

## **Ebor Lecture Essay Prize 2016: Religion in the Public Sphere**

**Winner of the 18 and under category: Jack Chivers, The Perse School, Cambridge**

### **Could a promotion of Liberation Theology create a more egalitarian society in the UK?**

#### **Introduction**

Say for instance the household population in the UK were to be divided up into percentiles, with the 100<sup>th</sup> percentile being the richest percent in the UK and the 1<sup>st</sup> percentile being the poorest percent of households in the UK, how equal would the UK test? The first percentile would have negative net wealth<sup>1</sup> of more than £12,000 and it would take until the 9<sup>th</sup> percentile for one's net wealth to become positive. The top percentile, the richest households in the UK, hold 20% of the total household wealth. 40% of total wealth is held from the 95<sup>th</sup> to 100<sup>th</sup> percentile and just over half of UK wealth is held in the top 10% of households<sup>2</sup>. These figures, (although from 2012) show the vast inequality in the UK. While wealth has never been shared equally throughout the state, the gaps between the richest and the poorest are increasing rapidly<sup>3</sup>. With this in mind, I will plan on addressing the idea of what type of welfare state we should utilise in the UK to attack the ever increasing inequality and promote an egalitarian society, focusing particularly on the use of Liberation Theology (why an egalitarian society is considered desirable will be discussed below). Liberation theology originates from the Christian tradition and teaches that we must attempt to help the poor in any way possible, to work with them, be charitable towards them and if necessary fight for them against the Government and other political agents. I will be addressing whether an increase in awareness of these views can somehow create a more egalitarian society.

#### **Discussion**

Egalitarians believe that equality and uniformity must be shown to all members of a state. In regards to this essay and the question of welfare, this left wing view of the economy maintains that class and background matter nil; every person instead should gain equal access to one's own pleasure and wealth. Be this through working as a Professor, spending one's life helping the poor or simply living a prosperous and simple life, there should be no constraints on one's ability to achieve these dreams. Ranging from free healthcare, free public schooling and social security, an egalitarian welfare state aims to maximise the personal good of every human while at the same time attempting to balance the personal good of all members of a society so none live a better life as a result of inequality.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Negative net wealth' means that the total equity that someone owns, being savings or property, is less than the amount of money they owe in the form of debt.

<sup>2</sup> Household wealth in Great Britain (2016) *Household Wealth in Great Britain: Distribution, Composition and Changes 2006–12*. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1475-5890.2016.12083/full#fisc12083-note-0015>

<sup>3</sup> Financial Times (2015) *UK wealth inequality widens for first time in a decade*. (Chris Giles). Retrieved from <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/1ad5c43a-a593-11e5-a91e-162b86790c58.html#axzz4CzippOOc>

The question of equality however is one on which many theologians and philosophers disagree: ‘people who praise it (equality) or disparage it disagree about what they are praising or disparaging’ (Dworkin 2000, p. 2), so for the purpose of this essay I will address two of the main interpretations of equality before outlining an interpretation suitable for this essay.

Formal equality is seen as a non-discriminatory principle and embodies the philosophy of equal access to all and a complete indifference to one's background. Although this cannot be observed all the time (for example, because a visually impaired person will quite obviously not be able to perform as well as a visually correct person with a job utilizing sight), formal equality demands more awareness and thus elimination of arbitrary obstacles. Race, gender and socio-economic background are all examples of features which should be disregarded if people are to be treated as formally equal.

Proportional or substantive equality is another view of equality that states that goods and services are provided not simply in identical quantities but instead according to an individual's own specific needs. It recognises that policies which may seem to be non-discriminatory, will not always address the specific needs of certain people. Thus these policies are indirectly causing discriminatory effects. Through giving all people goods solely dependent on what they require, a level playing field is created and there are no advantages to raising particular people above others. ‘We can accept the outcome of a competitive process as fair only when the participants have equality in basic capabilities; the fact that no one is allowed to have a head start does not make the race fair if some contestants have only one leg’<sup>4</sup>.

For the purposes of this essay I will be utilising a notion of substantive equality. All notions of charity and self-sacrifice will be following the intention of providing solely to those who need it more. This form of equality perhaps links greater with the idea of an egalitarian state as it follows that through providing each with their needs a society with equal opportunities is created. Equality, in respect to this essay, is found primarily when all members of the state are supplied fairly with given resources, ensuring that all happiness is overall closer to becoming unanimous. Thus the amount of equality or inequality will depend on the overall distribution of the good (McKerlie, D., 1996).

Having this classless society in which the less fortunate are given footholds to climb out of their poverty and the rich help to construct these footholds is seen as desirable as giving people equal opportunities reflects the fundamental equality of humankind and reduces the possibility of society failing to harness the talents of all of its members. Charities and some egalitarians view the act of giving and providing for others to be an intrinsic good and one that is beneficial to the population. In this specific system one's own wealth and importance is no longer dictated through the family he was born into, but instead the opportunity to flourish can come through hard work, the sacrifice of others, and determination.

