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LIBERATION THEOLOGY: AN HISTORICAL EVALUATION

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## Liberation Theology: An Historical Evaluation

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What is liberation theology? Why has a relatively new theological current in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America become front page news in the world press? One reason for the attention it is receiving is the polarization of opinion pro-and-con, as to its implications. For Cardinal Ratzinger, writing in a private memorandum published in the Italian press in 1984, it is a "fundamental threat to the Faith of the Church." For the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly the Holy Office) in its 1984 Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation it "uses concepts uncritically borrowed from Marxist ideology..." To the Catholic novelist, Walker Percy, it is a "perversion of Christianity... They justify killing (and) joining Marxist-Leninist revolutions" (National Catholic Register, January 6, 1986). In September 1984 the Vatican summoned a leading liberation theologian, the Brazilian Franciscan, Leonardo Boff, and after a discussion of his writings, ordered him to observe a period of "penitential silence" beginning in April 1985. In the United States, the Wall Street Journal frequently has published articles on the subject, and the Departments of State and Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the United States Information Agency have asked theologians to analyze and interpret the implications of liberation theology, especially as to its revolutionary potential in Latin America and the Philippines. In the last twelve months four major academic conferences have been held at various universities in the United States and Canada, and the founder of the movement, Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian priest, is currently a Visiting Professor at the University of Michigan.

By no means all of the evaluations of liberation theology are hostile. Fidel Castro in 23 hours of interviews with a Brazilian liberation theologian, Frei Betto, published as Fidel and Religion, expressed his enthusiasm for the movement and called for a "strategic and lasting alliance" between Marxists and Christians "to transform the world." In the United States leading American theologians such as Robert McAfee Brown and John Coleman S.J. have described it in enthusiastic terms. Its influence is clear in an American textbook on religion and social justice, Social Analysis by Joe Holland and Peter Henriot S.J., that sold 50,000 copies in its 1980 edition and in its second edition continues to be widely used by religious study groups, workshops, and seminars. At the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in Rome in December 1985, when the Colombian General Secretary of the Latin American Bishops Conference, Bishop Dario Castrillón Hoyos, attacked liberation theology for using "instruments that are not specific to the Gospel" and promoting "hate as a system of change," the president of the Brazilian Bishops Conference replied, "Liberation theology is not a theology that assumes or justifies Marxist ideology. (It) presupposes a new consciousness of the context of

oppression...a conversion to the poor and a commitment to their liberation. Liberation theology is indispensable to the church's activity and to the social commitment of Christians." Then in March 1986, the Vatican published a second Instruction on the subject in which, while warning against reducing "the salvific dimension of liberation...to the socio-ethical dimension which is a consequence of it," it supported "the special option for the poor" favored by the liberation theologians, and described the Basic Christian Communities which they had promoted as "a source of great hope for the church." A few weeks later, the pope himself seemed to endorse the movement when he wrote to the Brazilian bishops that as long as it is in harmony with the teaching of the Church, "we are convinced, we and you, that the theology of liberation is not only timely but useful and necessary. It should constitute a new state--in close connection with the former ones--of theological reflection."

What is it about liberation theology that elicits such strong opposing responses? To answer this question it is necessary to examine its history and sort out the various elements in what is a complex and evolving current of theological reflection. The term itself is taken from A Theology of Liberation, the title of a book by Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian priest, which was published in Spanish in 1971 and in English two years later although its essential elements first appeared in the 1960's. The sixties were a period of ferment and revolution both in Latin America and in the Roman Catholic Church. Early in the decade Pope John XXIII had called for an aggiornamento (updating) of the Catholic Church, and had published several socially oriented encyclicals, the best known of which is Pacem in Terris (1963) which had finally committed the Church to democracy, human rights, and religious freedom.

That commitment was formalized by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) called by Pope John, which ended the self-imposed insulation of the Catholic Church from modernity, opened the church to other religious and philosophical currents, and formally endorsed democratic government and religious pluralism (see especially two of the Councils final documents, "The Church in the Modern World," Gaudium et Spes, and "The Declaration of Religious Freedom", Dignitatis Humanae). In a way those documents only recognized changes that had already taken place in contemporary Catholicism. In Europe and Latin America large Christian Democratic parties had emerged which were committed to democracy, freedom, and the welfare state, and in Italy, Germany, and Belgium as well as in Venezuela and Chile they were major contenders for power. Those parties had developed as representatives of Catholic social teachings, articulated in papal encyclicals such as Rerum Novarum (1891) and Quadragesimo Anno (1931) which criticized both the egoism of "liberal capitalism" and the collectivism of "atheistic socialism." However, while the earlier papal writings had proposed a quasi-corporatist political structure which might be either democratic or authoritarian, the Christian Democrats strongly supported pluralistic democracy, human rights, and a mixed economy.



