Liberating Appalachia and Its Church from the Coal Industry1

Once prosperous coal towns that dotted Appalachia now lie in ruin, like Centralia, Pennsylvania, which has burned for nearly 60 years straight. Previously an economic powerhouse, the region is now in shambles.2 As a 2020 report by the Appalachian Regional Commission details, Appalachian households’ median income in 2018 was $49,747, only 82.5% of the national median ($60,293).3 While primarily caused by the coal industry, this ecological and economic impoverishment has been aided by "the church." Michael J. Bransfield, for example, a former Catholic bishop of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, downplayed Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which concerns itself with the declining state of the global environment, as not relevant to Appalachia. He reasons the critical importance of coal jobs to the Appalachian economy, makes Francis' ideas economically unfeasible.4 Other suspicious incidents out of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston include the revelation of a Mineral Rights Account which Bransfield used as a personal bank account.5 As evidenced by these events, it is clear “the Appalachian church” has intertwined itself with a corrupt system that has systematically harmed millions of Appalachians’ livelihoods and continues to wreak havoc on the environment.6

If the church wishes to turn over a new leaf, implementing an Appalachian theology of liberation would be a strong rebuke of their past actions. Liberation theology arose in the 1960s in response to the economic oppression that Latin Americans faced. The writings of Latin-American theologians, like Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, helped develop the movement beyond its conception at the Second Episcopal Conference in Latin America. Liberation theology is defined as a method of theorizing and reflection through which theologians might aid in relieving the oppressed. Theologians accomplish this by inspiring action derived from their work aimed at liberating the world from structural (or social, institutional) sin that follows the examples of the liberation Christ provided through salvation from sin. In Appalachia, the coal industry is such a structure as evidenced by the damages it has caused in the pursuit of profit. Though many are rightfully concerned about the theological movement becoming more political than religious by focusing solely on instituting a socialist state, liberation theology’s emphasis on methodology helps counteract its corruption. Leonardo Boff, a Colombian theologian who contributed to liberation theology in a manner similar to Gutiérrez, speaks of this in his writings. He talks about how proper liberation performed at the margins of society has made people true converts to the cause of liberation.7

Apart from Michael Iafrate, theologian and Co-Coordinator of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia (CCA), few scholars have written on Appalachian liberation theology. However, consulting these limited works in concert with Latin American liberation theologians will enable leaders and activists across denominations to conceive an Appalachian theology of liberation. In implementing an Appalachian theology of liberation born from contemplative action, these leaders and activists can help the church move past its environmentally and economically harmful past by assisting the Appalachian people with a response uniquely shaped to the region's troubles.

**The Holy Gift of Coal**

Over the past several years, Appalachian church leaders have made numerous concerning statements, no small number of which came out of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston. Former Catholic Bishop Michael J. Bransfield has voiced support for the coal industry, an entity that has exploited Appalachia and her people environmentally and economically. Bransfield’s vocality about the coal industry and its importance to Appalachia arose in response to Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’*. In the encyclical, Francis makes a general call for action, saying that “highly polluting fossil fuels- especially coal” must be “progressively replaced without delay.”8 Bransfield carefully worded his initial response, appearing hesitant though receptive to the Pope’s message. He called the encyclical a framework, rather than an exact blueprint, for future discussion and action.9 While appearing as a good starting point, Bransfield's later statements raise some eyebrows. In an interview with West Virginia Public Radio, Bransfield said that Francis mentioned economic feasibility in his encyclical. Michael J. Iafrate counteracts this point. He notes that Bransfield lied by including words not present in *Laudato Si'*, and manipulated the Pope's message.10 In another article, Iafrate cites comments by the Diocese stating that responding to questions on Bransfield's citation of coal's importance to Appalachia in his downplay of *Laudato Si'* "wouldn't be prudent."11 Bransfield's ardent support of the coal industry and the Diocese's reluctance to comment further are alarming, especially when considering that a 2019 audit revealed that from 2007-2018 he had withdrawn $313.6 million from the Diocese's Mineral Rights Account.12 This account is something the Diocese should not have had in the first place as it means mineral companies are exploiting church lands, a deal that brings both groups profits. Bransfield and the Diocese have an economic stake in the success of Appalachian coal companies.

**Historical Failures of the Church**

The actions of Bransfield and the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston are not institutional issues unique to the Catholic Church. Evangelicals have had an equally large role in perpetuating and critiquing the church’s ties to the coal industry. In *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia*. Joseph D. Witt, an associate professor of religion at Mississippi State University, talks about Appalachian environmental activists Joe Begley and Larry Gibson. Witt details a 1987 oral history written by Begley, noting his critical opinion of Appalachian ministers, whom locals claimed to be responsible for mountaintop removal. Begley says that it was often the ministers in the 19th and 20th centuries that convinced locals to sell their lands to coal companies. Witt then cites Gibson, who recounts a visit by a group of Appalachian ministers and founding members of Christians for the Mountains in 2004. The latter is a non-denominational, “*voluntary* network of persons advocating that Christians and their churches recognize their God-given responsibility to live compatibly, sustainably, grateful, and joyously with God’s Earth.”13 Upon meeting the preachers, Gibson asked where church leaders, at large, had been, as companies had removed mountaintops in search for coal for decades by the turn of the 21st Century. In a 2010 interview, Gibson explained his skepticism of the preachers' motives. If the preachers had genuinely cared about Appalachia's environmentally unsafe mining practices, they would have expressed concern sooner.14 Looking at Begley and Gibson’s accounts, “the Appalachian church” has had a long history of dealings with the coal industry. Gibson’s question still rings true eleven years later. After pressuring community members to give their land to coal companies since the 19th Century and their extensive silence on the coal industry for the better part of two centuries, what has changed?

