

Liberation Theology

General Information

Liberation theology, a term first used in 1973 by Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian Roman Catholic priest, is a school of thought among Latin American Catholics according to which the Gospel of Christ demands that the church concentrate its efforts on liberating the people of the world from poverty and oppression.

The liberation-theology movement was partly inspired by the Second Vatican Council and the 1967 papal encyclical *Populorum progressio*. Its leading exponents include Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff of Brazil, and Juan Luis Segundo of Uruguay. The liberationists have received encouragement from the Latin American bishops, especially in resolutions adopted at a 1968 conference in Medellin, Colombia; others in the Roman Catholic church have objected to their use of Marxist ideas, their support for revolutionary movements, and their criticisms of traditional church institutions. Two members of Nicaragua's Sandinista leadership belonged to the Roman Catholic clergy, a Maryknoll and a Jesuit. Vatican authorities censured Boff in 1985 but in a 1986 document supported a moderate form of liberation theology.

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Liberation Theology - Haiti

General Information

While studying at a seminary to become a priest, Jean-Bertrand Aristide (later to become president of Haiti) was influenced by the tenets of liberation theology, which taught that Christians must work for social and economic justice for all people. For Aristide, liberation theology meant criticizing the repressive dictatorship of Jean Claude Duvalier and protecting the rights of the poor in Haiti.

After completing his seminary training in 1979, Aristide's superiors sent him out of the country in an effort to curb his political activism. He went first to Israel, where he studied biblical theology, and then to London and to Montréal, Canada, where he completed a master's degree in theology. Aristide returned to Haiti briefly in 1982 to be ordained as a Salesian priest.

In 1985 Aristide became the pastor of a small, impoverished parish in Port-au-Prince. He also organized and led a number of movements protesting the Duvalier government. In February 1986 Duvalier fled the island, and for the next four years Haiti was governed by a group of civilians and military officers who had supported the former dictator. Aristide continued to organize and lead Haitians in protests against the repressive dictatorship known as "Duvalierism without Duvalier." In 1988 the Salesian order, under pressure from the government, accused Aristide of inciting violence and expelled him from the order.

In December 1990, in the first free elections in Haiti since 1804, Aristide was elected president of Haiti.

Philip A. Howard

Liberation Theology

General Information

Roman Catholic Popes have consistently decried the injustices of the economic and social conditions created by modern industrial societies and proposed remedies for them. They have denounced nuclear warfare, repeatedly urged an end to the arms race, and sought to halt the exploitation of poor nations by rich ones. The protection and promotion of basic human rights in the social, economic, and political orders have been central to these pronouncements. The so-called liberation theology created by some Catholic intellectuals in Latin America has recently attempted to fit these concerns into a less traditional framework of speculation, even utilizing concepts found in Marxist literature.

John W. O'Malley

Liberation Theology Advanced Information

This is more a movement that attempts to unite theology and sociopolitical concerns than a new school of theological theory. It is more accurate to speak of liberation theology in the plural, for these theologies of liberation find contemporary expression among blacks, feminists, Asians, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. The most significant and articulate expression to date has taken place in Latin America. Theological themes have been developed in the Latin American context that have served as models for other theologies of liberation.

There are at least four major factors that have played a significant role in the formulation of Latin American liberation theology. First, it is a post-Enlightenment theological movement. The leading proponents, such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Juan Segundo, Jose Miranda, are responsive to the epistemological and social perspectives of Kant, Hegel, and Marx. Second, liberation theology has been greatly influenced by European political theology finding in J. B. Metz and Jurgen Moltmann and Harvey Cox perspectives which have criticized the ahistorical and individualistic nature of existential theology.

Third, it is for the most part a Roman Catholic theological movement. With notable exceptions such as Jose Miguez-Bonino (Methodist) and Rubem Alves (Presbyterian) liberation theology has been identified with the Roman Catholic Church. After Vatican II (1965) and the conference of the Latin American episcopate (Celam II) in Medellin, Colombia (1968), a significant number of Latin American leaders within the Roman Catholic Church turned to liberation theology as the theological voice for the Latin American church. The dominating role of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America has made it a significant vehicle for liberation theology throughout the South American continent.

Fourth, it is a theological movement specifically and uniquely situated in the Latin American context. Liberation theologians contend that their continent has been victimized by colonialism, imperialism, and multinational corporations. Economic "developmentalism" has placed so-called underdeveloped Third World nations in a situation of dependence, resulting in the local economies of Latin America being controlled by decisions made in New York, Houston, or London. In order to perpetuate this economic exploitation, liberationists argue, the powerful capitalist countries, especially the United States, give military and economic support to secure certain political regimes supportive of the economic status quo.

