

# All for One or One for All? Liberation Theology and the Quest for Self- Determination in Latin America, Israel, Palestine, and the United States

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## INTRODUCTION

At the onset of the apartheid regime halfway into the twentieth century, many Afrikaners believed they engaged in a righteous God ordained struggle of liberation. After decades of British suppression they would now be free to fulfill their Christian mission and preside over South Africa. Later that century anti-apartheid activists would similarly invoke the Scriptures, this time to urge the liberation of blacks from Afrikaner oppression. In both cases people claimed the right to self-determination partly on the basis of their faith. In the first case theological notions of liberation and election helped bolster a profoundly exclusivist ideology and systematic racism. Within the anti-apartheid movement theologians, on the contrary, sought to develop an inclusive theology that advocated freedom for all of humanity.<sup>1</sup>

Although the above illustration involves significant difficulties on its own accord, the two divergent attitudes towards theology and freedom bring us to an important broader question. How might theologies of liberation boost a community's search for self-determination without resorting to exclusivism or nationalism and its potentially lethal excesses? Liberation theology may help release people from dominating forces, whether economic, political, cultural, or otherwise. But what to do when one community's fight for freedom becomes another's source of oppression?

To explore these questions this paper will draw from four different traditions. Comparing major liberation theologies from Latin America, Israel, Palestine, and among American Indians in the United States,<sup>2</sup> it aims to analyze how

1 For further elaboration see for instance: Tristan A. Borer. *Challenging the State: Churches As Political Actors in South Africa, 1980-1994*. Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998; Richard Elphick and T R. H. Davenport. *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1997.

2 The following works will be considered: Naim S. Ateek. *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, (N.Y: Orbis Books, 1989); George E. Tinker. *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty*. Maryknoll, (N.Y: Orbis Books, 2008); George E. Tinker. *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004); Gustavo Gutiérrez and James B. Nickoloff. *Essential Writings*. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1996); Marc H. Ellis. *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*. (London: SCM, 2002).

they confront dilemmas of liberation and self-determination in terms of ethics, in vision as well as actions on the ground. In all four regions theologians seek to balance the quest towards liberating their own communities with ensuring respect for one's neighbors. This becomes particularly intricate when the latter are perceived as oppressors. With his Palestinian theology of liberation, Naim Ateek, for instance, makes a thoughtful effort to reach out to Jewish Israelis and stresses their right to a secure Jewish homeland. The American Jewish theologian Mark Ellis meanwhile aspires to an inclusive theology that considers the suffering of both Jews and Palestinians. Equally interesting are the works by Gustavo Gutiérrez and George Tinker. Where the former's preference for the poor appears to cross Latin America's national and community borders, Tinker presents Indians' self-determination as a primary condition for theirs as well as other Americans' liberation from capitalist consumer culture.

While the four mentioned authors widely differ in the causes they engage with and the approaches they take to liberation theology, each stresses the need for autonomy. Only with the freedom to decide for themselves can individuals as well as communities reach the state of liberation God desires for them. On what ethics do the various authors base this call for autonomy and to what extent do they acknowledge potential dangers in seeking self-determination?

To guide the discussion on these matters, focus will be given to the insights provided by Gregory Baum in his book *Nationalism, Religion and Ethics*.<sup>3</sup> Building on various religious philosophies, Baum seeks to understand how nationalism can be ethically acceptable. Key to the ethics he relates is the notion of justice as well as respect for others. Communities may strive for autonomy as long as they advocate for a just society, respect people from different groups, cooperate with neighbors, and refuse to see their nation or group as the highest good. Regarding the latter Baum explicitly stresses the extent to which identities are constructed rather than natural or static categories one is born into. Individuals as much as communities need always be aware of the social experiences that shaped their sense of self. It changes in time and is hence far from absolute. This however does not mean that notions like nationhood or religious or ethnic identity are illusory. They are experienced as real and should be valued as such. The challenge according to Baum is to be able to sustain and cherish one's identities while bearing in mind the dangers of any ultimate truth claim, whether religious, secular, liberal or otherwise. With these principles the author sketches a potential theological basis for communities to protect and build upon their own traditions and simultaneously remain open to engagement in an increasingly globalized and diverse world.

