

# **The Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant Definitions of Justice and the Liberation Theology**

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## Introduction

The Bible greatly emphasizes doing Justice and pursuing a just walk. It is expected of every Christian to be righteous, to act justly, and to promote Justice at all cost. The Judeo-Christian emphasis on Justice is deeply rooted in the reality of God's existence and the inalienable rights granted by Him to humankind. Protecting these rights is the very fundament of the western tradition of law and Justice. Throughout history, different interpretations of justice have been developed and adopted.

To embrace the Biblical definition of Justice as both the starting point and destination of every societal unit is to set clear parameters to measure the effectiveness and success of a society. The following paragraphs are dedicated to presenting the different concepts of Justice from the early Jewish fathers until the contemporary 20th-century Catholic theologians who coined the Liberation Theology, a misinterpretation of Biblical Justice that contradicts the Catholic tradition of Justice and deeply incorporates a secular humanistic worldview.

## The Jewish Justice

The Jewish tradition counts different words to convey the concept of Justice. The *Torah* uses the words *Tzedek*, *mishpat*, and *din* to refer to what should be every Jewish person's most significant commitment and search. The terms *mishpat* and *din* refer to a legal type of Justice. At the same time, *Tzedek* and its derivate *tzedakah* mean Justice, charity, righteousness, integrity, equity, fairness, and innocence<sup>1</sup>. In other words, *mishpat* is the retributive form of Justice, the rule of law accepted by the members of society. *Tzedakah* is, on the other hand, a distributive form of Justice.

As crucial as properly acknowledging the different concepts, it is to highlight how both ideas of Justice are complementary, never presented by the Bible as excluding or conflicting with each other. The Prophet Amos says: "But let justice roll down like water, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the psalmist affirms, "God loves *mishpat* and *tzedakah*,"<sup>3</sup> and that "Blessed are those who observe justice (*mishpat*), who do righteousness (*tzedakah*) at all times!"<sup>4</sup>. The Christian Biblical understanding of Justice builds from the Jewish definition of Justice (*mishpat* and *tzedakah*) and preserves it as a fundamental pillar for the Christian doctrine, both Catholic and Protestant.

It is not by coincidence that the most frequent word in Hebrew<sup>5</sup> used to describe justice also translates as righteousness or the one who walks rightly. It derives from the Jewish acknowledgment of the absolute, in this case, an absolute definition of right and wrong. Justice is established as creation acts following God's laws and imitates God's attributes of Justice<sup>6</sup>. The Biblical commentator and medieval Jewish scholar Nachamides further explain that humankind should seek to act in righteousness continuously, but that search cannot be accomplished by humanity alone. The first and foremost source of Justice is the *shechina*, the presence of God<sup>7</sup>. In other words, it is impossible for creation to imitate what they do not see or do not perceive. For

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Sacks, "Tzedek: Justice and Compassion - Profits and Prophets - Parshah," n.d., [https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/2269078/jewish/Tzedek-Justice-and-Compassion.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2269078/jewish/Tzedek-Justice-and-Compassion.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Amos 5:24.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 33:5.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 106:3.

<sup>5</sup> Sacks, "Tzedek: Justice and Compassion - Profits and Prophets - Parshah."

<sup>6</sup> Edward Kessler, "The Jewish Concept of Justice," n.d., 10.

<sup>7</sup> Aviya Kushner, "Tzedek: What Does 'Justice' Really Mean Anyway?," *The Forward*, August 20, 2018, <https://forward.com/culture/408113/tzedek-what-does-justice-really-mean-anyway/>.

humankind to walk in Justice, now both *mishpat* and *Tzedek*, a revelation of God, His attributes, and His ways are necessary.

### Early Catholic Justice

The worldview around the Jewish understanding of Justice was successfully kept and endorsed by Jesus and the Early Church, expanding its influence even to the gentiles through the life of the first missionaries. Later, St. Augustine classifies Justice as one of the four primary forms of loving God and defines it as "its task is to see that to each is given what belongs to each."<sup>8</sup> To the Jewish concept of Justice, Augustine adds the also biblical component of repentance and the idea of *order within man*.

