

A Political Theology of Ecological Action: Liberation of the Poor through Democratic Stewardship of Creation

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In the United States, many popular forms of evangelical Christianity hold a deep skepticism and antipathy toward ecological activism for reasons ranging from political interests to eschatology. In this paper I will present a legitimate model for the role of the Christian faith in ecological action that is developed by considering and synthesizing the work of two theologians, Leonardo Boff and Christopher Southgate. The contributions from each of these authors are centered on the call to care for creation as a response to their respective areas of emphasis: the suffering and striving of the poor and marginalized in the case of Boff, and the evolutionary bondage of the biosphere in the case of Southgate. While their studies are different in substantial ways, their models of faithful evaluation and response are remarkably complimentary. To this end, working to implement Boff's vision of an ecological-social democracy is actually a quality application of Southgate's view of the role of Christians in ecological work.

Ecological crisis and socio-political conflict in the developing world are inextricably related; consequently, a broad, multi-disciplinary approach is essential to deal with the underlying causes.¹ For example, few would link fishery decline to child slavery. However, the connection is actually quite strong.² As yields at established fisheries decline, West African communities resort to hunting instead of consuming fish, which had previously been the primary source of protein from animals. Due to terrestrial wildlife decline, however, hunters have turned to using forced child labor to cost-effectively hunt in areas which were previously too cost-prohibitive to be profitable.³ Terrorist groups that exploit the high prices associated with the largely black-market ivory trade are another example cited as a connection between conflict and ecological concerns and policy.⁴

Aside from the veritable minefield of moral hazards, current methods of approaching both ecological concerns and social conflict is clearly unsustainable. We need a new approach. Considering that the extant problems are so large and systemic, we must next ask, what should the people's role be in engaging sustainability?

To assist in considering this question, Christopher Southgate has developed a helpful spectrum for identifying the human role in care for creation, which he reviews in his 2008 book, *The Groaning of Creation*. On one end, he places *anthropocentric* views such as Philip Hefner's model of being co-creators with God; this high view of human dominion and intermediation seeks to elevate our status well above other creatures, perhaps too far.⁵ Southgate points out that a model that leans exclusively to this end of the spectrum fails

¹ Brashares et al., 2014

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Southgate, 2008

to take into account that man has existed alongside animals for only a short time and he also suggests this view could serve as a distraction from the evolutionary kinship we share with animals.⁶ On the other end of his spectrum, there are the more *biocentric* models, which provide a strong emphasis on humans as being just another part of an interdependent web within the biosphere, often accompanied with a desire to “return to a somewhat romantically conceived past, when there were many fewer human beings, imposing less of a load on the carrying capacity of the planet, and more in touch with our early life as hunter-gatherers.”⁷ Among other critiques, this view gives very little consideration to the right of humans to continue to exist at all, and it naturally leads to the question of whether there would ever be a circumstance in which the continuation of a human’s life would be preferable to the preservation of the ecosystem they inhabit.⁸ Finally as a middle-ground alternative to either end of this spectrum, Southgate suggests *stewardship*, which he envisions “is less convinced of its prerogative to alter nature than co-creation or co-redemption, but it is less passively inclined and more convinced of human distinctiveness than biocentrism.”⁹ From this centrist position, one might prefer a weak stewardship of preservation, closer to biocentrism, or a stronger stewardship of nurture, closer to the more active anthropocentric role.¹⁰ Another way to view this role is as simultaneously sacramental and preservationist, a sort of priesthood over creation. While considering where this might fall on this spectrum, it is

hard to place with precision, but this does not necessarily make the concept any less useful.¹¹

In considering the responsibility of the faithful for matters of ecology, Leonardo Boff would land somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. He approaches the subject from the standpoint of liberation theology, his particular area of study. Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez launched this view by discussing the concept of God’s preferential “option for the poor” as essential to our understanding of Scripture and as a call to poverty as a form of demonstrative solidarity.¹² It has sometimes been seen as controversial, but its key concept has been endorsed by leading figures in Catholicism, recently including Pope Francis.¹³ It serves to interpret and critique both Christianity and society through the lens of the suffering and hope of the disenfranchised, giving the poor primacy in matters of theological practice as well as in evaluation of the effectiveness of a city or nation.¹⁴ In considering Boff’s position on Southgate’s spectrum, then, it is within the context of a faith system that emphasizes the role of servant as highest in the Kingdom of God, while he does still use the co-creator language of the more anthropocentric view. He fleshes this ideal out, however, by also using the more descriptive language of shepherds and custodians.¹⁵ He is quick to point out that scientific advancements have made it undeniable that we are *not* the focus of creation; his view of systems of power cause him to outright reject the idea that we would be despots or rulers in relation to

⁶ *ibid.* p.106

⁷ *ibid.* p.107

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.* p.108

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Gutierrez, 1971

¹³ Francis, 2013 (Paragraph 199), quoting some earlier words of John Paul II in order to endorse this

concept: “Without the preferential option for the poor, ‘the proclamation of the Gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today’s society of mass communications.’”

