




RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Donald Macleod: Free Church liberation theologian?

Hunter Nicholson 

School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK  
Email: [hunter.nicholson@gmail.com](mailto:hunter.nicholson@gmail.com)

(Received 30 November 2022; revised 26 January 2023; accepted 2 February 2023)

## Abstract

Donald Macleod (1940–) has been called one of the two most important Scottish Reformed theologians of the twentieth century. This article shows that by the 1990s Macleod in his public theology consistently used language and concepts which were also trademarks of Latin American liberation theology. By comparing his work to the three mediations of liberation theology, I show it is possible to speak of Macleod as exhibiting a distinctive Scottish Reformed theology of liberation. I propose this connection should be understood through Macleod's constructive engagement with his own Scottish (and specifically Highland) Reformed tradition, whose interest in liberation carries surprising parallels with Latin American liberation theology.

**Keywords:** Christian socialism; Free Church of Scotland; land reform; liberation theology; Donald Macleod; Scottish Reformed Theology

Thirty years is long enough for most people in Scotland to forget that there was ever such a thing proposed as the Harris Superquarry. It would have been the largest mining operation in Europe, removing 600 million tons of rocks over sixty years from the isle of Harris.<sup>1</sup> Thirty years is also long enough to have forgotten the public hostility that the project elicited which ruined the venture before it began. Notable among those hostile was the Professor of Systematic Theology at the Free Church College in Edinburgh, Donald Macleod (1940–). Professor Macleod has been called by James Eglinton one of the two most important Scottish Reformed theologians of the twentieth century,<sup>2</sup> but in the Superquarry controversy, his influence also lay in the fact that during the 1990s he was a regular contributor to the regional newspaper, the *West Highland Free Press*.<sup>3</sup> From that post, Macleod, a native of Lewis, positioned himself as a

<sup>1</sup>Harry Barton, 'The Isle of Harris Superquarry: Concepts of the Environment and Sustainability', *Environmental Values* 5/2 (May 1996), p. 99.

<sup>2</sup>The other being T. F. Torrance (1913–2007). James Eglinton, 'Reformed Theology in Modern Europe (19th and 20th Centuries)', in Michael Allen and Scott Swain (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2020), p. 138. I am grateful to Dr Eglinton for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>3</sup>Cited in this article as *WHFP*.

theological voice speaking to contemporary issues in Scotland and especially Highlands and Islands society. In one 1996 column, Macleod situated the proposed superquarry in broader issues of economics and morality. What the quarry promised was economic development, but what it offered, he suggested, was only a fool's hope. 'Development always brings dependence. The community loses control. The capital can be withdrawn at will. The quarry can be closed in a whim.'<sup>4</sup> He argued that the reality behind the euphemism of 'development' is always the exploitation of marginalised communities by international capitalism. Rather than another outside economic project, what Macleod called for was liberation:

Exploitation and development: is there nothing else? Yes! Liberation! Set us free! Give us control! Why should decisions about Roineabhal be taken in London, Brussels or Edinburgh? Let them be taken in Harris! Give us back the mountain; and give us back all the other rights stolen from us by Redcoats, gunboats and distant parliaments. Give us back our ancient fishing-grounds. Give us back the liberty to build piers where we need them and roads where they suit us. Give us back our ancient hunting and fishing rights; and if we think our Maker is agreeable, we'll think carefully about letting you have some of our rock to build your roads.<sup>5</sup>

One could be forgiven for thinking that this diatribe against oppressive capitalism sprang from the pen of a Latin American liberation theologian like Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff or Jon Sobrino. After all, the language of development, dependence and exploitative capitalism are trademarks of their version of liberation theology.<sup>6</sup> These ideas, however, are the work of the most significant intellectual leader of the post-1900 Free Church of Scotland and it was opinion pieces like this that led Alastair McIntosh to appreciatively label Macleod a 'Presbyterian liberation theologian'.<sup>7</sup>

But does that title stick? The purpose of this essay is to examine the extent to which it might be fitting to describe Donald Macleod as a liberation theologian. The suggestion is *prima facie* unlikely. Macleod is openly committed to the theologically conservative Free Church of Scotland, which has shown little interest in explicitly adopting principles of liberation theology. And even if Macleod's stance towards liberation theology was not antagonistic, he certainly does not adopt any such title for himself. Even so, the resemblances between Macleod's public theology and that of some Latin American liberation theologians like Leonardo Boff is intriguing.

This article will show that by the 1990s Macleod in his public theology consistently used language and concepts which were also trademarks of Latin American liberation theology. By comparing Macleod's work to the three 'mediations' of liberation theology as proposed by the brothers Leonardo and Clodovis Boff in their book *Introducing Liberation Theology*, I will show that it is possible to speak of Macleod's public theology

<sup>4</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 25 October 1996.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. Roineabhal was the site of the proposed quarry.

<sup>6</sup>See, for instance, Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, ed. and trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), pp. 34–55.

