Abstract: This article proposes that developments in the fields of liberation theology and development economics have made this the right time for a dialogue between the two fields, despite their historic estrangement. Our argument unfolds in three parts. The first introduces the concerns of liberation theology, emphasizing its “see, judge, act” methodology of social analysis and its historical critique of development as a “top-down” approach to improving the lives of the poor. The second part charts recent changes within development economics, noting an increasingly holistic understanding of both poverty and human development, as well a growing emphasis on empowering local agents. The final part argues that points of compatibility now exist between the aims and methods of the two disciplines, but also notes ongoing areas of disagreement and difference. The article concludes by outlining subjects on which critical conversation between the two fields may prove mutually enriching. Keywords: liberation theology, development economics, social analysis, institutions, poverty. JEL codes: O2, B2, Y8

Introduction

For some time now, the going assumption appears to have been that liberation theology is no friend to economics, and vice versa. Indeed, if the record of dialogue (or lack thereof) between the two fields can be taken as any indicator, they have very little in common: liberation theology is certainly not a regular subject in the pages of Faith & Economics.

There are good reasons for this interdisciplinary silence. On the side of economics, there is the fact that, as Valpy FitzGerald notes, “this theology does not really address the central questions of modern economic theory” (2008, p. 261). Rather, many liberation theologians originally
looked to Marxism as a model for their social analyses, and were often vague about the political economic arrangements they hoped would replace the oppressive status quo they critiqued. As the single review of a work of liberation theology in this journal complained some time ago, the text under review was “less than convincing” because it relied on “all-or-nothing thinking” and “ignore[d] any benefits of relatively free enterprise” (Black, 2005, p. 68).

In turn, among liberationists mainstream economics has regularly been viewed as an ideological tool of the developed world – when it is considered at all. Rather than economics itself, however, the earliest liberation theologians more frequently addressed the field’s practical fruit: “development.” Liberation theologians expressed significant disillusionment with the results of the various developmental paradigms imposed upon Latin American countries over the decades, and above all with the way that these seemed to entrench, instead of transforming, what they saw as fundamentally unjust social structures. Brazilian brothers Leonardo and Clodovis Boff summarized this sentiment well in their lamentation that despite the “great feats” to which developmental “reformism” may lead, “this development is nearly always at the expense of the oppressed poor and very rarely in their favor” (Boff and Boff, 1987, p. 5).

With all this in mind, now let us imagine that a liberationist priest and World Bank economist walk into a bar today, and strike up a conversation: Are they able to see eye to eye on anything? Has the passage of time changed anything? The argument of this article is that indeed it has; despite the historic estrangement of their fields, we suggest that these two would in fact find a few subjects on which they could agree, and even more areas where dialogue would be both possible and fruitful. Specifically, this article proposes that our imaginary interlocutors would find striking compatibilities between their different concerns, methods of social analysis, and approach to action planning, and that these points of commonality are more than enough to start a mutually enriching, if perhaps also mutually critical, conversation between the two sides.

This article advances this argument in three parts. The first of these addresses liberation theology by introducing its social goals and theological analysis of poverty, sketching its “See, Judge, Act” methodology of social analysis, and outlining its classic critique of development as a “top-down” approach to improving the lives of the poor. The article does
so primarily (although not exclusively) in conversation with Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino, two of the earliest and most influential practitioners and proponents of Catholic, Latin American liberation theology.

The second part turns to the field of development economics, and to the increasingly holistic understanding of human development now operative there. It highlights especially the capabilities approach first articulated by Amartya Sen and now widely used in the development community. Although this field does not have a single and articulated method of social analysis akin to “See, Judge, Act,” this part notes the trend in recent decades toward the use of randomized controlled trials and experimental economics, and growing emphases on attending to culture and empowering local agents in the development process.

The third part then outlines key areas of compatibility between the aims and methods of these fields as they stand today. It points out that each aims to understand poverty as a multidimensional problem, and to take a generally inductive and multidisciplinary approach to describing the social issues they seek to address. Moreover, each advocates for sustainable, community-led processes as the way forward. Despite differences in the “why” of the social action these fields aim to encourage, we suggest that there is now significant overlap between the professed “how” and the “who” of their problem-solving.

However, as this part also explains, this overlap is not total. As a branch of theology, liberationist thought is anchored by normative commitments that do not have analogues in development economics, including to an analysis of poverty as sinful (i.e. as the result of oppression), and thus to regular and critical reflection on the fundamental structures of a society. Liberationist thought also retains a healthy suspicion of the very market-based solutions that, in the view of development economics, are central to achieving progress for the poor. In contrast, (and despite its broadened theoretical account of development) the increasingly experimental methods of development economics tend to move that conversation toward what can be understood and improved through interventions on the margin within existing market frameworks.

The final part of this article thus does not suggest that individual liberationists and economists will necessarily agree on any one given topic, or that their methods and concerns are now perfectly compatible. However, after outlining areas where ongoing differences and
disagreement between the fields might lead to mutual critique, we argue that ultimately there is now a good chance of such a critical conversation being both intelligible and productive – and thus, of our hypothetical interlocutors eventually coming to view each other as allies on their quest to change the world for the better.

**Liberation Theology**

The term “liberation theology” now describes a broad set of conversations within theology and biblical studies that center on the economic, political, and social implications of the gospel message. One of the places in which this conversation originally emerged was the Latin American Catholic Church in the 1960s, as struggles for justice among the poor raised new questions about the connections between faith and everyday life. Out of the reflection generated in this context, priests such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino articulated a theology that sought to understand salvation and Christ from the perspective of and within the lives of the poor. This theology was originally viewed with suspicion by the Vatican, given its early reliance on Marxist categories of thought, not to mention its identification of the Church’s own hierarchy as complicit in the oppression of indigenous populations. Over time this suspicion has abated as dialogue between the Vatican and the council of Latin American bishops (CELAM) has progressed, and as liberation theology itself has evolved (see Rowland, 2009, for a usefully brief overview of this history). In fact, a number of themes and principles initially developed within liberation theology – including the concepts of social sin and the preferential option for the poor – have now migrated to the center of Catholic social teaching.

Since the 1960s, theologies of liberation have developed in a range of other ecclesial and local contexts, including Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and North America (on these movements in the US, see De La Torre, 2004). In what follows, this part focuses on Latin American Catholic liberation theology, especially as it has been articulated by Gutiérrez and Sobrino. In order, it sketches its conception of poverty and its social aims, its methodology of social analysis and problem-solving, and its historical critique of development. This introduction cannot speak to the full diversity of liberation theologies today, and risks giving a false impression of homogeneity even within Latin American and Catholic thought.
It does so, however, in order to provide readers with a basic overview of some of the key commitments and perspectives that continue to fund much liberationist thought and practice today.

