

## *A Comparison Study of Liberation Theory and the Ruhi System*

Shahla Mehrgani,\* Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, Iran

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study seeks to understand the similarities and differences between Liberation Theology and the Baha'is current system that is based on the Ruhi System. There are some undeniable similarities between the key principles as well as the elements of these two systems. Both had been revealed during the 60s and the 70s in Colombia, in particular, and Latin America in general. They both suggest that religion is a social construction. Following the feature of constructionism, both suggest that religious activities and the nomos towards their cosmic frame of reference should be based on local and even neighbourhood activities. Both criticise academic theology and praise grassroots theology based on regular believers' interpretations of the scriptures that happen in the basic churches for liberation theology and Study Circles for the Ruhi system. Both are making efforts for justice, and both suggest that the prosperity of humanity is the fundamental principle and goal of religion.

Regarding the search for justice in society, both believe every individual is responsible for freedom from poverty and oppression in their communities. Their approaches to freedom along with justice are also similar; they suggest that followers should take actions to reduce poverty and make efforts for the betterment of the world through action, consultation, and interpretations of the scripture within the Basic Churches (Liberation Theology) or the Study Circles (Ruhi). Then they will act through this loop until they gain their goal. They both suggest that there is no dualism between sacred and profane. Therefore, they prioritise praxis over knowledge and cognition. Accordingly, for them, the definition of faith is taking action towards the prosperity of humanity (starting from their neighbourhood). Both criticise Western liberalism and following that, the contest culture, which is the crucial principle of Western liberalism.

The author explains some of the features mentioned above and how they are significantly similar to each other. The argument is made that the Ruhi System is highly inspired by Liberation Theology popular in Latin America at the time Ruhi was formed.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper seeks to demonstrate fundamental similarities between the Ruhi System (2019) in Baha'i Faith and Liberation Theology in Latin American Catholicism (Cadorette et al., 2004). The modern world requires different versions and approaches to religions and religiosity that

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\* Senior Lecturer, Baha'i Institute for Higher Education

is different from the previous ages (B. R. Wilson, 1979; B. R. Wilson, 1961). While there are different sects and divisions within all of the world religions, Baha'is believe that there will not be any division and sectarianism within their faith ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1990). The Baha'i Faith has been evolving during different stages of its history (Berger, 1954; Smith, 1987a), but they manage to face all the changes and evolutions without division among followers. The Ruhi System (The Ruhi Institute, 2019), which comes from a Colombian Institute is a new approach throughout the entire Baha'i Faith. It was announced and supported by the Universal House of Justice (UHJ, 1996a) and revolved the Baha'is approach firstly towards teaching the Faith and gradually towards community-building activities and from there towards the entire (UHJ, 1963-2019).

Christianity had faced division and sectarianism during its entire history, including during the 1960s and 1970s, when Liberation theology appeared in Latin America, promoting liberation for the poor and the oppressed (Berryman, 1987). The similarities are quite significant such that it cannot be random. This paper does not claim that Liberation Theology influences the Ruhi system, but that Liberation Theology could have inspired the Ruhi System.

This paper will compare and contrast five aspects of these two schemes and try to highlight their similarities and some of the fundamental differences which will be listed at the end.

### **LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

Liberation Theology is a new type of theology that emerged in the twentieth century and quickly found its place among the disadvantaged masses. The political geography of this theological discourse is Latin American countries; countries that were struggling in the twentieth century with two major problems, foreign colonialism and internal tyranny, including poverty, deprivation, and inequality. As population growth continued to increase, under such circumstances, the institutions of government by abusing the teachings of classical Christianity tried to justify the situation in their favour, and these governments were usually puppets of the old colonists like Spain. Portugal. England and the United States of America

to some extent were in contact with the Roman Catholic Church, and in various ways tried to use the Catholic Church's teachings and religious authority to maintain the status quo (Cadorette et al., 2004).