<sup>7</sup>Alastair McIntosh, 'Public Inquiry on the Proposed Harris Superquarry: Witness on the Theological Considerations concerning Superquarrying and the Integrity of Creation', *Journal of Law and Religion* 11/2 (1994–5), p. 768. McIntosh has linked Macleod to wider movements of liberation in Scotland. See Rutger Henneman and Alastair McIntosh, 'The Political Theology of Modern Scottish Land Reform', *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 3/3 (2009), pp. 355–7, 361–2, 365–7.

as exhibiting a distinctive Scottish Reformed theology of liberation.<sup>8</sup> I also propose that this connection should be understood in the light of Macleod's constructive engagement with his own Scottish (and specifically Highland) Reformed tradition, whose interest in liberation carries surprising parallels with Latin American liberation theology. Macleod's work therefore offers a useful point of dialogue between the two traditions.

### Defining liberation theology

Liberation theology can be difficult to define because of its multiformity, finding unique expressions in black theology, feminist theology and ecotheology among others. However, it is with the specifically Latin American expression of liberation theology that Macleod interacted, and it is that particular form which governs our analysis of his work.<sup>9</sup> Latin American liberation theology developed after Vatican II as a theological response to the plight of the poor in Latin America, and its trademark stance is to maintain a 'clear and prophetic preferential option and solidarity for the poor'.<sup>10</sup> This solidarity begins with seeing the world from the perspective of the oppressed, and it is from this position of solidarity that one then pursues liberation from the oppression and dependence which has caused poverty in the first place.

As the Boff brothers explain, *doing* liberation theology requires three distinct 'mediations' (or stages of the theological process): *socio-analytical mediation*, *hermeneutical mediation* and *practical mediation*.<sup>11</sup> These mediations provide a framework for examining elements of liberation theology in Macleod's work. Therefore, a brief summary of their methodology is necessary.

First, in *socio-analytical mediation* one seeks to identify the oppressed in a given situation and understand the root cause of their oppression. In twentieth-century Latin America, the primary oppressor was a capitalist system, which increased the wealth of individuals and nations that control capital while further impoverishing poorer workers and developing nations.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, in liberation theology the term 'poor' is often interchangeable with terms like 'oppressed', because poverty is seen primarily as the product of oppressive systems. Thus, 'poor' can more broadly be defined as any group victimised by unjust systems. The goal of the *socio-analytical*

<sup>8</sup>Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. Paul Burns (New York: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 24.

<sup>9</sup>Thus, in what follows, the term 'liberation theology' is generally intended as a reference to Latin American liberation theology.

<sup>10</sup>John Eagleson and Philip Scharper (eds), *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, trans. John Drury (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 264.

<sup>11</sup>Boff and Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup>Liberation theology has not unfairly been associated at times with Marxism. In her early assessment of the movement, Monika Hellwig argues that liberation theologians make a 'critical acceptance of the Marxist analysis of the politico-economic functioning of society ... The contention of the liberation theologians is that, if the Marxist economic analysis offers the most coherent and rational account of the Latin American situation at the present (a matter to be judged rationally) then a Christian is committed to use it as a tool, because charity must be efficacious, and therefore must be based on the best possible analysis of the cause of suffering and oppression.' Hellwig, 'Liberation Theology: An Emerging School', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30/2 (April 1977), p. 145. Macleod's approach to Marxism was typically negative, even as he seems to implicitly adopt a socio-analytic similar to that of liberation theology. See his denouncement of Marxism in 'Calvinism and Freedom', *The Monthly Record*, May 1988, p. 77.

*mediation* is to ask *who* are the poor and what systems keep them in poverty. This is to see the world through the eyes of the oppressed.

*Hermeneutical mediation* is the process of understanding ‘what God’s plan is for the poor’ by interpreting their present oppression in the light of scripture.<sup>13</sup> For example, Christopher Rowland describes the way poor, rural Brazilians used the Exodus story and its hope for a promised land to understand their own struggle for land access.<sup>14</sup>

In *practical mediation* the theologian tries to ‘discover the courses of action that need to be followed so as to overcome oppression in accordance with God’s plan’.<sup>15</sup> Liberation theology always leads to action, because its goal is for the poor to gain freedom from the unjust systems that dehumanise them. This action takes many forms including advocating political solutions, organising movements and working in local communities.<sup>16</sup> The Boffs write, ‘Liberation theology ... starts from action and leads to action, a journey wholly impregnated and bound up with the atmosphere of faith. From analysis of the reality of the oppressed [*socio-analytical*], it passes through the word of God [*hermeneutical*], to arrive finally at specific action [*practical*].’<sup>17</sup>

### Themes of liberation theology in Macleod

It is possible to demonstrate the presence of each of these mediations in Macleod’s thought.<sup>18</sup> Prior to considering these mediations, however, it is important to note a key motivating principle Macleod shared with liberation theology. As already noted, for liberation theology that principle is called the ‘preferential option for the poor’; Macleod’s own principle is to ‘see things from below’, but the ideas are virtually synonymous. Macleod borrows his christological reorientation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45), who wrote the following in a letter to a friend from prison in Nazi Germany: ‘We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer.’<sup>19</sup>

Macleod argues that this view from below should be the default perspective of both individual Christians and of the church collectively. It requires the church to recognise and advocate for the oppressed, something which Macleod admits is not always natural in his own Reformed context. ‘Churches, especially Reformed churches, are often composed of the fit and the strong, the intelligent and the healthy. They have been hard-working and successful. Very often, the membership has little experience of unemployment or social discrimination or poor housing or inner-city deprivation or rural

<sup>13</sup>Boff and Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup>Christopher Rowland, ‘Liberationist Reading: Popular Interpretation of the Bible in Brazil’, in Katharine J. Dell and Paul M. Joyce (eds), *Biblical Interpretation and Method: Essays in Honour of John Barton* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), pp. 132–48.

