

The Violence of Poverty: Theology and Activism in an 'Age of Austerity'

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Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Shannahan, C 2019, 'The Violence of Poverty : Theology and Activism in an 'Age of Austerity'' *Political Theology*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 243-261.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2018.1543820>

DOI 10.1080/1462317X.2018.1543820

ISSN 1462-317X

ESSN 1743-1719

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Political Theology on 08/11/2018, available

online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/1462317X.2018.1543820>

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Political Theology

The violence of poverty: theology and activism in an 'age of austerity'

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	POL345R1
Full Title:	The violence of poverty: theology and activism in an 'age of austerity'
Article Type:	Unsolicited Paper
Keywords:	poverty; liberation theology; peace studies; activism; austerity
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Additional Information:	
Question	Response
Author Comments:	
Funding Information:	

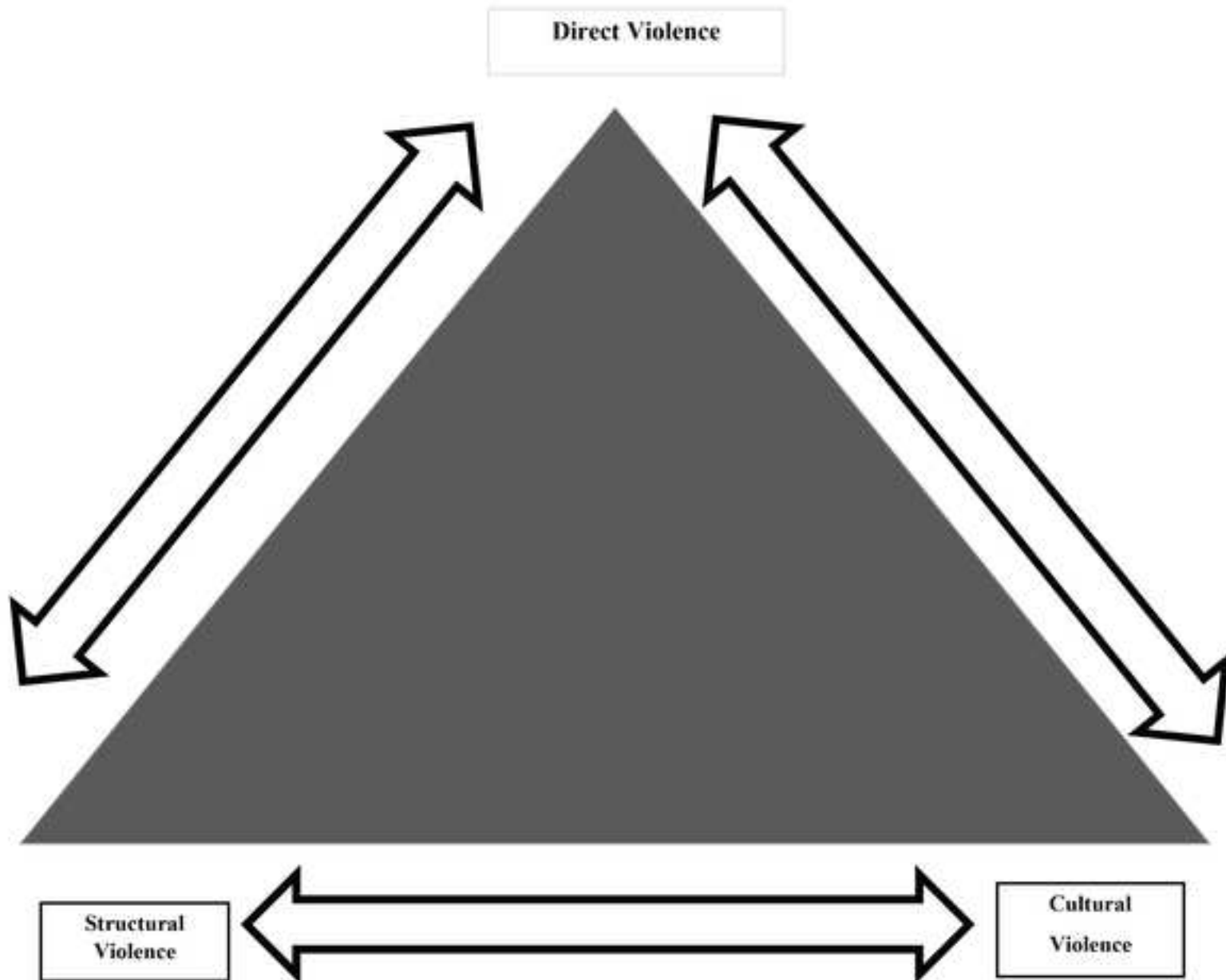


Figure 1: The Triad of Violence

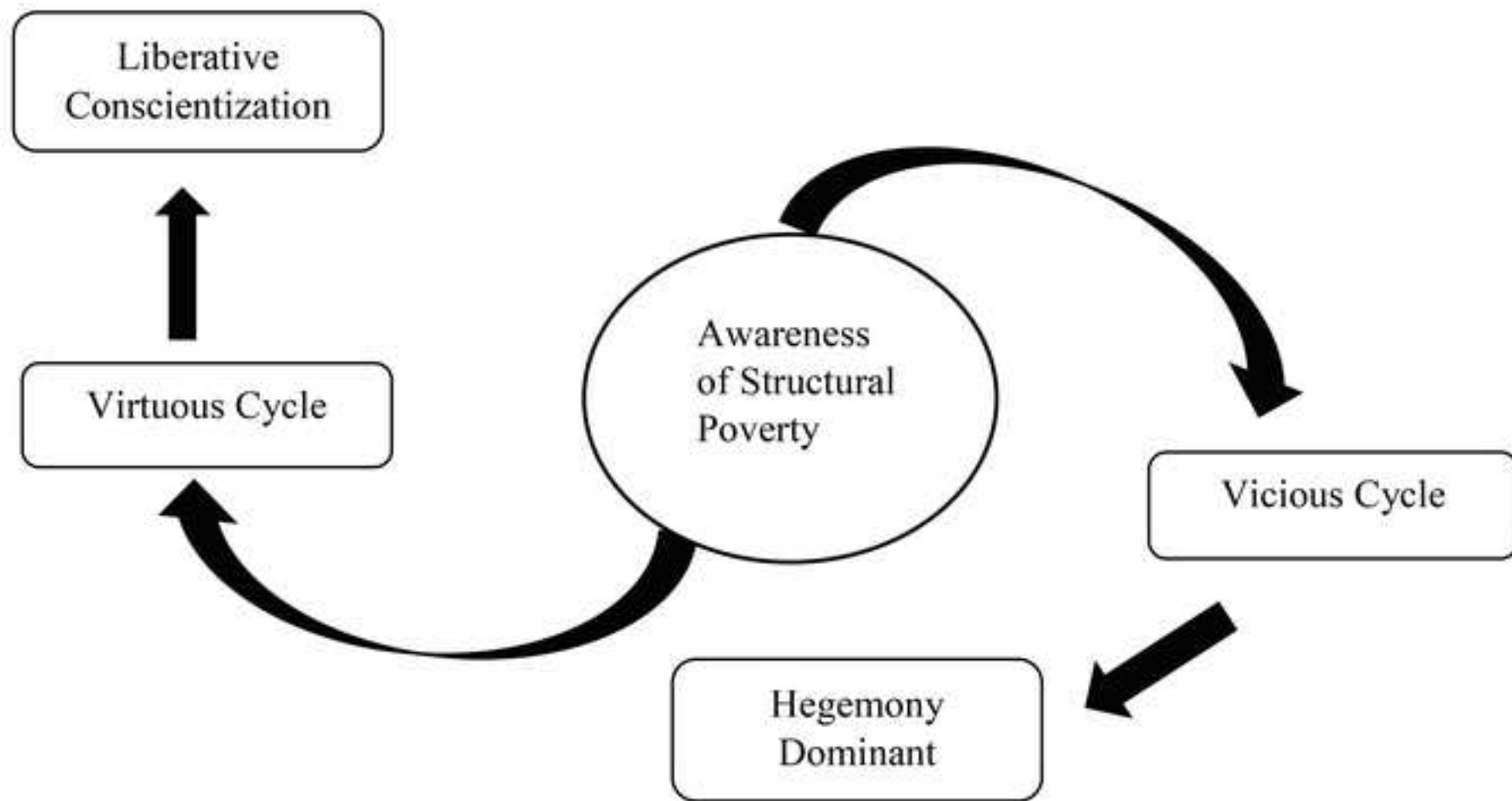


Figure 2: Ambivalent Awareness

The violence of poverty: theology and activism in an ‘age of austerity’

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The violence of poverty: theology and activism in an ‘age of austerity’

Faith groups are in the front line of the struggle to defeat poverty in breadline Britain. Given their roots in local communities Churches and Christian NGOs are well-placed to challenge economic policies that have resulted in the spiraling of food poverty, homelessness, personal debt and child poverty. By framing poverty as a political choice, a form of structural violence and systemic sin this paper brings peace studies and political theology into a constructive dialogue. In the face of ongoing ‘austerity’ the paper demonstrates that poverty represents a clear and present danger to the social fabric of the UK and argues that only a re-imagined interdisciplinary theology of liberation can provide academics and activists with the tools needed to defeat systemic poverty and the cultural violence upon which it rests.

Keywords: poverty; liberation theology; peace studies; activism

Introduction

The spiraling of foodbanks, homelessness, child poverty and insecure low-paid work represents a clear and present danger to the social fabric of breadline Britain. Drawing together Johann Galtung and Gustavo Gutiérrez, this paper shows that poverty is a form of structural and cultural violence, which demands a systemic and spiritual revolution if it is to be defeated. The conversation I establish between peace studies and liberation theology opens new areas for debate within political theology in an ‘age of austerity’.

Theologians such as Althaus-Reid have justifiably criticized the pioneers of liberation theology for neglecting the oppressive nature of racism, sexism and homophobia.¹ However, the fundamental assertion of those pioneering liberation theologians that poverty is the driver of wider structural violence remains as true today as it was when Gutiérrez published his iconic *A Theology of Liberation*. As I demonstrate, a critical engagement with Galtung’s framing of poverty within a triad of violence can enhance contemporary theologies of liberation in five ways. First, it provides a corrective to diffuse and individualized conceptualizations of social exclusion. Second, it enables a

fuller critique of the hegemonic political discourse which individualizes poverty and frames it as an aberration. Third, Galtung's focus on cultural violence can help to unmask the corrosive nature of this discourse, which blames people living in poverty for being poor. Fourth, a focus on direct violence enables more informed reflections on the impact of poverty on individuals and communities. Fifth, whilst more commonly used terms like oppression are widely used within liberation and political theologies, the intersectional clarity of Galtung's triad of violence presents us with a supplementary theoretical framework ideally suited to the study of poverty in an 'age of austerity'. In the UK the Church has become an increasingly visible player in civil society politics as the state has withdrawn.² However, Davey argues that, "The mainstream churches have failed to...develop a theology...through which the essential role of the church of the poor can be realized."³ This paper asks how the Church can shake itself free from its hesitant approach to activism.

The paper begins with a discussion of contemporary poverty, which I frame as a form of structural violence and systemic sin. I then discuss the influence of theologies of the common good on contemporary Christian activism but argue that they are unable to stimulate the transformation needed to win the war against austerity age poverty. Only a holistic theology of liberation has the capacity to defeat such structural violence and the cultural violence that gives it life.

Pinning down poverty in breadline Britain

Following the 2008 financial crash poverty rose more dramatically in the UK than in any other G7 nation.⁴ Between 2009 and 2017 the number of people earning less than a living wage rose from 3.4 to 5.5 million, the number of patients admitted to hospital with malnutrition trebled and in 2018 over 30% of children were living below the poverty line. In 2008 the Christian NGO the Trussell Trust distributed 25,899 meal parcels at its

foodbanks but by 2017, this number had increased to 1,310,000. The number of children living in temporary accommodation has increased by 73% since the 2010 General Election and during 2017 approximately 4,751 people slept rough each night, a 169% increase since 2010.⁵

Responding to such factors represents an urgent challenge but pinning down the complexity of poverty is like trying to catch water in a net. The United Nations defines ‘absolute poverty’ as the, “severe deprivation of basic human needs.”⁶ In the UK ‘relative poverty’ is defined as living on a household income that is less than 60% of the national median wage. People are considered to be in ‘persistent’ poverty if they live on such an income for more than three years and ‘severe’ poverty if they earn less than 50% of this average annual wage.⁷ Whilst useful, a focus on income alone underestimates the complexity of poverty. The Institute for Fiscal Studies advocates a more nuanced, “statement of how the...wide-ranging set of potential indicators relate to each other, and how each ultimately relates to poverty.”⁸

Engagement with debates about social exclusion can help us to offer this more nuanced approach. First used by René Lenoir, a Minister in the 1974-78 French government, the term social exclusion didn’t feature on the British political landscape until the 1997 election of the Tony Blair led Labour government, which quickly established a Social Exclusion Unit. New Labour viewed social exclusion in intersectional terms - the combined impact of unemployment, low income, poor housing, high crime and family breakdown on an individual’s life. The Labour government introduced a national minimum wage in 1999, numerous redistributive tax credits and lifted 900,000 children out of poverty, but Levitas suggests that there was a movement from economic redistribution to ethical communitarianism during the Blair decade.⁹ Indeed, Levitas argues that New Labour depicted poverty as “pathological...rather than

endemic”.¹⁰ This paper shows how the work of Galtung and Gutiérrez’ can help theologians and activists to challenge such moralism and the myth of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor that followed in its wake.