Translating Baum's principles to the writings of Naim Ateek, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Mark Ellis, and George Tinker, the following pages examine if and how their theologies ensure an ethical approach to self-determination. In the conclusion we will turn to the difficulties raised earlier in relation to South Africa. If faith can inspire people to engage in an exclusive battle for just one community's freedom or

in a broader liberation struggle for all, how can liberation theology make a difference and promote the latter?

### SOCIAL ETHICS: BETWEEN FREEDOM AND FIDELITY

Before examining their ethics in relation to issues of self-determination, it is important to outline some of the overall principles on which the four authors base their liberation theologies. Gustavo Gutiérrez first of all is most known for his concept of a "preferential option for the poor." God, according to the Peruvian theologian, has a special love for all those who experience material deprivation, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender. To liberate them from oppression requires unequivocal solidarity. Key to this solidarity is the full commitment of both the Catholic Church and each individual Christian to fostering structural change, social justice, and equal economic development in today's world.

Mark Ellis in turn translates the notion of solidarity to all those suffering persecution, particularly in the historical context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the center of his Jewish liberation theology is the notion of an "inclusive liturgy of destruction." It incorporates the struggles of both Jews and Palestinians, in the past and present. Building on ethical traditions and critical thought within Judaism, Ellis emphasizes values of fidelity and shared empowerment rather than the tendency of what he refers to as "Holocaust theologies" to focus exclusively on Jewish survival. His work displays strong linkages to that of Naim Ateek. The Episcopalian priest incorporates both his Palestinian heritage and Israeli citizenship in a theology that seeks justice for Palestinians while safeguarding a Jewish homeland in the state of Israel. Justice for Ateek implies first and foremost the right for his people to have full autonomy and establish a viable state on the lands they inhabit. Most important is to remain true to the message of Jesus Christ and his principles of love and forgiveness. These should, according to Ateek, form a leading guide in any approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and for Palestinian Christians in particular.

George Tinker, finally, builds his American Indian liberation theology primarily on the belief in his community's right to determine their own way of life. For this purpose, Indians need to be set free from the United States' dominating Euro-American culture and its individualist consumerism. In indigenous traditions all of God's creation is sacred. People care for their communities as much as they do for the natural resources their Creator provided. Fostering respect for the entire earth, American Indian values would, in Tinker's view, not only benefit Indians, but also American society at large.

As the above overview shows, the four theologians hold widely different views of liberation. For all of them, however, liberation denotes a level of freedom so that people can shape their own lives and communities. Taking a closer look at the authors' ethics in this respect, we may discern three common trends. First among them is the interconnectedness of liberation with notions of justice and autonomy. To liberate means to secure an equal and just society, which in turn requires independence from domineering powers. The latter may be felt in various

<sup>3</sup> Gregory Baum. *Nationalism, Religion, and Ethics*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).

ways. Where Gutiérrez is primarily, though not solely, concerned with economic exploitation, Ellis and Ateek note the dangers of political subjection, and along with Tinker, the misappropriation of land. Irrespective of the form it takes, each author embraces the fundamental belief in God's desire for people to be released from the dominion of others. Essential to this belief is that it refers to matters of this world and not merely the afterlife. Gutiérrez states this most clearly when he claims that the kingdom of God is not something that might happen at the end of times, but is "at hand and in process of being brought to completion."<sup>4</sup> The kingdom might hold a messianic promise of justice for all within human history. It will, however, not be achieved unless one works towards it here and now by helping advance the emancipation of contemporary men and women.

Such emancipation meanwhile does not entail socio-economic development alone. As Tinker indicates, it also involves communities' ability to preserve their native cultures. Ellis adds to this the need to ensure respect for the rights of other groups. The establishment of Israel after the Holocaust may be seen as an ultimate form of Jewish emancipation. However, it has been accompanied by large-scale disempowerment of their Palestinian neighbors as well as continued preoccupation of Jews with their own victimhood. Ellis hence warns of the potential costs of empowerment: "The desire to remain a victim is evidence of disease; yet, to become a conqueror after having been a victim is a recipe for moral suicide."<sup>5</sup>

This last quote brings us to a second ethical trend that comprises the relation between liberation and solidarity. For all four authors freedom should never be an individual cause, or even limited to one particular community. True liberation requires support for all who suffer, across time, place, and nation. Most explicit in this respect is Marc Ellis. Building on writings by Etty Hillesum and Martin Buber, he stresses the need for fidelity among the deprived. Especially Jews and Palestinians need to realize how deeply their respective struggles are connected and how both demand equal concern. Rather than blaming one for the pain of the other, they should seek to reach out to one another. Here both Ellis and Ateek note the special capacities found among those who have gone through intense horrors in the past. Such experience may allow people to better understand today's persecuted, as well as realize the importance of love and forgiveness. Gutiérrez similarly recognizes the special position of the poor as a moral justification for solidarity. He makes clear however that this position is not attached to any specific group, nor does it suggest that one community is better than others. It is only the fact that they are suffering that provides the poor priority in the eyes of God and earns them the care of others.