¹⁴ Berryman, 1987

¹⁵ Boff, 1995a

creation.¹⁶ Regarding the human propensity to domination, he writes, “This conception has consecrated and underpinned the violence and aggression against nature since the beginning of the modern era (as witness the invasion in 1492 of what is now Latin America).”¹⁷

Boff also seems to have instinctively developed the connections found in the social conflict and ecology research mentioned near the beginning of this paper when he draws a clear philosophical association between liberation of the poor and the importance of ecology: “Liberation theology and ecological discourse have something in common: they stem from two wounds that are bleeding. The first, the wound of poverty and wretchedness, tears the social fabric of millions and millions of poor people the world over. The second, systematic aggression against the earth, destroys the equilibrium of the planet, threatened by the depredations made by a type of development undertaken by contemporary societies, now spread throughout the world.”¹⁸

This is the apparent foundation of his extensive writings on this subject. The woundedness of both subjects is the effect of what is his systemic view of sin, “a denial in history of God’s design.”¹⁹ Confronting the victimization and marginalization of those who do not have a voice is the primary focus

for liberation theology, and so sin operates as less of a personal morality and more of a collective systemic responsibility.

This concept of liberation is a helpful framework for thinking about both the humans and the rest of created order that are all in bondage to the effects of a first world culture of consumerism, greed, and lack of concern for the future or fellow creatures. In the first chapter of his book *Ecology and Liberation*, Boff lays out several possible objections that someone might have of a liberation theologian addressing ecology at all. One potential objection is helpful for understanding his perspective more fully: in responding to the suggestion that ecological crisis is a problem perceived by the wealthy (similar to the common “first world problems” social media meme), he harshly dismisses both environmentalism and conservationism as popular with the rich, but unable to fully respond to the desperate needs of the poor that are caused by ecological crisis.²⁰ This makes it clear that there are deep influences affecting even which solutions we might consider to be wholesome; solutions that with a more enlightened consideration we can see could be somewhat problematic on their own. Again, this emphasizes the need for multiple perspectives in reaching solutions and makes clear that the rich are in bondage as well. Given his belief system, Boff sets the

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.* p.85

¹⁸ Boff, 1995b, p.67. He continues, “Both lines of reflection and action stem from a cry: the cry of the poor for life, liberty and beauty (see Exod. 3.7) in the case of liberation theology; the cry of the earth growing under oppression (see Rom. 8.22-3) in that of ecology. Both seek liberation: one of the poor by themselves, as organized historical agents, conscientized and linked to other allies who take up their cause and their struggle; the other of the earth through a new alliance between it and human beings, in a brotherly/sisterly relationship and with a type of sustainable development that will respect the different ecosystems and guarantee future generations

a good quality of life.”

¹⁹ Boff, 1995a, p.72

²⁰ Boff, 1995b, p.13. “The mistake of the rich is traditional; it consists in thinking only of themselves and in lacking a holistic perspective.... They are environmentalists who want fewer human beings in the environment, claiming that that will make things better, for humans pollute and destroy it. Or they are conservationists who wish to conserve threatened vegetable and animal species in a special reserve. Ecological behavior and attitudes are to prevail in this area, whereas outside it modern human beings will continue to behave selfishly and carry on their plunder.”

gospel expectation that the wealthy and privileged must no longer consider the concerns of the poor and marginalized only after tending to their own needs; instead, he challenges them to treat the needs and the voices of the poor as even more important than their own.

In a close parallel to this challenge from liberation theology, Southgate earlier in his book calls for three types of “ethical kenosis.”^{21, 22} He suggests that the believer must not aspire to a status that is above the one God has given to us, saying there is a “tendency in human nature to grasp at more than is freely given, to seek to elevate our status beyond what is appropriate or helpful, to seek to be ‘as Gods.’”²³ This is valuable both as he applies it (to not consider ourselves too far above our fellow creatures), as well as in considering the status of the wealthy in relation to our poorest global neighbors. Read this way, the importance of elevating the status of distant people and nations we would otherwise never contemplate is also an ethical responsibility. Further, he proposes kenosis of appetite, the avoidance of making “a substance or experience a kind of substitute God.”²⁴ Lastly, he suggests kenosis of acquisitiveness, lest we become too full of material things gained through the expenditure of the security and happiness of our fellow man, “be it through sweated labor

to make trainers or printed circuit boards, or the mining that delivers exotic metals and other raw materials at great expense to human health and natural ecosystems.”²⁵

