

# Liberation and The Trinity

A Missiological Discussion of the implications of Trinitarian faith within Liberation Theology.

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The concept of the Trinity, one God existing in tri-unity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit has been found within Christianity, whether in biblical writing or theology, virtually since its inception two thousand years ago. Within the dynamics of the Graeco-Roman world, the concept of the Trinity was developed not only to counter heresy, but also to urgently communicate the reality of God's revelation to the world. It was in essence, missiological.<sup>1</sup>

The meeting of the World Missions Council at Edinburgh in 1910, promised to herald the ongoing victorious conquest of the Christian mission to the world<sup>2</sup>. In our contemporary world and the questions and problems faced by many thousands of people, it is hard to understand the grounds for such optimism. Christianity has found itself squeezed by the pressures of rationalism and secularism away from the public arena. Indeed, within the western world it struggles to contribute to contemporary debate. Epistemological domains such as Marxism or Pluralism have also posed many questions of the church and its mission. As a result, Christian mission itself seems in a state of flux, of re-evaluation, with many courageous and radical facets of mission developing.

Trinitarian understandings of mission are reasserting themselves as a viable route for understanding Christian mission. Newbigin states, "we should insist that Christian doctrine, with its prime model in the doctrine of the Trinity, ought to be playing an explicit and vigorous part in the public debate"<sup>3</sup>, as opposed to Pluralist or Unitarian concerns. One particular development is known as 'Liberation Theology', a church

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<sup>1</sup> Neill, S. A History of Christian Missions. Penguin Books, 1990, p. 32. Neill speaks of the development of theology as being missiological.

<sup>2</sup> Gnanakan, K. "From Edinburgh to Bangkok" in Kingdom Concerns. IVP, 1993, pp. 15-31.

<sup>3</sup> Newbigin, L. "The Trinity as Public Truth" in The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age. Ed. Vanhoozer, K.J., Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997, p. 1.

and theology that purports to centralise the liberation and the interests of the masses, as its very core. (As such, even to talk of ‘liberation theology’ as a system is probably a misnomer, as liberation is the people whom it is concerned with). Mission, then becomes defined as that motion toward and action on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Interestingly, this missiological action finds it’s definition within the doctrine of the Trinity; it is rooted upon the existence and action of the triune God himself as revealed within the Scriptures.

We will examine both the Trinitarian definition and praxis of mission in the liberationist tradition. Mission in itself is the outward reaching of the Godhead; as such it is important that we look at the character as well as the theology of liberationist definitions of mission. We shall pose the question, does a liberationist view of mission find it’s root solely in the doctrine of the Trinity, or do other sources cloud the liberationist interpretation? We will also examine the character of the mission that results from the liberationist tradition, seeking to ascertain the viability of such mission in our contemporary world. We shall conclude by attempting to define points of contribution that the liberationist tradition can bring to the public debate that is so badly in need of guidance and wisdom from God.

### **A Liberating Trinity?**

The notion of the Trinity as the prime model from which the mission of God flows, is the centrepiece of Boff’s Trinity and Society<sup>4</sup>, and his subsequent understanding of mission in the Liberationist tradition. To define mission, Boff first defines the personhood and existence of God via the Trinity, it is only from this platform that he

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<sup>4</sup> Boff. L. **Trinity and Society**. Burns & Oates (translated by Burns. P. from original portuguese), 1988.

then proceeds to extrapolate the consequences for mankind and human society. We shall follow the same model in our examination of the subject.

### **Elements of the Trinity**

To define the personhood and action of God within the Trinity, Boff uses three concepts: life, communion and perichoresis. However, we should proceed with caution at this point. Boff does not want to nullify the mystery of the Trinity by defining simple mechanics, he is commenting upon the revelation presented to us in Scripture and its consequent theological understanding.

