

*Religion as an Empowerer of the Oppressed:
A Study of Liberation Theology, Engaged Buddhism,
and Pentecostal Serpent Handlers*

*An Honors Thesis in Religion
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INTRODUCTION

Religion has served to shape the lives and actions of individuals and groups throughout the ages. It has given people strength and solace, inspiring individuals to fight and die in wars, even moving people to take up severe ascetical practices. But just what is religion capable of doing? Can it ease economic, political, or social deprivation? Can religion act as a successful empowerer to engender a change in the oppressive structures of individuals' lives?

Liberation theology, "engaged Buddhism" (specifically the movement started by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar), and the Pentecostal serpent handling faith all share one commonality: they appear to empower the oppressed of their particular cultures. The first two movements arose as a response to particular social circumstances of oppression, while the third simply occurred within oppressive structures. While both liberation theology and Ambedkar's movement used religion as a "tool" to attempt to change the social, political, and economic situations of the oppressed, the serpent handling movement did not arise out of this same conscious effort to form an instrument of social action. The snake handlers can be better categorized as representative of a religion that has "built-in" empowering capabilities, meaning that these capabilities were not deliberately constructed but are a major aspect of the tradition.

These three very different religious traditions have distinct methods of empowering the oppressed. Liberation theology is primarily geared toward the oppressors to convince them that they should join in solidarity with the oppressed as equals in order to help them in their fight against the structures under which they suffer. The theory is that through reaching the oppressors and persuading them to help in the social, economic, and political struggles that a large number of Latin American people face, the oppressed will gain power and control over their situation. Ambedkar, who himself was an Untouchable in India, attempted to empower these oppressed people by causing a mass conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism, thus removing this group from the caste system all together and giving them a new identity and sense of self-worth. This new self-worth would then, in theory, translate to an improvement in social, political and economic position. In the case of the Pentecostal serpent handlers of Appalachia, followers of this faith appear to gain power through tapping in to the supernatural power of God, which they believe allows them to handle poisonous snakes, drink strychnine, heal the sick, handle fire, and perform various other miracles.

The question that I wish to answer in this thesis is whether or not these attempts at gaining power truly have been successful in bringing these groups of people out of the oppression that they experience.

WHO ARE THE “OPPRESSED”?

I chose the term “oppressed” and not “impoverished” to characterize the people whom these movements seek to empower for the reason that exploitation of these groups goes well beyond a measure of economic deprivation or income distribution. The people upon whom this thesis is focused are not only economically impoverished, they are

politically and socially depressed as well. The commonality between all three of these groups is that they are exploited by a more powerful force in their region or culture. The degree to which these people suffer is different in all cases, but a comparison of this is not the purpose of my study. I am looking at three distinct cultures that have three different situations of oppression and three unique solutions of empowerment for the oppressed. This thesis in no way is an attempt to exhaust all of the ways in which oppressed peoples have used or have attempted to use religion as a tool for empowerment, but it does seek to explore the successes or failures of three distinct religions as effective empowerers for the oppressed.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE OPPRESSED AT THE TIME OF THE RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

The Oppressed of Latin America

Liberation theology emerged out of social and political unrest stemming from the first world's negative impact upon the economic development of Latin America. These more recent developments have a historical context, however, which is important to explore in order to understand the situation of today.

Latin America has been the victim of oppression and exploitation since the day that Columbus set foot on the West Indies. Seventy years after the Spaniards and Portuguese arrived, "the Indian population was on the verge of extinction;" in fact, the

native population dwindled to a mere 15 percent of what it had been.¹ These Europeans came in and claimed the land as their own, not considering the well-being of the natives and making all kinds of justifications for this thievery. They declared that “God had granted these lands to the Spaniards as a province or reward for their wars against the infidels.” They justified their actions using political philosophy as well, claiming that there were no “legitimate” owners of the lands, so the Europeans had the right to take them over. They also utilized anthropological arguments, “establishing” the “human inferiority” of the Indians, even going so far as “denying them a soul or human nature.” The Indians were seen as “evil and perverse,” and thus, it was not only permitted but also “demanded that the Indians be subjugated, so as to be set free from them.”²

This injustice has carried into modern times. Most of Latin American nations are highly dependent upon income earned from export products. American or European companies force their employees to work in destitute conditions. These companies are able to do this because there are not many other jobs.³ Thus, a job monopoly in Latin America creates the structures necessary for exploitation and oppression.

In the late 1960s and 70s, the time in which liberation theology first came about, Latin America was described as the “region of the open veins.” As one Latin American economic historian asserts,

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 consume, natural resources and human resources.⁴

¹ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 72.

² *Ibid.*, 75.

³ <http://www.latinsynergy.org/latinamericahistory.htm>

From the gold in Peru and the silver in Mexico and Bolivia in the 1500s and 1600s, to the sugar mills in Brazil and the Caribbean islands, the United States and Europe have taken the richest resources from Latin America without returning what is due to these countries. The “industrialization” of the 60s and 70s was aimed at processing the natural resources of the region, including wool, leather, tin, and oil and the subsequent production of them for exportation. However, the majority of Latin America was still not suffering any less. Although the gross national product (GNP) in Latin America was “growing steadily,” the gap between the poor and the rich also grew, as did the gap between the poor and rich nations. This phenomenon was the result of the fact that the per capita income (PCI) of the working poor was not increasing.⁵

As a case study, I have chosen to look at Brazil, for it was said to have experienced an economic “miracle” between 1968 and 1973. It maintained GNP growth of 10 percent, as well as a substantial increase in industrial products, exportation of manufactured products, and a growth in international credit and financial reserves. Industry grew at an average of 11 percent a year, and inflation was kept at a secure level. The “economic boom” was also tied to an increase in education levels. A large number of students were entering elementary and secondary schools, as well as colleges and universities. Education opportunities expanded, and new universities and graduate programs were established. Furthermore, Brazilian export growth increased six-fold in a mere eleven years, and the production of manufactured goods doubled.⁶

⁴ Eduardo Galeano, *The Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of Pillage in a Continent* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 12. In Esther and Mortimer Arias, *The Cry of My People: Out of Captivity in Latin America* (New York, NY: Friendship Press, 1980), 43.

⁵ Arias, 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

With all of these statistics pointing to the “Brazilian miracle” of economic growth, one would assume that Brazil was no longer a victim of Europe and the United States’ exploitation. However, these figures do not reveal that “the increase of production and consumption was concentrated in...the 20 percent minority at the top, while food and the basic commodities for the great majority of the population were inadequate.”⁷ The Catholic Bishops of the Northeast “denounced the impoverishment” of this majority of people who remained suffering in the “midst of this ‘miracle.’” In the summer of 1973 they stated:

Concentration of income has reached levels which reveal better than anything else the true meaning of the government’s economic policy. Between 1960 and 1970, the 20 percent of the Brazilian population with the highest income raised its share in the national income from 54.4 percent to 64.1 percent, while the remaining 80 percent saw their share reduced from 45.5 percent to 36.8 percent. The imbalance is glaringly revealed in the fact that in 1970, the 1 percent group of the Brazilian population earned more than did half of the entire population.⁸

Although these figures are startling, even worse is what the Bishops point out later in their statement:

What is very serious is that such an income concentration was made possible because the buying power of wages was brutally lowered. Between 1961 and 1970, the *decrease* of the real wage was about 38.8 percent. During the same period, the increase of real productivity was 25.6 percent. For the realization of the so-called “Brazilian miracle,” the government, through its regulation of minimum wages, has thus transferred part of the income of the working masses to the classes which are enjoying the fruits of economic growth.⁹

Furthermore, Theotonio dos Santos, one of the “leading Brazilian economists in exile,” reveals that in order to make the “miracle” of the Brazilian economy, the majority of the Brazilian people suffered. There was an increase “in the rate of exploitation of Brazilian

⁷ Ibid., 53.

⁸ Catholic Bishops of Northeast Brazil, “I Have Heard the Cry of My People,” IDOC-North America, Summer 1973. In Arias, 53.

⁹ Ibid.

workers, increases in the duration of their working days, decreases in their feeding and other essential consumption aspects, as well as increases in infant mortality rates.”¹⁰ From looking at Brazil, a country with over three million square miles, mining, agricultural, and industrial capabilities, a treasure of natural resources, expansive seacoasts and a “strategic position,” one would have assumed that this country had the capabilities to become one of the richest in the world.¹¹ With all of these resources and the potential for economic self-sufficiency, why was there such exploitation of the country and its people?

In the 1960s, Brazil had the “largest concentration of foreign investment in all Latin America.”¹² Furthermore, Latin American economist Andre Gunder Frank reveals that while the United States gave Brazil \$2,962 million in aid during the decade between 1950 to 1961, the U.S. procured \$6,875 million in “remittance of profits and interest” from Brazil during that time. In other words, Brazil lost a total of \$3,913 million to the U.S. during those ten years. Frank asserts that “what Brazil lost in terms of trade between 1955 and 1961 offset all the aid given by the United States to Brazil since World War II.”¹³

This type of domination was analyzed using Marxist theories on imperialism, which concentrated on powerful capitalist countries’ aversion of their own collapse through their exploitation of the poorer and less powerful nations.¹⁴ From this theory,

¹⁰ Theotonin. dos Santos, “The Crisis of the Brazilian Miracle,” Working Paper, Brazillian Studies, Latin American research Unity (LARU) (Toronto, Canada, 1977), 13. In Arias, 53-4.

¹¹ Arias, 51.

¹² Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Toward an Assessment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 125.

¹³ Andre Gunder Frank, *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1969), 150-4. In Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Toward an Assessment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 127.

¹⁴ McGovern, 125.

liberation theologians extrapolated the “Dependency theory,” which was used as a tool to analyze how this type of domination affected Latin America. According to dos Santos, “dependency is a situation in which a certain group of countries have their economies conditioned by the development and expansion of another country’s economy.”

Furthermore, the

Dominant countries...impose a dominant technology, commerce, capital, and socio-political values on the dependent countries...that permits them to impose conditions of exploitation and to extract part of the surplus produced by the dependent countries. Dependency, then, is founded in an international division of labor that permits the industrial development of some countries and limits the same process in others, submitting them to conditions and restraints imposed by the centers of world domination.¹⁵

Thus, according to this theory of Latin American dependency, the United States and Europe built their economies on the exploitation of the weaker and poorer third world countries. It is this injustice that liberation theology sought to address.

Through this Marxist analysis, liberation theology identified the atrocious injustices in Latin America and suggested that they were manifested most visibly in the intense poverty pervading these countries. Jon Sobrino, an El Salvadorian liberation theologian, asserts that “the greatest cause of massive, cruel and intolerable suffering in today’s world is the poverty found in the third (and the fourth) world.” It is here that poverty is the “instrument of death,” either slowly killing the people through unjust structures that inhibit their abilities to meet their most basic needs, or through “rapidly and violently” killing through the “repression that brings forth and maintains these unjust structures.”¹⁶ These poor are what Sobrino refers to as the “crucified peoples,” for they, like Jesus, suffer because of no fault of their own. They are the victims of an oppressive

¹⁵Theotonio Dos Santos, in Jaguaribe, Helio; Ferrer, Aldo; Wionczek, Miguel S.; Dos Santos, Theotonio. *La dependencia politica-economica de America Latina*. (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1971), 180. Cited in McGovern, 126.

force, much as Jesus was, for no reason other than the fact that they are born into the wrong station in life.

HISTORY OF THE MOVEMENT

In the 1960s, concerns over Latin America's dependency on the United States brought about attempts to eliminate this dependency through policies encouraging Latin Americans to produce their own manufactured goods instead of importing them. However, when these policies failed, many people, including liberation theologians, looked for another solution.

Vatican II helped to encourage liberation theologians through calling for the church to "become more involved in the struggles and aspirations of the poor." A large number of priests and other religious people began to live and work with these oppressed peoples. "Living and working with them brought new awareness of the wretched conditions of the poor, which in turn led to anger directed at the structures and oppressing groups they saw as causes of this misery."¹⁷

At Medellin, Colombia in the summer of 1968, bishops met for the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM), which was the event that "gave the newly-developing theology its greatest impetus." This meeting connected the teachings of Vatican II to the major issues confronting the church in its mission to help the oppressed of Latin America. It focused on Latin American society's class structure. In Latin America, an "aristocratic white elite has always controlled wealth and power," excluding the majority of the population "from any real economic, political, or cultural

¹⁶ Sobrino, 32.

development.” Some asserted that the church actually supported this supremacy because the bishops and priests found their “natural associates” in the higher classes, and “Catholic education [served] primarily the same upper classes.”¹⁸

Anticipating the Medellin conference, Gustavo Gutierrez first offered his “theology of liberation” in Chimbote, Peru in July of 1968. He “urged the church to speak of liberation rather than of development in addressing the problems of Latin America.” The concept of liberation emphasizes “Latin American dependency” on the United States. Gutierrez “combined this socio-political sense of liberation with a biblico-theological meaning: God acted in history to save a people from every form of enslavement.”¹⁹ In his introduction to the revised edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutierrez asserts that because “in many different ways the Bible shows us that the doing of God’s will is the main demand placed on believers,” it is the obligation of Christians to determine what that will is and to act according to it. Karl Barth supports this idea and states that “the true hearer of the word is the one who puts it into practice.”²⁰ Liberation theologians argued that God wills the liberation of the poor from the unjust social and economic structures that oppress them.

