

## FAITHFUL OBLIGATIONS: MEROLD WESTPHAL'S MIDDLE CLASS LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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### ABSTRACT

Often, liberation theology's preferential option for the poor is pushed aside within theological discourses as being too specific, too focused on social problems, to function as a viable theology for the Church as a whole. Through this line of reasoning, many often see liberation theology as something that can remind Christians of their need to help others, but it cannot become the foundation for a sustainable belief system. In response to this, I claim that a liberation theology can be viable for daily life of all persons and this article explores this argument through the work of Merold Westphal, who's philosophical theology finds a style of liberation theology that is directed at the middle class – in his context the American middle class. This article explores the ways in which liberation theology can work as a general, programmatic theology for all within the Church, which not only empowers those at the margins but society as a whole.

### Key words

Liberation Theology; Philosophical Theology; Fundamental Theology

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**M**erold Westphal situates his work on the premise of faith seeking understanding and, following this, he attempts to argue that a Christian faith must be focused on liberty for the other and that the task of faith begins with welcoming the widow, orphan, and stranger. Even though he does present within his work a possibility for other religious or non-religious dialogue, he openly confesses that he is working within his own experience and understanding of the Christian

faith.<sup>1</sup> Considering the critique of onto-theology, and in particular its focus on how the concept of ‘God-as-ground’ becomes the founding gear of a religious ideology that produces violence, Westphal seeks to present a version of the Christian faith that is steeped in revelation and that employs reason to better enact and understand the command and promise within revelation.<sup>2</sup> That command stems from the ultimate commandment of the Christian faith, given by Jesus:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Mat 23:37–40, NASB).

Westphal articulates that the promise within this commandment is that, through its enacting, one helps bring about the Kingdom of God, here on earth, while paradoxically working for the Kingdom yet to come. It is an eschatological promise, and Westphal capitalizes on this command-promise in order to articulate an active faith that, through its helping concern for the other, opens the believer and the other in question to a self-transcendence where they may be lifted up in God’s transcendence (as seen through making the Kingdom of God present, here on earth, while working for a future eschatological moment).<sup>3</sup>

This article will explore how this promise-command for helping the widow, orphan, and stranger might be further developed for a liberation theology that presses upon the Christian believer in Westphal’s context – that is, the American Christian who resides within the so-called ‘middle class’ of American socio-economic political life – to

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<sup>1</sup> See: Merold Westphal. *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2004, p. 6; Merold Westphal. *Overcoming Onto-Theology*. New York: Fordham University Press 2001, pp. ix–xii. This article will heretofore cite *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence* as *TST*.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of how Westphal sees faith working within philosophy, see: Merold Westphal. “Whose Philosophy? Which Religion? Reflections on Reason as Faith”. In: James Faulconer (ed.). *Transcendence in Philosophy of Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2003, pp. 13–35, especially pp. 14–15.

<sup>3</sup> Constraints of space and scope prevent me from going further in describing Westphal’s thought in broader detail. For more on Westphal’s eschatological framework, see my article: Justin Sands. Radical Eschatology: Westphal, Caputo, and Onto-Theology. *Louvain Studies* 38 (2014), pp. 246–268. For direct references within Westphal’s work, see: Westphal. *TST*, pp. 18, 128, 146–149, 154–159, 160, 162–163, 215–218, 227–230.

move beyond the complacency and relative comfort that their status affords. Westphal's liberation theology, then, begins from the center of privilege within the Church and pushes those Christians to the margins. We will begin with a brief review of Westphal's concept of the other within his theology, then a brief personal narrative to illustrate how this concept might critique one's privileged status within the Church and society at large. We will then elaborate upon this narrative by showing how Westphal capitalizes on this critique in his more lay-oriented writings.<sup>4</sup> We will conclude our exploration with some critique of the oversights within Westphal's liberation theology.