Sen reminds us that material poverty, “has an enormous influence on the kind of lives we can lead.”¹¹ He argues that it represents, “a capability deprivation that takes the form of social exclusion.”¹² For Sen, poverty deprives us of the chance to flourish because we, “lack freedom to do certain valuable things”.¹³ Castells argues that such social exclusion is a “process, not a condition”, resulting from an individual’s moral inadequacy.¹⁴ This depiction of poverty can help us to critique the mind-set that paints it as an unfortunate accident or a moral judgement. Galtung and Gutiérrez’ suggestion that poverty represents a form of structural violence and systemic sin can help us to critique such a flawed perspective.

Poverty as Structural Violence

Peace studies and liberation theology are too rarely viewed as dialogue partners. However, a critical engagement with Galtung and Gutiérrez’ can provide the basis for a more holistic understanding of poverty in an ‘age of austerity’. Five years before Gutiérrez’ seminal *A Theology of Liberation* was published Galtung set the agenda for future generations of peace studies researchers in ‘Violence, Peace and Peace Research’. Galtung suggests that it is necessary to adopt a broad definition of violence if we are to respond to the multidimensional damage it causes to individuals, families and communities. For Galtung violence is, “the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual” and is conscious, systemic and deliberate, rather than naturally occurring.¹⁵ Galtung’s conception of violence as the limiting of human potential enables us to consider the impact of invisible violence of political policies, employment practices, institutional discrimination and cultural discourse, as well as the visible actions of

individuals. His triad of violence (see Figure 1) provides a valuable intersectional lens through which theologians and activists can view poverty.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

For Galtung, direct violence is the use or threat of physical, verbal or psychological force against an individual or group.¹⁶ Such violence has visible outcomes which “work on the soul”, reflect invisible structural violence and are reinforced by subterranean cultural violence.¹⁷ In his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize lecture, Martin Luther King Jr compared poverty to a “monstrous octopus”, suggesting that the, “poor...have been shut out of our minds...because we have allowed them to become invisible.”¹⁸ King reminds us of the multidimensional nature of poverty and hints at its direct, structural and cultural components. Focusing only on the direct violence of poverty can blind us to its other, damaging tentacles and hidden faces.

Galtung’s insistence that the direct impact of poverty is driven by indirect structural injustice, which is justified through the deployment of hegemonic cultural discourses can enrich our understanding of what Gutiérrez calls its systemically sinful nature and resource a more holistic model of political theology capable of attacking austerity poverty at its roots. Galtung argues that structural violence is “silent” and de-personalized,¹⁹ “shows up as unequal power and...life-chances” and builds inequality into a social system.²⁰ ‘Austerity’ policies that result in permanent low pay, ‘zero hours’ contracts, homelessness, increased personal debt and a growing reliance on foodbanks can, therefore, be characterized as examples of structural violence.

Just after the 2010 UK General Election the Work and Pensions Minister, Iain Duncan-Smith, outlined the part that Universal Credit would play in Conservative welfare

reforms. The expectation was that the new unitary benefit would be paid to 7 million people by 2022. The introduction of Universal Credit was framed as an attempt to simplify the UK welfare system by replacing six existing benefits (Child Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, Jobseekers' Allowance, Income Support, Working Tax Credit and the Employment and Support Allowance) and move people into paid work. Recipients of Universal Credit, paid monthly in arrears, cannot receive other benefits and its level is cut if claimants earn more than £317 p/month or a couple earn more than £498. Due to delays the implementation of Universal Credit was not begun until 2016. Since its introduction it has been accused of deepening rather than reducing poverty, putting people who cannot pay their rent, because Universal Credit payments are late by as much as ten weeks, at risk of eviction and adding to the number of people relying on foodbanks (BBC News, 29 September 2017; Josh Halliday, 6 October 2017 and Tom Peck, 9 October 2017). In 2018 the Trussell Trust reported a 52% rise in the number of people using foodbanks in areas where Universal Credit had been introduced.²¹ In October 2018 UK Work and Pensions Secretary, Esther McVeigh, acknowledged that 3.2 million people could be up to £2,400 a year worse off once Universal Credit has been fully rolled out.²² This admission stimulated criticism from two former Prime Ministers, Gordon Brown (Labour) and John Major (Conservative), both of whom highlighted the damage that the benefit is having on the poorest people in the UK.²³

Universal Credit exemplifies the features of structural violence identified because it has systemically built the further impoverishment of people already living in poverty into British government policy. Furthermore, its introduction was made culturally possible because of the moral discourse introduced twenty years earlier by the Blair Labour government, which blamed people who receive benefits for their own poverty - what Galtung calls cultural violence.

Cooper and Whyte document what they describe as, “the devastatingly violent consequences of [*British*] government policy conducted in the name of austerity“, but such violence reaches back long before the 2010 General Election.²⁴ As the ‘riots’ in Handsworth, Moss Side, Toxteth and Brixton in the 1980s and Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in 2001 remind us, systemic poverty can trigger eruptions of direct violence when the voices of the dispossessed are not heard as Lewis et al demonstrate in relation to the 2011 riots across England.²⁵ Leech argues that such violence is a form of communal self-harm, directing rage inwards, rather than outwards at the institutions that are responsible for the structural violence of poverty.²⁶ Gutiérrez’ depiction of poverty as systemic sin adds a deeper existential element to such an analysis.

From Galtung to Gutiérrez’

This paper breaks new ground within British political theology by establishing a dialogue between Galtung’s analysis of structural and cultural violence and Gutiérrez’ depiction of poverty as systemic sin. However, it is important to recognize that others have also made connections between Galtung’s analysis of structural violence, faith-based political activism and liberation theology on the international stage.

Springs, for example, illustrates the use that religious peacebuilders have made of Galtung’s analysis, to forge a “more sensitive and fine-grained” understanding of multidimensional violence.²⁷ Furthermore, Springs suggests that an engagement with Galtung’s triad of violence provides religious peacebuilders with a new lens through which they can reflect on the capacity of faith communities to foment conflict or build, what Galtung calls ‘positive peace’.²⁸ Writing from an anthropological perspective, Farmer has engaged in depth with the work of both Galtung and Gutiérrez. Reflecting on his work in Haiti, Farmer argues that analyses of systemic injustice can often appear disengaged from the raw realities of everyday oppression.²⁹ He suggests that liberation

theology allows suffering to speak and interrogates social systems that rely on the imposition of structural violence. For Farmer, liberation theology “underlines connections” between the different faces of structural violence, whilst continuing to identify deep-seated poverty as the primary driver of injustice.³⁰ Farmer provides a bridge between Galtung and Gutiérrez as seen in his extended conversation with the pioneer of liberation theology in 2013’s *In the Company of the Poor*. More recently, with Rilko-Bauer, Farmer has brought Galtung’s exploration of the relationship between ‘positive peace’ and the absence of structural violence into a dialogue with liberation theology.³¹ Farmer and Rilko-Bauer draw our attention to the work of Freire, which interconnects Gutiérrez analysis of poverty as systemic sin with an exploration of structural violence.³² Warning against the “narrow conceptualizations” found in some typologies of violence, Farmer and Rilko-Bauer argue that a marriage of the work of Gutiérrez and Galtung can help us to develop a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of poverty.³³

A critical reading of Galtung’s work has influenced analyses of structural and cultural violence within peace studies, religious peacebuilding and liberation theology. It is time for his work to be brought into a dialogue with a post-crash political theology of poverty. When aligned with Gutiérrez’ description of poverty as systemic sin, Galtung’s analysis of the relationship between direct, structural and cultural violence can enrich the work of political theologians and activists alike. If we are to forge such a transformational discourse, we must first examine Gutiérrez’ framing of poverty as systemic sin and what Galtung terms cultural violence.

Poverty as Systemic Sin

Gutiérrez is the iconic pioneer of Latin American liberation theology and his work cannot be understood in isolation from this pivotal theological movement. This paper is not a

critical survey of liberation theology, but it is important to briefly note its central tropes if we are to understand Gutiérrez' examination of poverty as a form of systemic sin for two reasons. First, liberation theology argues that the experience of poor communities should be the hermeneutical lens through which Christian belief and practice are viewed, as Rowland reminds us.³⁴ Second, it argues that the God of the Bible has a preferential option for the poor that the Church should embody this in its mission, strategy, teaching and practice. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff summarize, "Liberation theology was born when faith confronted the injustice done to the poor."³⁵

Reflection on the nature of sin within Christian theology has drawn heavily on the work of the 5th century CE North-African theologian Augustine who defined it as, "a word, deed or desire in opposition to the eternal law of God."³⁶ This depiction of sin locates it within the life of the individual; a perspective critiqued by Gutiérrez - "in the liberation approach sin is...regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood."³⁷ By envisaging sin as the systemic damaging of communal relationships we can begin to grasp its "collective dimensions".³⁸ For Gutiérrez, "Sin is evident in oppressive structures...as the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation."³⁹ Gutiérrez' depiction of poverty as a form of systemic sin enables us to fashion a theological response to its institutionalization as structural violence in an 'age of austerity'.

The embedding of poverty in social policy to which Galtung and Gutiérrez point is arguably exemplified by the practice of the Trump Presidency in the United States. The visit of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Poverty to the US in December 2017 highlighted the damage caused by Trump's reverse redistribution agenda, which has given tax breaks to corporations and the super-rich, whilst cutting welfare spending (United Nations, 2018: 4 and 19). Gutiérrez suggests that the construction of social

systems built upon such structural inequality subvert the doctrine of Creation, which declares all people to be of equal worth because everyone is made in the ‘image of God’ (Genesis 1:26-27). Galtung’s work amplifies Gutiérrez’ reflections on the systemically sinful nature of poverty and can facilitate the translation of the core values of liberation theology into contexts that are very different from the Latin America that gave it life.

Gutiérrez recognizes the intersectional nature of poverty. Echoing Galtung’s exploration of the systemic nature of structural violence, Gutiérrez writes, “Poverty means death: lack of food and housing, the inability to attend properly to health and education needs, the exploitation of workers, permanent unemployment, the lack of respect for one’s human dignity...”⁴⁰ Hinting at Galtung’s structural violence motif, Gutiérrez argues that, “Material poverty is a sub-human situation...to be poor means to die of hunger...to be exploited by others...not to know you are a person.”⁴¹ Echoing Catholic Social Teaching, Gutiérrez suggests that, “In the Bible poverty is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God”.⁴² It is, therefore, ‘an expression of sin...a negation of love.’⁴³ Armed with Galtung’s triad of violence, we are able to re-read the witness of liberation theology in a manner that brings its foundational insights about the sinfulness of endemic poverty into a critical dialogue with daily life in an ‘age of austerity’.

Gutiérrez points to the multifaceted meaning of the Biblical phrase ‘the poor’, which can mean ‘weak’, ‘laboring under a burden’, ‘humiliated’ or ‘the wretched one driven into begging’.⁴⁴ Such a breadth of understanding is reminiscent of Galtung’s multidimensional definition of violence noted above. In her analysis of the ways in which oppression is understood within the Bible Elsa Tamez comments on the devaluing of people living in poverty – the “degradation of the human being, a seizure, as it were, of the divine image in the person.”⁴⁵ The words of the Hebrew prophet Job graphically

illustrate this systemic damage, “The wicked...thrust the needy off the road; the poor of the earth all hide themselves.” (Job, 24:2-5). Whilst Job wrote more than 2,500 years ago his words resonate in twenty-first century Britain. Austerity age poverty is a direct consequence of conscious decisions made by British political leaders following the 2010 General Election. Can a theological commitment to the common good help to loosen its death-grip during the ‘age of austerity’? It is to this question that I now turn.