Gutierrez points to the many times God intervened in this world on behalf of and has given special preference to the “weak and abused.” From the story of Cain and Abel to the Exodus to the Beatitudes, God’s “preferential option for the poor” has been obvious. The poor and oppressed “deserve preference not because they are morally or religiously better than others, but because God is God,” and in God’s eyes, “the last are

¹⁷ McGovern, 7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹⁹ Ibid., 9.

first.”²¹ The Second Vatican Council supported this claim in John XXIII’s call for the church to be a “church of the poor.”²² More recently, at the extraordinary Synod of Bishops held in 1985, the final report reflected upon the fact that after Vatican II, the church became “more aware of its mission in the service of the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast.” The “preferential option for the poor” reveals the gospel’s “true spirit.” For Jesus “declared the poor blessed (Matt. 5:3; Luke 6:20), and he himself wished to be poor for us.”²³

METHOD OF EMPOWERMENT

As noted, liberation theology attempts to reach the oppressors, people in the first world who are directly responsible for the suffering and exploitation of the third. First world oppressors are called to join in the fight that the third world has already begun, learning from the oppressed as equals and taking on these people’s struggles as their own. I will attempt to summarize the arguments that liberation theologians, primarily Gustavo Gutierrez and Jon Sobrino, have employed in addressing the oppressors.

Who Are the Poor?

According to Gustavo Gutierrez, “poverty means death.” It means a deficiency of food and shelter and inadequate healthcare and education. It means permanent unemployment, or if one does have a job, exploitation. It means a loss of human dignity

²⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xxix.

²¹ Gutierrez, xxviii-xxix.

²² *Ibid.*, xxvi.

²³ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

and “unjust limitations placed on personal freedoms in the areas of self-expression, politics, and religion.” Poverty is a state of existence that completely devastates individuals and families, and both the Medellin and Puebla conferences labeled it as “institutional violence.”²⁴ However, there is another aspect of poverty that calls us to not merely look to the poor with eyes of sympathy and mercy, but to look upon them with admiration and respect. Being poor is also “a way of living, thinking, loving, praying, believing, and hoping, spending leisure time, and struggling for a livelihood.” Being an impoverished individual in Latin America “is also increasingly coming to mean being involved in the struggle for justice and peace, defending one’s life and freedom, seeking a more democratic participation in the decisions made by society, organizing to ‘live their faith in an integral way’ (Puebla 1137).”²⁵ These aspects of poverty “reveal a human depth and toughness that are a promise of life.”²⁶ An often-cited passage from the Puebla conference asserts that through its commitment to the poor and oppressed and the “rise of grassroots communities,” the church has discovered the “evangelizing potential of the poor.” The poor of which Gutierrez speaks “challenge the church at all times, summoning it to conversion”; and furthermore, “many of the poor incarnate in their lives the evangelical values of solidarity, service, simplicity, and openness to accepting the gift of God [no. 1147].”²⁷

The Sin of the First World

There are two distinct dimensions of “liberation” that are to occur. The first is the liberation of the poor “from social situations of oppression and marginalization that force

²⁴ Ibid., xxi.

²⁵ Ibid., xxii.

²⁶ Ibid., xxii.

many (and indeed all in one way or another) to live in conditions contrary to God's will for their life." This does not mean, however, that the first world is to come in and be the "liberators." Instead, it means that the first world join together with the third world in solidarity to help in the struggles that the third world has already begun.

But before this can occur, there must first be a liberation from within the heart of the oppressor. The first world must experience a "liberation from sin, which attacks the deepest roots of servitude." Sin is the severing of the "friendship" that exists amongst human beings and between God and human beings. Thus, the only way sin can be destroyed is through the "unmerited redemptive love of the Lord whom we receive by faith and in communion with one another." Only this kind of liberation gets at the "very source of social injustice and other forms of human oppression." It reconciles us with God and the rest of humankind.²⁸

Liberation theology attests that poverty is due to sin. Sin is not considered to be an "individual, private, or merely interior reality... Sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood and love in relationship among men."²⁹ Sin blinds the first world to the consequences of its actions. When the reality of these consequences are revealed to the oppressors through the lives of the poor, they "tend to ignore it, cover it up, or distort it, because it simply terrifies" them.³⁰ The first world does not want to be told that it is causing the deaths of millions.

This is why it is so important that the oppressors become active participants in this theology. Sobrino imparts that "one knows reality when one not only understands

²⁷ Ibid., xlii.

²⁸ Ibid., xxxviii.

²⁹ Ibid., 175.

³⁰ Sobrino, 49.

reality... and takes responsibility for it... but when one takes charge of reality,” fighting to change it.³¹ These crucified people are the “actualization of Christ crucified, the true servant of Yahweh.”³² Realizing that the poor are also “the servant,” Sobrino reminds us that “God says of the servant that he will set him up as a ‘light for the nations’ (Isa. 42:6; 49:6),” and thus, the poor will be the light to “show the nations what they really are.” The “fundamental sin” is the “imprisoning of the truth by injustice,” from which many evils derive, such as the “darkening of the heart.”³³

Recognition and Ownership as an Oppressor

The first step in this theology of liberation, thus, is to educate the non-poor so that they recognize the sinful exploitation of the impoverished. This recognition should engender in them a feeling of pity. However, according to liberation theology, this feeling needs to move beyond mere pity to mercy, the characteristic that “stands at the origin of all that [Jesus] practices,” for it is “mercy that shapes and molds his entire life, mission, and fate.”³⁴ As Christians, we are called to live after the example of Jesus, who throughout his life and mission repeatedly proclaimed the blessedness of the poor, participating in their suffering.

We can come to know God through attempting to emulate the mercy that he has on the downtrodden and oppressed. This mercy is not mere pity -- it is much more. To emulate God’s mercy, one must practice *praxis*, or active, mercy. The ideal human being is one who “interiorizes, absorbs in her innards the suffering of another...in such a way that this interiorized suffering becomes a part of her, is transformed into an internal

³¹ Ibid., 38.

³² Ibid., 51.

³³ Ibid., 54.

principle, the first and the last, of her activity. Mercy, as a re-action, becomes the fundamental action of the total human being.”³⁵ This phenomenon is what Sobrino calls the “principle of mercy,” the principle that we are called to follow because Jesus lived this principle. If we have mercy on the poor, we must internalize the pain of the exploited worker; we must identify with the child who does not have clean water to drink; we must feel the hunger pains of the malnourished. Because they hurt, we hurt. Since we experience their pain, we want to do whatever we can to stop the source of the suffering. If we have mercy on the poor, we must also join together with them in solidarity.

Solidarity with the Poor

Solidarity is the “movement of the heart, mind and body toward those who are suffering.” It is more than merely helping those in need – it is standing beside them and fighting to change the oppressive forces that cause the suffering.³⁶ We need to support them in their struggles and resist the temptation to place our own ideas and foreign categories upon them. We have to “share in the life of the poor” and view them as our equals, for “if there is no friendship with them and no sharing in the life of the poor, then there is no authentic commitment to liberation, because love exists only among equals.”³⁷

Gutierrez uses the word “development” to describe the process of liberation that the oppressors and oppressed are to achieve through working in solidarity. However, development cannot simply be economic growth modeled after the more successful first world countries. It must be “a *total social process*, which includes economic, social,

³⁴ Ibid., 20.

³⁵ Ibid., 17.

³⁶ Ibid., 93.

political, and cultural aspects.”³⁸ It must reach to the “root causes of the problems,” among which is the complete dependence, (economic, social, political, and cultural) of some countries upon others. The change to a new, independent and non-poor group of countries requires a “radical break from the status-quo, that is, a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution.”³⁹ However, mimicking the development of the first world will never work.⁴⁰ Instead, the change must come from within, from the grassroots of the particular country, from the poor themselves. The role of the first world is to learn from the third world as equals and join with them in the ideas and the fight that they have begun.

Solidarity with the poor does not mean that the first world is blameless. We must recognize our own role in their exploitation. When we truly face their pain and suffering, we must also look into our own lives; we must analyze our own oppressive actions and remember that we benefit from the exploitative economy. Thus, we not only have to fight to change the structures of the government and economy that cause the poverty, but we must also change the structures of our own lives, our own personal oppressive actions.

This is only one of the reasons that Gutierrez identifies for our “becoming poor.” He asserts that “unless we make an ongoing commitment to the poor, who are the privileged members of the reign of God, we are far removed from the Christian message.”⁴¹ We are to live the life of the poor to follow God’s example in alleviating the pain and suffering of the oppressed and for our own liberation and salvation. We need to learn from qualities that the poor possess in order to be truly free and enlightened.

³⁷ Gutierrez, xxxi.

³⁸ Ibid., 15.

³⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18.

Solidarity attempts “to reclaim our own humanity, bruised and alienated when our lives are built on the exploitation of others.”⁴²

Salvation and Redemption for the First World

We can see the effects of solidarity in our everyday actions. As Sobrino asserts, “in the reality of the South, with all of its poverty, injustice, and death, the North can recognize itself, as in a reverse mirror image, through what it has produced.”⁴³ By entering into solidarity with the poor, the rich “receive, in a way they hardly expected, new eyes for seeing the ultimate truth of things and new energies for exploring unknown and dangerous paths.”⁴⁴ The poor are not merely receiving aid from us; they are also giving something back, offering us a means to salvation.

Sobrino asserts that the “theology of the crucified people as Yahweh’s suffering servant includes not only the servant as victim...but also the servant’s saving role in historical soteriology.”⁴⁵ She who decides to live according to the “principle of mercy,” working to eradicate the poverty and oppression in the third world, “realizes – renders real – the profoundest element of what it is to be human, and comes to resemble Jesus (the *true* human being of dogma)”⁴⁶ and God. Furthermore, through coming to the aid of the poor, “one receives from them meaning for one’s own life,” and learns about true joy and happiness. The crucified peoples present values to us that we cannot learn elsewhere: “community against individualism, co-operation against selfishness, simplicity against opulence and openness to transcendence against blatant positivism, so

⁴¹ Ibid., xxxiii.

⁴² Sobrino, 93.

⁴³ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 150.

prevalent in the Western world.”⁴⁷ The poor offer, “as inspiration,” the “Christian creativity that poverty with spirit generates”: innovative ways to show love and community. We have much to learn from the unselfishness of the poor, and through identifying ourselves with them, we can learn to take on their characteristics.

What Action Is To Be Taken?

What, specifically, does joining in solidarity with the oppressed entail? Liberation theologians embrace the idea of Ecclesial Basic Communities, (most often referred to as Base Communities) asserting that they are the way through which the first world and the third world can come together to solve the problems of Latin America in solidarity. “Base Community” is a generic term that refers to “all types of Christian-based, grass-roots groups among the poor” in Latin America.⁴⁸ These communities were started by priests in the mid-1960s in Brazil, primarily in rural areas and in the “slum peripheries” of cities. In 1989, McGovern estimated that there were probably close to one hundred thousand of these communities with between one and two million members.⁴⁹ The communities that he observed were varied in size, but most often there were ten to thirty individuals in each group. The idea behind these groups is that once a week, the members come together to “read scripture, to pray, to sing hymns, and to discuss problems and how to act upon them.” The emphasis placed on these base communities is “faith-sharing and community organizing, with responsibility taken on by the poor themselves.” Because these communities are made up of “the poor, simple,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 51.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁸ McGovern. 199.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 199-201.

marginalized persons in Latin American society,” the oppressed are given a voice and are empowered to make changes in their own lives. Although “pastoral agents” are there to help facilitate discussion and help the poor to recognize what the major problems are, they are not there to tell the community members what they should do to change their situation. These pastoral agents allow the group members to discover for themselves the parallels between their own plight and the plight of the oppressed in the Bible stories. Base communities have helped the poor to move away from a fatalistic view on life to “recognize the structural causes of their poverty and to believe that working in solidarity as a community can effect change.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

In summary, liberation theology empowers the oppressed through educating the oppressors so they will see their pain-causing actions and then calling upon these newly-enlightened oppressors to stand in solidarity with the poor to unite as equals in the fight against the unjust structures of oppression. The first world is not “liberating” the third, but it is joining in on the liberating process, and through so doing actually becomes liberated itself. Through the Medellin and Puebla conferences, the poor were identified as the beloved of God and raised up in the eyes of the Church. The Christians of the first world are called to look at the poor with new eyes, to learn from them, and to help them in their struggles. However, aiding them does not mean imposing the first world’s remedies upon the problems of the third world. It means listening to and acting upon ideas that come from the oppressed peoples.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 202-3.

ANALYSIS OF EMPOWERMENT

The most obvious way that one would think to assess the success of liberation theology in empowering the oppressed is through looking at how the economic situation of the poor has changed since its inception. In looking at the Absolute Poverty Rates⁵¹ of the rural poor throughout the world, it is startling to notice that of the top ten countries with the greatest percentage of rural poor, seven are Latin American countries. Bolivia has the highest percentage of rural poor in the world with 86% of this population in poverty. Guatemala, Haiti, and Honduras are all tied for second with 80% of their rural population living in poverty. Peru is in third place with 70%, and Brazil is in fifth place with 66%.⁵² From these figures, it does not appear that liberation theology has had much of an impact in improving the economic plight of the Latin American poor.