<sup>15</sup>Boff and Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>While Macleod has written numerous theological books, the most important sources in comparing his work to liberation theology are his writings in *The Monthly Record* and the *West Highland Free Press*. *The Monthly Record* is the monthly periodical of the Free Church of Scotland. Macleod was its editor from 1977 to 1990. He wrote regularly for the *West Highland Free Press* from 1993 to 2015.

<sup>19</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 17.

hardship. It is very difficult for such people to see things from below.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, he argues that only when the church adopts the view from below in solidarity with the outcasts can it reflect the self-sacrificing love of Christ.

### Socio-analytical mediation

As with liberation theology's option for the poor, Macleod's view from below does not merely invite empathy and material aid to the poor. It is to recognise the systemic injustices which hold them oppressed. He claims that Britain and Scotland are in many ways defined and governed by unjust systems, as is Latin America. He writes:

In Britain today, there is still structural injustice. Economic and industrial power is concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority able to command financial rewards out of all proportion to their actual work. The majority, whether in management or on the shop floor, work for wages which, by comparison, are trivial; and at any time they may find themselves redundant as a result of decisions taken in board-rooms which have little understanding of ordinary human problems. Fortunes are inherited, not made. Add the problems of long-term unemployment, of poor housing, of regional inequality, of racial discrimination, and it is not surprising that there are occasional outbursts of lawlessness.<sup>21</sup>

The kinds of injustices Macleod lists here are an important point of contact with liberation theology, which considers sinful economic systems as the primary cause of poverty.

Inevitably, the different cultural and economic contexts of Macleod and Latin American liberation theologians lead to differences in socio-analytical mediation. In addition to claims about the plight of the economically poor across Scotland, Macleod writes of regional inequalities that are specific to the Highlands and Islands. Part of his concern is that London (and Edinburgh) rules with little thought to the welfare of these places on the periphery of the kingdom. In the late twentieth century, there was a growing effort in Scotland to preserve Gaelic language and culture, and Macleod argued that their disappearance (along with the disappearance of Highland evangelicalism) was as much an economic problem as it was a cultural one.<sup>22</sup> Centuries of economic injustices forced Highlanders and Islanders to leave their home to seek prosperity elsewhere, emptying the land of its people with all their cultural artefacts. After a visit to the Hebridean island of Scarp, Macleod asks in one article why no Gaelic is spoken any more on the island. His answer: 'It is because there are no people there. The community has been destroyed.'<sup>23</sup> For him, the disappearance of Highland culture, language and religion must be understood in terms of economic oppression. 'Today those who want to preserve Gaelic must immerse themselves in a wider struggle: the struggle to save our fishing industry, the struggle to secure the future of Harris Tweed, the struggle to provide decent communications; and above all the struggle for control of the land.'<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Donald Macleod, 'The Christian and the State', in Ian Shaw (ed.), *Social Issues and the Local Church* (Bath: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1988), p. 71.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 7 May 1993.

<sup>23</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 5 August 1994.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

Land ownership was indeed key to Macleod's understanding of oppression in the Highlands and Islands, as it was for many Scots in the late twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> For him, the consolidation of land into the hands of a wealthy, select few was the most egregious systemic injustice in the country. In one pointed article Macleod described the situation:

Every title deed in the country is, in effect, a narrative of events leading up to the acquisition of the property by its current owner. Unfortunately, the first event in the chain (the act of robbery and pillage by which the title was first established) is never referred to. It is a well recognized legal principle that a criminal should not benefit from his crime (for example, by inheriting the estate of his murdered victim). If that principle were applied to land ownership in Scotland, our aristocracy would be queuing up for council houses in Craigmillar.<sup>26</sup>

Macleod argues that this history has led to the present problem where wealthy individuals own large swaths of land for entertainment, leaving whole communities 'land hungry'. The result is a class struggle between 'land-owners' (read: the oppressors) and 'land-users' (read: the oppressed).<sup>27</sup> These examples show that there is a socio-analytical mediation in Macleod's work similar to that of liberation theology, but one which embodies the particular concerns of Macleod's own Scottish context.

### Hermeneutical mediation

Like the *hermeneutical mediation* of Latin American liberation theology, Macleod also seeks to understand the plight of the poor through the lens of scripture. The texts he references most often for this purpose are the creation narrative and the Gospels. He uses the creation narrative both to highlight the dignity of the oppressed as those made in the image of God and also to recognise the divine authority that sits above the oppressors. As an example of the former, consider Macleod's reply to Margaret Thatcher's 1986 address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. In her speech, Thatcher said that because man is made in the image of God, he is responsible for his actions and the government should stand back and allow him to rise or fall based on his own choices.<sup>28</sup> Macleod's response to Thatcher in the next issue of the *Monthly Record* was biting.

She affirms quite rightly that man is made in the image of God. What she deduces from it is that he is responsible. Which is as may be; but it is not the deduction one would expect. Why not say that because he bears God's image he should live with dignity: like a prince? Any Christian political philosophy will make this its goal ... The problem with Mrs Thatcher's visit to Scotland is that she always comes to

<sup>25</sup>As McIntosh and Henneman note, because of 'early modernity's market commodification of land and subsequent "clearances" of the peasantry from it', Scotland now has one of the 'most highly concentrated patterns of land ownership in the world'. Ongoing political pressure in the late 1990s eventually led to the Land Reform Scotland Act 2003. Henneman and McIntosh, 'Political Theology of Scottish Land Reform', pp. 340–1, 349.