The Second Vatican Council legitimized philosophical and religious pluralism, endorsing dialogue not only with other Christians, Jews, and Moslems but also with agnostics, atheists, and Marxists. Christian-Marxist dialogues had already been taking place in Europe, but in Latin America the Roman Catholic church strongly opposed Communism--especially in its Castroite form, which in the wake of the Cuban revolution had acquired a new appeal to intellectuals and youth. Church-inspired labor, youth, and student groups joined with the Christian Democratic Parties to promote democratic reform which would be a viable alternative to the Cuban model of revolution. In the same period the United States government established the Alliance for Progress which was intended to demonstrate that with U.S. financial support democratic governments could promote reforms in land tenure, taxation, education, and social welfare that would prove that it was not necessary to resort to revolution to secure social progress. U.S. and Latin American social scientists wrote about solving the problems of modernization in the third world by promoting development--especially economic development--which could respond to a perceived "revolution of rising expectations." As millions flocked to Latin America's already overcrowded major cities, economists argued that the promotion of industrialization through import-substitution and economic integration, as well as agricultural development through agrarian reform, would provide the basis for a democratic response to the underdevelopment of the continent.

#### Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Critique of Developmentalism

Yet by the latter half of the sixties it was apparent that the millennium was not about to arrive in Latin America. Military coups in Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and Bolivia and continuing military domination in Central America demonstrated that there was no inevitability about a democratic future for Latin America. The agrarian reform programs bogged down or were emasculated. Latin America's economic integration fell afoul of nationalist economic pressure groups. Latin America did not seem to be approaching the "take-off" which had been promised by the theories of Walt Rostow's Stages of Economic Growth early in the decade.

Why not? Some Latin American social scientists argued that Latin America had been kept in a state of underdevelopment because of its dependencia on the developed countries in the capitalist world, especially the United States. Students and intellectuals became disillusioned with the possibilities of reformism and argued that a more revolutionary approach along Cuban lines was necessary.

In Catholic-influenced groups such as the Catholic universities in Lima and Santiago and the International Movement of Catholic Students (MIEC) this led to a rethinking of the developmentalist models of the earlier part of the decade. Much of this rethinking was related to the meeting of the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM) to be held at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. In a preparatory seminar held at Chimbote, Peru, Father Gutiérrez first set

out the themes that were to be developed in later papers and books. He was also present at the Medellín meeting and influenced the content of the final documents of the meeting which spoke of the need for the transformation of man in the light of the Gospel as "an action of integral development and liberation," denounced poverty in Latin America referring to "a deafening cry from the throats of millions asking for a liberation that reaches them from nowhere else," and called for the church to "give effective preference to the poorest and most needy sectors." In the most controversial sections of the Medellín documents the bishops asserted that "the principal guilt for the economic dependence of our countries rests with powers inspired by uncontrolled desire for gain" and declared that, "In many instances, Latin America finds itself faced with a situation of injustice that can be called institutionalized violence."

As Latin America (along with, one might note, the United States, France, and many other countries) became more radicalized at the end of the 1960's the Medellín documents appeared to legitimize a corresponding radicalization of the Catholic intelligentsia. In Chile, for example, the rebelde left of the Christian Democratic Party split off in 1969 to form part of the Allende Popular Unity coalition in the 1970 elections, and they were followed by another split by the Christian Left in 1971. Because of the expansion of air travel, like-minded Catholic and Protestant theologians were able to meet in many parts of the continent and Gutiérrez took the lead in forming a theologically-based Catholic radicalism which he called liberation theology.

As articulated in English first in an article in the Jesuit journal Theological Studies ("Notes for a Theology of Liberation," vol. 31, no. 2, June 1970) Gutiérrez argued that for "poor countries, oppressed and dominated, the word, liberation, is appropriate; rather than development. Latin America will never get out of its plight except by a profound transformation, a social revolution that will radically change the conditions it lives in at present. Today a more or less Marxist inspiration prevails among those groups and individuals who are raising the banner of the continent's liberation. And for many in our continent, this liberation will have to pass, sooner or later, through paths of violence...." Gutiérrez quoted the Medellín bishops on the "institutionalized violence" in Latin America and related it to the "situation of dependence" and "condition of neocolonialism" in Latin America. He called for the Latin American Church "to break her ties with the present order," to "denounce the fundamental injustices on which it is based," and to commit itself to the poor as the bishops at Medellín had done.

