

## The Wordly Failures of Liberation Theology

“A specter was haunting America ... the specter of the Theology of Liberation ... ”

This paraphrase of one of the initial statements of *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848 comes to my mind readily, as I try to summarize the present bankruptcy of a theory which threatened to revolutionize Latin America once more in the late seventies, and contaminated increasingly larger segments of the Catholic clergy in the United States as well.

There were several doctrinaire political movements of presumed Christian inspiration grouped under the term “theology of Liberation,” which had in common a curious and unprecedented blend of solid philosophical, and even theological, contemporary thought, and a Hegelian (and increasingly Marxist) analysis of society and history.

Roughly, one can distinguish three main lines of thought, all grouped under the heading of the ambiguous term “Liberation”:

**The first**, most eloquently advocated by Cardinal Pironio, and the closest to the traditional point of view, equates “liberation” with the cleansing of the soul of sin, the latter being the root of all human misery in the Pauline interpretation.

**The second**: the Brazilian Hugo Assmann put forth the exact opposite, which barely disguised militant Marxist thought under superficially-taken religious terms.

**The third**, the best known stream of Liberation Theologians, headed by Father Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru, followed closely by the Brazilian brothers Leonardo and Clodoveo Boff, Franciscan priests, and Father José Luis Segundo, of Uruguay.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bibliography on this issue grows by leaps and bounds. Some of the main works are the following (in Spanish): I. Ellacuría, “Tesis sobre la posibilidad, necesidad y sentido de una teología latinoamericana,” in *Teología y Mundo Contemporáneo: Homenaje a K. Rahner en su 70 cumpleaños* (Cristiandad, Madrid 1975), pp. 325-350; J. C. Scannone, “Teología de la Liberación,” in C. Floristán and J. J. Tamayo, *Conceptos Fundamentales de la Pastoral* (Ediciones Cristiandad, Madrid, 1983); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la Liberación* (Lima, 1970); Hugo Assmann and Franz Hinkelammert, *La Idolatría del Mercado* (Seminario, San José, Costa Rica); Hugo Assmann, *Teología desde la praxis de liberación: Ensayo teológico desde la América dependiente* (Sígueme, Salamanca, 1976); C. Boff, *Teología de lo político, sus media-*

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In this short essay, I will try to analyze Gutiérrez' work, which I consider to be the most representative. But before going into a more detailed discussion of his thinking, I wish to offer some preliminary considerations which might give Anglo-Saxon Catholic observers of Latin American society a better understanding of the evolution of the so-called "Theology of Liberation."

Since roughly the mid-sixteenth century, Latin America had depended on Europe—and to a lesser extent on the United States during the last fifty years—for the growth and vitality of its religious

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*ciones* (Sígueme, Salamanca, 1980) and *Comunidad eclesial-comunidad política: Ensayos de eclesiología política* (Vozes, Petrópolis, 1978); L. Boff, *Teología desde el cautiverio* (Indo-American Press Service, Bogotá, 1975), *Jesucristo y la liberación del hombre* (Cristiandad, Madrid, 1981), *La fe en la periferia del mundo: El caminar de la iglesia con los oprimidos* (Sal Térrea, Santander, 1981), *Iglesia, carisma y poder: Ensayos de eclesiología militante* (Sal Térrea, Santander, 1982) and *Eclesiogénesis: Las comunidades de base reinventan la iglesia* (Sal Térrea, Santander, 1980); J. Bonino, *La fe en busca de eficacia: Una interpretación de la reflexión teológica latinoamericana* (Sígueme, Salamanca, 1977); A. López Trujillo, *Teología liberadora en América Latina* (Paulinas, Bogotá, 1978) and *Liberación marxista y liberación cristiana* (BAC, Madrid, 1974); José Sobrino, *Cristología desde América Latina: Esbozo a partir del seguimiento del Jesús histórico* (CRT, México, 1977), *Jesús en América Latina: Su significado para la fe y la Cristología* (Sal Térrea, Santander, 1982) and *Resurrección de la verdadera Iglesia: Los pobres, lugar teológico de la eclesiología* (Sal Térrea, Santander, 1981); S. Torres (ed.), *Teología de la liberación y comunidades cristianas de base* (Sígueme, Salamanca, 1982); Comisión Teológica Internacional, *Teología de la liberación* (BAC, Madrid, 1978).