However, statistics and numbers alone should not be the only indicators examined when determining liberation theology's success or lack of success as a tool of empowerment. What should also be considered is the degree to which this movement's teachings have permeated Latin American thought and activism to cause social action and solidarity with the poor. Many people were inspired by the Medellin conference to work toward liberating the poor. At a press conference in Puebla in 1979, one Argentine exile gave testament along with other exiles to the effect that Medellin had on his life:

At the time of Medellin, I was 16 years old. Medellin gave to young people reasons to live, reasons to hope, above all it helped us to see that Christ had identified himself with the poor. We formed small prayer and reflection groups and we began to see the necessity of living and working with the poor. This, for me, was a true conversion, in the

⁵¹ "Absolute poverty" is the term used to describe the economic situation in undeveloped countries and is much more severe than the poverty of developed countries. In fact, the upper end of the absolute poverty limit is a great deal lower than the poverty levels that governments of the developed countries have fixed. In the U.S. the absolute poverty limit is \$14.40 a day per person, while in Latin America it is only \$2 a day. [*Human Development Report 1997*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13.]

⁵² George Thomas Kurian, ed. *The Illustrated Book of World Rankings, 4th Ed* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1997), 83.

sense that all the plans I had for my life were called into question when I realized how serious the needs for the poor were.⁵³

Many people even placed their lives on the line to fight against the injustices in Latin America. Numerous Christian ministers and priests have become martyrs in the struggle of this movement. One such case occurred in the state of Matto Grosso when Father Joao Bosco Penido Bournier, a Jesuit missionary, went to the police station along with Bishop Pedro Casaldaliga in order to report the torture of two peasant women whose cries could be heard “all over the place.” Following his report, he was “insulted and slapped in the presence of the Bishop, hit in the face with a revolver, and killed with a dum-dum bullet.”⁵⁴ Another group of 50 Jesuits in El Salvador were given an ultimatum by the terrorist White Warriors Union that they should leave the country or else they would be killed. The Jesuits did not leave, stating, “We are going to continue to be faithful in our mission until we fulfill our duty or are liquidated.”⁵⁵

Some advocates for this movement were not passive, however. Nestor Paz Zamora, one young guerrilla fighter explains his reasoning for taking up arms against the oppressors, using violent action to help the poor:

“Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. This is the commandment which sums up the ‘Law’.”

That is why we take up arms: to defend the illiterate and undernourished majority from exploitation by a minority and to give back his dignity to the dehumanized person.

We know that violence is painful, because we feel in our own flesh the violent repression of the established disorder. But we are determined to liberate man because we consider him as a *brother*. We are the people in arms...

⁵³ Peerman, Dean, “CELAM III: Measured Steps Forward,” *The Christian Century*, Vol. 96, No. 12, April 4, 1979, pp. 373 – 8. In Arias, 11.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 115.

We have chosen this method because it is the only one open to us, painful though it may be.⁵⁶

Although there are sometimes people such as Zamora who feel that violence is the only way to change the oppressive structures, for the most part, base communities' work "involves cooperative efforts of members rather than struggles of conflict." The groups will "clearly opt for nonviolent methods of change," even when faced with conflict with "unjust structures that block the possibility of further development because of land ownership issues."⁵⁷

In order to assess the successfulness of base communities in Latin America, McGovern studied "how communities and groups that espouse liberation theology translate their commitment into practice."⁵⁸ He found that the problems that these communities most often focused upon were needs specific to that community such as sewage disposal, clean water, paved roads, food, electricity, education, health care, and job skills.⁵⁹ Thus, most of the concerns were not dealing with big structural changes, but were small, immediate concerns that could be addressed much more easily. However, even with the rapid growth of these base communities, they still only comprise less than two percent of Brazil's population, which is the country in which these groups were first formed and is where they are most prominently found.⁶⁰

Another major problem that McGovern reveals is Scott Mainwaring's criticism of these base communities that they have not established "links with broader political parties." He feels that they must do this "if they hope to achieve real structural

⁵⁶ Ibid., 139.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 212.

⁵⁸ One problem with this study is that it is eleven years old. I do not have any more recent data, so I do not have any evidence as to what has happened with base communities since this study was conducted.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 211.

change.”⁶¹ Marcello Azevedo also argues that base communities will need to “collaborate and compromise with groups in different sectors of society if they hope to effect broader social changes.”⁶²

Although liberation theology and base communities have not caused obvious changes in the poverty statistics in these countries or in their governmental structures, they have done something for the poor. Through base communities, the poor have been given “a sense of their dignity, allowing them to participate actively in decisions that affect their lives.” Moreover, they have been prepared “for a more active role in society as a whole.”⁶³ This empowerment is one that effects changes statistically intangible to the whole of society. The oppressed people are psychologically or spiritually empowered through a heightened sense of self-worth and importance. The Latin Americans in the base communities have a voice within the small areas in which they live and can effect small, but tangible to that particular group, effects on their small communities.

Liberation theology has not had the broad, sweeping impact upon the oppressors that it needs in order to elicit significant economic, social and political change in Latin America. However, it has affected some middle class, capitalist Americans who have read about liberation theology. I am an example of such an individual. I first read Jon Sobrino’s *The Principle of Mercy* during my freshman year at Washington and Lee in a Christian theology and ethics class. That was my first exposure to liberation theology and it caused me to think about the poor and oppressed of Appalachia that I had encountered in a different way than I had before. From the numerous week-long summer

⁶⁰ Ibid., 212.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

“Servant Events” that I, along with other members of my church, had gone on in order to help re-build homes for the impoverished in Appalachia, I had learned many things about “poor people.” I saw first hand the destitute conditions of individuals living in such an exploited region, but I also saw the same unselfishness and beauty in these Appalachians that Sobrino speaks of as being visible in the lives of the poor in Latin America. With very little in their lives to spare, the people with whom we came into contact on those Servant Events, even those whose homes we were not working on, always found a way to give us something. It may have been a meal, some cookies, a jar of honey, or simply a front porch to sit on, but I was struck again and again by the kindness and joy in life that these individuals shared with us.

Reading Sobrino caused me to think more about the ways in which we should join with these oppressed people, and he gave me a new perspective on my romanticized desire to “rescue the poor of Appalachia.” Reading about joining in solidarity with the poor and recognizing the lessons that they have to teach *us* gave me a new insight into how I can truly “help” the oppressed. It is only through listening to *their* ideas and not through imposing our own upon them that they can truly be empowered. The capability to improve their social, economic, and political situation is within the oppressed, we who are not poor merely need to recognize that and encourage them to bring those capabilities out.

I am but one of many people whose way of thinking about the poor and oppressed has been challenged through reading liberation theology. Liberation theology has affected religious ethicists throughout the world, even those dealing within completely different social and religious contexts. There is a black “liberation theology,” a women’s

“liberation theology,” even a Jewish “liberation theology.” The very fact that “theology” is a Christian term and it is being placed upon a Jewish movement is evidence of the impact that liberation theology has had cross-religiously and cross-culturally. Furthermore, nearly every single person who goes through seminary will at some point be required to read liberation theology, and Orbis Books has published hundreds of manuscripts on this subject.⁶⁴ Admittedly, liberation theology’s having impacted the thinking of certain scholars does not mean that there should be a significant translation of this “enlightenment” onto the thinking and actions of the majority of citizens in the developed world. Thus, although liberation theology has spread from Latin America and is well known within the realms of social justice, its tangible impact is much less significant.

Although liberation theology has not caused massive economic change in the lives of Latin Americans as a whole, it has empowered on an individual basis. To these lives that it has reached, liberation theology has had a significant psychological and spiritual impact that should not be regarded as a failures.

ENGAGED BUDDHISM

⁶⁴ Affirmed by Dr. Harlan Beckley, professor and director of the Shepherd Poverty Program at Washington and Lee University.

Unlike liberation theology, engaged Buddhism did not arise out of one specific social or political circumstance. “Engaged Buddhism” includes a number of different social movements within this religion and across national borders. Socially engaged Buddhism refers to the application of Buddhist teachings, or *dharma*, to helping to resolve social, economic, and political injustices.⁶⁵ The term “engaged Buddhism” is used to refer to a multiplicity of movements in Asia, from Thich Nhat Hanh and his followers, who helped to bring about the fall of the oppressive Diem regime in Vietnam, to the Dalai Lama, who through his work in trying to free Tibet from its oppression has come to be regarded by many as the manifestation of divine compassion.⁶⁶ The engaged Buddhist social movements have been extremely different, but they have all had the common thread of seeking and working toward justice.

For the purposes of this study, I will focus on only one of these socially engaged movements in Buddhism. In my attempt to explore methods of empowerment through religion, I have chosen the movement started by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, which focused on the empowerment and liberation of the Mahars, one of the many groups of “Untouchables” in India.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE OPPRESSED AT THE TIME OF THE RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

⁶⁵ Christopher S. Queen, Introduction. In Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), ix-x.

⁶⁶ Queen and King, 5.

The Untouchables of India

India's caste system resembles the Latin American social situation in many ways. However, it may be even more problematic to address because it is religiously ordained through Hindu beliefs and tradition. Based upon Brahmanical (Sanskrit) scriptures, the caste system "encompasses a complex ordering of social groups on the basis of ritual purity."⁶⁷ An individual has no control over which rung on the ladder of social order he or she falls; one is born into a caste and has the mark of that position in the social hierarchy for the remainder of his or her life. Although there are many variations in this social order according to region, the traditional 2,000-year-old system can be ideally described within the context of four caste categories, or *varnas*. The Brahmins (priests and teachers) are at the top of the hierarchy, next are the Kshatriyas (rulers and soldiers), then the Vaisyas (the merchants), and last are the Shudras (the laborers). A fifth class is so low that it is not even included within the caste system; these are the "Untouchables" or Dalits.⁶⁸ These people are given the tasks and jobs that are too polluting for the more ritually pure castes to perform.⁶⁹

Before Ambedkar's movement and the subsequent mass conversion to Buddhism, Mahars made up the largest group of Untouchables in the Indian state of Maharashtra, and they traditionally worked as "inferior village servants." The tasks for which the Mahars were responsible included: acting as the watchman of the village, being guides for visitors, repairing the village hall, sweeping the roads of the village, serving as letter carriers to other villages, as well as the defiling duties of bringing fuel to the burning

⁶⁷ *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchables."* (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 24.

⁶⁸ "Dalit" is a term used by rights activists to refer to the "Untouchables." It literally means "broken people." (Ibid., Glossary)

ground for the cremation of the dead, and the removal of the carcasses of dead cattle.⁷⁰ Because they were viewed as being defiled, both by their birth status and by the work that they did, the touch of a Mahar, and even the touch of his or her shadow in some areas, was polluting. Furthermore, the village well, the temple, and the school were all off-limits to them.⁷¹ The Mahars suffered from a very low socio-economic status. They lived in isolated areas, always apart from the caste Hindus' quarters.⁷² Because of the nature of their responsibilities, they were constantly coming in contact with the caste Hindus, a situation which served to be a continual reinforcement and reminder of their lowly position in the social hierarchy.⁷³

The oppression that the Dalits experienced, and still do today, is one that goes beyond degrading village responsibilities. In many regions, violence against the Untouchables, especially women, has been quite prevalent. A government investigator in Tamil Nadu told Human Rights Watch interviewers that “[n]o one practices untouchability when it comes to sex.”⁷⁴ Especially in rural areas, rape is prevalent among Dalit women as a “form of retaliation” by upper-caste leaders in an effort to “suppress movements” aimed at demanding a minimum wage, reclaiming lost land, or starting sharecropping disputes. These innocent women are “raped by members of the upper caste, by landlords, and by the police in pursuit of their male relatives.”⁷⁵ The raping of

⁶⁹ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁰ Eleanor Zelliott, “Background of the Mahar Buddhist Conversion.” In Robert K. Sakai, ed., *Studies on Asia, 1966* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 50.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Neera Burra. “Buddhism, Conversion, and Identity: A Case Study of Village Mahars.” In M.N. Srinivas, ed., *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*. (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1996), 153.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with R. Balakrishnan, director of Tamil Nadu chapter of national Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Madras, February 13, 1998. In *Broken People*, 30.

⁷⁵ *Broken People*, 31.

Untouchable women is one weapon used by many caste-Hindus to keep the Dalits in their oppression. The Bathani Tola massacre that occurred in 1996 is a perfect example of this type of corruption:

The “landlords” wanted to reassert their feudal tyranny over the poor who have started becoming more vocal, and by attacking the most vulnerable, women and children, they sent a clear message that they would not allow anyone to disturb the social structure... Women were raped and hacked. The huts and small houses in which the victims took shelter were burnt down. The shrill cries failed to draw the attention of the police posted a kilometre and a half away because their food came from the landlords’ houses.⁷⁶

Thus, Although it is illegal today, caste violence still occurs in order to keep the Untouchable peoples in their designated place within the social hierarchy. It is this oppressive system from which Ambedkar wanted to become completely removed.