This egalitarian view of the state can be harmonised and in many ways improved by acts of the religious community. This essay focusses on Christianity and specifically Liberation Theology. Emerging in South America in the late 1960's, Liberation Theology was a radical

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<sup>4</sup> The Guardian. (2010, Ha-Joon Chang). *We lost sight of fairness in the false promise of wealth*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/aug/30/fairness-inequality-free-market-growth>

response to the growing poverty and ill-treatment of the masses; this dogma is often seen as an 'interpretation of Christian faith out of the experience of the poor...an attempt to read the Bible and key Christian doctrines with the eyes of the poor' (Berryman, P., 1987, p.4).

As we saw earlier, the views of egalitarianism and the classless society are viewed as key to the continued flourishing of a country: utilising the welfare state provides the poor with opportunities and chances to climb out from debt and hardship. Many believe this ideology is echoed by South America's Liberation Theology. On top of this some may extend this idea to the belief that Liberation Theology helps to improve the equality and integrity of a country or region. For example, by imitating the theology composed by writers such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Camilo Torres and Enrique Dussel one can nurture relationships and ameliorate not only the lives of the poor but of the masses as well. Gutierrez, one of the movement's key theologians and writers placed great value on Christian care and support for the poor and along with many Liberation Theologians did no longer feel it was adequate for the church to simply 'care' and preach about the poor. The church instead needed to be a means of social change, to work with and for the poor and to act as a new agent of pacification. In this era many Christian Liberation Theologians moved away from the comfortable life of the Church and moved in with the more vulnerable of society. Here they would help through labouring with the poor and living their life instead of simply preaching at the Church.

Through disregarding one's personal wealth and status in the prospect of helping to increase the quality of life for another, Liberation Theologists are emulating a perfect egalitarian society. With the idea of an egalitarian state being one which favours equality for all its members, it is clear that by mirroring a life following the concept of Liberation Theology, the probability of obtaining this equal state is increased. By observing the work of Gutierrez and other leading figures of this movement, be that through giving to charity or other acts of that kind, one will unthinkingly act in a way deemed positive by an egalitarian society.

Nonetheless many might view this interpretation of Christianity as an excessively far left perspective, for instance due partly to its danger to ignore man's spiritual needs, and instead concentrating on bettering man's physical condition. Some orthodox Christians may see this as heresy, undermining the doctrine of salvation through faith in Christ alone. In addition to this, the desirability of substantive equality is contested. Some would argue instead for the idea of a minimal state; a state in which the Government only protects its members (through the use of simply providing services such as the police, fire brigade and hospitals) without the provision of benefits or free schooling and other such goods. While many Christians identify the benefits of following Jesus' lessons of caring and healing the poor, others do not share this view. There are some Christians who instead adopt a right wing view of the religion, a conflicting perspective applauding the concept of working hard for one's own wellbeing and livelihood. One of the more serious versions of this belief is that of the Christian right. Holding its roots in the American 1940's, the Christian Right movement shifted over to the UK in 1999 in the form of the Christian People's Alliance (in 2005 splitting apart and forming the UK Christian Party). The Christian right assumes that a 'government's proper role is to cultivate virtue, not to interfere with the natural operations of the marketplace or workplace'<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The Christian Right (2000) *World-view of Christian Right*. Retrieved from [http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/chr\\_rght.htm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/chr_rght.htm)

However, I would still argue that substantive equality is desirable in a society and that adopting a Liberation Theology can help us to achieve this. Even when taking a more modest approach to Christianity, the same core view of the innate importance of charity and helping those less fortunate than oneself is still found. From Galatians 3:28 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' to Luke 18:22 'One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me' to Matthew 5:5 'blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth', the value of self-sacrifice and care for the poor is obvious in Jesus' teachings. It is thus argued that if a whole community imitated this creed (of Liberation Theology) the state as a whole would move towards creating the conditions necessary for substantive equality (which, it has been argued, is desirable).

## Conclusion

Ascertaining what form of welfare state best fits each particular economy is key to maintaining the wellbeing of individuals of the state. There are however many conflicting approaches to which end of the right/left spectrum best suits the UK economy. While it can be argued to be positive for the economy to advocate a society promoting the value of Liberation Theology and thus financial support for the poor and equality shown to all, it can also be seen that there are negatives involved with increased support for left-wing Christianity and emulating the life of Jesus. Many of these problems can be economic, for instance increased spending on state provided goods could cause a Government budget deficit eventually leading to borrowing from other countries which can often be harmful to the economy. On top of this through increasing the amount of trust placed in Liberation Theology, many Christians would feel the state is becoming more secular through forgetting the true calling of the Christian faith (which is to focus on the spiritual, as opposed to the material, life). This is illustrated through the belief of Pope John Paul II, being that Christians should help the poor find their freedom through redemption and observing the Christian faith, not turn the church into a political institution (Lynch, E., 1994, p.3). However while these points may provide an argument against the benefits of following the dogmas of Liberation Theology, I personally believe that one should see sense in the vast number of advantages of Liberation Theology. For the UK economy to thrive and flourish while providing greater equality and integrity, I believe that a wider acceptance and encouragement to care for the poor is required and provided in Liberation Theology.

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