<sup>26</sup>Donald Macleod, 'In a Stew over Deer Culling and "Poachers"', *WHFP*, 8 July 1994.

<sup>27</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 12 January 1996.

<sup>28</sup>Margaret Thatcher, 'Speech to General Assembly of the Church of Scotland', <https://www.margaret-thatcher.org/document/107246>; accessed 25 November 2020.

teach, not to learn; to lecture, not to listen. Next time she should avoid triumphal entries to places of circumstance and go where she can see and hear and touch and smell the problems. Let her go for a walk in Wester Hailes (by no means the worst area in Scotland) at 11 o'clock on a Friday night (without publicity, but *with* escort). She would learn something of the resigned dignity of the poor; the simplistic folly of blaming it all on the parents; the soul-destroying, claustrophobic oppressiveness of a concrete jungle; and the pained confusion of divine image-bearers who have never had an answer to that most Scottish of all questions: What do you do?<sup>29</sup>

In other words, Macleod invites Thatcher to 'see things from below'.

Underlying Macleod's use of the image of God in his hermeneutic of liberation is a fundamentally Reformed approach to anthropology. In keeping with historic Reformed anthropology, Macleod posits that after the fall, man lost the moral image of God but retains the natural image. This natural image for Macleod includes freedom (or agency), rationality, aesthetic sense and community.<sup>30</sup> Crucially, he argues that the natural image imposes an obligation on society to see that individuals flourish according to each of these attributes.

Chief among them is community. As bearers of God's image, Macleod argues that human society must reflect the mutual care and love of God within his triune self, in part by sharing the resources of the community with the impoverished.<sup>31</sup> This kind of sharing is more than an exchange of money – it means using the shared resources of the community to encourage the flourishing of every aspect of the image of God, including rationality, aesthetic sense, and freedom. A major threat to this kind of divinely mandated community, according to Macleod, is the interference of those who do not want the government to be involved in any redistribution of wealth – those who support 'the kind of minimalist government beloved by the millionaires of the American Right' and who cry 'Let things be! Keep out of the godless state! Let market forces have free course and be glorified!'<sup>32</sup> Macleod continually uses the doctrine of the image of God to speak to the responsibility that those with power or wealth have to the rest of society. In doing so, he uses the creation narrative to perform a similar hermeneutical function that the Exodus narrative does in liberation theology: with it the oppressed can see that God's purpose for them is not slavery and oppression but freedom and dignity.

In Macleod's hands even the biblical principle of Sabbath rest was a call for liberation from oppressive market forces. 'Every week the economic cycle of production, distribution and exchange must stop for a full 24 hours. That's what God wanted because it was the only way to protect the weak from the remorseless grind of untrammelled market forces.'<sup>33</sup> Macleod's use of the sabbath here is a key example of the way in which his association with the Free Church (and its commitment to sabbath observance) informs his articulation of liberation.

<sup>29</sup>Emphasis in original. Macleod, 'Mrs Thatcher and the Kingdom', *The Monthly Record*, June 1988, pp. 132–3.

<sup>30</sup>Donald Macleod, 'God's Image in Man', *The Banner of Truth* 122 (November 1973), pp. 6–14.

<sup>31</sup>Sometimes Macleod will explicitly attribute this position to liberation theology. See Donald Macleod, 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 20 October 1995; 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 1 March 1996.

<sup>32</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 1 March 1996.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

The Genesis narrative was especially helpful for Macleod in speaking about land rights issues. For example, in a 1993 speech at the Scottish Crofter's Union, he compared the dignified calling of crofters to man's original calling as a cultivator of the soil. Like Adam, crofters have been charged to protect the earth: 'Let us guard our own environment. It faces many perils. It faces perils from pollution, from over grazing, from industrial irresponsibility.'<sup>34</sup> The manual labour of crofting has an inherent dignity because, in that work, crofters bear God's image by being a 'maker' as he is. Implicit throughout his speech is the spectre of absentee landlords who owned much and cared little. He also addressed crofters as an oppressed group who had already achieved a large measure of economic liberation, and he encouraged them to use any newfound power to help others secure similar rights. Nonetheless, in his writings he clearly considered the Highlands and Islands places that remained threatened by economic systems that disregarded the needs of such peripheral communities.

The most interesting use of what we might call Macleod's liberation hermeneutic in Genesis is his notion that God is the one true landlord. He is the one to whom all oppressor landlords will one day be held accountable, and he is the one who has given the land freely to all image bearers. While much of Scotland's Highlands and Islands were controlled and enjoyed exclusively by a select few, Macleod's constant refrain is that the true owner of all the land in Scotland is not an aristocrat. It is God, and he intends his land to be shared among all who bear his image. In one article on the need for community ownership he writes:

The Almighty is the real Feudal Superior and many centuries have passed since He denounced property speculators and land-grabbers. Woe to those who add house to house and field to field! ... Greed will masquerade as law and order and the heirs of medieval bandits will portray the pursuit of justice as subversion. But none of that will alter the fact that crofting communities possess their land not by grace and favour of the Scottish Office but by deed of gift and grant from God himself. We stand on that land not as its lords but as its servants; not to exploit it but to protect it; not to rape it but to nourish and cherish it. Yet equally, we stand in it not to be ground into but to hold ourselves erect, bearers of God's image and proud successors of our forebears, who trenched and ploughed it, lived and loved on it and often died for it.<sup>35</sup>

With the creation narrative Macleod makes normative claims about the way society should function, and in doing so, he invites all people (including the poor) to participate in the ongoing narrative of creation. It is a call to remember the original plan for humanity before the fall and to seek the liberation of society from the social and individual injustices which keep man from fulfilling his original *telos*.

