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## **Beck-Styled Liberation**

### **Bulletpoints and Bromides**

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#### **An Essay**

[1] Over the past several months, much to the chagrin of my family and friends, I have daily tuned into Glenn Beck's television program. Admittedly, I do not engage in this activity because I share in his political opinions – indeed, I regard most of them as anathema rooted in half-truths and wild associations. I also do not view Mr. Beck's show because he is, in the words of Sarah Palin, "America's professor." As an adjunct professor of theology at a major Catholic university, I find that a majority of his theses do not adhere to the most basic rules for logical argument building. Rather, I begrudgingly turn on Fox News at 5:00 p.m. because Beck has begun to position himself as a burgeoning theologian. His forays into religion are not new: during the 2008 campaign he attacked, with extreme prejudice, Rev. Jeremiah Wright and the United Church of Christ (UCC). But, as of late, he has turned his attention to liberation theology, a system of thought about which, as I explain below, his understanding is incorrect. Yet he is using his hours of daily radio and television time to unleash a vitriolic and irresponsible attack on liberation theology, positioning it as a politico-religious palimpsest masking a Marxist plot to take over the United States. This is not hyperbole on my part; Beck has made these claims repeatedly. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that Beck presents himself as a political commentator and not a fledgling religion critic; his true intention is to lambast President Barack Obama because Obama is un-American. In many ways, Beck is unabashed about this goal. He has said several times since his August 28, 2010 "Restoring Honor Rally" that he "is not attacking anyone's faith," but just wants to understand what is happening to his country. This sentiment is belied by his

actions; indeed, he *is* attacking the faith of President Obama. And as a follower of liberation theology and a member of the UCC, my own faith is assailed. While I would be a nebbish defender of Obama's political accomplishments, as a published theologian I feel called to enter into the fray of the current religious debate.

[2] A great deal has been written lately about Beck's words and actions, and I do not wish to repeat what others have cogently and eloquently presented. Rather, I would like to focus upon two details that, for me, can be important discussion points for us in the Progressive Church as we attempt to counteract Beck's misinformation campaign. On August 29, following the rally, Beck appeared on television and was questioned about his infamous statement that President Obama "time and time again" has shown "a deep-seated hatred for Whites or White culture." Proffered the opportunity to retract the statement, Beck issued a half-hearted apology, calling himself a "big mouth," but only *amended* the original claim by saying that he now understands that Obama is not a racist, but rather a follower of liberation theology which sets forth the paradigm of the "oppressor and the oppressed." This, to Beck, explained all, and through such a claim, Beck sought to bring the gospel to the masses. When he returned to his own show on August 30, Beck showed a series of clips in which President Obama expressed his belief that his own "individual salvation means nothing without collective salvation." Gesticulating wildly and mugging for the camera, Beck said, "This is not Christianity!" I would like to take these two points in turn – that liberation theology and collective salvation are outside of the mainstream – for I believe that a majority of Christians, actually, *do* agree that liberation theology reflects what Jesus said both about the Kingdom of God and how people should treat one another.

[3] While Beck erroneously maintains that Dr. James Cone "founded" liberation theology, most people who bother to read more than a bullet-pointed, one-page summary know that it has its roots in many different soils. Historically, liberation theology emerges from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the subsequent Latin American Catholic Bishops Conferences held in Medellin, Columbia (1968) and Puebla, Mexico (1975), which all set forth the Church's commitment to a "preferential option for the poor." To understand this development, we must understand history. So it is with no disrespect to Dr. Cone, whose work I greatly admire, that I point out that the most internationally recognized and quoted liberation theologian is the Peruvian-born Gustavo Gutierrez, whose *A Theology of Liberation* still stands as our seminal text on the issue. Certainly, there are many different ways liberation theology has evolved and matured – as black liberation theology, feminist liberation theology, GLBT liberation theology – but it has as its basis, through all permutations, a bottom-up approach. Liberation theology is something that emerges from the people, based upon their lived realities and their reflections, the pairing of which results in *praxis*. Liberation theology is less an ideology and more an experiential worldview rooted in the common existences of people who live in disparate countries, but who share a similar reality. While Beck is correct that all liberation theologies set forth an "oppressor/oppressed" paradigm, to leave off an explanation at this is a bromide. It would be akin to saying that the basis of the American Declaration of Independence is: "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ." and not elucidating the truths we hold so dearly! If we include only one clause, we do not have a completed sentence; liberation theology allows us to have an entire conversation.