life. Spanish missionaries, as eager and hardworking as they were to win souls for God, brought with them a European-centered vision of the Catholic world, which accounts for the Spanish traditional lack of trust in native Americans until well into the nineteenth century. This ethnocentric attitude was passed on to the children and grandchildren of the Conquistadores, who were expected to live and behave as native Spaniards in a foreign land, and more often than not failed to live up to these expectations.

Therefore, the Catholic Church in Latin America has been to a certain extent bereft of a native *inborn* dynamism to sustain its growth with its own human resources. This is apparent still in the inordinately high percentage of foreign-born priests and nuns at the service of the local Catholic hierarchy.

The Church was seriously wounded by two historical upheavals: one, the expulsion of *all* Jesuits from the lands subject to the Bourbon kings between 1764 and 1773, which robbed the Catholic community of Spanish-speaking America of thousands of their most energetic and successful spiritual leaders and missionaries. The other, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was the violent separation from the mother country of almost all its Spanish provinces in America (Cuba and Puerto Rico were exceptions until 1898). The hostile anticlerical animus of the French Revolution greatly influenced the Latin American movement towards independence from Spain (especially under the aegis of secret freemasonry), and certainly did not strengthen the position of the Church in the newly sovereign nations.

This latter situation was compounded by the refusal of the Popes to name new

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bishops for almost a third of a century after independence from Spain, under the pretext that as the Pope recognized the already fictitious suzerainty of the Spanish crown over these lost lands, any bishop named by him would still be considered bound by an oath of loyalty to the kings of Spain.

Due to this policy, the Church suffered varying degrees of persecution under the governments of the self-styled “liberal” republican parties in different parts of Latin America, and did not start to make a comeback until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The colonial Spanish heritage can boast of some truly magnificent accomplishments, but it also left behind a feeble rate of growth in native priests and members of religious orders, an unhealthy reliance on those coming from abroad for spiritual nourishment, and a rather languid and superficial religious life among the masses of peasants and urban workers. This sorry history explains to some extent the impact that a few bright and enterprising native priests, such as the ones mentioned above, had with their “Theology of Liberation” among the least educated of the laymen (usually to be found among the fast reproducing working class members of society).

This impact very easily spilled over into violent and subversive action, more often in the rural areas (as in the Mexican uprisings during the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), while more recently (in Nicaragua, for example) even posing a serious threat to the chain of command of the official hierarchy of the Church, through the multiplication of “comunidades de base”—community cadres—often, particularly in Brazil, in a mood defiant of the same hierarchy.

Also to be taken into consideration is the fact that violent politics—or whatever goes under this guise—loomed unfortunately larger than ever in Latin America since Fidel Castro took over power in Cuba in 1959. Presently, it is receding, but varieties of populism (Venezuela under Chávez), narco-guerrillas (as in Colombia) might trigger a resurgence in political violence at any moment.

One important reason for all this is traceable to the enormous growth of the public sector in almost all the Latin American countries since the end of World War II. Many large enterprises were transferred over to the government-run sector, and a hemorrhage of regulations fell on the private sector while at the same time taxes were being raised everywhere.

Another reason, closely linked with the first, was the advent of the so-called “dependency theory,” the only genuine Latin American “contribution” to the explanation of their well known poor rate of economic growth since the mid sixties as compared to the “Asian tigers” in the Pacific rim (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand). This theory was built up in the early fifties, particularly by the Argentine Raúl Prebisch and his associates at the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL), the regional branch of the United Nations, headquartered in Santiago, Chile. It rested on a wrong reading of the terms of trade between more developed and less developed economies (understanding as such those which export mainly manufactured goods and those which export raw materials, respectively).

