JUAN LUIS SEGUNDO'S HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE:

A CONTINUAL HERMENEUTICAL ENCOUNTER OF THE WORD AND THE WORLD

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Introduction

Juan Luis Segundo is a notable figure in Latin American Liberation Theology. Like other liberation theologians, he fosters a notion of a critical attitude concerning social structures, ideologies, and even other theologies.[1] One of the problems that a theologian must confront is the reality that some ideologies and theologies can consciously and unconsciously lead to domination and exploitation.[2] Thus, the task of a theologian, according to liberation theology, is to open the path for an encounter of the Word of God and

[1]"The fact is that dozens of groups, movements, and parties claim to possess the one key to a real revolution.» (Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology.* Trans. John Drury. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979, 101.) J.L. Segundo taking a note from the post-Marxist scholar György Lukács cautions against taking any conceptualization of liberation wholesale. Even theologies of liberation must be considered and understood with a critical attitude. This critical distance would help us to avoid any messianism that would obscure the true face of liberation, which is the face of God.

[2]"In other words, the oppressor constructs an ideological edifice in which the cause of the oppressed people suffering is not even mentioned, much less studied." (Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 28) The problem lies in complacency or indifference, where people take their situation for granted and forget to understand it in the context of a loving and liberating God. Even worse is the tendency to justify such oppressive systems as God-imposed systems in several ways.

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the World. Faith, then, is a liberative process.[3] It builds on relationships, for the liberative hermeneutical process is an arduous journeying with one another. With each encounter of the Word and the World, a new horizon or possibility of being is unveiled.

Furthermore, it must be essential to note that this task of unmasking the oppressive structures, according to liberation theologians, cannot be done in the usual way of doing theology, where theology is done from the privileged point of the theologian's ivory tower.[4] Theology cannot be simply an engagement with ideas and spiritual matters, but it must be done where the people of God are. Theology must touch the ground where the people, especially the poor, toil. Pope Francis, during his Chrism Mass on March 28, 2013, said: "This I ask you: be shepherds, with the 'odor of the sheep,' make it real, as shepherds among your flock, fishers of men."[5] In the same way, the theologian must foster a spirit of accompaniment—walking with the people in any theological undertaking. Only by being immersed in the people's suffering and standing in solidarity with their plights can theology be liberating. Thus, this study will explore the notion of a "feet on the ground" understanding of theology in Juan Luis Segundo.

In consonance with the "feet on the ground," understanding theology is reevaluating our understanding of hermeneutics. Gustavo Gutierrez and other liberation theologians in the past have described this methodological break as "the

[3]Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 110.

[4]C.f. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 19.

[5]Pope Francis, Chrism Mass Homily. 28 March 2013, Homilies, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html. (Accessed on October 10, 2021)

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epistemological leap" or "the hermeneutical shift."[6] The basic principle guiding liberation theology in its hermeneutical shift is the need to reevaluate, rephrase, and reinterpret our understanding. The task of interpretation is creating a connection between the past, present, and future. This vision of hermeneutics is a dialectical process between reading the life world and reading Scriptures and Tradition.[7] In short, interpretation is an encounter between the Word and the world.

It is here where Segundo's notion of the hermeneutical circle comes into play. For Juan Luis Segundo, the hermeneutical circle is "the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal."[8] Scholars comment that a proper understanding of Segundo's hermeneutical circle can be adequately achieved if we envision a hermeneutical spiral. For Segundo, like Paul Ricoeur, hermeneutics is a continual effort to bring the text alive in our context. In the same way, a hermeneutical shift according to liberation theology can only be effective if there is an encounter between the human and the divine, between the living world and the living Word of God.

Ideology and Faith

One of the critical starting points of our discussion on Segundo's hermeneutical circle must begin with his

[6]Gustavo Gutierrez, Praxis de Liberacion y Fe Cristiana (Lima 1973, 16) Jose Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation, (Philadelphia, 1975), 88. Quoted in Juan Stam. "The Hermeneutics of Liberation Theology." Bangalore Theological Forum. Vol. XI. No. 2 (1979): 126.

[7]"… the word of God has always dialogued with human beings preoccupied with efficient problems.» (Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 12.)

[8]Stam, "The Hermeneutics of Liberation Theology," 131.

understanding of ideology. According to Segundo, our understanding of faith is always grounded in the lens of a particular time and space. Thus, consciously or unconsciously, our ideological lens allows us to make sense of our world which also influences how we understand the faith through our particular context. As Heidegger claims, we are beings in the world, and our work of interpretation is permanently anchored in our very situatedness.[9] John Ries adds: "As such, human understanding is essentially interpretive, and its interpreting includes the one interpreting. As a human being, the one seeking is intrinsically entangled in the very process of interpretation."[10] Some ideological lens also informs even our way of doing theology.

Polemicizing against Schillebeeckx, Segundo argues that theology cannot be the application of the Word of God to present-day reality, as though the Word of God and its meaning first is understood in some pure sense, in an antiseptic laboratory immune from ideological struggles.[11]

Nevertheless, in contrast to other theologians who take the notion of ideology in a purely negative manner,[12] for

[9]C.f. John Ries, "Of Truth and Method: Juan Luis Segundo's Mapping of a Liberating Hermeneutic Circle," *Louvain Studies* 22 (1997): 212.