**Further Evidence Against the Church in Appalachia**

*The Environmental Cost of Supporting Coal*

The church failed to accomplish its God-given mission of stewardship.. For commentary, it is helpful to turn to the Catholic Committee of Appalachia. In their statement “On the Implementation of Laudato Si’ on Appalachia to the Bishops of the Region,” the organization calls out the silence of bishops on industry practices saying their lack of remarks might be mistaken for approval by “Catholics, the general public and industry itself.”15 The CCA points out the risk of remaining silent. The organization cites the expansion of oil and natural gas extraction via hydraulic fracking in Appalachia, a development which the CCA notes may be more destructive than similar practices employed by the coal industry. Continuing, the CCA claims that as bishops only engage in dialogue concerning job protectionism, environmental destruction marches on. Aligning with Francis, the CCA champions grassroots organization and calls for an investigation into fossil fuel alternatives by Appalachian bishops.16 While the CCA's call may seem to be nothing but an old man yelling at a cloud, seemingly unimportant and irrelevant, it addresses the uncomfortable truth of the coal industry’s negative impacts on Appalachia. The statement, authored in 2015, marked their 45th year of asking bishops to start thinking about the greater whole. A call the church did not answer 20 years earlier when the CCA published, *At Home in the Web of Life*, a pastoral letter concerning "sustainability in Appalachia and beyond."17 Nor was it answered in 1975, the year the CCA's prophetic mission began. Now in the CCA's 51st year, bishops have not heeded the group's words, and the church remains a poor steward of God's garden.18

*The Human Cost of Supporting Coal*

How could the church have possibly failed to protect the poor? That is Christians' central mission beyond proclaiming the Gospel.19 The fact is, ignoring environmental degradation and the overall climate crisis impacts the poor directly––in economic, health-based, and other dimensions. Pope Francis cites this in *Laudato Si'*, saying, "Exposure to atmospheric pollutants produces a broad spectrum of health hazards, especially for the poor, and causes millions of premature deaths."20 These excess deaths are an unimaginable human cost. Matthew 25 calls Christians to look after the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner.21 The question is, how can the church help the sick and hungry when it ties itself to a system that creates those very people? It cannot. There will only be more and more people at the church's doorstep asking for help from the very body that has planted its boot firmly on their neck. Christ's love cannot abound in such a circumstance.

**The Church Making the Case for Coal**

Those who support or at least tolerate the coal industry view the relationship through a different theological lens, founded upon work. More specifically their position is founded on the idea that God created humanity to work, as evidenced by their role in the Garden, and that work is good as God's original design was good. Such a position is hard to argue against. Labor, no matter physical or creative, bears mental, material, emotional, and even spiritual fruits. It tempers the mind and body. Michael J. Bransfield, a figure we previously discussed, uses these ideas to introduce his pastoral letter, which responds to the Upper Big Branch Mine Disaster, a 2010 coal mine explosion that left 29 miners dead.22 In the letter, Bransfield reflects on earlier mining disasters such as the 1907 Mongalah Mine Disaster, which spurred the creation of the Bureau of Mines.23 With this in mind, he moves to the pastoral's central idea of the dignity of human labor and the importance of a safe work environment. Bransfield notes the unsafe conditions and asks, "Why is it safer to travel in space than to work in a West Virginia mine?" He calls for reform to the mining industry, envisioning a "zero accident workplace." He also speaks so that he might proclaim the "Gospel of Life."24

To Bransfield, the coal industry's economic importance to the United States demands the protection of its workers as evidenced by him saying, “West Virginia’s coal helps to supply over half of our nation’s energy. A good deal of our State’s coal is exported to help other nations improve their economies and further their development. These are facts of which we can be extremely proud. We can also reasonably expect that miner safety will be a higher priority than coal production.”25 The fact that he begins this plea for greater safety in West Virginia’s mines with their contributions to the United States’s economy over their God-given role as workers betrays the fact that his concerns are economic over theological.

**Refuting Bransfield**

It is foolish to deny West Virginia's coal mines' historical importance to American energy production. However, in the 11 years since Bransfield penned his pastoral, the United States has dramatically shifted towards other energy sources like natural gas. A 2018 article published in Scientific American detailed the dramatic decline in America's reliance on coal, noting low coal usage levels not seen since 1979. The report also detailed that PacifiCorp plans to close four coal plants by 2022.26 The 2020 U.S. Energy & Employment Report published by the Energy Futures Initiative recorded an increase of 612 jobs or 0.8%, as compared to a general 2% increase within other fuel sector jobs (defined as oil/natural gas, biofuels, coal, and mining and extraction). The report also explains that while mining and extraction jobs increased by 7,000, this was driven mainly by oil and natural gas production. Electric power jobs (defined as wind, solar, natural gas, and similar sectors) increased by 21,200 jobs or roughly 2.5%. In particular, the natural gas industry grew by 8%, adding 9,100 new jobs, 6,500 of which were in advanced/low emissions technologies. In contrast, coal declined by 7,000 jobs or 8%.27 Coal jobs in Appalachia have drastically declined, with the 2015 job total being 70% the size of its 2001 number, compared to 120% nationally. Further, job markets within Southern West Virginia and Eastern Kentucky have shrunk by nearly half in the ten years between 2005 and 2015.28

Additional data of interest when examining the coal industry within Appalachia is the median household incomes in the region compared to average green-energy wages. As previously mentioned, the median Appalachian household income, including families and single-member households, was **$49,747** in 2018. In 2019, the United States's median hourly wage was $19.14, which assuming a 40-hour workweek, comes out to **$39,811.20** annually. Comparatively, the hourly median for green-energy jobs was $23.89, an annual total of $**49,691.20**.29 The median hourly rate for an employee in the green-energy sector is nearly on par with the median Appalachian household.