HISTORY OF THE MOVEMENT

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar

Born as a Mahar, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar suffered many abuses growing up. He is an individual example of the difficulties that members of this class have long endured. When he and his brother were in grade school, they were forced to “sit silently on a piece of burlap in the back of the classroom.” Furthermore, their teacher would not handle their notebooks, and when they were thirsty, “drinking water was poured into their mouths from above to avoid physical contact.” They were beaten when they accidentally trespassed on private property, and the barber, (himself low-caste) would not even cut their hair. Fortunately, Ambedkar’s parents were very devoted to their children and ambitious for their futures. Both his mother and his father’s sides of the family were

actively involved in the devotional cult of Kabir, a Hindu poet-saint who was “known for his rejection of caste and his vision of universal brotherhood.” Ambedkar’s father took an active role in the education of his children and would drill them in both English and Marathi translations, math, and in memorizing long passages in the Hindu epics. In his later years, his father was also an activist for securing Untouchables’ rights.⁷⁷

All of his parents’ support and encouragement gave Ambedkar the drive and determination to graduate from high school in 1907, making him only the second Untouchable to do so. He entered a college in Bombay, where his tuition was paid by Sayajira Gaekwad, a very generous and liberal Hindu Maharaja who lived in the neighboring Baroda State.

Dr. Gaekwad continued in his generosity, and Ambedkar went on to become “one of the most highly educated men in India.” He received MA and Ph.D. degrees from Columbia University, and the M.Sc. and D.Sc. degrees from the University of London. He was also admitted to the bar in London, and continued in his postdoctoral studies at the University of Bonn.⁷⁸

Despite these, among many other, great achievements, Ambedkar was “repeatedly victimized by caste violence, including eviction from housing, beatings, and death threats.” As a result, Ambedkar came to realize that “neither the well-wishes of the liberal Hindus, the random support of the British, nor the efforts of isolated Untouchables like himself could make a lasting difference in India.” It would take a “social revolution

⁷⁶ Neena Bhandari, “Sexual Assaults on Women: Women are being sexually violated in India for various reasons including land disputes and caste conflicts,” [no date] Inter Press Service. In *Broken People*, 32.

⁷⁷ Queen and King, 49.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

with broad support of the masses” to remove the oppression that the Mahars suffered.⁷⁹ Hence, Ambedkar began his journey to find a way to make this social revolution a reality.

Realizing that “untouchability” is not simply an economic or social problem but also a religious problem, Ambedkar saw that the only way to liberate India’s oppressed was through a religious movement. Whereas liberation theology sought to work within Christianity to change the structures of oppression through reinterpreting the Bible in the light of liberating the poor, Ambedkar’s approach was to completely remove the Untouchables from Hinduism. He believed that because the caste system was so engrained in Hindu beliefs and traditions, the only hope they had at truly becoming liberated from the social confines and barriers imposed upon them would be through a complete rejection of Hinduism. But he also saw the importance of religion to Indian life, and so had to find a compassionate religion in which they could take refuge.

METHOD OF EMPOWERMENT

Ambedkar’s approach to empowering the poor was much different than liberation theology’s approach. First of all, although Ambedkar was very active politically in attempting to alleviate the structures of oppression in India, he did not use religion to influence the oppressors. Instead, he used religion to effect a change in the oppressed. Through denouncing Hinduism and giving them a new identity as Buddhists, Ambedkar attempted to raise the self-esteem of the Mahars to give them the desire to fight against the social oppression from which they were suffering.

⁷⁹ King and Queen. p. 49.

Ambedkar's Initial Attempts at Empowering the Untouchables

As the British raj made attempts to expand the representative base in 1919, Ambedkar seized the opportunity to testify to the Southborough Committee, which was responsible for drafting a report to be used in the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. As a highly educated representative of the Mahars, Dr. Ambedkar's main request was that the Untouchables secure a separate electorate from the caste Hindus, thus ensuring that the Untouchables would hold direct and proportionate representation in the Bombay legislative council. His words paint a very vivid picture of the situation that the Untouchables experienced in 1919:

Socio-religious disabilities have dehumanized the untouchable . . . The untouchables are so socialized as never to complain of their low estate . . . The exact description of the treatment cannot be attempted. The word untouchable is an epitome of their ills and sufferings. Not only has untouchability arrested the growth of their personality, but it comes in the way of their material well-being. It has also deprived them of certain civil rights . . . The principal modes of acquiring wealth are trade, industry, or service. The untouchables can engage in none of these because of their untouchability. . . In the whole Bombay Presidency there [is] one B.A. [himself] and six or seven matriculates among the depressed classes.⁸⁰

Ambedkar's address emphasizes a theme that crops up repeatedly in his future orations – the low self-esteem and diminished self-worth that the Untouchables experience.⁸¹ His hopes of securing representation on the legislative council reflect his belief that 1) Untouchables need to be empowered, and 2) that only Untouchables truly know their needs. Representation by anyone other than one of their own, even by sympathetic caste Hindus, was not acceptable.

⁸⁰ *Evidence taken before The Reforms Committee (Franchise)*, vol. 2, Government of India, Calcutta, 1919. pp. 729-39. In Eleanor Zelliot, "Buddhism and Politics in Maharashtra." In Donald Eugene Smith, ed., *South Asian Politics and Religion*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 195.

⁸¹ *Buddhism and Politics*, 195.

Ambedkar's plea to the Southborough Committee was ignored. Instead of granting the Depressed Classes the nine elected seats in the Bombay Presidency, as Ambedkar requested, they gave only one seat. Furthermore, this seat was not an elected position as Ambedkar had requested, but was a nominated position. However, this did not discourage Ambedkar, and he continued to seize every opportunity that he could to try to gain political power for the Untouchables.⁸²

Attempting to invigorate the Mahars, Ambedkar led three temple *satyagrahas* in which they tried to enter Hindu temples that were forbidden to them because of their status as Untouchables. Although all three were unsuccessful, the objective of actually gaining entry into these temples was not what Ambedkar was after. He wanted to help these people see that they could fight against the social barriers. They did not have to sit by passively.⁸³ In reference to these actions, Ambedkar, in a letter to a Mahar leader of one of the temple *satyagrahas*, insisted that he "started temple entry Satyagraha only because [he] felt that it was the best way of energising the depressed classes and making them conscious of their position."⁸⁴ Ambedkar was seeking to arouse "class consciousness." Instead of attempting to move up the Hindu caste system, Ambedkar sought to remove and separate the Untouchables from it entirely. He did not believe that the Untouchables could rid themselves of their "disabilities" if they remained in the "Hindu fold." His letter asserted that he "would advise the depressed classes to insist upon a complete overhauling of Hindu Society and Hindu Theology before they consent to become an integral part of Hindu Society."⁸⁵ Although Ambedkar did not want the

⁸² Ibid., 196.

⁸³ Background, 53.

⁸⁴ Letter to B.K. Gaikwad, March 3, 1934. In Background, 53-4.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Untouchables to accede to the Hindu caste system, he demanded that they act and dress like the highest caste Hindus. He repeatedly called the Mahars to stop the degrading and defiling work of dragging the corpses of dead cattle out of the village, and to also refrain from drinking alcohol, to not beg alms, to dress well, to become educated, to send their children to school, and to respect themselves.⁸⁶

The Announcement of Conversion

On October 13, 1935, Ambedkar, along with a collection of ten thousand of his followers, congregated at Yeola for the Bombay Presidency of Depressed Classes Conference. Ambedkar was the President of the Conference, and he delivered an hour and a half long speech reminding those gathered that after five years of non-violent efforts, they were still unsuccessful at obtaining the simple right to enter a Hindu temple. He then continued with some of his most important and memorable words:

Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindus, we are treated thus. If we were members of another Faith, none would dare treat us so. Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment . . . I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power.⁸⁷

With these words, Ambedkar began his public rejection of Hinduism. At the All-Bombay District Mahar Conference that Dr. Ambedkar called in May 1936, a motion for a conversion to another religion was made. The reason for the conversion was not because of a strongly held belief in any other religion, but due to a rejection of the oppressive practices and beliefs of Hinduism. In his speech at this conference, Ambedkar

⁸⁶ Buddhism and Politics, 197.

⁸⁷ Rev. Jans Ranchi, *The Depressed Classes: A Chronological Documentatioin, Part I*. Catholic Press; parts II-VII, Kueseong, St. Mary's College, no date. p. 41. In Zelliot, Eleanor. "The Psychological

insisted that “to remain in Hinduism and to attempt to abolish the caste system is like sweetening poison.”⁸⁸

Interestingly, Ambedkar felt that it was necessary that empowerment of the Untouchables occur through religion. In order to fully realize the gift of oration that Ambedkar possessed and to thoroughly understand the depth to which he felt that a conversion was necessary for his people to truly be liberated, Eleanor Zelliot quotes at length from the speech he gave at this conference. In the printed Marathi version of this speech, this section has actually been put in a poetic form at the beginning of the pamphlet.⁸⁹

Religion is for man; man is not for religion.

If you want to gain self-respect, change your religion.

If you want to create a cooperating society, change your religion.

If you want power, change your religion.

If you want equality, change your religion.

If you want independence, change your religion.

If you want to make the world in which you live happy, change your religion.

Why should you remain in a religion that does not value your manhood?

Why should you remain in a religion that does not let you enter its temples?

Why should you remain in a religion that does not give you water to drink?

Why should you remain in a religion that does not let you become educated?

Why should you remain in a religion that bars you from its good jobs?

Why should you remain in a religion that dishonours you at every step?

That religion which forbids humanitarianism behaviour between man and man is not a religion but a reckless penalty.

That religion which regards the recognition of man’s self-respect as sin is not a religion but a sickness.

That religion which allows one to touch a foul animal but not a man is not religion but a madness.

That religion which says that one class may not gain knowledge, may not acquire wealth, may not take up arms, is not a religion but a mockery of man’s life.

That religion which teaches that the unlearned should remain unlearned, that the poor

Dimension of the Buddhist Movement in India.” In G.A. Oddie, ed., *Religion in South Asia*. (Columbia, NY: South Asia Books, 1977), 120.

⁸⁸Ibid., 121.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

should remain poor, is not a religion but a punishment.

Do not say that men who treat animals with more respect than humans and who respect all Brahmans as Gods are religious.

Do not say that men who feed ants with sugar and let men go with out water are religious.

Do not say that men who embrace another religion and push their own far from them hate society.⁹⁰

Although Ambedkar's speech called for a renunciation of Hinduism, it did not suggest a religion to which the group should convert. In fact, it would be almost twenty-one years before his conversion to another religion.

The Conversion to Buddhism

Ambedkar knew that he would need to find a compassionate religion with a belief system conducive to liberating the poor.⁹¹ After receiving offers from Christians, Sikhs, Muslims, and Buddhists, finally in October of 1956 he, along with 300,000 to 600,000 others converted to Buddhism. He decided that Buddhism best fit the "complex requirements of reason and morality he stipulated along the way."⁹² He concluded that the Buddhist dhamma is the religion that most focused on human liberation and freedom.

He set forth four criteria for a "satisfactory religion." It needed to "foster *morality*; accord with scientific reason; offer liberty, equality, and fraternity; and not sanctify or ennoble poverty."

He concluded that Buddhism was the "only religion which [satisfied] these tests."⁹³ Ambedkar said that

⁹⁰ B.H. Ambedkar, *Mukhti Kon Pathe?* ("What Path Freedom?") (Bombay: Bharat Bhushan Printing Press, 1936), In Psychological Dimension, 122-3.

⁹¹ B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Second Edition with Preface by Justice R.R. Bhole. (Bombay: Siddharth Publication, 1974), xii.

⁹² Queen and King,46.

In addition to *ahimsa*, the principle of nonviolence, the Buddha taught 'social freedom, economic freedom, and political freedom. He taught equality, equality not between man and man only but between man and woman. It would be difficult to find a religious teacher to compare with Buddha, whose teachings embrace so many aspects of the social life of a people, whose doctrines are so modern, and whose main concern was to give salvation to man in his life on earth, and not to promise it to him in heaven after he is dead.⁹⁴

Many Buddhist intellectuals did not like or accept Ambedkar's "redefinition of Buddhist liberation" as the "amelioration of material conditions and social relationships in this life." One such critic who reviewed *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in *The Maha Bodhi* found the book to be "enough to shock a real Buddhist" and especially was opposed to the book's "denial of the Buddha's infallibility, its rejection of karma and enlightenment, its omission of the Four Noble Truths, and its reduction of the First Sermon to 'a merely social system.'" ⁹⁵ Furthermore, in two of his unpublished studies which analyze Ambedkar's "use of the Pali scriptures in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*," Adele M. Fiske "documents Ambedkar's repeated use of omission, interpolation, paraphrase, shift of emphasis, and rationalization passages that are presented as, in Ambedkar's words, 'simple and clear statement[s] of the fundamental Buddhist thoughts.'" ⁹⁶

The Mahars' New Identity

Even before the mass conversion in 1956, Ambedkar was leading up to that move. In 1948 he published *The Untouchables*, in which he attempted to show that the

⁹³ Ibid. p. 47.