What's the problem, and what's the goal? Poverty as sinful; salvation as entailing this-worldly liberation

We begin with liberation theology’s distinctly spiritual understanding of poverty. In Gutiérrez’s field-defining work, *A Theology of Liberation*, he set the tone for future liberationist treatments of the issue by distinguishing between spiritual, evangelical, and material poverty. While scripture and Christ’s own example affirm the value of the first two of these, Gutiérrez found the latter to be a “scandalous condition” (Gutiérrez, 1973, p. 165; see also CELAM, 1968a, p. 4). By the very fact that it unnecessarily exposes individuals to physical suffering, social exploitation, and early death, he argued, material poverty contradicts the divine wishes for humanity expressed in “the mandate of Genesis” (Gutiérrez, 1973, p. 168). Gutiérrez pointed out, moreover, that scripture rarely treats poverty as an accidental or neutral fact of life, and tends to depict it instead as a shameful state of affairs caused by “the injustice of oppressors” (p. 165). In this view, then, poverty is regularly the result of sin on the part of the powerful – especially when it is experienced by entire people groups, and perdures over generations.

Liberationist thought thus assumes that poverty is regularly “dialectical” (or “conflictive”) and is produced by social systems and institutions (Boff and Boff, 1987, p. 27; Sobrino, 1993, p. 81; Sobrino, 2008, p. 31). Liberationists have developed a range of conceptual tools to analyze these systems, including the concepts of “social sin,” “structural sin,” and even “structural violence” (González Faus, 1993, pp. 536–539; on structural violence specifically, see Farmer and Gutierrez, 2013, pp. 95–146, and Whelan, 2019, especially p. 641). These acknowledge that while social institutions and structures may be misshaped by and reflect individual sin, they also come to exercise an impersonal kind of power that transcends individual wrongdoing. In addition to imposing suffering, such structures can also become morally corrupting; as Jesuit, José Ignacio González Faus, summarizes the teachings of the Latin American bishops: “When human beings sin, they create structures of sin, which, in their turn, make human beings sin” (González Faus, 1993, p. 537). Ignacio Ellacuría puts it even more pointedly: structures “manifest and actualize
the power of sin, thereby causing sin, by making it exceedingly difficult for men and women to lead the life that is rightfully theirs as daughters and sons of God” (cited in Sobrino, 1993, p. 355). With this in mind, liberation theology holds that institutions and structures, as well as persons, can be sinful, and thus stand in need of transformation.

In liberation theology, this transformation is not only necessary as a matter of justice. Rather, working to dismantle structural sin and its effects is also a central aspect of conversion, and what it means to both receive and share the good news of the gospel. For this, ultimately, is the goal of liberation theology: salvation. While liberation theology often begins from a meditation on material deprivation, its exact opposite – material abundance – is only fully meaningful as a goal when placed within the larger pursuit of spiritual and holistic liberation that are the hallmarks of the Kingdom.

This three-dimensional, “concrete,” and even this-worldly, view of salvation is a result of the commitment in liberation theology to reading scripture through the eyes of the poor (Sobrino, 2008, p. 57). Reading the gospel from a context of material suffering brings into sharp relief Jesus’ identity as “liberator,” and the tangible nature of the “good news” he brought – not only through the healing, feeding, teaching, and interpersonal care he so often offered, but in the link between his proclamation of the Kingdom and the Hebrew prophetic tradition (Sobrino, 1993, especially pp. 17–18; Sobrino, 2001). As the Latin American bishops wrote, the Son was sent “to liberate everyone from the slavery to which sin has subjected them: hunger, misery, all oppression and ignorance, in a word the injustice and hatred which have their origin in human selfishness” (CELAM, 1968b, p. 3).

In contrast to overly spiritualized Christologies and hermeneutics, liberationist readings of scripture see integral linkages between the spiritual and material aspects of the redemption that salvation brings. As Leonardo Boff put it, the process it initiates:

is a comprehensive one, spanning economics (liberation from material poverty), politics (liberation from social oppression, and the appearance of a new human being), and religion (liberation from sin, the re-creation of men and women in their total realization and actualization in God). These phases are not successive but simultaneous. Thus a struggle for economic liberation is also a struggle for political and religious liberation. In other words,
justice and grace are affairs of economics too… with each of the three areas opening out upon the other two. … The theology of liberation reflects on the theological dimension of this historical process. (Boff, 2011, pp. 59–60)

Against theological tendencies to universalize salvation as an abstract state, liberationist thought thus affirms that it is both a “state of affairs” and a “process,” and that its “substance… will be understood differently in different places” (Sobrino, 2008, p. 57).

In such a view, what is at stake with regard to social sin is no less than the ability of oppressed peoples to live into their salvation, and into the integral freedom for which they have been made. To be clear, this should not be read as entailing the claim that social oppression can block anyone’s soteriological status, or that the eschatological destiny of the poor is in the hands of the powerful on earth; in this ultimate sense, salvation comes from God alone. The claim is the inverse: rather, that Jesus’ earthly ministry and initiation of the Kingdom indicates that the liberation from (inner, personal) sin that salvation brings is naturally complemented and completed by work to liberate the oppressed from the (outer, social) sin that impedes their flourishing in the here and now.4 For this reason, working for justice is an integral part of what it means to say “God loves you” to the poor (Farmer and Gutiérrez, 2013, p. 27), and to live in service to the reign of God (Sobrino, 1993). Moreover, in an important sense, this work and the communion with the poor from which it springs offers the non-poor a chance to receive grace as well, insofar as it helps them begin to see the world more clearly.5

Individual liberationists differ in how they describe the concrete dimensions and results of this work for justice, and the ways that God’s reign intersects with existing political and economic structures. Even limiting our focus to Catholic and Latin American reflection, we find a range of political visions – as is to be expected when considering a movement that has been developing now for half a century in a number of different national contexts. Some call for specific reforms of existing legal, political, and social institutions, while others use the much more dramatic rhetoric of “revolution” (e.g. Boff and Boff, 1987, p. 27). Given that only a few now specify markets and/or private property itself as their targets (e.g. Duchrow and Hinkelammert, 2004), we do not agree with FitzGerald’s sweeping conclusion that liberation theology overall “considers capital and labour… to be essentially in conflict by their very
natures” (FitzGerald, 2007, p. 261). Indeed, while early liberationists were known for using Marxist categories of thought (including and especially class struggle and dependency theory), the field as a whole has moved in recent decades toward a more sophisticated sociological analysis that has metabolized Marxist cultural analysis but that no longer reproduces Marxist concepts wholesale. Moreover, even early liberationist thought that heavily relied on Marxist categories tended not to propose concrete political economic agendas. While this has sometimes frustrated critics, it is in keeping with the traditional Catholic claim that while “the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel,” it “does not propose economic and political systems or programs” (Vatican Council II, 1965, p. 4; John Paul II, 1987, p. 41). What certainly can be said is that, in their interpretations of the signs in their contexts, liberation theologians have never been reticent to identify specific institutions and systems as unjust, and thus to argue for their abolition or transformation.