[10]Ries, "Of Truth and Method," 208.

[11]Harold Wells, "Segundo's Hermeneutic Circle," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 34 (1984): 25-26

[12]Ideology would be the systematization of the perception of the real.» Insofar as one seeks to grasp reality concretely, one must use ideologies. Segundo insists upon this term since he believes that our way of seeing the world is objectively affected by what we understand. He realizes that every understanding, including *fides quaerens intellectum,* entails a pre-understanding that already colors the reality sought. (Ries, "Of Truth and Method: Juan Luis Segundo's Mapping of a Liberating Hermeneutic Circle," 210)

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Segundo, a theologian's task is always to be aware of the ideological veil present in the interpretation and even his own interpretation of the text. For Segundo, the goal of the work of interpretation and the hermeneutical circle is to allow the interpretation to be questioned on whether it illuminates or obscures the gospel message.[13] Segundo considers ideology as having both a positive and a negative dimension. The goal is to be aware that in doing our work of interpretation, we may either be an agent of liberation or one who propagates oppression. According to Wells: "The theology of liberation, especially this contribution from Segundo, has much to say about "slothful neutrality" which deserves our urgent attention."[14]

Ries highlights, "One crucial aspect of the hermeneutic circle is that it reminds us that every understanding is an interpretation, and as such needs to be called into question, re-opened so that its ideology can be unmasked of those elements which hide the gospel message."[15] Thus, Segundo must use the word "circle" to describe his methodology since every interpretation seeks its criticism so that it becomes aware of its conscious and unconscious ideological underpinnings.

[13]C.f. Ries, "Of Truth and Method," 210.

[14]Harold Wells, "Segundo's Hermeneutic Circle," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 34 (1984): 31.

[15]John Ries, "Of Truth and Method," 210.

The Hermeneutical Circle[16]

These two preconditions mean that there must, in turn, be four decisive factors in our circle. Firstly, our way of experiencing reality leads us to ideological suspicion.[17]

The first decisive factor, according to Segundo, is the initial motivation to look at and question reality. A person content with the world will not be interested in unmasking the mechanisms that conceal the authentic reality.[18] For example, an individual who is too entrenched in the attitude of consumerism will have a hard time building a critical attitude to question his or her buying habits. The problem is that many of us prefer to maintain the status quo rather than take the hard road toward life. From the Gospel, we know that collective human praxis disguises itself, shuns the light, prefers darkness, and does not want to stir up crisis.[19]

Through the lens of Sigmund Freud, James O'Donnell emphasizes this innate tendency of the human being to prefer a stable and comfortable life rather than to seek possibilities beyond the present and strive for self-transcendence.

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[16]Two preconditions must be met if we are to have a hermeneutic circle in theology. The first precondition is that the questions arising out of the present be rich enough, general enough, and basic enough to force us to change our customary conceptions of life. The second precondition assumes it can respond to new questions without changing its conventional interpretation of the Scriptures. (Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 8-9.) According to Segundo, the first precondition for the hermeneutical circle is one's critical disposition in confronting our understanding of our life and destiny. The second precondition task is about the connection between the original intention of the Word of God and the changing situation of our present context.

[17]Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 9.

[18]*Segundo, The Liberation of Theology,* 9.

[19]Juan Luis Segundo, *Signs of the Times* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 7.

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According to Segundo, the contrasting energy from this tendency towards an "easy life" is faith.[20] "Described from a Freudian perspective," O'Donnell states that "faith is the vital attitude that is not a surrender to one's instinctive desires and mechanisms for the "easy way out."[21] For O'Donnell, Segundo takes a cue from Freud's hermeneutics of suspicion in describing the tension between sin and grace, between a life of indifference and a life configured to the suffering Christ.

Nevertheless, no matter how much one tries to look the other way around and maintain a blind eye to the atrocities and sufferings around him/her, God finds a way to stir the heart toward something life-giving. Segundo thus states, "There belongs to the primordial reality of authentic Christianity a deep suspicion of any collective praxis that conceals its real motives, ignores its mechanisms and takes refuge in ideal conceptualizations of its most concrete and keenest reality."[22] No matter how much one tries to become apathetic and indifferent to the heart's stirrings, there is something inherent and natural in a person that stirs her/him towards concern for another.[23]

One concrete manifestation here is the presence of the poor in our society. No matter how our modern society tries to cover up the reality of the poor, the poor will allow us to

[20]See Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 43.

[21]James O'Donnell, "The Influence of Freud's Hermeneutic of Suspicion on the Writings of Juan Segundo," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 10, 1, Spring (1982): 29.

[22]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 7.

[23]"… the theology of Jesus derives theology from the openness of the human heart to man's most urgent problems. Indeed, Jesus seems to go so far as to suggest that one cannot recognize Christ, and therefore come to know God, unless he or she is willing to start a personal commitment to the oppressed." (Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 81.)

see the reality that we have been so accustomed to seeing with new eyes.[24] Beyond the great lights and the towering skyscrapers of a great metropolis lies the simple daily wage earners struggling in their daily commute to make a living. We also see street children running after buses and jeepneys to beg for some coins. The presence of the poor disorients and dislocates us from our seemingly utopian world of abundance.

