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Introduction

For the past 50 years, the “preferential option for the poor” has made its mark on the Christian theological landscape: lifting up the voices of peoples cast aside, rooting the reflection of theologians in the experiences of the poor, and inspiring social services and development initiatives. However, despite the embrace of the option for the poor by theologians, lay Christians, and the Vatican, its “theological content” remains contested. In particular, the issue of the Option’s hermeneutical dimension is still under debate. In an attempt to resolve some of this ambiguity, I undertake in this paper a comparative analysis of the theological commitments of two of the most influential supporters of the Preferential Option: Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez and Pope Saint John Paul II. While Gutiérrez is known for developing the Preferential Option from its early stages, it is Pope John Paul’s embrace of the option that brought it to the universal stage of the Catholic Church.

I have chosen Gutiérrez and John Paul II as interlocutors in this conversation because they are, respectively, the theological and **ecclesial** authorities on the Preferential Option. Gutiérrez is commonly accepted as the theological authority on the Option for the Poor. He is regarded as the “father” of Latin American liberation theology, out of which the option grew.¹ On the other hand, Pope John Paul II has been the ecclesial authority on the topic since his Opening Address to the Latin American bishops’ conference in Puebla, Mexico in 1979.² In that

¹ cite someone

² Some would argue that Pope Francis, elected in 2013, is the ecclesial authority on the PO. This argument does carry some weight, as PF has embraced the PO even more fully than JPII. However, the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church still cites JPII’s definition of the Option. The change in the ecclesial definition of the Option since the start of Francis’s papacy would be an interesting topic of further study.

Address, John Paul II set the tone for how the Option would be approached in the Puebla conference, thereby influencing the first **magisterial** treatment of the Option by the Latin American bishops in the Puebla Final Document. Furthermore, it is John Paul's definition of the Preferential Option for the Poor that is included in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* that is still used today.

In my comparative analysis, I pay particular attention to the theological anthropology and epistemology that underlie the Preferential Option in the account of Gutierrez and Pope John Paul II. I find these two categories to be most helpful in revealing the similarities between these accounts and resolving the ambiguity surrounding the Option's hermeneutical dimension. As we all know well, the Option for the Poor is layered with theological meaning, strands of which are traceable in Scripture and throughout the Christian tradition. Daniel Groody put it best when he wrote that Gutiérrez and his peers **quote** "did not invent the notion of the preferential option for the poor but rather drew it out of the Christian tradition." **close quote**. For these reasons, I focus on the theological commitments held by my interlocutors, instead of simplifying my analysis to the way they navigate the newer terminology of the "preferential option for the poor." I will start by comparing their theological anthropology. Then, I will compare their epistemological stances and hermeneutics. Finally, I will return to the issue of their terminologies in order to resolve any remaining doubt about their similarities. [3:22](#)

Theological Anthropology

Some may also say that Puebla is the ecclesial authority. Benedict never, or rarely, uses the term so he is not the authority

First, the issue of theological anthropology. The basis of the Option for the Poor is its theological anthropology, or understanding of the nature of man in light of one's understanding of God. When Gustavo Gutierrez first used the term "preferential option for the poor" in 1973, it was a radically counter-cultural proposition in its socio-historical context. As a product of the theology of liberation, the Option emerged out of the widespread injustices that existed in Latin America in the middle of the 20th Century and then into the 70s and 80s. The colonial history of Latin America had divided the region's countries between a wealthier upper class with more European roots, and a poorer lower class of indigenous descent. In 1970, the highest-earning people in Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela, for example, were earning approximately 20 times the income share of the poorest residents of those countries. Coupled with this grave income inequality was a fatalistic outlook inherited from the colonial Church, in which indigenous people were converted but denied true integration and quality catechesis in the faith. This fatalism, itself a result of an unjust treatment of indigenous peoples, made people accepting of the injustices that afflicted them, and fueled the self-justification of their oppressors.

The colonial legacy of income inequality, ethnic discrimination against indigenous peoples, and fatalism came together to constitute a social order in Latin America that denied the rights and the very humanity of entire groups of people. These are the people whom the Latin American bishops at Puebla referred to as "the poor:" they are those who lack basic material goods, as well as "participation in sociopolitical life." Puebla explicitly includes indigenous peoples, "peasants, manual laborers," "marginalized urban dwellers," and women in the grouping of "the poor" whom God shows preference **and with whom** Christians are called to stand in solidarity. In direct contrast to the widespread, dehumanizing view of these people that

justified their oppression, the theological anthropology that is the foundation of the Option for the Poor upholds the dignity of each human person. This is a point of common ground for Gutiérrez and John Paul II.