The other crucial texts for Macleod's hermeneutical mediation are the Gospels for the way they reflect Christ's bias towards the poor. His was the exemplary 'view from below', and the notion which encapsulates this for Macleod is kenosis. Jesus became poor in order to redeem the poor (spiritually and economically), and Macleod says Christians are to partake in a similar narrative. 'The Christian socialist can work for the poor only from alongside them, remembering that it was the marginalized that Jesus befriended and that it was not the powerful, the rich and the beautiful who

<sup>34</sup>Donald Macleod, 'We Sing Today Not the Landlord's Song...', *The Crofter*, May 1993.

<sup>35</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 12 January 1996.



benefited from His policies but the blind, the lame and the mendicant.<sup>36</sup> Through his kenosis, Christ ‘negates in his own person that principle of Competition on which we have built the Britain of the last 25 years’.<sup>37</sup>

For Macleod, an essential part of following Christ is identifying with and speaking for the outcast (variously defined). Christ ‘identified with particular victims of oppression: with the Jews, groaning under the burden of Roman imperialism; with the poor, weary under the yoke of the Pharisees; with social outcasts like tax-gatherers and prostitutes; and with racial minorities like the Samaritans and the Syro-Phonicians’.<sup>38</sup> While the church must never opt for assimilation in meeting the needs of the world around it, Macleod says that ‘an authentic, cross-bearing church must similarly identify with the despised, the inarticulate, the helpless, the defenseless and the godless’.<sup>39</sup>

### Practical mediation

Given that, as in liberation theology, Macleod saw many societal problems as conflicts between oppressors and oppressed, and given that he offered a hermeneutic to speak to these problems, what practical actions did Macleod advocate and what was his own involvement? These are the questions of *practical mediation*.

To the latter question, we point primarily to Macleod’s work as an editor and a journalist, keeping in mind that his journalism was addressed to the church and to those outside it from the perspective of a Christian theologian. To the extent that Macleod argued for a kind of political or economic liberation of the oppressed through structural transformation, this came primarily from his editorship at the *Monthly Record* and through his writings in various news outlets (primarily the *West Highland Free Press*). Which is also to say that these strands of liberation thought are not nearly so explicit in his published books or his sermons as they are in his journalistic work. Indeed, a key claim of this article is that readers who are only familiar with Macleod through his books will necessarily form an imbalanced view of who he was and what he stood for during his career. For readers (particularly within the Free Church of Scotland) during the 1980s and 1990s, the division in emphases between Macleod’s journalism and his more strictly theological works was probably less conspicuous, because many would have been familiar with both, and they would have constantly been interpreting the one in the light of the other. When, for instance, Macleod says in his work on the Trinity, *The Shared Life*, that politicians are responsible for ensuring honourable lives for their constituents, it is reasonable to assume that many of his readers would also have known the specific kinds of policy actions Macleod implied in such an imperative.<sup>40</sup> Many of the theological commitments evident in his books found concrete social, political, and economic application in his journalism.

What actions did Macleod call for in the light of the systematic justices in late twentieth-century Scotland? In short, he advocated for a kind of Christian socialism (over against what was sometimes referred to as international socialism).<sup>41</sup> He considered socialism as an ideal which naturally follows from Bonhoeffer’s ‘view from

<sup>36</sup>Donald Macleod, ‘Footnotes’, *WHFP*, 7 May 1993.

<sup>37</sup>Donald Macleod, ‘Footnotes’, *WHFP*, 29 December 1995.

<sup>38</sup>Donald Macleod, ‘The Crucified God’, *The Monthly Record*, April 1982, p. 75.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Donald Macleod, *The Shared Life* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 1994), p. 63.

<sup>41</sup>Macleod, ‘Footnotes’, *WHFP*, 7 May 1993.

below'.<sup>42</sup> Christian socialism calls for a government which prioritises the redistribution of wealth as a means of addressing inequality. It is the community taking 'responsibility for its children, its sick, its elderly and its unemployed' and using 'its power in the interest of those at the bottom of the social heap, protecting the poor, the unqualified and the disabled from the savagery of market forces'.<sup>43</sup> Macleod argues that the church must actively advocate for such a government. 'It [the church] must call for justice: for the society of its dreams, in which righteousness prevails, in which opportunity does not depend on accidents of birth and residence, and in which men and women of all races, creeds and classes have equal access to jobs, to schools and hospitals and to the mountains and the rivers.'<sup>44</sup>