At the end of the first session of Vatican II, Cardinal Lercaro lamented that "something has been missing so far in the council," and he asked, "where shall we find that vital impulse that soul let us say that fullness of the Spirit?" He replied, "This is the hour of the poor, of the millions of poor everywhere on the earth."[25]

In Cardinal Lercaro's words, we can observe that a critical element in the renewal of the Church is emphasizing a focus on the poor as a presence that allows the Church to look at itself with an ever-renewed vigor.[26] Archbishop Romero said insightfully, "The glory of God is that the poor live," these words can be taken as a "summary" of Christianity.[27] It is when the poor and the outcasts of society have been given a space to express the work of the Spirit in their lives. Only

[24]"But Jesus' theology says something very different. It suggests that when people stop at theological certitudes, those certitudes fall apart in their hands. They are not designed to take the place of an upright human heart as the primary source of any historical judgment.» (Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 80.)

[25]Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor,* 22.

[26]Thus, Enrique Dussel coined for theologians and pastoral agents the expression of the discipleship of the poor. Furthermore, Leonardo Boff spoke about a new "ecclesiogenesis," *a church born from the poor.* (Segundo, Signs of the Times, 74.)

[27]Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor,* 26.

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then can we say that the glory of God has truly shone in our world.[28]

We will do so by understanding salvation in relation to the poor and by seeing in the poor a locus and a potential for salvation.[29] The very prophetic presence of the poor allows us to be conscious of the scope of the work of salvation. Even the silent presence of the poor can become salvific if it allows us to reconsider and rethink our way of life. Through those humbled by the reality of poverty, the Spirit of the Lord has not refrained from using them as a channel to effect salvation but made them the very center by which salvation is to be fulfilled. "That very formula exceeds our grasp: *extra pauperes nulla salus."*[30] One could only hope to be lost in abstraction and hopeful fantasy outside the poor.[31] Medellin gave particular importance to the "option for the poor," but we now go a step further and do so with some novelty: we propose "the option to let salvation come from the poor."[32]

Secondly, our ideological suspicion is applied to the whole ideological superstructure in general and to theology in particular.[33]

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[28]In the Christian customs of an evangelized people, the Holy Spirit adorns the Church, showing her new aspects of revelation and giving her a new face. (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium,* 1 January 2013, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html. (accessed July 25, 2022), no. 116.)

[29]Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor,* 49.

[30]Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor,* 49.

[31]"Eternal salvation depends on the living out of a love of preference for the poor because the poor and needy bear the privileged presence of Christ." (PCP II, 312)

[32]Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor,* 50-1.

[33]Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 9.

We discussed in the previous chapter the task of prophecy in the light of Christ. Prophecy is a courageous confrontation of the evils of the Word, such that even in the face of alienation and oppression, one would remain committed to following Christ in denouncing the world's evils. Therefore, we read in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*: "The Church is called to exercise a truly prophetic role, condemning the evils of man in their infected source, showing the root of divisions and bringing hope in the possibility of overcoming tensions and conflicts and reaching brotherhood, concord, and peace at all levels and in all sections of human society."[34] Here, the Church must emphasize the role of the poor as a prophetic witness in helping the Church be attuned to the rhythm of History. To emphasize, it is also crucial that the Church recognizes the poor's prophetic role in denouncing the modern world's evils.

The poor are our hermeneutical key in addressing the culture of indifference prevalent in our technologically advanced world.[35] The poor are also a constant reminder that the Church is an *ecclesia semper reformanda;* the face of the poor allows the Church to look directly at the face of Christ.[36] Each time we become a witness to the plight and sufferings of the poor, we are confronted with the figure of the crucified

[34]John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, in The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations of John Paul II,* December 2, 1984, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html. (accessed July 30, 2022), no. 4.

[35]"However, when we speak of God's revelation to the oppressed, the analysis is incorrect. His revelation comes to us in and through the cultural situation of the oppressed. (Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 30.)

[36]C.f. PCP2 130 "We need to recognize the saving presence of Jesus among the poor he loved so much and whose faces bear his image.» (PCP II, 278)

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Christ whose silent gaze questions and challenges us.[37] The Church faces many challenges, but we believe none is more vigorous—and leaves the Church more defenseless—than the poor and the victims of this world.[38]

We realize in our History has often testified to events that have often used the Gospel as an instrument of oppression. Beyond our ideological lens, we must constantly be reminded of the person beyond the ideological veils of History; interpretation must return to Christ. Thus, our interpretation of the Bible must always go back to Christ rather than be fixated on the letter. Segundo emphasizes, "We will thus rescue them (the poor) from a tradition which, for various reasons indicated, has (been) transmitted (to) them in corrupted ways."[39] Our understanding of the Word of God must reach the depths of love beyond the letter and affirm the life-giving Spirit of the law.

Furthermore, we have the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which a person who neither knew nor understood the law but whose heart was open to an option to an attitude interpreted the law. This parable is situated in the context of the interpretation of the law. It is not a parable about charity. Jesus is being asked how he reads the law regarding one's neighbor. He responds that persons who do an authentic reading of the law with an open heart have come to the aid of their neighbor.[40]

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[37]C.f. David Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 197; "Similarly, the Church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder." (LG 8)

[38]Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor,* 33.

[39]Segundo, *Faith, and Ideologies,* 178.