Gustavo Gutiérrez

Gutierrez understands God as the God of life. It is God's desire for his human creation to have life to the fullest that makes poverty a Christian moral concern. The unjust death of poor persons due to conditions of poverty is an **affront** to the God of life. According to Gutierrez, each person deserves fullness of life as the creation of the God of life, and fullness of dignity as a temple of the Holy Spirit. This applies to all people; **but** it is God's intervention in history on behalf of the poor that defines them as God's preferred people. Throughout the Bible God shows a preferential care for the poor: in the Exodus, in the prophets, in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ in a stable, and in Christ's ministry among the poor. Therefore, it is Gutierrez's understanding of God as a God of life and God of the poor that leads him to an anthropology that recognizes the dignity of each person, and the preferential care of God for the poor.

John Paul II

Similar to Gutiérrez, John Paul II bases his understanding of the Option for the Poor on the claim that God in Christ makes such a choice. In both his Opening Address at Puebla and his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the pope upholds the Option for the Poor as a reflection of Christ's own preference for the poor. In the Puebla Opening Address, the pope writes that the Church's defense of human rights is based on **quote** "an authentically evangelical commitment

which, like that of Christ, is primarily a commitment to those most in need.” **close quote.** In the same vein, the pope asserts in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* that the Option, **in his words**, “affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ.” In both of these passages, the pope reflects his theological anthropology: that Christ is the ultimate human being, and therefore the ultimate example of human behavior. The preference that Christ shows in becoming poor and serving the poor is the reason for their dignity among other human beings.

Comparison of Theological Anthropology

So, Both Gutiérrez and John Paul II see the foundation of the Option as the commitment made by Godself in favor of poor and socially outcast people in the Hebrew Bible, the Incarnation, and the ministry of Christ. Integral to this theocentric foundation is its anthropological counterpart: the dignity of the human person as derived from his and her creation in the image of God. This similarity between Gutiérrez and John Paul II must not be taken for granted, although it may be easy to do so without a proper understanding of their historical moment. Their understanding of the human person is completely countercultural to the reality of oppression in Latin America at the time when Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians were developing the terminology of the “preferential option,” and equally opposed to the understanding of the human person in Communist Eastern Europe where the pope was from. To opt in preference for the poor in societies in which the governments, and the Church, consistently (and sinfully) opted for the rich was truly radical.

Epistemology

Now to move to my second point of comparison: epistemology. The theological anthropology held by Gutiérrez and Pope John Paul, as outlined in the previous section, sets up the next discussion of their epistemological stances and what hermeneutics these stances produce. One's epistemology makes a claim about which interpretive standpoints **are taken as valuable** on the one hand, **or rejected as negligible** on the other. The epistemological standpoint that one adopts leads to the hermeneutical lens through which one interprets anything else; in the case of the Option for the Poor, the points of interpretation are Tradition, Scripture, and society. To hold an anthropological stance that views poor people as dignified and preferred by God suggests that those same people would be valued in any epistemology, and that their hermeneutical lens would also be valuable.

The so-called "hermeneutic dimension" of the Option for the Poor refers to the way it is used to adopt the perspectival stance of people on the margins of society. This "hermeneutical dimension" is a point of contention in different accounts of the Option. In particular, the extent to which John Paul II adopts the hermeneutical dimension is contested, in particular because of his favored use of the term "love of preference" instead of "preferential option" in the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. Rohan Curnow's 2015 article on the Preferential Option argues that to express the Option in the terms of love or charity reduces it to **quote** "the context of Christian social ethics," **close quote** and therefore precludes the hermeneutical dimension of the option as expressed at Medellín and Puebla. Curnow makes this argument regarding the terminology the pope uses in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, when the pope uses the words "option or love of preference for the poor." Curnow interprets the pope's expression of the "option or love of preference" in

Sollicitudo Rei Socialis as representing, **in his words**, a “bifurcation in the doctrine of the Preferential Option for the Poor.”

I would like to suggest that Curnow’s analysis, in some way, misses the forest for the trees. That is to say, he takes the difference in terminology between the pope on one hand, and Gutierrez and the Latin American bishops on the other, as the most important representation of their ideas. I suggest on the contrary that the terminology used to refer to the Preferential Option is secondary to the theological commitments that lay beneath the concept. For this reason, I will address the hermeneutical dimension by looking at the epistemology of Gutierrez and Pope John Paul and the influence of the Option throughout their writings.