At a minimum, this was a call for higher taxes on the rich, with revenues going to public services in the community. Macleod often treated the wealthy with suspicion in his writings, rarely giving them the benefit of the doubt that their wealth was well-earned. In calling for higher taxes, he writes in 1987, 'Those who earn most probably earn it by dubious means anyway (from inherited investments, from asset-stripping, from non-executive directorships and from the more parasitic professions).'<sup>45</sup> In another *Monthly Record* article, Macleod responded to the charge that socialism is robbery by saying, 'The £700,000-a-year man who complains of being robbed by the Inland Revenue is himself a robber by definition, expecting the teacher, the plumber and the priest to serve him for a fraction of what he charges for his own (often more dubious) contribution to society. ... *Legalised robbery* is the slogan of the privileged. We need a slogan for the poor: *Free at the point of use*.'<sup>46</sup> Higher taxation was a key means of dismantling unjust economic systems in Scotland and restoring dignity to those most oppressed by unchecked capitalism. At times, Macleod will place his own view of socialism within the larger context of the Christian socialist movement in the UK, which shared many of the concerns of liberation theology.<sup>47</sup>

Specific to Macleod's Scottish context, Christian socialism also involved ensuring that those living in the geographic peripheries (i.e. the Highlands and Islands) were spoken for when they were forgotten by those in power. For example, in the 1990s Macleod wrote several articles critical of the toll charge on the newly built Skye Bridge, describing it as systematic theft characteristic of the way the central government in London mistreats the Highlands and Islands.<sup>48</sup> He supported protesters of the tax, saying 'In this instance, good men have been driven to the conclusion that the only way to secure justice is one that involves breaking the law. The rest of us (including the churches and local authorities) should back them. We have no right to be silent witnesses of evil deeds.'<sup>49</sup>

Another Scottish distinctive of Macleod's argument for Christian socialism was the issue of land reform. Macleod used his platform as a theologian to speak at events such

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 27 September 1996.

<sup>44</sup>Macleod, 'The Christian and the State', p. 71.

<sup>45</sup>Donald Macleod, *The Monthly Record*, February 1987, p. 28.

<sup>46</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Legalised Robbery', *The Monthly Record*, December 1989.

<sup>47</sup>Macleod explicitly connects Christian socialism with liberation theology in 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 7 May 1993. Other leaders in the UK Christian socialist movement also recognised similar shared concerns with liberation theology. See Christopher Bryant, 'Introduction', in Christopher Bryant (ed.), *Reclaiming the Ground: Christianity and Socialism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), pp. 22–3.

<sup>48</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 9 July 1993.

<sup>49</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 16 February 1996.

as the Scottish Crofter's Union's 'Understanding Land Reform' conference at the University of Edinburgh, and in testifying at the Public Inquiry on the Proposed Harris Superquarry.<sup>50</sup> On such occasions, Macleod joined with groups outside of the church to push for various reforms, which included allowing for community ownership of properties, giving local communities greater control of land, and promoting better stewardship of the land. In general, Macleod supported the Scottish land reform legislation in the late 1990s, saying in one speech, 'We know enough to move to immediate legislation on some key issues such as the taxing of supporting estates and the right to roam: even, in my view on the integration of agrarian and mineral rights and on tenants' right to buy.' But he argued the reforms must not end here. 'The campaign for land reform is driven by ideals: by a desire to curtail the powerful and to empower the disempowered; by a concern for stewardship and community; by a passion for freedom and justice. No one Bill is going to deliver on these ideals.'<sup>51</sup>

In summary, Macleod's public theology is distinguished by a clear bias for the poor and an assertion that the problems of the poor are often rooted in systemic economic injustices. Furthermore, he places the plight of the poor in a biblical narrative that implies a need for liberation, and he called for concrete change to the economic and legal system in Scotland and the United Kingdom. These continuities with liberation theology notwithstanding, any characterisation of Macleod as a liberation theologian must be carefully clarified in two ways: first, with his own assessment of liberation theology; and more importantly with attention to the fact that many of the beliefs and concerns that identify Macleod as a kind of liberation theologian find their origin for Macleod primarily in his own Scottish and Reformed context. We consider these two points in turn.

### Macleod's assessment of liberation theology

In his earlier writings (circa late 1970s), Macleod's comments on liberation theology are reserved. His first mention of the movement was likely in a 1978 article on contemporary challenges to Roman Catholicism, one of which was liberation theology. In his description of the movement, Macleod offers little opinion other than to say, 'There is much in this [the claims of liberation theology] with which any crofter will readily agree.'<sup>52</sup> Here already is a hint that Macleod saw in liberation theology echoes of political and theological concerns which were long indigenous to the Highlands and Islands. Similarly, in 1984, Macleod reports in an editorial that Leonardo Boff had recently been called to the Vatican 'to show why, as an advocate of Liberation Theology, he should not be treated as a heretic.'<sup>53</sup> He uses the story as an opportunity to argue that clergy must be allowed to be politically involved. 'There can be no no-go areas for the spokesman of Christianity.'<sup>54</sup>

However, it is not until Macleod published *The Person of Christ* in 1998 that we find his fullest appraisal.<sup>55</sup> On the one hand, he heartily endorses some of the major themes

<sup>50</sup>Macleod, 'We Sing Today', and his 'Land Reform and Human Values', in Robin Callander and Andy Wightman (eds), *Understanding Land Reform in Scotland: Report of the Conference of 6 March 1998* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh 1998), pp. 52–4; McIntosh, 'Public Inquiry', pp. 783–5.

<sup>51</sup>Macleod, 'Land Reform and Human Values', p. 54.

