutual. Nhat Hanh is not so much a traveling companion who is enriched by my company as a Park Service ranger who can suggest better trails for the journey that Gutiérrez started in me.

This imagery also provokes some uneasiness. Two issues in particular rise to the surface. First, does the method I use employ a romanticized understanding of Nhat Hanh's perspective to judge (and then discount) Gutiérrez, as in, for example, my preference for Nhat Hanh's interbeing to Gutiérrez's dualisms? Second, and maybe more to the point, does my method somehow exploit or raid Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism? Am I falling into the typical, Western, colonial tendency to loot other cultures for personal gain? I hope not. Raiding, exploiting, and looting are actions which advantage one person to the detriment of another. In this enterprise, however, Nhat Hanh's view is not harmed or impoverished in any way. In fact, it has been his goal over the last forty years to share and "give away" his view, specifically to people like me.

The image that has been used in previous chapters is that of "conversation partners." In using this image, I hope to underscore my conviction that the perspective of each partner is adequate and appropriate to its context.[440] That is, there is wisdom in both Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh. However, when we bring these views together in conversation, new realms of insight and creativity can open up. Maintaining the conversation metaphor, we could suggest that, after having listened first to Gutiérrez and then to Nhat Hanh, now it is time for me to speak. Fair enough. In this chapter, I argue that: (1)

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[440] In a similar way, Marjorie Suchocki has argued, "In a deep sense, all religions can be true in their descriptions of ultimate reality, even when these descriptions disagree." See Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *Divinity and Diversity: A Christian Affirmation of Religious Pluralism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 30.

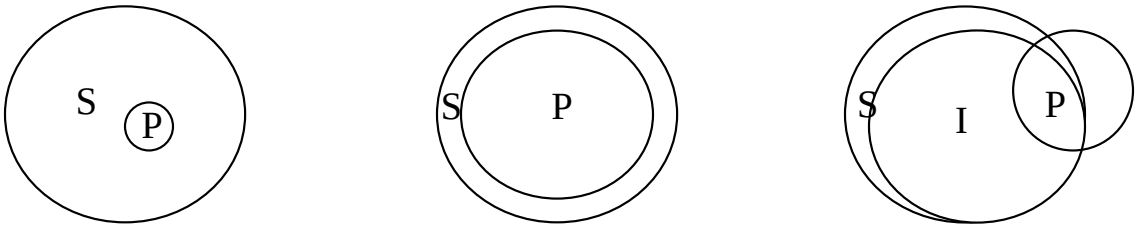
Gutiérrez is right to focus on the social and structural nature of suffering. When individual greed becomes embodied in social and economic structures, it takes on an existence of its own, which can produce a particularly nasty (that is, oppressive) form of social ignorance. (2) Even when social analysis and personal introspection are accomplished, there is still something wholly mysterious about suffering. Thus, whatever activism is taken up to address suffering, it must be wholly grounded in mysticism. (3) The dualisms of rich/poor and oppressor/oppressed can be useful tools for North Americans to understand suffering, even though these dualisms should not be clung to as adequate descriptions of reality. That is, dualisms can function as "dharma doors," which open to reveal our fundamental interconnectedness; they are hermeneutical fingers pointing to the moon of interbeing beyond them. (4) Finally, I propose some practices which can help North American social activists use these dualisms to establish solidarity with the suffering poor in the Third World in a sustainable way.

2. Suffering Revisited

I argue throughout this work that bringing Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh into conversation can provide a deeper, richer understanding of human suffering. Both want to understand suffering and its causes; however, since their cultural contexts and religious trainings are different, they appropriate different tools for their investigations. Gutiérrez adjusts his analytical focus to the reality of the suffering masses in the Third World. He is concerned with large-scale oppression, with the grinding mental and physical suffering that results when a class, sex, race, or culture is systematically marginalized and deprived. Moreover, Gutiérrez's attention is directed to the specific suffering of a

particular people in a concrete time and place. His focus is on actual, historical suffering, rather than on general suffering in the abstract. Because his focus is both social and historical—that is, attending to the massive poverty of Latin Americans—it only makes sense to turn to the social sciences to investigate suffering. Socio-economic structural analysis is called for by the very nature of his approach. Nhat Hanh's approach, on the other hand, in typical Buddhist fashion, is more individual and psychological than social and historical. While Nhat Hanh also critiques historic social structures, he is more concerned with the psychological experiences of suffering (and ignorance) that people have within such structures. Although he argues that instances of concrete historic suffering should be seen in detail for what they are, his actual analysis operates at a more general level.

When Gutiérrez explores the nature of suffering, he does so under the rubric of poverty. Since his doing so has, in many ways, established the initial contours of the present work, the relationship between poverty and suffering warrants clarification. Let us look at some graphical representations of possible ways to understand this relationship:



Conventional View Gutiérrez's View Nhat Hanh's View

[P=poverty; S=suffering; I=ignorance]

As was pointed out in chapter one, a conventional understanding of poverty sees it as a type of suffering. Poverty, defined as simple material lack, is a subset of suffering, one of many possible things that could be understood as suffering.

Gutiérrez sees poverty as a more complicated reality. "Material poverty" or "real poverty" is actually about how power is exercised across social barriers. To be poor is to be on the losing end of a relationship with the rich; it is to be oppressed, marginalized, ignored, humiliated, weakened, victimized, abused, and unjustly persecuted. The misaligned relationship between the poor and the rich is a manifestation of the misaligned relationship between the rich and God. Poverty is the result of sin; it is a condition which so negates the reality of love that it can be equated with death itself. As casualties of sinfully disordered relationships, the poor—and the set-apart world they inhabit—are characterized by a wide range of physical and mental afflictions. This range is so wide, so scandalous in fact, that poverty can be understood as the core of human suffering. Although the reality of the poor may not encompass every aspect of suffering, it plunges one into the heart of suffering so quickly and deeply that the poor can be appreciated as the epitome and embodiment of suffering. They personify suffering as it essence.

Nhat Hanh brings to the discussion the notion of ignorance as pivotal for understanding how poverty and suffering relate. When poverty is understood as simple material lack, it should not necessarily be defined as suffering. There are people who have very few financial resources, but who are, nevertheless, deeply happy. The Buddha himself could be included in this group. Moreover, even when poverty is understood as membership in a socially oppressed group, it does not necessarily signify suffering. According to the Buddha, members of the untouchable caste (now *dalits*), perhaps the

most socially oppressed group, can attain enlightenment and cease to suffer.[441] In Nhat Hanh's diagram above, this group is represented by the portion of the poverty circle which lies outside the suffering circle. For Nhat Hanh, that which best characterizes suffering, and thus occupies most of the space in the suffering circle, is ignorance. When material lack is coupled with ignorance, it does fall within the circle of suffering. In fact, people who experience social oppression and material deficiency within an overall psychological background of ignorance are those who experience suffering in its "worst," most "intense," and most "obvious" form. They are the ignorant dispossessed who are socially marginalized and cannot see the elements of wonder or happiness in their lives. Nhat Hanh does not argue that such persons exemplify the nature of suffering since the suffering of the rich, while different and more subtle, is also suffering. I have left a small slice of the suffering circle outside of the ignorance sphere to represent the reality that even fairly enlightened people can experience physical pain and distress in their lives. There is a question, however, whether or not this group should even been included in the suffering circle, since suffering "proper," for Nhat Hanh, is primarily a psychological experience.

When taken together, the differing visions of human suffering proffered by Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh allow a richer understanding of the nature of suffering. I contend that Gutiérrez is absolutely right to highlight the structural, systematic roots of suffering. The suffering of the materially poor is not accidental; it does not pop into existence *ex nihilo*. To accept facile truisms as an explanation of suffering ("that's just

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[441] For an insightful description of the way modern Dalits have appropriated Buddhism, see Tara N. Doyle, "Liberate the Mahabodhi Temple!" in *Buddhism in the Modern World: Adaptations of an Ancient Tradition*, ed. Steven Heine and Charles S. Prebish (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 249-280.

the way it is" or "the poor will always exist"), simply will not do. The fact that the majority of people in the Third World are poor is evidence enough that something larger than their personal choices is at work. Modern life is organized along political and economic grids that severely restrict access to services and opportunities for large sections of society. These grids, in biblical terms, are sinful; they divide people from one another and, more often than not, place a desire for money where Christians affirm there should be a desire for God. What is particularly insightful in Gutiérrez's view is that the suffering of the oppressed profoundly connects them to their oppressors. The poor are not downtrodden by some malignant being, their imaginations, or their fiscal decisions; they are exploited by other people within systems created by other people. This fact is more obvious to the poor than it is to the wealthy who, because of their privilege, can simply choose to ignore it. So when Gutiérrez writes his theology *desde el reverso de la historia* (from the underside of history), it is this fact that rises immediately to the surface: the oppressed and their oppressors are deeply connected through the suffering of the oppressed.

When prosperous North Americans treat Latin American liberation theology as only applicable to the Latin American poor, they implicitly deny their role in the massive suffering within that context. Gutiérrez's relentless attention to the biblical dualism of rich and poor and to the Divine's preferential option for the poor can help Christian theologians, in any context, pay attention to the dynamics of oppression. One can no longer say that racism, misogyny, homophobia, child abuse, sexual violence, etc. are not his problem because, from the underside, they *are* his problem. These problems are all of our problems because we are all interconnected by structures and systems; the comfort

enjoyed by the privileged is possible in part because of mistreatment experienced by others. The benefit of attending to the interweaving character of all oppression through the concept of economic oppression, as does Gutiérrez, lies in the sheer magnitude of globalized economic systems. In the modern world, almost no one escapes participation in these structures.