**Social analytical methodology: See, Judge, Act**

At the heart of liberationist social and ethical analysis lays the “See, Judge, Act” method. Originally formulated in the early twentieth century by the Belgian cardinal, Joseph Cardijn (and perhaps based on Aquinas’ description of prudence), this method has now been almost fully adopted and metabolized within the broader field of Catholic social thought (and is the structuring principle of Pope Francis’ encyclicals *Laudato Si’* and *Fratelli Tutti*, for example). Its major development, however, was in the hands of Latin American bishops and liberation theologians. The method itself moves from a critical interpretation of reality through a spiritual assessment of that reality, and toward the goal of transformative social action.

**See**

This first step requires the close observation of a specific social problem or form of suffering, in order to understand both its root causes and the full impact (Farmer and Gutierrez, 2013, pp. 37–45). An indispensable aspect of this is the requirement to begin by listening to the experiences of those directly affected. Being present with and consulting the poor is sometimes referred to as “participation,” and occasionally described as “step zero” in the methodology of liberation theology (Boff and Boff,
1987, p. 40) in recognition of its utter necessity for the steps that follow. As Gutiérrez puts it, “the first thing to do is listen” (cited in Farmer and Gutierrez, 2013, p. 23). On a liberationist reading, this listening is not only owed to the poor out of respect for their dignity and necessary as a way to empower them as agents within their own lives, but is also pragmatically critical, given their privileged insight into the nature and dynamics of their own oppression (a principle sometimes called the “epistemological privilege of the poor” (Boff, 2011; see also Singh, 2017).

Equally integral in this first step is a broad consultation with the resources of the social sciences, and any other disciplines that offer insight into the complexity of human social life, including economics (Boff, 2011, p. 113; Farmer and Gutierrez, 2013, p. 20). In the earliest years of the field, Marxist thought was infamously preeminent among these, although we should not oversimplify liberation theology’s relationship with Marxism. Even before the 1980s, there was significant diversity of attitudes among theologians toward Marxism, ranging from attempts at a full synthesis (as in advocacy for Christian socialism) to careful usage of selected elements (such as praxis, ideology, and class conflict); Gutiérrez (1973) arguably presents an example of the latter approach (Rowland, 2009). Gutiérrez’ contemporary body of thought also illustrates the earlier mentioned development in the field since roughly the 1980s, owing at least in part to criticisms from Rome and developments in Eastern Europe.

**Judge**

As its name indicates, the second step of social analysis moves to attribute moral responsibility. Where the step of seeing identifies causation, the step of judging a community uses resources from within the Christian tradition to discern where the causal relationships it has found are sinful and stand in need of transformation (Farmer and Gutierrez, 2013, p. 40). Like seeing, it prioritizes the perspectives of the poor, and their interpretations of scripture “are given a leading role” (Singh, 2017, p. 559).

This step is a challenging one, in that alongside assigning responsibility to external parties and decisions it also requires involved agents to recognize their own role in sustaining oppressive structures. Even if their only participation is passive, this step thus calls the theologian and involved communities to a process of “conversion,” which may require “a break with the social milieu to which we belong” (Farmer and Gutiérrez,
Judging is thus at once social and communal/personal, and it requires a turning away from sin that may be ongoing (Farmer and Gutiérrez, 2013, p. 83).

**Act**

The third stage or step of this process moves the theologian and/or reflecting community to action, and to concrete work for justice undertaken in solidarity with the oppressed. This criterion of solidarity is critical: for action to be truly effective, it cannot be done exclusively for the poor, or from a distance. Rather, it must be done with them; as Leonardo and Clodovis Boff write: “the definition of action can of course be only a collective task, carried out by all those involved in the particular question of the moment” (Boff and Boff, 1987, p. 40). Whatever course of action is taken must reflect the specific desires of an oppressed people to become agents of their own lives, and empower their own efforts to transform the worlds they inhabit. Toward this end, this stage of practical engagement urges approaches to social transformation that are creative and collaborative (and, in light of the observations of the first step, interdisciplinary). As Gutiérrez (citing Ignatian spirituality) observes, the liberationist goal of pursuing effective action within human history encourages an attitude of dependence on providence, but at the same time makes use of all known “human means to succeed” (Farmer and Gutiérrez, 2013, p. 84).

Gutiérrez and others frequently use the term “praxis” to highlight the interconnections between the experiential and cognitive dimensions of faith, and of the way that the truth of Christ’s message is disclosed within this historical action toward liberation (Boff, 2011). As Sobrino argues, practical service of the Reign of God “enhances one’s grasp of the reality to be taken up... In the doing of justice appears all the depth of injustice” (Sobrino, 1993, p. 377). In this sense, rather than being a “final” step, action returns the theologian to the “first” step of seeing, now with new insight into a specific historical moment. “See, Judge, Act” is thus meant to be an iterative and ongoing process of analysis, and circular rather than linear (Dávila, 2012a).

*Liberation theology’s historical critique of “development”*

The emphasis in the “Act” step on fostering the agency of the poor themselves begins to explain liberation theology’s historical antipathy
to what it knew by the name of “development.” In the experience of the liberationists, progress cannot be true – or “authentic,” as the Latin American bishops put it – development if it is simply imposed upon a people (CELAM, 1968b, p. 11). What is needed instead is a process of empowerment that enables oppressed peoples to become the subjects of their own lives, and co-architects of their own futures. While material progress is certainly a component of this, it must be pursued within a comprehensive process of liberation that is inclusive, collaborative, and local.

In the experience of the liberationists, the development sold to Latin America in the middle of the twentieth century was anything but. High expectations in the 1950s went unfulfilled, and led to disillusionment in the following decades with Western and Northern programs. Gutiérrez argued that the developmentalist paradigm of the 1960s, for example, “stayed on an abstract and ahistorical level,” and thus “made it impossible to appreciate both the complexity of the problem and the inevitable conflictual aspects” of poverty in Latin America (Gutiérrez, 1973, p. 51). Indeed, rather than beginning the deep structural reforms many felt were necessary, development programs focused on “timid” and incremental changes that many felt “were often nothing more than new and underhanded ways of increasing the power of strong economic groups” (Gutiérrez, 1973, p. 17).