### **Life Itself**

“Life is the inner nature of God”<sup>5</sup>, declares Boff, it is the wellspring that defines who God is. How then do we define life? To aid us, Boff provides the formula, “life consists in the self realization of an ex-istent”<sup>6</sup>. The ‘self realization’ aspect of life is summed with the statement, ‘God living to live’, bursting forth in spontaneity. He is constantly emerging, constantly producing, a constant “coming to be without end”<sup>7</sup>. He is life to the full. The self-realization of God is the presence of this dynamic eternal life of God. Life is constantly seeking to create, to express itself, to create life in concrete reality.

This leads on to the ex-istent aspect of Boff’s formula. To define a living being as having life, it is required that the living being relates outward to other beings establishing active reciprocal relationships. If God is life to the full, then it logically follows that God must be the creation of life, and outward relation of that creation to

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<sup>5</sup> Boff. L. Trinity and Society. Burns & Oates, 1988, p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> Boff. L. Trinity and Society. Burns & Oates, 1988, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> Boff. L. Trinity and Society. Burns & Oates, 1988, p. 127.

the fullest possible extent. Boff thus sums the concept of the life of God, “eternal life consists in the self realization of the eternal Ex-istent”<sup>8</sup>, or in other words, God is eternally relating his spontaneous life existence in full outward participation with others. If we thus take the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity: One God revealed to us in three distinct persons, each person Father, Son and Spirit (who are fully God) must display the attributes of life that we have been discussing. Thus for the Trinity, “it is not enough to state that the Trinity is the distinction between the three Persons. The essential characteristic of each Person is to be for the others, through the others, with the others and in the others”<sup>9</sup>

This leads to the concept of the communion of the Trinity. The term communion however implies a static nature of relations, where in fact God is eternally ‘self realising the ex-istent’. Thus a more correct term would be the eternal communing of the Trinity. “God is communion precisely because God is a Trinity of Persons. Three Persons and a single communion and a single Trinitarian community”<sup>10</sup> The ex-istent life of God must be realised in the community or communing of God in total presence, reciprocity and immediacy otherwise God cannot be life in all of its fullness. To express these dual concepts of life and the dynamic concept of communing, the term ‘perichoresis’ was developed in Christian theology.

### **Perichoretic Life**

Perichoresis is the theological term used to characterise the existence of God in the Trinity. It combines two concepts, which in Latin are known as ‘Circumcession’ and ‘Circuminsession’ as there are no adequate singular constructs in Latin to fully

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<sup>8</sup> Boff. L. Trinity and Society. Burns & Oates, 1988, p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> Boff. L. Trinity and Society. Burns & Oates, 1988, p. 127.

<sup>10</sup> Boff. L. Trinity and Society. Burns & Oates, 1988, p. 133.

express the Greek term. Circumincection is defined as, “The active *interpenetration* of the divine Persons between themselves, due to the eternal communion between them [Emphasis Mine]”<sup>11</sup> and Circumsession as, “The being or dwelling of one Person in another, since each divine Person exists only in the others, with the others, through the others and for the others”<sup>12</sup>. Thus we see in Perichoresis, the concepts of life and communion in fullest and deepest expression. The concept displays the rich relationship the Trinity enjoys, the interpenetration of the Godhead, the singular oneness that is defined in three persons. As to the mechanics of this process, that will remain a mystery for millennia!

### Trinity and Creation

Boff’s thought expands the perichoretic relationship of the Trinity to an expression of the Trinity within His creation. Creation is where the communing of God bursts forth outside of himself. Here we note the self-realizing and ex-istent forms of life in radical and necessary display. The eternal life, the perichoresis of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, their love, must find expression in a reality outside of themselves. The implied reason for this outward movement is pure love, a wanting to share oneself with others in the creation.

Three ‘ages’ of God’s involvement within creation are identified: The age of the Father, The age of the Son and the age of the Spirit. There is no ascendancy or succession implied within these ages, as that would preclude the perichoretic life of the Trinity. However, Boff does want to distinguish between the roles of the Trinity in creation.

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<sup>11</sup> Boff, L. **Trinity and Society**. Burns & Oates, 1988, p. 239.

<sup>12</sup> Boff, L. **Trinity and Society**. Burns & Oates, 1988, p. 239.