Attention should therefore be paid to both the oppressed and the oppressors. Not only might the latter have been victims of past atrocities. They also suffer from their own dominant behavior as it deprives them of true engagement with fellow human beings and with God. This notion of solidarity is not unambiguous though. Ateek and Tinker both seek to be considerate of the troubles facing

4 Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings*, 174.

5 Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, 31.

their tormentors, whether Jewish Israeli or Euro-American. Simultaneously, they indicate the urgent need of concentrating first on their own communities. The ongoing expansion of settlements in the West Bank makes it hard to empathize with settlers who might suffer traumatic Holocaust memories. Indian Americans meanwhile have their hands full with defending their particular lifestyles against the mass culture surrounding them. Engaging with broader social issues in the United States might distract from the indigenous cause and deplete its already scarce resources.

The dilemmas Palestinian and Indian liberation theologians are facing over which community to prioritize returns in a final common ethic. Core to the principles of each of the discussed theologians is the concept of a universalistic God. God would not only care for people's freedom, but would also do so without singling out any specific nation or group. Ateek explicates this by noting the evolution in the Scriptures from a nationalist to a more inclusive conception of a God who does not merely elect one people, the Israelites, but cares for all of humanity equally. While discerning references to this perspective throughout the Old Testament, Ateek highlights its culmination in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As he quotes Paul: "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."<sup>6</sup>

Tinker extends this perspective towards a vision in which all of God's creation is sacred, from each human being to every animal, stone, or tree. At the same time, he and Ateek as well as Ellis point to the importance of preserving particular cultures and values against universalizing trends. God might bestow everyone with equal rights, but this does not mean all differences should be equalized. In the face of worldwide tendencies towards capitalism, consumerism, and excessive individualism, these theologians fear for the decline of communal values. Furthermore, Ellis in particular perceives a threat from imperialist attitudes rising among Christians and Jews, as well as Muslims. With the term 'Constantinian' he describes these attitudes as focused on the expansion of one culture or religion at the expense of others, while rebuffing any attempt towards self-critique.<sup>7</sup> To counter such trends it is essential to revive within one's own community ethics of dialogue and reflection, service and care for each other. Only then will it be possible to truly liberate oneself from oppression and join in the kingdom God intends for all.

Relating the discussed principles to the ethics laid out in Baum's work, they appear largely in common. Each author stresses the need to balance their search for liberation and autonomy with social justice and respect for one's neighbors. More complicated is the refusal to perceive one's collective identity as the highest good. In all four traditions theologians are struggling to bolster their specific community concerns and meanwhile maintain solidarity with the larger society and other communities around them. Although one does not have to exclude the other, the equal consideration of all may not always be effective. If American Indians

6 Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 99.

7 Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, 187 / 206-213.

would present themselves as one of America's many minority groups, would they ever gain recognition for their specific history and rights? And can Palestinians afford stepping down their claim on statehood so that Israelis would feel more at ease? One may wonder whether groups that confront severe and immediate oppression have the luxury to relativize their identity, let alone empathize with others. Perhaps the only way to voice their demands is by highlighting their specific community, not as the highest good, but with enough emphasis that dominating powers can no longer ignore its demands. To what extent do such ethical predicaments return in the authors' broader visions of liberation?

