

Friend or Foe?

An evangelical engaging Latin American Liberation Theology

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In recent decades, effort has been made by Latin American theologians to move away from the traditional Roman Catholic orthodoxy that has shaped and influenced so much of their society, and move towards a contextualised understanding of Christianity in the light of the contemporary needs and issues faced by Latin American communities. One guise that this contextualisation has taken is that of Liberation Theology¹. In this essay, I will offer a critical evaluation of the main characteristics of this theology from an evangelical point of view. I will not be dealing in detail with the historical progress and development of liberation theology, neither will I be focussing on the writings of any particular theologians; rather I will be concentrating my evaluation on the major beliefs and practices of this way of thinking, its strengths and weaknesses. Although there are different types of liberation theology², I will be exclusively addressing its Latin American contextualisation. I recognise that my essay will be offering an evaluation based upon my own personal evangelical bias, and it is from this position that I will approach the theories encompassed within Latin American liberation theology.

Gustavo Gutiérrez was the first to present an outline of liberation theology³, primarily as a response to what he perceived to be the major flaws in the way the Church⁴ was operating in Latin America. It was perceived as being an institution that served the affluent⁵, with priests and monks being found predominantly in large cities, in rich Catholic schools (Berryman 1987, 13)⁶. Liberation theology seeks to redress this imbalance by presenting a theological perspective from the point of view of the poor and the oppressed in Latin American society. To do this, it presents two overarching methodologies that differ from those of conventional European theologies⁷. Firstly, rather than first approaching Scripture, and interpreting life through the glasses of theological understanding; liberation theology asserts that we should first engage with the realities of life, and from there we should seek to understand our response through the light of Scripture, 'so experience of faith is a first act; theology comes afterwards: theology as a second act' (Gibellini 1987, 5)⁸. Secondly, in looking to approach theology with the needs of the oppressed in mind, liberationism has said⁹ that there is a 'need for conversion on the part of the whole church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral¹⁰ liberation' (Gibellini 1987, 3). It is this 'preferential option for

¹ In this essay, I will refer to this concept as liberation theology, the theology of liberation and liberationism.

² For instance, those of a black or feminist concern.

³ Gutiérrez introduced it to a conference held in Chimbote, Peru, in July 1968 (Gibellini 1987, 2).

⁴ The capitalised 'Church' that I refer to in the essay will be referring to the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America.

⁵ Some liberation theologians even went as far as raising the question of 'whether the Eucharist celebrated in a wealthy congregation might seem to endorse extravagant consumption that reduced others to inhuman poverty' (Berryman 1987, 26).

⁶ Robert McAfee Brown has explained that 'even though many bishops, priests, and religious are actually poor, the prevailing image is of an affluent church in lockstep with the affluent portion of society,' (1990, 58).

⁷ Gutiérrez has said that 'theology is of necessity both spirituality, and rational knowledge' (Gibellini 1987, 34).

⁸ Liberation theologians have asserted that whereas classical theology refers to revelation and tradition, liberation theology refers to facts and questions derived from the world and from history.

⁹ As a result of the influence that the theology of liberation was having on the Latin American church, this statement was included in the closing document of the Third conference of the Latin American episcopate at Puebla from 27th January to 13th February 1969 (Gibellini 1987, 3).

¹⁰ Integral liberation in this sense means freedom from sin as well as economic and social oppressions (Gibellini 1987, 4).

the poor' that shapes much of the doctrines and practices of liberation theology that I will be evaluating here.

The major concern of liberation theology is that 'theologians are not to be mere theoreticians, but practitioners who participate in the ongoing struggle to liberate the oppressed' (Rhodes 1991, 3). This gives much of what they believe a distinctly political focus. Stephen Pattison has observed that '[liberation theology] claims to be a way of approaching the whole of theology which must be recast from the standpoint of the poor... All the major doctrines, ideas and texts of the Christian tradition must be re-examined and evaluated from the viewpoint of the oppressed,' (1997, 40). There has been centuries of Latin American churches teaching that just as Christ accepted the suffering and role that God had for him at death, so each person should accept their lot as the will of God¹¹. However, it is claimed by liberationists that this theological position benefits the rich and the powerful far more than the oppressed (Brown 1990, 5), and that God's will is for people to live in harmony and solidarity, across all of society (Berryman 1987, 93). They argue that Jesus died in order to bring change, an end to injustice and the promotion of love. Those who oppress followers of Christ are effectively crucifying Christ again and again¹². It is the aim of liberationists to create a society free of this oppression (Brown 1990, 5), and that is what drives the practices of liberation theology. Liberationists have a doctrine of the church that is explicit in how they operate. They enforce that the church should be outward-looking (Berryman 1987, 54), and it must identify in poverty with the poor¹³. Liberation theology is clear that the Church's main mission should no longer be that of salvation or evangelism, but rather a prophetic activism for justice (Rhodes 1991, 4)¹⁴.