⁹⁴ Ahir, D.C. *Dr. Ambedkar on Buddhism*. Bombay: Siddharth Publications, 1982. pp. 27-8. In Queen, Christopher S. "Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation." In Queen, Christopher S. and King, Sallie B., eds. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. p. 47.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Untouchables had become this lowly group not because of an inborn defiled state, but because they had once been Buddhists, who were “degraded and banished from the villages.” While the rest of India, which became the caste Hindus, returned to Brahminism, the soon-to-become Untouchables held fast to their Buddhist beliefs and thus were ostracized.⁹⁷ The facts are difficult to assess, for even Ambedkar admits in his preface that “the origin of Untouchability lies buried in a dead past which nobody knows.” He continues, “it cannot be but that imagination and hypothesis should play a part” in a work that attempts to reconstruct the “origins of Untouchability.”⁹⁸ However, the fact remains that here, even before the mass conversion, Ambedkar was attempting to change the self-perceptions of the Mahars. Through giving them this other identity, an identity of a banished group of Buddhists, Ambedkar legitimizes the conversion to Buddhism by asserting that this group is truly Buddhist at its roots. Furthermore, this return to Buddhism was also a return to the group’s higher status in a previous “Golden Age” as virtuous followers of the true path to enlightenment. Their lowly status, in effect, became a sign of virtue from an earlier time.

The approach that Ambedkar used to empower the Untouchables was to give them a new identity, one that would allow them to have a heightened sense of self-worth and a confidence to refuse the oppressive treatment that they had suffered for generations. Furthermore, because their new identity was one that asserted their virtuous origins, they no longer were suited for the defiling jobs of the village. While liberation theologians’ approach did not create a new identity for the oppressed as Ambedkar did for the

⁹⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁹⁷ Buddhism and Politics, 203.

⁹⁸ Ambedkar, B.H. *The Untouchables: Investigation of the Origins of Untouchability*. (New Delhi: Amrit Book Co., 1948). Preface found on-line at <http://saxakali.com/southasia/untoucha.htm>

Untouchables, liberation theology did engender a similar experience of raised self esteem and worth in the oppressed, giving them a voice through base communities. However, in liberation theology the oppressors are called to solidarity with the poor, but in Ambedkar's movement the oppressors are not. In fact, there is a real separation between the oppressed and the oppressors.

ANALYSIS OF THE EMPOWERMENT

Although "untouchability" was abolished in 1950 under India's constitution (which Ambedkar had an important role in writing), it "remains very much a part of rural India."⁹⁹ As was seen with liberation theology, Ambedkar's movement was not able to alter the social, economic, and political situation of the majority of Dalits in India.

Today, more than 160 million people, or over one-sixth of India's population, fall under the title of "Untouchables." Untouchables "continue to live in extreme poverty, without land or opportunities for better employment or education." The Human Rights Watch continues,

With the exception of a minority who have benefited from India's policy of quotas in education and government jobs, Dalits are relegated to the most menial of tasks, as manual scavengers, removers of human waste and dead animals, leather workers, street sweepers, and cobblers. Dalit children make up the majority of those sold into bondage to pay off debts to upper-caste creditors. Dalit men, women, and children numbering in the tens of millions work as agricultural laborers for a few kilograms of rice or Rs. 15 to Rs. 35 (US\$0.38 to \$0.88) a day. Their upper-caste employers frequently use caste as a cover for exploitative economic arrangements: social sanction of their status as the lesser being allows their impoverishment to continue.¹⁰⁰

According to this description, it appears that the Dalits have not experienced any type of empowerment. However, here again, as was the case with liberation theology,

one must look beyond the “big picture” to see if there are underlying empowerments occurring on a smaller scale. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the conversion movement in empowering the Untouchables in India, I will focus on one specific village in Maharashtra. Neera Burra conducted an anthropological study on this village to determine how Buddhism is “understood and practiced by the ordinary Mahar in the village.” Although there are also Mahars in the urban settings, the majority of them still live in small rural villages such as this one.¹⁰¹

Parents and grandparents of the current generation went through the conversion to Buddhism in 1935, taking the vows along with Ambedkar to renounce Hinduism and take refuge in the Buddha’s teachings. The extent to which the movement succeeded in empowering the Mahars is depends upon the people’s experience of a heightened self-worth and changed identity from that of defiled “Untouchables” to self-affirming “Buddhists.” Thus, we can ask how descendants of those converted relate to the caste system and how they perceive themselves as Buddhists.

When Burra asked 102 village Mahars to what caste and religion they belonged, 72 asserted that they were Buddhists, nine of them said that they were Mahars, 16 said that they were Hindu Mahars, two that they were Buddhist Mahars, two that they were Harijan Buddhists, and one declared that he was a Harijan.¹⁰² However, when asked by a government official similar questions, the village people almost always respond that they are Mahars. Mahars and not Buddhists are awarded special privileges and dispensations with state and Central legislature representation, as well as with education and

⁹⁹ *Broken People*, 2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Burra, 154.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 157.

employment provided by the Central government.¹⁰³ Thus, the villagers' response is clearly determined by the people to whom they are speaking.

Although 70 of the 102 Mahars interviewed declared that they were Buddhists, none had actually taken the vows of Buddhism. Burra found a great deal of misunderstanding as to what taking the vows actually meant. When he asked why people did not take them, there was a "genuine, deep-seated anxiety that once they took the vows, they would not be able to live by them."¹⁰⁴ Moreover, when asked if the religious practices that they observed were identical to the caste Hindus' practices, all 102 respondents answered that they were. In the homes of many of the villagers, Hindu gods and goddesses set alongside pictures of the Buddha and Ambedkar, all of which are worshipped.¹⁰⁵

Burra concluded that although there is no real "identification with Buddhism as a religion," these villagers still feel a very strong "need to assert the Buddhist part of their identity." When a Mahar tells someone that he or she is a Buddhist, that person is not asserting a rejection of Hinduism to follow the teachings of the Buddha; instead, this individual is establishing a changed identity. No longer does this person accept that he or she is "a member of the Untouchable community which is undeserving of human dignity and treatment."¹⁰⁶

This theory gains more support through observing village Mahars' greeting practices. When one Mahar meets another, it would be very common for him or her to say "Ram Ram," which is a greeting traditional of the caste Hindus. However, if this

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 160.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 161.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 158.

same Mahar greets a caste Hindu, he will most likely say “Jai Bheem,” a greeting made only by Buddhists. This greeting is “a signal to the outside world to observe the change in identity” and an “assertion of the new identity, of the distinction between being a Scheduled Caste Mahar and a human being.”¹⁰⁷

Their identity as “Buddhists” has helped the Mahar to have a new and positive self-image and to renounce traditional social order. Through the teachings of Ambedkar, the Mahars perceive themselves as equals to the rest of Indian society and as such have violated the “sacred world of the caste Hindus.” The caste Hindus expressed much resentment to Burra over the actions that the Mahars were taking to assert their empowerment. The fact that the Mahars attempted to “enter village temples,” drew water from the “pure” wells, celebrated Hindu festivals that were forbidden to them to celebrate, prepared sacred foods, used ghee, (clarified butter, again traditionally forbidden to Untouchables), dressed in nice clothes, and walked throughout the village freely greatly upset the caste Hindus.¹⁰⁸

Although the Mahars have not integrated the spirituality of Buddhism into their lives and rituals, they have been empowered by their identity as Buddhists. They no longer acquiesce to the position in society into which they were born. They “fight tooth and nail for what Ambedkar called *manuskichya haka*, or the right to humanity.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, it seems that Ambedkar’s form of grass-roots empowerment succeeded in pulling these people out of their oppression. Through an identity as a people of worth, the Mahars have fought against their oppressors and have been empowered.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 167-8.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 168.

Although the Mahars believe that they have a right to live the same way that the caste Hindus live, the caste Hindus do not seem to be convinced of the Mahar's self-proclaimed spiritual equality. In many interviews, again and again, Burra reports the caste Hindus' bitterness, even anger, at the Mahars for "using the secular law of equality to transgress the sacred law of equality."¹¹⁰ Thus, although the Mahars have the law on their side, there is still much convincing of the "oppressors" that needs to be done for this movement to be entirely successful. This is a place where the ideas of liberation theology would be helpful.

PENTECOSTAL SERPENT HANDLERS

As I have shown in the previous two sections of this paper, individuals and groups have attempted to use religion as a tool to empower the oppressed. However, in some circumstances religion's empowering capabilities can exist without being directly used by

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 168.

a certain group in response to specific circumstances of oppression. As I will attempt to show to be the case with mountain religions, and most dramatically with the Pentecostal serpent handlers, this inherent empowerment can actually allow social, economic, and political oppression to continue, while still empowering the believers. Their empowerment is one that is on a level outside this worldly existence. They are empowered through becoming vessels for the supernatural and evangelical powers of God, and if they are successful in this purpose, they believe they can even exert some degree of control over the devil.

In an interview with Reverend Elkins, the pastor of the serpent handling *Church of the Lord Jesus* in Jolo, West Virginia, he asserted that serpents are “the visible sign of the devil,” and in handling these deadly creatures, one is, with the influence of God of course, wielding power over the devil.¹¹¹ Furthermore, the ultimate purpose of the Jolo congregation’s “supernatural feats,” (which also include drinking poison without being harmed, healing the sick, casting out demons, speaking in foreign tongues, and various other miracles) is not for their own prestige or well being, it is to evangelize to the world the awesome powers of the Lord. Each of these church members’ primary purpose in life is to be a “vessel that God uses” in order to spread the Word of God.¹¹² The nature of this type of empowerment removes believers from the affairs of this material world and makes those concerns secondary to their evangelical role of witnessing to unbelievers through displaying God’s power.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE OPPRESSED

¹¹¹ Interview with Reverend Elkins, Sunday, March 12, 2000.

¹¹² Ibid.

The History of Oppression in Appalachia

The economic and social oppression in this isolated region of America stemmed from a history that is full of cultural misunderstandings, unjust actions, and ignoble motives by outsiders who “discovered” Appalachia. Propaganda methods very similar to those employed against the Indians in Latin America were used against the Appalachian mountain people when the rich supply of minerals lying beneath these “hillbillies” was discovered toward the end of the nineteenth century. Up until this time, Appalachia was, for the most part, a subsistence economy.

The 1880s marked the birth of the mill in the south and the mine in the mountains. During the Industrial Revolution, coal’s importance constantly rose until it eventually replaced wood as the primary fuel for the nation. As the demand for this “black gold” rose, new sources were searched out, and an untapped treasure of coal was discovered in the Southern Appalachian mountains. Eager entrepreneurs from the outside procured millions of acres of this mineral and timber treasure at prices “as low as twenty-five cents an acre.”¹¹³ With their smooth talking and sophisticated northern attitudes, the entrepreneurs convinced many mountain farmers that they were getting a great deal. Little did these Appalachians realize, but they were giving away a fortune. An entire mountain, which now supplies Georgia Power at least 1,000,000 tons of coal yearly, was “reportedly traded to an agent of the company for a hog rifle.”¹¹⁴ Not all were so easy to part with their land. Nonetheless, the cunning entrepreneurs utilized legal tricks to obtain the land they were after. One method used was to jail the landowner “and then offer to

¹¹³ Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia 1880-1960*, (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 29.

¹¹⁴ Haynes, Ada. *Poverty in Central Appalachia*. (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), 49.

post bond in return for his land.” Furthermore, force was sometimes used “when there was resistance.”¹¹⁵

Very similar to the way in which false portrayals of the Latin American natives were used to justify the taking of land, the Appalachians were also victimized by propaganda. The people who “discovered” Appalachia depicted this land and its people as “an ‘otherness’ which placed the region in radical opposition to middle class America.” Widespread writings about these “different” and “strange” people flourished. Arnold Toynbee wrote in 1947 that

The modern Appalachian has... failed to hold his ground and has gone downhill in a most disconcerting fashion. In fact, the Appalachian “mountain people” today are no better than barbarians. They have relapsed into illiteracy and witchcraft. They suffer from poverty, squalor, and ill-health. They are the American counterparts of the latter-day White barbarians of the Old-Fifis, Albanians, Kurds, Pathans and Hairy Ainus; but, whereas, these latter are belated survivals of an ancient barbarism, the Appalachians present the melancholy spectacle of a people who have acquired civilization and then lost it (Toynbee, 1947).¹¹⁶

This pervasive exploitation paved the road for the level of oppression and control that the coal industry is still able to maintain even today, over a hundred years later. As Ada Haynes points out, it was essential for the “industrialists” to remove the Appalachians from their land in order to “turn them into a docile workforce... This separation of producers from the means of production became the primary undertaking of the corporations upon initial contact with the region.”¹¹⁷

Due to the labor-dependency of the early mine work, laborers were in high demand and were recruited in large numbers. “Cheap labor was the foundation” of this industry, and in order to ensure that there would be a constant supply of this low-cost

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 49.

help, the coal industry employed the idea of company towns. Not only were Appalachians recruited to work in the mines, but many were also drawn to the mills. Both of these industries relied on company towns which were self-sufficient, consisting of a “superintendent’s residence, a cluster of single-family dwellings, one or more frame churches, a modest schoolhouse, and a company store.” A paternalistic strategy was employed to dominate the lives of the workers, and many corruptions and abuses occurred.¹¹⁸ Federal investigators in 1907 reported of the mill towns that “all the affairs of the village and the conditions of living of all the people [were] regulated entirely by the mill company. Practically speaking, the company [owned] everything and [controlled] everything, and to a large extent [controlled] everybody in the mill village.”¹¹⁹ Both the mill villages and the coal towns “suffered ‘a distinct absence of self-government,’” for there were no town councils to set forth the laws and regulations of everyday life. Instead, the mill or coal officials had “dictatorial power” to impose whatever rules they desired, provided they did not clash with the laws of the state.¹²⁰ Millhand Paul Cline recalls that living in the mill towns was “almost like slavery.” The company “tried to run your life – tell you what to do outside the mill. They thought they owned you.” Similarly, Blaine Wofford asserts that the superintendents “could really browbeat the people . . . They would threaten you with [taking away] your house. They pretty well had the upper hand over you all the time.”¹²¹

In order to keep capital flowing back into the mines or the mills, company stores often utilized a “scrip system.” A form of currency only redeemable through the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 114.