#### SOCIAL VISION: BETWEEN SELF-EMPOWERMENT AND SECURITY

Developing ethics of liberation and self-determination is one thing, but their translation into an actual vision for change raises a whole new set of questions. Who is included, and who remains outside the picture? What implications does one community's dream have for broader society? Three types of responses emerge out of the different traditions under consideration here. Firstly, each of the four authors seeks to explain what an autonomous future might look like for their respective constituencies. In essence, this would entail that people are free to decide their own destiny. Tinker elaborates upon such freedom and envisions a society in which American Indians are in full control of where and how they live, the way they raise their children, and which leaders will guide their communities. Sovereignty in this perspective reaches far beyond a community's mere existence or survival. "What we [Indians] want is life in the sense of self-sufficient, cultural, spiritual, political, and economic sustainability – on our own terms."<sup>8</sup>

Gutiérrez brings to this another, more personal dimension. In his vision for the Latin American poor he looks forward to the day in which they will be agents of their own lives. Liberation according to him involves interior sovereignty and the awareness of each individual's capacities to elevate one-self. The deprived will be conscious that they do not have to be poor, that God does not want them to remain marginalized.<sup>9</sup> While Ellis and Ateek agree with most of the above, their vision of autonomy centers on a more specific level, that of nationhood. Essential for them is that the Palestinian and Jewish people will as nations have the freedom to rule over their lands and livelihoods. It leads them towards a second line of response: liberation in the form of statehood.

At the core of this vision is the idea that statehood, especially when democratic, is imperative for a people or nation to achieve true justice and freedom. It allows them to be first-class citizens and in charge of their own economy, as well as political and cultural affairs, rather than being dependent on others. Ateek is most adamant in this respect. For him the only just future is one in which a viable Palestinian state is established on at least part of the lands his people have inhabited for ages. Notably, the Palestinian theologian recognizes that none of these

8 Tinker, *American Indian Liberation*, 81.

9 Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings*, 184-190.

lands are owned by any specific people. It is first and foremost God's land. Here he quotes from a passage in Leviticus in which the Israelites are told that: "the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me."<sup>10</sup>

In addition, Ateek perceives a continued existence of Israel as a Jewish state. Here he overlaps with Ellis who also envisions a two state solution to the suffering of both Jews and Palestinians. Though neither may be fully entitled to any part of the land, they each require a sovereign state. History has shown that without such autonomy Palestinians as well as Jews face serious persecution or subjugation by others. The vision of statehood hence appears to have more to do with security concerns than with national claims to a holy land.

This brings us to a third way in which the four theologians imagine the outcome of their liberation cause. Besides autonomy, they ultimately strive for an inclusive world in which their own and other people feel safe from persecution and free to fully develop themselves. The notion of safety may even trump aspirations to complete self-determination. In discussing the possibility of a Palestinian state that includes what is now Israel, Ateek makes it unmistakably clear: "We should put aside the idea of one democratic Palestine and insist on preserving the Jewish character of Israel so as to alleviate the insecurity of the Jewish people."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Ellis emphasizes that any two state solution should prioritize a fair distribution of land along with a sincere commitment to security on both sides. Matters of culture and identity can be determined at a later stage in dialogue with all involved parties. For the moment it is more important that Israelis and Palestinians build a common basis of pain as much as healing. The shared empowerment that evolves from this basis forms the key to the Jewish liberation vision. It entails a profound awareness that neither community can move forward as long it harms the other. "As we celebrate our empowerment," Ellis asserts of the progress Jews have made in recent decades, "we must repent of our transgressions and stop them immediately."<sup>12</sup>

The importance of sharing also occurs in Indian and Latin American theologians. In the end Tinker believes liberation of indigenous peoples could help foster a culture of care across the United States. Rather than ownership of certain lands or statehood, he desires a shift in consumption patterns that allows a more communal approach to the earth's resources as found within Indian spiritual traditions. Likewise, Gutiérrez envisages a liberated Catholic Church that commits itself to service only. No longer an exclusive space for salvation, it will be un-centered and focused entirely on supporting all those in need whatever their background.<sup>13</sup>

What the above visions display is once more a careful balancing act between group specific and broader notions of liberation. The former appears to receive the most prominence. Whether in the form of cultural sovereignty, personal empowerment, or national statehood, all theologians frame their ultimate goal within the

10 Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 106.

11 Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 166.

12 Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, 212.

13 Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings*, 243-246.

immediate needs of their constituencies. This may be of little surprise for theologies explicitly designed towards Palestinians, Jews, Indians, and the Latin American poor. It does raise qualms about some of the ethics discussed earlier. Particularly the notion of solidarity seems at stake. In his aspirations toward American Indian sovereignty, Tinker displays scarce consideration of the possible anxieties this may elicit among white Americans. Meanwhile Ateek's "Dream of Peace" says little about how to approach Jewish settlers now living in his future state. What kind of solidarity might they need?