[40]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 124.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Christ asks how we read the law, for one must be wary of whether his or her hermeneutical lens can be a source of charity or oppression. When appropriately used, biblical criticism could free the reader from the fundamentalist prison of the letter.[41] The Spirit of the law is always directed towards the liberation and the manifestation of the freedom proper to all. Any understanding of the law that moves in the opposite direction is in danger of being lethal and stifles the freedom of another. Unfortunately, the letter continues to be the letter, which can be lethal.[42] Any attempt to interpret the Word of God must be able to elucidate the liberating power of the Word. Therefore, hermeneutics must be understood in the context of love, and become hermeneutics of charity, allowing mercy and compassion to propagate in our world rather than punishment and suppression.

Neoliberal ideology (one of the slogans, with unintended irony, proclaims 'the end of history') has its way of reading the historical future of humanity; it dispossesses the developing nations of their past and disguises an economic and social process that is increasing the imbalance.[43]

"In Latin America, millions of people are dying because the gospel has been interpreted in a particular way for five centuries."[44] One must be aware that the Gospel can be interpreted in either salvific or oppressive light. Thus, every hermeneutics must pave the way for its criticism. In making itself vulnerable, the interpretation can make itself open to the touch of

[41]Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology,* 185.

[42]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 120.

[43]Gutierrez, *The Density of the Present* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 132.

[44]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 119.

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the Spirit. This point of vulnerability in the interpretation process allows for space for dialogue to be nourished by the interpretation of another. The goal of interpretation must always be a reiteration of our connection with God and God's people. Any interpretation that does the contrary is in danger of being oppressive. Genuine hermeneutics is to be vulnerable with the poor.[45]

"Almost automatically, we cling vainly to some letter of ours, to some past figure who is no less in contradiction to the very revelation of Christ and the outpouring of his Spirit for being the very figure of Christ."[46] Any genuine interpretation seeks to touch its wounds, for these gaps can become spaces for transformation and conversion. For Segundo, hermeneutical suspicion must be understood as an invitation to openness rather than a direct criticism. In touching its wounds, it also seeks to touch people whose lives have been affected negatively by its misuse or disuse. Interpretation is an expression of power that one can either unveil or cover up the truth.[47] "The Church (and the society) seriously needs to be challenged, for it has a natural tendency to hide its miseries."[48]

The Gospel can be read apart from any relation to the liberation of the poor from their poverty, which is why it has been read for so long without the poor experiencing any change in their situation.[49] The poor are often neglected in

[45]"I am glad, brothers and sisters, that our Church is being persecuted precisely because of its option for the poor and because it seeks to be incarnated in the interest of the poor.» Oscar Romero. «Homily of July 15, 1979,» quoted in Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor,* 32.

[46]Segundo, *Our Idea of God,* 30.

[47]C.f. Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor,* 43.

[48]Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor,* 33.

[49]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 119-20.

any hermeneutical undertaking on the Gospel, which is why the Gospel often appears stale in front of oppressed people. I have an answer —my own —to this hermeneutic problem. "My answer is the option for the poor."[50] The presence of the poor revitalizes our understanding of the Word. The eyes of the poor allow us to look again and reevaluate how we are as a humane and civilized people.[51] Through the presence of the forgotten in History, we find a wealth of meaning in the Word.

Through the paradigm of love, the work of interpretation seeks to renew its outlook on the world, beginning with those suffering and oppressed. Through the lens of love, hermeneutical suspicion also gives way to the creative unfolding of salvation history. For Segundo, "God-in-us, attuned to the rhythm of history, ensures the continuing presence of Jesus' word in a creative way."[52] Our hermeneutical attempt must always be both a looking back and a looking forward. The possibilities of interpretation are a testament to the creative work of the Spirit. Hans de Wit adds: "Thus the interpretation process of biblical texts should not be limited to the exploration of the historical meaning of the text... but should concentrate just as much on how the surplus of the meaning of the text is made operational from the praxis in the interpretive communities."[53]

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[50]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 120.

[51]"This change is at the heart of Christian discipleship lived in a world of poverty, oppression, exploitation, and conflict." (PCP II, 272)

[52]Segundo, *Our Idea of God,* 30.

[53]Hans de Wit. "'It Should be Burned and Forgotten!': Latin American Liberation Hermeneutics through the Eyes of Another." *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation.* Edited by Alejandro F. Botta & Pablo R. Andinach (Altlanta: Society of Biblical (Literature, 2000), 44–5.

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Thirdly, there comes a new way of experiencing the theological reality that leads us to exegetical suspicion, that is, to the suspicion that the prevailing interpretation of the Bible has not taken essential pieces of data into account.[54]

God's Spirit, Who, with a marvelous providence, directs the unfolding of time and renews the face of the earth, is not absent from this development.[55] Any work of interpretation is one's participation in the work of renewal. In the face of each new juncture in History, active and critical listeners will make the good news sound out anew—ever the same (the message of Jesus) but ever different.[56] God seeks everyone to become aware of their capacity for interpretation, especially the poor. The particular context of each interpreter allows people to enflesh the Word of God through their setting in life (*sitz im leben*).