The term 'liberation theology' is, in theory, referred to as any theology that addresses or deals with cruel conditions. In this sense, for some scholars, feminist theology and black theology can also be regarded as a kind of liberation theology. However, the term is used for an approach to Christian theology rooted in Latin American circumstances in the 1960s and 1970s. This theological movement considers the most important roots of the misery of the poor in Latin American societies to be authoritarian, military, and dependent on the great superpowers and colonial powers of North American and European countries. It is the duty of the Church to protect the deprived and to resist against oppressors so that all may attain emancipation and the kingdom of heaven. These theologies insist on the need for poverty alleviation and independence through the struggle, education, and awareness of the masses (Boff and Boff, 1987). In these theologies, the Church must obtain its legitimacy by liberating the poor from poverty. The Bible should be read and experienced from the perspective of the poor. At the beginning of the 1970s, many Latin American countries joined this movement, but the price they had to pay to resist the existing situation was too high. They have lost many of the members in a bloody battle that swept across the area. Despite the opposition of Pope John Paul II, this movement could attract many followers and maintained the idea that the effort towards the betterment of the life of the poor is a significant part of their Christian belief system (Berryman, 1987).

### **RUHI SYSTEM IN THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH**

The Ruhi Institute is an educational institution established and managed by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Colombia (Ruhi, 2019). The Ruhi Institute, in its statement of purpose and methods (Ruhi, 2008), declares that they dedicate their efforts to "the development of human resources for the spiritual, social, and cultural development of Colombian people" (Ruhi, 2008). In 1996 Universal House of Justice, the universal management organisation of the Baha'is declared that the programs and curriculums of the Ruhi Institute should be considered as the 'core activities' among the Baha'is and asked all

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Baha'is to pass these programs and engage in its 'core activities' including; devotional sessions, children's classes, study circles, and later the junior youth classes (UHJ, 2010b; UHJ, 1996a). In fact, a ground-breaking change happened with the goal of the teaching plans in 1996. The Four-Year Plan declared in April 1996 shifted its target from growth of the Bahá'í Administrative Order (Effendi, 1994) to significant growth of the 'entry to the Faith by troops' (UHJ Ridván messages, 1996a).

The main difference is that Liberation theology could easily establish another movement or a version of Christianity. However, Baha'is apply the Ruhi system within the Training Institute as the mainstream practice of the Faith because the central leadership establishment of the Baha'is has adopted and supported it. Nothing, at least so far, could lead to sectarianism in the Baha'i Faith. There are many Baha'is who disagree with the Ruhi system and its activities, but they are encouraged to support it, or at least avoid opposition to it. No one among the Baha'is would stand against the authority of the Universal House of Justice, or they will lose their right to the membership of the community, and they may even be excommunicated. Nothing matters more among the Baha'is than their unity and oneness. So, even though many Baha'is disagree or are at least not very fond of the Ruhi system, they would not stand against it and jeopardise the unity among the Baha'is.

### **COMPARISON**

In the section below the author compares some key features of these two religious systems and examines its roots in the original faith according to their interpretations of their scriptures.

#### ***Time and Space***

When some talented priests from Latin American countries returned to their countries in the late 1960s, they found out that their education and training should be translated into the conservative version of theology in their countries. Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928 – present) from Peru and Juan Luis Segundo (1925 – 1996) from Uruguay returned from Europe, ready to accept the challenge from Vatican II for a 'renewed, socially committed Christian community' (Cadorette et al., 2004, 5). They had studied Marx and Freud along with Augustine and Aquinas and were ready to welcome modern ideas of sociology, psychology, economics, and

politics to their new theological opinions (Cadorette et al., 2004). They noticed that people in Latin America had been dehumanised because of poverty and political violence. They realised it was not possible for poor people to even think about God while they were turned into non-persons by economic exploitation and political oppression. At the Medellin-Colombia assembly of the bishops, in 1968, a document was issued which called for a fundamental renovation of the Latin American Church along with the socio-political structures of the entire continent of Latin America. Soon after that, Gustavo Gutiérrez published *A Theology of Liberation* (1971) in which he stated that Christians should commit themselves to liberate the poor from poverty and oppression. The title of this book was soon applied to the theological and pastoral movement that had already been started in the late 1960s (Cadorette et al., 2004).