### Revelation and Obligation: Westphal's Concept of the Other

Westphal often begins from the onto-theological critique of metaphysics and how its representational, scientific-calculative thinking creates a 'bad theology'; even though he readily admits that the critique itself (particularly Heidegger's articulation of it) expands beyond theological concerns, his work primarily focuses on its implications for theology and god-talk.<sup>5</sup> In *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, Westphal addresses the problem through three concepts of transcendence: 'Cosmological Transcendence', where he employs Heidegger's critique of metaphysics to clean the slate, so to speak, of poorer ontological understandings of God that rely upon the principle of sufficient reason or other onto-theological constructs; 'Epistemic Transcendence', where he seeks to articulate how, even within the critique of onto-theology, one can still come to understand God through various methods of reasoning that do not adhere to onto-theological constructs;<sup>6</sup> finally, in 'Ethical and Religious Transcendence', Westphal subsumes both of these concepts of transcendence into an ethico-religious framework. He does so by arguing that that religious faith is a task of a lifetime where the believer must continually enact her faith in daily life in the pursuit

<sup>4</sup> Westphal wrote extensively for Christian periodicals such as *The Church Herald*, *Perspectives*, and *Christian Century*. Even though these texts are important to fully understanding Westphal's practical and pastoral reach, we will limit our scope to just his books for ease of access to readers and because these books represent a more detailed overview of what he wrote in these periodicals.

<sup>5</sup> Westphal. *TST*, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Here, he explores the implications of the *analogia entis*, *via negative*, and *analogia fidei* for coming to know God, even though God, as an infinite and theistic being, is beyond human understanding; see: Westphal. *TST*, pp. 93–95.

of coming to know God (epistemic) without falling into a concept of God that is in service to her own will to power, her own constitutive metaphysics of presence (cosmological). In this final movement, each of the prior two concepts of transcendence are subsumed (*aufgehoben*) into the latter, self-transcendent (and continual, devotional) act of faith.<sup>7</sup>

What matters for our present scope is the fact that Westphal articulates faith as a task to love and care for the other, thus giving faith an outward trajectory towards the other. Moreover, this faith as a task not only orients the believer, but it also creates the conditions of possibility for the believer to experience revelation. This he gathers from an appropriation of Kierkegaard's concept of faith as a task that cannot be articulated (i.e. understood or grasped) through mere reason and Levinas' ethics as first philosophy. Through Kierkegaard, Westphal is able to come to an understanding of faith where the believer can obliquely 'know' God through enacting God's promise-command in and through revelation. This relates back to the *Aufhebung* of epistemic transcendence, which has taken up (*aufgehoben*) the critique found within cosmological transcendence. Basically, one can come to know and speak of God (possibly through the *via negativa*, *analogia entis*, and *analogia fidei*) while also recognizing that she cannot completely comprehend God. This prevents God from being rendered into a metaphysics of presence, an onto-theological construction of God. A Kierkegaardian faith implies that one is never completely finished with the task of faith – indeed 'it is a task of a lifetime' – and thus one never renders complete knowledge of God.<sup>8</sup>

Concerning Levinas, Westphal is especially interested in how his concept of ethics as first philosophy negates an ontological (i.e. completely metaphysical) understanding of the other, where the self is 'both the subject and object of knowledge.'<sup>9</sup> In an ontological construct,

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<sup>7</sup> Westphal. *TST*, pp. 227–231.

<sup>8</sup> Westphal. *TST*, p. 203. For how Levinas' phenomenology articulates this possibility, see: Merold Westphal. *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2008, pp. 17–21, 33–41. For how Westphal summarizes his appropriation for both within a liberation theology, see: Merold Westphal. 'Levinas, Kierkegaard, and the Theological Task' *Modern Theology* 8, no. 3 (July 1992): 241–261.

