

A Theology of Liberation

By Ernst H. Wendland

The following question was recently raised by one of our world missionaries: "What is 'liberation theology' all about?" Statements concerning theological liberationists occur in missiological publications so frequently these days and in so many different contexts that it is difficult to know where to begin a coherent analysis of the movement.

Liberation theology is a strange admixture of political activism with a religious flavor. Someone described it as "a brand of Christianity which takes Che Guevara's admonitions seriously." While from a conservative standpoint one might be tempted to dismiss the movement as a theological absurdity, its involvement with the poor of the world and its concern for the underprivileged cannot simply be ignored.

A Worldwide Movement

Latin America happens to be the scene of the movement's greatest activity. Here some of the world's worst economic misery exists, side by side with the highest percentage of nominal Christianity. Theological liberationists, however, are by no means confined to Latin America. Throughout the world, including North America, inequities among people because of economic, political and social dependence have become a cause for expressing ethical outrage. Church leaders have been forced to face some searching questions. By remaining passive in such conditions they are accused of being like the priest and the Levite who "passed by on the other side" (Lk 10:31).

Sometimes searching questions come from government leaders. In Africa, for example, Third World heads of state are openly asking what the Christian churches are doing to become, as they say, "relevant to the problem of modern life." Coupled with questions is the veiled threat that by failing to follow "the injunctions of Jesus concerning the poor" a church body could very well forfeit its continued right of existence in that country.

More often the pressure to "do something practical" toward revolutionizing society is brought by Christian church leaders themselves. In their opinion it is no longer good enough for a church to be involved in charitable institutions which help to relieve misery. The church must actively commit itself to the cause of liberation. It must identify with the oppressed in a battle to change the conditions which bring about this misery.

In North America agitation for civil rights goes hand in hand with movements like Black Theology, which is a modified form of liberation theology. The "Exodus experience," we are told, happened when the first African refused to accept slavery and when biblical faith found its real significance in a fight for political justice. Blacks are joined in this cry for liberation by Chicanos, Asian Americans, native Indians and Appalachians. All want "a God who is part of liberating action."

Intellectuals are getting into the act as well. In his book "The Secular City" Harvey Cox argues that the institutional church is too preoccupied with its own organizational ideology and worried about its own economic basis to speak out boldly for revolutionary change. To speak of God in a metaphysical sense, Cox maintains, is an escape; God is a political issue; the "God-talk" of the establishment has lost its relevance; Jesus Christ comes through social action. Cox is sophisticated enough to obtain a hearing from the university student, and anti-establishment enough to appeal to the Hippie and the Yippie as well.

To the World Council of Churches (WCC) remains the task of somehow keeping all these radical storms under an ecumenical umbrella, while at the same time retaining some semblance of the language of traditional theology. It is no secret that the WCC is becoming increasingly involved in a program to politicize Christianity, even advocating through its leadership a revolutionary change in the world's unequal distribution of wealth. Its financial support of guerilla fighters in wars of liberation has been questioned by some of its own constituency. Yet the WCC Program to Combat Racism continues to subsidize activist groups involved in terrorist activities.

A Radical Movement

This assortment of voices for liberation should make it apparent that liberation theology is no fad, no passing fancy. Its interests include the many who feel that the world has dealt with them unjustly—the poor, the oppressed, the underprivileged, those who have suffered discrimination. Its cry for liberation appeals to ethnic minorities, slum dwellers and intellectuals. This cry has been voiced by church leaders who believe that anything contributing to such evils must be changed, whether that be a controlling economic system, an authoritarian form of oppressive government, or a theological hierarchy which wishes more than anything to preserve its institutions. It is a radical movement.

It may be of interest that theological liberationists are not at all offended when the term “radical” is applied to them. They reply that this word comes from the Latin *radix*, meaning root. Their movement wants to get at the root of humanity’s discontent. It “does” theology rather than passively “thinks about” theology, actively opposing ecclesiastical institutions, economic programs or political systems which foster oppression.