Alongside its outside-in and top-down nature, liberation theology’s second major concern with development was this: the way that it amounted to a mere reshuffling of the existing and unequal status quo – or the “reformism” to which the Boffs referred. What was needed instead was a deeper and more radical judgment of existing institutions (Gutiérrez, 1971, p. 247), as part of a collaborative process of social transformation that springs from and is open to God’s transformation of individuals, as well:

> Concern for effective action is a way of expressing love for the other. …we must show society a reign that is not reducible to energy expended in the service of human development, but that has its source in an encounter with a personal God with whom intimacy is bestowed as a gift and who, once given to us, neither suppresses nor competes with the human effort to build a better world. (Farmer and Gutiérrez, 2013, pp. 83–4)
Gutiérrez’ reference to an encounter with God introduces a further concern with development programming and discourse: the way that it has prioritized economic growth over other dimensions of social development. As Sobrino has argued, such an exclusive focus itself can even be “dehumanizing,” if attempts to eliminate poverty “effectively bracket people’s dignity… [and if] It is simply accepted that any means is good as long as it alleviates poverty. …we are not talking about feeding a species of wild animal, but about nourishing human beings” (Sobrino, 2008, p. 41).

**Development Economics**

This part turns to consider development economics, a field that focuses on understanding growth and development processes in order to improve the lives of the global population, and which has provided the intellectual scaffolding supporting practical development discourse and policies. Even more so than liberation theology, development economics has undergone significant changes in recent decades, and in many ways is entirely different now from when it emerged in the postwar era (at least as a distinct academic subfield; on the antecedents to development economics in the more distant past of economics, see Alacevich, 2018, pp. 116–118). Also like liberation theology, it is not monolithic, and continues to host a number of competing perspectives, perhaps even more so than other areas of economics. As with the above part, a comprehensive survey of the field is beyond the capacity of this article. The following sections focus selectively upon the transition toward viewing development in terms of capabilities, and on the growing use of experimental approaches and RCTs in development work and research.

*What’s the problem? What’s the goal? From growth as income to development as capabilities*

Since its emergence as a distinct academic discipline in the postwar era, development economics has been a discipline on the move. The earliest wisdom focused on the need for structural change in the sectors of developing economies, and on using state planning to encourage industrialization in particular. The 1970s and 1980s then saw a transition (or “counterrevolution”) to a more “neoconservative” conceptual paradigm (e.g. Toye, 2018). In contrast to the earlier planning-centric
model aimed at structural transformation, this focused on monetarism and market-oriented or laissez faire policies generally oriented around what Lawrence Summers and Lant Pritchett called “the four ‘…ations’” of structural adjustment programs: “stabilization, liberalization, deregulation, privatization” (Summers and Pritchett, 1993, p. 383).

As a correction to the failures of the planning-centric approach, it could be argued that the move to pursue these “ations” represented a step toward acknowledging the complexity of development and the importance of empowering human agency on the ground. In both these eras, however, the field remained highly theoretical, and highly focused on growth – in the view of some, to the point of a “fetish” (Khan 2020, p. 20). Roughly until the 1990s or so, poverty was largely conceptualized in terms of lack of growth, and thus assumed to be visible through national systems of accounting measures such as GNP. Over the course of these decades, the exact shape of the “problem” – that is, what was understood to impede national growth – varied depending on the economic paradigm of the observer, as naturally did the necessary solutions (e.g. see Saad-Filho, 2010). Whether Keynesian or “neoliberal,” however, solutions tended to be top-down in nature, proposed by academics and policy makers located and/or trained in the US and Britain, and oriented toward helping developing nations conform to a path presumed to have been taken by prosperous and industrialized nations. Originally meant to be prescribed “judiciously, not mechanistically” (UNDESA, 2017, p. xi), the now much-criticized Washington Consensus list of goals widely shared among organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Williamson, 2004) eventually coalesced into something of a checklist of policy prescriptions.

It is precisely such one-size-fits-all and growth-obsessed thinking that liberationist scholarship has had in mind when critiquing what it identifies as “development.” Theologians were not alone, either, in voicing concern about these policies or the underlying views of poverty and progress on which they were based. Some of this critique came from within economics itself (which should be unsurprising given its internal diversity; e.g. see Khan, 2020, for an overview of heterodox critiques of the mainstream within development economics). As early as the 1960s, figures such as Dudley Seers argued that GNP should be “dethroned,” on the grounds that it obscured other important measures such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment (Seers, 1969; see Nafziger, 2007, for
more on Seers’ critiques of growth as an objective). Later, in the 1980s, the harsh consequences of austerity policies in places like Latin America generated an even greater critical response to dominant growth-oriented thinking from voices both within and external to academia (e.g. see Cornia et al., 1987; Woodward, 1992; for a more recent and concise analysis of the conceptual failures leading to the “lost decade” of development, see UN–DESA, 2017).

In the past three decades, development economics has accordingly broadened its focus, and now attends more closely to an ever-growing range of concerns, including environmental sustainability, gender equality, the role of institutions, social policies, and state effectiveness. As Julie Schaffner summed it up in this forum: the field “has come a long way over the last 30 years,” and is now “more coherent, more grounded in empirical reality, and richer in its conceptions of well-being, people and socioeconomic systems” (Schaffner, 2014, p. 1). In what follows, we focus on the expanded definition of development underlying this transformation, and specifically on the influential “human development” framework that developed out of Amartya Sen’s arguments for taking a capabilities approach to assessing welfare (e.g. Sen, 1974, 1979 and 1980; for more on the development of this into a larger theory of justice and even a field in its own right see Sen, 1999, and Robeyns, 2017, respectively).

In Sen’s view, the goal of development should be expanding freedoms – or capabilities – rather than simply maximizing income (1980, 1985). While income is certainly useful in facilitating personal capacities and outcomes, it is not itself determinative, given that access to the same level of resources does not lead to the same level of utility for all persons (Sen, 1980). Conversely, neither is lack of income itself a lack of well-being so much as a form of being unable to pursue well-being. Economic models and evaluative frameworks focused on income thus effectively measure means, rather than ends. To ascertain an individual’s true experience of well-being, Sen argued, we must draw on a richer base of information, enquiring into what sorts of “valuable functionings” an individual’s social, personal, and physical circumstances practically (and not merely formally) enable (Sen, 1985, p. 200). In short, we must attend to questions of freedom and agency as agents experience them within particular contexts.