<sup>9</sup> Westphal. *TST*, p. 180. For how Levinas' phenomenology articulates this possibility, see: Merold Westphal. *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2008, pp. 17–21, 33–41. For how Westphal summarizes his appropriation for both within a liberation theology, see: Merold Westphal. Levinas, Kierkegaard, and the Theological Task. *Modern Theology* 8, 3 (1992), pp. 241–261.

the self is liable to totalize, or render completely, the other's own identity as to whatever the self sees and understands of the other. By placing ethics as first philosophy, Levinas, according to Westphal, describes the self-other experience as an ethical obligation, where the self can never completely come to know the other but, rather, is open to infinite possibilities of knowing the other and the life-world in which this relationship exists. It is here that an epistemic transcendence is possible through the ethical: by continually enacting a loving obligation toward the other, the self opens itself to infinite possible understandings of not just the other or herself, but also of the world in which both participate.<sup>10</sup>

Westphal's understanding of ethical and religious transcendence thus relies upon a relationship between God, the self, and the other. Within this relationship, Westphal emphatically states that any theology – any reflection upon and/or interaction with God – must be 'liberation theology, a guide to the practice of overcoming oppression in all its forms'.<sup>11</sup> However, this form of liberation theology is highly philosophical and functions more as a philosophical justification for a potential liberation theology than a practical theology that might help the widow, orphan, and stranger. Yet still, Westphal is not finished, and in his more lay-oriented works he employs this philosophical scaffolding to build a concept of liberation theology that emphasizes the comfortable Christian's obligation to helping the widow, orphan, and stranger. In what follows, we will explore how he articulates this and how one might come to call it a middle class liberation theology.

### **When Speaking about the Poor is Not Enough: Westphal's Theological Call to Action**

Before continuing with Westphal, I would like to give a personal reflection for illustrative purposes. Here, I will show an example of how Westphal's critique of (and prescription for) Christianity can be all too relevant and exact. After this reflection, we will continue by looking at how Westphal relays these critiques to his Christian community through his lay-oriented writings.

<sup>10</sup> Westphal. *TST*, p. 221.

<sup>11</sup> Westphal. Levinas, Kierkegaard, and the Theological Task, p. 246.

After I received my Master's degree in Theology, I began a teaching assignment at a private, all male Catholic school in a wealthy suburb of Philadelphia. Tuition for each student was set at 18,000 US dollars per year but, if students wanted to join clubs or sports teams, that tuition regularly topped 23,000 dollars per year.<sup>12</sup> The average median income of a Philadelphian household is 37,000 US dollars.<sup>15</sup> As part of the theology faculty, my first job at this school was to help run our yearly day of service which opened the school year. The campus minister and the head of the theology faculty had set up three projects for the students: to help restock a neighborhood food pantry, to clean up a community center, and to do landscaping at a government housing project for low-income, 'at-risk' families in neighboring Camden, New Jersey. However, when the students arrived, the school had organized and mandated that these service hours be done when these organizations were closed, and when the project housing units were unoccupied. *They had literally removed the faces of the poor whom they sought to help.* When I mentioned this affront to my superiors, they told me it was out of the best intentions for my students and especially for their protection (as if seeing those faces might harm them).

The questions my students posed in class reflected the 'protection' afforded to them. When the issue of poverty and social inequality came up, many – if not most – of the students were quick to blame the poor for their own circumstances. They often stated that these people deserved their situations since they had not worked hard enough, usually citing their parents and family as counter-examples. On the issue of women's rights they were quick to suggest that women were inferior workers – they bear children, which diminishes their productivity – and that it was fair to pay them lower wages or prevent them from holding leadership positions. I take most of this to be typical of young adults parroting beliefs they have heard from parents and others, and thus not fully formed opinions.<sup>14</sup> However, the fact that several of my students gathered these beliefs from such a nominally Christian

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<sup>12</sup> To their credit, there was also some financial assistance, and tuition reduction for multiple familial enrollments, but most of this assistance came in the form of loans, and not grants or scholarships.

<sup>15</sup> United States Census Bureau. *Census, Quick Facts about Philadelphia* [2015-02-05]. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/42/42101.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Additionally, this was not all the students in the class. I would say about 40 percent of my students regularly returned reflection papers which represented such views to varying degrees.

context of Catholic education and church life is alarming. They were brought up in a Christian worldview that had removed the faces of poverty and had replaced them with stories of the damned: damned to be poor because of their own work ethic, damned to be unequal because of their gender.