But is this kind of radicalism new to theology? Where do theological liberation’s own roots lie?

The Roots Go Deep

The concept of a socio-political gospel is not something new to Christian interpretation and experience. Rosemary Radford Reuther, herself a theological liberationist, has done her own investigation on this matter. Her book *The Radical Kingdom* traces the movement’s development.

Radicals such as the Hutterites, Taborites, and the Zwickau Prophets of the Reformation era, Dr. Reuther maintains, were among the first to break with the established territorial churches, forming separate communities according to a communistic ethic. Both Socialists and Marxists can very well include these dissenters as a part of their own lineage, the author contends.

The age which followed, Dr. Reuther suggests, emphasized reason as the “spectacles” by which Scripture was to be viewed. Rationalism acknowledged God as the “Architect of the Universe,” but the ideological foundations of Christendom were gradually replaced by scientific propositions. Christian teaching adapted itself more to worldly ideals. This emphasis upon the secular rather than the spiritual side of man pointed to the need of a realization of God’s kingdom *within history* rather than in an eternity unrelated to history. In the “doctrine of progress” salvation was thought of in terms of political freedom, pointing to an era in which all people would eventually enjoy equal rights.

European Albert Ritschl’s Christian Socialism and American Walter Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel, according to Dr. Reuther, offered the next formal development in the progression toward liberation theology. Already a century ago these men voiced the church’s deep concerns over the deterioration of mankind’s social and economic situation. Their efforts, however, led to reform movements *within* existing institutions rather than revolutionary programs involving a radical change. Churches themselves created organizations for social action, offered more and more social services, and devised social institutions for the betterment of conditions within society.

Meanwhile Karl Marx was developing other ways to grapple with these problems. Man must become his own creator, Marx held, the maker of his own destiny. By foolishly seeking his goals in the form of material commodities, Marx maintained, man merely enslaved and dehumanized himself. A capitalistic society was sucking the common man dry. It was therefore up to the socialist revolution to overcome this destructive system, raise the proletariat to power, and regulate society in a more equitable way.

Conservative theologians may consider it blasphemous to suggest that Marxism and Christianity have anything at all in common. Yet, as Dr. Reuther and others sympathetic to liberation theology point out, the polarization between the two may not be as great as some think. Both Marxists and liberationists champion the cause of the oppressed. Both find in capitalistic exploitation a primary cause of evil. Both see fulfillment of goals in the “here and now” rather than in an eternal future.

While Marxism and Christianity's liberation theology appear to have something in common, one must turn to Latin America to ascertain whether or not this is true. Here liberation theology has attained its most flourishing outgrowth. Here the climate for its latest and greatest activity has been especially conducive to further development.

Conditions For Growth

Statistics are often presented in such sweeping generalities that their accuracy as well as the conclusions derived from them are open to debate. In the case of Latin America so many shocking statistics are offered frequently and in unrelated publications that one has little reason to question their reliability. A brief visit to Latin America is also enough to convince the observer of their plausibility. Some of these conditions often repeated in reports are the following:

Latin America's twenty republics number nearly 300 million inhabitants. They are a part of a genuine melting pot consisting of native Indians, Europeans, Negroes, and Asiatics. Latin America's population growth-rate is faster than that in any other area in the world.

Sixty percent of these people subsist by agriculture, yet ten percent own nine-tenths of the land....As more and more land has been consolidated into large estates, there has been a mass exodus to the cities. Instead of beautiful suburbias, however, these cities have become surrounded by a necklace of slums. Millions of the underprivileged live on an average income of thirty cents per day....People in Latin America die of old age at 28. Two-thirds are undernourished, and one-half of the work force is either unemployed or underemployed....Fifty percent of the children die before the age of two. Four million or more children carry on an existence in the city streets....The illiteracy rate is higher than it was ten years ago. Fewer people have potable water today than yesterday....In spite of all these statistics one-third of the national budget in many Latin American countries is spent for late-model weaponry.