¹¹⁹ J.D. Hall, J. Leloudid, R. Korstad, M. Murphy, L. Jones, and C.B. Daly, *Like a Family* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 114.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 120.

company store and unable to be converted back into dollars, scrip was yet another way the companies were able to dominate their workers' lives. Because the company stores were the only places that would redeem the scrip, workers were forced to pay "monopolistic prices" on essentials, which "ran several times above those of local independents."¹²² As David Alan Corbin asserts, workers ended up "ow[ing] their souls to the company store."¹²³

This early control made it possible for the economic and social oppression that Appalachia still suffers today. The coal industry owns a large percentage of the land and pays less money in taxes per acre than small landowners so that the small landowners "carry a disproportionate share of the tax burden," while the large owners, who are mostly absentee and corporate, "go relatively tax-free."¹²⁴

Furthermore, the coal industry has a monopoly on the jobs, and with the rise of mechanization many people have been laid off, causing a large portion of Appalachia to suffer from some of the highest unemployment rates in the country. The coal companies own so much of the land that they make it "virtually impossible for any sizable manufacturing industries to move in" and create more jobs.¹²⁵

Oppression in Jolo, West Virginia

If one talks with the members of the Jolo *Church of the Lord Jesus*, it is quite obvious that they are still suffering from the oppression of the coal industry. There are

¹²¹ Ibid., 124.

¹²² Shifflett., 179-80.

¹²³ David Alan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922*. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

¹²⁴ The Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, *Who Owns Appalachia? Landownership and it's Impact*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 57.

¹²⁵ Jeffrey Fleishman, "A Close Knit Society Imperiled," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 9 Jan. 1994, A10.

many ways in which this oppression manifests itself in the lives of the members of this church. They live in a world where fathers and brothers work for the coal mines, with black lung disease to look forward to in retirement and accidents to worry about in the present. For all of the years and work that these miners put into the company, they usually end up being forgotten when they are most in need. Furthermore, the economic deprivation that many of these individuals experience means that sickness can often lead to death because most do not have health insurance. The stresses of life also can affect the actions of people, often leading to frustrations being taken out on others in their lives. Thus, many of the people in Appalachia end up being victims of abuse in their childhood or in marriages.

Reverend Bob Elkins, the pastor of the Jolo church, worked underground in the mines for forty-four years, and he has black lung disease. However, because of the black lung laws, which make it very difficult for miners to receive compensation for their suffering, he does not draw black lung benefits. Less than a week before my last visit, Reverend Elkins had actually just come out of a six-day stay at the hospital for a lung infection, which was ultimately caused by his black lung.¹²⁶ The coal industry is very tricky in its manipulation of government, and as Reverend Elkins asserted, “a poor man ain’t got a chance.”¹²⁷ The coal industry is so powerful, in fact, that it takes many suffering coal miners “anywhere from eight to sixteen years” to receive their black lung benefits. A startling 94 percent of miners who file for black lung benefits are turned down.¹²⁸ The coal companies will fight almost every individual wanting compensation

¹²⁶ It is interesting to note, however, that Reverend Elkins was back at the church preaching the same day he got out of the hospital!

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Interview with Mike South, President of the Black Lung Association, November 1997.

for his condition. The burden of proof is on the coal miner, and the coal companies will hire many physicians who will say what the company wants to hear – that there is not substantial proof of black lung in the miner being examined. Even if the miner does win the case the first time, he has eight or nine appeals waiting for him before he can ever actually receive his benefits continuously.¹²⁹

Most of the members of the church either work in the mines, have worked in the mines, or have husbands who work in the mines. Thus, the coal industry's oppression permeates the Jolo church. Beyond the concerns about black lung, the church members must also deal with the constant fear of a mine accident. In fact, less than a month before my first visit to the *Church of the Lord Jesus* in January, Reverend Elkins' great-grandson was killed in a mine explosion. Reverend Elkins told me about two men that he himself had to bury due to accidents related to the mine. This fear is one that hangs over the heads of almost every single member of the Jolo church and community.

Aside from these health-related risks, the poverty experienced in this region, especially in McDowell County, (where the Jolo church is located) is severe. When stopping to ask for directions in another town on the way to the church, or in a casual exchange at a gas station, if the fact that my destination is the town of Jolo comes out in our conversation, the question is always, "Why the hell would you want to go there?" There is a large stigma associated with this town, and this area in general, because it is so impoverished. The severity of these people's plight is indicated by the statistics: the per capita market income in McDowell County is a mere 32.8% of the national average,¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic and Statistics Administration, Bureau of Economic Analysis, regional Economic Measurement Division (REIS 1997). Compiled by Appalachian Regional Commission at <http://www.arc.gov/research/income/incmain.htm>

the unemployment rate is 260.8% of the national average,¹³¹ and the last Census (in 1990) reported a poverty rate at 287.5% of the national average.¹³² Poverty and unemployment are issues that everyone in the Jolo church faces.

Although this industry exploits and abuses its workers, the workers still feel a sense of loyalty to the company. Coal mining or driving a coal truck is one of the only decent-paying jobs to be found in this county. The people fear losing their jobs because unemployment is so pervasive in this region, and for the simple fact that there will always be someone to do their job if they do not.

Appalachia currently suffers from “the worst times” it has seen “in 40 years.” There are fewer and fewer jobs for miners because “automation has stolen forever jobs from the one industry that kept the region alive.”¹³³ In West Virginia alone, “72,000 people since 1980, or 26 percent of [the] population between the ages of 18 and 25,” have been forced to migrate from their beloved homes to find work in the cities.¹³⁴ The coal companies own so much of the land that they make it “virtually impossible for any sizable manufacturing industries to move in” and create more jobs.¹³⁵ Thus, the only options for many are to either move away from the tight kinship ties and community so important to many Appalachians, or to live in poverty.

Power in Jolo

¹³¹ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment statistics, 1998. Compiled by Appalachian Regional Commission at <http://www.arc.gov/research/employ/empmain.htm>

¹³² U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census (1990 census Files – STF 3a). Compiled by Appalachian Regional Commission at <http://www.arc.gov/research/poverty/povmain.htm>

¹³³ Fleishman, A1.

¹³⁴ Ibid., A10.

¹³⁵ Ibid., A10.

Throughout the seven times I have attended services at the Jolo church and through the conversations I have had with the members of the congregation, I have come to see how the particular form of empowerment that the serpent handlers experience is one that places them in another realm of reality. Through their worship, they are able to remove themselves from this world and peek into the supernatural existence of God, becoming vessels for the powers of the Holy Spirit. Through displaying some of God's supernatural capabilities, their lives are given a very important purpose: witnessing to unbelievers and spreading the Word of God.

The *Church of the Lord Jesus* is one of the most famous snake handling churches in the country and I have even run across pictures of congregation members in books from our school library. Members of the church have appeared on various television programs, most of which have merely sensationalized the practices of the church, oftentimes completely misrepresenting them as members of some strange snake-worshipping "cult." However, according to Reverend Elkins, they feel that they should talk to everyone who approaches them because they are called to spread the Word of the Lord, and any opportunity to do that should be taken. Even if the message is warped, at least it is being spread and "some truth" will be carried with it.¹³⁶

The power that the members of this church experience is almost tangible to an observer. One of my favorite songs, and one that I have heard sung at almost every service I have attended, is a perfect summation of what these individuals experience in their worship:

It's fire, fire
 In my bones
It's fire, fire

¹³⁶ Interview with Reverend Elkins, Saturday, March 12, 2000.

In my bones
It's fire, fire
In my bones
It's Holy Ghost fire
In my bones
I feel that power
In my bones
I feel that power
In my bones
I feel that power
In my bones
It's Holy Ghost power
In my bones...

To see Brother Ray, as he is referred to by the members of the church, singing deeply, passionately, and full of energy, dancing his eighty-six year old body across the front of the church, microphone in hand, is simply incredible. When he sings that song, I feel like getting up and going to the front to dance with the rest of the congregation. It is a celebration of the power of the Holy Spirit coming down upon them and giving them the ability to handle rattlesnakes, copperheads, and cottonmouths, to drink strychnine, to speak in tongues, to cast out demons, and to heal the sick. The members of this church have a faith and a connection to the Lord that allows them to not need riches of this world. At the last service I attended, Reverend Elkins (or Papa, pronounced "Pa-paw," as the younger members of the church call him) said that he is a "rich, rich poor man,"¹³⁷ something that is true of all of the members of the Jolo church. They may be economically deprived, but they are rich in what really matters to them: the Spirit of God, and the power of the Lord that goes along with it.

¹³⁷ Church service; Sunday, March 12, 2000.

HISTORY OF THE MOVEMENT

The history of the Pentecostal snake handlers is a complicated one. It is not like the previous two religious movements in that this sect did not arise as a response to social or political injustices. Followers of this faith are not attempting to better their social or economic situation through religion; in fact, this religion actually seems to allow oppression to continue. It is a completely different form of empowerment that these people experience, one that does not translate into a betterment of the material aspects of this life. Instead, believers are empowered through becoming vessels for the Holy Spirit's supernatural and evangelical powers, giving them a higher purpose external to this realm of existence.

The history of this movement is one that comes out of a larger group of religions called the "mountain religions." What is true of the mountain religions in general is true of all serpent handling sects; however, the intensity of the latter goes far beyond that of any other mountain religion.

The "centrality of the *religious experience*" is what sets mountain religions apart from the rest of the mainstream Protestantism.¹³⁸ My first encounter with Appalachian mountain religion came about five years ago when as a junior in high school I first went on a "Servant Event" with my Lutheran church in Frederick, Maryland. We traveled to the mountains of southwestern Virginia to help fix up homes for the impoverished living in Wise County. We attended a Freewill Baptist church there, and I experienced a "religion shock" as I sat in the pews, surrounded by about 30 other of my ritualized Lutheran peers, watching the unorganized, dynamic, and spirit-filled service of our hosts.

¹³⁸ Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History*. (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 6.

We looked on with bewildered eyes when at the beginning of the service the members of the congregation dropped to their knees and yelled, moaned, and lifted up their prayers to God. There was no structure or reservation to these prayers. It was a cacophony of sounds; everyone voicing his or her own prayers, in a manner that seemed to be as loud as possible. I felt self-conscious standing there stiff and reserved. These people were pouring out their souls to God in prayer as we stood there, and all we were doing was watching. The rest of the service continued in this spontaneous manner. Anyone who was moved by the Spirit stood up and preached or sung a song. There were no hymnals or creeds to guide the service, and the pastor did not have a planned sermon like my Pastor Dave did every Sunday. In fact, this pastor almost seemed to be possessed when he stood on the pulpit to preach with his voice changing and his breathing becoming very strange. Because I had never seen someone “get the Spirit in him,” I had no idea what was going on and was afraid that this heavy-set man, with face turning redder and redder by the moment, seeming to be gasping for air, was going to collapse of a heart attack.

When the service was over and we left the church, I remember feeling like I was really missing out on something. Never in all the times that I had gone to church had I come close to experiencing the Holy Spirit as these people seemed to. I had felt God’s presence on certain special occasions, but had never felt a connection to and a faith in the divine as these people did. Growing up in my little Lutheran church, I was taught the Scripture, had sung the hymns, had taken communion, been confirmed, and had believed that Jesus loved me and died for my sins. But I had never *experienced* my religion as these people did. This is the difference between mainstream Protestantism and mountain religions – the *experience* of the Spirit is what offers power to religious Appalachians.

The power is not a political, social or economic power, however. This is a power that reaches beyond this earthly realm and allows followers to tap into the powers of God and become vessels for the Holy Spirit. These Spirit-filled outpourings are typical of almost all mountain religions, even the most “doctrinally conservative.”¹³⁹

Generally, these church traditions are found only in the Appalachian region, and exist outside the area only through “out-migration.”¹⁴⁰ However, these practices did not merely “pop up” in Appalachia as a result of the poverty that these people experience, as is often believed. In fact, before the early nineteenth century, experiencing the Holy Spirit and the centrality of grace were characteristics of mainstream Protestantism. However, these comparable practices were almost completely replaced in the 1830s and 40s by the “theology of free will.” Instead of the “irrational” acquiescence to the grace of God, salvation was something that the believer chose to have. For the mainstream Protestant, salvation ceased being a “miracle,” which was dependent upon the “uncontrollable and unpredictable quickening of the Holy Spirit in a moment of grace.” It was now a “rational and logical process”; it was something that one chose to pursue. People now spoke in terms of “accepting Christ” or dedicating their lives to Jesus instead of speaking of the Spirit coming over them and anointing them with “saving grace.”¹⁴¹

What protected the Protestants in Appalachia from this change to a more “rational” and controlled religious tradition? Perhaps it is the physical isolation that the mountains provide, offering a protection from many of the ideas and changes the rest of the country experienced. Whether it was the mountains or some other force that kept these changes away from the Appalachian mountain religions, these people were able to

¹³⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 2.

maintain an incredibly close connection to the divine, one that allows these worshippers to feel that they achieve a “spectacular ‘transformative power.’” This power creates a “unity of being” in the community of worshippers that gives them a taste of “what heaven must be like” according to their belief system.¹⁴² The protection of the Spirit-filled worship set the stage for the birth of the serpent-handling sect of Pentecostalism.