Considering the decline in coal jobs and overall better wages in the green-energy sector, Michael J. Bransfield and other bishops should not support the coal industry. Their advocacy especially does not make sense as Bransfield offered support to the industry based on the "dignity of labor."30 Unless Bransfield operates under some other definition of dignity, higher-paying and drastically safer jobs are more dignifying to the people who work them. This higher dignity is of heightened consideration when the median income in green-energy is comparative to that of a household in Appalachia. If anything, Bransfield should be championing the migration of green-energy jobs or, at the very least, "cleaner" energy jobs such as natural gas extraction to the region. His reasoning does not support his position when put to the test against job data. Additionally, advocating alternative energy would be more in line with the idea of good stewardship than Bransfield’s promoting of the myth of clean coal as he did by saying, “I think technological improvements of cleaning of coal and other things can bring us to a point where we can use coal.”31 Comparatively, the natural gas industry's extraction technologies are cleaner and easier on the environment. In fact, Appalachia is estimated to contain 214 trillion ft3 of the resource.32 If he did the bare minimum, advocating for a transition to natural gas jobs would ensure less environmental degradation and increased pay for West Virginian workers.

**Moving On From the Mines**

**Refocusing on Method**

Appalachian liberation boils down to helping the church help Appalachia. The first step in liberating Appalachia does not involve influencing policy but liberating the church from the coal industry. As established previously, the church cannot hope to help those it continues to actively harm. Doing so perpetuates a destructive cycle. Instead, what needs to come is a shift in the church’s heart. A step towards such a goal would be a language change. The church would need to move from Bransfield's false statements and towards supporting its parishioners by championing the migration of green energy to Appalachia. With such an act, the church would be actively anti-coal rather than complicit or passive. The exact solutions, though, need to be enacted on a community-based level. Individual congregations know what their members need most. Ultimately, lifting Appalachia's poor out of poverty would require the church as a whole to shift towards a pro-environment and anti-coal mindset.

While indeed theologizing is an integral part of liberation theology, so too is praxis. Liberation theology is an applied theology that demands action. Thankfully, Michael J. Iafrate and the Catholic Committee of Appalachia have laid some foundational frameworks for the movement. When engaging in Appalachian liberation, it is essential to recognize the region suffers from twin crises, economic and environmental. There is also a health crisis, a potential object for future study in work beyond this paper. This work seeks to address the coal industry's damages, though its environmental and economic degradation play somewhat into the health crisis. For example, studies conducted by the Appalachian Regional Committee to examine the region's mortality compared to the rest of the nation note links between exposure to coal mine dust, an environmental hazard, and respiratory illnesses like COPD and emphysema.33 That aside, when thinking about Appalachian liberation, one cannot separate these two crises. Mountaintop removal occurs in the pursuit of profit, and coalfields remain some of the only viable sources of work in Appalachia. The coal industry intertwines these two issues tightly, so liberation theologians must address them together. The CCA does so within its activism, which is built on Catholic social teaching.

What then, do Iafrate and the CCA recommend? The first and most significant step is listening. That theme united the pastoral letter *Telling Takes Us Home* and the CCA's statement "On the Implementation of Laudato Si'." The former advocates for listening to the magisterium of the Earth and her people, and the latter encourages partnerships between churches and grassroots organizers.34 Most of all, though, Iafrate encourages listening to the youth, especially those leaving Appalachia. He says:

We are all aware of the out-migration from West Virginia and Appalachia. It is not getting better. If we want this place we love to thrive, we need to listen to these young people to find out while they're leaving. They have a vision of what they want their lives to be. They love this area. But they feel they need to leave. It's a love-hate relationship. They want to stay but can't find work. The transformation that we need will not occur without younger people.34

As the youth leave in larger numbers, Appalachia will find itself in more dire circumstances.35 Liberation must begin locally. To survive, communities must look towards not the general exodus of young adults, but to their community members, the students who have attended their schools and sat in their churches. They must look to the Christs within their midst, which Matthew 25:35-40 reminds us of:

For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You as a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You?And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did *it* for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of Mine, you did it for Me.’

These are the Christs that are suffering economically, socially, and politically. A means of reaching out to their suffering community members is to increase the contact between them and congregational leadership. This could mean engaging in direct and personal fellowship through events like meal delivery or allowing for more significant youth involvement in congregational decisions through, say, granting them actual positions or encouraging youth to sit in on business meetings. These actions, particularly providing youth with actual institutional power through committee positions or as voting members of congregations, give people a say in their communities' future. Otherwise, church elders may brush aside their youthful congregants' concerns and further exacerbate the ongoing exodus.