The downside of Gutiérrez's approach is that it does little to recognize the suffering of oppressors. To give voice to unheard and socially ignored victims is absolutely appropriate. To hear *only* those voices endorses the same lopsidedness that exists in current systems of oppression, which ignore the voices of the poor. The wealthy also suffer, albeit in a different way. By clinging to dualistic biblical categories, Gutiérrez risks a radical dualism which belies God's ultimate love for everyone. That is, Gutiérrez's description of suffering can entrench a worldview of dastardly villains and innocent victims, of greedy titans and their unsuspecting prey. I maintain that biblical dualisms *can* be used in a relative, non-clingy way to help oppressors, but that when a vision of the ultimate unity behind such dualisms is lost from sight, an unhealthy one-sidedness becomes all too easily ensconced.

Nhat Hanh's vision of ignorance as central to suffering can act as a leavening agent, which lightens and brings balance to the tendency to scapegoat oppressors. If ignorance is a central ingredient in almost all instances of suffering, as the Buddha suggests, then a superior response to oppression is to seek to understand it and to understand the type of ignorance that motivates the oppression, rather than to look for whom to blame. Christianity has long affirmed that humans are created in the image and likeness of God. There is, they affirm, something intrinsically good about human nature

insofar as it can reflect the source of all goodness. Of course, Christians have also asserted that human nature is flawed, imperfect, and incapable of completely reflecting the Divine. However, this imperfection is temporary. The hopeful message of Christianity is that all people have the potential for salvation; that is, for being deeply reconnected with the Divine such that the imperfection of sin is wiped away. Buddhists also have a sense of humanity's innate goodness. All beings have Buddha nature, the nature of awakening to the impermanent and non-self character of reality. Nevertheless, when we are in the egocentric state of sin or ignorance, we usually fail to see our fundamental goodness. We experience an internal battle between our potential for goodness and our potential for self-centeredness. We then project this conflict onto the world around us and interpret the world through the dualisms of good and evil. In situations of oppression, we almost automatically see villains and monsters at work, maliciously inflicting suffering on the weak. Although this reaction is understandable, it is not justifiable. Nhat Hanh's vision of ignorance as central to the suffering of both the rich and the poor can help correct the tendency to judge and accuse. Better stated, it can help prevent the invention of evil straw men who must be condemned.

To avoid condemnation and seek understanding does not mean that one cannot criticize; it means that one criticizes the mental formations that are obstacles to real understanding, rather than the people who suffer from these mental formations. Nhat Hanh argues that "man is not our enemy. . . .*Our enemy is our anger, hatred, greed, fanaticism, and discrimination against men.*"[442] This view is quite different from that of Gutiérrez who, as was noted in chapter 3, understands sin as the personal choice of a free

[442] Nhat Hanh, *Call Me by My True Names*, 18-19. Italics in original.

will to reject God's love. Despite the deep respect I have for Gutiérrez, on this point we part company. My impression is that very few Northerners deliberately try to create suffering in the Third World. However, they have been raised within and conditioned by a culture which blinds them to this reality. In cultures of the industrialized North, citizens are trained to think that their happiness and well-being are pursued through personal consumption. Kalle Lasn notes that "every day, an estimated 12 billion display ads, 3 million radio commercials, and more than 200,000 TV commercials are dumped into North Americans' collective unconscious."[443] This advertising intentionally encourages an atmosphere of self-centeredness. From almost every direction, Northerners are bombarded with the message, "You are the most important thing on earth."[444] The psychological effects of this are devastating. Material desires are intensified and greed is purposefully fostered. According to Erich Fromm, the cultural disposition of the modern West is orientated toward entertainment and distraction. He writes:

> Man's happiness today consists in "having fun." Having fun lies in the satisfaction of consuming and "taking in" commodities, sights, foods, drinks, cigarettes, people, lectures, books, movies—all are consumed, swallowed. The world is one great object for our appetite, a big apple, a big bottle, a big breast; we are the sucklers, the eternally expectant ones, the hopeful ones—and the eternally disappointed ones.[445]

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[443] See Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999) quoted in Stephanie Kaza, ed., *Hooked!: Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire, and the Urge to Consume* (Boston: Shambhala, 2005), 8. Much of this paragraph is dependent upon Kaza's insightful work.

[444] Bill McKibben observes that this message teaches people to pay attention only to themselves and not to the suffering of others or the environment. He calls this orientation "I-dolatry." See Bill McKibben, *The Age of Missing Information* (New York: Random House, 1992).

[445] Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving,* 15th ed. (New York: HarperPerennial, 2006), 80-81.

Rather than truly fulfilling the existential needs of people, the culture of consumerism promotes a sense of self-involved inadequacy and dissatisfaction which, in turn, sends consumers back to the market to find new sources of fleeting egoistic escape. Simply put, in such a toxic culture, the will is not really free.

The rich are not evil; they are self-involved and confused. The issue is not a problem with their fundamental nature; it is a problem with the vision the rich have of themselves and of the road to their happiness. It is a problem of spiritual myopia. As Nhat Hanh has pointed out, modern industrialized societies are "sick" and they promote psychological illness in their citizens. Northerners live in a culture of hyper-stimulation which imposes its values upon them and teaches them not to pay attention to the needs or suffering of others. The culture is seductive, all-encompassing, and a prime factor in the production of ignorance. Traditionally, when Buddhists talk about ignorance, they refer to the psychological state of individuals. However, as I see it, what may have begun as the *personal* greed and ignorance of an individual have taken on a life of their own and have become ensconced in cultural norms and economic structures as *social* greed and ignorance. Once greed and ignorance become embodied in the very structures and self-identity of a society, then everyone under their influence is at risk of becoming their slaves. So while the common image of the rich is that they freely and maliciously create self-centered policies to serve their own interests, it seems more accurate to observe that they are victims of culturally conditioned ignorance. Moreover, the particular brand of ignorance experienced by the wealthy is especially treacherous, since it instills an ultimately false sense of self-sufficiency and separation. I contend that this illusion of independence is the defining characteristic of the spiritual myopia of the privileged.

Gutiérrez is right to see social structures as sinful and destructive, but he goes astray by simply blaming oppressors. Nhat Hanh's inclusion of ignorance as a constituent feature of suffering can help Christians reach a richer understanding of suffering. Both personal introspection and social analysis are needed to understand suffering.

Socially-induced ignorance produces suffering for both the rich and the poor. However, as Paul Knitter has noted, "There is a difference between the suffering I impose on myself because of ignorance and the suffering I impose on others because of ignorance."[446] To suffer from alienation, loss of meaning, self-centeredness, and despondency because of greed is one thing; to oppress others out of that self-centeredness is another. When First World greed inflicts poverty and suffering on people in the Third World and then *trains* Northerners to ignore the suffering of the South, issues of injustice arise. This is where the wisdom of Gutiérrez's divine "preferential option for the poor" comes into play. If God has a special tenderness for the oppressed, then conscientious Christians should seek to embody this as well. Paying attention to the suffering of the poor in the Third World is radically counter-cultural for Northerners.[447]

I believe there is a fundamental symmetry between Gutiérrez's "preferential option for the poor" and Nhat Hanh's vision of suffering as necessary, holy, and therapeutic. Christians often say that when God chose to communicate the depth of divine love for humanity and to offer salvation (i.e. the restoration of authentic

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[446] Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian,* 206.

[447] Feminist theologian Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite suggests that the Northerner who attempts to be in solidarity with the poor "is the colonizer who becomes a traitor to his or her own colonial origins, whether that be gender for men, racial dominance for the privileged races, or class dominance for the middle and upper classes." See S. B. Thistlethwaite, "On Becoming a Traitor," in J. Rieger, ed., *Liberating the Future,* 25.

relationship with God and neighbor) to all, God did this by "taking on the human condition" in Jesus Christ. The radicality of God's act is mollified in this description. Gutiérrez is right to point out that God did not take on the condition of an emperor or CEO who may struggle with alienation but who does so from the circumstances of opulence. Instead, God became one of the suffering poor. It was from a condition of weakness, humility, and oppression that God offered and offers salvation to the world. The biblical narrative reveals a God who has a special tenderness for the poor and oppressed and who chose the suffering of the poor as a way to communicate his divine love. Nhat Hanh suggests that the Buddha chose suffering as the tool by which to communicate the insight of his awakening. In fact, Prince Siddhartha did not become enlightened until he had renounced his wealth and taken on the condition of voluntary poverty. Might this parallel reveal something about the nature of suffering?

I want to suggest that there is something particularly fruitful about the experience of oppression. When one suffers injustice at the hands of others, questions about the meaning of human life rise quickly to the surface. This is not always the case, but intense suffering does seem to have a way of diminishing one's being distracted by minutia and dispersion. Nhat Hanh argues that suffering has a positive side: it motivates people to strive for enlightenment and, in so doing, makes love possible. I believe the experience of oppression can be a powerful, spiritual solvent which cuts through layers of egoistic grit, laid down over time by ignorance. Moreover, the experience of oppression can thin the veil of self-sufficiency and the illusion of separation. I am not arguing that the suffering poor are more enlightened or less ignorant than the rich. Such arguments confuse "the finger with the moon" (to use Buddhist imagery); they confuse the suffering

of the poor with deep, liberating solidarity. The poor, like the rich, can be lost in self-centeredness or escapism. However, I contend that the character of the suffering of the poor reveals interconnectedness more easily than the typical ignorance-induced suffering of the privileged. The ignorance of the poor is usually not as complacent as that of the rich for the simple fact that the prickliness of their pain doesn't allow it. As Leonidas Proaño suggests, solidarity among the poor happens "almost spontaneously," even if it is a "misery likes company" or a "we're all in this sinking ship together" kind of communal regard.[448] For Gutiérrez, the poor have a natural sense of class (or group) identity. What seems clear is that suffering and attention to suffering have the tendency to "wake you up." When one suffers at the hands of others, the connections to those others are obvious, painfully so. It is no accident that Gutiérrez's spiritual vision calls for deep solidarity with the materially poor (by inhabiting their world, concerns, and suffering) and that Nhat Hanh's vision asks us to "become the poor" by "penetrating" their suffering and experiencing it from the inside.