Building the ‘Common Good’

Edwards reminds us that the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall were marked by a political turn towards civil society. Whilst recognizing the conflation of this term with Western models of representative democracy, Edwards points to its use as a synonym for a society that is characterized by, “tolerance, non-discrimination, non-violence, trust and cooperation.”⁴⁶ JK Galbraith suggests that, “In the good society all citizens must have personal liberty, basic well-being, racial and ethnic equality, the opportunity for a rewarding life.”⁴⁷ Galbraith’s vision of the ‘good society’ stands as a stark rebuke to an era dominated by headlines about foodbanks, zero-hours contracts, rough sleeping and child poverty. Edwards acknowledges that, “Too many of our existing social, economic and political systems destroy the bonds we want to have with each other” but suggests that “...civil society seems to offer a way of re-constituting these relationships.”⁴⁸ Can such a vision of the common good provide a firm enough foundation for models of political theology and activism that seek to challenge the structural violence of poverty and the systemic sin and culture of blame that give it life?

Most Christian responses to contemporary poverty are informed by theologies of the common good, which find their origins in the Catholic Social Teaching tradition stimulated by Pope Leo XII’s 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.⁴⁹ Six key themes can be discerned in *Rerum Novarum*, which resonate with Galbraith’s vision of the ‘good

society’ – the innate dignity of all people, mutual solidarity as a means of community building, social policies that enhance the common good, the empowerment of local communities, widely distributed property ownership and God’s preferential option for the poor. In 1931, as the Great Depression took hold, Pope Pius XI built on Leo XII’s thinking in *Quadragesimo Anno*. In the encyclical Pius advocated a middle way between *laissez faire* capitalism and state socialism. Wealth creation was affirmed but growing inequality and the exploitation of workers were condemned in his call for just wages - a balance that continues to characterize many theologies of the common good.⁵⁰

The William Temple Foundation, which draws its inspiration from the thinking of former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple, exemplifies contemporary Anglican common good research.⁵¹ Furthermore, the central strands of Catholic Social Teaching influenced the emergence of the ‘Blue Labour’ initiative spearheaded by Maurice Glasman, which sought to articulate the philosophical and ethical basis of a new Centre-Left vision of the common good following the Labour Party’s defeat in 2010. This vision, which was distilled by Geary and Pabst, balances a commitment to a dynamic wealth-creating economy with an equal emphasis on social inclusion reminiscent of the theological middle way found in Catholic Social Teaching, but is critiqued by Smith as too tentative and incapable of meeting the structural poverty that characterizes life in an ‘age of austerity’.⁵²

In a similar vein the Social Gospel articulated by the US Baptist pastor Walter Rauschenbusch in the early twentieth century has had a lasting impact on Protestant Christian traditions. Baker notes that, “The social gospel...challenged both *laissez faire* capitalism and Protestant individualism with a reformulation of Christian faith that stressed the doctrine of God’s immanence...in the suffering of the world.”⁵³ Social Gospel thinking remains a formational, if unstated, foundation for much Protestant engagement

with poverty and influenced the iconic 1985 *Faith in the City* report published by the Church of England and its ecumenical successor *Faithful Cities* in 2006. Theologies of the common good and the Social Gospel continue to inspire much Christian engagement with poverty. However, in the face of systemic inequality, it is important to ask whether their moral argument has the capacity to defeat the structural violence of poverty in an age when the claims of political leaders to be committed to the common good have an increasingly hollow ring to them. In an attempt to respond to this question, I now turn to a more radical Christian tradition, which, whilst often marginalized, can resource contemporary liberative theologies in an ‘age of austerity’.

What happens when the Common Good is not good enough?

Despite its dominant position within Christian activism common good theologians have increasingly acknowledged the failure of the Church to challenge structural poverty. Morisy, for example, recognizes that, tied by bonds of history, class and culture to the establishment, “the church has found it easier to ‘speak up on behalf of the poor’ than to confront the mainstream culture which forms us so extensively.”⁵⁴ In spite of its emphasis on the need for people of faith to take on a preferential option for the poor, theologies of the common are, it seems, constrained by an inability to attack systemic poverty at its roots. Leech argues that, “the oppression of the lowly, the promotion of hunger and poverty, the persistence of concentrated wealth are not accidental aberrations within capitalism but are central to its character.”⁵⁵ Is the Church too entwined with systems of power to subvert the structural violence of contemporary poverty?

Throughout its imperial history an often submerged, egalitarian tradition has persisted on the margins of the Church as the witness of the early Franciscans, the Anabaptists, the Levellers, Tolpuddle Martyrs, Victorian Christian Socialists and worker

priest movement in the middle of the twentieth century attest. Echoing Jesus' parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25: 31-46, Tamez suggests that in the face of structural poverty the God of the Bible, "identifies himself with the poor to such an extent that their rights become the rights of God himself."⁵⁶ Gutiérrez argues that, "Only authentic solidarity with the poor and a real protest against the poverty of our time can provide the...context necessary for a theological discussion of poverty."⁵⁷ Such solidarity demands a revolution in reflection and practice tantamount to the turning of the world on its head, which Mary sings about in the Magnificat (Luke 1:52-53). Gutiérrez summarizes, "The poor deserve preference not because they are morally or religiously better than others but because God is God, in whose eyes the 'last are first'."⁵⁸ The systemic nature of austerity-age inequality negates the love of a God who creates all people in the divine image by building a society which rests on the structural violence of poverty. Consequently, God's preferential option for the poor is a necessary first step in the forging of a society built around a credible commitment to the common good.

The dismantling of the structural violence of systemic poverty demands a model of activism that is premised on the determined enactment of God's preferential option for the poor. However, as Leech notes, such a step will only be possible if it arises from an existential revolution that transforms the mindset of the institutional church into that of a liberative social movement.⁵⁹ An engagement with what Galtung calls cultural violence can help us to argue for the kind of spiritual revolution that is needed if we are to rob systemic poverty of its existential justification.

Cultural violence and Poverty

Galtung asks, "which factors, apart from personal violence and the threat of personal violence...uphold inequality?"⁶⁰ To respond to this question, we need to turn to the third angle on his triad of violence – the use of culture to justify poverty and inequality. Galtung

refers to cultural violence as, “the symbolic sphere of our existence...that can be used to...legitimize direct or structural violence.”⁶¹ Writing a generation earlier from a prison cell in Mussolini’s Italy, Gramsci argued that culture elicit false consciousness, thereby masking the true nature and causes of class oppression.⁶²

For Galtung, what Gramsci termed hegemony resembles a, “substratum from which [*direct and structural violence*] ...derive their nutrients.”⁶³ Galtung argues that a, “violent structure leaves marks not only on the human body but also on the mind and the spirit.”⁶⁴ Such damage, says Galtung, leads to the internalizing of the cultural narratives that normalize the structural violence of poverty. An example of the hegemonic use of music to exert cultural violence is the Christian hymn ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’ that is still sung in many schools. Today the hymn is one of innocent praise, but in the Victorian original congregations would sing, “The rich man in his castle; the poor man at this gate. God made them, high and lowly, and ordered their estate.” Within worship the structural violence of poverty can be given God’s seal of approval. Given the believer’s conviction that they encounter the divine in worship, the situating of structural inequality in this context can embed it in our subconscious as something that is blessed by God. An engagement with the work of Galtung can enable a fuller understanding of the use of cultural violence during the ‘age of austerity’ to fashion a public discourse that blames people living in poverty for being poor, diminishes their agency and pits marginalized social groups against one another. Galtung’s analysis of cultural violence can help contemporary theologians to grapple with the ideology of austerity and its underpinning public discourse which undermines the solidarity of God with oppressed humanity (John 1:14) by blaming people in poverty for the financial crash.

An important feature of cultural violence is the fashioning of a discourse which scapegoats the powerless and blames them for their poverty.⁶⁵ *The Lies We Tell Ourselves*

was published by the ecumenical Joint Public Issues Team [JPIT] as the ‘age of austerity’ introduced by Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, began to bite. Revolving around six myths about poverty, the report highlights the use of cultural violence to scapegoat people living in poverty – [1] “They are lazy and don’t want to work”; [2] “They are addicted to drink and drugs”; [3] “They are not really poor – they just don’t manage their money properly”; [4] “They are on the fiddle”; [5] “They have an easy life on benefits” and [6] “They caused the deficit”.⁶⁶ Whilst none of the myths identified by JPIT are based on credible evidence, they have circulated on television programmes like the Channel Four documentary *Benefits Street* or *Shameless*, a long-running comedy show that revolved around a family from the North of England apparently enjoying an ‘easy life’ on benefits.⁶⁷ Leading politicians have perpetuated these ‘convenient myths’ and former British Prime Minister David Cameron, even cited ‘Shameless’, when launching his ‘Troubled Families’ initiative in December 2011.⁶⁸ Cameron’s speech exemplified the shift towards a moralistic approach to social exclusion begun under New Labour. In July 2012 the senior civil servant Louise Casey published the *Listening to Troubled Families* report, which considered the themes that Cameron had sketched out in greater detail but provided, “no more substantial evidence for a ‘Shameless’ culture than the statistics quoted in the Prime Minister’s speech eight months earlier.”⁶⁹ The deployment of cultural violence makes it possible for political leaders to side-step the need to examine the structural causes of poverty.

The word ‘myth’ is often used as a synonym for something that is ‘untrue’, but the term actually refers to a narrative that encapsulates social, ideological, political or religious values in a manner that convinces or persuades. Bottici and Challand remind us of the use of myth within political discourse.⁷⁰ Bottici suggests that by “slipping into our unconsciousness political myths can deeply influence our most fundamental

perceptions...and thus escape...critical scrutiny.”⁷¹ Under successive British governments since 1997 the myths discussed above have not only shaped social policy; they have permeated public discourse about poverty and slipped into ‘our unconsciousness’.

The political myth of austerity is an example of ‘poverty porn’. Whilst this term has its roots in the short films used by development initiatives like Live Aid and Comic Relief, which arguably exploited the experience of people on the edge of starvation, its use has become common in relation to poverty during the ‘age of austerity’. Jensen suggests that “poverty porn serve[s] to transform precarity into a moral failure, worklessness into laziness and disconnection into an individual failure to strive and aspire...rather than [*viewing it*] as a consequence of the excesses of neoliberalism.”⁷² Such poverty porn exemplifies the systemically sinful cultural violence to which Gutiérrez and Galtung point.

I recognize that it is difficult to demonstrate a quantifiable causal link between cultural discourses and rising levels of poverty and inequality. However, the demand for such evidence, is arguably a further exertion of cultural violence by a defensive political élite. In spite of this caveat, I suggest that it is possible to identify, if not prove, the power of culture to oppress or liberate, as seen in a range of social movements from the linkage of soul music with the US Civil Rights Movement and reggae music with Black emancipation to the connection between the Anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa and the music of the Black Church and Two Tone and the anti-racist struggle in the UK in the early 1980s. As the Critical Theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, Chomsky’s work on the power of the media and Pinn’s analysis of music and historic African-American struggle reminds us, cultural discourse is able, unseen and often unacknowledged, to shape social relations and justify or subvert the socio-economic status quo.⁷³ Consequently, like Leech

and Beckford, I suggest that systemic poverty does not only cause deep existential damage, but that it is sustained by an equally corrosive cultural discourse, without which it cannot, in the long term, survive unscathed.

The hegemonic discourse that underpins austerity poverty will only be defeated when a persuasive new narrative of inclusion displaces it in the public imagination. Such displacement demands what Gutiérrez calls a conversion to our neighbor and the active embrace of God's preferential option for the poor. But such an existential revolution cannot occur until we are woken from our sleep as I demonstrate below.

‘Crossroads Ahead’ – What happens when we wake up?