**Concerns About Liberation Theology**

Before moving further into this discussion, it is imperative to ask the question of why liberation theology? More applicable methods exist, do they not? Indeed, there is a large crowd within the church that sees better options.36 Objectors’ criticisms lie primarily with the political nature of liberation theology. These criticisms, however, are not that liberation theology is political, but rather it is political to the point of overshadowing the theological element. James Burtchaell explains his criticisms by noting that although liberation theology's concerns claim to be social, economic, religious, and political, these are all absorbed into the latter by pursuing a socialist state on which liberation theology's adherents spend extensive time detailing its construction.37 Later on, he says liberation theology's central doctrine of the preferential option of the poor, the notion that the poor are of unique concern to God, demands nothing of them. They are virtuous because of their condition alone and do not require any sort of conversion to Christ.38 He uses this to show that the religious agenda of liberation theology is folded into and overtaken by the political. While Burtchaell is concerned with the praxis of liberation, others, such as John M. Frame, are concerned about the theory behind liberation theology. He critiques liberation theology's epistemology. Frame claims that liberation theology's use of Marxism is a theological presupposition. This position does not require agreement with God's word and allows liberationists to, in effect, silence God.39

While Burtchaell's position arises from dialogue with liberation theologians, Frame's position hinges on an admitted misunderstanding of how liberation theologians manage to use Marxism as an "analytical tool" without fully committing to a Marxist worldview.40 Marxism is a single theory among a spectrum of leftist philosophies that examine the world through the lens of class struggle. Liberation theology uses this Marxist concept when engaging with the world as class struggle is an effective transliteration for liberation theology to speak about its ideas about oppression, development, and liberation. The two political theories diverge at this point, though, regarding how they approach their natural endpoint. While Marx advocates for a violent class revolution grounded in an armed lower class, Gutierrez advocates for democratic socialism backed by a social revolution aimed at increasing solidarity among workers instead of emphasizing class dynamics.41 Gutierrez, though, is also a single liberation theologian. Others align more with Marx, and some are generally anti-capitalist, an attitude they all have in common. While liberation theology does have its grounding in Marxist concepts, the former's radically different process and end-goal prevent it from being any shade of Marxist.

Burtchaell's concerns about liberation theology are essential to the discussion of Appalachian liberation as praxis lies at the heart of liberation theology. A means of preventing political agendas from overtaking the movement's religious nature is to remove instituting a socialist state as an end-goal. Socialism is not a pre-supposition for liberation. A more effective substitute for the socialist state is a liberation theology grounded in contemplative action and Christ's role as a liberator.

In *On Job: God-talk and The Suffering of the Innocent*, Gutierrez speaks about contemplative action by saying God is the source of all theology.He explains that theological discourse made before an encounter with God violates biblical norms, such as engagements made with God only through theological reading or discussion. Instead, while acting in a Christian capacity, that being evangelization and the actions detailed in Matthew 25:31-40, one should remain silent before God. During such an encounter, God's will becomes discernible At this point, with a solid foundation, the believer can begin to engage in theological discourse. As it relates to liberation theology, such a process will eventually result in a faith-based praxis central to the methodology.42 As the focus is on God from the start of the liberation process, there is little chance for political zealots to form and the death of liberation theology's religious element.

While engaging in liberation, one must also return to the scene of the cross in addition to practicing silence before God. After all, it is the source of all liberation from sin, which invades every sphere of life due to humanity's free will. Considering this, a theology of *liberations*, as Jurgen Moltmann calls it, might be a more apt practice instead of a theology of liberation.43 Those who aim to liberate any group of people must consider the issues of godforsakenness and feelings of meaninglessness along with racial, cultural, and ecological concerns.44 A liberation concerned with only the political and economical is no true liberation. Christ is a God of the oppressed and outcast, a group that has no class or nationality. The task of liberation must note this and work towards a world that points where Christ has returned by reflecting the joy and material fulfillment that comes with the Second Coming.45 Keeping these notions in mind by contemplative encounters at the scene of the cross offers a Christianity-based liberation that would not easily, if at all, be overtaken by political zealotry.

**Contemplative Action Helping Appalachia**

It is precisely this emphasis placed on contemplation that makes liberation theology a useful method to help raise Appalachia above the environmental and economic crises she is suffering. A methodology that roots itself in action feeding into theory allows for adaptability. Not only have liberation theologies been developed on about every continent, including Asia, Latin-America, and North America, the movement has also found itself speaking to various people groups and faiths, for example, Native Americans, Black, and feminist and even liberation theologies from Muslim and Jewish perspectives.46 A method that can stretch itself across contexts and faiths has a place in raising Appalachia as liberation theology does not distinguish among the poor by religion, race, or nationality. Such flexibility and generality are optimal in a region that is densely Christian and white. Though it is important, not to forget the Native American, African-American, Latin, and Asian populations in the region. However, we should note that these barriers do exist, and working to raise Appalachia collectively may require the coordination of multiple theologies of liberation at once.

The talk of liberation theology's flexibility also raises another point about its method. Liberation theology does not require the poor to rely on the philanthropy or goodwill of external groups. Instead, it seeks to make the oppressed the protagonists of their own liberation. Gutierrez, in *A Theology of Liberation*, quotes the Peruvian Bishop's Commission for Social Action, saying, "It is primarily up to the poor nations and the poor of other nations to effect their own betterment."47 He notes, though, that this means presupposing that the oppressed are aware of their condition. As a result, a type of awakening must ensure to result in the organization of the poor so that they are able to pressure usually impotent public officials into sponsoring programs of social change.48 What this means is that the Appalachians can coordinate their own liberation as they tend to be distrustful of outside groups and intentions, through no fault of their own as a result of the often unfair stereotypes that individuals outside the region have historically and presently perpetuated. An Appalachian-owned liberation would prove a far more effective effort, rising out of cohesive communities that have experienced common adversity.