[4] Liberation theology holds that Jesus Christ, God's presence on earth, came with a ministry aimed particularly at the poor. Like the Israelite social justice prophets before him, Jesus taught about God's love for the impoverished, his concern for widows, and his agony at the pain of orphans; Jesus also had harsh words for those who misused their economic, social, and religious powers to subjugate others. He himself showed a preferential option for the poor; it was to them he went most often. Abject poverty in the face of unequal wealth, according to Jesus, was and is unnatural; Jesus did not come to tend to the well, but to the sick. We must recognize that Jesus understood earthly hierarchies as inauthentic; they are not what God intends for us. The good news is that Christ stands as a way in which the lives of people and society as a whole can be transformed. This is so much more than an "oppressor/oppressed" dichotomy. Liberation theology does not set forth the idea that there is an oppressor who must be overthrown by the oppressed so the vanquished can become the vanquisher; such a contention would be ridiculous, because a switch in roles would only maintain the current power dynamic. On the contrary, Christ's presence on earth served as a clarion call to people that systematic poverty is inhumane. While I am aware that Jesus said that the poor will be with us always, we should not take that as a tacit assent to systems that maintain and even propagate poverty. Indeed, we must understand how poverty functions in the lives of far too many people around the world.

[5] According to Robert MacAfee Brown, a preeminent scholar of religion, poverty is three things: *destructive*, and as such must be eliminated by obliterating its causes; *structural*, and will continue to be perpetuated unless a transformation of hearts and culture is achieved; and is *experienced by an established social class* that will remain used and abused, locked into lives of despondency and quiet desperation unless they believe that there is a real possibility for liberation. Christ *is* that liberation. He teaches us that we can achieve freedom from the social structures that keep people in misery and poverty; he teaches us that we are not *destined* to be either oppressors or the oppressed; our true identity is that we are members of a human family born of the same Creator, a God who intimately understands human suffering and desires to see it alleviated and destroyed. This is Jesus' work on the cross, the undertaking of personal suffering in order to free us from sin. Liberation theologians take this belief very seriously, but they emphasize that the fruits of Christ's suffering is divine mercy and forgiveness, fruits that we can reap every day. We should seek to transform unnatural, human systems that keep people in financial and spiritual poverty, all the while knowing that this is *the* work a merciful, loving God calls us to do. Certainly, Christ has liberated us through a single act; but he calls us to continue this work so that, as we confess everyday around the world, God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. What Beck fails to understand is that God's preferential option for the poor does not mean that there is not divine love and the possibility of salvation for all. In truth, the basis of Christ's earthly ministry concerned radical equality that transcended the boundaries of clean and unclean, male and female, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor; in God, we are all equal, just as he intended.

[6] This helps us segue into the second point upon which Beck harps in order to criticize and ridicule President Obama's faith, and the faiths of all those who champion liberation theology as the constituent message of our God. Beck regards Obama's understanding of his individual salvation being meaningless without universal salvation as Marxism. This, Beck

claims, is the key to unlocking the sinister plot that will unleash Armageddon upon the United States. He argues, again, that most Christians believe in a God that offers *individual* salvation. Here, I believe that a story central to Jews, Christians, and Muslims will be of service to us. Moses, speaking for God, approaches Pharaoh declaring that the slavery of the Hebrews is unjust, and demands that Pharaoh, “Let my people go, that they may serve me.” Moses does not demand that Pharaoh “Let me go,” or even “Let Aaron, Miriam, and me go.” No, such a claim would be ludicrous because God is concerned with the freedom of all his people. Now while the biblical story can be interpreted in a multitude of ways, the resulting exodus is metaphorical and not just literal. The beauty of the Abrahamic traditions is that, through the work of thousands of years and the revelation of history, increasing numbers of people have found truth, meaning, and redemption in this story. It is why I have summarized it in the present tense. God has concern for his people collectively, not as selective individuals, but corporately and across space and time. Notice, too, that there is a purpose for this liberation: God frees us so that we may serve him.