Given this ethical calling in our role within creation, what is then required of us? Southgate lays out two proposals of ethical action to take, vegetarianism and a concerted effort to cut the extinction rate.²⁶ Admittedly, these proposals were certainly meant to be representative of a direction and not all encompassing of the steps that are needed, but there are some inherent flaws with his approach. Returning above to Boff’s critique of bourgeoisie approaches to ecology, it is not hard to imagine a critique of Southgate’s first proposal: vegetarianism could be perceived as an approach of a resident of the developed world who has near unlimited choice in what he eats; much of the developing world has no such luxury. Even as an attempt to change the means of production, it is insufficient at creating renewed relationships, since taken to scale it would eliminate a way of life for the rancher,²⁷ a much more common proposition in the developing world. Additionally, both proposals fail to challenge the first-world resident (invested into a system of oppression, wittingly or unwittingly) to fully re-examine his or her previous relationships to the rest of creation.

²¹ Southgate, 2008, p.101

²² In Christianity, kenosis refers to Christ emptying himself on behalf of humanity as described in the Philippian hymn:

“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he *made himself nothing* by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8 New International Version 2011) [Emphasis mine. The Greek word for this concept is the verb form of *kenosis*]

²³ Southgate, 2008, p.101-102

²⁴ *ibid.* p.102

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Southgate acknowledges this portion of the critique, noting that the relationship between humans and animals can be a life-giving proposition even if the animal is going to be consumed. In speaking of the hill-farming community in which he resides, he says, “Without that community, the landscape and ethos of the place would be utterly different (and, of course, the animals in question would not have any quality or unquality of life; they simply would not exist.”

Upon being convinced of all of these ethical principles, then, there is still an abiding need for a broader, more systemic, fully multi-disciplinary approach that gives voice to the concerns of all of the marginalized. To that end, Boff proposes an approach of radical political inclusion: the ecological-social democracy, one “that accepts not only human beings as its components but every part of nature, especially human species.” This vision refuses to allow the interests of a few with power and voice to outweigh the needs of the many who have neither, whether human or animal. Specifically, mankind has a particular responsibility to elevate the needs of creation, as the moral agents that can choose to respond to it with either blessing or destruction, and this takes a both/and approach in also recognizing our common interdependence.²⁸ Throughout documented history, other forms of democratic process have failed to involve all parties and protect the interests of the most vulnerable.²⁹ Therefore, in addition to the poor, the needs of nature itself get a full hearing and a seat at the table, as both a guard against the consumptive impulses of man and as force for the preservation of all life that might be wiped out by outside destructive forces. Boff suggests a dramatic expansion of our understanding of the preferential option for the poor revealed in scripture and articulated by Gutierrez to also “include an option for the most threatened of other beings and species.” By broadening the interests we attend to through including the voices and needs of all, we become capable of finding solutions that truly address the needs of our global community through full understanding and solidarity. To briefly return to the subject of Southgate’s ethical proposals for the purposes of synthezation, this system would insist that the way forward must be centered on attention to the plight of the

oppressed and its proposal for accomplishing this goal ostensibly creates a way for many such ethical proposals to be considered. Vegetarianism very well might become the result of the realization of his vision and reduction in the extinction rate almost certainly would be, but in his understanding of the world, these proposals would be relegated to their proper position as an effect of the right course of action being pursued, not necessarily the right course of action in themselves. Other sustainability initiatives could also be considered and developed with input from all parties, so that unintended consequences can be corrected or not created in the first place.

To summarize, Southgate provides a clear theological framework for considering the role of the faithful in encountering issues related to care of creation. Boff, with that framework applied, expresses a viewpoint firmly, if not precisely, in the middle of the continuum in a similar manner to Southgate himself. From that position, Boff casts a broad, holistic vision of a democratic approach fully aware and inclusive of all ecological and social needs, expanding and fulfilling Southgate’s models of Christ-like ethical kenosis. This approach is deeply informed by gospel values, but inclusive of all. Of course, if this vision has a flaw, it is that this ecological-social democracy may be overly idealistic in its expectation that power structures will be willing to approach this table of equality without exterior motivation. Further, more work must still be done to flesh out how this process would work, but in these days of instantaneous communication, there is reason for optimism that it can be done and that perhaps Boff’s vision might be fulfilled:

“Once this view prevails, we shall have broadened our own horizons, enlarged our hearts with sensitivity, and increased

²⁸ Boff, 1995a

²⁹ *ibid.*

our knowledge, not as domination, but as a form of communion and participation in the existence of the other. We shall also have molded our wills as a force for collaboration with life and for service to everything that is tiny and threatened with extinction. Having largely overcome

the promptings of fear, we shall feel that we are co-citizens of the same planet, and brothers and sisters in the same cosmic adventure, surveyed by the fatherly and motherly eyes of God.”³⁰

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³⁰ *ibid.* p.90