An Appalachian-owned liberation is necessary as there has been a history of unsuccessful applications of liberation theology in Appalachia. This history pointed out by Deborah McCauley, who in *Appalachian Mountain Religion*, notes that the "base communities" of Appalachia, which are self-reliant communities of worship organized under a priest, were pushed to the side in response to the external Protestant denominations' belief that God had called them to reveal the larger demands of social justice to Appalachian people. These groups pushed aside the region's religious culture and tried to inject their strain of American Protestant beliefs. McCauley notes that these actions violated the methodological core of liberation theology, as evidenced by Gutierrez’s words above, which is the participation of the oppressed in their liberation.49

In the 25 years since Protestants tried to bring liberation theology to Appalachia, the United States's culture has shifted its focus from praising allied groups' wishes to listening to oppressed peoples' actual needs. This change may bring about a chance to engage in real Appalachian liberation theology as what the American Protestants attempted was only an appropriation of liberationist language.50 The Protestants failed to engage in contemplation before theologizing and, as a result, did not move beyond an intellectual understanding of liberation theology adapted to an Appalachian context. Such is a failure by outside advocacy groups, as translating intellectual understanding into action is of the utmost importance to performing liberation theology.51 It is up to the Appalachian people themselves to amplify the voices of the suffering Christs in their community.

**The Future of Liberation in Appalachia and Beyond**

The task of those undertaking liberation theology lies primarily on two forefronts, the economic and the ecological. Liberationists cannot separate the two crises as they come from one source, the coal industry, a machine that exploits its workers, the environment, and the Appalachian people at-large. The first task comes with separating the church from the coal industry's business concerns so that it might fulfill its stewardship to the environment and oppressed peoples. The separation will come only with a change of heart among the church corporate, which would feed into a change of speech and action at large. Local congregations must then determine the exact means to address the damages caused as a body and by individual members in their unique contexts in hope that others might see effective changes result and follow suit. The exact roles of institutions, laity, or even para-church organizations must be determined by each locality, as no singular method would result in all-encompassing change.

For those leading liberation, the importance of listening to either their community or the one they are helping cannot be overstated. All proper theology and especially those concerning liberation must proceed from a contemplation conducted while enacting God's will for the world. While engaging in liberationist acts in Appalachia, one must constantly maintain awareness of the historical failure to apply liberation theology in the region. If liberationists lack such an awareness, the movement might fester, and activists might once again try to impose solutions to problems wholly unrelated to the concerns Appalachians face today. While the passage of 25 years since the last significant attempts to implement an Appalachian theology of liberation brings some hope for change in the hearts of liberation-concerned activists, it must not be a foolish one. It must be grounded in the historical, aimed at the present, and look towards a future informed by the Appalachian people, especially their youth, through engaging in dialogue with congregational leadership either as members of said institutions or through greater community outreach as previously explained.

Lastly, liberation theology must work to re-implement historical projects, an ideological halfway point between a utopia not grounded in historical or present reality and overly technical projects that speak of societal organization. This method gives enough specificity to point society in a particular direction but avoids becoming overly technical and consumed with jargon as a book of political theory might. The importance of historical projects to liberation theology lies in the fact that without them liberation theology theologizes but does not act. As Ivan Petrella, an Argentinean theologian and professor, puts it, historical projects served several purposes, three of which are relevant to this discussion, the first being a means through which the theology could pursue liberation concretely. The second is that historical projects helped to give meaning to liberation theology's theological terms. The third and final is combatting the idolatry of society as it stands and the idolatry of plans for revolution both of which hinder any meaningful action.52

Petrella’s third point feeds into the last point of this discussion on the future of liberation theology and its implementation in Appalachia. As it stands, liberation theology's primary goal of instituting a socialist state faces incredible hardships, both practically and methodologically. Regarding the former, socialism has become a scare word in the American political landscape. To even attempt such an implementation would require a massive education campaign which would likely leave the oppressed to suffer for years. Instead, new theories must arise from a faith-based praxis instituted at society's margins. It is the task of liberation theologians to develop new historical projects that aim for a comprehensive liberation. This particular type of liberation also addresses the methodological concerns of the political overtaking the religious. By marrying the two efforts, liberation theologians can continue their anti-capitalist efforts without being encumbered by the weight that comes with a socialist agenda.

**Conclusion**

Considering the need for new theories and actively anti-capitalist and anti-coal approaches, the project of Appalachian liberation is rich soil for further scholarship. Areas such as health, agrarianism, and community planning remain untouched by this work but are critical subjects in lifting Appalachia out of its present social, economic, and ecological conditions. This new perspective on liberation theology will benefit from the many stances future researchers and theologians will take on the matter, especially as those inside and outside Appalachia engage in a constructive dialogue on how to proceed practically and purposefully. More broadly, liberation theology will benefit from approaching the task of liberation from a contemplative and holistic method to help ease concerns of the movement's critics and keep it on solid biblical, theological, and ideological grounds. As this paper develops only the first contours of Appalachian liberation theology, much work remains.