Despite the initial and understandable priority for their particular audiences, the authors each make significant effort to broaden their goal. Gutiérrez, especially, takes a wide approach that involves basically all engaged Christians, poor or not, from within or outside of Latin America. The Palestinian and Jewish theologies also show a high level of inclusivity in their larger visions. Both realize one cannot live in justice without ensuring the same for the other. The deeper meaning of this neighborly concern however remains unclear. Does Ateek recognize a Jewish state of Israel for the sake of the Jews, or more for his own conscience, or Palestinians' benefit? And what to make of Ellis' shared empowerment? Will that truly help elevate Palestinians out of their current quagmire? With again more questions than answers it becomes paramount to turn our attention to concrete actions. The next section will explore how the four theologians propose to translate their ethics and visions into actual change on the ground.

#### **SOCIAL PROJECT: BETWEEN CONFESSION AND CONVERSATION**

No liberation theology is complete without tangible suggestions for how to reach the envisioned autonomy. This much becomes clear in each of the writings. Where Gutiérrez speaks of a new pastoral praxis, Ellis and Tinker call for policy changes, while Ateek urges his people to search for internal justice and forgiveness. Translating words into action is vital to all four theologies. Differences occur when it comes to the level at which such action should take place. Who needs to change what and how?

For Ateek and Gutiérrez transformation begins on a personal scale. "The challenge," Ateek writes, "to Palestinian Christians, and indeed to all Palestinians and to all people in this conflict in Israel-Palestine, is: do not destroy yourself with hate; maintain your inner freedom; insist on justice, work for it, and it shall be yours."<sup>14</sup> In order to achieve liberation, individuals should contemplate their own participation in cycles of hatred and humiliation. It makes a difference if an Israeli soldier treats a Palestinian passenger well at the checkpoint, just as it matters if the latter approaches the soldier as a human being and not merely an instrument of oppression. In the end all are God's children and deserve to be treated as such. Ateek thus implores his people to incorporate Christ's message into every aspect of life. This is the message Christ gave to humanity when he called for forgiveness while hanging from the cross. If he could turn his other cheek even then, Ateek

14 Ateek. *Justice, and Only Justice*, 187.

believes Palestinian Christians should also open their hearts. Threatening one's oppressors with revenge will only lead to more violence and humiliation on all sides. The Palestinian theologian however does not call for unconditioned love and forgiving. True love requires honesty and in this case, the duty to address injustices on the part of Israel.

Similar words can be heard in the Latin American context. Wealthy or poor, no one has an excuse to disengage from his or her fellow humans. In Gutiérrez's words, "our encounter with the Lord occurs in our encounter with others."<sup>15</sup> If we forsake our selfishness, he asserts, we not only help liberate the deprived, but also ourselves. For through loving our neighbors we will be closer to God. Throughout his writings, the Peruvian priest hence calls upon Christians to reflect and act within their direct environment. Where will the poor in your neighborhood sleep tonight, he asks, and what can you do for them? However important personal behavior is, Gutiérrez as well as the other theologians recognize it is scarcely sufficient.

Liberation requires structural change, implying the involvement of society at large. Tinker and Ellis therefore give precedence to the community level. For the former it is of paramount importance that white Americans acknowledge the pain inflicted upon indigenous people over the past centuries. Individual confessions will not suffice. Without a broader recognition of the patterns of oppression inherent to Euro-American culture, history is likely to repeat itself. This repetition also forms a major concern in Jewish liberation theology. Aware of the traumas still present within Jewish communities worldwide, Ellis notes the necessity of addressing them collectively. Jews should not only remember the Holocaust, but also the events that followed. What suffering was caused to ensure Jews' survival after 1945, and after they established their state on Palestinian lands? When do the oppressed become oppressors themselves?