<sup>52</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Is there a New Catholicism?', *The Monthly Record*, March 1978, p. 52.

<sup>53</sup>Donald Macleod, 'The Clergy in Politics', *The Monthly Record*, November 1984, p. 241.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Macleod, *The Person of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology*, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), pp. 251–61.

of liberation theology: its bias for the poor, its portrait of Jesus as challenging the major political groups of the day and its identification of oppressive social and economic structures as sinful. He even broadly endorses the way Latin American theologians involved themselves in various political struggles, saying, 'In such a context, the preacher of redemption must inevitably become a preacher of political liberation, not least because of the tendency of power to corrupt all who hold it, including the redeemed.'<sup>56</sup>

Its weakness, he argues, is in what it neglects. 'To the extent that it is proposed as a self-contained alternative to the church's traditional understanding of the gospel, Liberation Theology is open to serious criticism.'<sup>57</sup> Macleod's primary criticism here is that liberation theology has a tendency to focus exclusively on the Christ of history, ignoring the significance of the atonement for individual Christians and for the Kingdom of God. The call to move toward liberation in the earthly sphere is true and good, but Macleod says that the defining perspective of Christians should be to recognise that in the truest sense they are already liberated through Christ's atonement for sin on the cross. 'The Christian is not *moving towards* liberation. He is starting from liberation, because he has already been translated from the Empire of Darkness to the Commonwealth of Love (Col. 1:13).'<sup>58</sup> For Macleod, those who have been liberated from sin in their own person are truly empowered to secure the liberation of their communities from systemic injustices.<sup>59</sup>

He also worries that liberation theology 'canonizes' the poor. Christ, he says, did have a bias towards the poor, and yet at the same time he treated all people as if he were 'completely indifferent to distinctions of class'.<sup>60</sup> Latent in this concern is a further concern that when an oppressed group finds liberation, it sets itself up as oppressors.<sup>61</sup> He also criticises liberation theology for sometimes embracing themes of liberal theology (for example, when Jon Sobrino argues that 'Jesus did not preach about himself'<sup>62</sup>).

Despite his several concerns (which are not insignificant), Macleod's final assessment of liberation theology is largely appreciative. He writes,

What is innovative is the importance they attach to Christ's political activity and to his commitment to liberating people from pain, poverty and injustice. Theirs is a classic example of a theology of overstatement. If we assess it as a balanced description of Christianity as a whole, it fails miserably. But that is not how it asks to be assessed. Acutely and painfully aware of its own Latin American context (largely the result of a heartless orthodoxy) it has recovered a long-neglected vein of New Testament teaching, expounded it with deliberate exaggeration and made the world listen. Had Gutierrez, Sobrino and Boff inserted all the necessary qualifications, we should never have heard of 'Bias to the poor!' Such has been their success that the church of the future will find it hard to ignore its obligation to

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 255. For their own part, the Boff brothers are emphatic that liberation theology was never intended as such a 'self-contained alternative'. See Boff and Boff, *Introduction to Liberation Theology*, p. 32.

<sup>58</sup>Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, p. 259.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., citing Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (London: SCM Press, 1978), p. 41.

defend the oppressed and speak for the dumb. The Liberationist strand will now take its place along with the Kerygmatic, the Charismatic and the Sacramental as an indispensable element in the fabric of Christianity.<sup>63</sup>

### A distinctly Scottish Reformed view of liberation

A final key to understanding the evident themes of liberation in Macleod's work is the primary role his own Scottish Reformed context has in their development. Indeed, one reason why Macleod finds it so easy to appropriate some of the concepts and language of liberation theology is because he saw in that movement parallels with themes of liberation already present in his own tradition of Scottish Reformed theology. From Macleod's perspective, the Scottish Reformation was orientated towards liberation. He writes of Scotland, 'Our democracy was born in the struggles of the Reformers and the Covenanters. Fired by the Calvinistic vision of the sovereignty of God and seeing His image in every man, they raised their voices against the tyranny of the Stuarts and the rapacity of the nobles. They spoke for the poor and called for a school in every parish and a road to university for every lad o' pairs.'<sup>64</sup>

Throughout his writing, Macleod often points to nineteenth-century Free Church leaders like Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) and James Begg (1808–83) as men whose convictions led them to have their own kind of bias for the poor and in that sense they prefigured the concerns of liberation theology.<sup>65</sup> At one point Macleod says that Chalmers may not have *spoken* like a Gutierrez, 'But is the reason, perhaps, that instead of speaking for the poor (asking others to do something) he did something himself? And is there not in Chalmers' action all the asymmetry that Gutierrez and Bonhoeffer could have asked for?'<sup>66</sup> At least, Macleod would like to think so. We might add to these Scottish influences the major contribution that Dutch theologian and prime minister Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) had on Macleod's view that society has a responsibility to care for its poor.<sup>67</sup>

What is most interesting about Macleod's use of liberation theology in light of Reformed theology is not the way in which he tries to read back themes of liberation and socialism into Reformed history. It is rather the way that he himself articulates in his own time a distinctively Reformed theology of liberation. This is evident in his article, 'The Influence of Calvinism on Politics'.<sup>68</sup> At one point, Macleod describes the main themes of the Calvinist view of church and state relations. He writes, 'Calvinism has always stressed that the whole of human life is subject to the authority of God and the lordship of Christ.'<sup>69</sup> Therefore, he asserts that 'the church must bear

<sup>63</sup>Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, p. 260.