**Endnotes**

1. In the period between this article’s submission and acceptance, Michael J. Iafrate, former co-coordinator of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia passed suddenly. As such, the author would like to dedicate this article to his work and memory.
2. A county by county map of Appalachia is available on the Appalachian Regional Commission’s website under the tab “Appalachian Region.”
3. Pollard, Kevin, and Lisa A. Jacobsen, The Appalachian Region: A Data Overview from the 2014-2018 American Community Survey § (2020). Appalachian Regional Commission, 2020. <https://www.arc.gov/report/the-appalachian-region-a-data-overview-from-the-2014-2018-american-community-survey/>.
4. Iafrate, Michael J. “Pope Francis' Environmental Encyclical Gets Waylaid in West Virginia.” National Catholic Reporter. National Catholic Reporter, July 1, 2015. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/pope-francis-environmental-encyclical-gets-waylaid-west-virginia>.
5. Bernstein, Gregg L., Caroline Judge Mehta, Christopher Helmrath, Diane Barr, and John Moore. “Investigative Report on Former Bishop Michael J. Bransfield.” Washington Post. Zuckerman Speeder LLP, December 23, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/investigative-report-on-former-bishop-michael-j-bransfield/b46b7a87-a74b-4c72-9ca1-9068b02fba7d/>, 38.
6. The Appalachian church refers to Christians of all denominations in Appalachia. In this paper it is synonymous with “the church.”
7. Boff, Leonardo, and Clodovis Boff. *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Translated by Paul Burns. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987, 6.
8. Francis. *Laudato Si'*. *The Holy See*. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015. <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html>, no. 165, 122.
9. Gutman, David. “W.Va. Bishop Stresses Nuance, 'Framework,' in Pope's Call for Climate Action.” Charleston Gazette-Mail. Charleston Gazette-Mail, June 18, 2015. <https://www.wvgazettemail.com/news/w-va-bishop-stresses-nuance-framework-in-pope-s-call-for-climate-action/article_2e983ddd-8912-54a8-b711-6fc5a7f90eec.html>.
10. Iafrate, “Pope Francis' environmental encyclical waylaid in West Virginia;” The West Virginia Public Radio broadcast referenced in this article is no longer available as of June 21, 2021 and has not been cataloged on Internet Archive.
11. Iafrate, Michael J. “Dirty Money in the Appalachian Church: Six Years After Deadly Coal Mine Disaster, Where Are We Now?” Religion Dispatches. Religion Dispatches, April 14, 2016. <https://religiondispatches.org/dirty-money-in-the-appalachian-church-six-years-after-deadly-coal-mine-disaster-where-are-we-now/>.
12. Bernstein, et al., “Report on Bishop Bransfield,” 38.
13. Christians For The Mountains. “Our Mission.” Christians For The Mountains. Christians For The Mountains. Accessed February 21, 2021. <https://christiansforthemountains.org/?page_id=237>.
14. Witt, Joseph D. *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia: Faith and the Fight Against Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining*. University Press of Kentucky, 2016. Kentucky Scholarship Online, 2017. doi: 10.5810/kentucky/9780813168128.001.0001, 188.
15. Catholic Committee of Appalachia. “On the Implementation of Laudato Si' on Appalachia to the Bishops of the Region.” CCA. Catholic Committee of Appalachia, January 14, 2015. <https://www.ccappal.org/statements-1/on-the-implementation-of-laudato-si-on-appalachia-to-the-bishops-of-the-region>.
16. Ibid.
17. Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “Publications.” As *At Home In the Web of Life* concerns sustainability in Appalachia and beyond its use here refers to the body of Christ as a whole, which has since made no meaningful change in its stances.
18. See footnote 17; Also see Genesis 2:25.
19. See Luke 14 .
20. Francis, “Laudato Si’,” no. 20, 16.
21. Matthew 25:31-40.
22. Iafrate, “Dirty Money in the Appalachian Church.”
23. Bransfield, Michael J. “On My Holy Mountain: Mine Safety in West Virginia.” Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston. Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, June 15, 2017. <http://dwc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Oh-My-Holy-Mountain.pdf>, 1.
24. Ibid, 3-6.
25. Ibid, 3.
26. Storrow, Benjamin. “Coal Use Continues to Decline in the U.S.” Scientific American. Scientific American, December 5, 2018. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/coal-use-continues-to-decline-in-the-u-s/>.
27. Energy Futures Initiative, “The 2020 U.S. Energy & Employment Report,” Energy Futures Initiative. Energy Futures Initiative, 2019. <https://www.usenergyjobs.org/s/USEER-2020-0615.pdf>, xi-xii.
28. Bowen, Eric, Christiadi, John Deskins, Brian Lego., “An Overview of the Coal Economy in Appalachia,” Appalachian Regional Commission, January 2018.. <https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/CIE1-OverviewofCoalEconomyinAppalachia-2.pdf>, Figures 15-16.
29. BW Research, “Clean Jobs, Better Jobs,” BW Research. E2, October 22, 2020. <https://e2.org/reports/clean-jobs-better-jobs/?utm_source=ACORE+Master+Press+List&utm_campaign=a1ca9c01b6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_PR_2020_04_15_COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_106f720bd1-a1ca9c01b6-59416397&mc_cid=a1ca9c01b6&mc_eid=af00f4eb73>.
30. Bransfield, “On My Holy Mountain,” 6.