In his exploration of power relations in the ‘information age’ Castells pinpoints the vital importance of existential emancipation in the struggle for social justice, “Whoever wins the battle for people’s minds will rule, because mighty rigid apparatuses will not be a match in any reasonable timespan for minds mobilized.”⁷⁴ However, heightened awareness is not inherently liberative. The political myth that justifies poverty can foster fatalism and the promise of ‘prosperity gospel’ preachers that financial wealth is a reflection of God’s blessing confined to ‘believers’ can reinforce cultural violence by offering false hope to people who are the end of their tether.⁷⁵ Consequently, the result of Castells’ ‘battle for people’s minds’ is not a foregone conclusion. It can give rise to a vicious cycle which leaves the hegemonic justification of poverty intact or lay the ground for the forging of a virtuous cycle which fosters a process of liberative conscientization capable of forging of a new egalitarian politics as depicted below in Figure 2.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Gramsci suggests that we are engaged in a ‘cultural war of position’, which can only be won when poverty becomes morally unacceptable within public discourse.⁷⁶ Such existential emancipation demands a spiritual transformation, as well as a social revolution because, as Gutiérrez notes, “The step from an abstract to a real freedom... (*demands*)...a struggle against all the forces that oppress humanity.”⁷⁷ It is not enough, therefore, for the theologian to be a passionate political intellectual insulated from the heat of the struggle because of their social position.⁷⁸ Rather, as Gramsci points out, a further step is needed into, “active participation...as an organiser...and not just as a simple orator.”⁷⁹ This demands what Vincent calls a “journey downwards” from security into solidarity if, as Gutiérrez puts it, “the theologian is to be an organic intellectual...with links to the popular liberation undertaking...” who, according to Gramsci, “feels the elemental passions of the people.”⁸⁰ The peace studies activist-scholar Lederach highlights the central importance of such a liberative ‘moral imagination’ in the search for social justice.⁸¹

A compass needle functions by finding its north. The north of peacebuilding is best articulated as finding our way towards becoming...local and global human communities characterized by respect, dignity, fairness...To understand this north, to read such a compass, requires that we recognize and develop our moral imagination far more intentionally.⁸²

Gutiérrez views such re-orientation as the basis of a “spirituality of liberation [*that*] will centre on a conversion to...the oppressed person, the exploited social class, the despised race...”⁸³ He suggests that the conscious adoption of a preferential option for the poor needs to reflect a deeper existential emancipation if it is to resource truly transformative practice.⁸⁴ Such an option for the poor needs to be characterized by “a commitment to

solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer misery and injustice...to witness to the evil which has resulted from sin and is a breach of communion.”⁸⁵

For Gutiérrez such spiritual poverty “is an act of love and liberation...a protest against poverty.”⁸⁶ Preaching against the backdrop of US segregation, Martin Luther King Jr amplifies Gutiérrez’ point in his sermon ‘Levels of Love’.⁸⁷ King argues that only a model of activism that is rooted in selfless, inclusive love can defeat injustice. The hegemonic grip of structural poverty will only be loosened if this ‘act of love and liberation’ shapes our hermeneutical stance. Only then can a model of activism and theology emerge that can begin to fashion a life beyond austerity, for the many and not just the few.

Galtung, Gutiérrez and a life beyond ‘austerity’

Since the 2008 financial crash faith-based action on poverty, largely inspired by theologies of the common good, has become an increasingly significant feature of the resistance to austerity. The value of the children’s breakfast clubs, foodbanks, pensioners’ lunch clubs and soup runs’ should not be minimized. However, such initiatives and tentative theological challenges to inequality stand little chance of forcing ingrained poverty into long-term retreat.

The world has been transformed since Galtung and Gutiérrez set their pioneering agenda. Why then do I argue that a critical engagement with their work can lay the ground for a theology of poverty capable of meeting the challenges of ‘austerity’? Three factors lead me to make this claim. First, in an interwoven but increasingly fragmented century only holistic examinations of poverty can offer the multidimensional analyses needed to grapple with its complexity. Drawing peace studies and liberation theology into a purposive dialogue enables greater creativity within both disciplines and the forging of a

holistic theological analysis capable of addressing contemporary poverty in a convincing manner. Second, Galtung's depiction of poverty as structural violence and Gutiérrez' description of it as systemic sin has the potential to meet the challenges of the 'age of austerity' more convincingly than the middle-way of common good theologies and an uncertain centre-left. Galtung and Gutiérrez provide us with the resources needed to forge a bolder response to the ingrained poverty that characterizes life in breadline Britain and the neoliberal economics from which it arises. Third, Galtung's analysis of cultural violence when interwoven with Gutiérrez' reflection on the existential damage wrought by poverty, can help contemporary academics and activists to undermine a resurgent myth of the 'undeserving' poor. Armed with such tools we can begin to identify Lederach's 'true North' and forge a narrative of liberation capable of paving the way for the existential emancipation needed to win the 'war of position' in the battle against poverty.

It can be tempting to romanticize liberation theology, uncritically coopting a theological vision honed in very different circumstances, or to consign it to an era that ended with the falling of the Berlin Wall. It is important that we do not fall prey to either of these temptations. The world has been transformed since Gutiérrez wrote his seminal *A Theology of Liberation* but the grinding poverty that shaped his urgent theological manifesto has not been consigned to history. Rowland, who, with Vincent, has sought to stimulate a British theology of liberation since the late 1990s, reminds us that the core witness of liberation theology is not time or context limited because its stimulus, "...is not detached reflection on Scripture and tradition but the present life of the shanty towns and land struggles."⁸⁸ Rowland argues that, "Liberation theology is not a body of knowledge which can be learnt but a way of understanding God in the midst of history."⁸⁹ In his search for a liberative twenty-first century theology, Petrella, cautions us against recycling twentieth century theologies of liberation. The ending of the Cold War posed

new questions for liberation theologians raised in an era of revolution. As political struggle has become more fluid and intersectional the defining landscape for the forging of new liberative theologies is increasingly found on the shifting sands of civil society, rather than in a unitary struggle against oppressive state power, as Richard notes.⁹⁰ Petrella argues the need for liberation theology to discover a new historical project, which can root its articulation of God's preferential option for the poor in new struggles and contextual particularities.⁹¹ The daily realities of austerity poverty provide British liberation theology with its new historical project. As I have shown Galtung's analysis of structural and cultural violence, when married with Gutiérrez' reflections, can enrich the work of theologians and activists and the building of a political theology capable of healing the damage that austerity has done to the social fabric of headline Britain.

Conclusion

Poverty is an insidious form of violence, which can scar multiple generations. In this paper I have demonstrated how it is built into the structures and systems of contemporary British society. I have shown that such poverty has been dismissed as an aberration and depicted as the result of individual inadequacy through the deployment of hegemonic patterns of cultural violence. Whilst theologies of the common good have stimulated a selfless engagement with poverty I have demonstrated why they are incapable of dismantling the structural injustice that gives rise to systemic poverty. Only an existential transformation, which stimulates a deep-seated solidarity with those who have been forgotten during the 'age of austerity', a commitment to a love that does justice and the active embodiment of God's preferential option for the poor can squeeze the life out of death-dealing poverty. My marriage of peace studies and liberation theology has helped us to see poverty as a form of structural violence and systemic sin. Galtung and Gutiérrez

can provide us with the tools we need to subvert the social system that counts our neighbors who rely on foodbanks as collateral damage in a battle to balance the nation's books. Only then can a model of political theology arise that is able to grapple with austerity age structural poverty and re-interpret God's preferential option for the poor in headline Britain. Only then can we lay the foundations for a world beyond 'austerity'.

Notes

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- ² Hoelzl and Ward, *The New Visibility of Religion*.
- ³ Davey, 'Being Church as Political Praxis', 57.
- ⁴ Shorrocks, Davies, and Lluberas. *Global Wealth Report*.
- ⁵ Homeless Link. 2017 Rough Sleeping Statistics. Web site <https://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Homeless%20Link%20%20analysis%20of%20rough%20sleeping%20statistics%20for%20England%202017.pdf>, London: Homeless Link. Accessed 3 March 2018
- ⁶ United Nations, *The Copenhagen Declaration*, 57.
- ⁷ McGuinness, *Poverty in the UK*, 5.
- ⁸ Browne et al, *Child and Working Age Poverty in Northern Ireland*, 1-2.
- ⁹ Levitas et al, *The Multi-dimensional Analysis of Social Exclusion*, 10ff.
- ¹⁰ Levitas, *The Inclusive Society*, 7.
- ¹¹ Sen, *Social Exclusion*, 3.
- ¹² Ibid, 4.
- ¹³ Ibid, 5.
- ¹⁴ Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 164-165 and *The Power of Identity*, 73.
- ¹⁵ Galtung, 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research', 168.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 169ff.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, 169.
- ¹⁸ Web site <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/> Martin Luther King Jr, 'The Quest for Peace and Justice'. Nobel Lecture, 11 December 1964, accessed 29 September 2018.
- ¹⁹ Galtung, op. cit., 173.
- ²⁰ Ibid, 170-171.
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- ²⁴ Cooper and Whyte, *The Violence of Austerity*, 1.
- ²⁵ Lewis; Newburn; Taylor and McGillivray, Ed. *Reading the Riots – Investigating England's Summer of Disorder*. London: London School of Economics and The Guardian. 2011.
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- ²⁷ Springs, A. 'Structural and Cultural Violence in Religion and Peacebuilding', 146-147.
- ²⁸ Ibid, 148.
- ²⁹ Farmer, 'On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below', 19ff.
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- ³¹ Rilko-Bauer and Farmer, 'Structural Violence, Poverty and Social Suffering'
<http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199914050.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199914050-e-4#oxfordhb-9780199914050-e-4-div1-20> (accessed 10 October 2018)
- ³² Freire, *Pedagogy of Indignation*, 118ff.
- ³³ Ibid, p7 of 34.
- ³⁴ Rowlands, *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 2-3.
- ³⁵ Boff and Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 3.
- ³⁶ Augustine. *Contra Faustum* Book XXII. PL 42, 418.
- ³⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 175.
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- ⁴⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1988, xxi.
- ⁴¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1974, 289.
- ⁴² Ibid, 291.
- ⁴³ Ibid, 295.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, 291-294.
- ⁴⁵ Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, 12.
- ⁴⁶ Edwards, *Civil Society*, 47.
- ⁴⁷ Galbraith. *The Good Society*, 4.
- ⁴⁸ Edwards, op. cit., 47.
- ⁴⁹ Pope Leo XII, *Rerum Novarum*, paragraph 42.
- ⁵⁰ Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* paragraphs 58-59 and 64-66.
- ⁵¹ Web site <https://williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/> accessed 14th April 2018.
- ⁵² Geary and Pabst *Blue Labour* and Smith, 'The Long Read: Blue Labour in the age of Corbyn'
- ⁵³ Baker, *The Hybrid Church in the City*, 71.
- ⁵⁴ Morisy, *Journeying Out*, 96.
- ⁵⁵ Leech, op. cit., 135.
- ⁵⁶ Tamez, op. cit., 73.
- ⁵⁷ Gutiérrez, 1974, op. cit., 302.
- ⁵⁸ Gutiérrez, 1988, op. cit. xxviii.
- ⁵⁹ Leech, op. cit., 140.
- ⁶⁰ Galtung, 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research' 175.
- ⁶¹ Galtung, 'Cultural Violence', 291.
- ⁶² Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks Volume III*, 168ff.
- ⁶³ Galtung, 'Cultural Violence', 294-295.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid, 294.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid, 295.
- ⁶⁶ Joint Public Issues Team, *The Lies We Tell Ourselves*. 13, 18, 19, 21, 23 and 27.
- ⁶⁷ 'Benefits Street' was shown on Channel 4 between January and February 2014, produced by Love Productions. 'Shameless' was shown on Channel 4 between January 2004 and May 2013 and written by Paul Abbott.
- ⁶⁸ Joint Public Issues Team, op. cit. 8.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid, 11.
- ⁷⁰ Bottici and Challand, 'Rethinking Political Myth', 317ff.
- ⁷¹ Bottici, 'Towards a Philosophy of Political Myth', 41.
- ⁷² Jensen, 'Welfare Common sense...', 4.
- ⁷³ Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*; Adorno, *The Culture Industry*; Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent* and Pinn, *Why Lord?*
- ⁷⁴ Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 360.
- ⁷⁵ Beckford, *God of the Rahtid*, op. cit., 70 and *Jesus Dub*, 130ff and Reddie, *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue*, 80-8.

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- ⁷⁶ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks Volume III*, 168ff.
- ⁷⁷ Gutiérrez, 1974, op. cit. 32.
- ⁷⁸ West, *The Cornel West Reader* and Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*.
- ⁷⁹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 10.
- ⁸⁰ Vincent, *Into the City*, 110ff; Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 103 and Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 418.
- ⁸¹ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 23.
- ⁸² Ibid, 24.
- ⁸³ Gutiérrez, 1974, op. cit.205.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid, 299ff.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid, 299.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid, 300-301.
- ⁸⁷ Web site <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/levels-love-sermon-delivered-ebenezer-baptist-church> accessed 7 October 2018.
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The violence of poverty: theology and activism in an ‘age of austerity’

Faith groups are in the front line of the struggle to defeat poverty in breadline Britain. Given their roots in local communities Churches and Christian NGOs are well-placed to challenge economic policies that have resulted in the spiraling of food poverty, homelessness, personal debt and child poverty. By framing poverty as a political choice, a form of structural violence and systemic sin this paper brings peace studies and political theology into a constructive dialogue. In the face of ongoing ‘austerity’ the paper demonstrates that poverty represents a clear and present danger to the social fabric of the UK and argues that only a re-imagined interdisciplinary theology of liberation can provide academics and activists with the tools needed to defeat systemic poverty and the cultural violence upon which it rests.