I want to be careful when I talk about the fertility of oppression because I could be easily misunderstood. I am not arguing that there is something fundamentally good about being oppressed. By itself, the suffering of the poor is scandalous, sinful, and tragic. I am not arguing that God wants humans to suffer or that, by their suffering, the poor are somehow better in God's eyes. I am not arguing that one needs to be deeply oppressed to be saved or enlightened. I am not arguing that suffering is fundamentally a mark of existence to be understood and passively accepted. I *am* arguing that, in some weird way, oppression can open one's heart to the reality that we are all interconnected to each other

[448] See the Proaño citation in the epigraph of chapter 3.

and dependent upon one another. In other words, oppression can open the door to the reality of interbeing. As I understand both Gutiérrez and Thich Nhat Hanh, realizing the radical solidarity that interbeing implies is the key to both personal happiness and sustainable social action. The suffering of the weak, poor, and abused can function like spiritual jumper cables for both the poor and the rich; it can provide the spark and energy necessary for us to move past the economic, cultural, and stereotypical fences we use to segregate ourselves from one another. When Gutiérrez argues that the kingdom of God was "meant first and foremost for the poor and then, *through them*, for every human being," could it not be possible that the way in which the rich are included in the kingdom is *through* attention to the suffering poor?[449]

Despite their attempts to understand and explain human suffering, both Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh conclude that there is something about it which defies adequate description with words. Suffering is ultimately mysterious and it must be experienced deeply and personally to be understood. For Gutiérrez, to be a follower of the poor Christ situates one "in the terrain of mysticism and practice."[450] To see that the suffering of the poor is connected to the suffering of the rich—that is, to feel that in some inexplicable way it *is* the suffering of the rich and vice versa and to experience interconnectedness through and beyond that suffering—requires an insight that escapes logical comprehension. This insight, which conveys a profound and unforgettable sense of unity and imparts joy to those who attain it, can appropriately be called "mystical." Such insight is enigmatic, compelling, sustaining, and, according to both Gutiérrez and Nhat

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[449] Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo*, 70. Italics mine.

[450] Gutiérrez, *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente,* 16.

Hanh, can arise from a mindful, whole-bodied sharing of suffering with someone else. The three of us have argued that any adequate response to suffering must involve a deep experience of suffering. If this is true, then Paul Knitter cuts straight to the point when he states, "Effective activism requires solid mysticism."[451] In a subsequent section, I make suggestions for practices that I believe can help awaken Northern Christian social activists to the insight of interbeing through attention to the suffering poor. Before I do so, however, it is important to examine how the *use* (not truth) of dualisms can foster acts of solidarity and ground an understanding of interbeing.

3. Radical Solidarity

Gutiérrez's suggestion for a proper response to the reality of poverty in Latin America is for everyone, rich and poor, to be in solidarity with the suffering poor. Solidarity means to inhabit *el mundo del pobre*, to take their hopes, dreams, suffering, and struggles as one's own, and, in some sense, *to feel* the world as they do. For the privileged, solidarity requires a kind of rupture with one's sense of self in which former, culturally-conditioned guiding principles, such as individualism and self-sufficiency, are converted to more transcendent principles, such as love and understanding. Nevertheless, as was pointed out in chapter 3, although solidarity with the suffering is a central goal of the spiritual life, according to Gutiérrez, one can "never reach the point of real identification with the life of the poor."[452] With Nhat Hanh's help, I find myself asking, "Why not?" What is it that prevents the privileged from really indentifying with the

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[451] Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, 198.

[452] Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo*, 188.

poor? At issue, I suspect, is the fact that Gutiérrez has a more rigid sense of personal identity than does Nhat Hanh. For Gutiérrez, one cannot really identify with the poor because one can never really free themselves from their context. To experience hunger through fasting is not the same as experiencing hunger because there is no money to buy food. This barrier, however, is a mental one; it has to do with the concepts one uses to understand who he is. When one's sense of self is loosened from its cultural mores, it can become more fluid, and new realms of identification with others become possible.

I believe that Nhat Hanh's vision of interbeing reveals that the kind of identification to which Gutiérrez refers is absolutely possible; it is possible because the fundamental nature of reality is a deep, division-destroying interconnection between all things. By becoming increasingly in touch with reality, one is increasingly able to let go of her conceptual self-image and identify with the suffering of others. As was pointed out in chapter 4, Nhat Hanh describes how, through meditation, one can "enter" or "penetrate" another person, assuming their interests and goals as one's own. For example, concerning children Nhat Hanh writes, "There are times while watching our children play that we think about the future. We know that life is filled with worries, fears, hopes, and disappointments, and we worry for them and anxiously think about the struggles before them. It is at that very moment that we *enter* into our children."[453] The affection and love we have for our children is, in part, based on the sense that they are a part of us, an extension of us, and that, in some mysterious way, their suffering and happiness are also our suffering and happiness. This is solidarity. We and our children are not completely separate, not unequivocally "two," and because of this, we can "feel"

[453] Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 71.

the world from their point of view. When the privileged realize that they are "not two" with the poor, they can begin to feel the world through the point of view of the poor; they can "enter" the poor, identify with the poor, and, in some sense, *be* the poor. This is what I am calling "radical solidarity,"—the ability to tap into the interconnectedness with others that is at the root of our being.

Radical solidarity recognizes that not only are we interconnected with others (interpenetration), but also we *are* others (interbeing). A deep understanding of interbeing destroys our attachment to conceptual dualisms such as rich/poor, First World/Third World, and oppressor/oppressed and allows one to see herself in all things. Using Christian imagery to describe the Buddhist notion of interbeing, Paul Knitter writes, "We live and move and have our being in each other. So a Buddhist can love her neighbor as herself because her neighbor *is* herself!"[454] When we understand that we are radically interconnected, we naturally and automatically want to help those who suffer. Psychologist Erich Fromm describes what I mean by radical solidarity when he writes of "brotherly love." He posits:

> The most fundamental kind of love, which underlies all types of love, is *brotherly love*. By this I mean the sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further his life. This is the kind of love the Bible speaks of when it says: love thy neighbor as thyself. . ..In brotherly love there is the experience of union with all men, of human solidarity, of human at-onement. Brotherly love is based on the experience that we are all one. The differences in talents, intelligence, [and] knowledge are negligible in comparison with the identity of the human core common to all men. In order to experience this identity it is necessary to penetrate from the periphery to the core. If I perceive in another person mainly the surface, I perceive mainly the differences, that which separates us. If I penetrate to the core, I perceive our identity, the fact of our brotherhood.[455]

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[454] Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian,* 202.

[455] Fromm, 44.

Although his language is unfortunately paternalistic, his description of the ability to identify deeply with others is apt. Interestingly, Fromm argues that brotherly love begins with love for the poor. He writes:

> Love of the helpless one, love of the poor and the stranger, are the beginning of brotherly love. . ..By having compassion for the helpless one, man begins to develop love for his brother, and in his love for himself he also loves the one who is in need of help, the frail, insecure human being. Compassion implies the element of knowledge and of identification. "You know the heart of the stranger," says the Old Testament, "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; . . *therefore love the stranger!*"[456]

When one is friends with oppressed people and when one loves the oppressed, one's heart opens, and his capacity to love oppressors and even love himself is enhanced. The key to loving the oppressed, so it would seem, is to know them, understand them, and identify with them. In language remarkably similar to Fromm's, Nhat Hahn corroborates his view, saying, "In Buddhism we learn that understanding is the very foundation of love. If understanding is not there, no matter how hard you try, you cannot love. If you say 'I have to try to love him,' this is nonsense. You have to understand him [the other] and by doing so you will love him."[457]

Finally, I argue that to love the poor is to desire their liberation. Gutiérrez speaks of three levels of liberation: liberation from oppressive structures, liberation of the human person to reach her potential, and liberation from sin—what he also calls liberation *for* communion with God and others. I believe the communion about which he writes can be understood as radical solidarity. Christians understand that God's love is the source of human life. At our core, we are made by Love for love. As such, the experience of

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[456] Ibid., 45.

[457] Nhat Hanh, *Going Home,* 36.

radical solidarity can reveal the purpose of our lives. Fromm expresses it nicely when he says that love is the "answer to the problem of human existence."[458] Paradoxically, when the wealthy turn their attention to the poor, they discover who they (the wealthy) are and why they are here. "Life lived in community and in commitment to the marginalized," Gutiérrez observes, "are channels through which the fundamental meaning of human life becomes known."[459] When the privileged work for the liberation of the poor, they find themselves liberated as well.

4. Divine Preference and Taking Sides

Many North American Christians (myself included) have found something powerfully convincing and powerfully alarming in Gutiérrez's biblical exegesis, particularly in his articulation of God's preferential option for the poor. While the bible is clear that God loves all of creation, it is also equally unambiguous that God's love goes first to the poor and oppressed. This seems like good news all around, until one notices the dualistic language in which God's preference is couched. In the gospel of Luke, blessings are juxtaposed to warnings:

Blessed are you who are poor,
For yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
For you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
For you will laugh.

But woe to you who are rich,
For you have received your consolation.
Woe to you who are full now,
For you will be hungry.
Woe to you who are laughing now,
For you will mourn and weep.[460]

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[458] Fromm, 17.

[459] Gutiérrez, *La densidad del presente*, 59.

[460] Luke 20b-21, 24-25 NRSV

In the biblical narrative, all people are presented with an unavoidable, existential choice between siding with the poor and siding with the privileged. Liberation theologians tell us that we must all make a choice between life and death, between God and money, and that salvation itself hangs in the balance. The message is clear: followers of Jesus must choose the side of the poor.[461] The question then arises, how does the vision of radical solidarity (interbeing) described above fit with Gutirrez's notion of the preferential option for the poor? What should Northern Christian social activists do with Nhat Hanh's counsel to "not take sides" when it appears that God has done so and is calling us to do likewise?