Augustine believed that true Justice could only become attainable in the afterlife of a Christian, and the perfection of God and the sinful nature of man explain that. To him, one cannot be imperfect and evil and still be perfectly just. The way, however, to gradually act justly is made possible when a man decides to renounce his own will and submit to God's, letting go of the love of self and growing in love of God. This is the *metanoia* process presented in the New Testament by the Apostle Paul, translated as repentance. According to Augustine, when a man is in the right relationship with God, he can act in Justice to the external world. To love God and to know Him is an act of preparation to love others. Justice begins within. Tying true Justice to man's search for God adds purpose to the societal organization, according to Augustine. A society that shares God as the common object of love is consequently just.

If drawing close to God is the way to reach inner Justice and express a just attitude towards others, drawing further from God would then be an act of injustice. Augustine considers all violations of the Ten Commandments as acts of injustice after one another. The first three are violations of the religion or the Love of God; the fourth is a violation of the love for parents; the remaining are violations of the love for neighbor.<sup>9</sup> This definition of Justice was highly controversial for Augustine's times because it disregarded the institution of the state in the human development process. The idea that the king would represent the people before God and God before the people was still predominant but was elegantly under attack by Augustine and his *order within man*.<sup>10</sup>

Thomas Aquinas, who also plays a significant role in forming Catholic doctrine, has a much more pragmatic and materialistic approach to Justice. Justice, to Aquinas, is a habit by which one renders to others what is rightfully theirs.<sup>11</sup> This also implies a previous acknowledgment of God and His standards; however, it does not root the practice of Justice in a growing relationship of love for God like Augustine first introduced. Aquinas divides Justice into two categories: commutative and distributive Justice. The first refers to the relations between individuals within a defined community, and the latter refers to the regard of the community for individuals.

Commutative Justice is conducted under the principle of restitution, in which one individual restitutes to the other something of equal or higher value than what was taken from him. This is, according to Aquinas, necessary so that every individual receives what is rightfully theirs and personal disputes are no longer. His concept of Justice is deeply rooted in a constant awareness

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<sup>8</sup> Mary T. Clark, "Augustine and Justice." (Revue d'Études Augustiniennes et Patristiques, 1963), <https://www.brepolsonline.net/doi/10.1484/J.REA.5.104055>.

<sup>9</sup> Clark.

<sup>10</sup> Katherine Chambers, "Augustine on Justice: A Reconsideration of City of God, Book 19," *Political Theology* 19, no. 5 (July 4, 2018): 382–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2018.1438781>.

<sup>11</sup> Christian Classics Ethereal Library, "St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologica," n.d., <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.toc.html>.

of debt, both for commutative and distributive Justice.<sup>12</sup> Individuals have natural rights that cannot be private from them by other individuals or institutions. Therefore these different individuals and institutions owe them respect for their rights. Aquinas applies this logic to sustain his definition of Justice and where its primary motivator derives from.

Over the years, this concept of *debitum* has served as grounds to theologically justify the so-called affirmative policies and several of the Liberation Theology standpoints, which will later be discussed as a conclusion to this paper.

### **The Protestant Justice**

The 1517 Protestant Reformation challenged many of the doctrines imposed by the Catholic Church, including its interpretation of what is to be considered a Biblical concept of Justice. Martin Luther's doctrine on the "Two Kingdoms" led to a profound reorganization of society, separating and balancing relations between Church and State, sin and crime, liturgy, and civic duty. By recognizing the aspiration for a heavenly kingdom and acknowledging the temporal state of the earthly kingdom and its requirements, Luther brought back the Augustinian view on Justice and its emphasis on repentance and personal relationship with God.<sup>13</sup> He once stated, "justice is a temporary thing that must, at last, come to an end; but the conscience is eternal and will never die."<sup>14</sup>

Luther believed that the urgency to bring Justice lay first and foremost in need for a personal justification process. Only then, once individuals are aligned with God, their actions toward others would be virtuous and just.<sup>15</sup> Alongside Aquinas, he also believed in distributive Justice promoted by the community or the institution representative of that community. However, to Luther, this distributive Justice was limited to the assurance of one's inalienable rights<sup>16</sup>.