These four factors combine to bring about a distinctive theological method and interpretation.

Theological Method

Gustavo Gutierrez defines theology as "critical reflection on historical praxis." Doing theology requires the theologian to be immersed in his or her own intellectual and sociopolitical history. Theology is not a system of timeless truths, engaging the theologian in the repetitious process of systematization and apologetic argumentation. Theology is a dynamic, ongoing exercise involving contemporary insights into knowledge (epistemology), man (anthropology), and history (social analysis). "Praxis" means more than the application of theological truth to a given situation. It means the discovery and the formation of theological truth out of a given historical situation through personal participation in the Latin American class struggle for a new socialist society.

Liberation theology accepts the two-pronged "challenge of the Enlightenment" (Juan Sobrino). These two critical elements shape liberation theology's biblical hermeneutic. The first challenge comes through the philosophical perspective begun by Immanuel Kant, which argued for the autonomy of human reason. Theology is no longer worked out in response to God's self-disclosure through the divine-human authorship of the Bible. This revelation from "outside" is replaced by the revelation of God found in the matrix of human interaction with history. The second challenge comes through the political perspective founded by Karl Marx, which argues that man's wholeness can be realized only through overcoming the alienating political and economic structures of society. The role of Marxism in liberation theology must be honestly understood. Some critics have implied that liberation theology and Marxism are indistinguishable, but this is not completely accurate.

Liberation theologians agree with Marx's famous statement: "Hitherto philosophers have explained the world; our task is to change it." They argue that theologians are not meant to be theoreticians but practitioners engaged in the struggle to bring about society's transformation. In order to do this liberation theology employs a Marxist-style class analysis, which divides the culture between oppressors and oppressed. This conflictual sociological analysis is meant to identify the injustices and exploitation within the historical situation. Marxism and liberation theology condemn religion for supporting the status quo and legitimating the power of the oppressor. But unlike Marxism, liberation theology turns to the Christian faith as a means for bringing about liberation. Marx failed to see the emotive, symbolic, and sociological force the church could be in the struggle for justice. Liberation theologians claim that they are not departing from the ancient Christian tradition when they use Marxist thought as a tool for social analysis. They do not claim to use Marxism as a philosophical world view or a comprehensive plan for political action. Human liberation may begin with the economic infrastructure, but it does not end there.

The challenge of the Enlightenment is followed by the challenge of the Latin American situation in formulating liberation theology's hermeneutics of praxis. The important hermeneutical key emerging out of the Latin American context is summarized in Hugo Assmann's reference to the "epistemological privilege of the poor." On a continent where the majority is both poor and Roman Catholic, liberation theology claims the struggle is with man's inhumanity to man and not with unbelief. Liberation theologians have carved out a special place for the poor. "The poor man, the other, reveals the totally Other to us" (Gutierrez). All communion with God is predicated on opting for the poor and exploited classes, identifying with their plight, and sharing their fate. Jesus "secularizes the means of salvation, making the sacrament of the 'other' a determining element for entry into the Kingdom of God" (Leonardo Boff). "The poor are the epiphany of the Kingdom or of the infinite exteriority of God" (Enrique Dussel). Liberation theology holds that in the death of the peasant or the native Indian we are confronted with "the monstrous power of the negative" (Hegel). We are forced to understand God from within history mediated through the lives of oppressed human beings. God is not recognized analogically in creation's beauty and power, but dialectically in the creature's suffering and despair. Sorrow "triggers the process of cognition," enabling us to comprehend God and the meaning of his will (Sobrino). Combining post-Enlightenment critical reflection with an acute awareness of Latin America's conflict-ridden history results in several important theological perspectives.

Theological Interpretation

Liberation theologians believe that the orthodox doctrine of God tends to manipulate God in favor of the capitalistic social structure. They claim that orthodoxy has been dependent upon ancient Greek notions of God that perceived God as a static being who is distant and remote from human history. These distorted notions of God's transcendence and majesty have resulted in a theology which thinks of God as "up there" or "out there." Consequently the majority of Latin Americans have become passive in the face of injustice and superstitious in their religiosity. Liberation theology responds by stressing the incomprehensible mysteriousness of the reality of God. God cannot be summarized in objectifying language or known through a list of doctrines. God is found in the course of human history. God is not a perfect, immutable entity, "squatting outside the world." He stands before us on the frontier of the historical future (Assmann). God is the driving force of history causing the Christian to experience transcendence as a "permanent cultural revolution" (Gutierrez). Suffering and pain become the motivating force for knowing God. The God of the future is the crucified God who submerges himself in a world of misery. God is found on the

crosses of the oppressed rather than in beauty, power, or wisdom.