The answer to this apparent tension, between taking sides or not, lies, for me, in Nhat Hanh's distinction between the historic and ultimate dimensions of reality. Reality can be understood from at least two vantage points: (1) according to how it appears to us in daily life (the historic, relative, conventional dimension) and (2) according to how it really is underneath its appearance (the ultimate, absolute dimension). For example, from the historic dimension, people speak of separate beings, of "you" and "I" and "others," while from the ultimate dimension, there are no such individuals; there is only interbeing. Both dimensions are important, so important, in fact, that the secret to the spiritual life can be understood as finding the right (skillful) balance between them. Nhat Hanh

[461] Jesuit missionary Aloysius Pieris argues that "Jesus is the covenant between YHWH [God, the divine] and the nonpersons of the world." [Aloysius Pieris, *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.:Orbis Books, 1996), 150-51. See also Aloysius Pieris, *God's Reign for God's Poor: A Return to the Jesus Formula* (Sri Lanka: Tulana Research Centre, 1998), chapter 4.] In several places, Pieris argues that "Jesus is God's defense pact with the poor" and that there is "no salvation outside God's covenant with the Poor." See Pieris, "Christ beyond Dogma: Doing Christology in the Context of the Religions and the Poor," *Louvain Studies* 25/3 (2000): 220.

explains, "The deeper level of practice is to lead our daily life in a way that we touch both the absolute and the relative truth."[462]

In the historic dimension, the world is experienced with the *vikalpa* discriminating mind, according to the names and identities that this form of knowledge employs. This view sees the world as a realm populated by individuals who suffer, compete for power, and struggle for liberation. From this outlook, one can (and should) employ a whole range of concepts to understand reality—concepts such as life and death, suffering and liberation, the poor and the rich, the Third World and the First World, the oppressed and the oppressors, self and other, and justice and injustice. In the historic dimension, there are sides to take. One can "betray" the values of one's class to be in solidarity with another group; even God can "take sides" by showing a special, preferential tenderness for suffering victims. From the ultimate dimension, on the other hand, one must let go of grasping to concepts to understand reality. From the ultimate dimension, there is no life, no death, no suffering, no liberation, no poor, no rich, no Third World, no First World, no oppressed, no oppressors, no self, no other, no traitor, no class, no struggle for justice or injustice. Most importantly, there is no divine preference. Whereas language which reflects the universality and equanimity of God's love expresses the ultimate dimension, language which communicates divine preference expresses human experience in the historic dimension.

Both dimensions are important; both have their place in the spiritual life. The key is to know how to use these two perspectives, to see how they relate to one another, and to learn to move back and forth between them gracefully, skillfully, and artfully. Nhat

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[462] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching,* 128.

Hanh has been clear that from the ultimate dimension, suffering does not exist. Nevertheless, in the historic dimension, suffering is a holy and noble truth, exactly because, by paying attention to it, one can move beyond it. Paying attention to the historic dimension can open one to the ultimate dimension. As Nhat Hanh explains, "looking deeply into relative truth, we penetrate the absolute."[463] The Buddha himself experienced the ultimate truth of nirvana by paying deep attention to the relative truth of suffering. I contend that by paying attention to the historic truth of the suffering poor, the privileged can penetrate the ultimate truth of interbeing. Better said, through a sustained consciousness of the way their participation in structures of oppression links them with the suffering of poor people in the Third World, wealthy North Americans can realize (i.e. accept and live out) radical solidarity. Furthermore, I argue that paying attention to the Third World poor is particularly efficacious in helping wealthy North Americans "wake up." Mindfulness of the poor can serve as a "dharma door" for the privileged, opening their hearts to the reality of interbeing. Allow me to explain.

As Thich Nhat Hanh has dedicated increasing amounts of his time to spiritual practices for affluent people in the industrialized West, his engaged Buddhism has increasingly turned to practices that encourage what, in chapter 4, was termed "soft" engagement—a focus on helping people become more mindful of their thoughts and actions in daily life. He reasons that when people are mindful of their lives, they become more peaceful. They gain a certain stability that, when coupled with insight, better prepares them to act compassionately in the world. There is much to be said for this view. Many North American social activists have rushed into situations of injustice only

[463] Ibid., 125.

to find that their anger at the situation created negativity and blindness in them and led them to take hasty and ineffective actions. Nevertheless, it also seems the case for some Northerners that the internal peace that "mindfulness in daily life" can bring can have a lulling effect. That is, when one is trained to pay attention first and primarily to one's body, breath, sensations, thoughts, and actions in the present moment, it is possible to remain focused on these objects of attention and never attend to the deep suffering of people in the South. Being mindful of one's own suffering may help a person to understand and feel the suffering of those immediately around her (e.g. family members, colleagues, etc.), but it does not necessarily lead her to pay attention to the suffering of people distanced from her geographically, culturally, and linguistically. Unfortunately, however, given the global nature of economic markets, political ideologies, and other structures of oppression, North Americans are deeply connected to the suffering poor in the Third World. The fact that these connections are not more obvious to North Americans only shows how reality-occulting and ignorance-generating the structures of their society are.

Perhaps an example may help clarify my point. Imagine that a parent who practices "mindfulness in her daily life" in the United States becomes aware that the plastic toy guns and dolls she buys for her children are promoting violence and unhealthy body images in them. Being attentive to her desire to buy such things when the desire arises, she realizes she has been conditioned to think that good parents should "provide for their children" and "make them happy" by furnishing toys. Further mindfulness helps her understand that such plastic playthings do not contribute to her children's long-term happiness and that they, in fact, may lay the seeds for future suffering. Therefore, she

decides to quit buying guns and dolls and to spend more time in the park with her children instead. Having become aware of the suffering that certain purchases can produce, she has taken actions which help her and her children "let go" of their suffering. Case closed. Except, in this scenario, the mother is never led to consider how her purchasing decisions affect the Third World poor.

Despite her lack of attention to this detail, one can be sure that such decisions do affect the underpaid factory workers in China or Guatemala whose job it is to make plastic toy guns and dolls. The reality of modern life is that almost every decision one makes has implications for the Third World poor. We are deeply connected to them (interbeing tells us this); the issue is that we don't see it. To be mindful of where one's coffee beans or bananas come from and to see that their consumption connects one to Latin America is easy. To see how *every* decision one makes connects one to the Latin American poor is more difficult. However, as I understand him, this is what Gutiérrez is calling for—a rupture with the cultural values of individualism and egoistic pleasure-seeking and a conversion to *el mundo del pobre*. Gutiérrez solicits a fundamental re-orientation of one's sense of self, such that the hopes, dreams, and suffering of the Third World poor are always present to mind. I am not sure that mere "mindfulness in daily life" is adequate for citizens of the First World to break through their culture of ignorance. Our cul-de-sacs, gated communities, and suburbs are cut off from the Third World. We are so conditioned to feel helpless in the face of another's suffering that when that suffering takes place on another continent, the temptation to turn away, to become complacent, or to focus on our breathing instead of the reality of the poor is almost too great to surmount.

Nhat Hanh argues that, while all people need to realize the interdependent nature of reality, it is "a realization that each of us can experience in a unique way."[464] I am suggesting that a uniquely appropriate way for people living in modern, First World cultures is to pay attention to the Third World poor. We need a spotlight, or better yet, fog lamps, to cut through the dense cloud of ignorance upon which escapism, materialism, and egocentricity thrive. As I see it, there are at least two notable benefits to this suggestion for Northern social activists. First, when constant attention is paid to the Third World poor, one gains a clearer vision of their reality. In the nightly news, North Americans are repeatedly shown images of the Third World poor—people with bloated bellies, covered in flies, or victims of malnutrition, natural disaster, and civil war. Instead of getting to know the actual poor, one acquires a stereotype, a pitiful and superficial facsimile of the real life of the poor. In the final analysis, many times, this conditioned typecast of the poor is what Buddhists might call a "near enemy;" although the image resembles the real poor, it actually carries its holder (the North American) farther away from true sympathetic knowledge of the poor.[465] Consistent mindfulness of the Third World poor can protect us from accepting easy stereotypes of them.

Second, as it turns out, paying attention to the intense suffering of the poor can bring balance, rootedness, and happiness to First World persons. All too often, the spiritual and psychological by-products of First World culture for the wealthy are numbness, isolation, anomie, alienation, and meaninglessness. Paying attention to a more

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[464] Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 76.

[465] A near enemy in Buddhism is a quality that superficially resembles another, but that, upon closer examination, opposes it. For example, the near enemies of loving kindness, compassion, and equanimity are attachment, pity, and indifference. See Donald Rothberg, *The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Transforming Ourselves and the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 175-177.

obvious kind of suffering, such as the intense, grindingly cruel suffering experienced by the Third World poor, can be just the catalyst that breaks us out of our gray, self-involved, psychological ruts. Nhat Hanh observes, "In intense suffering, you [the social actor] feel a kind of relief and joy within yourself, because you know that you are an instrument of compassion. Understanding such intense suffering and realizing compassion in the midst of it, you become a joyful person, even if your life is very hard."[466] Paying attention to the suffering of others can, ironically, help one to put his own suffering in perspective. Compassionate action in such circumstances can bring joy. Said differently, solidarity with the poor can relieve the suffering of the rich. In an intriguing episode, Nhat Hanh recounts the story of a wealthy woman in the United States who is lonely and bored with life. He observes:

> I think the woman. . .could be healed from her illness if she would just abandon her material comforts for awhile and live instead in a simpler society, *perhaps in a village in South America* or a hamlet like the one I'm now in [in Vietnam], someplace where she would have to wash her own clothes in the river. She might cringe when she sees the unsanitary water the villagers drink, but if she lives with the people and shares their concerns, the knowledge she possesses can help the peasants improve their lives. She will undergo hardships and trials, but her smile will begin to radiate like the sun at daybreak. Of course, her liberation will not be without setbacks or challenges. People have a hard time letting go of their suffering. Out of a fear of the unknown, they prefer suffering that is familiar.
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> The best medicine to chase away the heart's dark isolation is to make direct contact with life's sufferings, to touch and share the anxieties and uncertainties of others. Loneliness comes from locking yourself in a false shell.[467]

There is something grounding, satisfying, and real about sharing oneself in solidarity with the poor.