In the book that followed the article, Gutiérrez criticized the developmentalism that provides only palliatives that "in the long run actually consolidate an exploitative system." He attacked Christian Democracy for its "naive reformism" and described it as "only a justifying ideology...for the few to keep living off the poverty of the many." Referring to Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach ("Philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is, to change it") Gutiérrez defined liberation theology as "critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word." Theology needed "a

scientific and structural knowledge of socio-economic mechanisms and historical dynamics," and this would come from a recognition of dependence, "the domination exercised by the great capitalist countries and especially, by the most powerful, the United States of America." That domination was a result of the "worldwide class struggle between the oppressed countries and dominant peoples." New solutions, "most frequently of socialist inspiration," were emerging involving a variety of different approaches, "a broad rich and intense revolutionary praxis" which sought a "qualitatively different society" and "the building of a new man." Among those approaches, Gutiérrez cited one that was to be central to the future development of liberation theology--the literacy programs of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (see his Pedagogy of the Oppressed, New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) involving a process of conscientização by which the oppressed person becomes aware of his situation and is encouraged to find a language which makes him "less dependent and more free as he commits himself to the transformation and building up of society."

Freire's methods were already being applied in a new movement of renewal within the Brazilian church--the Basic Christian Communities (CEB's). These small face-to-face groups usually in rural or marginal areas discussed the application of selected passages of the Bible to their daily lives in ways that the liberation theologians saw as an example of the praxis that they were promoting. Along with the structuralist critique of capitalism the Basic Christian Communities rapidly became a central element of the liberationist social program.

In a later section of the book which was to be quoted often by his opponents, Gutiérrez called for the abolition of the private ownership of capital because it leads to "the exploitation of man by man" and insisted that "the class struggle is a fact and neutrality in this question is not possible." "To love one's enemies presupposes recognizing and accepting that one has class enemies and that it is necessary to combat them...." (p. 276)

What his critics do not quote is Gutiérrez's discussion (pp. 203-208) of "a spirituality of liberation" which he was to develop further in the 1980's. This involves a recognition that "conversion to God implies conversion to neighbor in an act of gratuitousness which allows one to encounter others fully, the universal encounter which is the foundation of communion of men among themselves and of men with God" producing a joy and celebration which is "the feast of the Christian Community." (p. 207) However rather than developing what could have been a fruitful theological exploration, Gutiérrez then returns to themes of the relation of the church to ideology and the class struggle. Biblical references begin for the first time (there are none in chapters 1-8), but only in the last chapter is there a meditation on the biblical meaning of poverty.

Structuralist Anti-Capitalism, Grass-roots Communities, and the  
Hermeneutic of Praxis

Gutiérrez' discussion of Christian community suggests a problem that was to dog the liberation theologians as their thinking developed--the relation between a conflictual and a cooperative model of society. The liberationists have borrowed from the left a belief in conflicting interests and structural oppression as an explanation for poverty and oppression. Yet they also share the Christian belief in community and charity. The conflict is partially but not fully resolved through their support of Basic Christian Communities made up primarily of the poor and underprivileged who are to apply the Bible to the solution of their day-to-day problems through a process of grass-roots democracy and participation. From the outset, liberation theology thus has contained both elements--a structuralist anti-capitalism and a populist grass-roots communitarianism--and the relation and interaction and occasionally a tension between the two continues as it develops over time. The different implications of the two elements also help to explain the varying reactions to the movement--since those like the Brazilian bishops who see it primarily as the theoretical support for the Basic Christian Communities, of which there are now upwards of 100,000 in Brazil, take a different attitude from the members of the Colombian hierarchy who view it as a justification for Christian participation in the guerrilla movements that have plagued that country for the last three decades.

For the academic theologian, however, what was exciting about liberation theology was its claim to have developed a new way of reading the Gospels--a "hermeneutic of praxis" arising out of the experience of the poor as related to the Bible and to historical experience. The rejection of the abstract intellectualism of the earlier social teachings of the church in favor of direct social involvement by committed Christians came at a time when new alternative approaches were being opened by the assimilation of the changes of the Second Vatican Council and help to account for the rapid development of the movement.