John Calvin, another Protestant Reformer whose contribution influenced the Protestant Doctrine, agreed with Luther and, consequently, Augustine on the concept of Justice but elevated it not only to the fruit of one's relationship with God but also as an act of worship to God<sup>17</sup>. To Calvin, the simple observance of a statute is not what God originally intended. When considering a law, a statute, or a principle, we must consider the matter it treats, and its opposite to grasp the heart of God behind that ordinance fully.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, a Christian who indeed observes the sixth commandment is not only to abstain from murdering his neighbor but also to promote and protect the gift of life. Such a proactive approach brought Christians to understand their roles not only as abstainers of injustice but also as perpetrators and advocates for Justice.

The proactive responsibility attributed by Calvin to Christians propelled significant economic growth and social development in Europe and, later, in the United States.<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>12</sup> "Debitum and Personae: The Metaphysical Foundation of Justice," *Thomistic Philosophy Page* (blog), February 4, 2020, <https://aquinasonline.com/justice/>.

<sup>13</sup> Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy*, Third, Book, Whole (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), <https://go.exlibris.link/HXbqTPMg>.

<sup>14</sup> Graham Giles, "The Reformation and Relational Justice." (Asociația 'Europa pentru Europa,' n.d.), [https://www.academia.edu/35610807/The\\_Reformation\\_and\\_Relational\\_Justice](https://www.academia.edu/35610807/The_Reformation_and_Relational_Justice).

<sup>15</sup> Giles.

<sup>16</sup> Giles.

<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, Mark DeVries, and Kirk Freeman, *Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book, Whole (Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Reference, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, DeVries, and Freeman.

<sup>19</sup> David S. Sytsma, "John Calvin and Virtue Ethics: Augustinian and Aristotelian Themes," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 48, no. 3 (2020): 519–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12324>.

Protestant movement proceeded to identify injustices and promote what was right, adding the concept of Justice as worship to their work ethics.

### **The Liberation Theology view on Justice**

As previously presented, there are profound differences between the Catholic and Protestant approaches to Justice. These differences became even more significant in 1968 when a group of Catholic bishops in Colombia issued a document affirming the differences between the Roman Catholic Church and the Latin Catholic Church. This is considered the birth of the later entitled Liberation Theology Movement.<sup>20</sup>

The Liberation Theology argues that the Old and New Testament Bible can only be fully understood if studied through the lens of the poor. Its name derives from the idea there is a divine redemption of men from the sinful bonds of political and economic oppression. The document signed in Colombia stated the fundamental rights of the poor and attributed the responsibility for the poverty found in developing countries to the developed ones.

The Liberation theologians sought a Christianity that would be politically and culturally decentralized, as they believed the Early Church to be.<sup>21</sup> Their emphasis is on fighting poverty targeting its alleged source, greed, and protecting its victims, the poor. The 1968 document states the Liberation Theology "preferential option for the poor," raising individuals in poverty to the category of "privileged channels of God's Grace."<sup>22</sup> To tackle poverty, churches were to start the so-called Christian Base Communities (CEBs), where no more than 30 members would gather to study the Bible under the Liberation Theology's perspective and assist each other's immediate needs.<sup>23</sup> This movement spread throughout Latin America, raising the Roman Catholic Church's suspicion of its faithfulness to the Bible and possible service of Marxist indoctrination.

Unlike the Catholic tradition of Justice that rooted its approach to the individual's relationship to God and attempted to solve collective matters by transforming individuals' morals, Liberation Theology attributes the practice of injustice exclusively to systemic roots. The poor are poor because they are under systemic exploitation, not due to a potential individual root cause that has led them to a state of poverty. Christians should then understand society through the logic of the oppressed who needs liberation from the oppressors, not from the perspective of sinners who need redemption from sin.