The Pentecostal Serpent Handling Movement

What sets the followers of Pentecostal serpent handling religious sects apart from the rest of mountain religions, and the reason why I am focusing on them instead of on mountain religions in general, is that they are the most dramatic and intense example of supernatural empowerment through religion. This particular tradition of mountain religion reads Mark 16:17-18 literally (as they read all of the passages in the Bible). The *King James Bible*, (which is the only one that they will use) reveals this passage to say:

And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

Thus, as they read the passage, it is a command that they handle poisonous snakes because they are believers. This version does not say they *can* take up serpents, or *if* they take up serpents that they will not be hurt, it says that they *shall* take up serpents. Thus, they must.

Charles Lippy notes that this specific practice “directly draws the believer into a realm of power” because in handling the poisonous snakes, one “literally has the power

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 13-15.

¹⁴² Ibid., 16.

of life and death in one's hands." These feats do not merely act as tests of the believer's faith, they actually act as entrance points into the realm of God's supernatural power.¹⁴³

Historically, George Hensley, an illiterate Church of God evangelist, has been credited as the first person to "take up serpents" and to start the practice of doing so in worship services. The story goes that while sitting atop White Oak Mountain, which surrounds Grasshopper Valley, Tennessee, George Hensley brooded over a passage in the book of Mark, trying to understand its meaning. J.B. Collins, who was a journalist in Chattanooga talked with Hensley and reported the following account of that "summer day in 1909 atop White Oak Mountain":

On this particular day, George Hensley, a small but powerfully built man in his early thirties, decided to settle once and for all a matter of great importance to him . . . The first phrase in St. Mark 16:18 had caused him much spiritual unrest ["They shall take up serpents"] . . . this, he felt, was a command spoken by Jesus after resurrection and just before His ascension.

Hensley had never taken up serpents, yet he believed that if he was to receive eternal life after death he must do so. His decision was to risk his life in order to have rest from his spiritual burden . . .

In a great rocky gap in the mountainside he found what he sought, a large rattlesnake. He approached the reptile, and . . . knelt a few feet away from it and prayed loudly into the sky for God to remove his fear and to anoint him with "the power." Then suddenly with a shout he leaped forward and grasped the reptile and held it in trembling hands.¹⁴⁴

It is interesting to note, however, that George Hensley was illiterate, and according to his youngest son James Roscoe Hensley, it was Amanda (George's first wife and wife at the time he first took up serpents) that read the Scriptures to the family every night. It was she who "gave theological interpretations of the Word" to the family, and, being a Christian before George was converted, she is the one who "taught George most

¹⁴³ Ibid., 43.

¹⁴⁴ J.B. Collins, *Tennessee Snake Handlers*. (Chattanooga, TN: Chattanooga News-Free Press, 1947) In Thomas Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers*. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 37.

of what he knew about the Bible” after his conversion. It is very possible that her reading and interpretation of the Word is what caused George Hensley to first take up serpents.¹⁴⁵ But, since she is a woman of the early twentieth century, she would have never been given credit for such a thing.

Regardless of whose idea it was originally to take up serpents, after his initial encounter with the rattlesnake on White Oak Mountain, Hensley began his evangelical work. He brought the rattlesnake to revival meetings, handled it there, and passed it on to other believers. Hensley’s belief that handling serpents was necessary for his salvation spread, and so did the practice. Today, serpent handlers are divided on the issue of whether or not “taking up serpents” is necessary in order to be saved. Some believe that it is, while most feel that it is simply a sign of faithfulness.¹⁴⁶

METHOD OF EMPOWERMENT

As I have previously mentioned, Appalachian mountain religions, specifically the Pentecostal serpent handling sects, do not empower the oppressed through bettering the social, economic, or political position of the believers. Instead, religion empowers through allowing the believers to become vessels for the supernatural and evangelical powers of God. According to Reverend Elkins, when one is “anointed” and the Holy Spirit enters into his or her body, the individual becomes “like Jesus,” who “was a man

¹⁴⁵ Mary Lee Daugherty, “Serpent Handlers: When the Sacrament Comes Alive.” In Bill J. Leonard, ed. *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism*. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 149-50.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

that the Spirit came into,” for “Jesus was God manifested in the flesh.”¹⁴⁷ Thus, this religion enables these Appalachians to become connected to the divine through being vessels for the power of the Holy Spirit and through becoming more like the Son of God. Furthermore, their purpose in this world, as described to me by Reverend Elkins, is to spread the Word of God, and in performing these signs they bear witness to the powers of the Lord.

Although the land and labor has been nearly stolen from them, leaving them with very little in the material world, the members of the *Church of the Lord Jesus* have remained rich in one thing: faith in the saving grace of Jesus. This saving grace is not merely to manifest itself in the next life, but it has the potential to work in the physical realm of this life as well. Through their worship services, these individuals feel that they are able to tap into the power of God to obtain the ability to heal the sick, speak in foreign tongues, drink poison, handle poisonous snakes, as well as perform various other miracles. Through the religious practices of this sect of mountain religions, the powerless believe that they gain the strength of the Holy Spirit to work certain supernatural acts and overcome some of the weakness in humanity.

Losing Control of Self and becoming a Vessel for God

In an interview with Reverend Elkins, I asked him how one is “anointed with the Spirit.” He told me, “You just have to have an open mind and really just call on Him, ‘Lord, I’m yours, I’m in your hands, and God, you just do with me what you would have me to do’...and He’ll use you. He will use you.”¹⁴⁸ In his explanation of what it feels

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Reverend Elkins, Sunday, March 12, 2000.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Reverend Elkins. Saturday, March 11, 2000.

like to be anointed by the Spirit, he said that “you really can’t express the feeling. The anointing is so deep within you that you really don’t care what comes and goes because you have the joy of the Lord within you.” Moreover, when the Spirit is in you, “you don’t fear.”¹⁴⁹ That is quite a feat in the world in which these people live. As I have previously discussed, they live in a world where fathers and brothers work for the coal mines, with black lung disease to look forward to in retirement and accidents to worry about in the present. For all of the years and work that these miners put into the company, they usually end up being forgotten when they are in need. Furthermore, the economic deprivation that many of these people experience means that sickness can often lead to death because most do not have health insurance. The stresses of life also can affect the actions of individuals, often leading to frustrations being taken out on others in their lives. Thus, many of the people in Appalachia end up being victims of abuse in their childhood or in marriages.

Perhaps it is because they are used to it, or maybe it is the comfort that they find in knowing that a greater power will take care of them, but somehow, even with all of these aspects in their lives to which they have relinquished their control, the serpent handlers are still able and very willing to again surrender their control over to another force: the Holy Spirit. As Reverend Elkins told me, he becomes “a vessel that God uses.”¹⁵⁰ Thus, the power that these people experience is not their own – it is an external power made manifest in their own flesh.

There is a higher purpose and plan behind the obtaining of supernatural powers – to reveal the awesome power of the Lord to non-believers. As an “outsider” in this

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

church, I could sense a certain degree of witnessing and legitimization of these practices aimed at myself and the other “outsiders” present, especially when something would appear to be going wrong. I do not know what goes on in the church when an outsider is not present, but at every service I have attended, there have been attention and explanations given that seem to witness to the “observers” in church. Two stories illustrate this point well, the first of which is Reverend Elkins’s response to what appeared to be a “failed” healing of Vikki, a member of the church who had been having lung problems, and the second is what happened when Brother Ray was bitten five times by a handful of copperheads in one worship service.

Vikki’s Healing

“Well, I want y’all to pray for me, I’ve been so sick...and I’m getting’ tired of not being able to breathe and move the way I want to,” Vikki said as she moved toward the altar and Reverend Elkins. “This is one of them signs we talk about,” the Reverend said, and with that he brought out olive oil from behind the pulpit. All the members of the church gathered around Vikki and laid their hands on her head, shoulders, and back. Reverend Elkins anointed her head with oil, and an assortment of voices, praying, moaning, and yelling, raised above Vikki. I could only catch bits and pieces of what they were saying because the voices were all mixed together, but I could hear Reverend Elkins saying things like, “the power of the Lord is about to move down upon us,” and “we know your power, Lord, move down, Lord.” A song started up, and the laying of hands and praying continued into the song. After awhile, the group dispersed, and Vikki, who was crying and raising her hands up, circled around the dance floor and rested her head

on the pulpit. She cried throughout the song, and when the song ended, Reverend Elkins went into preaching:

We ought to be ashamed of ourselves. We ought to be *ashamed* of ourselves. We handle the serpents, we drink the poison, but when it comes to the sick, *we can't pray the prayer*. I tell you, we just don't have what we say we *got*, or we could do the Word. You know what, He said he'd give you the *desires* of your heart. And if you *desire* to see somebody healed, you seek God for the sick like you do for the serpents or the poison...I can drink that poison, but if I ain't got what it takes, I can't heal the sick...We *deceive* our own selves when we confess to have these *five* signs and we can't perform them. Then we make ourselves a liar. He said "*these* signs," not "*a* sign," but "*these* signs" [shall follow them that believe]. We gotta want. We do what we *want* to do. We move when we *want* to move. But I'm gonna tell you, you better move when *God* wants you to move! He said to lay hands on the sick and they *shall* recover. According to the Word, she's supposed to get better. If I had a gift, it would've been instantly done. But if she don't recover, then you know we didn't get through...We need to get *down* in this Word and see what's the matter that we're *not gettin' through*. We can't blame it on the spirits, you blame it on *yourself*. Because you've failed to pray and seek God and get what He has for you. Because *I've* failed to pray and seek God and get what He has for me...I'm gonna tell you right now, God is able. God is *able*. If there's any failure, it's in *me* it ain't in God. You know what the Word says, it says, "Ye are complete in Him," and this is a good sign that we're not complete...If I pray for you and you ain't healed, I ain't gonna blame you, I'm gonna blame *me*. I'm gonna blame *me*.

...We've got a big name out in the world; we ought to be able to *fulfill* that name when people come here. He said, "Ye are my witnesses," you've got to be able to *do* that thing to witness unto the Word. And if you can't do it, then what are you? You're a *false witness*. You go to the court and they'll put you in jail if you tell a lie on the witness stand...If we ask for the sick to be healed, and they're not, where do we stand? We're *not abiding* in the Word!

...We get entangled with the world too much...We're out there in the world, but we're not supposed to be *of* the world. But we're partakers of the world and that's why we can't [heal Vikki]. *That's the reason* these signs aren't followed!¹⁵¹

While Reverend Elkins was preaching, I felt that although he was preaching to the members of the congregation, his reproach of them and their inability to heal Vikki was partially for our benefit as outsiders. This became quite evident when he said, "...We've got a big name out in the world; we ought to be able to *fulfill* that name when people come here." Throughout his sermon, he was ensuring that it was very clear to us that the fact that Vikki had not been healed was in no way a reflection on God's power, or lack thereof. Instead, it was they who were not being proper receptacles for God's power. As

Reverend Elkins asserted, “God is able. God is *able*. If there’s any failure, it’s in *me* it ain’t in God.” In their role as disseminators of the Word, they must always legitimize a “failure” in the power of the Holy Spirit so that those to whom they are witnessing know that it is not God’s failure, but is their own that has caused this breakdown in the signs.

Ray’s Snakebites

One of the first things I found out in talking to the people at the Church of the Lord Jesus was that Dewey Chafin had been bitten 133 times throughout his years of snake handling. Almost all of the men in the church exhibit some kind of deformity on their hands and fingers from a past snake bite. An atrophied finger, the loss of movement in part of a hand, or simple scars from a snake’s fangs, are proudly exhibited by these church members when asked about their “battle scars.” And they are exactly that: battle scars. According to Reverend Elkins, the snakes “are the visible sign of the devil,” and when one has power over these snakes through the anointing of the Holy Spirit, he or she is, in effect, exerting control over the devil.¹⁵² None of the church members seek medical attention when a poisonous snake bites them, and Reverend Elkins’ step-daughter was killed by a snake bite in the 60s. But what does it mean when someone is bitten or when someone dies of a bite? Has the power of God failed that person in some way?

At the last service I attended, I witnessed someone being bitten five times by a handful of copperheads. Luckily, he was fine, and the next day he actually helped his wife unload a truck.

¹⁵¹ Worship service, Church of the Lord Jesus, Jolo, West Virginia, Saturday, February 19, 2000.

¹⁵² Interview with reverend Elkins, Saturday, March 11, 2000.

Brother Ray is eighty-six years old and has been with the church almost since its beginning in the early 50s. Ray is always one of the first people to handle the snakes in the services, and he has his own box of serpents that he himself hunted, and he brings them with him to the church. Ray's right hand was bitten "twenty-some years" ago by a diamondback rattlesnake, and is very atrophied. His index and middle fingers are completely unusable, and both of his hands have a swollen appearance. Before that service, Ray had been bitten 89 times throughout the "forty-some" years that he had been with the church, And during that Sunday morning, while holding a handful of copperheads, Ray was bitten five more times on both of his hands.