Keywords: poverty; liberation theology; peace studies; activism

Introduction

The spiraling of foodbanks, homelessness, child poverty and insecure low-paid work represents a clear and present danger to the social fabric of breadline Britain. Drawing together Johann Galtung and Gustavo Gutiérrez, this paper shows that poverty is a form of structural and cultural violence, which demands a systemic and spiritual revolution if it is to be defeated. The conversation I establish between peace studies and liberation theology opens new areas for debate within political theology in an ‘age of austerity’.

Theologians such as Althaus-Reid have justifiably criticized the pioneers of liberation theology for neglecting the oppressive nature of racism, sexism and homophobia.¹ However, the fundamental assertion of those pioneering liberation theologians that poverty is the driver of wider structural violence remains as true today as it was when Gutiérrez published his iconic *A Theology of Liberation*. As I demonstrate, a critical engagement with Galtung’s framing of poverty within a triad of violence can enhance contemporary theologies of liberation in five ways. First, it provides a corrective to diffuse and individualized conceptualizations of social exclusion. Second, it enables a

fuller critique of the hegemonic political discourse which individualizes poverty and frames it as an aberration. Third, Galtung's focus on cultural violence can help to unmask the corrosive nature of this discourse, which blames people living in poverty for being poor. Fourth, a focus on direct violence enables more informed reflections on the impact of poverty on individuals and communities. Fifth, whilst more commonly used terms like oppression are widely used within liberation and political theologies, the intersectional clarity of Galtung's triad of violence presents us with a supplementary theoretical framework ideally suited to the study of poverty in an 'age of austerity'. In the UK the Church has become an increasingly visible player in civil society politics as the state has withdrawn.² However, Davey argues that, "The mainstream churches have failed to...develop a theology...through which the essential role of the church of the poor can be realized."³ This paper asks how the Church can shake itself free from its hesitant approach to activism.

The paper begins with a discussion of contemporary poverty, which I frame as a form of structural violence and systemic sin. I then discuss the influence of theologies of the common good on contemporary Christian activism but argue that they are unable to stimulate the transformation needed to win the war against austerity age poverty. Only a holistic theology of liberation has the capacity to defeat such structural violence and the cultural violence that gives it life.

Pinning down poverty in breadline Britain

Following the 2008 financial crash poverty rose more dramatically in the UK than in any other G7 nation.⁴ Between 2009 and 2017 the number of people earning less than a living wage rose from 3.4 to 5.5 million, the number of patients admitted to hospital with malnutrition trebled and in 2018 over 30% of children were living below the poverty line. In 2008 the Christian NGO the Trussell Trust distributed 25,899 meal parcels at its

foodbanks but by 2017, this number had increased to 1,310,000. The number of children living in temporary accommodation has increased by 73% since the 2010 General Election and during 2017 approximately 4,751 people slept rough each night, a 169% increase since 2010.⁵

Responding to such factors represents an urgent challenge but pinning down the complexity of poverty is like trying to catch water in a net. The United Nations defines ‘absolute poverty’ as the, “severe deprivation of basic human needs.”⁶ In the UK ‘relative poverty’ is defined as living on a household income that is less than 60% of the national median wage. People are considered to be in ‘persistent’ poverty if they live on such an income for more than three years and ‘severe’ poverty if they earn less than 50% of this average annual wage.⁷ Whilst useful, a focus on income alone underestimates the complexity of poverty. The Institute for Fiscal Studies advocates a more nuanced, “statement of how the...wide-ranging set of potential indicators relate to each other, and how each ultimately relates to poverty.”⁸

Engagement with debates about social exclusion can help us to offer this more nuanced approach. First used by René Lenoir, a Minister in the 1974-78 French government, the term social exclusion didn’t feature on the British political landscape until the 1997 election of the Tony Blair led Labour government, which quickly established a Social Exclusion Unit. New Labour viewed social exclusion in intersectional terms - the combined impact of unemployment, low income, poor housing, high crime and family breakdown on an individual’s life. The Labour government introduced a national minimum wage in 1999, numerous redistributive tax credits and lifted 900,000 children out of poverty, but Levitas suggests that there was a movement from economic redistribution to ethical communitarianism during the Blair decade.⁹ Indeed, Levitas argues that New Labour depicted poverty as “pathological...rather than

endemic”.¹⁰ This paper shows how the work of Galtung and Gutiérrez’ can help theologians and activists to challenge such moralism and the myth of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor that followed in its wake.

Sen reminds us that material poverty, “has an enormous influence on the kind of lives we can lead.”¹¹ He argues that it represents, “a capability deprivation that takes the form of social exclusion.”¹² For Sen, poverty deprives us of the chance to flourish because we, “lack freedom to do certain valuable things”.¹³ Castells argues that such social exclusion is a “process, not a condition”, resulting from an individual’s moral inadequacy.¹⁴ This depiction of poverty can help us to critique the mind-set that paints it as an unfortunate accident or a moral judgement. Galtung and Gutiérrez’ suggestion that poverty represents a form of structural violence and systemic sin can help us to critique such a flawed perspective.

Poverty as Structural Violence

Peace studies and liberation theology are too rarely viewed as dialogue partners. However, a critical engagement with Galtung and Gutiérrez’ can provide the basis for a more holistic understanding of poverty in an ‘age of austerity’. Five years before Gutiérrez’ seminal *A Theology of Liberation* was published Galtung set the agenda for future generations of peace studies researchers in ‘Violence, Peace and Peace Research’. Galtung suggests that it is necessary to adopt a broad definition of violence if we are to respond to the multidimensional damage it causes to individuals, families and communities. For Galtung violence is, “the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual” and is conscious, systemic and deliberate, rather than naturally occurring.¹⁵ Galtung’s conception of violence as the limiting of human potential enables us to consider the impact of invisible violence of political policies, employment practices, institutional discrimination and cultural discourse, as well as the visible actions of

individuals. His triad of violence (see Figure 1) provides a valuable intersectional lens through which theologians and activists can view poverty.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

For Galtung, direct violence is the use or threat of physical, verbal or psychological force against an individual or group.¹⁶ Such violence has visible outcomes which “work on the soul”, reflect invisible structural violence and are reinforced by subterranean cultural violence.¹⁷ In his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize lecture, Martin Luther King Jr compared poverty to a “monstrous octopus”, suggesting that the, “poor...have been shut out of our minds...because we have allowed them to become invisible.”¹⁸ King reminds us of the multidimensional nature of poverty and hints at its direct, structural and cultural components. Focusing only on the direct violence of poverty can blind us to its other, damaging tentacles and hidden faces.

Galtung’s insistence that the direct impact of poverty is driven by indirect structural injustice, which is justified through the deployment of hegemonic cultural discourses can enrich our understanding of what Gutiérrez calls its systemically sinful nature and resource a more holistic model of political theology capable of attacking austerity poverty at its roots. Galtung argues that structural violence is “silent” and de-personalized,¹⁹ “shows up as unequal power and...life-chances” and builds inequality into a social system.²⁰ ‘Austerity’ policies that result in permanent low pay, ‘zero hours’ contracts, homelessness, increased personal debt and a growing reliance on foodbanks can, therefore, be characterized as examples of structural violence.

Just after the 2010 UK General Election the Work and Pensions Minister, Iain Duncan-Smith, outlined the part that Universal Credit would play in Conservative welfare

reforms. The expectation was that the new unitary benefit would be paid to 7 million people by 2022. The introduction of Universal Credit was framed as an attempt to simplify the UK welfare system by replacing six existing benefits (Child Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, Jobseekers' Allowance, Income Support, Working Tax Credit and the Employment and Support Allowance) and move people into paid work. Recipients of Universal Credit, paid monthly in arrears, cannot receive other benefits and its level is cut if claimants earn more than £317 p/month or a couple earn more than £498. Due to delays the implementation of Universal Credit was not begun until 2016. Since its introduction it has been accused of deepening rather than reducing poverty, putting people who cannot pay their rent, because Universal Credit payments are late by as much as ten weeks, at risk of eviction and adding to the number of people relying on foodbanks (BBC News, 29 September 2017; Josh Halliday, 6 October 2017 and Tom Peck, 9 October 2017). In 2018 the Trussell Trust reported a 52% rise in the number of people using foodbanks in areas where Universal Credit had been introduced.²¹ In October 2018 UK Work and Pensions Secretary, Esther McVeigh, acknowledged that 3.2 million people could be up to £2,400 a year worse off once Universal Credit has been fully rolled out.²² This admission stimulated criticism from two former Prime Ministers, Gordon Brown (Labour) and John Major (Conservative), both of whom highlighted the damage that the benefit is having on the poorest people in the UK.²³

Universal Credit exemplifies the features of structural violence identified because it has systemically built the further impoverishment of people already living in poverty into British government policy. Furthermore, its introduction was made culturally possible because of the moral discourse introduced twenty years earlier by the Blair Labour government, which blamed people who receive benefits for their own poverty - what Galtung calls cultural violence.

Cooper and Whyte document what they describe as, “the devastatingly violent consequences of [*British*] government policy conducted in the name of austerity“, but such violence reaches back long before the 2010 General Election.²⁴ As the ‘riots’ in Handsworth, Moss Side, Toxteth and Brixton in the 1980s and Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in 2001 remind us, systemic poverty can trigger eruptions of direct violence when the voices of the dispossessed are not heard as Lewis et al demonstrate in relation to the 2011 riots across England.²⁵ Leech argues that such violence is a form of communal self-harm, directing rage inwards, rather than outwards at the institutions that are responsible for the structural violence of poverty.²⁶ Gutiérrez’ depiction of poverty as systemic sin adds a deeper existential element to such an analysis.

From Galtung to Gutiérrez’

This paper breaks new ground within British political theology by establishing a dialogue between Galtung’s analysis of structural and cultural violence and Gutiérrez’ depiction of poverty as systemic sin. However, it is important to recognize that others have also made connections between Galtung’s analysis of structural violence, faith-based political activism and liberation theology on the international stage.

Springs, for example, illustrates the use that religious peacebuilders have made of Galtung’s analysis, to forge a “more sensitive and fine-grained” understanding of multidimensional violence.²⁷ Furthermore, Springs suggests that an engagement with Galtung’s triad of violence provides religious peacebuilders with a new lens through which they can reflect on the capacity of faith communities to foment conflict or build, what Galtung calls ‘positive peace’.²⁸ Writing from an anthropological perspective, Farmer has engaged in depth with the work of both Galtung and Gutiérrez. Reflecting on his work in Haiti, Farmer argues that analyses of systemic injustice can often appear disengaged from the raw realities of everyday oppression.²⁹ He suggests that liberation

theology allows suffering to speak and interrogates social systems that rely on the imposition of structural violence. For Farmer, liberation theology “underlines connections” between the different faces of structural violence, whilst continuing to identify deep-seated poverty as the primary driver of injustice.³⁰ Farmer provides a bridge between Galtung and Gutiérrez as seen in his extended conversation with the pioneer of liberation theology in 2013’s *In the Company of the Poor*. More recently, with Rilko-Bauer, Farmer has brought Galtung’s exploration of the relationship between ‘positive peace’ and the absence of structural violence into a dialogue with liberation theology.³¹ Farmer and Rilko-Bauer draw our attention to the work of Freire, which interconnects Gutiérrez analysis of poverty as systemic sin with an exploration of structural violence.³² Warning against the “narrow conceptualizations” found in some typologies of violence, Farmer and Rilko-Bauer argue that a marriage of the work of Gutiérrez and Galtung can help us to develop a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of poverty.³³

A critical reading of Galtung’s work has influenced analyses of structural and cultural violence within peace studies, religious peacebuilding and liberation theology. It is time for his work to be brought into a dialogue with a post-crash political theology of poverty. When aligned with Gutiérrez’ description of poverty as systemic sin, Galtung’s analysis of the relationship between direct, structural and cultural violence can enrich the work of political theologians and activists alike. If we are to forge such a transformational discourse, we must first examine Gutiérrez’ framing of poverty as systemic sin and what Galtung terms cultural violence.