<sup>64</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Are we Hopelessly Englished?' *The Monthly Record*, October 1987, p. 220.

<sup>65</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 24 May 1996. Begg's legacy played a particularly painful role in Macleod's own career when a group of Free Church ministers formed the James Begg Society, an organisation which called for a return to the kind of Free Church principles for which Begg stood (over against Macleod's perceived liberalism). Macleod responded to this group saying, 'What a pity that his modern disciples focus on his theological nit-picking rather than on his Christian socialism!'

<sup>66</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Thomas Chalmers: The Practical and the Pious', *The Monthly Record*, March 1976, p. 56.

<sup>67</sup>See, for example, Macleod 'Politics and Spirituality', *The Monthly Record*, February 1987, pp. 27–9.

<sup>68</sup>Donald Macleod, 'The Influence of Calvinism on Politics', *Theology in Scotland* 16/2 (Autumn 2009), pp. 5–22.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 14.

witness to the state'.<sup>70</sup> This means bringing 'the light of scripture to bear on the conduct of government'. Then Macleod implicitly unites this Reformed principle of Christ's Lordship with a theology of liberation: 'Above all, the church must bear constant witness to the principle, "Remember the poor" (Gal 2:10)'. The church must take Bonhoeffer's 'view from below', and from that perspective it 'has to address government on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves'.<sup>71</sup>

He goes on to say that the church as an institution should be willing to step into the political sphere, particularly for the sake of the oppressed:

The church cannot confine herself to being a social life-boat authorized only to rescue the victims of recurring disaster. Poverty and injustice are structural, and the church must raise its voice against such structures ... Protest against an intellectually bankrupt penal system or against the inhumane treatment of immigrants cannot be left to either individual Christians or voluntary associations.<sup>72</sup>

To the extent that Macleod argued that there are themes of liberation in his own tradition that parallel Latin American liberation theology, he was not alone. Donald Meek has argued that Scotland (and the Highlands in particular) has its own indigenous liberation theology, which parallels expressions found in Latin America and South Africa. In particular, he points to several key late nineteenth-century Highland leaders whose language and actions 'anticipated the type of argument which lies at the heart of Liberation Theology in present-day Latin America and South Africa'.<sup>73</sup> This context helps us explain in part how someone like Macleod, a native of the Highlands and Islands himself, can find so much commonality with Latin American liberation theology and yet remain so distinct from it. Macleod's work in liberation seems to have matured in his own Highland context and with the particular concerns of the Highlands, and yet he has also been quick to recognise the way the struggles of Scotland and the Highlands are mirrored elsewhere. In a 2012 article Macleod wrote of Scotland and Latin America as having parallel movements of liberation which both centre on the problem of land reform. He wrote, 'In South America, peasants and Liberation Theologians fight for the nationalization of land. In the Highlands we strive for community ownership: a return to the old Celtic form of tenure, where the land was owned by the clann [*sic*] (the clan or the children)'.<sup>74</sup>

If Macleod was the most vocal proponent in his own time of what we might tentatively call a Scottish Reformed theology of liberation, he evidently did not stand alone. In 1997, the Public Questions, Religion and Morals Committee of the Free Church of Scotland presented a motion to the General Assembly denouncing the exploitation of land in Scotland and calling on the government to 'seek remedies by way of widening land ownership, promoting good stewardship, and devolving responsibility for local land management policy to local communities'.<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, the document criticised

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>73</sup>Donald Meek, "'The Land Question Answered from the Bible": The Land Issue and the Development of a Highland Theology of Liberation', *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 103/2 (1987), p. 88.

<sup>74</sup>Donald Macleod, 'Footnotes', *WHFP*, 30 March 2012.

<sup>75</sup>'The Land Problem', *1997 Public Questions, Religion and Morals Report* (Edinburgh: Free Church of Scotland, 1997).

both earlier Scottish land reformers and ‘aspects’ of liberation theology for misusing Old Testament texts to justify their politics. Nevertheless, the authors of the report assert that the Old Testament does warn against a person possessing more territory than he or she needs (citing Ezek 45:8–9; 46:18). It concludes that ‘the Old Testament sees land as a resource for *people*’ and not a commodity. Specific to the Scottish context, the report says, ‘Against a biblical background, there must be a question mark against a situation in which – to be specific – half of Scotland is owned by 600 individuals in blocks ranging from 2,000 to 100,000 hectares.’<sup>76</sup> Macleod was not on the committee that authored this report, but in it we find a socio-analytical, hermeneutical and practical mediation of liberation not all that different from Macleod’s own.

## Conclusion

Was Donald Macleod a liberation theologian, as Alastair McIntosh suggests? If by that we mean ‘Is Macleod’s public theology to be conceived of chiefly as an appropriation of Latin American Liberation Theology’, then the answer is clearly no. What we can say, however, is that in Macleod’s public theology we find a theology of liberation which parallels many of the concerns of Latin American liberation theology, and yet which owes its genesis primarily to its own Scottish and Reformed context.

Why then compare Macleod to Latin American liberation theology in the first place? It is precisely because Macleod stands as a constructive inheritor of a tradition which has developed its own indigenous theology of liberation that he represents an important opportunity for constructive dialogue between Latin American liberation theology and Scottish (and particularly Highland) Reformed theology.

---

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.