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Liberation Theology In Battleground Religion Education

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LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Liberation Theology is a twentieth-century theological movement that intersects with grassroots struggles for social justice, especially throughout Latin America. Born out of the Roman Catholic Church, and especially the changes formed at the great church gathering known as "Vatican II" (in Rome in the 1960s), Liberation Theology includes an emphasis on the church's role as one that "relates believers to the modern world" (Gutierrez 1988). Advocates of Liberation Theology interpreted this to mean that the church is to be an advocate for believers, especially poor believers. Liberation Theology took the *preferential option for the poor* as a rallying cry and, through Christian-based communities (regular gatherings for study and prayer), worked for social and economic justice for the poorest peoples. Connecting to other global movements such as feminism and environmentalism, Liberation Theology has continued to expand, despite resistance from inside and outside the Catholic and Protestant churches.

LEADING FIGURES

Leading figures in the Liberation Theology movement are Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru, Juan Luis Segundo of Uruguay, Jon Sobrino of El Salvador, and Leonardo Boff of Brazil.

Peruvian Dominican priest and activist Gustavo Gutierrez, defined the method of Liberation Theology as "critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the bible" in his 1968 address to the first South American Bishops' Conference (CELAM) at Medellin. *Praxis* became a central term in Liberation Theology generally, and the term-meaning *action-sought* to focus all Christian action toward transforming unjust social structures in favor of the poor and dispossessed. While educated in Europe himself (Catholic University of Louvain, University of Lyon, Georgian University, Rome), Gutierrez worked most of his career in Peru, and he emphasizes that Liberation Theology must be "home grown." Theologies from Europe and America, however well intentioned, are not sufficient. The starting point of Liberation Theology, then, is specifically the experience of Latin Americans-and especially the unique context of suffering and economic depression.

One of the most prolific liberation theologians is the Jesuit priest Juan Luis Segundo of Uruguay. Segundo and Gutierrez became good friends during their time together as students at Louvain. Called *the dean* of liberation theologians, Segundo has written extensively on the method of Liberation Theology. Segundo rejected a European-styled emphasis on individualized or *personal* readings of the gospel, and argued for a more *contextual* and social reading. The importance of the Bible for social situations-economic and political-was taught against an exclusively *personal* religion, only for the

individual. In Liberation Theology, it was believed that these new interpretations of the Bible's message would give way to new, positive social structures.

Jon Sobrino, a Jesuit priest from El Salvador, writes extensively on the tradition of martyrdom within Liberation Theology. The way of being Christian in Latin America carries with it the mark of martyrdom, signified by the assassination of Monsignor Oscar Romero in 1980. While this particular death is well known, Romero is only one of the 70,000 victims killed by El Salvador's armed forces and paramilitary death squads during the 1980s and 1990s. In part, Sobrino's emphasis on martyrdom grows out of those deaths, as well as from being a member of the community of Jesuits who were assassinated by Salvadoran guards in 1989. Sobrino only escaped because he was in Thailand at the time. In the 1980s and 1990s Sobrino and his brother Jesuits carried on the work for social justice, pioneered by Monsignor Oscar Romero, with El Salvador's poor and disenfranchised. Sobrino questions the role of human cruelty and indifference in the world and challenges the "developed world" to recognize their complicity in the suffering of the world's poorest inhabitants.

Brazilian Franciscan priest Leonardo Boff is another leading figure in the movement. His book, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, written with his brother Clodovis Boff, has been the foundation for base communities in Brazil (Boff and Boff 1987). Boff specifically advocates the notion that authority and ministry can come *from below*, rather than from the church hierarchy. He was silenced twice by the Vatican, first in 1985, and again in 1991, for his "politicized" theology. After honoring a second year of silence, Boff left the priesthood and continues to act as an advocate for the poor and disenfranchised as an honorary professor of theology at the University of Rio de Janeiro.