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[466] Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step,* 125.

[467] Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves,* 172-3. Italics mine.

When I propose that North Americans be mindful of the Third World poor and notice how they are connected to the poor through the decisions they make, I am really proposing that they "take the side" of the poor. At its best, mindfulness of others attunes you to their suffering and gives birth, quite naturally, to compassionate action on their behalf. I am not suggesting that one take on an ideological commitment to always (and unthinkingly) support the social movements of the poor; neither am I suggesting that one take the side of the poor in a way that attacks their supposed oppressors. What I am suggesting is that being mindful of the poor will be perceived by others in the historical dimension as "taking sides" and that it is possible to do this in a way that is not based on a one-sided allegiance; there is no superficial blaming involved. From the ultimate dimension, action on behalf of any part is action on behalf of the whole, because everything "inter-is" with everything else. In the historical dimension, however, reality is usually interpreted through dualisms with the consequence that social action is seen as a type of "taking sides." I suggest, like Gutiérrez, that the side to take is that of the suffering poor.

When one employs the concepts of poverty and wealth in a relative way, without attaching to them, one can then move beyond them. The sequence might look something like this: by moving meditatively inside the concepts of rich and poor, one deconstructs them and realizes that they are hollow. One then identifies with both the poor and rich, seeing herself as both poor and rich and as neither poor nor rich. In more traditional Buddhist language, "Mountains are no longer mountains, and rivers are no longer rivers." However, just as the reality of mountains and rivers is still there after the deconstruction of their labels, the reality of poverty and suffering is still there after one lets go of her

attachments and aversions to concepts about them. With labels deconstructed, one can see the actual reality of suffering. Hence, one uses dualisms to go beyond them and to encounter the reality of radical solidarity and interbeing. Like bodhisattvas who work to lead people to nirvana while being clear that there are no such things as "people" or "nirvana," North American Christian social actors can take the side of the poor while being clear that there are ultimately no sides to take.

5. Mysticism, Sustainability, and the Middle Class

My suggestion for taking the side of the poor calls into question the social location (side) of the rich. Many social critics, including Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh, group together everyone in modern industrialized societies who is not extremely poor and calls them: the rich, the wealthy, the privileged, the powerful, and the creators and controllers of global economic and social structures. The middle class is lumped in with the upper class, which consists of the truly rich, the elite. For most of this dissertation, I have followed this pattern. Nevertheless, something is wrong with the picture. If the Northern social actors I have in mind truly were the creators and controllers of economic structures, they would have changed them already. There is a disconnect between the image we have of the wealthy and the reality of many people included in this group.

From the perspective of the Latin American poor, it is very easy to see all Americans as rich and powerful. However, the experience of most Americans is somewhat different than this stereotype. In their book *Risking Liberation: Middle Class Powerlessness and Social Heroism*, authors Paul King, Kent Maynard, and David Woodyard contend that the dominant feeling of middle class North Americans (and,

therefore, of the majority of Americans) is *powerlessness* in the face of global problems and structures:

> Individuals and collections of individuals in the middle sector are remarkably impotent. Some may be able to dart and dodge in pursuit of personal goals, but on a wider scale we have little sense of being able to shape or control the history in the midst of which our lives are lived. No one is sure how to stop a nuclear holocaust, how to break the cycle of environmental destruction, or how to suspend conflict in areas like the Middle East. Those issues are part of a structure that as individuals we are unable to penetrate. Personal aspirations aside, we do not know how to bring about "a just and livable society" within which those aspirations could come into being. We are not confident of our ability to alter events. We feel powerless.[468]

King, Maynard, and Woodyard contend that the way middle class North Americans understand themselves is based on folklore from the Reformation era and the Industrial Revolution, which depicts North Americans as powerful social agents, able to shape their own destiny freely and creatively. They suggest that middle class North Americans in particular have been conditioned by the "ideology of individualism."[469] We are trained to think that with hard work and determination, a person can obtain a good education, a good job, ever increasing job-security, and material comfort—all the trappings of the good life. Although the story of individualism declares that society can be transformed through individual action, the reality of individualism is that it has led to structures which deeply inhibit any real social change. The system, which pretends to reward innovation with higher pay and job security, really rewards loyalty to itself. The system trains one to see colleagues and co-workers as competitors for company benefits. Workers are pitted against one another in such a way that poverty, discrimination, and joblessness are seen

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[468] Paul King, Kent Maynard, and David Woodyard, *Risking Liberation: Middle Class Powerlessness and Social Heroism* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 151.

[469] Ibid., 37. Much of this section is dependent on King, Maynard, and Woodyard.

as individual problems or personal failings, rather than as structural problems. In the end, the actual social mobility of the middle class and its true ability to effect real social change are illusory. One is told that he is in charge of his life and his choices, when in truth, all his decisions occur within an overall framework of control. King et al. observe, "We are like the little child who is free to run away from home but not free to leave the block. . .in large measure it is the nature and dynamic of the economic order than controls the framework within which we can make only rather inconsequential decisions."[470]

Middle class social actors find themselves in a particularly odd predicament. The culture of individualism convinces them that they should aspire to have the comfort and freedom that the wealthy elite have and that they should attain it by being independent, hard-working, and loyal to the system, which will reward them. This overall goal sets them against the interests of the working class and the poor, who are seen as either competition or pawns to be managed, convinced, and controlled so as to increase production. Even middle class persons who try to be compassionate and mindful of the poor find themselves participating in the oppression of the poor simply by being good workers and doing their job. The middle class have become "the ones who ensure that the system of production runs smoothly, either through managerial control or by making people believe it."[471] Yet the structure is designed so that the middle class never really attain that which the folklore of individualism promises. The middle class become alienated from the poor, from the rich, from themselves, from their work, and from a sense of control over their lives. They experience a sense of powerlessness, isolation,

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[470] Ibid., 150.

[471] Ibid., 27-8.

meaninglessness, and vulnerability. They find themselves acting as oppressors in a system which oppresses them as well. The type of structural constraint that the ideology of individualism exercises over the middle class is subtle, seductive, and almost invisible; it is ignorance-producing. One is led to believe that these structures work in favor of middle class autonomy, when in fact they "are not only limiting the freedom and choice of the poor, they are entrapping the middle sectors as well."[472]

The middle-class Christian social actor who wants to take the side of the poor has to recognize, confront, and oppose a lifetime of social conditioning that trains her against such solidarity. One must reject the culture of individualism and find a completely different story by which to understand oneself. This turn-about can be very isolating work. Gutiérrez has suggested that the road to solidarity leads one through the wilderness of solitude. In similar language, Nhat Hanh observes that to renounce one's social conditioning leaves one feeling alone, as if in exile:

> I think when you decide to do something in order to become yourself, and your thinking and your aspirations become one, you might find that you are quite alone. People will not understand; people will oppose you. A kind of loneliness, a real exile, settles in. You may be with your parents, with your friends, with your community, but you are in exile practically because of your situation.[473]

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[472] Ibid., 44.

[473] Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, *The Raft Is Not the Shore*, 50. In another text, Nhat Hanh describes a personal experience of what Gutiérrez might call rupture and conversion that, because of its clarity, bears inclusion: "I became a battlefield. I couldn't know until the storm was over if I would survive, not in the sense of my physical life, but in the deeper sense of my core self. I experienced destruction upon destruction, and felt a tremendous longing for the presence of those I love, even though I knew that if they were present, I would have to chase them away or run away myself.

When the storm finally passed, layers of inner mortar lay crumbled. On the now deserted battlefield, a few sunbeams peeked through the horizon, too weak to offer any warmth to my weary soul. I was full of wounds, yet experienced an almost thrilling sense of aloneness. No one would recognize me in my new manifestation. No one close to me would know it was I. Friends want you to appear in the form they know. They want you to remain intact, the same. But that isn't possible. . . .I cannot force myself back into the shell I've just broken out of. This is a source of great loneliness for me." See Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, 86-7.

I believe the loneliness Nhat Hanh describes is the first stage in the classic process of mystical transformation. For Christians, the experience of union with God and with neighbor is not possible until all the conditioned psychological props upon which the ego relies are destroyed. One of the most famous Christian mystics, Saint John of the Cross, calls this initial step the "dark night of the soul" through which a person must travel in order to deeply experience divine love:

> This night withdraws the spirit from its customary manner of experience to bring it to the divine experience that is foreign to every human way. It seems to the soul in this night that it is being carried out of itself by afflictions. At other times the soul wonders if it is not being charmed, and it goes about with wonderment over what it sees and hears. Everything seems very strange even though a person is the same as always. The reason is that the soul is being made a stranger to its usual knowledge and experience of things so that, annihilated in this respect, it may be informed with the divine.[474]

When middle class social actors recognize and release their conditioned, individualistic way of seeing things and when ignorance is overcome, new horizons of interbeing come into view. The experience can be painful (because one is now more sensitive to the suffering of others) and wonderful (because one is now more sensitive to beauty and marvel). In either case, the process is necessary for radical solidarity to arise. Therefore, as should be obvious by now, I contend that what Northern middle class social actors need are practices which help them shuck a former individualistic vision of themselves and see the interbeing nature of poverty and wealth. These practices can be both physical acts of solidarity with those who suffer (e.g. lifestyle changes, forms of protest, voluntary poverty, etc.) and meditations intended to reveal interbeing. Gutiérrez is helpful here. When he suggests that action and contemplation are both part of the same moment of *silence* necessary before speaking about God, he underscores their nature as interbeing.

[474] Saint John of the Cross, 414.

