

## LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Liberation Theology (LT) is beyond doubt one of the most significant theological movements of the twentieth century. It started in Latin America in the early 1960s. Within a few years it had influenced the development of similar theologies in other continents, especially in Asia and Africa. Its historical roots may be traced back to *Iglesia y Sociedad en America Latina* (ISAL), whose launching platform was the First Latin American Consultation on Church and Society (23-27 July, 1961), held in Lima, Peru. This meeting, sponsored by the World Council of Churches (WCC), coincided with the beginning of intensive political activism on the part of Christians in the midst of increasing social unrest in a revolutionary situation. ISAL was initially a think-tank made up mainly by Protestant theologians such as Julio de Santa Ana and Julio Barreiro of Uruguay, Jose Míguez-Bonino of Argentina, and Rubem Alves of Brazil. Eventually, however, ISAL produced greater impact in Roman Catholic circles to such an extent that LT became known largely as progressive Roman Catholic theology, represented by outstanding theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru, Juan Luis Segundo of Uruguay, Pablo Richard of Chile, Enrique Dussell of Argentina, Jose Miranda of Mexico, Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff of Brazil, and Jon Sobrino of Spain/El Salvador.

The first major LT work was written by Rubem Alves—*A Theology of Human Hope* (Washington: Corpus Books, 1969)—, based on his PhD thesis at Princeton Theological Seminary. Another early fruit of LT, much more widely known than Alves', was Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation*, originally published in 1971 in Spanish and soon translated into several languages, including English. As a result of this work Gutierrez came to be known as “the father of liberation theology.”

An important factor which favored the development of LT in Roman Catholic circles in Latin America was Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the social encyclicals issued by John XXIII and Paul VI, especially *Populorum Progressio* (1967). The insights that emerged from this *aggiornamento* of the Church provided the basis for the document produced by the Second Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) held in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. This document, signed by the 130 prelates present, was critical of the Latin American situation as a “situation of sin”, condemned “institutionalized violence”, advocated the promotion of the *comunidades eclesiales de base* (grass-roots ecclesial communities), and ratified “God's preferential option for the poor”. The basis was thus laid for social and political activism and for “a new way of doing theology” (Gutierrez) on behalf of the liberation of the poor from all kinds of oppression, including that related to socioeconomic dependence.

Many priests and nuns who wanted to identify with the poor in order to implement the Medellin conclusions went to live among them in the slums,

rural areas, or the jungles. Their aim was to achieve liberation in terms of socioeconomic justice, if necessary through class struggle and confrontation, instead of waiting for the rich ruling elite to give hand-outs to the poor. Their approach to change provoked a double reaction. On the one hand, the conservative constituency of the Church accused them of promoting a “theology of violence” and endangering the unity of the Church. On the other hand, many were murdered by the anti-Marxist, fascist, and “national security” governments which had been erected in several Latin American countries during the 1970s. According to some estimates, during this “decade of captivity” approximately 1,500 priests, nuns and active laypersons were arrested, imprisoned, tortured, exiled or assassinated. The “cost of prophecy” paid by people committed to LT was indeed very high! A memorable example of their willingness to pay that price was that of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who said: “Martyrdom is a grace of God that I do not feel worthy of, but if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, my hope is that my blood will be like a seed of liberty and a sign that our hopes will soon become reality.” One month later, in 1980, he was shot dead while celebrating mass.

In sharp contrast with much of Western Christian theology, which is primarily concerned with doctrine, LT was focused on action for the sake of the poor. From this perspective, it made a significant contribution mainly in three fields:

1) **Hermeneutics.** LT insists that if theology is to fulfill its task it should take as its starting point the present historical situation, which in Latin America, as in the rest of the Two-thirds World, is marked by the overwhelming presence of the poor. The practice of truth (“historical praxis”) always has the priority over theology, which is always “a second act”—a critical reflection on historical praxis. For the sake of relevant praxis, however, the historical situation needs to be analyzed; consequently, theology must be interdisciplinary. It is at this point that, at least for some of the liberation theologians, Marxism becomes important, mainly as a tool of socioeconomic analysis.

2) **Christology.** LT is not particularly interested in the doctrine of Christ or in the search for the historical Jesus of Nazareth to which Western theology has devoted so much attention. Instead, it concentrates on Jesus’ liberating praxis among the poor of his time. It majors on Christ the liberator and the practical implications of his life and ministry for the life and ministry of the Church.

3) **Ecclesiology.** LT takes very seriously the view of the Church as primarily a community rather than an institution. Accordingly, it interprets the emergence of thousands of grass-roots ecclesial communities in Latin America as a “new genesis” or a “reinvention” of the Church. In these communities the Bible is read in the context of poverty and oppression, a critical understanding of the situation of the poor is promoted, possible courses of action to change the situation are explored, every aspect of life is placed under the influence of the

gospel, and the practical exercise of the priesthood of all believers is encouraged.

Undoubtedly, the political activism of the liberation theologians, whose critique of the ruling elite was sometimes accompanied by Marxist overtones of class struggle, contributed to a large extent to the heated internal debate that LT unleashed in the Church. More than that, however, their ecclesiology was perceived as a real threat to the ecclesiastical hierarchical structure centered in Rome. As a result, in the 1980s Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), at that time Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued two cautionary documents regarding LT, the *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation* (1984) and the *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (1986). This opposition on the part of the Vatican, to which was added the fall of the Marxist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe at the end of that decade, brought LT to a standstill. The fact remains, however, that the problems that motivated LT in the 1960s and 1970s have not been solved but aggravated, with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. A new LT for a world that lies under the spell of globalization is urgently needed.

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