This theory, which runs parallel to the one suggested by Lenin thirty years ear-

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lier, starts from the assumption that the world capitalist system entails a developed “center” (the United States, Western Europe, Japan) and the exploitation of a backward and underdeveloped broad “periphery” (mainly former European colonies in Africa, Asia, and to a lesser extent Latin America).

At certain points this “macro” view overlaps and reinforces the interventionist, authoritarian, and “caudillistic” trends among Latin American “strongmen”, and as such is felt to be by their mass constituencies in closer accord with Latin American idiosyncrasies.

No mention is made, by liberation theologians who took over this approach, of the free price system as a means of information for producers and consumers about the most rational allocation of resources (by definition always scarce), nor of the “micro” principle of marginal utility, or of the law of decreasing productivity. None among them showed any understanding of the nature of credit, capital, savings, investments, and particularly profits. They evidently were not acquainted with the key role of the entrepreneur among the other factors of production (land, labor, capital), and still less with competitive business ethics. None quoted recent trends in economic thought, like the school of rational expectations or the economic analysis of public choice. They were, for all theoretical purposes, economic illiterates.

For them, politics is a struggle over power between classes intent on exploiting each other. But the Kingdom of Heavens must resemble a classless society. Therefore, given that the wave of the future (“a providential sign”) pointed to an unavoidable triumph of socialism, and even of communism, Christians should

join forces with all those proletarians organized to depose the dominant *bourgeoisie*, even, if necessary, by violent means, and suppress the root of all social evils: private property.

One more point of importance: the Catholic Church has recently been undergoing its most serious crisis since the Protestant Reformation. For thirty-five years, the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council has been widely and severely felt all over the Catholic world, but nowhere as strongly or anxiously as in Latin America. The doors suddenly were thrown open to the winds of change, in essence secular and humanistic, that had been blowing outside for so long. This shocked the rigid structure of the Latin American hierarchy to its foundations, almost as badly as when these countries gained their independence from Spain.

French-speaking theologians, in particular, provided Latin American bishops and priests with the mental tools of critical analysis, which in the explosive atmosphere of post-Castro Latin America have proven to be fuses to time bombs.

Together with the newly approved guidelines for the liturgy of worship and pastoral duties, new theological approaches to history, philosophy, and the social sciences flooded into Latin America. Many of these approaches have much in common with traditional Marxist dialectics and, by the same token, are completely foreign to the individualist and empirical philosophy upon which most of the democracies of the Anglo-Saxon societies have been founded.

These radical winds of change had their official beginnings in the *Gaudium et spes* constitution on “the Church and the World,” issued by the Second Vatican

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Council in 1965. Two years later, Pope Paul VI abandoned the traditional caution of papal social teaching by advocating the taking of concrete political and economic steps by the industrialized nations on behalf of the nations of the Third World in his encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*.

The following year, 1968, all the bishops of Latin America convened in the city of Medellín, Colombia, for the Second Conference of Latin American bishops. For the first time, concepts such as “liberation,” “evangelization,” and “human promotion” were interchangeably incorporated into the official language of the Latin American Church. A few months previously, the prototype of the new radical and political Latin American priest, Father Camilo Torres, had died, machine-gun in hand, fighting the legitimately elected government of his country, Colombia. That same year, the military took power in neighboring Peru through a military coup, and immediately launched an ambitious land reform program as well as the socialization of trade and industry. Simultaneously, Fidel Castro since 1965 attempted to reconcile the manifold leftist movements in Latin America under his personal leadership. That was also the never-to-be-forgotten year of student unrest on campuses protesting the Vietnam War, in Europe as well as the United States.

Five years later the Peruvian priest, Gustavo Gutiérrez, finished his *opus magnum* under the tell-tale title, “The Theology of Liberation.” It rapidly went through successive printings in Latin America and was translated and widely distributed in the United States through the auspices of the Orbis Printing Press, belonging to the Maryknoll Guild.