Acts of solidarity and meditation are both mystical; they are both necessary for Northern social actors to realize radical solidarity; they "inter-are" with one another and, as such, are pivotal to sustain action on behalf of those who suffer.

The key to sustainable social action on behalf of the poor is moving past the idea that one is doing "social action" on behalf of "the poor." Stated differently, the key is mindfulness of interbeing. When middle class actors continue seeing themselves as "middle class actors" engaging in humanitarian projects for those that suffer, they remain under the lure of the ideology of individualism. As such, one's ability to sustain charitable initiatives depends largely on the ego affirmation one receives when the project is completed and successful. When injustice drags out or a project fails, however, the individual ego is wounded and motivation lags. When one is deeply aware of the nature of interbeing, one no longer needs to affirm his ego through the poor. In the ultimate dimension, one is not a social actor, and the poor do not exist. With a vision of interbeing, one's life becomes an act of solidarity and a response to suffering. One lives one's life helping one's friends (poor and rich, in the Third World and the First World) or, better yet, helping oneself, since we all inter-are. Personal straining gives way to simply being who one is: a sufferer who suffers in and with other sufferers. By paying attention to the suffering of others, one can see how suffering is connected to happiness (one's own happiness) and begin to notice the inspirational, awe-invoking character of life lived in community.

Nhat Hanh has been clear that mindfulness can bring clarity, determination, patience, and inner peace, which are the keys to sustaining social action.[475] In a longer text, he describes how compassionate social actors become discouraged:

> Why? It is because they lack deep, inner peace, the kind of peace they can take with them into their life of action. Our strength is not in weapons, money, or power. Our strength is in our peace, the peace within us. This peace makes us indestructible. We must have peace while taking care of those we love and those we want to protect. . .[This] kind of peace brings you into the world and empowers you to undertake whatever you want to do to try to help—struggling for social justice, lessening the disparity between the rich and the poor, stopping the arms race, fighting against discrimination, and sowing more seeds of understanding, reconciliation, and compassion. In any struggle you need determination and patience. This determination will dissipate if you lack peace. *Those who lead a life of social action especially need to practice mindfulness during each moment of daily life.*[476]

In the section which follows, I make recommendations for practices that North American Christian social activists might employ to help them be more peaceful, more liberated from their cultural ignorance and the suffering it produces, more mindful of the interbeing nature of reality, and more connected with the suffering poor.

6. Practices for Sustaining Mindful, Liberating Social Action

Paul Knitter has observed, "Buddhism was born as part of a search for a spiritual practice that really worked. Gautama, like many of us today, was a frustrated practitioner."[477] Diverse techniques can be practiced to experience the interbeing nature of reality; the trick is for each person to find practices that work for them. Nhat Hanh has said that interbeing can be realized differently by everyone and he encourages the

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[475] See Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step,* 99.

[476] Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart,* 127-8. Italics mine.

[477] Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian,* 141.

invention of new practices. He even goes so far as to suggest, "If Zen is to fully take root in the West, it must acquire a Western form, different from Oriental Zen."[478] Perhaps one of the Western forms Zen could take is one that aims to see reality for what it is by looking initially through the lenses of Third World suffering, radical solidarity, and the preferential option for the poor.

Here are some practices that have been helpful to me. They are either adaptations of practices recommended by Nhat Hanh or my own recommendations, offered in the spirit of the mindfulness guideposts for solidarity with the suffering poor that I pointed out at the end of chapter 4. It is with some trepidation that I recommend spiritual practices to others because I do not see myself as especially spiritually enlightened. Nevertheless, in the spirit of conversation, I share what I have found useful. Although I believe these suggestions are in line with the fundamental insights of both Buddhism and Christianity, I am not suggesting that, by themselves, they convey Buddhist enlightenment or Christian salvation. I am not suggesting that, by themselves, these practices comprise an entire spirituality or that they are the only spiritual exercises one should practice. I am suggesting that these practices could be useful; at least I have found them to be. Catholic priest and former monk Michael Holleran comments, "In my long experience of our Christian tradition, I have found that we are high on inspiration, but low on technique; long on ideals and content, but short on method."[479] The following are techniques I believe can help North American Christian social activists to: (1) understand suffering in a deeper way (both their own and that of others); (2) recognize

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[478] Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys*, 102.

[479] See Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, 140.

the influence of economic and cultural structures in their lives (and how they produce ignorance); (3) discover ways to live a life in solidarity with the poor in a sustainable way; and (4) be happy.

Smile to the Poor First Thing in the Morning

Put a note on your alarm clock with the word "smile." After waking but before getting up, bring to your mind an image of the suffering poor in the Third World. You could choose a different country each day and imagine the poor in that place. Smile to them. Connect with them. Be aware of their suffering. Smile to them again, while wishing that their suffering be relieved. Recognize that the poor, even those geographically far away, will be with you throughout your day. Dedicate your day to being conscious of and grateful for their presence. Notice any internal resistance to thinking about human suffering. Smile. Try to feel both kindness and understanding in your heart. Breathe easily five breaths, smiling to the poor.

Work with Gathas

Gathas are short verses that one recites during daily activities to focus one's energy and mindfulness. For Christians, these can be thought of as mindfulness reminders or as little prayers. Memorize two *gathas* a day and practice them throughout the day. Compose new gathas that are particularly helpful to you. The following are some examples that I use:

- Taking out the trash: "Taking out the trash, I notice my tendency to judge some things (and some people) as useless or unimportant. Everything is

interconnected. Smiling at my tendency, I see myself as garbage. I see myself as precious. With compassion I see past all notions of judgment."

- Drinking coffee: "Drinking this coffee, I am connected to Third World farmers. Drinking this coffee, I am a Third World farmer. Drinking this coffee, I feel grateful to Third World farmers. Drinking this coffee, I determine to learn more about the production of coffee worldwide."
- Eating bananas: "Eating this banana, I am the banana plant growing in the tropics. I am the sun and the rain which help this plant grow. Eating this banana, I am the poor indigenous worker, underpaid to care for and harvest this fruit. Eating this banana, I am the plantation owner who oppresses his workers. I am truck drivers, cargo ship operators, and supermarket employees. Eating this banana, I open my heart to the suffering of these other "me's."

Take a Mindful Shower

Once a week, while taking a shower, bring your mind to the present moment. Be aware of your own body and the space it occupies in the shower. Be aware of the feeling of the water on your skin. Then choose among the following options (or use them all!):

Gatha: Repeat to yourself, "Like this water which washes dirt from my body, may my mindfulness wash ignorance from my eyes."

Meditate on interbeing: Notice all the facets of interbeing with the poor involved in taking a shower. Suggest to yourself, "Through this shower, I am connected to plumbers, sewage line layers, septic tank diggers, and all those who work with human

waste and water management. Through this shower, I am connected with the masons who built this shower and with the factory workers who made its parts. Through this shower I am connected to the architects, builders, managers, and bureaucrats who employ and oppress masons and factory workers. Through this shower, I am connected to the suffering of and social discrimination against many poor people. Through this shower, I am connected to the greed that oppresses people, the desire for comfort, and the deeper desire for liberation of all humans. Through this shower, I am connected to my own suffering and the suffering of others. Through this shower, I am connected to the four elements and the life-giving (and life-taking) capacity of water. I am connected to legal structures that deny to others access to clean water. I am connected to every person who has ever showered. Through this shower I become aware of God's presence.

Dedication: Repeat, "May this shower help me be more compassionate to the suffering poor."

Deepening solidarity: Let your shower motivate you to deepen your solidarity with the suffering poor. Here are some possible examples of what I have in mind:

- Once a week, take a cold shower in solidarity with those have no access to hot water. Enter their experience through meditation while showering.
- Once a month, go three days without showering in solidarity with those who have no regular access to clean water. Notice how and when your anxiety of what others think of you arises.
- Occasionally, buy and use the most inexpensive shampoo in the store. Ask yourself, "Who uses this shampoo as their daily shampoo?" and connect with their experience.

- Find ways to conserve water. Could you use less water in the shower? Experiment with turning off the water while washing and only turning it back on for the final rinse.
- Think about how you interact with water in others moments of the day and how you are connected to the poor in those moments.
- Commit to learning more about how water is used to oppress peoples in different parts of the world. Include those situations in your prayers and social resistance.
- Find ways to express gratitude to those who make your shower possible.

Walk Mindfully with the Poor

Go for a twenty minute walk in a garden or park. As you walk, visualize the face of someone who is oppressed. Breathe normally. As you inhale, mentally repeat that person's name as a way to maintain your attention. As you exhale, say, "I am with you." Measure your steps with your breath. Suppose you use the name Rosa, and your inhalation and exhalation each last three steps. Your mental speech would be, "Rosa, Rosa, Rosa," with the inhalation and, "I am with you, I am with you, I am with you," with the exhalation. Concentrate entirely on the physical act of walking and the spiritual act of opening your heart to this person. As a possible variation, try calling the name of a Third World country or any oppressed group of people with each step. Try walking through a poor neighborhood when possible. This practice can also be used in any repetitive exercise. Try swimming, biking, or jogging mindfully with the poor.

Practice Mindful Driving

While driving, bring your attention to the present moment. Notice the posture of your body, your grip on the steering wheel, and the rhythm of your breathing. Then choose among the following options:

Gatha: Repeat to yourself, "The road to happiness is the road to solidarity. I promise to protect all beings in my outing today. I recognize selfishness and separation as obstacles in my path."

Meditate on interbeing: Notice all the facets of interbeing with the poor involved in driving. Notice that, through driving, you are connected with all those who lay roads or who work with concrete, asphalt, or cobblestone. You are connected with miners, truck drivers, and steam roller operators. You are connected with factory workers in the automobile industry. You are connected with all the workers in the global oil industry. You are connected with indigenous peoples who have lost their land and lives to environmentally-destructive drilling practices. You are connected with cyclists, pedestrians, and animals that also use the same roads on which you drive. You are connected with all those who have no car and must take public transportation. Your driving today includes the suffering and happiness of these people. Open your heart to their suffering. Think about all the people and animals that have been killed in traffic accidents. Feel compassion for their suffering and gratitude for their contribution to your life. Notice when any element of "road rage" arises in you. Breathe deeply, and release your frustration as an act of courage, protection, and solidarity. Notice "road rage" in others. See how their frustration connects them equally to cruel dictators and to you.