Farzam Arbab (1941 – present) principal founder of the Ruhi Institute (2019) and the Fondaec Foundation (1988), states that he became familiar with the subject of development in 1971 when he was invited to participate in interdisciplinary research on an integrated approach towards rural development while he was a visiting professor in the Universidad Valle in Colombia (2000). He mentions that he did not approve of the group's approach towards development. The project tried to challenge the issue of poverty and justice in rural environments in Colombia; their main concern was to modernise the rural societies in Colombia as an outcome of development. He, had significant disagreements with the entire group, and hence, he gradually distanced himself from them and with some colleagues' help, he founded Fondaec (Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Science) (Arbab, 2000, 152). At the same time, he started the Ruhi system for training Baha'i teachers with the same philosophy and doctrine as Fondaec.

### ***Social Construction of Religion***

Liberation theology and the Ruhi System share the idea that religiosity is socially constructed (O'Shaughnessy, 2016; Lample, 2009). For Liberation theologians, sin is based on the structure of a given society (Hemmati, 2014). They argue that the main challenge is to liberate people from structural sin. They suggest that people in different societies because of the corrupted structures of their society commit structural sin. Accordingly, sin happens because of social situations and to liberate people from the sin, they should be liberated from the

corrupted structures and to do that, they suggest interpreting the Bible in the manner that serves this purpose and also to select and prioritise the verses that refer to the poor or how Jesus supported the poor (Boff and Boff, 1987). Liberation theology also suggests that the concept of God is socially constructed, and each society needs their own understanding of God. Hence they should have separate, different theology (O'Shaughnessy, 2016). Accordingly, they do not believe in universal theologies or metanarratives or meta-interpretations of the holy scriptures (Moerman, 2006; Nadeau, 2002). The concepts of theology, God, and sin are not universal generalisable ideas. On the contrary, they believe that the concepts are historical, cultural, and evolving matters (O'Shaughnessy, 2016). Accordingly, they oppose the academic theology that promotes a universal metanarrative of theology, God, sin, and liberation. They suggest that theology should be local instead of universal and should be produced in local situations and by local individuals (Boff and Boff, 1987). They suggest that theology can be practised at three levels. It starts with the real experience of local believers in their everyday lives, which is then sorted and organised at the middle level. After that, it is passed to the higher level. The higher level is informed by the everyday life experiences of the believers and produces a practical version of theology that can be applied by and inspire other people all over the world. Otherwise, it will only be another armchair theory which is not relevant to people's real problems and issues (Boff and Boff, 1987). Christianity should stop making general statements, and instead practically help to liberate the poor (Moerman, 2006). Based on these opinions, their field of interest is grassroots, which is the local level of actions and see individuals as responsible for liberating themselves from poverty and oppression as well as the production of their own theological knowledge (Nadeau, 2002; Moerman, 2006).

In the same way, the Ruhi system tries to study the words of God together in the local area, understand and interpret it together, and then they try to apply it in their everyday life (Lample, 2009). After that, they will document their experience and share it with the cluster coordinators, and they will share the findings and understandings, and experiences with the Counsellors in continental and international conferences and gatherings and eventually all the experiences and grassroots efforts and learning become documented and will be sent out to

all Baha'is to be inspired by them (UHJ, 1996-2019). Similarly for them, three levels of production of knowledge (starting from the grassroots and ending at the universal levels) matters and not the other way around (UHJ, Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice, 2010b). Therefore, for both, grassroots theology and knowledge matters more than academic theology. Accordingly, theology is socially constructed and is based on time, locality, and specific individuals.

### ***Justice and Prosperity of Humanity***

There is no doubt how much Liberation Theology is related to the liberation of the poor and establishment of justice in Latin American society in its original version and for all the oppressed and marginalised groups including black people, women, and other oppressed and exploited people all over the world (Berryman, 1987; Boff and Boff, 1987; Gutiérrez, 1971). Therefore, they strongly take opposition against Western liberalism and the structural poverty that is related to it (Cadorette et al., 2004). Liberation theologians suggest that God cannot be neutral because being neutral is supporting the rich and oppressors (Baum, 2000). Hence, in their opinion, not only should God side with the poor against the oppressors, but the Bible should be interpreted in favour of the poor and the oppressed (Boff and Boff, 1987; Gutiérrez, 1971). According to their experience, the main oppressor, especially regarding Latin American oppressions is Western liberalism (Cadorette et al., 2004).