I find in Westphal's thought an essential contribution to liberation theology precisely because of these experiences. I call Westphal's theology a middle class liberation theology since his lay-oriented works are aimed at the American Christian middle class; reminding them of their duties as Christians while also speaking on behalf of the middle class to the other classes to remind them of the middle class' importance. This context separates Westphal's work from liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, and Marcella Althaus-Reid. Westphal cannot speak as a Latin American liberation theologian, nor can he speak as a feminist liberation theologian, for it is not his context. With books like *Inflation, Poor-talk, and the Gospel*, *Suspicion and Faith*, and *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?*, Westphal situates himself alongside his fellow American churchgoers and, consequently, he addresses the worries and concerns of that demographic.<sup>15</sup> For Westphal, those concerns begin and end, essentially, with how the Christian faith can be lived daily and it is particularly focused on economic matters. The term 'middle class', after all, comes from economics; yet it also reflects a certain set of values which have come to define a large segment of American culture.

Economically and culturally, it is also somewhat of an insult; for who in America wants to settle for average? Who would want to be in the middle, instead of at the top? Aspiration to economic sovereignty is a latent elitism within the capitalist, so-called American dream. As such, the term middle class designates those who did not quite make it to the top but who are nevertheless doing ok. Westphal's work contradicts this supposition and exalts this class of people by lifting them to a higher purpose: to do the work of Christ within their communities through their care for the other. He fashions this as a Christian solidarity *devoid* of class, thus transcending a Christendom built upon

<sup>15</sup> Merold Westphal et al. *Inflation, Poortalk, and the Gospel*. Valley Forge: Judson Press 1981; Merold Westphal. *Suspicion and Faith*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998; Merold Westphal. *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2009. Hereafter these works will be abbreviated to IPTG, SF, and WCWI, respectively.

capitalism. This is the underlying intent behind much of his writings aimed at lay-audiences and it also informs his academic work.

In *Inflation, Poor-talk, and the Gospel*, Westphal writes alongside economists and psychologists to explore how inflation, the foremost economic issue in America when it was written, influences culture and what the Christian response to inflation might be.<sup>16</sup> His concern in the book is theological in that he seeks a proper, Christian response to this economic problem and how it might be enacted in day-to-day life.<sup>17</sup> Westphal and his colleagues articulate this through the concept of ‘poor-talk’, which concerns how the middle class often speaks about the poor. Poor-talk is a catch phrase, in other words, which encapsulates how the middle class perceives the lower class. It divides the American people into segments, with ‘us’ being a middle class who aspire to be the upper class. In their aspiration, they cast aspersions against ‘those people’ who are poor and who, accordingly, think and act poorly. The concept of poor-talk shows the latent morality behind these views, where ‘the middle class seems to believe that the poor are well served by government assistance, while the rich have sufficient assets and tax advantages to profit regardless of economic climate’.<sup>18</sup> While the poor are on the government doles, and thus a burden to society, the rich are so well off that they are rarely injured by this burden. Therefore, it is the middle class who have to carry the heaviest burden and who get hurt the most.

Even though my private school students were definitely not middle class, one can see that they held the same outlook on economic matters: the poor, through no fault *but their own*, were the burdens of society and it was a burden which these students’ families unjustly carried. In a contemporary political context, this poor-talk has taken on the character of ‘moochers’ and ‘makers’, where those on government assistance (i.e. the moochers) unjustly take wealth from those who create it. A moocher is a derogatory, political colloquialism denoting one who always takes from others, is always dependent on others and is thus a burden on society. Mitt Romney, as the Republican candidate

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<sup>16</sup> *IPTG* was published in 1981.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example: Westphal. *IPTG*, pp. 48–50, 52–54, 60–62, 72–77. In those sections, Westphal, consonant with Ludwig, Klay, and Myers, gives direct arguments for how one should form their economic worldview along Christian principles, chiefly of which is a solidarity with the poor.