Liberation theologians regard sin not as personal, but as social evil; all personal sin is considered to be a product of social injustice¹⁵. As a result, salvation is viewed in terms of the restoration of a correct social order, so that the phrase 'Kingdom of God' is interpreted as the earthly realisation of God's intended social order: that of equality and harmony. Liberation theology offers a complete rethink of the doctrine of God. It claims that historically, God has been portrayed and theologised to show support for capitalist ideologies, and has been given the guise of a transcendent and distant deity, contrary to their belief that God is 'dynamically involved in behalf of the poor and downtrodden' (Rhodes 1991, 4). This conveys a Christology of liberation 'in which the Father is the ultimate horizon, the Son the definitive example of how to correspond to the Father, and life in the Spirit of Jesus the specific form of being a Christian' (Gibellini 1987, 24). The theology of liberation emphasises his saving work as being through his fight against the oppressive powers of his day, and his love and support for those that were victims of social injustice. They see Christ's crucifixion as being primarily

¹¹ The argument being that the suffering, poverty, injustice and oppression of the world are nothing compared to the joys and glorious life found in an eternal salvation (Brown 1990, 5).

¹² Liberationists use such passages as Luke 4:18-19, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."; and Matthew 25:44-45, "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'"

¹³ '[the church] must denounce the injustice manifest in all the inequities between rich and poor, and bind itself to a life of poverty among the poor, following the example of Christ' (Brown 1990, 58)

¹⁴ J. Andrew Kirk shows that 'Gutiérrez believes that the Church's hierarchy should go even further, throwing all of its influence, still considerable in many parts of the continent, against every dehumanising situation. Its denunciation should not be partial (individual acts of injustice), but global (the entire system of dependence)' (1979, 29). This deeply political comment on the nature of injustice colours much of the doctrinal foundations of liberation theology.

¹⁵ Liberation theology regards capitalist nations are the most guilty exponents of these injustices (Rhodes 1991, 3).

a social comment that led the way for an uprising against the dominating classes (Rhodes 1991, 4).

In summary, Gustavo Gutiérrez has explained liberation theology as being 'a critical reflection on praxis¹⁶ in the light of the Word'¹⁷ (Pattison 1997, 32). Its focus on the practical responsibilities of Christian faith have led it to be described as a 'historical theology'¹⁸, principally concerned with identifying and cooperating with God's salvific acts in the Bible of the present' (Pattison 1997, 38), through the preferential option for the poor¹⁹.

Liberation theology has become known as a controversial theology for a number of reasons, and none have been as prevalent as its standpoint on certain doctrinal points. The liberationist view of sin is contentious, as it suppresses the idea of personal responsibility for sin in favour of social responsibility. This conflicts with the evangelical view that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23²⁰), and suggests that without the corruption of society, humans would be sinless²¹. Harold S. Martin has spoken against the liberationist tendencies to omit biblical themes of justification, sin, sanctification, holiness and the second coming from their teaching (1980, 3). It is certainly true that liberationist doctrines emphasise particular parts of their beliefs to support their socio-political activism: the deity of Christ is downplayed in favour of his humanity and characteristics as a revolutionary²²; they give little weight to the eternity of salvation, preferring the idea of applying the Kingdom of God to present society; and the biblical miracles of Jesus are often told to emphasise their nature as signs of solidarity with the poor, rather than being told to emphasise the divine power of provision given to Christ (Berryman 1987, 61).

There are a number of other biblical challenges to liberation theology, some of which stem from the methodologies described earlier²³. In relation to the primacy of praxis over theological understanding, Ron Rhodes declares that 'evangelicals reject any suggestion that "we must do in order to know, and hope that orthodoxy will arise from orthopraxis [right action]"', pointing out that Jesus made theological interpretation primary and objective, not social praxis; and putting praxis above theology means that there is no controlling exegetical criteria – the final authority has transferred from Scripture to the reader's own interpretation

¹⁶ In this context, and throughout this essay, the word 'praxis' is referring to the practical response of people to the injustices and oppressions of the world.

¹⁷ Fellow liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, expands this definition, saying 'the theology of liberation therefore means critical reflection on human praxis (of human beings generally, and Christians in particular) in the light of the praxis of Jesus and the demands of the faith' (in Gibellini 1987, 5).