Similarly, the Ruhi system and its leaders and founders made strong statements against Western liberalism (Karlberg, 2004; Arbab, 2000) and in support of the poor and the establishment of justice in local society (UHJ, 1996-2019). Farzam Arbab, founder of the Ruhi system and Fondaec, states that he was not comfortable with the Western meaning of development, which would promote the same modernisation and liberalism that is applied in Western countries and would eventually lead to the exploitation and oppression in so-called underdeveloped countries (Arbab, 2000). Arbab and other co-founders of Fondaec state that their main aim for the establishment of this organisation is to establish their own version of development in rural areas by empowerment and development of the poor regarding the requirements of their local development (Arbab, Correa and de Valcarcel, 1988). In this regard, in recent years in the new system, a new term became very popular, which is the

twofold purpose in growth (UHJ, 1996-2019) which means the growth and development of self and the local neighbourhood. The growth means a balanced combination of material and spiritual growth and development (UHJ, 2003). In recent years the statement of *The Prosperity of Humankind* (BIC, The Prosperity of Humankind, 1995) is considered as key guidance in Baha'is' community-building activities. The Baha'i World Community has issued several statements to promote Baha'is' version of development. It not only emphasise a balanced combination of material and spiritual prosperity but also discusses justice and solving the problem of poverty by the empowerment of individuals to liberate themselves from the unjust situations (BIC, 2018, BIC, 1999, BIC 1995).

### ***Faith Equals Praxis***

The founders of the Liberation Theology (inspired by Marx), emphasises praxis and taking actions by the poor themselves towards freedom from poverty and oppression (Berryman, 1987; Hemmati, 2014). Liberation Theology is known for being against academic theology and supporting the experience of the individuals in their everyday life (Boff and Boff, 1987). Therefore, it is a grassroots theology that suggests that regular people should be considered as real theologians. Thus, they established base churches in every neighbourhood and localities (Hemmati, 2014). In their base churches, they studied the Bible and interpreted the verses regarding their specific situations. They then take actions and practice their understandings within their everyday lives. The next meeting will also be about sharing their experiences and what they have learned from their experience, and then they would improve their interpretations and understandings from the Bible (Hemmati, 2014; Askari, 2009). Paulo Freire applies this doctrine in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2006) to develop his method in education and suggests that the current modern education system supports Western liberalism and maintains the oppression and exploitations in Latin America and other developing countries. He also applies the method of Liberation Theology in his education system. He suggests that theology and education should be universal and generalised to everybody all over the world, but also that each society should have their own version of education as well as their own theology (Freire, 2006). Accordingly, Liberation Theology is

regular individuals' theology rather than schooling academic institutional formal church-based theology.

The Ruhi Foundation has been an individual-based organisation from the very beginning. Initially, it was only applied in Colombia (Ruhi, The Ruhi Institute, 2019) but is now practised by Baha'is all over the world and is highly supported by the Universal House of Justice (UHJ, 1996-2019). The Universal House of Justice emphasises the vital role of individual and grassroots activities for teaching the Faith as well as community-building activities (UHJ, 2010b). In a significant and highly appreciated document ISGP (ISGP, 2009) in addressing the students and the lecturers at the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) suggests that none of the existing universities in the world could be an example for BIHE, but Fondaec, which is based on individual, grassroots, local actions for knowledge production. The contents of this document are similar to Freire's opinions in education (ISGP, 2009; Freire, 2006).