<sup>18</sup> Westphal. *IPTG*, p. 16.

for the American Presidency in 2012, frequently used these terms and the concept has continued in American political discourse ever since in different forms.<sup>19</sup> The poor, in this style of poor-talk, are seen as problems first and people a distant second. In response, Westphal and his colleague's propose to show how this is fundamentally inconsistent with Jesus' teachings.

Westphal further develops these ideas within his reflections on Hegel. These writings, most of which were gathered into *Hegel, Freedom, and Modernity*, philosophically develop this concept of poor-talk.<sup>20</sup> Here, Westphal critiques a nominally Christian society whose *Sittlichkeit* fails to take a proper account of the poor. He presents this in light of the Cold War politics of America in the 1980's, particularly in its uncritical praise of capitalism. In the chapter entitled 'Hegel, Human Rights, and the Hungry', Westphal situates the conservative theologian Michael Novak alongside Hegel's theory of freedom, showing how a theology which focuses on political freedom over feeding the poor gives neither freedom nor nourishment to the poor.<sup>21</sup> After a thorough description of Hegel's theory of freedom, Westphal summarizes that, although it might give liberty with respect to property, Hegelian freedom does not satisfy the moral need to feed and secure those people who are in need of help:

The property I own may be far from sufficient to provide for my subsistence needs; and my property rights will not have been violated as long as I own something. The society that refuses to bulldoze the shanty town in which I live so as to respect my rights as a 'homeowner' will have done all that is required by Hegel's theory of property rights, even if it provides me with no work or with work at wages so low that I cannot feed and clothe my family. [...] What property rights are to guarantee is not my survival as an organism, but my status as a person.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See, for example: Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy. 'Moochers' and 'makers' in the voting booth, [2015-02-05]. <http://journalistsresource.org/studies/politics/elections/moochers-makers-voting-booth>. This type of rhetoric dates back to the 1980s, where politicians, mostly Republicans, addressed the blight of 'welfare queens' who were cheating the system and living off of government funds without any real contribution to society.

<sup>20</sup> Merold Westphal. *Hegel, Freedom, and Modernity*. Albany: SUNY Press 1992. Hereafter this work will be abbreviated to *HFM*. These articles were written around the time he and his colleagues wrote *IPTG*.

<sup>21</sup> Westphal. *HFM*, p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Westphal. *HFM*, p. 25.

In a religious context, this becomes a question of ‘what political actions does your religion validate?’ This issue of validation led Westphal to Kierkegaard, whose critique of Christendom effectively raises a similar question against the Danish society and its Hegelian version of Christianity. In Westphal’s reading of Kierkegaard’s critique, he finds a way to not only unveil this hypocrisy but to also remedy it. Through Kierkegaard, he finds a concept of the Christian faith that is so perpetually concerned with the love of others that it exhausts itself and can never be fully realized. It is a faith that requires a lifetime’s work on behalf of the poor, a faith which, as long as the Christian is breathing, must be asking: what can I do next? Furthermore, from this faith comes a form of self-effacement and criticism. This criticism is suspicious of religion – of Christendom and of individual practice – and Westphal employs it to reveal how faith becomes corrupted all too easily by selfish desire.

Westphal further develops his appreciation for this form of religious critique in *Suspicion and Faith*. Here, however, he explores a similar suspicion developed by Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche and prescribes their atheistic suspicion for Lenten reflection. This ‘Atheism for Lent’, Westphal argues, reveals to believers how they often unknowingly go about practicing their faith for selfish purposes. Reflecting upon my experience at the boys Catholic school, I am certain that my superiors thought that they were doing good work by organizing those community service days for the students; indeed they even said as much. At the end of the day, we held a prayer vigil, *attended solely by the staff and students*, where we reflected upon the work that we did and the people that we helped. Those people were mentioned in those prayers, but only as objects of gratification: for example there were stories highlighting how the organizers at those facilities were especially grateful for our help and how this volunteer work would make the lives of poor better. Yet there was not a single name mentioned of those whom we had helped nor was there a reflection on them as people similar to us. In its place were heaps of praise to the students and teachers for the good work that they had done. There was no intention or thought given to a sustained engagement with these communities, for our work was already completed. The prayers given at the vigil were all too general, and they primarily reflected how great we felt that we could help those *who could not help themselves*.