The biblical notion of salvation is equated with the process of liberation from oppression and injustice. Sin is defined in terms of man's inhumanity to man. Liberation theology for all practical purposes equates loving your neighbor with loving God. The two are not only inseparable but virtually indistinguishable. God is found in our neighbor and salvation is identified with the history of "man becoming." The history of salvation becomes the salvation of history embracing the entire process of humanization. Biblical history is important insofar as it models and illustrates this quest for justice and human dignity. Israel's liberation from Egypt in the Exodus and Jesus' life and death stand out as the prototypes for the contemporary human struggle for liberation. These biblical events signify the spiritual significance of secular struggle for liberation.

The church and the world can no longer be segregated. The church must allow itself to be inhabited and evangelized by the world. "A theology of the Church in the world should be complemented by a theology of the world in the Church" (Gutierrez). Joining in solidarity with the oppressed against the oppressors is an act of "conversion," and "evangelization" is announcing God's participation in the human struggle for justice.

The importance of Jesus for liberation theology lies in his exemplary struggle for the poor and the outcast. His teaching and action on behalf of the kingdom of God demonstrate the love of God in a historical situation that bears striking similarity to the Latin American context. The meaning of the incarnation is reinterpreted. Jesus is not God in an ontological or metaphysical sense. Essentialism is replaced with the notion of Jesus' relational significance. Jesus shows us the way to God; he reveals the way one becomes the son of God. The meaning of Jesus' incarnation is found in his total immersion in a historical situation of conflict and oppression. His life absolutizes the values of the kingdom, unconditional love, universal forgiveness, and continual reference to the mystery of the Father. But it is impossible to do exactly what Jesus did simply because his specific teaching was oriented to a particular historical period. On one level Jesus irreversibly belongs to the past, but on another level Jesus is the zenith of the evolutionary process. In Jesus history reaches its goal. However, following Jesus is not a matter of retracing his path, trying to adhere to his moral and ethical conduct, as much as it is re-creating his path by becoming open to his "dangerous memory" which calls our path into question. The uniqueness of Jesus' cross lies not in the fact that God, at a particular point in space and time, experienced the suffering intrinsic to man's sinfulness in order to provide a way of redemption. Jesus' death is not a vicarious offering on behalf of mankind who deserve God's wrath. Jesus' death is unique because he historicizes in exemplary fashion the suffering experienced by God in all the crosses of the oppressed. Liberation theology holds that through Jesus' life people are brought to the liberating conviction that God does not remain outside of history indifferent to the present course of evil events but that he reveals himself through the authentic medium of the poor and oppressed.

Theological Critique

The strength of liberation theology is in its compassion for the poor and its conviction that the Christian should not remain passive and indifferent to their plight. Man's inhumanity to man is sin and deserves the judgment of God and Christian resistance. Liberation theology is a plea for costly discipleship and a reminder that following Jesus has practical social and political consequences.

Liberation theology's weakness stems from an application of misleading hermeneutical principles and a departure from historic Christian faith. Liberation theology rightly condemns a tradition that attempts to use God for its own ends but wrongly denies God's definitive self-disclosure in biblical revelation. To argue that our conception of God is determined by the historical situation is to agree with radical secularity in absolutizing the temporal process, making it difficult to distinguish between theology and ideology.

Marxism may be a useful tool in identifying the class struggle that is being waged in many Third World countries, but the question arises whether the role of Marxism is limited to a tool of analysis or whether it has become a political solution. Liberation theology rightly exposes the fact of oppression in society and the fact that there are oppressors and oppressed, but it is wrong to give this alignment an almost ontological

status. This may be true in Marxism, but the Christian understands sin and alienation from God as a dilemma confronting both the oppressor and the oppressed. Liberation theology's emphasis upon the poor gives the impression that the poor are not only the object of God's concern but the salvific and revelatory subject. Only the cry of the oppressed is the voice of God. Everything else is projected as a vain attempt to comprehend God by some self-serving means. This is a confused and misleading notion. Biblical theology reveals that God is for the poor, but it does not teach that the poor are the actual embodiment of God in today's world. Liberation theology threatens to politicize the gospel to the point that the poor are offered a solution that could be provided with or without Jesus Christ.

Liberation theology stirs Christians to take seriously the social and political impact of Jesus' life and death but fails to ground Jesus' uniqueness in the reality of his deity. It claims he is different from us by degree, not by kind, and that his cross is the climax of his vicarious identification with suffering mankind rather than a substitutionary death offered on our behalf to turn away the wrath of God and triumph over sin, death, and the devil. A theology of the cross which isolates Jesus' death from its particular place in God's design and shuns the disclosure of its revealed meaning is powerless to bring us to God, hence assuring the perpetuity of our theological abandonment.

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