Poverty as Systemic Sin

Gutiérrez is the iconic pioneer of Latin American liberation theology and his work cannot be understood in isolation from this pivotal theological movement. This paper is not a

critical survey of liberation theology, but it is important to briefly note its central tropes if we are to understand Gutiérrez' examination of poverty as a form of systemic sin for two reasons. First, liberation theology argues that the experience of poor communities should be the hermeneutical lens through which Christian belief and practice are viewed, as Rowland reminds us.³⁴ Second, it argues that the God of the Bible has a preferential option for the poor that the Church should embody this in its mission, strategy, teaching and practice. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff summarize, "Liberation theology was born when faith confronted the injustice done to the poor."³⁵

Reflection on the nature of sin within Christian theology has drawn heavily on the work of the 5th century CE North-African theologian Augustine who defined it as, "a word, deed or desire in opposition to the eternal law of God."³⁶ This depiction of sin locates it within the life of the individual; a perspective critiqued by Gutiérrez - "in the liberation approach sin is...regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood."³⁷ By envisaging sin as the systemic damaging of communal relationships we can begin to grasp its "collective dimensions".³⁸ For Gutiérrez, "Sin is evident in oppressive structures...as the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation."³⁹ Gutiérrez' depiction of poverty as a form of systemic sin enables us to fashion a theological response to its institutionalization as structural violence in an 'age of austerity'.

The embedding of poverty in social policy to which Galtung and Gutiérrez point is arguably exemplified by the practice of the Trump Presidency in the United States. The visit of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Poverty to the US in December 2017 highlighted the damage caused by Trump's reverse redistribution agenda, which has given tax breaks to corporations and the super-rich, whilst cutting welfare spending (United Nations, 2018: 4 and 19). Gutiérrez suggests that the construction of social

systems built upon such structural inequality subvert the doctrine of Creation, which declares all people to be of equal worth because everyone is made in the ‘image of God’ (Genesis 1:26-27). Galtung’s work amplifies Gutiérrez’ reflections on the systemically sinful nature of poverty and can facilitate the translation of the core values of liberation theology into contexts that are very different from the Latin America that gave it life.

Gutiérrez recognizes the intersectional nature of poverty. Echoing Galtung’s exploration of the systemic nature of structural violence, Gutiérrez writes, “Poverty means death: lack of food and housing, the inability to attend properly to health and education needs, the exploitation of workers, permanent unemployment, the lack of respect for one’s human dignity...”⁴⁰ Hinting at Galtung’s structural violence motif, Gutiérrez argues that, “Material poverty is a sub-human situation...to be poor means to die of hunger...to be exploited by others...not to know you are a person.”⁴¹ Echoing Catholic Social Teaching, Gutiérrez suggests that, “In the Bible poverty is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God”.⁴² It is, therefore, ‘an expression of sin...a negation of love.’⁴³ Armed with Galtung’s triad of violence, we are able to re-read the witness of liberation theology in a manner that brings its foundational insights about the sinfulness of endemic poverty into a critical dialogue with daily life in an ‘age of austerity’.

Gutiérrez points to the multifaceted meaning of the Biblical phrase ‘the poor’, which can mean ‘weak’, ‘laboring under a burden’, ‘humiliated’ or ‘the wretched one driven into begging’.⁴⁴ Such a breadth of understanding is reminiscent of Galtung’s multidimensional definition of violence noted above. In her analysis of the ways in which oppression is understood within the Bible Elsa Tamez comments on the devaluing of people living in poverty – the “degradation of the human being, a seizure, as it were, of the divine image in the person.”⁴⁵ The words of the Hebrew prophet Job graphically

illustrate this systemic damage, “The wicked...thrust the needy off the road; the poor of the earth all hide themselves.” (Job, 24:2-5). Whilst Job wrote more than 2,500 years ago his words resonate in twenty-first century Britain. Austerity age poverty is a direct consequence of conscious decisions made by British political leaders following the 2010 General Election. Can a theological commitment to the common good help to loosen its death-grip during the ‘age of austerity’? It is to this question that I now turn.

Building the ‘Common Good’

Edwards reminds us that the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall were marked by a political turn towards civil society. Whilst recognizing the conflation of this term with Western models of representative democracy, Edwards points to its use as a synonym for a society that is characterized by, “tolerance, non-discrimination, non-violence, trust and cooperation.”⁴⁶ JK Galbraith suggests that, “In the good society all citizens must have personal liberty, basic well-being, racial and ethnic equality, the opportunity for a rewarding life.”⁴⁷ Galbraith’s vision of the ‘good society’ stands as a stark rebuke to an era dominated by headlines about foodbanks, zero-hours contracts, rough sleeping and child poverty. Edwards acknowledges that, “Too many of our existing social, economic and political systems destroy the bonds we want to have with each other” but suggests that “...civil society seems to offer a way of re-constituting these relationships.”⁴⁸ Can such a vision of the common good provide a firm enough foundation for models of political theology and activism that seek to challenge the structural violence of poverty and the systemic sin and culture of blame that give it life?

Most Christian responses to contemporary poverty are informed by theologies of the common good, which find their origins in the Catholic Social Teaching tradition stimulated by Pope Leo XII’s 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.⁴⁹ Six key themes can be discerned in *Rerum Novarum*, which resonate with Galbraith’s vision of the ‘good

society’ – the innate dignity of all people, mutual solidarity as a means of community building, social policies that enhance the common good, the empowerment of local communities, widely distributed property ownership and God’s preferential option for the poor. In 1931, as the Great Depression took hold, Pope Pius XI built on Leo XII’s thinking in *Quadragesimo Anno*. In the encyclical Pius advocated a middle way between *laissez faire* capitalism and state socialism. Wealth creation was affirmed but growing inequality and the exploitation of workers were condemned in his call for just wages - a balance that continues to characterize many theologies of the common good.⁵⁰

The William Temple Foundation, which draws its inspiration from the thinking of former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple, exemplifies contemporary Anglican common good research.⁵¹ Furthermore, the central strands of Catholic Social Teaching influenced the emergence of the ‘Blue Labour’ initiative spearheaded by Maurice Glasman, which sought to articulate the philosophical and ethical basis of a new Centre-Left vision of the common good following the Labour Party’s defeat in 2010. This vision, which was distilled by Geary and Pabst, balances a commitment to a dynamic wealth-creating economy with an equal emphasis on social inclusion reminiscent of the theological middle way found in Catholic Social Teaching, but is critiqued by Smith as too tentative and incapable of meeting the structural poverty that characterizes life in an ‘age of austerity’.⁵²

In a similar vein the Social Gospel articulated by the US Baptist pastor Walter Rauschenbusch in the early twentieth century has had a lasting impact on Protestant Christian traditions. Baker notes that, “The social gospel...challenged both *laissez faire* capitalism and Protestant individualism with a reformulation of Christian faith that stressed the doctrine of God’s immanence...in the suffering of the world.”⁵³ Social Gospel thinking remains a formational, if unstated, foundation for much Protestant engagement

with poverty and influenced the iconic 1985 *Faith in the City* report published by the Church of England and its ecumenical successor *Faithful Cities* in 2006. Theologies of the common good and the Social Gospel continue to inspire much Christian engagement with poverty. However, in the face of systemic inequality, it is important to ask whether their moral argument has the capacity to defeat the structural violence of poverty in an age when the claims of political leaders to be committed to the common good have an increasingly hollow ring to them. In an attempt to respond to this question, I now turn to a more radical Christian tradition, which, whilst often marginalized, can resource contemporary liberative theologies in an ‘age of austerity’.

What happens when the Common Good is not good enough?

Despite its dominant position within Christian activism common good theologians have increasingly acknowledged the failure of the Church to challenge structural poverty. Morisy, for example, recognizes that, tied by bonds of history, class and culture to the establishment, “the church has found it easier to ‘speak up on behalf of the poor’ than to confront the mainstream culture which forms us so extensively.”⁵⁴ In spite of its emphasis on the need for people of faith to take on a preferential option for the poor, theologies of the common are, it seems, constrained by an inability to attack systemic poverty at its roots. Leech argues that, “the oppression of the lowly, the promotion of hunger and poverty, the persistence of concentrated wealth are not accidental aberrations within capitalism but are central to its character.”⁵⁵ Is the Church too entwined with systems of power to subvert the structural violence of contemporary poverty?

Throughout its imperial history an often submerged, egalitarian tradition has persisted on the margins of the Church as the witness of the early Franciscans, the Anabaptists, the Levellers, Tolpuddle Martyrs, Victorian Christian Socialists and worker

priest movement in the middle of the twentieth century attest. Echoing Jesus' parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25: 31-46, Tamez suggests that in the face of structural poverty the God of the Bible, "identifies himself with the poor to such an extent that their rights become the rights of God himself."⁵⁶ Gutiérrez argues that, "Only authentic solidarity with the poor and a real protest against the poverty of our time can provide the...context necessary for a theological discussion of poverty."⁵⁷ Such solidarity demands a revolution in reflection and practice tantamount to the turning of the world on its head, which Mary sings about in the Magnificat (Luke 1:52-53). Gutiérrez summarizes, "The poor deserve preference not because they are morally or religiously better than others but because God is God, in whose eyes the 'last are first'."⁵⁸ The systemic nature of austerity-age inequality negates the love of a God who creates all people in the divine image by building a society which rests on the structural violence of poverty. Consequently, God's preferential option for the poor is a necessary first step in the forging of a society built around a credible commitment to the common good.

The dismantling of the structural violence of systemic poverty demands a model of activism that is premised on the determined enactment of God's preferential option for the poor. However, as Leech notes, such a step will only be possible if it arises from an existential revolution that transforms the mindset of the institutional church into that of a liberative social movement.⁵⁹ An engagement with what Galtung calls cultural violence can help us to argue for the kind of spiritual revolution that is needed if we are to rob systemic poverty of its existential justification.

Cultural violence and Poverty

Galtung asks, "which factors, apart from personal violence and the threat of personal violence...uphold inequality?"⁶⁰ To respond to this question, we need to turn to the third angle on his triad of violence – the use of culture to justify poverty and inequality. Galtung

refers to cultural violence as, “the symbolic sphere of our existence...that can be used to...legitimize direct or structural violence.”⁶¹ Writing a generation earlier from a prison cell in Mussolini’s Italy, Gramsci argued that culture elicit false consciousness, thereby masking the true nature and causes of class oppression.⁶²

For Galtung, what Gramsci termed hegemony resembles a, “substratum from which [*direct and structural violence*] ...derive their nutrients.”⁶³ Galtung argues that a, “violent structure leaves marks not only on the human body but also on the mind and the spirit.”⁶⁴ Such damage, says Galtung, leads to the internalizing of the cultural narratives that normalize the structural violence of poverty. An example of the hegemonic use of music to exert cultural violence is the Christian hymn ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’ that is still sung in many schools. Today the hymn is one of innocent praise, but in the Victorian original congregations would sing, “The rich man in his castle; the poor man at this gate. God made them, high and lowly, and ordered their estate.” Within worship the structural violence of poverty can be given God’s seal of approval. Given the believer’s conviction that they encounter the divine in worship, the situating of structural inequality in this context can embed it in our subconscious as something that is blessed by God. An engagement with the work of Galtung can enable a fuller understanding of the use of cultural violence during the ‘age of austerity’ to fashion a public discourse that blames people living in poverty for being poor, diminishes their agency and pits marginalized social groups against one another. Galtung’s analysis of cultural violence can help contemporary theologians to grapple with the ideology of austerity and its underpinning public discourse which undermines the solidarity of God with oppressed humanity (John 1:14) by blaming people in poverty for the financial crash.

An important feature of cultural violence is the fashioning of a discourse which scapegoats the powerless and blames them for their poverty.⁶⁵ *The Lies We Tell Ourselves*

was published by the ecumenical Joint Public Issues Team [JPIT] as the ‘age of austerity’ introduced by Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, began to bite. Revolving around six myths about poverty, the report highlights the use of cultural violence to scapegoat people living in poverty – [1] “They are lazy and don’t want to work”; [2] “They are addicted to drink and drugs”; [3] “They are not really poor – they just don’t manage their money properly”; [4] “They are on the fiddle”; [5] “They have an easy life on benefits” and [6] “They caused the deficit”.⁶⁶ Whilst none of the myths identified by JPIT are based on credible evidence, they have circulated on television programmes like the Channel Four documentary *Benefits Street* or *Shameless*, a long-running comedy show that revolved around a family from the North of England apparently enjoying an ‘easy life’ on benefits.⁶⁷ Leading politicians have perpetuated these ‘convenient myths’ and former British Prime Minister David Cameron, even cited ‘Shameless’, when launching his ‘Troubled Families’ initiative in December 2011.⁶⁸ Cameron’s speech exemplified the shift towards a moralistic approach to social exclusion begun under New Labour. In July 2012 the senior civil servant Louise Casey published the *Listening to Troubled Families* report, which considered the themes that Cameron had sketched out in greater detail but provided, “no more substantial evidence for a ‘Shameless’ culture than the statistics quoted in the Prime Minister’s speech eight months earlier.”⁶⁹ The deployment of cultural violence makes it possible for political leaders to side-step the need to examine the structural causes of poverty.