The age of the Father is primarily concerned with creating the order around us and the governing and judging of such. The age of the Son reaches its fulfilment where the, “incarnate Son died as a protest against the slaveries imposed on God’s sons and daughters”<sup>13</sup>. The work of the Son is continually to liberate the oppressed, beginning with the most poor and needy, giving himself at their service. The age of the Spirit moulds individuals and social movements to show the manifestation of the Trinity within the creation, through the lives of believers. This is again primarily directed toward the poor and oppressed. In this scheme, creation, especially the darkest and most troublesome parts of creation, are where the dynamic life of the Trinity is witnessed.

God’s overall purpose is to insert creation into the Trinity. The creation, men, will be taken up and be adopted sons, expressions of love and life in eternity. The dynamic communing of the Trinity will one day embrace creation to the fullest extent. It is with a graphic and wondrous description that Boff tantalises us.

“The universe in the triune God will be the body of the Trinity, showing forth, in the limited form of creation, the full possibility of the communion of the divine three. This is the festival of the redeemed. It is the celestial dance of the freed, the banquet of sons and daughters in the homeland and household of the Trinity, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit...we shall be loved by them, praised by them, invited to dance and sing, sing and dance, dance and love forever and ever, amen.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Boff, L. **Trinity and Society**. Burns & Oates, 1988, p. 229.

<sup>14</sup> Boff, L. **Trinity and Society**. Burns & Oates, 1988, p. 231.

## Trinity and Society

What are the practical implications of this ‘celestial dance’ of the Trinity? If we were to admire the Trinity from afar without participation, it would be hard for us to realise any practical application of Boff’s words, or indeed the doctrine of the Trinity. However, the perichoresis of the divine Trinity leaves us no such room for uninvolved non-participation. The key concept is found in humankind being caught up in the redemptive, liberating and creative action of the Trinity itself, participating within the communing dynamic of God.

The dance of the Trinity, involving creation leads us in our discussion of ‘mission’ within the liberationist tradition. It is not surprising that Boff sees the Trinity as the ‘inspiration and critique for human society’, as he envisages the whole of society being caught up in the outward dance of God. Firstly we can consider that God’s action and relation to the creation is solely related to his existence in the Trinity. It is defined by his very being. This has first relation to his church that have chosen to participate within the perichoretic mission of the Trinity, and secondly to humanity and creation as a whole. Amongst Boff’s primary concerns is that the doctrine of the Trinity contributes wholly to the Christian mission, but not in an academic sense. It is important that action is rooted in a real ‘concrete’ sense of praxis, otherwise the Trinity is not realised at all, and it remains academic rhetoric. This is known in liberationist thought as ‘orthopraxis’, or right doing. What then does the mission of God mean in contemporary concrete reality?

### **The Faces of Trinitarian Society**

Liberationists use a Marxist analysis of society to elicit meaning and praxis from majority oppression in Latin America. This analysis comprises concepts of class struggle and revolution, the conscientisation of the masses against the bourgeois elite who control the economic and social dynamics of society for their own gain (the means of production). Political involvement is not only necessary; it is inevitable. The mission of the Trinity then becomes couched and defined within these pseudo Marxist terms of revolution and struggle. We shall now examine some of the liberationist ‘faces’ of society that are inspired by the Trinity.

#### **The economically and socially marginalized**

The prime concern is liberation of the oppressed from primarily economic marginalisation. Marxist analysis is used to deduce the ‘true’ state of society, which is unashamedly based upon the economics of the means of production. Thus the phrases ‘God of the Poor’ or ‘Preferential Option for the Poor’ have been coined to characterise God’s attitude and involvement, his mission to society. The poor are the apple of Gods eye, the focus of his mission. The rich are the oppressors, and God opposes those who do not work on behalf of the poor. The involvement of God with the poor is not only seen that of emancipation from suffering, it is one of conscientisation and revolution. It is the educating and working with the poor from the base of society upwards, towards a better and correct life for everyone.