Such questions demand critical reflection which, according to Ellis, is best conducted on the basis of traditions intrinsic to Judaism. Here he singles out the importance Jews have always given to communal solidarity as well as bearing witness against idolatry. The indisputable support for Israel would in this perspective be a reminder of the very idealization God denounced and undermine values of commonality with one's neighbors. To revive such values Ellis urges for sincere dialogue within and among the communities involved. More concretely, he encourages Americans, Palestinians and Israelis, Jews, and Muslims and Christians, to engage in conversation with one another. Together they can break with Constantinian trends towards exclusivism and imperialist expansion. The dialogues should moreover confront persistent anti-Semitism, help embrace each other's differences and foster mutual critique. Ateek takes this a step further and appeals to both Palestinian and Jewish communities to actively change their attitudes. For the former it is crucial to acknowledge the horrors of the Holocaust, whereas Jews should come to terms with the pain of Palestinians. Like Tinker, Ateek requests

15 Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings*, 155.

a confession of wrongdoing. It is time for Jews to state without reservations: "We have wronged you."<sup>16</sup>

Again, the question rises how affective the above propositions are. In addition to individual and collective actions, the four theologians each seek to reach out to influential elites. Whether they involve religious institutions, clergy, or political leaders, without the engagement of authorities the envisioned liberation is likely to have limited impact. Gutiérrez appears particularly aware of this caveat. Time and again he urges the Catholic Church and its leading priests, bishops, and pastors to take a stand. They can no longer remain on the sidelines, but should publicly declare their solidarity with the poor and translate this into immediate action. Besides providing bread to the hungry or shelter for the homeless, churches need to engender structural change by addressing social injustices and calling attention to political oppression. Here Gutiérrez, for instance, refers to the difficulties facing his fellow Peruvians. In a country where political leaders may still get away with atrocities they committed in the past, he perceives it to be a Christian duty to challenge immunity claims and demand prosecution.

Equally important is to conduct in-depth social analysis and promote a critical reading of the Scriptures. The latter should help uncover Christ's true message of justice and love. Transferring this message to the context of their current societies then allows Christians to identify inequalities and advocate for change. Furthermore, Gutiérrez emphasizes the need to read the Bible as in a dialogue, with both questions and answers for the reader. Tinker and Ateek follow this line and extend it towards their own cultures. Indian Americans should connect the Christian notion of creation with their spiritual traditions and promote an interpretation of the Scriptures that appreciates all of creation equally. For Palestinian Christians it is important to consider the words of Jesus Christ as primary guide through both the Old and New Testament and perceive their land as holy for all of humanity. Each author makes clear that anyone can and should take up such reflective Bible reading. Theologians and priests have the special task to disseminate the gospel of justice and instigate discussions within and outside their communities.

Fundamental change on the ground, Ellis and Ateek realize, requires the involvement of policy makers. Their Jewish and Palestinian theologies set out several ideas on how to alter the current political situation. Essential to Ellis is for the United States to develop a more equal foreign policy that gives less focus to economic and strategic interests and enables both sides to obtain autonomy on equal terms. Although he does not seem to address politicians directly, Ateek at the end of his work provides them with an alternative vision for a future Middle East. Rather than separate nation states, this involves the establishment of a Federated States of the Holy Land that ensures the autonomy of each state and enables all to cooperate on economic levels and share Jerusalem as sacred capital to all.

At first sight the proposed actions correspond well with both Baum's ethics and the principles and visions outlined by the theologians themselves. Whether on personal, communal, or elite levels, suggestions are made for profound critical

reflection. This should be directed towards more awareness of injustice in one's immediate environment, respect for differences, and collaboration with people from other nations, cultures, and religions. Still, two difficulties emerge. One pertains to the impact of some of the proposed actions. Particularly complicated is the request for recognition of wrongdoing on the part of perceived oppressors. However important, such a demand could easily alienate large segments of the population. Many white Americans and Jewish Israelis might not be ready to acknowledge their role in sustaining patterns of oppression and feel provoked by the very thought of it. Urging them to confess guilt could seriously harm other much needed steps towards dialogue and collaboration. What to do when Jewish Israelis for instance first demand apologies from Palestinians for terrorist acts committed in the Palestine's name? How many conditions should be set before even starting a conversation?

A second problem comes back to the refusal of presenting one's nation as the highest good. Inherent to this ethic is the absence of absolute truth claims. In their struggle against oppression, all four authors indicate the danger of imposing one dominant worldview, whether religious, ethnic, cultural or otherwise. The urge to recover the Bible's true message, however, appears reminiscent of exactly the absolutism the theologians seek to overcome. For, who knows the truth about this message? Is there such a thing as one ultimate truth? Clearly, we cannot ask these theologians to resolve infinite problems of interpretation, nor can we expect them to resort to relativizing what is core to their faith. Better perhaps is to realize some questions may never be answered. With this uncertainty, let us turn once more to the ethics outlined at the beginning of this paper. What conclusions can we draw from the discussed works regarding liberation theology's potential to safeguard inclusivity?