¹⁸ 'The description of liberation theology as a historical theology denotes not a preoccupation with the past, but a dominant concern for God's action in the world at present' (Pattison 1997, 36).

¹⁹ Liberation theology uses the 'bottom-up' theory that if you start by working to alleviate the social injustice perpetrated towards the poor, the social reform and transformation will eventually work upward to include the rich (Brown 1990, 60).

²⁰ All Scriptural references in this essay are taken from the New International Version.

²¹ Some extreme liberation theologians have said that 'those who are oppressed can and do sin by acquiescing to their bondage; to go along passively with oppression rather than resisting and attempting to overthrow it – by violent means if necessary – is sin'. Some liberation theologians have gone so far as to claim that violence by oppressors is sinful, but if the oppressed use violence to fight against the oppressors, it is seen as virtuous (Rhodes 1991, 3).

²² Liberation christology is very Christ-centred, especially focussing on the humanity of Jesus. It seeks to move away from the metaphysical concepts of God to ideas more in-line with human experience (Berryman 1987, 157).

²³ It is in regard to the Scriptural challenges against liberation theology that Phillip Berryman makes the almost embarrassingly humorous defence that 'liberation theology is quite biblical, but it is not literalist or fundamentalist' (1987, 61). One can only guess at what he meant, or who he was trying to convince with the description, 'quite biblical'.

(1991, 10)²⁴. Rhodes also argues against the deliberately biased perspective of a preferential option for the poor, saying that Scripture is clear that the preferential option is for the fallen, whether they are rich or poor²⁵ (1991, 11-12). However, Brown (1990, 60) points out that 'to speak of "a preferential option for the poor" is not to speak of an "exclusive option for the poor," as though God loved only the poor and hated everybody else, especially the rich... [moreover,] to the degree that the cries of the poor are heard, and are given priority over the complaints of the rich, there can be movement toward a more just society'. Liberationists are extremely effective in subscribing to Scriptures such as Matthew 25:31-46, which condemns those who are not involved in improving social conditions, and the three major reasons they give for their preferential option for the poor are Christ's example, Christ's instructions to his people, and the idea that the connection between the gospel and poverty should translate to a connection between the Church and the poor²⁶ (Brown 1990, 59).

Phillip Berryman has said that 'liberation theology is often accused of being an unwarranted mixing of religion and politics'²⁷ (1987, 126); and Harold S. Martin has said that 'it is quite evident that there is among liberationists a deliberate twisting of biblical concepts to suit a set of theoretical political principles' (1980, 3)²⁸. Both are correct in observing the dangers of valuing practice over theological understanding, and evangelicals have accused liberation theologians of compromising faith in favour of works. Criticisms of relativity and postmodernism are not unfounded, and liberationists themselves admit that 'it is an evolving, changing theology that sees itself as only partly reflecting the totality of God's word and truth. It has no desire to standardise, to gain conformity, or to reflect the concerns of those outside Latin America... it predicts its own passing – and welcomes the prospect!', (Pattison 1997, 39). To its credit, liberation theology tries to expose the true realities of theological-subjectivism, while being explicit in showing the contextual origins of its own ideology²⁹ (Pattison 1997, 33); and perhaps in this sense it is more aware than other theologies of its bias in interpretation.

This relativity is largely a political response; in that liberation theologians' suspicion is that all ideologically based theologies are distorted and dictated by existing social situations (Pattison 1997, 33). As a result, liberation theology denies any claim to absolute truth. It recognises its own contextual bias, and accepts that as such, it cannot have any eternal or universal validity (Pattison 1997, 38)³⁰. This has also extended to an acceptance of universalist thought, so as 'there is no separate, distinct, or privileged "church history" or

²⁴ 'The emphasis on concrete historical praxis as the starting point for theological understanding means that liberation theologians frequently have scant respect for the apparently academic theologies found in the Northern hemisphere,' saying that they are too concerned with classical texts, philosophy and orthodoxy – rather than grappling with real-life issues (Pattison 1997, 32).

²⁵ The same message that is preached by Jesus to the poor (Luke 7:22), is also given to the rich (Luke 5:32, 10:1-10) (Rhodes 1991, 11).

²⁶ Ron Rhodes (1991, 9) has been explicit in affirming that there is a strong Scriptural basis for helping the poor.

²⁷ 'those who see liberation theology as a threat typically view the theological and pastoral workers infecting the church with Marxism under the guise of theology' (Berryman 1987, 81).

²⁸ 'While rigid Marxist orthodoxy, dogmatism and ultimate solutions are largely rejected, the categories and tools of Marxist class analysis are those selected as best suited to understanding the situation of the poor in Latin America' (Pattison 1997, 35).