The ‘base communities’ are the driving force behind the liberationist movement. They are drawn from distinct geographical areas, meeting and living in community. It is within these communities that the social reality of the communal trinity is to be

primarily realised. The mission of God becomes realised in the emancipated human relationships present within them, and the subsequent overflow of those relationships in a creative and filial motion based upon the Godhead itself. In the words of Hebblethwaite, “The communities are built on a more vital, lively, intimate participation in a more or less homogenous entity, as their members seek to live the essence of the Christian message: the universal parenthood of God, communion with all human beings, the following of Jesus Christ who died and rose again, the celebration of the resurrection and the Eucharist, and the upbuilding of the Kingdom of God, already under way in history as the liberation of the whole human being and all human beings.”<sup>15</sup>

This creation of social reality is in stark contrast to the monarchical structures so typical of the church, capitalism and even some forms of socialist society. Boff commentates that these structures and their relationship within the world, are based upon a conceptual framework of a-trinitarian monotheism, a powerful and domineering God enforcing his will in a top down fashion, rather than the perichoretic Trinitarian God that we have been discussing. This point has also been echoed in the work of Moltmann<sup>16</sup> who sees nothing but oppression resulting from a non-communal, non-Trinitarian understanding of God. For Boff, the trinity is the symbol and vehicle of God’s prime mission to the oppressed, par-excellence.

“As this communion, participation and equality are at present denied to a majority of men and women, who remain oppressed and permanently marginalized, it has become

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<sup>15</sup> Hebblethwaite, M. **Base Communities: An Introduction**. Geoffrey Chapman, 1993, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Bauckham, R. “Jurgen Moltmann’s The Trinity and the Kingdom of God and the Question of Pluralism” in **The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age**. Ed. Vanhoozer, K.J., Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997, pp. 155-164.

urgent that a process of liberation should start from the oppressed themselves. Oppressed Christians find an incomparable inspiration for the liberation struggle in the God of their faith. This liberation aims to bring about participation and communion, the realities that most closely mirror the very mystery of Trinitarian communion in human history.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Gender Relationships**

As struggle and oppression is specifically targeted in a Marxist social analysis, it is not surprising that the issue of gender arises. In turn the issue of masculinity and femininity within the Godhead is discussed as having relevance to the mission of the Trinity. This may seem like a notional academic point. However, as the mission of God and the legitimisation of our various systems find their ultimate source in God alone, the source of male/female relationships acquires a new importance.<sup>18</sup>

In speaking of the Father, Boff suggests that both a paternal and maternal dimension of the deity are present. Primarily appealing to the Father being a single source of procreation, he presents a trans-sexist representation of the Father. Boff also appeals to female imagery used of God in passages such as Isaiah 49:15 or Isaiah 66:13. Using the imagery of the Son, he describes how the ministry of the Son had no place or time for the social structures of the day that oppressed women. They were in fact liberated within his presence. The emotive aspects of the Son, particularly in respect to compassion and relating to children are also appealed to, as the Son showing and giving his femininity ‘free reign’. Defining these qualities as ‘feminine’ is in my view somewhat problematic, but that is another discussion entirely. It is the work of the

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<sup>17</sup> Boff. L. **Trinity and Society**. Burns & Oates, 1988, p. 152.

<sup>18</sup> Discussed sporadically in Boff. L. **Trinity and Society**. Burns & Oates, 1988, p. 155-212.

Spirit to actualise these traits within the sons and daughters of God. Thus the Spirit is also involved in this gender liberating work.

Thus, male and female are equal; there is no gender patriarchy in the Godhead. Thus Boff can extrapolate the perichoretic dimension for gender in creation. There should be no gender hierarchy within the creation also. Femininity finds liberation from oppression in the existence of the Trinity whilst masculinity finds freedom to embrace feminine qualities. If gender were not to be liberated from oppression in the face of the Trinity, there would be a legitimisation of that oppression within creation. Again, we observe the emerging perichoretic link of the Godhead and creation that Boff is wishing to develop.