Have compassion for their frustration. Give them a smile and a little extra room. Breathe in their frustration and breathe out peace to them.

Dedication: Repeat, "May this outing help me be more compassionate to the suffering of the poor."

Deepening solidarity: Let your mindful driving prompt other acts of solidarity. For example, you might choose to:

- ride a bicycle to work instead of driving;
- take pubic transportation in solidarity with those who have no car;
- walk (the normal mode of transportation of the poor).

Practice Mindful Eating

Eating is an incredibly political act. In today's global economy, food is treated like any other commodity; it travels sometimes thousands of miles before making it to your plate. In North America, it is very common to sit down to a meal of rice from Asia, chocolate from Africa, and coffee from South America. People are oppressed, even killed, in food production. Food can be a source of both well-being and illness. For this practice, choose a food you know to be healthy and natural. Sit with your back erect. Breathe normally. Bring your attention to the food you are about to eat. Ask yourself where the food comes from. Recognize that most of the children in the Third World will never see the quality foods that regularly arrive to your plate. In their countries, the finest food is reserved for export to the First World. Be mindful of the fact that more than half of the world's population is either hungry or malnourished at the present moment. Eating slowing and mindfully, be grateful that you have food to eat. Let your food nourish your

body and your awareness of the many people who suffer from hunger. Commit yourself to finding ways to eat more simply, more mindfully, and with more solidarity.

Study Oppression, Talk to the Oppressed

Both Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh emphasize the importance of staying close to oppressed peoples. This practice takes to heart the fourth precept of the Tiep Hein Order: "Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering by all means, including personal contact and visits, images, sound. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world."[480] Much can be learned about the structural causes of oppression when one so desires. Read books. Watch documentaries. Study. See past biased reporting and easy explanations of any issue. Most important of all is finding oppressed people with whom you can interact on a regular basis. Go to an inner city church or park, a homeless shelter, a refugee resource center, a children's home, a prison, or any place where you can visit with the oppressed. Talk. Share stories. Make friends. Listen for the details of people's pain and joy. Try to experience something of their fears, hopes, and dreams from the inside. Visit with them until their reality replaces the stereotype you have of the poor.

[480] Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*, 34.

Visit the Third World

Nothing exposes the reality of life in the Third World quite like being there. To whatever degree possible, try to go to the Third World. Seek out ways of participating in the daily life of the people there, rather than staying in tourist destinations. Expose yourself to another way of life. Look for its subtleties. If possible, stay for a month or longer. Nhat Hanh comments that such visits can be particularly therapeutic for citizens of the First World. Of regaining our sanity, he writes:

> Restoring mental health does not mean simply helping individuals adjust to the modern world of rapid economic growth. The world is sick, and adapting to an unwell economic environment will not bring real health. . ..One way to help such a person may be to move him or her to a rural area where he can cultivate the land, grow his own food, wash his clothes in a clear river, and live simply, sharing the same life as millions of peasants around the world.[481]

If it is not possible to live in the Third World, try to visit it as often as possible, and treat the trip as an experiment in mindfulness, rather than a vacation from it.

Sit for the Oppressed

Opening oneself to the suffering of others demands internal stability and tranquility, and it is important to maintain a regular spiritual practice that cultivates these qualities in us. Find a sitting posture in which you can maintain an upright spine. Breathe normally. Make the conscious decision to nurture stability and tranquility in yourself so that you are better prepared to be open to the suffering of others. Pay attention to the physical sensation of sitting and breathing. Notice the contact between your body and the floor, the movement of your abdomen, and the feeling of the air going in and out of your nostrils. Smile and relax while maintaining awareness of your

[481] Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 123.

breathing. When you notice that your attention has strayed, smile to yourself and gently return your awareness to your breath. Conclude the practice by dedicating the merit of your practice to all those who are oppressed.

Work with Stereotypes of the Poor

Nhat Hanh points out, "Any subject can bring about awakening if it is sown deeply into the ground of your being. But if it is only entrusted to your intellect, it is unlikely to bear fruit."[482] One may begin with an intellectual concept in order to deconstruct and move past the concept. For this exercise, find a sitting posture in which you can maintain an upright spine. Breathe normally. Begin by bringing to mind any cultural stereotype of the poor that you know. Hold the stereotype gently in your mind, noticing the ways in which gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, skin tone, and education give it color and contour. Investigate the nature of the stereotype. Where does it come from? Where does it lead? Ask yourself how this cultural stereotype has influenced your vision of the poor, even despite your best intentions. How are you trapped by the stereotype? Does the existence of stereotype produce negativity or anger in you? Breathe through this negativity and let it go. See that the stereotype is impermanent. Try to see the stereotype as your friend. One can learn about her culture and the functioning of her own mind by recognizing, deconstructing, and letting go of stereotypes.

[482] Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart,* 119.

Enter the Poor, Be the Poor

Find a sitting posture in which you can maintain an upright spine. Breathe normally. Bring to your mind the mental image of someone who is undergoing some form of extreme suffering, preferably someone in the Third World. You may choose someone you have met personally or someone of whom you know through friends or the media. Allow enough time that your awareness of this person deepens and you begin to "go inside" and experience his world—his feelings, sensations, perceptions, consciousness, hopes, fears, and suffering. Begin by noticing any physical suffering this person may be experiencing (i.e. sickness, pain, hunger, stunted growth, or premature ageing from malnutrition, etc.); then, move on to noticing his internal suffering produced by ignorance (e.g. fear, anger, jealousy, embarrassment, self-hatred, etc). Look for ways in which this person's perceptions affect his suffering. Continue looking until can see yourself in this person, until you feel that you are him. Try to be deeply involved in his suffering, without becoming lost in it. Notice how his suffering, is in, part connected to his socio-economic location. Notice how this person's socio-economic location is connected to yours. You are not two separate individuals. Instead, you comprise each other, include each other, and *are* each other. See and feel that the concepts of "you," "me," "the other," and "the poor" do not adequately define the reality you share. As you inhale, mentally repeat, "I am *in* this person," and as you exhale, repeat, "This person is *in* me." Follow this by inhaling, "I *am* this person" and exhaling, "This person *is* me." Dwell in this person's suffering until connection and compassion well up inside of you, until you feel the desire and motivation to help this person suffer less.

Work with Dualisms

Choose as the subject of your meditation any of the dualisms traditionally employed by liberation theologians: for example, rich/poor, oppressor/oppressed, North/South, or First World/Third World. Sitting erect and breathing normally, gently begin to unpack and explore the nature of the dualism as was done with stereotypes above. What reality does each dualism highlight? What does it hide? What third (or fourth element) is missing from the dualism that could be included? (For example, in North/South, we could include the concepts of East, West, and middle.) Explore how each side is defined by and conditioned by its opposite. Notice that the two sides inter-are; they inter-exist so completely that the distinction between them shows itself as shallow, artificial, and without meaning. Try overturning the traditional meaning of each side to see how the reverse might be true. For example, conventional wisdom tells us that the rich are greedy and stingy and the poor, who have less, share more.[483] Psychologically speaking, however, the person who shares—who gives of herself—is rich, and the person who hoards is impoverished by anxiety and fear of loss. Continue slicing through the dualism until you see its non-essential nature and until you can see the rich as poor and the poor as rich.

Contemplate a Social Work Project

Find a sitting posture in which you can maintain an upright spine. Breathe normally. As the subject of your meditation, select any service project which originates in the First World and attends to people in the Third World (for example, rural

[483] See Fromm, 22-3.

development projects, clothing redistribution programs, Peace Corps initiatives, medical missions (such as those sponsored by "Doctors Without Borders"), church overseas mission trips, disaster relief project, etc.) or any other social work project you consider important. Reflect upon the purpose of the project. Try to see that the fundamental rationale for the project is to alleviate suffering and respond with compassion to others, not for the workers to receive recognition and self-satisfaction. Notice any internal tendency to see the project in terms of who gives and who receives. Smile on this dualistic interpretation, and let it go. Recognize that those who offer service also receive benefit from their work and that those who receive aid have much to offer their supporters. Try to move past notions of charity and pity to see that, because of the reality of interbeing, social work projects are always, at their best, mutually beneficial.

Stay in Touch with Children

Children have potential to open even the hardest of hearts. Having not yet developed full-fledged egos, children experience a world full of novelty and adventure. Find ways to be around children in your life. Listen to their stories; watch them play. Smile. Feel refreshed. Experience novelty and adventure vicariously. Get out of your own issues and worries and try to enter a child's world. Spend time holding a baby. Imagine that, in that baby, you are holding all the suffering babies in the world. By taking that baby into your arms, you take every orphan, every hungry child, every kid disfigured by abuse or neglect, every youngster forced to work in a sweatshop or a coal mine into your heart. Try to see every child in the Third World as your own precious child and your responsibility. Understand that every interaction you have with that child

lays a seed for her future happiness or suffering. Smile. Determine to find ways to make the world a better, safer place for children.

Identify with Oppressors

Nhat Hanh reminds us that all people, the oppressed and oppressors alike, are victims of ignorance and social conditioning. Sitting erect and breathing normally, bring to mind a particular person or group who you consider an oppressor, perhaps someone easily connected to the Third World. As examples, you might consider: a sweatshop owner, the owner of a banana plantation, the CEO/board of directors of any international company with interests in the Third World, an abusive dictator, a corrupt government official, Marxist guerrillas and other militant revolutionary groups, U.S. military forces, a weapons manufacturer, a banker who refuses to lend money to poor and indigenous peoples, a developer who seizes the sacred lands of indigenous peoples for personal gain, the logging company that destroys rainforests and the rich biodiversity they contain, the fishing company that encourages illegal fishing of protected waters, a pirate, a narcotrafficker, a terrorist, or an abusive spouse or parent. Notice the nature of that person's suffering. Notice the role that ignorance plays in their thinking. Examine how they too are oppressed. Notice how their unwise actions produce suffering both for themselves and for those they more obviously oppress. Practice this way until you can see yourself in each of them and until compassion for them arises. Determine that your attention to the oppressed will not nurture a subtle resentment for their oppressors.