The Catalytic Agent

In circumstances such as these, Roman Catholicism has for centuries played the dominant Christianizing role. In fact, one-third of the world's Roman Catholics are said to be Latin Americans. It is estimated that by the year 2000 the majority of the world's Catholics will be Latins. In the minds of some priests this constitutes "an anomalous situation." How can an influential institution which stands for the equality of humankind under God remain passive as it sees people being hopelessly exploited and oppressed?

The Conference of Latin American Bishops meeting in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968 felt called upon to raise its prophetic voice in protest. Men like Gustavo Gutierrez, Juan Luis Segundo and Dom Helder Camara became strong voices for liberation.

In August 1975 some 200 Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians and social activists met in Detroit to discuss the movement's progress in behalf of liberation. *Time* summarized the conclave's discussions as an effort to "combine Marxist economic analysis with the teachings of the Old Testament prophets and the commands of the Christian gospel to fashion a demanding spiritual ethic." *Time* credited liberation theology with being a significant "new mode of Christian thought."

Last year the Latin American bishops met once more at Puebla, Mexico. The conservative wing of bishops this time tried to tone down the more radical pronouncements of the liberationists. Pope John Paul II attended this meeting, calling the church to participate "in social action and the cause of justice," but cautioning against "ideological identification, whether Marxist or capitalist." According to one observer the "real topic" at Puebla was "whether the church could survive as a viable institution in a continent on the brink of disaster."

In the meantime the Orbis Press in Maryknoll, New York, keeps the flames of liberation theology burning brightly by publishing numerous books and pamphlets in support of the movement. The Maryknoll

Missioners are the members of an American Roman Catholic mission society which is active especially in Latin American countries.

The Prophet of Orthopraxis

Every religious movement has a voice which distinguishes itself above others. Liberation theology's most articulate prophetic voice is without question Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian priest. His book entitled *A Theology of Liberation* can justly be called the movement's "bible." Without attempting to reflect the intricate subtlety of the author's theological argumentation, a summary of his line of thinking is herewith outlined:

Theology must experience contextual development. Augustine's emphasis upon spiritual salvation fit the needs of his day. Thomas Aquinas had good reason for systematizing theological truth at a later era. We happen to live at a time when the existential aspects of Christian life have come into prominence. Our need is for "orthopraxis." This simply means that theological truth must emphasize a commitment of service to others. In times when human dignity is being trampled upon, theology without such a commitment is sterile.

In today's society everything has a political flavor. A Christendom which remains aloof from political involvement is out of touch with reality. This applies especially to a situation where by passive silence the church lends legitimacy to oppressive governments. Consequently the building of a just society today is a "salvific" work in which the church must be involved.

Historically the underdevelopment of Latin America is a byproduct of neocolonial capitalism. The oppressed masses must find a path towards a new society, and the church must help in this effort. Since all of human existence is a "yes" or a "no" to the Lord, and since the "salvific action" of God in Christ underlies all human existence, man by working to build a just society places himself within God's "salvific process." Thus the building of a just society is a part of God's saving action. Those who limit "salvation" to an extramundane sphere are trying to protect their own selfish interests from the radical change required in this struggle for liberation.

To hope in Christ is to believe in the adventure of history. To know God is to do justice. To be saved is to reach the fullness of love. To be truly converted is to commit oneself to the liberation of the poor, as both Mary (Lk 1:46–50) and Christ (Lk 4:14–21) proclaimed. They tell us that the kingdom of God has come. It is high time to correct the evils which are incompatible with this kingdom.

Only by an authentic solidarity with the oppressed and by an active commitment to the cause of their liberation can the church be true to its mission.

Thus far Gutierrez.

Scriptural Eradication

While attempting to follow the thought processes of a Gutierrez, one thinks of how often God's kingdom and Christ's work in relation to that kingdom have been misunderstood. The witness of Scripture concerning this is clear. The fault, as always, lies with man's earthbound reason, which does not want to accept Scripture's testimony. Modern theology seems to have much to say about "eschatological significance," yet without looking to the Bible for an answer.

