

# **The Preferential Options for the Earth and the Poor: The Task and Contribution of Theology**

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Clarifying the relationship between faith and the preferential options for the poor and the earth is vital to the work of contemporary Catholic theology.<sup>1</sup> But the theologian must go farther and also seek to historicize that relation. In other words, the theologian's talk of God must not simply explain the connection between faith and those options in the abstract; it must also speak about how these preferences for the poor and the earth might be made manifest within the present context of the global politico-ecological emergency. In so doing, theology can orient and energize communities of faith by responding to the "cries" of the environment and the impoverished and, thereby, help secure a sustainable future. In what follows, I consider how Catholic theology might fulfill this ambitious agenda. Throughout, I draw on two key sources: the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of contemporary theology's most prominent articulators of the concept of the option for the poor, and Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

## **The Preferential Option**

Since the time of the Second Vatican Council, the term "preferential option for the poor" has become ubiquitous in Roman Catholic theological and ethical discourse. In brief, this term expresses the view that the work of confronting, unmasking, and repairing the ways that death-dealing poverty marks the world is intrinsic to the life of faith.<sup>2</sup> The preferential option for the poor, then, orients communities of faith toward ways of living in solidarity with poor,

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<sup>1</sup> I write this essay as a Roman Catholic theologian reflecting on the task of my own discipline. Nonetheless, I believe that the work that I am calling for applies to other theological and religious discourses *mutatis mutanda*.

<sup>2</sup> This understanding of the preferential option for the poor is aligned with liberationist interpretations of the concept. On this point, see Rohan M. Curnow, "Which Preferential Option for the Poor? A History of the Doctrine's Bifurcation," *Modern Theology* 31 (2015): 27–59.

marginalized, and oppressed persons in the world. In his work, Gutiérrez locates the option at the heart of Christian faith. Indeed, he asserts that, for Christians, “the option for the poor arises from faith in Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Gutiérrez can make this claim, it is worth observing, because the symbols and narratives that form the Christian religious imagination—from exodus, to Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of God, to the lives of the saints—all testify to the view that God is one who hears and responds to the cry of the poor.

In recent years, there has been a growing tendency within Catholic discourse to affirm the need to proclaim not only a preferential option for the poor but also a preferential option for the earth.<sup>4</sup> The call to embrace the option for the earth, which is articulated most fully in *Laudato Si’*, stems from the acknowledgement that nonhuman creation and the eco-systems they co-constitute with humans have their own inherent value and integrity—value and integrity that humans must learn to discern and respect. Moreover, it also has become clear that the preferential option for the poor cannot be properly understood apart from a broader ethic of creation care. That is because the deleterious effects of ecological degradation are not evenly distributed across human populations. Instead, the poor are forced to bear a disproportionate burden of these costs.<sup>5</sup> Thus as Pope Francis writes, “Today...we have to realize that a true ecological approach...must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (no. 49).<sup>6</sup> In the same way, he maintains,

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<sup>3</sup> On this point, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, “The option for the poor arises from faith in Christ,” *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 317–326. See also Gutiérrez, “Option for the Poor,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, eds. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 235–250.

<sup>4</sup> Dorr, Donal draws out some of these developments within church teaching. See Dorr, *Option for the Poor, Option for the Earth: Catholic Social Teaching* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Robin M. Leichenko and Karen L. O’Brien, *Environmental Change and Globalization: Double Exposures* (New York: Oxford University, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> It must also be noted that for Pope Francis, the cry of the poor also encompasses future generations of human persons who will inherit the legacy of human abuse of the earth. For example, the pope writes, “That is why the New Zealand bishops asked what the commandment “Thou shall not kill” means when “twenty percent of the

“strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature” (no. 139).

Nonetheless, the theological grounding for this ecological option is less developed within the modern Catholic religious imagination than is the option for the poor—and its place within the tradition is comparatively less obvious and secure. For many, the option for the earth appears peripheral of the life of faith. This is because the symbols and narratives of the Christian faith that, in their interpretation, have proven so hospitable to grounding the option for the poor, can appear disconnected from the option for the earth. It is often unclear to modern communities of faith that the exodus, the reign of God, or the lives of the saints have anything to do with care for creation. Thus, as theology clarifies the relationship between faith and the options for the earth and poor it is vital that this discourse retrieves, reinterprets, and reconstructs its religious symbols and narratives in ways that establish the foundations for not only the option for the poor but also the option for the earth. In so doing, it can help to place care for creation at the heart of the life of faith.

### **Retrieving the Symbol of *Imago Dei***

At this point, it may be helpful to consider one concrete example of the interpretive and constructive theological work I call for. Consider the theological claim that the human person is created in the image of God—the theological symbol of *imago Dei*. In the Bible, the most prominent reference to *imago Dei* is found in the first creation narrative of Genesis. There, one finds the human person is explicitly described as being created in “the image and likeness of God” (Gen. 1:26). This claim has had an important history within the Catholic tradition. For centuries it has been used to defend the dignity of the human person. Likewise, in the second half

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world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive” (LS, no. 95).

of the twentieth century *imago Dei* has provided similar theological and ethical warrant for grounding the preferential option for the poor.