For Segundo, our hermeneutical key in understanding the Word of God is based on reading the signs of the times. So Jesus gives them, as an example of a sign of the times and of a reading of the signs of the times, the pagan people who, in the sensitivity of their hearts, have attuned themselves to what God was trying to tell them.[57] Without the hermeneutical key of love and option for the poor, any interpretation of the Word of God is bound to be focused only on the letter. Segundo discusses: "Meanwhile, here are the Pharisees looking at Jesus, and out of tune with God because they lack sensitivity in their hearts to interpret the Word. The signs of the times somehow precondition the reading of the Word."[58]

[54]Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 9.

[55]*Gaudium et Spes,* 26.

[56]Segundo, *Our Idea of God,* 29-30.

[57]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 124.

[58]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 124.

"The option for the poor is the human attitude that we adopt, on our responsibility and at our own risk, toward the Word of God, before the reading of that Word."[59] This sensitivity to the negative realities of the world and the cry of the poor in a seemingly "utopian" world of abundance is essential in facilitating an authentic encounter with the Word of God. Therefore, an interpreter needs to develop this sensitivity of the heart to see only the letter of the law and encounter the Spirit of the law.

Segundo writes: "I shall approach the option for the poor not as a conclusion drawn by liberation theology, or as one of its favorite themes, but as a hermeneutic key —that is, as the antecedent element required to interpret the gospel and keep its letter from killing."[60] One must be able to go back to the teachings of Christ on the two greatest commandments—the love of God and the love of neighbor. Only through love can any interpretation be purified of any narcissistic tendency and become genuinely inspired by the Word of God. Furthermore, interpretation must allow for a greater connection with the world.

In these lines, Hans de Wit takes a note from Ricoeur and emphasizes the notion of a "surplus of meaning" from liberation hermeneutics, with the latter drawing inspiration from the former. Compared to classical hermeneutics, the main goal is only to return to the original historical context. "In classic hermeneutics, Croatto observes, the biblical text is considered a *deposit* that is exhausted in its first production

[59]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 126.

[60]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 120.

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of a meaning (*produccion de sentido*)."[61] In other words, in classical hermeneutics, the message is directed only to the original audience; we, as readers, are only spectators as the text unfolds. It must be stressed again that the simultaneous presence of past and present in biblical interpretation is an essential hermeneutic principle.[62] As Segundo claims: "God will keep coming to speak to us from the very same Bible.[63]

For this to make sense, the challenge is to do things differently from what we have been doing. However, it is to fight creativity for the exact cause in one's context, tools, and, above all, hearts.[64]

"'The not said of the text' found in the contextualized reading is not just a free-floating new meaning or a parasite on a flower; no, it *reorients, remodels, enriches the original*."[65] The Spirit of the law allows us to "reorient, remodel, and enrich" our understanding of the law. There is much left unsaid in History; our task is to read again and reflect on how something that was said in the past could still be meaningful in our present context.[66] Segundo further insists, "… God in us, *God within us*. Or, to put it another way: the Word of God made our Word, the Word of God transformed into a creating, communitarian word that reveals our History because it follows its rhythm."[67]

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[61]de Wit, "'It Should be Burned and Forgotten!': Latin American Liberation Hermeneutics through the Eyes of Another," 44.

[62]Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 31.

[63]Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 32.

[64]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 80.

[65]de Wit, "'It Should be Burned and Forgotten!'" 45.

[66]C.f. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 31.

[67]Segundo, *Our Idea of God,* 31.

Fourthly we have our new hermeneutic, that is, our new way of interpreting the fountainhead of our faith (i.e., Scripture) with the new elements at our disposal.[68]

One must be aware that liberation hermeneutics does not depart from the Bible but seeks to encounter the person behind the text. The key to doing this is constant and rigorous walking with the Word. We encounter not a dead text but an Incarnate Word of God that constantly pitches his tent with us wherever our hermeneutical journey will lead us. "The liberation theologian goes to the scriptures bearing the whole weight of the problems, sorrows, and hopes of the poor, seeking light and inspiration from the divine Word. A new way of reading the Bible: the hermeneutics of liberation."[69] Segundo concisely believes that "God will keep coming back to speak to us from the very same Bible."[70]

It is intended only as a way into the hermeneutic circle, a way of breaking into this closed circle and becoming convinced that the Gospel itself is giving us a response to our human problems, the problems of poverty. Nevertheless, it demands a pre-attitude, a preunderstanding—and that it only opens itself (as the very letter of the Gospel has it) to those with this attitude, wager on the attitude called the 'option for the poor.'[71]

There is, nevertheless, a "hermeneutical circle" or "mutual appeal" between the poor and the Word.[72] The reality of the poor is a constant reminder that the work of interpretation is

[68]Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 9.

[69]L. & C. Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 32.

[70]Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 33.

[71]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 124-5.

[72]C.f. EN 29, see L. & C. Boff. Introducing Liberation Theology, 33.