## CONCLUSION

If one thing has become clear in the above analysis it is the convoluted nature of the notion of liberation. While people across the world claim to fight for it, few agree on the deeper meaning and implications of their causes. Some perceive it as an end to economic inequalities, others stress the need for free press or unrestrained political participation. It may be no surprise then that theologies of liberation face significant challenges. As we have seen, particular difficulties emerge among theologies that strive towards autonomy of a specific group in opposition to the powerful cultures and politics surrounding it. From the Latin American poor to Jews or Palestinians living in Israel, to Indians in the United States, people struggle with balancing their faith in a God who cares for all of humanity equally, and the urge to highlight their own specific group concerns. The latter may be crucial for the cause of liberation. But how to ensure this does not come at the cost of people from different, and possibly oppressing, communities?

The discussed liberation theologies provide us with several valuable responses to this dilemma. Relating these to Baum's overall ethical nationalism thesis has moreover shown they do not stand alone. Together, the various traditions eluci-

<sup>16</sup> Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 170.

date what could be considered as some of the essentials to any liberation ethos that promotes self-determination, whether economic, religious, cultural, political or otherwise. Central is the need to clarify basic terminology. Concepts such as liberation, freedom, justice, and autonomy may seem straightforward. But what do they really entail? Gutiérrez and Tinker have been especially articulate in outlining the meaning of liberation in terms of self-determination. It denotes both individual and communal transformation, full awareness, development, and control over one's own destiny, regardless of race, gender, or other backgrounds, and complete freedom from any form of domination.

The next step is to explicate the focus of liberation. Who needs to be prioritized, and why? It may seem obvious that the latter involves those who are currently facing oppression. However, their precedence should never rule out a sincere concern for other people who may not be among the most destitute, or who even belong to oppressing segments in society. Of vital importance here is to determine why and how subjugation takes place, and who bears responsibility. We may perhaps learn from the Occupy Wall Street slogans about the 99%. Also among dominant majority groups, many people are stuck in patterns of oppression they did not ask for, or are even aware of. While this does not exempt them from accounting for the suffering inflicted upon others, their fears and interests also demand consideration. Without it, cycles of violence, hatred, and humiliation are bound to continue.

The consideration of multiple groups and their widely different concerns cannot remain a matter of words only. It needs to be translated into visible and concrete actions on the ground. Again, the various traditions each display the necessity of clear guidelines. Any liberation activity requires continuous deliberation about its significance for the communities at stake as well as the impact on broader society. While the Bible provides core inspiration here, its messages should always be interpreted within people's daily lives. It is imperative to allow for probing questions and self-critique. Basing one's behavior on the words of Jesus Christ means a profound dialogue with those very words as well as awareness of what they implicate in one's immediate context. Finally, no act of liberation can take place without collaboration. Engaging with others and exploring common ground will help enhance mutual understanding and expand a sense of ownership of the liberation struggle across community boundaries.

It should be evident that the above requisites are neither complete nor exclusive. Many of the questions that emerged throughout this paper remain unresolved. Each community still has to see for itself how to remain close to one's own cause, while connecting it to a broader quest of liberation. Profound internal reflection is needed to determine what is at the heart of the matter. From there it will be possible to detect points of commonality as well as compromise. Which concerns do we share, and which may be negotiated? Indian and non-Indian Americans may be equally concerned about the deterioration of nature surrounding them. How can they work together to prevent pollution and share resources?

Key is the notion of trust. It is here that liberation theology plays a fundamental role. Theologians will not be able to answer all questions, and probably

should not even want to do so. Most important is that authors like Gutiérrez, Ellis, Ateek, and Tinker offer their communities a sense of faith: faith in personal capacities and in the value of one's own traditions and culture to foster an inclusive and just society. Such confidence is crucial in building a basis from which people feel safe enough to engage with the perceived other, dominant or not. Liberation theology, moreover, provides an indispensable moral basis. With ethics of forgiveness, love for one's neighbor, as well as practices of dialogue, it guides us through the abundant dilemmas along the thorny road to freedom. It allows the expression of grievances, calls for justice, and encourages us to reach out to each other. As long as we remain true to these principles, liberation theology has plenty of potential to make a difference, for the better, and for all.