31. Gretchen, Samantha. “Local Bishop Speaks Out About Pope Francis’s Papal Encyclical,” WTRF. WTRF. June 18, 2015. <https://www.wtrf.com/archives/local-bishop-speaks-out-about-pope-franciss-papal-encyclical/>.
32. “USGS Estimates 214 Trillion Cubic Feet of Natural Gas in Appalachian Basin Formations.” USGS. United States Geological Survey, October 3, 2019. <https://www.usgs.gov/news/usgs-estimates-214-trillion-cubic-feet-natural-gas-appalachian-basin-formations#:~:text=USGS%20Estimates%20214%20trillion%20Cubic%20Feet%20of%20Natural%20Gas%20in%20Appalachian%20Basin%20Formations,-USGS%20Updates%20Appalachian>.
33. Marshall, Julie L., Logan Thomas, Nancy M. Lane, G. Mark Holmes, Thomas A. Arcury, Randy Randolph, Pam Silberman, et al. Rep. *Creating a Culture of Health in Appalachia: Disparities and Bright Spots*. Appalachian Regional Commission, August 2017. <https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Health_Disparities_in_Appalachia_August_2017.pdf>, 49; Santo Thomas, Linus H. “ Emphysema and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease in Coal Miners.” *Current Opinion in Pulmonary Medicine* 17, no. 2 (March 2011): 123–25. https://doi.org/10.1097/MCP.0b013e3283431674; Laney, A., and David Weissman. “Respiratory Diseases Caused by Coal Mine Dust.” *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 56 (October 2014): S18–S22. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0000000000000260>.
34. Catholic Committee of Appalachia, “On the Implementation of Laudato Si’.”
35. Barrick, Michael M. “Putting Liberation Theology to Practice in Appalachia.” Appalachian Chronicle. Appalachian Chronicle, January 24, 2016. <https://appalachianchronicle.com/2016/01/24/putting-liberation-theology-to-practice-in-appalachia/>.
36. At present little data exists on Appalachian migration in the 21st century. As the Appalachian Regional Commission is concerned with the Appalachian region and not those outside it, the group’s 2014-2018 Appalachian Community survey does not detail population outflow, but does describe population flow within Appalachia. Their findings showcase a particularly large growth in college towns post 2010 and a large density of youth (ages 18-24 comprising at least 15% of the population) in college towns which comprise 19 out of the region’s 420 counties (see pages 11 and 16).
37. Refers to Christians collectively inside Appalachia and out.
38. Liberation theologians primarily see the institution of a socialist state as the primary means of lifting the poor out of social, economic, and political poverty. They detail ideas of a socialist state heavily in their writings. This view is discussed a bit more when referencing Ivan Petrella critiques of the movement and discussion of its future and Gustavo Gutierrez’s ideas on democratic socialism.
39. Burtchaell, James Tunstead. "How Authentically Christian Is Liberation Theology?" *The Review of Politics* 50, no. 2 (1988): 264-81. Accessed February 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1407650>, p. 264-267.
40. Frame, John M. “Liberation Theology.” The Gospel Coalition. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/liberation-theology/>
41. Ibid.
42. Marx, Karl, and Freidrich Engels. “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League.” Edited by Alek Blain. Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League by Marx and Engels. Marxists Internet Archive, 2006. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm>; Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Edited by William E. Jerman. Translated by Matthew J. O'Connell. 10th Anniversary ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988, p. 65-66.
43. Gutiérrez, Gustavo. On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent. United States: Orbis Books, 1987, xv-xvi; Liberation theologians at-large view history in a similar manner to Gutierrez. Liberation theologians treat history as a progressive revelation of God’s will for humanity that is obscured in the moment, but is made apparent with time.
44. Moltmann Jürgen. *The Crucified God*. 1st ed. Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 1993, p. 329.
45. Ibid, 330-31.
46. Ibid, 329-38.
47. Gutierrez, “A Theology of Liberation,” xix.
48. Peruvian Bishops' Commission for Social Action. “Letter to the People of the Third World.” Essay. In *Between Honesty and Hope: Documents From and About the Church in Latin America. Issued at Lima by the Peruvian Bishops' Commission for Social Action*, translated by John Drury, 5. Maryknoll, NY: Maryknoll Publications, 1970.
49. “Peace.” Essay. In *Medellín*, no. 18. Medellín, Colombia: Interprint, 1982.
50. McCauley, Deborah Vansau. Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. <https://www.google.com/books/edition/Appalachian_Mountain_Religion/itS-UuFD3VkC?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover>, 449;  Gutierrez, “A Theology of Liberation,” 68.
51. Iafrate, Michael. “Liberating Appalachian Theology: Paternalism and Praxis in Faith-Based Social Justice Movements in Appalachia.” Abstract. ASA Annual Conference, Appalachian Studies Association, 2014. <https://mds.marshall.edu/asa_conference/2014/Full/99/>.
52. Boff, Leonardo and Clodovis, “Introducing Liberation Theology,” 6-7.
53. Petrella, Ivan. *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto*. Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004. Accessed February 1, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, 11-12.