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a progressive and continuous effort.[73] Each historical context must be treated as an opportunity where the Word meets the world,[74] It must specifically be the Word of God and the poor. In other words, the face of the poor dislodges our usual understanding of the Word of God and calls us to re-encounter the Word in all its vigor and strength.[75] This dislocation breaks our usual gaze and learns to see the world and Word with a fresh perspective. In the case of poverty, it allows us to be aware of our human capacity and acknowledge our tendency for hubris and self-sufficiency. The viewpoint of the poor is thus placed into a broader viewpoint—that of the Lord of History—whence the Word of God derives its consistency and strength.[76]

It is with all its dynamism that the social teaching of the Church accompanies men in their search. If it does not intervene to authenticate a given structure or to propose a ready-made model, it does not thereby limit itself to recalling general principles. On the contrary, it develops through reflection applied to the changing situations of this world, under the driving force of the Gospel, as the source of renewal when its message is accepted in its totality and with all its demands. It also develops with the sensitivity proper to the

[73]Segundo's methodology is considered a circle because of the need to go "… back and reinterpret the word of God again, and so on." (Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 8.)

[74]The Word of God has always dialogued with human beings preoccupied with convenient problems… Jesus himself dialogued with disciples who were constantly preoccupied with ensuring they would get the choice spots in the coming of the kingdom. (Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 12.)

[75]In the diversity of peoples who experience the gift of God, each by its own culture, the Church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth the «beauty of her varied face .»(EG 116)

[76]L. & C. Boff. *Introducing Liberation Theology,* 33.

Church, characterized by a disinterested will to serve and pay attention to the poorest.[77]

The creative power of the Spirit of the Lord inspires each believer to uncover the vast wealth of meaning behind the Word of God. "A great creative force is necessary to confront the present challenges."[78] Each hermeneutical endeavor to understand the Word of God is to understand it as if Christ is walking alongside us, present in our every situation.[79] "Thus, theological reflection also cannot stay the same."[80] In a way, the creative power and the richness of meaning present in the Word of God testify to its characteristic as a "living" Word of God. "It combines a deep sense of God's gift of love and the urgent need for solidarity with those who historically come in last."[81] Interpretation unveils a call to be responsible for another, be s/he the excluded poor or the violated earth.

For Segundo, for our hermeneutical project to be liberative, it must espouse a commitment to the poor. "When God opts to allow us to give salvation and liberation to the poor, it shows that we are graced by a God who is scandalously present in them."[82] In such a manner, we configure our hermeneutical undertaking with the counter-cultural Christ. "And it is with this attitude, with this sympathy for those who suffer most, an

[77]Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens,* May 14, 1971, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html (accessed August 3, 2022), no. 42

[78]Gutierrez, *The Density of the Present,* 111.

[79]The fact is that God shows up in a different light when his people find themselves in different historical situations. (Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 31.)

[80]Gutierrez, *The Density of the Present,* 125.

[81]Gutierrez, *The Density of the Present,* 128.

[82]Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor,* 19.

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attitude and sympathy like God's, that I shall read the Gospel, to see what it tells me about those persons to whom, and together with whom, I make my commitment."[83] "As it was in Bonhoeffer's day: 'Only a God who suffers can save us.'"[84]

From Word to Flesh: Hermeneutical Praxis[85]

The Bible is read and studied to know better the present situation and the calls from God that exist in it. The ultimate aim of the people's use of the Bible is not so much to interpret it but to enflesh or incarnate it in their lives.[86]

To interpret is to reflect on our lives, such that through our hermeneutical endeavors, we are open to the possibility of transforming the way we live our lives and how we relate with people.[87] In short, hermeneutics is directed toward the fulfillment of a good life. Therefore, every struggle to interpret is a struggle to lead an ethical life. The reason for the essential connection between hermeneutics and praxis. From Word to Flesh. It must involve a process of inculturation if the Gospel is to take flesh in each people's culture and context.[88] As Leonardo and Clodovis Boff discusses: "Liberation theology is far from being an inconclusive theology. It starts from

[83]Segundo. *Signs of the Times,* 120.

[84]Sobrino. No Salvation Outside the Poor, 56.

[85]"Ask, what shall I do to bring down the crucified people from the cross?" (Ignacio Ellacuria. "Las Iglesias latinoamericanas," 230 quoted in Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor,* 34)

[86]Mesters. *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 71 quoted in Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology,* 180

[87]This stage can be viewed historically as a transition to Ignatian spirituality, which sought a problematic but fruitful synthesis between contemplation and action: *in actione contemplativus* ("contemplative in action"). Cf. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation,* 58.

[88]CCC 854.

action and leads to action, a journey wholly impregnated by and bound up with the atmosphere of faith."[89] Interpretation is not just an intellectual activity but also a practical activity that calls everyone responsible.

In liberation hermeneutics, praxis is the space within which biblical texts' humanizing and liberating potential is explored. Praxis is a continual process of searching, transformation, continually deciding, choosing, judging, and determining who we are and who we shall be, not as a private or an individual act, but as a public and communal activity.[90]

Hermeneutical praxis is a continuous effort to transform our lives and attitudes toward how we deal with the world. Segundo's concept of the hermeneutical circle testifies to the richness of the Word of God in guiding us on how we live in a just society with others. Committing to action is a constant struggle to walk with the voiceless in History. Faithfulness to the God of our faith and the poor implies a permanent tension between the Gospel and walking with people living in a changing situation.[91] Any work of interpretation experiences this tension of being faithful to the author's original intention and its capacity to invoke a new understanding in its reader.[92] The new Gospel preaching will have to address the challenges which the past and present history of the continent present.[93]

God's revelation is about making a difference. Moreover, in terms of the simplest definition, one who communicates

[89]L. & C. Boff. *Introducing Liberation Theology,* 39.