Christians for Socialism in Chile

Another reason for the spread in its influence and the increase in its controversial character in the early 1970's was the emergence in Chile of what appeared to be an example of the kind of social analysis and transformation described by Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians. In September 1970 Salvador Allende, the candidate of a coalition of Marxist, lay, and Christian leftist groups, Popular Unity, was elected president of Chile with 36% of the popular vote and subsequently confirmed by the Chilean congress. Allende was a Marxist Socialist who was committed to assisting the poor and oppressed and to opposing dependence and American imperialism. A major partner in his coalition was the Chilean Communist Party, the largest such party in Latin America outside of Cuba. However, Allende took pains to maintain good relations with the Catholic church and to appoint members of the Catholic-inspired

parties in his coalition to important positions. A year and a half after he came to power, a group of pro-Allende Christians organized a meeting of the Christians for Socialism with representation from various Christian left groups throughout Latin America. The meeting adopted resolutions that were characterized by heavily Marxist rhetoric, and the Chilean bishops finally forbade Chilean Catholics to participate in it. Gutiérrez participated in the meeting as did others now identified with what had become an emerging theological school in Latin America, and its extremism led other Latin Americans, especially in Colombia, to attack the movement and to take measures to counteract its influence (see the documents in John Eagleson, ed., Christians and Socialism, Orbis, 1975, and criticisms in Teresa Panoso Loero, Los cristianos por el socialismo, Santiago: El Mercurio, 1975, and Alfonso López Trujillo, Liberación marxista y liberación cristiana, Madrid: BAC, 1974).

### The Development of Liberation Theology

One of the more active participants in the meeting in Chile was Hugo Assmann, a Brazilian of German extraction, who wrote a book, later translated as A Theology for a Nomad Church (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1976) at the time he was living in Chile. It marks the high (or low) point of the lyrical leftism of the liberation theologians, being characterized by overstatements such as, "The concept of development has been shown up for the lie that it is" (p. 49), and a quotation from a Brazilian Protestant, Rubem Alves, "Truth is the name given by an historical community to the historical actions which were, are, and will be efficacious in the liberation of man." For Assmann, "Commitment to liberation means introducing the class struggle into the church itself" although "a truly historical reading of the Bible, particularly of the message of Christ, leads to a whole series of radical questions to which Marxism has not paid sufficient attention, of which perhaps the most significant is the Christian affirmation of victory over death, that final alienation to which Marxism can find no satisfactory answer." (p. 144)

Another influential liberation theologian, and the only one to have two studies of his theology written about him in English, is Juan Luis Segundo, a Uruguayan Jesuit. While his most important contribution is the analysis of the ideological conditioning of theological discourse in The Liberation of Theology (Orbis, 1976), the most frequently cited (and attacked) passage in his writings is his definition of socialism as "the political regime in which the ownership of the means of production is removed from individuals and handed over to higher institutions whose concern is the common good" ("Capitalism and Socialism the Theological Crux" in Claude Geffre and Gustavo Gutiérrez, eds., The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith, New York: Herder and Herder, 1974, p. 115). To requests for more details concerning a future socialist society, Segundo replied lamely that to demand that "Latin Americans put forward a project for a socialist society which will guarantee in advance that the evident defects of known socialist societies will be avoided" was like asking Christ before he cured the sick man to "guarantee that the cure will not be followed by even graver illnesses" (p. 121).



Critics of the liberation theologians often note such vagueness in their discussions of the future socialist society, and the absence of explicit criticisms of Marxist states. Yet there is one liberation theologian, Joseph Comblin, a Belgian who has been teaching and writing in Latin America for thirty years, who is quite specific both in his differences from Marxism and his proposals for a future liberated society. In his best-known work in English, The Church and the National Security State (Orbis 1979), he criticizes the identification of the Gospel with any specific party or groups, including--and he names them--the Christians for Socialism, and argues for a new society based on human needs and Christian charity which differs from the exploitative models of both the Marxists and the theorists of capitalism and modernization. The Gospel message is one of liberation from sin. "Sin is present in everything--in all personal behavior and all social structures. The very organization of life in society is based on sin and domination.... Liberty is a new kind of common life, a mutual relationship based on equality and cooperation. There is no liberty without the institutions of liberty being established as the structures of national life. There is no liberty without...a parliament, congress, or some form of popular representation, constitutions, courts of justice independent from repressive or military power etc." (pp. 160-61). Although his Belgian background may account for his concern for constitutional restraints, here is at least one well-known liberation theologian who is aware of the connection between the Christian belief in sin and the need for constitutional guarantees, an independent judiciary, and an elected legislature.