Now, where do Gutierrez and Pope John Paul II stand in relation to these issues? Gutiérrez’s epistemological claim is that people who are poor, oppressed, and exploited have a valuable approach to knowledge about God. This leads him to adopt a hermeneutic from the standpoint of these people on the margins of society. The hermeneutic functions as the interpretive lens through which he **does theology**. This is especially clear in his books on spirituality and biblical studies, in which he re-envisioned both fields from the perspective of the marginalized persons with whom he works in Lima, Peru. For example, his book *On Job* re-interprets the book of Job through the experiences of the poor; similarly he re-constructs Christian spirituality through the same lens in *We Drink from Our Own Wells*; and finally, he analyses the social reality based on the experiences of those persons on the socioeconomic margins.

Pope John Paul II makes a similar epistemological claim: that the experiences of poor persons are valuable in our interpretation of reality. The Option as hermeneutic is clear

throughout John Paul's writings. Like Gutierrez, the pope applies this hermeneutic to his theological reflection, biblical interpretation, and social analysis. In his Opening Address at Puebla, the pope interprets the gospels in the light of poverty, drawing out the story of the Good Samaritan from Luke and the Final Judgment from Matthew to demonstrate Christ's particular love for the poor and their role in salvation history. In terms of theological reflection, the pope's encyclicals *Laborem Exercens* and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* focus on the plight of vulnerable groups, in particular workers and the underdeveloped nations. In addition, in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the pope analyzes the socio-historical reality based on the experiences of the poor. The pope spends *pages* describing the current state of affairs in the world: the Cold War, poverty, inequality. His focus is always on the effects of these conditions on marginalized groups. A preferential commitment to the poor is evident throughout this letter; not just in the words used, but mostly, in the theological perspective that the pope adopts.

Keeping all this in mind, it is easy to conclude that the hermeneutical dimension of the preferential option is apparent in the writings of both Gustavo Gutierrez and Pope John Paul II. Their shared understanding of theological anthropology, which is focused on the dignity of the human person as made and loved by God, is the basis for their epistemological claim that poor persons have a valuable contribution to knowledge of all kinds. In turn, they each adopt a hermeneutical lens that prioritizes the concerns of vulnerable and marginalized people. [16:50](#)

Terminology

So far, I have highlighted the great similarities between the accounts of the Option for the Poor of Gutierrez and John Paul II, in terms of their theological anthropology and epistemology.

Now, what are we to do with Rohan Curnow's claim that the language of "love of preference" precludes a hermeneutical dimension? I suggest that this language does not in fact preclude the hermeneutical dimension when the full meaning of Christian love as charity is taken into account. For Pope John Paul II, charity does not **mean** giving alms or aid; it in fact refers to "caritas," the love that is the self-gift of God. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the pope includes the "option or love of preference for the poor" under the umbrella of solidarity as a virtue, and solidarity expresses charity in its fullest form: **in the pope's words**, "total gratuity, forgiveness and reconciliation." Therefore, the "love of preference" is much deeper than the realm of "Christian social ethics" in which Curnow places it. Rather, the "love of preference for the poor" expresses the "total gratuity" of God's love. In this sense, the pope's definition of the option as "the exercise of Christian charity" retains a meaning as deep and full as the "opción" of Gutiérrez. For these reasons, I do not take issue with the differences in terminology used by Gutiérrez and John Paul. [18:47](#)

Conclusion

Finally, I'd like to offer some conclusions regarding my treatment of the question: *What are the similarities and differences in the interpretation of the Preferential Option for the Poor by Gutiérrez and John Paul II?* The category of theological anthropology displays a central similarity between the two interlocutors: in a radical break from the culture of the time, both Gutiérrez and the pope see human dignity in poor persons, based on God's own preference for them. This anthropology allows both accounts of the Option to adopt a perspectival epistemology from the stance of those people on the margins of society. This perspectival shift produces a

hermeneutic that preferentially attends to the concerns of the poor in theological reflection, biblical studies, and social analysis. With this hermeneutic, Gutiérrez and the pope incorporate the perspectival stance of the poor into their own interpretation of the world.

On this foundation, I have argued that Pope John Paul II's expression of a "love of preference for the poor" reflects an expansive definition of love as Christian charity. We must understand charity with its full theological thrust, which the pope identifies as **quote** "total gratuity, forgiveness and reconciliation." With this understanding of charity, I conclude that the pope and Gutierrez express a very similar Option for the Poor.

My study contributes to a deeper understanding of the Option for the Poor by providing the first detailed comparison of the theological anthropology and epistemology of Gutiérrez and John Paul II. My analysis penetrates beneath a simple discussion of the terminology that each of these thinkers uses, and instead analyzes their deeper theological commitments. I hope that this work clarifies some of the ambiguity surrounding the hermeneutical dimension of the preferential option for the poor by resolving uncertainty surrounding Pope John Paul II's use of the Preferential Option as a hermeneutical lens in his writings.

With those remarks, I conclude my presentation. I invite any questions to continue the conversation. [20:34](#)