### **The Glory of God is the Mission of God**

The concept of the Glory of God provides the overarching framework for a definition of liberationist mission. Boff defines glory as, “the manifestation of the true reality of the triune God...it is showing the presence of the Trinity.” The glory is the realised ontological relationship of God to his creation in all of its saving and liberating significance. We have seen in our discussion that a significant understanding of the divine being is life expressed in perichoresis. The Glory of God, the realisation of his being in his creation provides us with the necessary link of understanding to mission. In fact it defines mission in all of its fullness. If freedom, relationship, community and kinship are the signs of God’s glory, then Boff’s words ring true when he speaks of the mission of God, “Only women and men freed from their oppressions can be signs

of universal fatherhood and kinship.”<sup>19</sup> The mission of the Trinity is summed in the revelation of his glory, which is solely defined in terms of the absence of oppression.

### **Comments upon Boff’s Trinitarian Framework**

Bonino a radical Wesleyan from Latin America voices some comments upon the Trinitarian framework proposed by Boff, and amongst others such as Guitierrez and Segundo. He is usually known as a liberationist, but his background is also from a holiness perspective.

Firstly, he is concerned that the revelation or acts of God in history, upon which liberationists put so much emphasis, take precedence over the very being of God, in defining the Trinity. He states, “It is possible to give such weight to God’s history with God’s world that God becomes a process which is somehow made possible by human action.”<sup>20</sup> For Bonino, the being of God, the immanent Trinity is preceding reality. Secondly, he is wary of stating that in God’s ‘synergy’ with human agents to express the divine perichoresis, this should not be done uncritically without judgement. One feels from his comments that he believes that within Liberationism (of which he radically approves) the work of the Trinity could be used to legitimise any human action with a ‘noble’ cause. Thirdly, Bonino is augmenting the liberationist position by drawing our attention to two theological points: The Trinity is indivisible in all outward activity; and the ‘appropriations’ that establish the distinctions between the persons of the Trinity.

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<sup>19</sup> Boff, L. **Trinity and Society**. Burns & Oates, 1988, p. 177.

<sup>20</sup> Bonino, J.M. “Salvation as the Work of the Trinity: An attempt at a Holistic Understanding from a Latin American Perspective” in **Trinity, Community and Power**. Abingdon Press, 2000, p.80.

“We have prioritised by our own decision which dimensions are more important in God’s work; even more, we have felt authorized to choose which “god” we want to honor – let the liberals serve the Creator, the evangelicals the Redeemer, and the Pentecostals the Spirit!”<sup>21</sup> Within this ‘tongue in cheek’ statement is a criticism at the development of specialist attention to part of God’s plan and mission at the exclusion of other parts. Is this a hint within Liberationism of wanting to look wider than mere material liberation as a sign of the mission and presence of God within his creation? He draws attention to the specific missions of the Son and Spirit within the Trinity. He looks for mutual respect and kinsman-ship between brothers and sisters who have been brought under the headship of the Son, and looks for the Spirit to galvanise our Christian praxis through discernment and wisdom. However, one detects a note of hesitancy, discernment, in the definition and substance of that praxis.

Volf<sup>22</sup> along with Boff and Moltmann wishes to underline our understanding of mission, the church and society as Trinitarian rather than monotheistic. This again is due to the power abuses that are inevitable from a non-Trinitarian perspective. Within this perspective he postulates that the Trinity are, “living realizations of separate centers of action”<sup>23</sup> (drawing upon Pannenberg). He provides us with another understanding of the outward motion of the Trinity. Formally being an engineer I draw on a mechanical allusion. I think of three great engines, centres of activity, driving the one vehicle of Gods relational grace and love toward and into mankind.

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<sup>21</sup> Bonino, J.M. “Salvation as the Work of the Trinity: An attempt at a Holistic Understanding from a Latin American Perspective” in Trinity, Community and Power. Abingdon Press, 2000, p.82.

<sup>22</sup> Volf, M. “Trinity and Church” in After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998, pp. 191-214.

<sup>23</sup> Volf, M. “Trinity and Church” in After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998, p.215.