Insofar as Sen’s perspective has gained traction, this clearly signaled a dramatic expansion of the objective of both the theory and practice of
development economics – and, indeed, the consensus now appears to be that development includes, but far exceeds, sheer growth. The United Nations Development Programme’s first *Human Development Report*, for example, identified income as at best a partial proxy for development, which it defined as “a process of enlarging people’s choices,” among the “most critical” of which are “to lead a long and healthy life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living,” and which also include “political freedom, guaranteed human rights and self-respect” (UNDP, 1990, p. 10). Clarifying that income is not “an end in itself” (p. iii), this report also proposed the multidimensional Human Development Index (HDI), which includes indicators such as literacy and life expectancy alongside national income. In turn, this transformed account of development has also led to an evolution in our understanding of the problems that development solves, as illustrated in the emergence of measures such as the Multidimensional Poverty Indicator (MPI) that attend to non-monetary forms of deprivation (Alkire and Foster, 2009; UNDP, 2010).

To be clear, none of these developments indicates that development economics has ceased to be a branch of economics and become instead a kind of philosophy; growth remains a central and ineliminable measure of success, and development is often still assumed to require at least a couple of Summers and Pritchett’s “ations.” Moreover, neither the HDI nor the MPI has displaced GNP (and, when it comes to it, are themselves widely acknowledged to be imperfect indicators). However, the fact that such holistic indicators are “increasingly presented alongside” monetary measures does indicate a more fundamental broadening in the field’s understanding of its objective (Stewart, 2018, p. 31). With clear echoes of language drawn from both Sen and the UNDP, for example, one popular textbook for undergraduates defines development as “the process of improving the quality of all human lives and capabilities by raising people’s levels of living, self-esteem, and freedom” (Todaro and Smith, 2020, p. 2).

*Social analytical methodolog(ies)*

With an eye toward the interaction between our hypothetical liberationist priest and our development economist, we might ask: What’s the payoff of this? That is, to what sorts of methods of social analysis and problem-solving have these theoretical developments led? How would
our World Bank staffer understand and approach a specific issue facing our priest’s geographic region, for example?

In this part, we begin to answer this by enquiring into how development economics encourages its practitioners to see, judge, and act in the world. Clearly, any discipline could be analyzed as requiring some form of seeing, judging, and acting, so our argument is not that the mere presence of such activities in economics is itself a sign of compatibility with liberationist thought. Instead, our goal here is sketch methodological trends in development theory and practice (with the obvious caveat that such a summary necessarily trades in rough generalizations due to the field’s methodological pluralism – see Rodrik, 2006) in such a way as to enable the following part to assess the prospects for – and remaining obstacles to – a mutually intelligible conversation between the fields.

See
Two features of how contemporary development economics trains its practitioners to view poverty stand out to us as relevant and significant: the current sense that the variability of poverty requires contextualizing conversations about development, and the increasing use of RCTs to find “what works.” The first of these is a marked departure from the processes of “seeing” functionally encouraged in earlier eras in the field, during which development problems were more often presumed to be roughly knowable in all their important particulars from a distance. The more capacious conception of poverty currently in use has expanded the range of faces that these problems may present, as the human development approach has in turn broadened the goalposts for what progress may require and entail. (As Alkire points out, because capabilities are subjective, “no one ‘list’ of basic capabilities will be relevant to every evaluation or assessment or measurement exercise or index” (Alkire, 2005, p. 127).) Even more relevant to our concerns here is that a growing awareness of the complexity and variability of poverty and development appears to be funding a commitment on the part of development institutions to engaging the particulars of specific regions before pronouncing on the shape of the problems they hope to solve there. The World Bank’s current strategy overview declares “taking into account the voices of the poor” to be a central element of its diagnostic approach to developing individualized country plans, for example (World Bank Group, 2014, p. 7). In a sense, we might say that development economics thus
encourages its practitioners to engage in a more inductive and perhaps even receptive process of conceptualizing poverty than it has in the past. That said, the precise dynamics to which academics and NGOs attend (and thus the nature of the “problems” they identify) are still to a large extent determined by their own training, preferences, and institutional priorities.

Something similar is the case with the increased use of randomized experiments, which have “changed the face of development economics research and teaching” (Alacevich and Boianovsky, 2018, p. 10) perhaps reflecting an underlying move from theory toward empirical work within the field more generally (Hamermesh, 2013). While this trend has obvious relevance for how economists design interventions and thus “act,” it is arguably also coming to shape how they “see” poverty as well, by encouraging attention to empirical research in place of grand narratives. Indeed, Banerjee and Duflo have argued that RCTs offers a way forward out of the Sachs–Easterly debate on aid effectiveness, which has seemed so intractable in no small part due to the incompatibility of the explanatory theories at work on each side. Urging instead what might be considered epistemic modesty, Banerjee and Duflo present their work as

an invitation to look more closely. If we resist the kind of lazy, formulaic thinking that reduces every problem to the same set of general principles; if we listen to poor people themselves and force ourselves to understand the logic of their choices; if we accept the possibility of error and subject every idea, including the most apparently commonsensical ones, to rigorous empirical testing, then we will be able not only to construct a toolbox of effective policies but also to better understand why the poor live the way they do. (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011, p. 272)

Emphasizing that experimental results may overturn a priori expectations, Banerjee and Duflo here frame RCTs as a form of listening to the poor, and of taking into account their priorities. Moreover, they urge restraint in extrapolating from experimental data: in their view, the goal of experimentation is not to ultimately build a better overarching theory of development, but to yield insight that is necessarily limited in scope. To the extent that this approach is dominant moving forward, development economics will encourage a process of “seeing” that is fairly
granular, and focused on the kinds of small-scale phenomena that can be seen and altered through experimental interventions.

**Judge**

Asking in what sense economics encourages normative and evaluative judgment is a perennially complicated question. As has been regularly discussed in the pages of *Faith & Economics*, while the rhetoric of economics regularly aspires to be value-free, it is difficult to avoid value judgments altogether (e.g. see Monsma et al., 2007).

In development economics, normative judgments are perhaps more visible than in other subfields, given the objective of promoting development – a widely-agreed upon value to be sure, but a value nonetheless. In each of the conceptual paradigms discussed above, one finds grounds on which to judge social phenomena as “better” and “worse,” based on whether they contribute to or hinder growth.