[90]de Wit, "'It Should be Burned and Forgotten!'" 45.

[91]Gutierrez, *The Density of the Present,* 112.

[92]"Without this connection between past and present, there is no theology of liberation in the long run. (Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 8.)

[93]Gutierrez, *The Density of the Present,* 110.

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conveys to the interlocutor "a difference that makes a difference."[94]One could understand Segundo's proposal of understanding hermeneutics as not simply interpreting things in a new light. Instead, the hermeneutical endeavor is a practical endeavor. Each effort to interpret the Word of God calls for an effort to interpret our way of interacting with the world. Segundo writes: "It is not a mere matter of perceiving something (for which our knowledge must receive a 'different' content from the one it had before). The 'difference' must also 'make a difference.'"[95] To interpret is to look again at the Word of God and how it makes a difference in how we live our lives.

The difference transmitted commences to signify when the receiver perceives what it should affect or change in his or her actual existence or behavior —that is, when the perceived difference is related to another correlative difference that ought to take place in the existence of the receiver.[96]

"Only then is there a true 'communication': when there is a difference that makes or produces a difference?"[97] Part of communication is a communion of difference; it is when we avoid the temptation to reduce one another to the same and the acceptance to live in a loving struggle with another.[98] We read in *Gaudium et Spes:* "Christian revelation contributes

[94]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 130.

[95]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 130.

[96]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 130.

[97]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 131.

[98]The council, then, does not regard revelation as something that, without transforming our historical life—with¬ out "making us better," to use Augustine's expression —constitutes a "truth": that is, something that can be possessed, be deposited, and have value in God's sight (see Matt. 25:24 and parallels) by magically performing its salvific activity (see GS 7, 43) (also see Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 132)

greatly to the promotion of this communion between persons, and at the same time leads us to a deeper understanding of the laws of social life which the Creator has written into man's moral and spiritual nature."[99]

At the same time, Vatican II believes that "This social order requires constant improvement. It must be founded on truth, built on justice, and animated by love; in the freedom, it should grow daily toward a more humane balance."[100] Any intention to maintain the *status quo* must be considered; the way that the Gospel may be allowed to break into our lives is through a continual and loving critique of our beliefs and values.[101] An entrenched system of beliefs and values tends to be an instrument of salvation or oppression. "Thus, according to the Council, the intent of God's revelation is not that we know (something that otherwise would be impossible or difficult for us to know), but that we are different and act better."[102]

One attitude that Segundo also proposes in undertaking any hermeneutical project is to see it as a wager. One must always be open to different possibilities of how a hermeneutical project plays out.[103] "When you start a revolution, you

[99]GS, 23.

[100]GS, 26.

[101]"Jesus' question points to a level before any theological questions, "where human beings make their most critical and decisive options: i.e., the heart. Furthermore, the theology of the Pharisees has bypassed the human entirely, as if it were insignificant by comparison with loftier criteria and certitudes. Jesus is saddened and angered by their silence." (Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 78.)

[102]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 132.

[103]What is this "faith" that precedes "revelation," and which, as we have seen, makes revelation possible as the necessary precondition for the revealed "difference" to effect the essential praxic "difference" without which there could be no authentic communication between God and ourselves? (Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 13)

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do not yet know what historical price it will demand of you or what will remain of your project even after you have paid the price."[104] One can never dictate how his or her project will progress and conclude. Nevertheless, a disposition of openness is always necessary to never constrict the possibilities of such undertaking to one's possibilities. As Segundo states: "History is exciting. It is like an open promise."[105]

> …we have a freedom that opens to us a specific spectrum of opportunities or routes to various values or satisfactions; all the same, we realize that our free existence is a kind of wager. Why a 'wager?' Because we have only one existence and cannot 'test out' in advance what we will choose. We are not granted to traverse a course to the end but to observe whether it has been satisfactory. And then, in all assurance and (empirical) cognizance of the cause, we return to our starting point —and then make our option knowing beforehand what awaits us at the end of the road.[106]

Hermeneutics must begin with the poor; thus, it must avoid emphasizing the usual comforts of the theologian's ivory tower.[107] When we talk about the text, we must be aware that it must end with the text, but it must touch the ground where the people of God have trod. Any theological project that cannot become relevant to the lives of the poor by giving them opportunities to interpret their lives can lead only to

[104]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 133.

[105]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 133.

[106]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 133.

[107]C.f. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology,* 19.

unwanted abstraction and alienation of the people.[108] As Segundo claims: "Without this process of consciousness-raising, the task of evangelizing and catechizing runs the risk of being a cultural invasion: i.e., the learning of new words that do not correspond to life's realities, and mere conceptual games that leave intact old alienations stemming from fear, enslavement, and ideology."[109]

Rather than mere objects of History, the poor must be understood as subjects of History. At the same time, the poor are not just objects in the eyes of the Church, but they are subjects. That is, they actively participate in building up the kingdom of God here on earth. "Thus Enrique Dussel coined for theologians and pastoral agents the expression, *the discipleship of the poor.* Moreover, Leonardo Boff spoke about a new 'ecclesiogenesis,' *a church born from the poor."*[110] Gutierrez further adds: "History, where God reveals himself and where we proclaim him, must be reread from the side of the poor."[111] In short, the challenge posed by liberation theology is a rereading of salvation history from the side of the lowly and allowing it to unfold gradually through mutual accompaniment and interpretation.