The word ‘myth’ is often used as a synonym for something that is ‘untrue’, but the term actually refers to a narrative that encapsulates social, ideological, political or religious values in a manner that convinces or persuades. Bottici and Challand remind us of the use of myth within political discourse.⁷⁰ Bottici suggests that by “slipping into our unconsciousness political myths can deeply influence our most fundamental

perceptions...and thus escape...critical scrutiny.”⁷¹ Under successive British governments since 1997 the myths discussed above have not only shaped social policy; they have permeated public discourse about poverty and slipped into ‘our unconsciousness’.

The political myth of austerity is an example of ‘poverty porn’. Whilst this term has its roots in the short films used by development initiatives like Live Aid and Comic Relief, which arguably exploited the experience of people on the edge of starvation, its use has become common in relation to poverty during the ‘age of austerity’. Jensen suggests that “poverty porn serve[s] to transform precarity into a moral failure, worklessness into laziness and disconnection into an individual failure to strive and aspire...rather than [*viewing it*] as a consequence of the excesses of neoliberalism.”⁷² Such poverty porn exemplifies the systemically sinful cultural violence to which Gutiérrez and Galtung point.

I recognize that it is difficult to demonstrate a quantifiable causal link between cultural discourses and rising levels of poverty and inequality. However, the demand for such evidence, is arguably a further exertion of cultural violence by a defensive political élite. In spite of this caveat, I suggest that it is possible to identify, if not prove, the power of culture to oppress or liberate, as seen in a range of social movements from the linkage of soul music with the US Civil Rights Movement and reggae music with Black emancipation to the connection between the Anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa and the music of the Black Church and Two Tone and the anti-racist struggle in the UK in the early 1980s. As the Critical Theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, Chomsky’s work on the power of the media and Pinn’s analysis of music and historic African-American struggle reminds us, cultural discourse is able, unseen and often unacknowledged, to shape social relations and justify or subvert the socio-economic status quo.⁷³ Consequently, like Leech

and Beckford, I suggest that systemic poverty does not only cause deep existential damage, but that it is sustained by an equally corrosive cultural discourse, without which it cannot, in the long term, survive unscathed.

The hegemonic discourse that underpins austerity poverty will only be defeated when a persuasive new narrative of inclusion displaces it in the public imagination. Such displacement demands what Gutiérrez calls a conversion to our neighbor and the active embrace of God's preferential option for the poor. But such an existential revolution cannot occur until we are woken from our sleep as I demonstrate below.

'Crossroads Ahead' – What happens when we wake up?

In his exploration of power relations in the 'information age' Castells pinpoints the vital importance of existential emancipation in the struggle for social justice, "Whoever wins the battle for people's minds will rule, because mighty rigid apparatuses will not be a match in any reasonable timespan for minds mobilized."⁷⁴ However, heightened awareness is not inherently liberative. The political myth that justifies poverty can foster fatalism and the promise of 'prosperity gospel' preachers that financial wealth is a reflection of God's blessing confined to 'believers' can reinforce cultural violence by offering false hope to people who are the end of their tether.⁷⁵ Consequently, the result of Castells' 'battle for people's minds' is not a foregone conclusion. It can give rise to a vicious cycle which leaves the hegemonic justification of poverty intact or lay the ground for the forging of a virtuous cycle which fosters a process of liberative conscientization capable of forging of a new egalitarian politics as depicted below in Figure 2.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Gramsci suggests that we are engaged in a ‘cultural war of position’, which can only be won when poverty becomes morally unacceptable within public discourse.⁷⁶ Such existential emancipation demands a spiritual transformation, as well as a social revolution because, as Gutiérrez notes, “The step from an abstract to a real freedom... (*demands*)...a struggle against all the forces that oppress humanity.”⁷⁷ It is not enough, therefore, for the theologian to be a passionate political intellectual insulated from the heat of the struggle because of their social position.⁷⁸ Rather, as Gramsci points out, a further step is needed into, “active participation...as an organiser...and not just as a simple orator.”⁷⁹ This demands what Vincent calls a “journey downwards” from security into solidarity if, as Gutiérrez puts it, “the theologian is to be an organic intellectual...with links to the popular liberation undertaking...” who, according to Gramsci, “feels the elemental passions of the people.”⁸⁰ The peace studies activist-scholar Lederach highlights the central importance of such a liberative ‘moral imagination’ in the search for social justice.⁸¹

A compass needle functions by finding its north. The north of peacebuilding is best articulated as finding our way towards becoming...local and global human communities characterized by respect, dignity, fairness...To understand this north, to read such a compass, requires that we recognize and develop our moral imagination far more intentionally.⁸²

Gutiérrez views such re-orientation as the basis of a “spirituality of liberation [*that*] will centre on a conversion to...the oppressed person, the exploited social class, the despised race...”⁸³ He suggests that the conscious adoption of a preferential option for the poor needs to reflect a deeper existential emancipation if it is to resource truly transformative practice.⁸⁴ Such an option for the poor needs to be characterized by “a commitment to

solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer misery and injustice...to witness to the evil which has resulted from sin and is a breach of communion.”⁸⁵

For Gutiérrez such spiritual poverty “is an act of love and liberation...a protest against poverty.”⁸⁶ Preaching against the backdrop of US segregation, Martin Luther King Jr amplifies Gutiérrez’ point in his sermon ‘Levels of Love’.⁸⁷ King argues that only a model of activism that is rooted in selfless, inclusive love can defeat injustice. The hegemonic grip of structural poverty will only be loosened if this ‘act of love and liberation’ shapes our hermeneutical stance. Only then can a model of activism and theology emerge that can begin to fashion a life beyond austerity, for the many and not just the few.

Galtung, Gutiérrez and a life beyond ‘austerity’

Since the 2008 financial crash faith-based action on poverty, largely inspired by theologies of the common good, has become an increasingly significant feature of the resistance to austerity. The value of the children’s breakfast clubs, foodbanks, pensioners’ lunch clubs and soup runs’ should not be minimized. However, such initiatives and tentative theological challenges to inequality stand little chance of forcing ingrained poverty into long-term retreat.

The world has been transformed since Galtung and Gutiérrez set their pioneering agenda. Why then do I argue that a critical engagement with their work can lay the ground for a theology of poverty capable of meeting the challenges of ‘austerity’? Three factors lead me to make this claim. First, in an interwoven but increasingly fragmented century only holistic examinations of poverty can offer the multidimensional analyses needed to grapple with its complexity. Drawing peace studies and liberation theology into a purposive dialogue enables greater creativity within both disciplines and the forging of a

holistic theological analysis capable of addressing contemporary poverty in a convincing manner. Second, Galtung's depiction of poverty as structural violence and Gutiérrez' description of it as systemic sin has the potential to meet the challenges of the 'age of austerity' more convincingly than the middle-way of common good theologies and an uncertain centre-left. Galtung and Gutiérrez provide us with the resources needed to forge a bolder response to the ingrained poverty that characterizes life in breadline Britain and the neoliberal economics from which it arises. Third, Galtung's analysis of cultural violence when interwoven with Gutiérrez' reflection on the existential damage wrought by poverty, can help contemporary academics and activists to undermine a resurgent myth of the 'undeserving' poor. Armed with such tools we can begin to identify Lederach's 'true North' and forge a narrative of liberation capable of paving the way for the existential emancipation needed to win the 'war of position' in the battle against poverty.

It can be tempting to romanticize liberation theology, uncritically coopting a theological vision honed in very different circumstances, or to consign it to an era that ended with the falling of the Berlin Wall. It is important that we do not fall prey to either of these temptations. The world has been transformed since Gutiérrez wrote his seminal *A Theology of Liberation* but the grinding poverty that shaped his urgent theological manifesto has not been consigned to history. Rowland, who, with Vincent, has sought to stimulate a British theology of liberation since the late 1990s, reminds us that the core witness of liberation theology is not time or context limited because its stimulus, "...is not detached reflection on Scripture and tradition but the present life of the shanty towns and land struggles."⁸⁸ Rowland argues that, "Liberation theology is not a body of knowledge which can be learnt but a way of understanding God in the midst of history."⁸⁹ In his search for a liberative twenty-first century theology, Petrella, cautions us against recycling twentieth century theologies of liberation. The ending of the Cold War posed

new questions for liberation theologians raised in an era of revolution. As political struggle has become more fluid and intersectional the defining landscape for the forging of new liberative theologies is increasingly found on the shifting sands of civil society, rather than in a unitary struggle against oppressive state power, as Richard notes.⁹⁰ Petrella argues the need for liberation theology to discover a new historical project, which can root its articulation of God's preferential option for the poor in new struggles and contextual particularities.⁹¹ The daily realities of austerity poverty provide British liberation theology with its new historical project. As I have shown Galtung's analysis of structural and cultural violence, when married with Gutiérrez' reflections, can enrich the work of theologians and activists and the building of a political theology capable of healing the damage that austerity has done to the social fabric of headline Britain.

Conclusion

Poverty is an insidious form of violence, which can scar multiple generations. In this paper I have demonstrated how it is built into the structures and systems of contemporary British society. I have shown that such poverty has been dismissed as an aberration and depicted as the result of individual inadequacy through the deployment of hegemonic patterns of cultural violence. Whilst theologies of the common good have stimulated a selfless engagement with poverty I have demonstrated why they are incapable of dismantling the structural injustice that gives rise to systemic poverty. Only an existential transformation, which stimulates a deep-seated solidarity with those who have been forgotten during the 'age of austerity', a commitment to a love that does justice and the active embodiment of God's preferential option for the poor can squeeze the life out of death-dealing poverty. My marriage of peace studies and liberation theology has helped us to see poverty as a form of structural violence and systemic sin. Galtung and Gutiérrez

can provide us with the tools we need to subvert the social system that counts our neighbors who rely on foodbanks as collateral damage in a battle to balance the nation's books. Only then can a model of political theology arise that is able to grapple with austerity age structural poverty and re-interpret God's preferential option for the poor in headline Britain. Only then can we lay the foundations for a world beyond 'austerity'.

Notes

¹ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*.

² Hoelzl and Ward, *The New Visibility of Religion*.

³ Davey, 'Being Church as Political Praxis', 57.

⁴ Shorrocks, Davies, and Lluberas. *Global Wealth Report*.

⁵ Homeless Link. 2017 Rough Sleeping Statistics. Web site

<https://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Homeless%20Link%20%20analysis%20of%20rough%20sleeping%20statistics%20for%20England%202017.pdf>, London: Homeless Link. Accessed 3 March 2018

⁶ United Nations, *The Copenhagen Declaration*, 57.

⁷ McGuinness, *Poverty in the UK*, 5.

⁸ Browne et al, *Child and Working Age Poverty in Northern Ireland*, 1-2.

⁹ Levitas et al, *The Multi-dimensional Analysis of Social Exclusion*, 10ff.

¹⁰ Levitas, *The Inclusive Society*, 7.

¹¹ Sen, *Social Exclusion*, 3.

¹² Ibid, 4.

¹³ Ibid, 5.

¹⁴ Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 164-165 and *The Power of Identity*, 73.

¹⁵ Galtung, 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research', 168.

¹⁶ Ibid, 169ff.

¹⁷ Ibid, 169.

¹⁸ Web site <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/> Martin Luther King Jr, 'The Quest for Peace and Justice'. Nobel Lecture, 11 December 1964, accessed 29 September 2018.

¹⁹ Galtung, op. cit., 173.

²⁰ Ibid, 170-171.

²¹ Jitendra, et. al, 1 and <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/next-stage-universal-credit/#1537797406800-ff30ac4d-e8cd> accessed 14 October 2018.

²² Brewer, Finch and Tomlinson, *Universal Remedy*, 8 and 'Some people will be poorer under Universal Credit', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45824590> accessed 14 October 2018.

²³ 'Halt universal credit or face summer of discontent Gordon Brown tells PM', <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/oct/10/gordon-brown-halt-universal-credit-rollout> and 'John Major: Universal Credit could repeat Poll Tax problems', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45817897> accessed 14 October 2018.

²⁴ Cooper and Whyte, *The Violence of Austerity*, 1.