This is the Christianity that Westphal sees in *Suspicion and Faith* with squinting eyes, wondering what sort of help we are giving and, ultimately, who are we really helping. Moreover, his suspicion asks whether this ‘help’ actually perpetuates the problem by seeing these poor people as a burden to themselves and to society. Even though he does not use the term poor-talk here, he raises the same issues regarding how theologies view the poor and oppressed. This can be seen where he explores ‘Vague Generality’, his term for a technique of neutralizing evil and oppression which actually accomplishes the exact opposite. ‘Theologies in this vein’, Westphal summarizes, ‘may well denounce the evils of which the poor and oppressed are victims. But they do so in such general terms that there is no way to move from theory to practice.’<sup>23</sup> At the prayer vigil, for example, there was a denunciation of poverty, but no true reflection on the ways in which we contribute to poverty or could participate in its eradication. Continuing, Westphal establishes Vague Generality as a trap into which many theologies fall, and he highlights how Marx’s critique of religion effectively exposes this problem. One pointed example Westphal gives is the white South African during apartheid who accepts that racism is bad but does not see the racism within apartheid itself.<sup>24</sup>

What this similarly reveals, according to Westphal, is how theologies which proclaim to love the widow, orphan, and stranger often show themselves to not only fail to act upon these proclamations but actually uphold ideological, theo-political alliances which work *against* these people. In my classroom experiences I often witnessed how these alliances operate when the students criticized the poor as lazy or women as inherently insufficient for ‘actual’ work. Unknowingly, they were crafting a theological narrative in which they were the liberators of these people precisely because of their Christian heritage and work ethic. It was also telling that these students were all men.<sup>25</sup> In this way, their helping the poor naïvely legitimized their own status while not actually contributing to the eradication of poverty. They did so ‘unknowingly’ and naïvely, since, as Westphal argues and I agree,

<sup>23</sup> Westphal. *SF*, p. 184.

<sup>24</sup> Westphal. *SF*, p. 184.

<sup>25</sup> They were also mostly white, though the school did push for diversity initiatives and tried to maintain a decent ratio between people of color and white students; in theory, if not in practice, they partially succeeded.

this legitimization often goes unnoticed and unintended. Still, this legitimization tacitly hides how we go about interpreting Jesus' message of helping those on the margins of society, how we choose which acts and types of charity to perform, who we vote into office, and so on.

Continuing his critique, Westphal then relates the building of these faulty theo-political alliances to Gutiérrez's critique of theology in the developed world, what Gutiérrez calls a 'Constantinianism of the Left'.<sup>26</sup> According to Westphal, this is where theological doctrines and teachings, such as the Love Commandment or even the Kingdom of God, are subsumed into the historical and political movements that endorse liberation but act against it. 'This makes it possible,' Westphal argues, following Gutiérrez, 'to give theological but uncritical support to historical agencies, which, however hopeful they may appear, are nevertheless human and sinful.'<sup>27</sup> This, I believe, also becomes an aspect of theology that he tries to address in his overcoming of onto-theology. Pressing the matter further in *Suspicion and Faith*, Westphal then quotes Gutiérrez at length against the dangers of allowing their efforts for liberating the oppressed to fall into something like Vague Generalities.

Going back to that community service day, I am not sure if we actually helped those people. Rather, I believe that we re-affirmed our status as the upper-middle class that need to, from time to time, step into poverty to remind ourselves of those teachings regarding the poor. Looking in on the lives of the poor – a sort of poverty tourism – does wonders for the soul: it reminds you of your blessings and that you need to give to charity. However, charitable giving, seen from a Nietzschean perspective, can often lead to a reaffirmation of one's superior place in society by helping those who are inferior. With true solidarity with the poor comes a radical social shift: we do not help 'those others' who are poor, *we become poor with them*. Westphal, in his emphasis on the other, attempts the same solidarity in that we share in the lives of the poor and we effectively remove the barriers which distinguish the two segments of society.<sup>28</sup> In *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*, Westphal critiques the 'church triumphant', a church that I similarly experienced at that prayer vigil:

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<sup>26</sup> Westphal. *SF*, p. 185.