### **A Model Rooted in the Trinity?**

A hesitancy remarked upon by many scholars is of the use of, and heavy reliance upon a Marxist analysis of social reality. Liberationists such as Guitierrez and Boff are critically conscious of Marxism in their positions. However, the driving force that pushes their specialist emphasis upon the poor and the oppressed is not solely the Trinity, it is Marxism tied with being present in conditions of harsh social reality. This leads to an elevation of the status of being poor and oppressed in moral terms. Surely, God favours them because of their position in life? Carras helps us to understand the pitfalls of this view,

“the Gospel’s concept of poverty is not one of relative deprivation but of destitution or exclusion from normal society. Once such a condition has been overcome there can be no automatic assumption that in a social conflict between classes the immediate advantage of the relatively poorer should be preferred to that of the relatively richer. Nor can one be certain the relatively richer are more ‘unchristian’: envy no more represents an acceptable Christian motivation than does greed.”<sup>24</sup>

In using a social analysis that is tied up with conflict between the social classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, it is inevitable that a mission model would arise with a substantial element of conflict and a bias toward the economically poor. In commenting upon liberationist analysis, Hundley states, “Liberation Theology has substituted social analysis for Scripture as the centre of theology...in doing so, it has ceased to be a theology and become an ideology.”<sup>25</sup> Whilst not agreeing fully with his analysis in Liberationism not being theology, the significant element of social analysis

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<sup>24</sup> Carras, C. “The Doctrine of the Trinity in Relation to Political Action and Thought” in **The Forgotten Trinity 3.** British Council of Churches, 1991, p. 181.

<sup>25</sup> Hundley, R.C. **Radical Liberation Theology.** Bristol Books, 1989, p. 57.

is evident. A quirky and interesting example to illustrate our point is that Kee criticises Liberationism for not being Marxist enough! Kee believes that Marx has not been given free rein in Liberationism; rather he has been used within limits, as a consultant. This has led to selectivity; especially when considering the socio-religious analysis of Marxism. Religion is used as part of Althusser's 'Ideological State Apparatus', the use of religion as an opiate of the people and part of a mechanism to subjugate the masses. The result for Kee is a somewhat contradictory theology that implodes intellectually, "the fact that under the rubric of liberation theology we find proposals that are very conservative in terms of theology, though progressive in social terms, tends to undermine the critical capacity of that theology when taken in overall terms"<sup>26</sup>. The fact that Liberationism develops upon significant strands of Marxism is not in doubt!

In an attempt to round our discussion, we can examine the hermeneutical work of Segundo<sup>27</sup> in relation to the 'Option for the Poor'. In interpreting the gospel, the revelation of God of himself, his triadic communing nature of love, Segundo's hermeneutical key is that of the poor and the oppressed and God's bias to them. He states that the gospel text itself is not sufficiently forceful to shake this initial entry assumption into the hermeneutical spiral. Thus, in his case, the oppressed and the poor, the Exodus narrative and his social analysis, shape the interpretation of the work of the Trinity that he receives from revelation. Can we see in this position, grounds for the accusation that social analysis has replaced Scripture as prime revelation?

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<sup>26</sup> Kee, A. Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology. SCM Press, 1990, p. 260.

<sup>27</sup> Segundo, J.L. "The Option for the Poor" in Theological Reflections. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993.

Thus, can we say that the model presented to us by the liberationists is rooted in the Trinity? For the sake of argument let us state a tentative affirmative to this question. This is however not without comment, with Bonino in particular contributing some helpful pointers and safeguards in our direction. Hundley and Carras note the roots of social analysis in the formation of Liberationism. However, we can conclude that theologically, Liberationism does contribute to our understanding of the mission of the Trinity, and in that sense is rooted in the Trinity. However, we have also observed that this operation is dependent upon a particular social analysis, namely Marxism. Thus, could we say that the liberationist model is truncated in terms of mission and indeed theology as a whole? Within missiology, talk of critical contextualisation is popular. Could liberation theology be a contextualisation of mission? Is it possible that Liberationism has understood in part but not the whole? Some evangelicals such as Hundley would, to quote a saying, “Throw the baby out with the bath water”, some like myself, are a little more cautious and would like to learn what we can from the unique and challenging views of the Liberationists.