In recent decades, however, the symbol of *imago Dei* has come under attack for a number of reasons. For my purposes here, the most pertinent concern is that the symbol can be used to sanction a destructively anthropocentric worldview in which the human person is accorded dignity over and against nonhuman creation. This concern appears to be underscored by the divine command in Genesis 1 for the human to “subdue” the earth and exercise “dominion” among its living creatures (Gen. 1:28). In the traditional way of conceiving *imago Dei*, then, this symbol seemingly places the option for the poor in an agonistic relationship to the option for the earth. It functions to affirm the dignity of the human person but simultaneously appears to provide warrant for the human domination of the earth. For this reason, Mary Catherine Hilbert worries that *imago Dei* has become a “threatened symbol,” one that might prove difficult to retrieve fruitfully within the present context of ecological emergency.<sup>7</sup> In order to identify how the symbol of *imago Dei* might continue to be employed productively for the Christian imagination at this moment of urgency, I turn to the second creation narrative in Genesis—the narrative of the garden of Eden. There, a careful reading of the text surfaces an implicit *imago Dei* anthropology, but one that binds together the options for the earth and poor.

In the second chapter of Genesis, God calls the human person to “cultivate and care” for the garden (Gen. 2:15).<sup>8</sup> God calls the human person to utilize her agential capacity in working with creation. This agency, however, is necessarily informed by an ethos of care and

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Catherine Hilbert, “Creation in the Image of God and Wisdom Christology” in *Earth, Wind, and Fire: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Creation*, eds. Carol J. Dempsey and Mary Margaret Pazdan (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 147–163.

<sup>8</sup> Claus Westermann maintains that Gen. 2:15 “is a decisive verse for the whole understanding of Gen 2–3.” See Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 220.

preservation. Indeed, this view is further reinforced when one observes that, in 2:15, the Hebrew term for “cultivate” (*’ābad*) can also be translated as “serve.” As Ellen Davis writes, *’ābad* connotes “*working for* the garden soil, serving its needs.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the vocation given in 2:15—what I term the symbolic vocation of “gardener”—suggests that the loves of God, neighbor, and earth are intimately interconnected. As Theodore Hiebert argues, the implicit object of the human person’s cultivation and care is the garden’s arable soil.<sup>10</sup> Here, however, we can note that, in Genesis 2, God fashions the creatures of the earth and sky, including the human person, out of this arable soil. It is reasonable, then, to interpret the object of service and care not simply as “the soil” but rather as “the soil and all that comes from the soil.” Thus, in responding properly to God’s call, the human person cares for both neighbor and earth. These three objects of human love (God, neighbor, and earth) are inextricably interconnected. Love of God is expressed *through* love of neighbor and earth, with neighbor and earth as closely related as the human is to the soil. What emerges in Genesis 2 is the view that the human person is created by God to live in communion with God, neighbor, and earth, and that the divinely sanctioned vocation of gardener is meant to sustain this threefold sense of communion.

Most strikingly, the second creation narrative of Genesis implicitly presents the gardener’s role as constitutive of *imago Dei*. In Genesis 2, God is imaged as the first Gardener. God is the one who plants the garden and makes the fruit-bearing trees grow in it. Thus, within the semiotic landscape of the Yahwist’s creation narrative, the human person comes to inhabit *imago Dei* God most fully precisely through serving and caring for the garden of the earth. The

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<sup>9</sup> Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 29. See also, Theodore Hiebert, “The Human Vocation: Origins and Transformations in Christian Traditions,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, eds. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), 140.

<sup>10</sup> See Theodore Hiebert, “The Human Vocation: Origins and Transformations in Christian Traditions,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, eds. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000).

gardener *is* the image of God. On this interpretation of the symbol, then, *imago Dei* provides clear warrant for both the option for the earth and poor. Indeed, the implicit *imago Dei* anthropology of Genesis 2 indicates that these options are entwined and intrinsic to the life of faith.

### **Historicizing the Options and the Symbols**

As I suggested at the start, the work of interpreting the symbols and narratives of religious faith (such as *imago Dei*) in order to ground the preferential options for the earth and poor is a necessary but insufficient task for theology. The discipline of theology must also bring the symbols and narratives of faith into contact with historical reality. More precisely, theology must utilize its (reinterpreted) symbols and narratives both to judge reality and to clarify the concrete demands of making the option for the earth and poor in the world. Here, I return to Gutiérrez, whose own work to historicize the option for the poor can prove instructive for contemporary theology.

Gutiérrez historicizes the option for the poor in two key ways. First, he locates the option against the background of the brutal legacy of Western colonial plunder. For centuries, and through varying means, the colonial powers of Europe appropriated the wealth and resources of the geographic regions at the periphery of the colonial system in order to secure and enhance their own economic and political status. The plunder of the Global South, itself an inherently violent act, required multiple forms of violence to secure its continued existence. Violent repression and the domination of entire peoples accompanied the plunder.<sup>11</sup> For Gutiérrez, the demands of the preferential option for the poor necessitate an honest confrontation with the

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<sup>11</sup> See for example, Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), especially chapters 1, 2, 14, and 15.

legacy of colonial plunder which has given rise to poverty throughout Latin America and other places within the Global South.