### **Conclusion**

The search for Justice is a constant goal for individuals from all beliefs and cultures. The approach used to define it can lead societal groups closer to or further away from it. In other words, ideas have consequences.<sup>24</sup> The Liberation Theology's interpretation of Justice, referred to as social Justice, is an example of a theoretical approach that presents little to no results that could

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<sup>20</sup> "Liberation Theology | Description, History, & Beliefs | Britannica," accessed November 27, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/liberation-theology>.

<sup>21</sup> Samira Mehta and Samuel L. Boyd, "A Justification for Unrest? Look No Further than the Bible and the Founding Fathers," The Conversation, accessed November 27, 2022, <http://theconversation.com/a-justification-for-unrest-look-no-further-than-the-bible-and-the-founding-fathers-139742>.

<sup>22</sup> Douglass Sullivan-González, "Liberation Theology in Latin America" (Oxford Research Encyclopedias, n.d.), <https://oxfordre.com/latinamericanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.001.0001/acrefore-9780199366439-e-955>.

<sup>23</sup> Sullivan-González.

<sup>24</sup> R. C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas: Understanding the Concepts That Shaped Our World*, Book, Whole (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2000), <https://go.exlibris.link/nxcDYxXc>.

legitimize it. The reports on social initiatives birthed from Liberation Theology broadly emphasize a new conceptual approach to the poor and the Church's role in poverty but fail to present measurable evidence of social progress that effectively corroborates its beliefs or even justifies its "revolution." No scientific data proves that Liberation Theology practitioners were effective in solving poverty or overturning a potential structure of exploitation.

The central problem of Liberation Theology lies in its intentional disregard for the inerrancy of the Bible and the transcendency of its principles. The father of Liberation Theology, Peruvian philosopher Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928), is proud of considering *praxis* above *orthodoxy* which can almost be compared to the Machiavellian principle of the ends justifying the means.<sup>25</sup> This emphasis has led its Christian Base Communities to serve as training hubs for guerrilla movements in Nicaragua<sup>26</sup>, mass land invasions in Brazil<sup>27</sup>, and even armed paramilitary forces in Colombia<sup>28</sup>. Such permissiveness to overlook doctrinal principles to achieve the aimed results could not be further away from the Biblical way to seek, establish and maintain Justice.

As Augustine affirmed that "an unjust law is not a law at all," it is safe to affirm that an unjust justice is no justice at all. In other words, Justice cannot exist outside the Biblical absolutes of right and wrong. It is what the Jewish tradition considers the *mishpat Tzedek*, the righteous Justice, and Schaeffer would later label as the true truth<sup>29</sup>. While the strategy on how to Biblically act in Justice may slightly differ considering the different traditions previously presented, none of them will overlook doctrines to achieve material, and temporary results like it is openly alleged by the Liberation Theology. This has opened the door of Central and South America to be swept by the secular humanistic worldview having Catholic Churches as a primary platform. This disservice to the continent and to the Kingdom of God will require significant work to be fixed. Luckily, it can be fueled by the promise: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6).

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<sup>25</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Liberation Theology: Preliminary Notes" (J.F. Thornton and S.B. Varenne, eds., The Essential Pope Benedict XVI, 2007), <https://www.remnantnewspaper.com/Archives/2013-0315-cullent-new-pope-new-world.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Pierre Reed, "Elective Affinities between Sandinismo (as Socialist Idea) and Liberation Theology in the Nicaraguan Revolution," *Critical Research on Religion* 8, no. 2 (August 1, 2020): 153–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303220924110>.

<sup>27</sup> Daniela Issa, "Praxis of Empowerment: Mística and Mobilization in Brazil's Landless Rural Workers' Movement," *Latin American Perspectives* 34, no. 2 (2007): 124–38.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Carnes, "Religion, the Catholic Church, and Peace in Colombia," November 10, 2016, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/religion-the-catholic-church-and-peace-in-colombia>.

<sup>29</sup> Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas: Understanding the Concepts That Shaped Our World*.

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