Connect to and Embody the Best

Identify people who model wise vision and compassionate action. Meditate on the connection between their vision and action. Let the suffering and happiness of that person so fill your consciousness that you see yourself *in* that person and see yourself *as* that person. Some possible examples are:

- The poor Christ: Gutiérrez suggests that God's love is best communicated through the poor Christ. Meditate on ways in which Christ was both poor and rich. Look deeply enough into Christ's nature that you can see Christ acting through you. Look deeply enough into the nature of the Christ that you see Christ in all those who suffer, in both the oppressed and their oppressors.
- The awakened Buddha: Consider the figure of the wise and compassionate Buddha. Try to see the Buddha in yourself. Try to see the Buddha in others, in both the oppressed and their oppressors.
- A loving mother: For most people, their first experience of love is the love they receive from their mother. Try to visualize and embody a mother's unconditional love.
- The compassionate Yasodhara: Yasodhara was the wife of young prince Siddhartha. When Siddhartha went to the forest to search for enlightenment, Yasodhara stayed behind in the palace. She was a person with wealth. Nevertheless, she had a large and compassionate heart for the suffering poor. She dressed simply, gave up wearing jewelry, sold her possessions to give money to the poor, and only ate one meal a day in

> order to be in solidarity with those who suffer. She is an excellent example of a wealthy person who takes on voluntary poverty as an act of solidarity and understanding. Try to connect with and channel her wisdom, love, and compassion.

Examine Your Life

After some practice meditating on interbeing, take the time to examine your life. How do your actions affect you and others in a positive or negative way? On what do you spend your money? What do you consume? In what structures of oppression do you participate unconsciously? How do you benefit from those structures? What psychological phenomena accompany your participation in oppression? Do you experience greed, selfish satisfaction, or First World guilt? Be realistic. Be honest.

Accept Yourself

Having taken stock of your actions and thoughts, try to accept yourself. The Buddha taught that the lotus flower blooms out of the mud in which it grows. Without the mud, the flower is not possible. Without your shortcomings and personal failings, it would not be possible for you to grow in love and compassion. Smile upon yourself and your self-centered choices. Try to understand and have compassion on yourself. Recognize that, deep down, you are naturally good; you have what Buddhists call Buddha nature. To be completely loving, wise, patient, and compassionate is absolutely a possibility for you. Mentally repeat, "I am in touch with my personal weaknesses," on inhalation and, "I smile with compassion on my personal weaknesses" on exhalation.

Repeat, "I am in touch with the energy of love (or patience, compassion, wisdom, etc.) in me," on inhalation and, "I am nurtured by the energy of love (or patience, compassion, wisdom, etc) in me," on exhalation. Continue breathing in this way until you become more calm and centered. As a way of testing your practice, remember that "if your practice does not bring you joy, you are not practicing correctly."[484]

Nurture Simplicity and Resistance

Modern First World societies, with their materialistic and egocentric values, all too often cause illness and ignorance in their citizens, who experience extraordinarily high levels of depression, stress, and high blood pressure. In order to have a sense of peace, satisfaction, and well-being in such societies, one must find ways to resist them, to actively and intentionally disengage from them. Seek out ways to be free from the relentlessly destructive economic machine. Consume less. Shop more mindfully. Remind yourself that happiness comes from truly understanding yourself, not from the objects you buy. Gutiérrez has been clear that true solidarity with the poor is not possible without taking on some kind of voluntary poverty. So do it. Live more simply. Do it for yourself and for all who suffer. Nhat Hanh reminds us, "Once we are able to live simply and happily, we will be better able to help others."[485] There are countless ways to resist the system. Here are a few I have found helpful:

- Resist seeking diversion in movies and television.
- Eat simple, vegetarian foods, rather than fast food.

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[484] Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching,* 100.

[485] Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing,* 37.

- Do a thirty hour fast once a week.
- Tell family and friends that what you want for Christmas and your birthday is their love and care, not more material stuff.
- Go through your possessions. Take stock of what is helpful to your liberation and what is not. Be honest, and free yourself of unhelpful things.
- Occasionally spend twenty-four hours without electricity.
- Make one day a week "no-car day."

Appreciate the Moon (The Well-Being Already There)

Throughout this work, I have recommended paying closer attention to the suffering of the Third World poor. However, if one attends to only life's suffering, it is easy to slip into despair and discouragement. Suffering and happiness inter-are. Being able to recognize and touch life's many joys is the key to sustaining a life of engagement and solidarity. Take time in meditation and in the course of your daily activities to notice beauty around you. Notice blooming flowers, the crisp morning air, and the sounds of children playing. Notice the fact that you have eyes, arms, legs, and lungs that work (if you do). Notice that you do not have a toothache, poison ivy, or AIDS. The present moment is overwhelmed with the conditions for happiness; you just need to learn to see them.

Day of Mindfulness of the Poor

Ideally, one should be constantly mindful of the suffering poor. In reality, however, this proves difficult to most. Nhat Hanh recommends taking a day of mindfulness once a week, in which you put aside your normal work to focus on doing normal household activities (e.g. cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, etc.) and meditative practices (e.g. studying, reading, writing, sitting, walking, etc.) with total mindfulness. In each activity, one pays close attention to the moment, to the sensations and perceptions that arise, and to one's breath and posture. His suggestion is helpful, because by being especially mindful one day, one becomes naturally more mindful on other days. I suggest a spin on Nhat Hanh's exercise: dedicate one day a week to being especially mindful of the suffering poor. Try to use every action you take as a reminder that the suffering poor are with you in every moment. Let every breath encourage you to see suffering in others and in yourself. Notice interbeing in everything you do. Nurture compassion for others in your heart, and don't forget to smile.

7. Conclusion: Precious Jewels and Partner Dancing

After years of living in the West and being exposed to a wide diversity of religious perspectives, Thich Nhat Hanh is convinced that "all religious traditions have their jewels."[486] I agree. I have argued that Gutiérrez's reading of the bible *desde abajo* (from underneath), his notion of God's preferential option for the poor, his critique of unjust social and economic structures as sinful, and his understanding of solidarity as revelatory of the meaning of human existence are valuable jewels one finds in Latin

[486] Nhat Hanh, *Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings,* 117.

American liberation theology. I have also argued that Nhat Hanh's mindfulness practices and view of interbeing as the fundamental nature of reality are precious and complementary jewels that can help North American Christian social activists understand suffering in a deeper way and live a sustainable, peaceful, and fulfilling life of solidarity with the poor.

In chapter 1, I suggested that the suffering of the world could be the basis for interfaith dialogue. I believe that Christian liberation theologians and engaged Buddhists are particularly equipped for this dialogue since both traditions make understanding and responding to suffering such a central goal. I am aware that, for many Christians, a project such as mine smacks of syncretism. By reading Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh together, I run the risk of unconsciously violating the integrity of Christian and Buddhist worldviews. It seems wise to point out, as John Berthrong did, that "one person's syncretism is another's creativity."[487] Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh have both been shrewd guides in this regard. They both found resources outside their traditions which shed new light on helpful aspects of their traditions. Better said, both brought renewal to their respective traditions by being open to insights from other sources, making them better equipped to deal with the pressing issues of their contexts. To my mind, Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh are both devoted followers and unnerving critics of their traditions. (To be accused of keeping such company is a charge I will accept.)

As a closing thought, let me return to the conversation metaphor I offered at the outset of this chapter. Using that metaphor, we have heard Gutiérrez and Nhat Hanh "speak" in earlier chapters, and I began to "speak" in this one. However, even this is not

[487] Berthrong, *All under Heaven,* 40.

quite right. The truth is that my voice has been present all along in the telling of Gutiérrez's and Nhat Hanh's stories. Thus, now I would like to suggest a final metaphor to describe how I envision this project. As much as they are conversation partners, I see Gustavo Gutiérrez and Thich Nhat Hanh as dance partners. Dancing is more embodied, experiential, and numinous than talking, which often remains intangible, theoretical, and heady. In any partner dance, one person leads and the other follows; however, when it is done well, the experience joins both partners with the music, the floor, and each other. The two poles of leading and following merge and harmonize such that leading becomes "inviting" and following becomes "responding" or "flowing with." Although each dance partner remains herself or himself, together they create and experience something new—something which words can never truly capture.

When I say that one of the goals of this project is to discover a deeper understanding of suffering I mean a kind of understanding that moves beyond academic definitions. This is why attention was paid to practices in this chapter. Following the dance partner metaphor, we might imagine that Gutiérrez chose the song to which we danced and was the first to take the lead. As the tempo changed to more personal and practical concerns, Nhat Hanh began to lead. As a follower, I do more than just listen. My whole body, feelings, and thoughts are drawn into movement with Nhat Hanh. Now, in this chapter, another song began, and I took my spot on the dance floor in the leader's position. Whether or not other North American Christians who have been inspired (and disheartened) by liberation theology will take up my invitation to follow certain meditative practices about suffering and solidarity is yet to be seen. If these suggestions are useful at all, I imagine that some will. Perhaps in time others, such as Latin American

liberation theologians and engaged Buddhists, will also join. Improvisation and creativity are the keys to both dancing and mysticism, no matter how sequenced their steps or how rigorous their techniques. I hope that this small choreography moves others to feel increasingly interconnected with the Third World poor and inspired to reduce suffering and poverty in a sustainable way.

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