VATICAN II

While Liberation Theologians trace their lineage back to Bartolome Las Casas, who advocated for the rights of South American Indians already in the sixteenth century, the origin of Liberation Theology can be found more recently with a proclamation originating in the Second Vatican Council. The Vatican document, *Gaudium Et Spes* (Joy and Hope), calls for greater human equality, both social and economic. In the landmark Second Vatican Council held from 1962 to 1965, the council called for the Church to engage in a renewed involvement in the world, and to give attention to the dignity of all humans, specifically in political and economic aspects. As a result, one of the commitments to arise from the council was a sense of obligation for the church to relate to believers, especially the poorest of believers, through the liturgy and the relationship of the church to governments. The council furthermore articulated a concern for social justice over the accumulation of wealth. The council called for the Church to take a position of energetic conversation and exchange with the modern world in order to learn from, as well as teach, secular, non-Christian, and Protestant persons. Liberation Theologians enthusiastically took up this injunction to dialog with secularists, and freely incorporated social sciences into their theologies.

MEDELLIN, 1968

In the wake of Vatican II and its new articulation of the Church's relationship to the world, liberationists like Boff and Gutierrez focused on social sciences in dialog with theology in order to develop a *theology of liberation*. This method of constructive theology linked salvation and liberation as a way of understanding the relationship of God's free gift of salvation on the one hand, and human efforts at liberation on the other hand. While traditional theology has used Western philosophy as a basis for reflection, Liberation Theology uses the critical and liberating perspectives of the social sciences—including elements of Marxism—to identify the root causes of oppression, and to reflect critically on formulating Christian action to overcome this oppression in society. Liberation Theology is a new way of doing theology—a theology of praxis from the perspective of the poor, and through their struggle for justice and for liberation.

Because Liberation Theology calls for a new way of acting as Christians in the world, liberationists are activists first and foremost. This is reflected especially in the activities of *comunidades eclesiales de base* or base Christian communities called CEBs) in Latin America. CEBs were fully articulated at Medellin. The conference at Medellin, the first Latin American Bishops' Conference (CELAM), encouraged use of *comunidades eclesiales de base* for organizing social, political, and religious justice among the poor and disenfranchised. A second goal of the CEBs was to render the Bible more accessible, utilizing the Bible as a tool for educating and empowering the poor.

CEBs are groups of between 5 and 30 individuals who meet to worship, read the Bible, and make plans for social justice in their communities. Reading the Bible through the lens of their struggle for justice, CEB members understand God as an advocate of justice. CEBs focus on education, teaching the members basic literacy skills through reading the Bible. For example, evidence of God's partisanship toward the poor and outcast is found in the Hebrew Bible. The role of God in Exodus is a particularly poignant passage for liberation theologians, and is emphasized in the CEBs (Exodus 3:7-8). Likewise, liberationists emphasize Jesus's solidarity with the poor and outcast, as seen in the Gospels. These biblical images then guide their Christian practice as disciples of Jesus, creating a relationship of solidarity between Jesus and the poor, shaping and guiding advocacy for social change.

Liberation is broad term within Liberation Theology, including not only the establishment of political and social justice and freedom from oppression for the poor, but also liberation from sin. When speaking of sin, liberationists tend to emphasize social sin, embodied in unjust societal and institutional structures such as racism and sexism. These unjust social systems lead further to individual sin. The bishops at Medellin condemned the "institutionalized violence" of poverty, and denounced capitalism and communism equally, placing blame for hunger and misery of the poor of the world on the rich and powerful. Following Vatican II, Liberation Theologians see continuity between justice and liberation in this world and the fullness of the Kingdom of God in the next world. Their primary focus, however, is on this world.

One of the first social theorists embraced by liberationists was Karl Marx, and this was clearly expressed at Medellin. While Liberation Theology specifically rejects the atheism of Marxism, and the apocalyptic notion of supernatural intervention in the political world, Marx provided important and necessary categories for understanding the experience of poverty and oppression in Latin America. Liberation Theology is founded upon a central notion of God's (and the Church's) preferential option for the poor that dictates its understanding of tradition, biblical texts, and philosophy. At Medellin, the conference of bishops took specific aim at the system of capitalism, arguing that it "militates against the dignity of the human person." Major components of Liberation Theology were formulated by Gustavo Gutierrez, just prior to the conference at Medellin. Gutierrez's book, *A Theology of Liberation*, marks the first full expression of Liberation Theology (Gutierrez 1988).