This sort of normative tone is especially noticeable in discussions of the role of institutions, given the clear evidence of the importance of “strong” or “healthy” institutions – and “effective” or “good” government – for sustainable growth (e.g. Acemoglu et al., 2005). Such framing language naturally positions “weak” institutions and the practices and cultures that sustain them as at fault for prolonged underdevelopment, and thus as “bad.” Similarly judgmental attitudes are also visible in the Sachs–Easterly debate on aid, with scholars on each side not only blaming underdevelopment on different causal factors, but also condemning what they view as ideologically driven errors and “delusions” on the other side (e.g. Easterly, 2006, p. 24).

**Act**

The primary “action” toward which development economics is oriented is policy. What, if anything, can we say about the practical method of a field that is not only internally diverse but that addresses an ever-growing range of subjects in as many different contexts as there are developing regions in the world?

While it would not do to overstate unity in the field, either in research or practice, one clear trend appears to be a move away from using “blueprints” (Rodrik, 2006, p. 974), and toward more diversity in policy planning. Reflecting on some of the prominent failures of Washington Consensus policies, for example, a 2005 World Bank review of policy
targets from the 1990s went so far as to call for “humility” in light of the fact that “there is no unique universal set of rules” (World Bank Group, 2005, p. xiii). Indeed, this report argued that “we need to get away from formulae,” and recognize that “policy advice must be country-specific and institution-sensitive” (pp. xiii, xii). The UNDP’s 2017 Strategic Plan likewise holds:

There is therefore no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to development. Countries determine their development priorities and approaches in response to their unique circumstances, seeking new ways to address complex challenges and trade-offs amidst uncertainty. Developmental challenges can affect women, men and children differently, requiring differentiated responses to ensure that no one is left behind. The enormity and the rapid pace of change necessitate decisive and coherent action on many fronts, with multiple actors and across different levels. (UN–DESA, 2017, p. 8)

As a result of this shift, development policy goals now extend significantly beyond the macro-level focus on privatization, deregulation, and liberalization and into a wide range of areas, including “soft” domains such as culture and education. In addition to varying depending on the local context, goals are now also designed with smaller regional areas in mind, given that development outcomes are not necessarily homogenous within a nation’s borders (e.g. World Bank Group, 2005, p. 25). Furthermore, there is broad recognition that achieving these goals requires working with partners in civil society as well as government, the private sector, and international financial institutions – and, moreover, that sustainable reform may require decentralizing decision-making authority, and “shifting key implementation choices to agents with better access to local information and stronger motivation” (Schaffner, 2014, p. 19). In short, the general framework in use “facilitates policy analysis that is disaggregated from beginning to end” (Schaffner, 2014, p. 20).

Two further developments deserve mention for their contribution to this more case-by-case approach to policy prescription (and thus to problem-solving): the earlier discussed “explosion of randomized experiments in development economics” (Banerjee and Duflo, 2009, p. 152), and the growing engagement of behavioral insights. Regarding the first of these, Banerjee and Duflo have argued that a “process of creative experimentation” in which researchers and policymakers collaborate to
“think out of the box and learn from successes and failures” now enables economists to design much more effective interventions (Banerjee and Duflo, 2009, p. 174). Regarding the second, it is possible that a related momentum is arising from the incorporation of cognitive and behavioral methods in development research and theory. While some behavioral literature simply relies on allegedly universal insights into psychology, other work studies “differences in psychology across cultures or across rich and poor,” and “the interaction of behavioral biases with the institutions and markets specific to developing economies” (Kremer et al., 2019, p. 2). By attending to the particularities of specific contexts, such scholarship further directs those hoping to “harness” the power of psychology for economic interventions to the importance of local knowledge (Demeritt and Hoff, 2018, p. 318).

Prospects for a Fruitful Alliance?

On any telling, liberation theology and development economics clearly remain distinct disciplines. However, it seems to us that their differences are mostly ones of language, focus, methods, and priorities and not, ultimately, of truly opposing core values, such that a practitioner would be forced to choose between them. With regard to development economics, we agree with Schaffner that the general framework currently in place is “fully compatible with a Christian worldview” (Schaffner, 2014 p. 21). In turn, we hold that, as a field, liberation theology need not be viewed as intrinsically hostile to either the theory or the practice of development economics.

More than this, in fact: our argument is that the fields have a surprising amount in common and, indeed, much that they may offer to each other. This is especially true if we keep in view the limitations of each form of discourse, and what each does and does not propose to do. In this part, we outline areas of alignment (or, if not full alignment, compatibility) between the normative and methodological commitments of the fields, addressing in turn their conceptions of the problem from which they begin (poverty), the goals toward which they aim (salvation/liberation and human development), and the methods, strategies, and assumptions they employ when problem-solving how to get from the one to the other. While we note important differences throughout, we then list a number of ways that the fields – and thus our imaginary
interlocutors—might be useful to one another, including through mutual critique.

Emerging compatibilities
We begin with the two fields’ understandings of the problem from which they begin: poverty. To state the obvious, both fields take poverty to be an actionable problem that is, if not solvable, at least reducible. More substantively, as they stand today both are concerned not only with quantifiable material deprivation but, more generally, with the way poverty represents and contributes to a lack of agency and holistic well-being. The liberationist analysis places this within the larger horizon of a biblical worldview, and views material poverty as a barrier to the this-worldly experience of salvation as liberation, and thus as something that contradicts God’s will for both individuals and people groups; in this analysis it far exceeds even the multidimensional view of poverty adopted by the development community. However, this is not an incompatibility so much as it is simply a difference, of the sort to be expected when comparing the working definitions and aims of a theological sub-discipline with those of a secular social science.

Something similar is the case with the goals of these two fields: while the one goal (liberation and salvation) is much more expansive and normatively charged than the other (human development), the two are not necessarily in conflict. From the perspective of our priest, the fact that human development is understood as an open-ended process of social empowerment would presumably be particularly well received.8 So understood, economic development may now contribute to liberation, insofar as God desires the holistic and this-worldly flourishing of humanity.

A third area of shared values is found in the problem-solving methodologies of the two fields. Specifically, liberation theology and development economics share an expressed commitment to listening to and empowering local communities, and both acknowledge the dangers and inefficiencies of large external agencies imposing overly theoretical reform programs. Although commenting on a World Bank report, Rodrik could have just as easily been summarizing a pastoral letter from the Latin American bishops or an essay by Gutiérrez when he writes: “It warns us to be skeptical of top-down, comprehensive, universal solutions—no matter how well intentioned they may be” (Rodrik, 2006,
p. 986). It might even be possible to compare the self-understanding of
the roles played by the priest and agencies such as the UNDP or World
Bank, if each views themself not as the principal agent of change but as
tasked with midwifing the process of empowerment in which the poor
themselves are the true agents.