To Nicodemus Christ said, "I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5).

To the Pharisees who asked when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come visibly, nor will people say 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (Lk 17:20–21).

To Pontius Pilate the Lord declared, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place” (Jn 18:36).

To a dying criminal, who asked Jesus to remember him when he would come into his kingdom, Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43).

To disciples who still wondered when the risen Savior was “going to restore the kingdom to Israel,” the Lord promised to send them the power of the Holy Spirit, so that they could be his witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (Ac 1:6, 8). Having said this, the Lord ascended to his heavenly throne with the assurance that he would return.

This assurance was given in the light of the King’s own promise that he would prepare a place for his followers in the Father’s house, so that some day they could be with him forever. He, the King of glory would at his second coming say to them: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Mt 25:34).

The Apostles caught the significance of this eschatology. To the Corinthians Paul writes, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Co 15:19). In this entire chapter he points to the significance of Christ’s resurrection as our victory over death. To the Romans Paul therefore declares: “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Ro 14:17). To the Philippians he writes, “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Ph 3:20–21).

Why go on? One could quote entire chapters, yes, entire books of Scripture in support of this “faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jd 3). A simple searching of Scripture gives mankind the truth which makes it free. Attending one of our Lutheran church services is totally unproductive if the liberationists are right. The hymns, the confessions, the readings, the sermon, the prayers, the celebration of Christ’s death “until he comes,” the benedictions are foolishness from the liberationist’s point of view. To those who believe, the Word and the Sacraments are the power of God and the wisdom of God unto eternal salvation.

A Gospel for the Poor

Dr. E. Nacpil, a Philippine theologian, comments that theological liberationists have so eulogized the poor as to “glorify poverty,” and make one wonder “what is the point of being liberated from it.” J. Berkuyll raises the point that a gospel which is “particularly for the poor,” as liberationists claim, becomes divisive by separating the “haves” from the “have-nots” and also by suggesting that the “haves” are not in need of being liberated from their “mania for the fat and comfortable life.”

J. D. Gort refers to the theology of liberation as a “truncated liberation,” indistinguishable from what is offered by the politician, philosopher, physician, social worker, psychiatrist and economist,” a kind of liberation leading to “a new enslavement.”

Vernon C. Grounds considers this radical kind of theology as “a fiat, denuded, one-dimensional reductionism which, enamored of the *Zeitgeist*, is willing to sacrifice its specifically Christian content.” It makes the task of seminary education, he adds, “the grooming of a sort of sociological task force.” Politics swallows up dogmatics, and Christianity “is reduced to an anthropocentricism which retains God merely as a partner in the historical enterprise.”

Apparently not all of present-day theological thinking feels that religion should degenerate into a secular movement in order to offer the poor a better world, and we are thankful for the astute and perceptive analysis of these men.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” says the Lord Jesus Christ, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). To deprive the souls of people of the rich comfort of the gospel of Christ as it reaches into their hearts and touches their spirits is Satan’s greatest achievement. A theology of liberation, by its emphasis upon this transitory, mundane existence here on earth, becomes another of Satan’s tools. What does this theology really have to offer those who cry out to God for help at the side of a loved one’s grave?

Christ's gospel offers true liberation from a terror-stricken conscience, from an existence in this life often full of disillusionments, human failures, and disappointments. It flees from the fear of an eternity separated from God. It gives the human spirit strength to lead a courageous life of faith in the here and now, a faith which can overcome this world and receive an inheritance in "a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (He 12:28).

Our Synod's "This We Believe" says it well in a concluding statement: "We reject as contrary to the clear revelation of Scripture all attempts to interpret passages in the New Testament that speak of the end of the world, Jesus' second coming, and the judgment symbolically, or to see these events taking place, not in the end of time, but concurrently with history."

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