In this landmark book, Father Gutiér-

rez synthesized the critical reflections of the European theologians and the native Latin American social scientists. The main themes of his philosophy can be summarized as follows:

1. Theology as a rational effort to understand the tenets of Christian faith is no longer valid. Instead, theology has to take on a critical function (he calls it a “prophetic call”), aided in this endeavor by the contemporary social sciences, particularly sociology and history. In a word, theology was to be emptied of its traditional metaphysical underpinnings in order to become more “scientific.”
2. Most theological reflections should start from a “*praxis*”—i.e., a decision to involve oneself in the unavoidable struggle of classes, which reflects itself in the political struggles of our times. Such an involvement will allow the Christian no other choice than the one in behalf of the exploited and impoverished “proletariat” (the true “people of God”). From political involvement in the here and now will spring the theological enlightenment of the Christian.
3. The traditional dichotomy between sacred and worldly history is no longer tenable. There is only one history, only one human nature, graciously called to supernatural life by God made man in the person of Jesus Christ. Hence, all worldly history is also sacred history and all human progress is supernatural progress.
4. The Kingdom of God lies in the future, but it cannot be realized without the purification of the human heart and sinful social structures. By the first is meant the Christian “option toward the poor,” and by the second the building of a classless society.

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5. All those who work for a more just society are working for the Kingdom of God, even if they are not consciously aware of it, and even when they might be consciously opposed to it; such is the case with the Marxists.

6. In the specific case of Latin America, this translates into a revolutionary and subversive struggle against international and domestic capitalism. The Church, too long in silent complicity with the oppressors, must take an active role. In this universal struggle not even the Church can be neutral.

7. The main reason for rampant injustice and backwardness all over Latin America is its dependency on the centers of capitalism in Europe, the United States and Japan. This dependency is not an historical accident, but a built-in part of the structure of capitalism, which must rest on a developed center and an underdeveloped periphery.

8. History marches on, dialectically, in the direction of the Kingdom of God at the end of time. There will be “a new heaven and a new earth” that will boast of the same traits as a Marxist classless society, where “each will give according to his ability and each will receive according to his need.”

Father Gutiérrez’ message, stated in elegant prose with a thorough knowledge of contemporary theology, made a tremendous stir in the theological world, the first time that a Latin American theologian has encountered a worldwide echo. After him, the flood gates were opened for a torrent of similar critical analysis: Father Enrique Dussell in Argentina, Father Jon Sobrino in El Salvador, and many others. Bishops’ conferences in Peru and Brazil openly turned toward the

Theory of Liberation. In Central America, liberation theologians were in the forefront of subversive and bloody movements. Many others have followed sympathetically at a prudent distance, so as not to incur the wrath of the Vatican. The debate has been joined with vigor and fury from both sides. Here are some statements which illustrate the point:

Father Juan Segundo, in his book *A Theology for the Builders of a New Humanity*, wrote: “The only truth that is the truth is the one which works for the liberation of man.” Father Gutiérrez, in his *Marx and Jesus*, added: “We must put an end to certain kinds of theologians whom we call ‘idealists’—i. e., theologians who have no concrete commitment. No matter how much goodwill they possess nor how much St. Augustine they have read, this kind of theologian will always be an idealist .... I am using the word ‘idealist’ in the Marxist sense because only theologians who are pastorally committed can match the true definition of a theologian.”