²⁵ Lewis; Newburn; Taylor and McGillivray, Ed. *Reading the Riots – Investigating England's Summer of Disorder*. London: London School of Economics and The Guardian. 2011.

²⁶ Leech, *The Sky is Red*, 90 and Beckford, *God of the Rahtid*.

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- ²⁷ Springs, A. 'Structural and Cultural Violence in Religion and Peacebuilding', 146-147.
- ²⁸ Ibid, 148.
- ²⁹ Farmer, 'On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below', 19ff.
- ³⁰ Ibid, 20.
- ³¹ Rilko-Bauer and Farmer, 'Structural Violence, Poverty and Social Suffering' <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199914050.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199914050-e-4#oxfordhb-9780199914050-e-4-div1-20> (accessed 10 October 2018)
- ³² Freire, *Pedagogy of Indignation*, 118ff.
- ³³ Ibid, p7 of 34.
- ³⁴ Rowlands, *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 2-3.
- ³⁵ Boff and Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 3.
- ³⁶ Augustine. *Contra Faustum* Book XXII. PL 42, 418.
- ³⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 175.
- ³⁸ Ibid, 175.
- ³⁹ Ibid, 175.
- ⁴⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1988, xxi.
- ⁴¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1974, 289.
- ⁴² Ibid, 291.
- ⁴³ Ibid, 295.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, 291-294.
- ⁴⁵ Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, 12.
- ⁴⁶ Edwards, *Civil Society*, 47.
- ⁴⁷ Galbraith. *The Good Society*, 4.
- ⁴⁸ Edwards, op. cit., 47.
- ⁴⁹ Pope Leo XII, *Rerum Novarum*, paragraph 42.
- ⁵⁰ Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* paragraphs 58-59 and 64-66.
- ⁵¹ Web site <https://williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/> accessed 14th April 2018.
- ⁵² Geary and Pabst *Blue Labour* and Smith, 'The Long Read: Blue Labour in the age of Corbyn'
- ⁵³ Baker, *The Hybrid Church in the City*, 71.
- ⁵⁴ Morisy, *Journeying Out*, 96.
- ⁵⁵ Leech, op. cit., 135.
- ⁵⁶ Tamez, op. cit., 73.
- ⁵⁷ Gutiérrez, 1974, op. cit., 302.
- ⁵⁸ Gutiérrez, 1988, op. cit. xxviii.
- ⁵⁹ Leech, op. cit., 140.
- ⁶⁰ Galtung, 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research' 175.
- ⁶¹ Galtung, 'Cultural Violence', 291.
- ⁶² Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks Volume III*, 168ff.
- ⁶³ Galtung, 'Cultural Violence', 294-295.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid, 294.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid, 295.
- ⁶⁶ Joint Public Issues Team, *The Lies We Tell Ourselves*. 13, 18, 19, 21, 23 and 27.
- ⁶⁷ 'Benefits Street' was shown on Channel 4 between January and February 2014, produced by Love Productions. 'Shameless' was shown on Channel 4 between January 2004 and May 2013 and written by Paul Abbott.
- ⁶⁸ Joint Public Issues Team, op. cit. 8.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid, 11.
- ⁷⁰ Bottici and Challand, 'Rethinking Political Myth', 317ff.
- ⁷¹ Bottici, 'Towards a Philosophy of Political Myth', 41.
- ⁷² Jensen, 'Welfare Common sense...', 4.
- ⁷³ Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*; Adorno, *The Culture Industry*; Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent* and Pinn, *Why Lord?*
- ⁷⁴ Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 360.
- ⁷⁵ Beckford, *God of the Rahtid*, op. cit., 70 and *Jesus Dub*, 130ff and Reddie, *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue*, 80-8.

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- ⁷⁶ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks Volume III*, 168ff.
- ⁷⁷ Gutiérrez, 1974, op. cit. 32.
- ⁷⁸ West, *The Cornel West Reader* and Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*.
- ⁷⁹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 10.
- ⁸⁰ Vincent, *Into the City*, 110ff; Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 103 and Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 418.
- ⁸¹ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 23.
- ⁸² Ibid, 24.
- ⁸³ Gutiérrez, 1974, op. cit.205.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid, 299ff.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid, 299.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid, 300-301.
- ⁸⁷ Web site <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/levels-love-sermon-delivered-ebenezer-baptist-church> accessed 7 October 2018.
- ⁸⁸ Rowland and Vincent, *Liberation Theology UK*; Rowland and Vincent, *Gospel from the City*; Rowland and Vincent, *British Liberation Theology: For Church and Nation* and Rowland, *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 2-3.
- ⁸⁹ Rowland, cited in Bennett and Gowler, *Radical Christian Voices and Practice*, 8
- ⁹⁰ Richard, *Liberation Theology Today: Crisis or Challenge?*
<http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/2541> accessed 14 October 2018.
- ⁹¹ Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 11ff.

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The violence of poverty: theology and activism in an 'age of austerity'

Comments from the Editors and Reviewers and the author's response:

Reviewer #1:

Decision: Revise and re-submit

Reviewer - The paper's thesis and purpose need to be much more explicit and sharp. The Intro and abstract need to be rewritten with some specific account of precisely why this study is important, the problem or challenge it takes up, how it addresses this problem in some new way. Why is Galtung important? What new is added by bringing him into conversation with Gutierrez, and political theology / religion, ethics, and politics more broadly? Why is liberation theology not adequate on its own?

Author Response – I have responded to this helpful suggestion by re-writing the abstract so that it reflects my central argument in the paper. I have also completely re-written and slightly extended the Introduction in a clearer manner that articulates the central thrust of the paper more adequately, the significance of the contribution that the work of Galtung can make to liberation theology in an 'age of austerity' and signposts the structure of the paper and the argument I make – **See p1-2.**

Reviewer - Provide a brief overview of the paper's argument and structure up front. What do the analytical lenses of structural and cultural violence provide that the other ways of naming poverty you highlight do not? Why is it urgent to propose this switch (or perhaps expansion/enrichment) of analytical tools and language? The author should make clear to the readers that he or she intends to make the case for this change, and something will be lost if we do not buy in. All this is implied—and, at times, touched on—in the current version of the paper, and in the final paragraph before the conclusion the author does bring the upshot home. But the paper's argument will be greatly strengthened, it will be more rhetorically effective and more persuasive, if the author is as upfront, clear, and precise about this from the very beginning.

Author Response

In the revised version of my paper I have summarized the thrust of my argument in the **introduction**. Furthermore, I have emphasized why the analytical lenses of structural and cultural violence are preferable to the much more common language of social exclusion and oppression in contemporary analysis and political discourse in relation to the discussion of austerity poverty. I have strengthened my argument that an engagement with Galtung's work expands and enriches the exploration of poverty within liberation theology and stressed that his triad of violence [direct, structural and cultural] enables a more holistic understanding of the multidimensional damage it causes.

Reviewer

In terms of the mechanics and structure of the paper, it will be more follow-able with more intentional transitions between the sections and by sign-posting throughout.

Author Response

I have added clearer sign-posting sentences at the end of each section throughout.

The example used in the middle paragraph of page 7 (pdf version) is, as written, difficult to follow. Some further clarification would aid readers unfamiliar with the recent British context.

Author Response

This section on Universal Credit has been expanded upon, clarified, updated and linked more clearly to the paper's broader argument – **see p6-8 in the revised paper.**

Reviewer

pp. 7-8 Some further description of the Galtung's account of the complex ways that the three forms of violence interrelate would be helpful for uninitiated readers.

Author Response

I have inserted a new paragraph summarizing Galtung's broad understanding of violence and the interrelation between direct, structural and cultural violence. See **page 6-7** of revised paper

Reviewer

pp. 10-11- the author's account of the way that Gutierrez's understanding of poverty is analogous to Galtung's conceptions of structural and cultural violence needs to be bit more precise. How is it *structural*, exactly? How is it cultural? The author never makes this fully clear in the preceding section.

Author Response

I have added greater clarity to my comparison of Gutierrez and Galtung on **p13-14** of the revised paper.

Reviewer

p. 14. The key question is at the center of p 14. I would offer an earlier statement of it as part of your re-vamped opening. Your reader will thus have some clear sense of the stakes in this line of inquiry, at least for the church.

Author Response

I have made much clearer reference to this key question in my **revised Introduction**.

Reviewer

P. 18. Good, concrete exposition of cultural violence. It is convenient that none of the claims have been supported by credible evidence? What if they had? Would that resolve the issue of cultural violence? Is it possible that fixation on "evidence" itself may tilt into a form of cultural violence? The author needs to anticipate and answer potential objections to his or her argument: For example: What are the liabilities to which Galtung and his account of structural violence prone? How does integrating his work with Gutierrez's not generate more problems than it purports to solve? (how does multiplying types of violence not turn into "violence" what would more aptly be termed "poverty" or "injustice" or political/legal/social "exclusion"? What do these complex lenses of interrelated forms of violence provide an analyst that more familiar words do not? (readers uninitiated to Galtung's work—and the debates it inspired—frequently raise this concern). There might be others to consider. Pick one or two that are most formidable and in need of being answered

Author Response

I have responded to the question of evidence in relation to cultural violence and the use of myth in relation to contemporary poverty. I have also added a short paragraph arguing the power of culture to oppress/repress/liberate, drawing on parallels linking social movements to different musical form (e.g – soul music and US Civil Rights movement) and the work of Horkheimer, Freire, Adorno and Chomsky. See **p21 of the revised article**. I have also shown why I argue that a use of Galtung's triad of violence is preferable to the more widely used term social exclusion – **see p3 of revised article**.

Reviewer

Further, while the literature on which the article draws is generally solid, it needs to reflect at least some familiarity and technical grasp on the work in the field that has already been done to draw Galtung into these conversations. For example, Gutierrez has long been in conversation with conceptions of "structural violence" (informed, if at a remove, by Galtung's writings) in the work of Paul Farmer. The article would be enhanced by indicating command of this material, both in terms of how it enhances the author's intervention, and contextualizes it in an already unfolding conversation. Freire is also pivotal to Farmer. You might consult Farmer's essays addressing structural violence, and *In the Company of the Poor*.

Author Response

I have inserted a new paragraph engaging with the wider field of literature, including Farmer, Freire and the field of religious peacebuilding and have made reference to the chapter on 'Structural and Cultural Violence on Religion and Peacebuilding' from the Oxford Handbook, as suggested. See **p10-11 of the revised paper**.

Reviewer

For another who has already taken up these central questions vis-à-vis Galtung's importance to political theology and religion, conflict, and peacebuilding, the author should consult the chapter on "Structural and Cultural Violence in Religion and Peacebuilding" in the Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding. The author needs to indicate that he/she is aware of this, and the exposition of the broader literature on structural/cultural violence that unfolds across the footnotes of that article.

Author Response

See previous response please.

Self-reflexivity about this articles location in the broader discussion will strengthen its effectiveness. Overall, this is a strong piece. It makes an important and timely contribution. With these revisions, it will be ready for publication.

Reviewer #2:

The content of this paper is excellent. Excellent analysis of poverty. Good understanding of Galtung and Gutierrez. I make three suggestions:

1. Adjust the title to include the activism in the second half of the paper. Right now, the title is passive.

Author Response

I have adjusted the title as advised.

2. Work to reduce the length of the paper. There is some verbosity, which detracts from the argument.

Author Response

I have reduced repetition within the article but the need to respond to other feedback from both reviewers means that the word length is not very different from the initial article submission. The total word length of the paper [excluding the bibliography, title and author details] is 7,661 words.

3. And then, not quite in contrast to what I just said, note briefly the modern day peace studies scholars and liberation theologians taking the work of Galtung and Gutierrez forward. In particular, note a few Anglicans working toward this, in addition to Chris Rowland. It would make a stronger link for British churches.

Author Response

I have added a section on **p10-11** engaging with the wider range of scholars and made fuller reference to Chris Rowland **on p24-25 of the revised article**.

Overall, I think this paper addresses the issue well.

The violence of poverty: theology and activism in an ‘age of austerity’

Faith groups are in the front line of the struggle to defeat poverty in breadline Britain. Given their roots in local communities Churches and Christian NGOs are well-placed to challenge economic policies that have resulted in the spiraling of food poverty, homelessness, personal debt and child poverty. By framing poverty as a political choice, a form of structural violence and systemic sin this paper brings peace studies and political theology into a constructive dialogue. In the face of ongoing ‘austerity’ the paper demonstrates that poverty represents a clear and present danger to the social fabric of the UK and argues that only a re-imagined interdisciplinary theology of liberation can provide academics and activists with the tools needed to defeat systemic poverty and the cultural violence upon which it rests.

Keywords: poverty; liberation theology; peace studies; activism