If this is the most exciting area in which the values of these two fields
are appearing to converge, it is also the most tenuous. It is surely much
easier to disavow the arrogance of grand plans and externally imposed
expertise on paper than it is in practice, and it might be a stretch to call
any programs designed and implemented by institutions as large as the
World Bank or UN truly “bottom-up.” In what regards can we expect the
practice (and not just the theory) of development economics to respect
and promote the Catholic theological principle of subsidiarity, which
holds that authority ought to be exercised by the lowest agency possible,
and only centralized for tasks that cannot be accomplished at the local
level? (For more on subsidiarity and development specifically, see Kelley,
2008.) The answer to this may depend on the direction the field takes in
the coming decades, and the long-term reception of arguments for pur-
suing modest and piecemeal goals over “big plans” (e.g. Easterly, 2001,
2006). In this regard, Banerjee and Duflo’s framing of RCTs as a form
of listening to the poor seems especially promising. Even so, however,
RCTs are still largely designed by non-local experts and necessarily lim-
ited in the sort of data they can yield and the objectives they can accom-
plish. While perhaps welcoming the shift away from a priori prescriptions
in development research, we could therefore imagine our liberationist
pastor carefully scrutinizing any interventions proposed for his commu-
nity, with an eye toward whether they yield genuine insight into how to
pursue the form of development most desired by the community itself.

Areas of mutual critique, and assistance
We suspect that in addition to finding the above subjects of (at least par-
tial) agreement, our imagined dialogue partners would also find areas in
which their expertise may be mutually beneficial, sometimes through the
challenges that the paradigm and values of each would present to the other.

To start with, economics clearly contains a wealth of resources useful
for liberation theology’s quest to “see” social problems in their full com-
plexity, and to attain nuanced understandings of the dynamics inhibiting
communal flourishing. Indeed, Catholic social thought more generally
has long accorded a critical role to the social sciences in empowering ethical reflection, and more recently liberationists have identified economics specifically as an important resource (e.g. Dávila, 2012a, p. 237). We suspect that further engagement with the theory and practice of development economics would usefully broaden and deepen theological analyses of a range of specific economic injustices. Above all, economic research contains insight into the empirical dimensions of the situations upon which theologians reflect, and thus offers help in their efforts to “see” what Mary Hirschfeld (2017) has called “facts on the ground.”

Perhaps less obvious is the way that economics may also be useful for the theological moment of “judging.” Insofar as economic literature yields insights into possible remedies for oppressive dynamics, it can bring into sharper relief the essential unjustness of those dynamics, by confirming their contingency – as FitzGerald has argued: “the critique of observed economic injustice can lose its force unless it is accompanied by some idea as to what would constitute a just economy in practice” (FitzGerald, 2007, p. 258). Finally, however, our economist would surely also counsel caution in our priest’s calls for structural change, and careful consideration of the trade-offs and unintended consequences of all policy planning especially (indeed, this is arguably economics’ most well-known contribution to theology; for more on this, see Yuengert, 2017). In recent decades, liberation theology has arguably become more “pragmatic and down to earth” (Klaiber, 2013; see also Dávila, 2012b, for an illustration of this); a conversation with development economics would invite it to become even more so, by attending specifically to how markets may host justice as well as injustice.

In turn, what might our priest have to offer our economist? If our economist identifies as a Christian, liberation theology offers them one articulation of the broader moral and spiritual horizon within which the goals of their profession make sense – and indeed, within which all the empirical disciplines are given their fundamental meaning. In important ways, this larger horizon both reaffirms and challenges the current pursuit of development. While wholeheartedly appreciating all gains in well-being brought by economic interventions, for example, we could imagine our priest reminding our development expert of the need to be wary of imposing plans that do not reflect a community’s own priorities.

Indeed, liberation theology consistently emphasizes the need to find ways to let the poor become agents of their own destiny by having a
genuine voice in social processes that affect them. This is based in the presupposition that true development is ultimately a material and spiritual process, related to the individual and community’s experiences of sanctification and salvation. Despite the current commitment to jettisoning expert “blueprints” in favor of detailed country investigations, it still may be hard to eliminate a fundamental assumption of control by experts from the social sciences. (Consider, for example, the framing of Todaro and Smith’s earlier-cited definition of development: who is “raising people’s” living standards and “improving the quality of all human lives,” exactly?) Wary of programs that, at the end of the day, still attempt to manipulate behavior – even if by means of highly sophisticated and ultra-tailored incentives – our priest might regularly ask whether interventions could be designed so as to promote relationships of “social proximity” between development workers and those they seek to empower, and thus to encourage what liberationists call accompaniment (Farmer and Gutierrez, 2013, p. 128). Put differently, while development economics has begun to become more attentive to development as a process in service to the flourishing of whole persons, a conversation with theology would invite it to become even more so.

We could also imagine our priest suggesting that economics could use something like liberation theology’s understanding of structural sin and the necessity of conflict for some social transformation; and challenging our development expert not to let an overly narrow focus on small interventions get in the way of big-picture thinking about barriers to communal flourishing. As explained above, liberation theology has a “conflictual,” or “dialectical” analysis of poverty, which assumes that it is regularly the result of injustice, both structural and personal. As a result, it acknowledges that the liberative process of salvation regularly “takes place in opposition to other realities and processes, and even in conflict with them” (Sobrino, 2008, p. 57). That is, that enacting justice may require significantly challenging – and not just tinkering with – the status quo. Even granting that a Christian economist might be personally comfortable using the language of sin to describe dynamics they view as corrupt or oppressive, this perspective both exceeds and in some ways conflicts with the policy-oriented nature of economics, which is not well equipped to enable such sweeping, systematic critiques. With this in mind, our priest might encourage our economist to be bolder in thinking about what broader structures stand in need of transformation, and not
to be content to aim for merely marginal or incremental improvements within existing institutions.

On a more personal level, our hypothetical priest might invite our development expert to a process of conversion. For one thing, liberation theology urges us to ask whether and how even the experts from a distance might have a role to play in sustaining, and therefore also in transforming, the dynamics holding the poor back in developing communities – See, Judge, Act is meant to be an uncomfortable and challenging process, no matter who undertakes it. For another, this methodology also foregrounds the need to be alert to the ever-present temptation to “fix things” for the poor, rather than to serve them by empowering their own leadership (a danger in ministry as much as it is in development!). Finally, our priest might push our economist to continually locate their focus on policy within a broader process of reflection on the cultural and personal – and not merely the structural and institutional – determinants of human flourishing, as it appears that some work within development economics has already begun to do.