Gutierrez speaks: "At the same time, it is important to observe that poverty is not only a matter of not having. On the contrary, the poor are brimming with abilities and

[108]"The 'poor,' with all the variety of shades that we will analyze, and above all the 'poor with spirit,' as Ellacuria called them… are those who humanize and offer salvation, those who can offer inspiration and energy for the creation of a civilization based on solidarity, as opposed to selfishness." (Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor,* 53.)

[109]Segundo, *Our Idea of God,* 174.

[110]Segundo, *Signs of the Times,* 74.

[111]Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor,* 201 quoted in Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology,* 191

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possibilities."[112] The problem with the common understanding of the poor is that we often begin seeing what needs to be improved rather than the vast possibilities waiting for them.[113] One such possibility is the poor's hermeneutical possibility.

Quoting from Segundo: "The Church as a whole is a community which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, should unceasingly be about the work of creatively translating this message, *spoken* in different circumstances, in terms of the problems that are posed today by human beings who are subjects of history."[114] Through the guidance and the gifts bestowed by the Spirit of God, everyone part of the community has the capacity and responsibility to become active and creative agents in bringing about the presence of God's kingdom through the various translation opportunities afforded by their various contexts. "The poor, the sick, the marginal people construct the future earth if they expend their forces to the limit in the work of liberating love."[115]

"All the functions and structures of the Church, from the magisterium to the sacraments, from the papacy to the laity, have no other meaning than this translation work."[116] The work of translation is an endeavor to open the possibility of an encounter between the Word and the world. Although one can visualize this encounter in terms of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, the very touch of God and Adam in the modern world is made possible by the work of translation. As

[112]Gutierrez, *The Density of the Present,* 133.

[113]C.f. PCP2, 280.

[114]Segundo, *Our Idea of God,* 175.

[115]Segundo, *Our Idea of God,* 46.

[116]Segundo, *Our Idea of God,* 175.

Segundo says: "… God *attuned to the rhythm of history.*"[117] Each effort to translate is a creative opportunity for the encounter of the human and the divine.

Summary and Conclusion

Juan Luis Segundo's notion of the hermeneutical circle has presented two crucial starting points before any hermeneutical endeavor. First, a critical attitude must be nourished to transcend and question any deeply embedded ideological understanding of reality. Any person that follows the natural tendency of a comfortable, easy-to-understand perception of reality is bound to be narrow and closed-minded in any hermeneutical endeavor. Second, the richness of one's experience of reality is directed to both an experience of positive and negative realities. Such is our case; the richness of our experience is based upon our connection with all of creation, especially the poor, the suffering, the forgotten, and the voiceless in History—the more that we can establish relationships, the more that our hermeneutical horizons are broadened.

After fulfilling the two preconditions of the hermeneutical circle, we can proceed with the four steps of the hermeneutical circle, according to Segundo. The first step is a critical attitude to question reality to open ourselves to the various realities in our world. For Segundo, the different faces of the poor in our world are our hermeneutical key in awakening ourselves from our self-inflicted blindness. The second step is the hermeneutics of suspicion, a questioning of ideological structures that can propagate or banalize the structures of sin and oppression. The third step is an application of the hermeneutics of suspicion to our theological understanding; one must be wary of our tendency to illuminate or obscure the Gospel message. The "unsaid" of the Gospel here is

[117]Segundo, *Our Idea of God,* 29.

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emphasized, hermeneutics as a way of listening to what the Gospel of love has to say about our present context. Fourth and last, we have given birth to a new hermeneutical understanding, and the cycle repeats.

The goal of the hermeneutical circle is the continuous purification of our hermeneutical understanding to avoid compartmentalizing and reducing the Word of God. Furthermore, with every completion of the hermeneutical circle, we are afforded a new way to approach reality and find a new way of living our lives. Every effort to renew and change our understanding of reality also becomes an effort to transform our lives to be configured to the person of Christ.

The Bible is more than a material for exegesis; as Hans de Wit claims, it is a place of encounter between the Word and the world. Through the Bible, we feel a connection with everyone who struggles to hear the message of the Lord in their specific context. Thus, one must appreciate the work of interpretation as more than just an academic endeavor. There is a kind of interpersonal endeavor that is initiated in every encounter with the Word of God. Interpretation is an encounter. The role of the hermeneuticist is to facilitate the encounter in a way to act as a bridge.

The Bible is a window, a breath of air, as a new perspective—this is what one encounters in the communities of faith.[118] Everyone's encounter with the text allows us to re-encounter the world. Through such re-encounter with the world, we become nourished with a new-found experience to encounter again in the light of faith in the Word of God. Hence, Hans de Wit reminds us, "The Bible and life are bound to each other in grass-roots reading practice, and there is a circularity that

[118]de Wit, "'It Should be Burned and Forgotten!': Latin American Liberation Hermeneutics through the Eyes of Another," 42.

is fed from concrete life."[119] Our re-encounter with the Bible through the experience of the grass-roots facilitates an interpretation that grounds our feet in the concrete.

[119]de Wit, "'It Should be Burned and Forgotten!': Latin American Liberation Hermeneutics through the Eyes of Another," 42.

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