After a milder call to attention to the bishops congregated at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, the Pope answered the challenge of the Theology of Liberation on August 6, 1984, through the Sacred Congregation for the Protection of the Doctrine of the Faith, headed by his friend Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.<sup>2</sup> The Pope severely con-

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<sup>2</sup>The main *official* documents are the following: Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* and Declaration *Dignitatis humanae* of the Second Ecumenical Council; Encyclicals *Mater et Magistra*, *Pacem in terris*, *Populorum progressio*, *Redemptor hominis* and *Laborem exercens*; Apostolic Exhortations *Evangelii nuntiandi* and *Reconciliatio et Poenitentia*; Apostolic Letter *Octogesima adveniens*. John Paul II has dealt with this issue in his “Inaugural Address to the Third Conference of the Latin American Bishops,”

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demned the use of Marxist terms and tools such “class struggle” as a means of Christian evangelization. It was followed by another letter of instruction a year and a half later, in which he appeared to make some concessions to the Brazilian bishops who had been clamoring in favor of a milder rebuff of the Theology of Liberation, especially of Father Leonard Boff.

The fallacies in the Theology of Liberation are many:

1. From a theological point of view, the Pope is right when he insists that Marxist analysis is not a “scientific” tool for a theologian who wishes to investigate the process of social progress in particular. He is also right when he points out that the selective use of isolated scriptural quotes, mostly from the Book of Exodus and the “Magnificat,” is not consonant with an in depth perception of the whole of the Revelation. Furthermore, he is also unassailable when he states that there cannot be a correct “praxis” without a previous correct “belief.”

He points out that class struggle is antithetical to the universality of Christian love, and that the moral relativism of Marxist dialectics is irreconcilable with the absoluteness of the truth of the moral law as founded on the Word of God. He warns of the fallacy of equating the people of the New Covenant to a specific social stratum, namely “the proletariat.” Last, but not least, the Pope energetically condemns reducing the spiritual message

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Puebla, Mexico, AAS, 71 (1979), 187-205; “Instruction about some aspects of Liberation Theology” (*Libertatis Nuntius*, AAS, 76 (1984), 876-77; Instruction on *Christian Liberty and Liberation*, by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Rome, March 22, 1986.

of Jesus Christ to that of a political agitator against the Romans.

At the same time the Pope has shown that he is well aware of the brutal challenge to the hierarchical structure of the Church innate in the concept that class struggle must invade all levels of the Church, which leads to a “popular Church” opposite to the official one headed by the Bishop of Rome.

2. In economic and political terms, the Theology of Liberation does a disservice to Latin American communities by coopting the so called “theory of dependency” wholesale. This theory has been a welcome pretext everywhere for uneducated leftist agitators to attack multinational corporations, who have the capital and technical knowledge so sorely needed by Latin Americans. These people show their absolute ignorance about how markets work; they also show a snobbish clerical contempt of the common sense of common people. Worst of all, they project into the community at large their own private biases and misunderstanding about the institution of private property and the allocation of scarce resources, thereby irremissibly damaging the most helpless and defenseless of all: their own peasant followers.

What can be expected if this trend continues in the future?

The Theology of Liberation movement is receding all over Latin America but remains strong among several countries such as El Salvador, Peru, Brazil, and Guatemala. In the latter, the present vice-president of the Republic is a former liberation theologian. In Honduras the Cardinal Archbishop of Tegucigalpa has echoed some of their main tenets. Aristide, in Haiti, was one of them.

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It has lost followers in some other countries, such as Nicaragua, Argentina, Mexico, and Chile, but it is still gaining in overall strength among the younger clergymen, and recently appears to have also infected those in the United States, Africa, and the Philippines concerned with development issues.

Only a resourceful and courageous stand in the face of this challenge by the Latin Americans themselves, as well as the Church authorities, can stem the tide in a definitive way.

There are many factors involved, each of which might prove decisive in the struggle, but none will be more important than the Christian will to be free. Men and women who have everything to lose must be convinced that what they do not do for themselves no one will do for them and their children.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>The Liberation Theology movement is not as original as claimed by its leaders. A similar approach was faced by Anglo-Saxon Christianity at the height of the "Social Gospel" movement during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The difference now lies in the more explicit use of Marxist and Neo-Marxist categories, and the open call for the violent overthrow of the present social structures, along with the traditional "revolutionary" cries of Latin American politicians.