The Ruhi Foundation clearly explains its method of Baha'i studies and training teachers, which is applied in the sequence books and curriculum and explains the circle of studying, practising, and reflection. It is also highly individual-based (Ruhi, 2008). The three-layer hierarchy of the liberation theology is also quite visible in the Ruhi system. Some individuals practice and produce the actual knowledge. Some coordinators classify and categorise the experiences in their reports to the counsellors, and then the counsellors provide categorised and conceptualised documents which are taught in local, national, and international conferences and reflection meetings (UHJ, 2010b) and (Ruhi, 2019) and (Khodadad, 2016). Devotional meetings, study circles, children's classes, and junior youth sessions are all local activities practiced in neighbourhoods by local individuals (Ruhi, 2008) and (Khodadad, 2016). In short, for the system, being and doing are together and equivalent (UHJ, Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice, 1996-2019).

### ***Rejection of Dualism between the Sacred and the Profane***

For both Liberation Theology and the Ruhi system, people's life and their liberation from poverty and the establishment of justice in societies are the vital aspect of their doctrine as well as activities. Liberation Theology suggests there is no faith without freedom from the

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structural sin and liberation from poverty (Boff and Boff, 1987). Jesus was the prophet of the poor, and he sacrificed himself for their liberation from oppression. There is no significant border between the sacred and profane as it is in mainstream Christianity and most of the religious belief systems as it is known and introduced by Eliade (1959). In this regard, Liberation Theology is an earthly and this world religious movement that tries for the betterment of people's lives.

Similarly, the Baha'i current system also tries towards the betterment of the world (UHJ, 1996-2019). The twofold moral purpose, which considers the growth of the individual and the growth of the local community links teaching the Faith to community-building and removes the separation between spiritual and material civilisation in a twofold moral principle (Khodadad, 2016). The Universal House of Justice in regards to the real civilisation, states that it is a balanced combination of spiritual and material growth that is reflected in the Ruhi system enterprise, including all of the community-building activities, junior youth programs and ISGP sessions and programmes (ISGP, 2009; Ruhi, 2008). Accordingly, 'deep Baha'is' who attend the Ruhi sequential curriculum and study circles, would apply their findings and understandings in their everyday life. This practice equals their affiliation with the Faith. It does not mean being registered as a Baha'is anymore or state the divine status of Bahauallah as the Manifestation of God, but to practice the contents of the first book in their everyday life (Khodadad, 2016). Thus, linking everyday life and spiritual affairs, as well as linking the twofold moral purpose and the betterment of the world with community-building activities, goes beyond the separation of sacred and profane.

### **SOME DIFFERENCES**

The differences between the two systems are also crucial and significant. These are based on the nature of the original faiths, in particular, their doctrine<sup>1</sup> and theology.

#### *Nature*

The nature of liberation theology is a movement within Catholicism against the mainstream (Ratzinger, 1984). However, the nature of the Ruhi system as a training institute is the

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<sup>1</sup> Baha'is avoid the term theology to name their doctrines.

dominant discourse among the Baha'is supported by the Universal House of Justice (UHJ, Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice, 1996-2019).

### ***Political Statue***

Liberation Theology has an obvious political attitude and statement, but the Ruhi system as a Baha'i approach cannot be political in a specific definition of politics. Because Baha'is do not engage in politics, in particular, partisan political activities (UHJ, *Avoiding Partisan Politics and Promoting the Lesser Peace*, 1987).

### ***Limitation and Generalisation***

Liberation Theology suggests that it can only be applied in developing countries, in particular in Latin America, and each society needs its own theology because of the different structures and the requirements of their version of poverty and oppression (Drogus, 1995). They do not believe that theology is not applicable in liberal countries because of the nature of their structures and the poverty status in these countries (Berryman, 1987). However, all of the Baha'is all over the world have applied the Ruhi system (Ruhi, *The Ruhi Institute*, 2019).

## **CONCLUSION**

As mentioned in this paper, there are significant similarities in various aspects of Liberation Theology of Latin America and the Ruhi System in the Baha'i Faith. Similarities include; the location and timing of their emergence, their doctrine of the betterment of the world as salvation, their belief in locality, individuals, and grassroots, their belief in religion as a construction of society; and their opposition with academic theology. Their emphasis on praxis and action demonstrates that these two movements and religious approaches are closely related. Interesting future research should find out how each founder influenced the other and what are the direction and level of inspiration.

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