²⁹ J. L. Segundo has said 'liberation theology consciously and explicitly accepts its relationship with politics' (Pattison 1997, 35).

³⁰ Despite the claim that it doesn't have all the answers, liberation theology is explicit in claiming to be a 'complete theology', as opposed to a theology of society or a theology of politics. J. L. Segundo instead says that 'liberation theology is meant to designate and cover theology as a whole', and rather than being an application of a dogmatic theology, '[it claims to be] the only authentic and privileged standpoint for arriving at a full and complete understanding of God's revelation in Jesus Christ' (Pattison 1997, 39).

salvation history which excludes people who are not Christians³¹ (Pattison 1997, 43). In liberation theology, 'the criterion [of a just life] is not whether one considers oneself Christian or not – one might even be atheist – but whether one has served the needs of others³²' (Berryman 1987, 55).

It cannot be denied however, that the political involvement of liberation theology is a form of contextualisation³³. As Pattison (1997, 31) says, 'the theology of liberation receives its challenge not from atheism, rationalism or secularisation [as with the European Church], but from the dehumanisation of ordinary people in Latin America'. Liberation theology looks to avoid the insular Church on which it is itself a comment³⁴; 'in Latin America it is not the church which is the focus of attention, but human beings, whom it is called to raise up and humanise' (Gibellini 1987, 20)³⁵. One product of liberation theology are ecclesial base communities³⁶; groups of poor Christians working to affect social and political issues³⁷ in their contexts (Rhodes 1991, 4)³⁸. These are relevant, contextualised and effective³⁹ products of liberation theology, showing Christ's concern for the poor in a way that is active and contrary to the normal practice of the Latin American Church.

In conclusion, the theology of liberation appreciates the political, communal and social nature of humanity, and is aware of the affect this has on life (Pattison 1997, 42). It profoundly claims for itself the call of Christ for church to be prophetic in the historical present⁴⁰, and understands the concern of God for the welfare of his people. As Ron Rhodes (1991, 9) has summed up, 'Certainly, evangelicals have little right to criticise the theology of liberation if they are not prepared to criticise possible deficiencies in their own theology in regard to caring for the poor and oppressed of our world', '[however], a legitimate and commendable concern for the poor and oppressed must never be used to justify a theological methodology that leads to a gross distortion of Christianity' (Rhodes 1991, 12). Finally, as a caution to the postmodernist relativity of its claims on truth, 'liberation theology must, therefore, find a way of affirming the worldly liberation struggle while preserving some Christian distinctiveness' (Pattison 1997, 45).

(2,154 words)

³¹ 'This kind of unifying and universalising thinking presents some problems. It can, for example, be seen as an attempt to resacralise the world by making all action of any kind, however unconscious, Christian' (Pattison 1997, 44).

³² Gustavo Gutiérrez has said that 'liberative activity on the part of the oppressed itself becomes salvific activity' (in Pattison 1997, 45); and in Brown (1990, 75), 'faith in God does not consist in asserting God's existence, but rather in acting on [God's] behalf'. Harold S. Martin has said that 'according to liberation theology, the "church" is the community of all those willing to participate in the struggle for liberation, and not a community of those who have been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ' (1980, 4).

³³ 'The biblical view of the poor and oppressed is such that God's people everywhere should be appalled at the poverty of the people in Latin America' (Rhodes 1991, 9).

³⁴ Liberation theology considers the Church in Latin America to be 'radically irrelevant' (Pattison 1997, 33).

³⁵ 'The theologians of liberation consider that this prophetic voice, directed to the world's crises, is the only way in which the Church can authenticate itself before a watching world' (Kirk 1979, 29).

³⁶ Ecclesial base communities were founded by priests and sisters trying to find 'a more appropriate expression of church for poor Latin Americans' (Berryman 1987, 71).

³⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez has said that in some places, the ecclesial base communities are the only social action working for the poor (Rhodes 1991, 5).

³⁸ 'In practice, the religious and social activities of [an ecclesial base] community tend to mesh. A group may meet to read the Bible, sing, reflect, and pray – and then go on to discuss the situation of a cooperative, or go out and fix a road so buses and trucks can get to the village' (Berryman 1987, 68).

³⁹ 'These communities have been effective in showing workers and peasants how to organise for their own social welfare' (Rhodes 1991, 5).

⁴⁰ Johannes Baptist Metz, a liberation theology founding father, has said that 'there is a political dimension to faith and the church ought to be an institution of social criticism' (Rhodes 1991, 1).

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