<sup>27</sup> Westphal. *SF*, p. 185.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example: Westphal. *IPTG*, pp. 76, 84; Westphal. *SF*, pp. 194–195, 200–208, 211, 250; Westphal. *Levinas, Kierkegaard, and the Theological Task*, pp. 246–250.

We must recognize that one makes that leap – if it is indeed the leap of true faith and not a poor substitute – not blindly, but in the full awareness that the One who is the Way and the Life and the Truth lived the life of a poor, suffering, impotent outcast through his identification with the poor, the suffering, and the impotent people on the fringes of his own society. [...] The requirement of faith is that the follower should become contemporary with Christ in his humiliation. This does not mean sacrificing Isaac, an illustration quite remote from our situation. What, then, does it mean?<sup>29</sup>

After giving several examples from Kierkegaard, Westphal then offers his own answer:

To become contemporary with Christ is to give up that ‘cruel pleasure’ that, as Nietzsche reminds us, is reinforced by morality. No doubt this movement is a necessary condition for the prior movement, for it is *only as we cease to judge the poor and oppressed that we are able to begin sharing with their suffering*.<sup>30</sup>

This contemporaneity with Christ becomes the touchstone for his concept of Christian faith and he develops it throughout his work. In my exploration of Westphal, I have tried to highlight how this thread ties his theology together and how his use of suspicion – and even his use of phenomenology – is all in the service of better understanding this need for solidarity with the oppressed and, consequently, with Jesus Christ. Through his academic work, particularly in *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, he develops this critique for a philosophical theology that can be expressed in a living faith.

In his most recent lay-oriented book, *Whose Community? Which Tradition?*, Westphal presents to a Christian audience, mostly Protestant, a hermeneutical guidebook for reading the Bible. Even though *Whose Community? Which Tradition?* is not itself a work of liberation theology, when read in light of his prior texts, it effectively reveals to his fellow Christians how Westphal himself came to understand this Christian message of solidarity. One could say that this work illustrates a way to read the Bible in a postmodern context, a context which Westphal believes reflects upon how religion can function in

<sup>29</sup> Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*. Macon: Mercer University Press 1987, p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*, p. 26; emphasis is mine.

the service of Christendom and not Christ's own mission. Westphal's academic engagement is a wrestling with how to best articulate a contemporaneity with Christ and his suffering people and it gives a philosophical-theological framework for his Christian convictions. Westphal articulates his philosophical-theological task as 'faith seeking understanding', and this faith is steeped in a Christian imperative of solidarity with the poor.

### **Only the Economy? The Concerns Over a Middle Class Liberation Theology**

Westphal's middle class liberation theology is not without its oversights, however. In his emphasis on solidarity with the poor, there is very little mention of gender, race, or sexual orientation. When he mentions race, for example, it is often in a tangent which he relates back to economic concerns over poverty, as seen in the apartheid illustration above. His primary, and often only, engagement with liberation theology is through the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez. Westphal reads Gutiérrez as a theologian whose work largely focused on a Marxian, economic critique of how religious praxis legitimated a colonial, capitalist form of oppression in South America. Consequently, Westphal's own understanding of liberation theology is based mainly on how economic factors often function as the levers of oppression. And while he speaks about liberation theology as a critique of ideology that can speak to various cultures, it almost always stems from economic matters such as class and wealth. It is thus always a middle class liberation theology. The middle class, recall, is an economic term.