[7] What this service to God entails depends largely on one’s general faith tradition and particular denomination. As a Christian in the United Church of Christ, I am reminded of Jesus’ message in the Gospel of Mark. In Mark 1:15, Jesus says, “The time is upon us, and the imperial reign of God is at hand; set your way, and believe in the good news” (my translation). I imagine, from having watched his show and heard his words, that Beck would interpret this passage to be a clear call for the individual to repent from his or her individual sin and await the coming of God, who most certainly is apoplectic with humanity. Here is where some detailed, but not impossibly dense scholarship helps us understand what the Gospel says and how it says it. In the pericope (passage), the Greek word translated as “time” is *καῖρός* (*kairos*). This understanding of time is much different than that of *χρόνος* (*chronos*). The latter is every day time which orders our lives: seconds become minutes, minutes hours, hours days, days weeks, weeks months, and months years. In *χρόνος* time, we fall into habits and routines. Our daily existences become, to a greater or lesser extent, monotonous and predictable. Yet *καῖρός* time is different. It is a time of possibilities, a time when the usual parameters do not apply. We are presented with the opportunity to transform our lives in fundamental ways. Sometimes this can be a blessing, sometimes a curse; much of this has to do with how we respond. What is clear, though, is that something unique and important has or is about to transpire. Jesus, in this Markan passage, connects the concept of *καῖρός* time to the Greek word *μετανοέω* (*metanoeo*), frequently translated as “repent.” But, as Marcus Borg eloquently explains, the term means “to ‘return’ or to ‘go beyond the mind that you have,’ not necessarily to ask for forgiveness” (31). Jesus is informing us that the Kingdom of God – which I, like the translators of *The Scholar’s Version* of the New Testament, translate as God’s Imperial Rule or the Imperial Reign of God – will be much different from the kingdoms established by humans. It will not look like that of the Romans, or that of other earthly powers. Instead, God’s kingdom, as the social justice prophets elucidated, will be based upon distributive justice, which, as Borg writes, is “the concept that everybody should have enough on God’s earth, not as the result of charity but as the product of justice” (29). God’s kingdom, *de jure*, is based in social, economic, and religious justice. In other words, as Jesus says throughout the gospel, we live in *χρόνος* time thinking with human terms; in *καῖρός* time, we can think in God’s terms.

### A Matter of Time

[8] Why does Beck not understand this? I think it is because he interprets Jesus to be speaking of χρόνος time. The clock is ticking, and we are so laden with sin that we must purge ourselves and hope that the end arrives before we transgress again. This is a theology familiar to many, and one that has permeated Christianity for thousands of years: Jesus arrived at a specific place at a specific time, and a celestial clock began ticking. With this view, individual salvation theology makes sense. If we are up against a deadline, what is the point of worrying about others around us? I am best served by setting my own house in order and waiting on God. It is not my intention to castigate the beliefs of others, so I will not pass judgment on such a contention. I will, however, say that a great number – in biblical language, a great multitude – have been alienated, abused, and robbed of their faith by such a view of God’s kingdom. I also think it has led to people of faith justifying ecological, social, and cultural atrocities, though these are not the *logical* consequences of such a theology. Certainly, I do not mean to say that anyone who believes that the Parousia, or Second Coming, is imminent is unconcerned for his or her neighbor or for the planet; certainly, compassion is the purview of even those who believe that our time is short. What I am saying, though, is that Beck’s dismissal of *corporate* salvation as unchristian is not supported by the text. I do not know if Beck has thought about this issue deeply, but he most certainly is speaking about it often. It is time to hold him accountable for his theology.

[9] Of course, if Beck were to read this – and I do not think that he will – most likely he would alight upon the understanding of God’s kingdom as favoring universal justice over “charity.” Beck, whose daily trope of “Faith, Hope, and Charity” is well-known, even to those who avoid his show, advocates the dismantling of much of our twentieth-century legislative gains; he has particular enmity for the governmental institutions that have implemented and sustained programs that guarantee economic, social, and educational justice. Of course, he reserves the greatest antipathy for the legislation passed by President Obama and the Democratically-controlled Congress. It would be simplistic, though, to merely castigate Beck as a pariah without compassion. He believes that, in a country with lower taxes and a less-intrusive government, private charity will be more abundant because, for some indiscernible reason, people will begin to tithe fully. This, he argues, is the answer to social, economic, and racial injustice. He believes that the American dream is rooted in the right of people to take a shot and fail. And in that regard, he might be correct. But Beck is appealing to religious people, and is attempting to use a theological, if not biblical, argument. He is setting forth a capitalist-Christ that seems as unfamiliar to me as my social-justice Jesus seems to him. Beck is thinking in human terms; he advocates alms giving, a bestowal of money or services that will temporarily address the symptoms of poverty and suffering. Those who follow liberation theology are thinking in God’s terms; we seek to address the cause of poverty and suffering, to eradicate the conditions that keep people in continued subjugation. I firmly believe that the true ideals of social justice and liberation theology, which are abundant throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament, will resonant more fully than the free-market, corporate Christianity Beck champions. I believe that a vast majority of Christians are more familiar and comfortable with a God who sees them through pain, suffering, and injustice, who transforms our lives with joy, grace, and mercy, than they are with a pernicious deity who calls certain individuals to salvation while

others wallow in the mire of pain and misery. It is our job as theologians to let people know that Liberation Theology's vision of God is real, vibrant, and providing of redemption, and is not the caricature set forth by Glenn Beck.

**Bibliography**

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