### **Liberationism: A Viable Model for Mission?**

We can now focus our attention upon the viability and character of the mission praxis that arises from Liberationism. We have examined the movement of the Trinity within creation, whose ontological relation is defined by the liberating effect upon human relationships, particularly those of the economically poor and oppressed whom God favours. In this vein, we would expect to see concrete examples of this mission model, the dance of the trinity enveloping and uplifting the oppressed classes in our world.

Alistair McGrath contends that liberation theology, is essentially an academic movement that is out of touch with the reality of ordinary people. “Liberation theology appeared well intentioned towards popular Latin American culture, but was perceived to be bookish, intellectualist and out of touch with the ordinary people. You’d need a degree of some kind to understand, for example, what Leonardo Boff was saying”<sup>28</sup>. McGrath is not opposing the need for orthopraxis; he is asking, what is the point of a movement on behalf of a group that can seem inaccessible to it? Is that mission ontologically relational or to use another term, incarnational?

To show the need for orthopraxis, McGrath commends the role and significant growth of the Pentecostal church in Latin America. He believes that this so, simply because Pentecostalism is meeting the needs of the people head on, rather than in academic fashion. Peterson provides an evaluation of the material attractions of Pentecostalism, proceeding conversion and an encounter with the Holy Spirit. Amongst divine healing, gifts of the Spirit and the like, he is also seeking to answer the charge from liberationists and other groups that Pentecostalism is otherworldly and not engaged with the poor and the needy.

“Pentecostal congregations, quite unlike a group with a mind only on heavenly things, are highly involved in alleviating pain and suffering in the physical realm. They establish programmes and institutions...which reach out to women and children who have been doubly marginalized...Literacy programmes for adults – offered so that believers can read the Bible for themselves, schools for children and adolescents, rehabilitation programmes for alcoholics and drug addicts as well as a multitude of

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<sup>28</sup> “The Transformation of Religion: The Reshaping of Christianity” in **The Future of Christianity**. Blackwell, 2002, p. 37.

other active expressions of social concern have been established. If their experience is, on the one hand, intensely personal, spiritual, eternal and mystical; on the other hand then, it is unquestionably corporate, practical, and committed to alleviating the pain of real life situations with much needed compassion”<sup>29</sup>

Kee in examining the work of Boff in Brazil is seeking to observe the mission model at work from the base of society, within the base communities that we discussed beforehand. Using the example of rubber gatherers in northern Brazil, Kee states that Liberationism had no answer for these dis-enfranchised, oppressed, and poorest of the poor people. Their society was not at a stage where effective communities could be formed, thus the conscientisation of their position could never occur. Talking of this example Kee states, “It will be along time before they are able to form basic communities, or take steps to liberate themselves. Boff has no liberation theology for them, nor apparently does he gain any inspiration form them in this direction.”<sup>30</sup> Further to that, Kee is keenly critical of Boff in his relationship to traders to push his strategy forward. In his view, he is working against his own principles by working with and gaining the favour of the closest type of bourgeois to the rubber traders. It seems that with the poorest of the poor, the academic Marxist social analysis has no answer, thus the action and mission of the Trinity within Liberationism is cut off by a limited and truncated political analysis. Within Liberationism, the most primitive of peoples are not reached by the Trinity and will remain so.

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<sup>29</sup> Peterson, D. “Pentecostals: Who are they?” in **Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the whole gospel**. Regnum, 1999, p.98.

<sup>30</sup> Kee, A. **Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology**. SCM Press, 1990, p. 261.

Wogaman<sup>31</sup> brings us a very interesting point regarding the relation of liberation theology to humanity. Our examination of Boff's Trinitarian missiology shows us his great concern for the communing of humanity in equality and love, using the model of the Trinity as inspiration, in fact being caught up in the divine community. Revolution, whether by peaceful means or conflict is the way to achieve the mission of the Trinity within humankind. To these sentiments, Wogaman essentially poses a question, 'Do Liberationist attitudes toward oppressors show and express the divine perichoresis?' He surveys the position of Guitierrez by defining that liberation theology sees revolution as expressing love to the oppressor by depriving him of his selfishness, ambition and power so he is free to live a 'free' life.