Ray did not yell out or even drop the snakes when he was bitten. The only way that I could tell that the bites had occurred was because he jerked just the slightest bit. He gently put the copperheads back into their box, and immediately the members of the church gathered around him and laid hands on him. I expected the music to stop at that point. I expected the service to be completely halted and all attention to be put on Ray. I expected him to sit down and care for his body. I expected this to be a tragedy.

But none of these things happened. Someone gave Ray a cloth to soak up the blood on his hands, and the music continued playing, full force. People gathered around Ray and prayed over him, touching him and caring for him, but he remained standing. In fact, another member of the church, Ruby, who appeared to be in an ecstatic state, actually dumped out another snake box, picked up a huge rattlesnake and two other smaller snakes, and handled them right there beside Ray. As she was about to put them back in the box, Ray took the snakes from her and handled snakes again. Ray danced to

the music, showing everyone that even though he had poison coursing through his body, he was protected from the effects by the power of the Lord.

After Ray was finished handling the snakes, Dewey came out from behind the pulpit and took the three snakes. He began to preach, which was something that I had never seen him do in the six services I had been to previously. Dewey handled the snakes frequently, and was always an active “healer,” but I had never actually heard him sing, preach, or even testify. But here he was, in the front of the church, holding these three snakes in his arms, cradling them, drawing them close to his face, and allowing them to slither up his arm. I was cringing in my seat watching this, but I realized that part of this display was for my benefit. I was an outsider, and they had to show me that the power of the Lord had not failed because someone had been bitten. It actually felt as though the event had intensified the presence of the Spirit in the church.

As Dewey stood there handling these snakes, he looked directly at me and asserted that the Bible “didn’t say these things [the snakes] wouldn’t bite you or wouldn’t hurt you...there’s death in these things.” I knew that he was speaking for my benefit so I would not think that the snake handling was a farce. He continued, “as a matter of fact, he said if you break a hedge, they’ll surely bite you...we all break some hedges, I’ve broke a lot of hedges...but He said, ‘these signs *shall* follow.’ These are the signs nobody wants to follow.”¹⁵³ It is because the Word says that the signs in Mark shall follow them that believe that the Jolo congregation feels that they *must* handle snakes. In an interview with Reverend Elkins, he added to this point: “If we’re led by the Spirit and it [the snake] bites us, then it was God’s will.” Furthermore,

¹⁵³ Worship service, Church of the Lord Jesus, Jolo, West Virginia. Sunday, March 12, 2000.

If it bites you and you're under the anointing, and you die, you've just done God's will. That was your way to go. That was just your way to go. Because there's going to be something that takes everybody out of this world. To me, it's fulfillment of the Word...the Bible says, "happy are you if you die in the Lord." What better way would you find to die than doing what God said to do? You know, I'm not homesick, I want to live as long as I can, but I want to live to the place that when I die it'll be all right.¹⁵⁴

Thus, there is a certain mystery associated with the will of God. No one knows why He might allow a snake to bite someone, but the members of this church all just have to trust that He had a reason.

At the end of the service, Ray's hands had swollen a great deal, but he wasn't feeling sick or any other effects besides being a little "itchy." He stood up to testify and said,

I'd like to praise God for being here...thank Him for the Spirit. I'd like to thank Him for the bites I got today, all five of them. I praise Him for it because they're not hurtin' – they're itchin', but they're not hurtin'. They're swellin'. But you know, I thank and praise Him for it because that lets me know that He's able to take care of me if I just trust Him. I've got to trust Him so He can take care of me. If I do what He says to do, I'll be all right...I praise Him for puttin' His Spirit on me to lead me and guide me, I praise Him for each and every thing He does for me...I started to go to that box of rattlers over there, but He moved and led me to the copperheads. I got the copperheads and I got bit. But that was for somethin'. That was done for somethin' – to show me that He's still able to take care of me even if I'm an old man. I praise Him for it. And I'll pray for you all the best that I know how.¹⁵⁵

Here again, we see that Ray feels that there is a reason for the apparent breakdown in the power of the Spirit. His getting bitten was not a breakdown at all, but it was God's way of showing him that He could still take care of Ray, even though he is an "old man."

It was very important to the members of the congregation that we outsiders understood that just because Ray was bitten, that did not mean that the power of the Lord had failed in any way. In fact, it reasserted His power because Brother Ray only minimally felt the effects of the venom. Out of this apparent breakdown in the Spirit, the

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Reverend Elkins, March 11, 2000.

¹⁵⁵ Worship service, Church of the Lord Jesus, Jolo, West Virginia. Sunday, March 12, 2000.

members of the church extrapolated an explanation that would be a further testament to the greatness and awesome powers of the Lord.

ANALYSIS OF THE TYPE OF EMPOWERMENT

If one merely looks at the social, economic, and political factors of empowerment in the Appalachian region, it is quite evident that the Pentecostal serpent handling tradition (as well as the other mountain religions) has done nothing to better the situation of the oppressed in this region. In fact, it seems to almost have perpetuated it. To look at the members of this church and ask myself, "How is this religion helping their material situation in this life?" I have serious problems figuring out a way that it is helping. First of all, this religion is one in which the empowerment is on a different realm of existence. Members believe that they are able to tap into the powers of God to perform supernatural feats for the good of spreading the Word to unbelievers; however, through so doing, they lose focus on the plight in which they currently find themselves.

The members of the Jolo congregation are obviously still suffering from the oppression of the coal industry and do not appear to be doing much to change the situation. They respond that their main goal is to spread the Word of God, not to better their social, political, or economic situation. This group of people is empowered in a way that leads them out of this earthly realm of concern. Through obtaining the supernatural powers to handle deadly snakes, drink poison, heal the sick, handle fire, and cast out demons, believers are led into another state of reality and a higher purpose: to save souls through displaying the awesome powers of God. Because of this, they do not concern themselves with the social or economic situation in which they exist. This alternative

realm of power is one that makes this earthly existence seem unimportant in comparison, and the oppressors in this world not true oppressors because they are mortal. As Reverend Elkins said in one of his sermons, “The flesh don’t profit *nothin*’. It’s going back to the dust, but the *Spirit’s* gonna live on!”¹⁵⁶ For the Pentecostal serpent handler, the devil is the main enemy, not the coal company, or the abusing father, or any other earthly foe that these people might encounter. Thus, through taking these people into a supernatural realm and giving them an alternative purpose in life, the empowerment that the Pentecostal serpent handlers experience precludes activism to better their economic, political or social position.

CONCLUSION

The question that I sought to answer in this thesis was whether religion can be a successful empowerer for the oppressed. From these three religious movements, it is obvious that deciding whether a particular religion has been a “successful” empowerer of the oppressed is not an easy task. Throughout the course of my research, the broad concept of “empowerment” with which I started has evolved into two distinct types, the

¹⁵⁶ Church of the Lord Jesus, Saturday, January 15, 2000.

first of which includes the more tangible means of empowerment, social, economic, and political, and the second consisting in psychological or spiritual empowerment. This second category of empowerment can range from engendering a feeling of self-worth or dignity, to producing a sense of moral confidence (believing that God is “on your side”), to an actual feeling of “divine presence.” Although this is a broad category, it encompasses the more intangible forms of empowerment that are even more difficult to measure than those of the first category.

Through my assessment of these three movements, I have come to conclude that none has significantly empowered the oppressed through social, economic, or political means. Liberation theology and Ambedkar’s movement sought this type of empowerment as their primary goal; however, my analyses of these traditions reveal that they had very little, if any, significant material impact on the lives of the followers of these movements. The Pentecostal snake handlers differ from the people of the first two movements, who endeavored to use religion as an “instrument” of empowerment, for the snake handling movement did not arise as a response to the circumstances of oppression in Appalachia. Instead, it evolved *within* an oppressive situation. Although liberation theology and Ambedkar’s movement are both clear examples of calculated attempts to use religion as a tool to better the material lives of the oppressed, the tangible end result is really not much different from that of the serpent handlers.

Although the first two movements were unsuccessful in their primary purpose of material empowerment for the oppressed, they, as well as the serpent handling religion, have succeeded in empowering the oppressed through the intangible means of psychological or spiritual empowerment. It is difficult to assess to what degree this has

had a direct impact on the lives of these individuals, but it would appear that through the heightened sense of self-worth and importance, religion has done something that has been quite positive.

Liberation theology has produced an improvement in the quality of life of a number of Latin Americans through base communities. As was previously noted, even in Brazil, the country with the greatest number of base communities, the number of members includes only two percent of the population. Although base communities have not successfully spread far enough to actually become a force that could engender significant changes in the overall oppressive structures of Latin America, they have been successful within the lives of particular individuals in base communities. As I mentioned above, the base communities themselves attempt to solve immediate problems and concerns facing that particular region. Not only are the individuals given a voice, and thus a sense of dignity and importance (psychological empowerment), they also gain an improvement in their material lives (economic empowerment). Although they are not addressing structural changes when they attempt to acquire better sanitation or clean water or improved health, they are doing something to better the quality of their particular lives.

The fact remains that in Brazil alone, it would be necessary for millions of these base communities to exist in order to elicit an overall significant social, economic, and political change. But, to the people included in this two percent of the Brazilian population involved in base communities, liberation theology has made a significant and positive impact upon their quality of life.

The impact of Ambedkar's movement on the Untouchables in India is again a question of the type of empowerment. From Neera Burra's study that I cited above it appears that the Mahars of that particular village are empowered, at least in their own minds. However, it is not clear that this actually translates into political, economic, or social empowerment. As is described above, the large-scale oppression suffered by the Dalits continues to exist today. Ambedkar's movement has not reached all areas of India, nor has it influenced significant numbers of the oppressors. However, from the study conducted by Burra, it is evident that his movement has empowered some of the oppressed on an individual level.

Through giving them a new identity and a sense of self-worth and importance, as was the case with the base communities in Latin America, the Untouchables have been empowered psychologically. Through a sense of moral certainty that came from Ambedkar's legitimization of their lowly status,¹⁵⁷ the Mahars of the community that Burra studied felt the internal power and ability to stand up to the caste-Hindus. To assert their newly-found power they drank from the restricted wells, celebrated the restricted festivals, used restricted ritual practices, and refused to do the defiling jobs that they were once required to perform. Thus, as was the case with liberation theology, an internal empowerment translates to social action, as insignificant as it may be to the whole of India. This social empowerment is one that improves the quality of these individuals' lives through making them feel like people and not like sub-humans. They have a self-esteem that they were not able to experience before the movement because they felt that their social situation was a result of an innate defilement. Ambedkar's

¹⁵⁷ That they were once Buddhists and became Untouchables because of their religion (see above).

alternative to the caste-Hindus' view allowed the Dalits to become removed from this lowly perspective of themselves and take pride in their identity as born-again Buddhists.

The Pentecostal serpent handling tradition did not begin as a conscious response to oppression, although it did arise from within the circumstances of oppression. Because the practices and beliefs of this religion seem to actually preclude social activism at all, one would assume that this movement has done nothing at all to reduce social, economic, or political oppression in Appalachia. And this assumption is, most definitely, correct, as is evidenced by the oppression experienced within the Jolo church.

Because of this fact, the serpent handlers offer a very striking contrast with the previous two movements. What I have concluded from this study is that liberation theology and the Ambedkar movement, which both attempt to engender social, economic, and political change through religious legitimization, experience a form of empowerment that falls under the same category as that experienced by the serpent handlers. The serpent handlers most definitely undergo an empowerment that reaches all types falling under the psychological or spiritual category.

The people in the Jolo congregation experience a sense of *self-worth and dignity* through their belief that their main purpose in the world is to be a vessel for God to spread His message to the "unbelievers." They experience a degree of *moral confidence*, for God most certainly must be "on their side" if He is choosing them as the vessels for His supernatural powers. And lastly, they experience a sense of *divine presence* every time they are "anointed" with the Holy Spirit or every time they witness another's anointing and resulting display of the "five signs." It is interesting to note that although both liberation theology and Ambedkar's movement empower the oppressed through the

first two means, it is only the serpent handlers that seem to have this third experience of divine presence.

These conclusions raise some important questions about whether religion truly can be used as an effective tool to significantly change the structures of political, economic, and social oppression without first forcefully securing a large degree of economic control and political power. The limitation that these first two activist groups experience seems to be a result of their approach of using religious persuasion instead of force to try to bring about structural change. By virtue of the fact that the serpent handlers are not attempting to bring about social change but are merely enacting their religious beliefs, they become a “control group” of sorts to this study. In comparing the empowerment that they experience to the empowerment brought about through the social activist movements, it is evident that there is not a significant difference in any of these traditions’ ability to use religious ideology to engender a large-scale social, economic or political change. The question then becomes: is simple religious persuasion incapable of shaping larger structures of power? Is religion only capable of this when there is the threat of violence behind the “persuasion”?

Despite the limitations of using religious ideology to change oppressive structures, in this study religion has appeared to be quite effective in empowering the oppressed on an individual and small-scale level. On the individual basis, it has been shown to be capable of effectively improving the material well-being of the oppressed, as was the case with Latin American base communities. More significantly, however, in all three cultural contexts that I have explored, religion seems to have improved the psychological state of the oppressed, ultimately giving them a sense of dignity and worth

in the face of their difficult and oftentimes demeaning struggles. It is in this achievement that religion has revealed significant and impressive empowering capabilities.

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