Second, in calling for the preferential option for the poor to be made manifest in history, Gutiérrez scrutinizes his own global geo-political context with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Specifically, he found that the project of developmentalism in the twentieth century, which was ostensibly oriented toward remediating the enormities of the colonial project, was actually *neo-colonial* in nature. Rather than alleviating colonial injustice, the development project perpetuated the conditions of death-dealing poverty throughout Latin America Africa, and South Asia. Along these lines, Gutiérrez argued that the rhetoric of “development” and “modernization” obfuscated the true nature of development. According to him, this rhetoric served to legitimize a project that was “synonymous with timid measures, really ineffective in the long run and counterproductive to achieving a real transformation.”<sup>12</sup> In short, Gutiérrez found that the development project could not be properly associated with the preferential option for the poor. Rather, the preferential option for the poor required a radical break from this project.

To be sure, much of Gutiérrez’s engagement with the discourses of sociology and political economy have been regarded as controversial. Without attempting to adjudicate these controversies here, I suggest that his two basic intuitions are nonetheless enlightening for contemporary communities of faith that seek to make manifest the preferential options for the earth and poor. Following Gutiérrez’s lead, one can affirm that ethical analyses of the earth and the poor, especially within the global context, must try to clarify their meaning in relation to the history of colonial plunder. As Pope Francis acknowledges in *Laudato Si’*, a “true ecological debt” exists between the Global North and South. This debt has its roots in the extractive

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<sup>12</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 17.

colonial economies that were first put into place with the Spanish *economienda* system. As is now clear, colonial and neo-colonial extractivism have resulted in the exploitation not simply of human persons, but of “the soil and all that comes from the soil.” Eduardo Galleano captures this reality well as he reflects upon the experience of Latin America within the modern world:

Everything, from the discovery until our times, has always been transmuted into European—or later United States—capital, and as such has accumulated in distant centers of power. Everything: the soil, its fruits and its mineral-rich depths, the people and their capacity to work and to consume, natural resources and human resources. Production methods and class structure have been successively determined from outside for each area by meshing it into the universal gearbox of capitalism.”<sup>13</sup>

Any serious attempt at clarifying the demands that the interrelated options for the earth and poor make in the contemporary world must take seriously the legacy of colonial extractivism.

Likewise, and again following Gutiérrez’s lead, any analysis that seeks to elucidate the demands of the options for the earth and poor should approach the global political context with a hermeneutic of suspicion. These analyses would do well to cast a suspicious eye toward the most recent iteration of development discourse: namely “sustainable” development and “ecological” modernization. When the term sustainable development was first used in the United Nation’s 1987 Brundlandt Report, it acknowledged that “painful choices” would have to be made in order to sustain the flourishing of life on Earth.<sup>14</sup> It is notable, then, that this acknowledgement has vanished from contemporary discussions of sustainability. Instead of wrestling with the

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<sup>13</sup> Eduardo Galleano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review, 1997), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Gro Harlem Brundtland, ed., *Our Common Future: The World Commission on Environment and Development*, <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>.

difficult moral trade-offs, the discourse of sustainable development is now predominantly couched in terms of win-win scenarios.<sup>15</sup>

The shift in discourse from “painful choices” to “win-win scenarios” should arouse misgivings. The respective works of Leslie Sklair, Michael Goldman, and Gilbert Rist all suggest that this change in the discourse of sustainable development suggests the discourse has been captured by hegemonic interests whose priority is not to sustain the resilience capacity of the earth but ensure the exploitation of the earth—and secure ever increasing amounts of wealth.<sup>16</sup> Along these lines, ethicist Stephen Gardiner’s analysis of the global community’s response to the threat of climate change finds that the response has been plagued by a moral corruption that minimizes or denies the irreparable harm being done to the earth.<sup>17</sup> In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis shares these concerns, warning that the contemporary globalization project promotes a “false or superficial [political] ecology which bolsters complacency and a cheerful recklessness” (no. 59) about the eco-social crisis. From this perspective, then, the projects legitimized by the language of sustainable development stand in tension with the demands of the preferential options for the earth and poor. These projects must continue to be scrutinized in order to more fully understand what it means to enact the options for the earth and poor.

In both relocating the preferential options for the earth and poor at the heart of faith, and historicizing these options, theology can help to orient communities of faith to the vital tasks of responding to the cries of the earth and poor in the present politico-ecological emergency.

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<sup>15</sup> See Michael Goldman, *Imperial Nature: The World Bank and the Struggle for Justice in the Age of Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University, 2005), 128.

<sup>16</sup> See Leslie Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); Michael Goldman, *Imperial Nature: The World Bank and the Struggle for Justice in the Age of Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University, 2005); and Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Zed, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Stephen M. Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (New York: Oxford Press, 2011), esp. 301–397.