Whilst recognising the dehumanising aspect of oppression of the oppressor as well as the oppressed, Wogaman remains sceptical. He asks whether the liberationist perspective is willing to listen to its adversaries.

"It is one thing to acknowledge the humanity of the adversary and to insist that the overcoming of oppression is as important for the oppressor as the oppressed...But it is another to acknowledge the humanity of the adversary by taking seriously the possibility that even the oppressor may have some part of the deeper human truth to share...when human beings are fundamentally and persistently defined as allies or adversaries, as oppressors or oppressed, the tendency is to lose sight of their humanity"<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Wogaman, J.P. "Christian Liberationist Perspectives" in Christian Perspectives on Politics. Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000, pp. 79-101.

<sup>32</sup> Wogaman, J.P. "Christian Liberationist Perspectives" in Christian Perspectives on Politics. Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000, p. 101.

Wogaman's observation regarding the character of liberationist mission is a very important one. Conflict, violence and power engender friends and foes; they do not seek reconciliation, community and love with all humankind, simply our allies in the fight. The very terms we use, fight, foe, enemy and ally are separatist terms. Is our dance of the Trinity throughout creation a dance of the warring Lord, embracing the downtrodden but stigmatising and reviling oppressors? Is that the mission of the Trinity? Wogaman is correct in his scepticism.

Our examination of praxis has shown us that a Trinitarian model of mission based upon liberationist principles, is at best truncated and not fully expressive of the divine perichoresis of the Trinity. The lowest of the low, those without community, those without fellowship, the 'primitive', cannot be reached, as community revolution is essential to the liberationist Trinity. These people will always be taken advantage of and oppressed. If the Trinity simply liberates these people from societal oppression they have no purpose in existence, they are futile.

Perhaps this is partly the reason for the observations of McGrath in seeing Liberationism as lofty and academic. Within the Pentecostalism commentated upon by Peterson, do we see another side of the Triune God? Do people encounter a God working within individuals, bringing them into personal relationship with the divine Trinity? They may still be oppressed, but they have found freedom, purpose and meaning. Their emancipation is not wholly dependent upon the social status quo! Wogaman's observations are also useful in that they show us a liberationist system, that due to social and political ideology contains various strains of thought that run counter to the communing and procession of the divine Trinity.

What good then has Liberationism done for understanding the mission of the Trinity?

It has brought to us the notion of God's concern (not exclusive concern) for the oppressed, his option for the poor and oppressed in every sphere. It has shown us that radical measures are sometimes necessary to act on the behalf of a humanity whom God loves. Perhaps it's greatest strength is to show us that the ontological community of the Trinity demands that we show love practically and incarnationally with full equality and acceptance within humankind.

### **Conclusion**

Together with some helpful comments from other commentators, we have examined the theological standpoint of Leonardo Boff in regards to the Trinity and mission. We have then briefly analysed the roots, praxis and character of liberationist mission as a movement.

Our discussion now comes full circle. Let us return to Newbigin and his plea that the Trinity needs to form our focus, the loci of communicating our God within the public arena. We have discovered that within Latin America, the Trinity has in some part inspired a theology, an understanding of church, that has the potential to communicate directly with people in their contemporary situation. Whether this attempt has succeeded or not is a matter for further debate. However, the old enlightenment inspired 19<sup>th</sup> century School of mission is being revolutionised by amongst other elements, consideration of the Trinity.

What challenge can we take from this discussion? Has God laid a challenge before us to rethink our contemporary situations in a Trinitarian shape? God's very being wants to reach out, to share himself, and to include people within his communing creation. God's very being and his overflowing mission, bring liberation to the heart of humankind. We have seen from our discussion that this can inspire the radical change of social situations, although correct character is important.

God is a liberating Trinity in every sense of the word. We must work with him to make the truth a radical and contemporary public truth that embraces people. Let us take inspiration from liberationists, no matter what one may think of their social analysis, for their brave attempt to make the Trinity radically and socially contemporary.

(5771 Words)

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