**Works Cited**

Barrick, Michael M. “Putting Liberation Theology to Practice in Appalachia.” Appalachian Chronicle. Appalachian Chronicle, January 24, 2016. <https://appalachianchronicle.com/2016/01/24/putting-liberation-theology-to-practice-in-appalachia/>.

Boff, Leonardo, and Clodovis Boff. *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Translated by Paul Burns. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987.

Bowen, Eric, Christiadi, John Deskins, Brian Lego., “An Overview of the Coal Economy in Appalachia,” Appalachian Regional Commission, January 2018.. <https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/CIE1-OverviewofCoalEconomyinAppalachia-2.pdf>.

Burtchaell, James Tunstead. "How Authentically Christian Is Liberation Theology?" *The Review of Politics* 50, no. 2 (1988): 264-81. Accessed February 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1407650>.

BW Research, “Clean Jobs, Better Jobs,” BW Research. E2, October 22, 2020. <https://e2.org/reports/clean-jobs-better-jobs/?utm_source=ACORE+Master+Press+List&utm_campaign=a1ca9c01b6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_PR_2020_04_15_COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_106f720bd1-a1ca9c01b6-59416397&mc_cid=a1ca9c01b6&mc_eid=af00f4eb73>.

Catholic Committee of Appalachia. “On the Implementation of Laudato Si' on Appalachia to the Bishops of the Region.” CCA. Catholic Committee of Appalachia, January 14, 2015. <https://www.ccappal.org/statements-1/on-the-implementation-of-laudato-si-on-appalachia-to-the-bishops-of-the-region>.

Catholic Committee of Appalachia. “Publications.” CCA. Catholic Committee of Appalachia. Accessed February 21, 2021. https://www.ccappal.org/publications.

Christians For The Mountains. “Our Mission.” Christians For The Mountains. Christians For The Mountains. Accessed February 21, 2021. <https://christiansforthemountains.org/?page_id=237>.

Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston. “On My Holy Mountain: Mine Safety in West Virginia.” Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston. Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, June 15, 2017. <http://dwc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Oh-My-Holy-Mountain.pdf>.

Energy Futures Initiative, “The 2020 U.S. Energy & Employment Report,” Energy Futures Initiative. Energy Futures Initiative, 2019. <https://www.usenergyjobs.org/s/USEER-2020-0615.pdf>.

Frame, John M. “Liberation Theology.” The Gospel Coalition. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/liberation-theology/>

Francis. *Laudato Si'*. *The Holy See*. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015. <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html>.

Gretchen, Samantha. “Local Bishop Speaks Out About Pope Francis’s Papal Encyclical,” WTRF. WTRF. June 18, 2015. <https://www.wtrf.com/archives/local-bishop-speaks-out-about-pope-franciss-papal-encyclical/>.

Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Edited by William E. Jerman. Translated by Matthew J. O'Connell. 10th Anniversary ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988.

Gutierrez, Gustavo. On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987.

Gutman, David. “W.Va. Bishop Stresses Nuance, 'Framework,' in Pope's Call for Climate Action.” Charleston Gazette-Mail. Charleston Gazette-Mail, June 18, 2015. <https://www.wvgazettemail.com/news/w-va-bishop-stresses-nuance-framework-in-pope-s-call-for-climate-action/article_2e983ddd-8912-54a8-b711-6fc5a7f90eec.html>.

Iafrate, Michael. “Liberating Appalachian Theology: Paternalism and Praxis in Faith-Based Social Justice Movements in Appalachia.” ASA Annual Conference, Appalachian Studies Association, 2014. <https://mds.marshall.edu/asa_conference/2014/Full/99/>.

Iafrate, Michael J. “Dirty Money in the Appalachian Church: Six Years After Deadly Coal Mine Disaster, Where Are We Now?” Religion Dispatches. Religion Dispatches, April 14, 2016. <https://religiondispatches.org/dirty-money-in-the-appalachian-church-six-years-after-deadly-coal-mine-disaster-where-are-we-now/>.

Iafrate, Michael J. “Pope Francis' Environmental Encyclical Gets Waylaid in West Virginia.” National Catholic Reporter. National Catholic Reporter, July 1, 2015. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/pope-francis-environmental-encyclical-gets-waylaid-west-virginia>.

Laney, A., and David Weissman. “Respiratory Diseases Caused by Coal Mine Dust.” *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 56 (October 2014): S18–S22. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0000000000000260>.

Marx, Karl, and Freidrich Engels. “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League.” Edited by Alek Blain. Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League by Marx and Engels. Marxists Internet Archive, 2006. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm>.

McCauley, Deborah Vansau. Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. <https://www.google.com/books/edition/Appalachian_Mountain_Religion/itS-UuFD3VkC?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover>

Moltmann Jürgen. *The Crucified God*. 1st ed. Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 1993.

“Peace.” Essay. In *Medellín*, no. 18. Medellín, Colombia: Interprint, 1982.

Petrella, Ivan. *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto*. Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004. Accessed February 1, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Peruvian Bishops' Commission for Social Action. “Letter to the People of the Third World.” Essay. In *Between Honesty and Hope: Documents From and About the Church in Latin America. Issued at Lima by the Peruvian Bishops' Commission for Social Action*, translated by John Drury, 5. Maryknoll, NY: Maryknoll Publications, 1970.

Pollard, Kevin, and Lisa A. Jacobsen, The Appalachian Region: A Data Overview from the 2014-2018 American Community Survey § (2020). Appalachian Regional Commission, 2020. <https://www.arc.gov/report/the-appalachian-region-a-data-overview-from-the-2014-2018-american-community-survey/>.

Santo Thomas, Linus H. “ Emphysema and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease in Coal Miners.” *Current Opinion in Pulmonary Medicine* 17, no. 2 (March 2011): 123–25. https://doi.org/10.1097/MCP.0b013e3283431674.

Storrow, Benjamin. “Coal Use Continues to Decline in the U.S.” Scientific American. Scientific American, December 5, 2018. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/coal-use-continues-to-decline-in-the-u-s/>.

“USGS Estimates 214 Trillion Cubic Feet of Natural Gas in Appalachian Basin Formations.” USGS. United States Geological Survey, October 3, 2019. https://www.usgs.gov/news/usgs-estimates-214-trillion-cubic-feet-natural-gas-appalachian-basin-formations#:~:text=USGS%20Estimates%20214%20trillion%20Cubic%20Feet%20of%20Natural%20Gas%20in%20Appalachian%20Basin%20Formations,-USGS%20Updates%20Appalachian.

Witt, Joseph D. *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia: Faith and the Fight Against Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining*. University Press of Kentucky, 2016. Kentucky Scholarship Online, 2017. doi: 10.5810/kentucky/9780813168128.001.0001.