The bishops at Medellin emphasized that Liberation Theology starts from an experiential perspective, more specifically; it begins from the experience of the Latin American poor. The focus is then on a *bottom up* approach to theology, as seen in the CEBs. Theology is not done in the ivory towers of distant first world academies, but rather by "militant theologians" working with the pilgrim people of God engaged in their pastoral responsibilities" (Boff, 1987).

Leonardo and Clodovis Boff (1987) indicate that Liberation Theology has several themes:

- Solidarity with the poor
- Real faith requires liberating action
- God sides with the oppressed
- God is actively working to set up the Kingdom of God in history
- Jesus attacked oppression and his gospel is one of freedom from oppression
- God is found in the struggle of the oppressed
- Mary is a "prophetic and liberating woman"
- God supports the rights of the poor
- "Liberated human potential becomes liberative"

A quick examination of these themes shows several commonalities. First, there is a focus on the poor and the oppressed. Second, God has a clear preference for the oppressed and the poor. God, Jesus, and Mary are all invoked on the side of liberation. Finally, there is clearly a class emphasis at the root of Liberation Theology's analysis. While Gutierrez and the Boffs rebel against oppression of any kind, including sexism and racism, at the bottom it is class oppression that is paramount for their articulation of Liberation Theology.

The tone for this type of class analysis was set at the *Medellin Document on Peace*, specifically the section titled, *Tensions between Classes and Internal Colonialism*. There, the bishops identify some of the problems as "Extreme inequality among social classes;" "Forms of Oppression of dominant groups and Sectors;" and "Power unjustly

exercised by certain dominant sectors" (CELAM 1968). Likewise Gutierrez, diagnosing the problem that leads to oppression and degradation of the poor, states quite clearly, "only a class analysis will enable us to see what is really involved in the opposition between oppressed countries and dominant peoples" (1988).

COMMUNIDADES ECLESIALES DE BASE (CEBs)

A detailed study of CEBs in El Salvador during the 1980s identified three ways CEBs contributed to politically mobilizing the poor. First, the local religious community was democratized in the CEBs, and through this mutual empowerment, those people were able to question institutional structures and existing systems of authority. Second, CEBs helped people develop leadership and organizing skills, especially in rural areas. Through the democratization of the CEBs, there was an emphasis on speaking in public, and working toward consensus rather than a hierarchical expression of power within the community. This gave individuals who would usually have said little about church or God or their community, an opportunity to participate in their church and community actively, leading to the second step of leadership and organization in order to change society at the grassroots level. For example, members of CEBs participated in community building projects and trade cooperatives. Lastly, CEBs strengthened collective identity among the poor, and helped them develop a sense of solidarity that comes from their struggle together. This solidarity then informs their relationship to each other, society, Jesus, and God. Cohesion at this local level leads to political solidarity and, in the case of El Salvador, participation in revolution. CEBs emphasized empowerment from the base, rather than from the top down, and functioned as the grassroots of Liberation Theology.

PUEBLA, 1979

The second South American Bishops Conference was held in Puebla, Mexico in 1979. The newly elected John Paul II attended this conference. There, he affirmed the conclusions of Medellin regarding the preferential option for the poor that the bishops had articulated at the first South American Bishops' Conference, but the Pope also cautioned against the misuse of secular political theories. He declared that Christ is not a political figure, nor a revolutionary, and said it was wrong to identify the Kingdom of God with an earthly political situation. He validated the liberationist's concern for social justice, while at the same time finding the use of secular social theories profoundly wrong.