In all such conversations, we suspect that dialogue will be most fruitful if both parties keep in mind the limits of what their disciplines can, and therefore should, do. As noted, on the side of theology this will mean being aware of theology’s need to ground its seeing, judging, and creative action planning in social observations that are empirically sound and realistic. In a sense, it could be argued that liberation theology needs to draw upon at least some resources from development economics, or something like it, to do its job well.

At the same time, our imaginary interlocutors will also need to keep in mind that the theoretical and empirical inputs that economics provides can only inform, and cannot themselves direct, theological social analysis. This is not merely the result of economics’ primary focus on policy. It is also the case that economics, like all the social sciences, has “emerged in the shadow of Machiavelli,” and thus focuses pragmatically on what is rather than imaginatively on what can and ought to be, or on how humans are morally formed (Hirschfeld, 2017, p. 209). To be sure, we are glad to see the emergence in economics of dialogue about the open-ended and multiform nature of human well-being, and a growing attention to culture. Even so, however, from a spiritual and theological perspective the discipline still trades in social descriptions and therefore prescriptions that are necessarily partial and incomplete, as a matter
of its very identity as a secular social science. A conversation with liberation theology might help development economics move further in useful directions but cannot – and need not – remake economics into a theological discipline; a spiritual account of development will necessarily remain more three-dimensional than it is possible for any social scientific category to be, and it will probably exist in at least some tension with even the best accounts of development developed there. In our view, observing this in no way diminishes the important contributions that economics can make to theological attempts to discern the signs of the times; as Julie Schaffner notes: “Christians pursue larger objectives than mere improvement in temporal well-being, but even so, the [current development economics] framework remains highly relevant to their practical choices about what, exactly, to do in their poverty reduction and development work” (Schaffner, 2014, p. 21).9

In reaffirming such an apparently tidy distinction between empirical and normative forms of discourse, we do not wish to be naïve about the fact that economic theory still regularly contains normative presuppositions and has the power to “shape culture” (Hirschfeld, 2017, p. 229) (or, for that matter, to ignore the very history of destructive paternalism that liberationists have often lamented). However, we believe it is reasonable to hope that the conceptual paradigm currently in use is both transparent and open-ended enough in its definition of well-being as to be potentially compatible with, rather than necessarily hostile to, comprehensive normative frameworks such as a Christian liberationist worldview. At the very least, communities are now in a better position to reflectively evaluate the normative aims of economic interventions, now that they are no longer cloaked in quite the same mantle of unquestionable scientificity as were the austerity measures of decades past. More ambitiously, it seems more possible than ever that concrete work for development could overlap with, reinforce, and perhaps even be further improved by the kind of holistic community building envisioned by liberationists.

Conclusion

The argument of this article has been that development economics and liberation theology no longer need to be as estranged as they once were. It would be misleading to overlook the real differences between the disciplines, or to skip over the fundamental incompatibilities between
value commitments and empirical assumptions that have animated each of these fields in prior decades. However, our sense of the fields as they stand today is that such antagonism is no longer a foregone conclusion: liberation theology no longer relies on largely Marxist conceptions of class conflict and critiques of market relations, and development economics no longer exclusively pursues growth through top-down measures. Rather, the fields now share—at least in theory—a number of normative and methodological commitments, including a commitment to sustainably empowering the poor to become agents of their own lives.

The near alignment of such values could, we think, serve as the platform from which to stage useful and mutually enriching conversations between the fields. We do not wish to overstate areas of agreement or convergence between them, especially in light of the internal diversity on both sides. There is certainly no guarantee that our hypothetical parties will see eye to eye with regard to how to see, judge, or act in any one given situation. We suspect, however, that even that process of identifying areas of disagreement and mutual critique may be useful—and so it is precisely the sort of conversation we hope to see more of in the future.

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Notes

1. While this article restricts its scope to largely Catholic sources, liberation theology has a more ecumenical background than is often appreciated. For a history of the emergence of liberationist thought in Protestant contexts in Latin America (sometimes under the title of “integral mission”), see Kirkpatrick, 2019.

2. Spiritual poverty is an attitude of unattachment to the goods of this world, and evangelical poverty is a commitment to solidarity and
protest with and for the poor; these are distinct from the material poverty by being voluntary (Gutiérrez, 1973, pp. 164, 172).

3. As with liberation theology more generally, it is worth noting that related and analogous concepts of social sin have emerged elsewhere, as well, including in the social gospel tradition in the US developed by Walter Rauschenbusch and others.

4. In Gutiérrez’s description, salvation includes “the communion of human beings with God and among themselves – is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads to its fullness in Christ” (2013, p. 85).

5. Sobrino offers one articulation of this argument in his proposal for reformulating the classic extra ecclesiam nulla salus as extra pauperes nulla salus: while this can only be a “mystery that exceeds our grasp” (Sobrino, 1993, p. 49), it nonetheless usefully orients us to history using a set of related biblical themes, including God’s own historic identification with the vulnerable and repeated choice to bring salvation through the figure of the lowly servant; the poor’s witness of evangelical values and dependence upon God; the centrality of our attitude and actions toward the poor to our salvation seen in Matthew 25 (50); and the power of the realities of God and both human sin revealed in the poor to move us to conversion (60). See also CELAM Puebla no 196, Puebla 1147 on the poor as evangelizing us, and calling the Church to conversion.


7. In decades past, equally strong normative judgments could be seen in neoclassical analyses of barriers to liberalization. Mihevc, 1995, for example, argued that “the discourse of development” even had a “fundamentally theological character,” and that the World Bank effectively used an implicit “theology of sin” to describe economic inefficiency in Africa in the 1980s (pp. 22, 25). Along such lines, Nelson (2001) held that the zeal with which economists urge their policy prescriptions upon public institutions itself indicates that the goals and terms of economics are functionally theological in nature, and inevitably interwoven with normative judgments.

8. As early as his 1973 A Theology of Liberation, in fact, Gutiérrez wrote: “The humanistic approach attempts to place the notion of development in a wider context: a historical vision in which humanity
appears to be assuming the direction of its destiny. But this leads precisely to a change of perspective which—after some corrections and the inclusion of other elements—we would prefer to refer to as liberation.” (p. 246) This response illustrates both the appreciative welcome that expanded accounts of development may receive among liberationists, as well as the insistence that it must be complemented still by “other elements.”

9. As Schaffner puts it: “[the current development framework] does not contain any explicitly Christian elements, but neither does it purport to describe spiritual reality. It does not even purport to provide a complete description of temporal reality, just an ever-improving approximation that is useful as a guide for research and policy” (Schaffner, 2014, p. 21).

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