Westphal is a product of his time in this regard, and the examples he cites in his critique of ideology are often based upon wealth inequality in America. While he does mention racism at times, e.g. his apartheid example above, it often appears as if Westphal thinks that economic equality is primary to all other forms of equality. It reminds me, at times, of James Carville, President Bill Clinton's campaign manager and trusted advisor who, when asked what his strategy was for winning Bill Clinton his first presidency, boldly proclaimed: 'It's the economy, stupid!'<sup>51</sup> Once Clinton came into office, nearly all of his

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<sup>51</sup> Michael Kelly. The 1992 Campaign: The Democrats – Clinton and Bush Compete to be Champion of Change; Democrat Fights Perceptions of Bush Gain (*New York Times*,

social welfare programs revolved around economic inequality with the mindset that this would open doors to solve other forms of inequality.

It appears that Westphal agrees with him. While both Carville and Westphal might also contend that racial and gender equality are also important, yet still, both men – Carville in the early 1990's and Westphal throughout his career – neglect to declare the importance of these inequalities in their rhetoric. Sometimes tacit agreement with these issues is not enough, and for Westphal's liberation theology to gain relevance beyond the middle class' economic concerns, he needs to develop a place for discussions on race, gender, and sexuality in his theology. However, in defense of Westphal, his work is fertile and open for this type of discussion. I do not see an explicit exclusion of such issues, so he has not truly omitted from his work people who are discriminated against due to their race, gender, or sexual orientation. Rather, it is a point that needs development, perhaps in a final text, or perhaps through other scholars who might advance his ideas in their own writings. In other words, this is a sin of forgetting – a sin of oversight – on Westphal's part, but it is a sin which can be absolved by further consideration of persons who experience other forms of oppression and a direct engagement in solidarity with them.

This oversight notwithstanding, I would like to highlight one final importance in Westphal's liberation theology: how his solidarity is mutually beneficial to all. It benefits both middle class Christians and the poor alike. It is not just that the teachings of Christ command this solidarity; one also finds Christ's promise of the Kingdom within it. Westphal's concept of self-transcendence, which requires this sort of solidarity to be enacted, is taken up by God in transcendence. As I all-too-briefly mentioned above, for Westphal, the self and the other are taken up by God in transcendence through this interaction. Solidarity, in this fashion, it becomes a two-way street where both the self and the other become a 'we', enjoined with God in the same community.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, this is not just solidarity with the poor; it is solidarity with *everyone*, including the richer classes. This prevents a converse moralizing where I, in my solidarity with the poor, might fashion the rich as an enemy who thereby legitimates my actions and beliefs.

51. 10. 1992) [2016-02-17]. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/31/us/1992-campaign-democrats-clinton-bush-compete-be-champion-change-democrat-fights.html>.

<sup>52</sup> This 'we' is not unlike Hegel's concept of recognition, see: Westphal. *HFM*, pp. 49–54.

Westphal's use of Nietzsche's critique of morality and self-legitimation cuts both ways in this regard, and I, in my portrayal and judgement of my teaching experiences, might be open to this cut as well. In light of this, I would like to express that I was a part of this community and I accordingly participated in (and perhaps also perpetuated) this community's poor-talk. Also, this community was not without its blessings. This Christian community, for example, was very open to and tolerant of other religions, including a deep engagement with atheism and the challenges atheism thought poses to a life of faith. Furthermore, within this community I became a better teacher, a better student, a better thinker, and I owe much of this to the school's open style of teaching and thoughtful debate among students and the faculty.

I find a similar ethos of self-criticism and learning in Westphal's thinking, which aims at solidarity with everyone. In this solidarity, it is not one person who does all the helping, and not merely one person who can become de-centered, but both of us: each party can experience a self-transcendence and be taken up by God in transcendence. We also heal each other by cancelling out our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. This is a partial, though essential, fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. It is a Kingdom that has no citizenship rights, and thus has no outcasts. Granted, Westphal needs to further expand on how this Kingdom benefits from a deeper respect of the others who feel excluded because of their gender, race, and sexual orientation, even still his notion of self-transcendence is open to them and his concept of solidarity has a place for these believers to speak.

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