VATICAN RESPONSE

Following Pope John Paul II's address at Puebla, the Vatican issued two instructions on Liberation Theology in the 1980s. The first, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation*, was released in 1984. This *Instruction* has at its heart a rejection of the possibility that Marxist analysis can make any constructive contribution to Catholic theology. The *Instruction* rejects the idea that Marxism is science, and that Marxism provides a strategy for changing society. The *Instruction* denies that any of

these elements can be removed from Marxism in order to give it any validity in constructive theology. While this *Instruction* does not use terms such as *heresy* or *errors*, the Vatican voiced concern that liberationists *deviated* from church teaching.

In 1986 the Vatican released a second instruction on Liberation Theology. *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* continues the themes developed in the first *Instruction* regarding Marxism, but this second *Instruction* is more hopeful about the possibility of achieving political liberation and freedom through social movements. The second *Instruction* acknowledges political uses of biblical narratives, such as Exodus, but subordinates political interpretations to "spiritual interpretations." *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* cautions religions against encouraging popular piety toward a "purely earthly plan" of liberation, calling that "nothing more than an illusion." The two instructions indicate that the aspect of Liberation Theology most alarming to the Vatican is the Marxist elements. Liberation Theology should be purged of its Marxist taint, and these *Instructions* offer guidance from the church of the issues of liberation, and the role of religion in political and social unrest.

SANTO DOMINGO, 1992

This fourth meeting of the South American Bishops' Conference was called to coincide with the 500th anniversary of Columbus' landing in the Americas. The theme of this conference was evangelization and human development. The conference emphasized the "preferential option for the poor" as articulated at Medellin. John Paul II spoke at the opening of this conference and called the bishops to practice a "genuine praxis of liberation" as set forth in the two instructions issued during the 1980s. Having effectively offered the final official word on Liberation Theology through the two instructions, the Vatican acted to change the role of the leaders of the movement. Throughout Latin America, liberationist priests and bishops were replaced with more conservative priests and bishops. And yet the Liberation Theology continues to be an important and effective voice in the Catholic Church, and to develop and grow in Latin America.

NEW DIRECTIONS

During the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, Liberation Theology has continued to use the CEBs to organize and expand. Because their emphasis is on *praxis* (*practice* or *action*), liberationists see Christianity as an active community of believers, and have continued to work with that goal in mind. Feminist and black theology, as well as ecologically informed theologies, have intersected with, and been woven into the fabric of Liberation Theology. One of the areas that both Boff (1995) and Gutierrez (1988) focus on in their latest writings is the environment. Social solidarity has been expanded to include creation. Defending indigenous land rights and fighting for the respect for life at all levels is part of the humanistic endeavor of liberationists. Identifying the paradigms of development and consumption as the main causes of the worldwide ecological crisis, liberationists see the connection between the global environmental crisis, and the poor health and ever-increasing high rate of mortality of the earth's poorest inhabitants.

Gutierrez articulates this commitment as "poverty means death, unjust and premature death" (Gutierrez 1988). The activism cultivated through CEBs, combined with the fact that the majority of the Catholic Church's constituency is poor, will continue to effect the way that theology is done, at least in those areas in the developing world most exploited by the developed world.

See also Bible and Poverty; Capitalism and Socialism.

Further Reading: Alves, Ruben A., and Elsa Tamez. *Against Machismo: Ruben Alves, Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutierrez, Jose Miguez Bonino, Juan Luis Segundo . . . And Others Talk About the Struggle of Women: Interviews*. Yorktown Heights, NY: Meyer-Stone Books, 1987; Assmann, Hugo. *Theology for a Nomad Church: Practical Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986; Boff, Leonardo. *Ecology & Liberation: A New Paradigm*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995; Boff, Leonardo, and Clodovis Boff. *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987; Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988; Hennelly, Alfred T. *Theologies in Conflict: The Challenge of Juan Luis Segundo*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979; Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM). "Medellin Document on Peace:' In *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader*, ed. Deane William Ferm. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1968; Peterson, Anna L. *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997; Second Vatican Council. "Gaudium Et Spies:' 1965. Available at: <http://www.rc.net>; Segundo, Juan Luis. *Liberation of Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976.