Comblin is also highly suspicious of Marxism. "Marxist science is only the ideology of the party, the result of the reduction of any rationality to the voluntarism of the party, a collection of arguments to justify the pragmatic decisions of the party. ...In practice the party finds the problem of power more important than the problem of freedom.... The party is supposed to be sufficient to create a new world, but it ends by creating a new power...."(p. 220)

One of the best known of the liberation theologians, largely because of his troubles with the Vatican in recent years, is Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian Franciscan. He studied theology in Germany and wrote a thesis later published in German as The Church as Sacrament (Paderborn, 1972). His interests in church organization were continued with the publication in 1977 of Ecclesiogenesis (English translation, Orbis 1986) which analyzed what he called "the reinvention of the church" in the form of the Basic Christian Communities in Brazil. He sees these groups as marking a return to the sense of community and the presence of the Holy Spirit that characterized the early church. However, he is careful to emphasize that the Communities do not function in opposition to the institutional church but in "permanent co-existence" with it. He argues against a "pyramidal" or hierarchical model of the church, but he accepts the papacy, the bishops, and the priesthood as necessary responses of the Christian community to the need for "union, universality, and bonding with the great witnesses of the apostolic past."

However, they must exercise their functions within the community rather than over it, "integrating duties instead of accumulating them, respecting the various charisms, and leading them to the oneness of one and the same body" (p. 60; p. 71 in the Portuguese edition). In the early 1980's Boff made a similar argument in his Church: Charism and Power (English translation, New York: Crossroads, 1985), but couched in such extreme language (e.g., "...there has been a gradual expropriation of the means of religious production from the Christian people by the clergy." p. 112) that it brought down on him the wrath of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome.

Boff also wrote Jesus Christ, Liberator (Orbis, 1978) but the best-known writer applying liberation theology to the life of Christ is Jon Sobrino, a Spanish Jesuit who has been teaching for many years at the Jesuit university in El Salvador. Sobrino's Christology at the Crossroads talks about "Christian transforming practice" and "political hermeneutics" as applied to "the concrete manifestations of politics, bodily life, and the cosmos" (p. 256, English translation, Orbis, 1978). For Sobrino an understanding of Jesus' resurrection presupposes an historical consciousness which sees history both as promise and mission. And one must engage in a specific praxis that is nothing else but discipleship carried out through "service to the community performed out of love" (pp. 380-81). Sobrino's work represents a more specifically biblical attempt to relate Christianity to the problems of Latin America than the writings earlier in the decade which borrowed so heavily from Marxism and dependency theory. He also attempts to develop the historical approach which the earlier liberation theologians had preached but not practiced. Like Boff, Sobrino also was criticized in the early 1980's by the Vatican for "rereading" the Gospel in ways that made it seem a product of historical conditions, subject to constant reinterpretation.

### The Critics of Liberation Theology

By the late 1970's the most important liberation theologians had emerged and they were beginning to get an international audience because of translations into other languages. (In the case of the United States, liberation theology is identified with Orbis Press, the publication house of the Maryknoll missionary order which has published over one hundred titles in the field, most of them translations from Spanish or Portuguese.) In 1975 a Theology in the Americas project co-sponsored by the U.S. Catholic Conference and the World Council of Churches brought the Latin American liberation theologians together with their American and Canadian counterparts. The meeting was the occasion for some harsh criticism by feminist and black theologians of the writings of the Latin American liberation theologians for their lack of concern with racial and sexual oppression in a continent which was built on the exploitation of the Indian and where machismo was the dominant sexual ethic. (See Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, eds., Theology in the Americas, Orbis 1976.)

The critics in Latin America were mainly on the right. Colombia was the principal center of the counter-attack, the first step of which was the election of the Archbishop of Medellín (later Cardinal) Alfonso López Trujillo as general secretary of the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM) in 1972. Aided by Roger Vekemans, a Belgian Jesuit who had left Chile at the time of the election of Allende, López Trujillo eliminated adherents of liberation theology from positions of influence in the CELAM structure, and both he and Vekemans wrote books and articles against liberation theology. Aside from occasional articles in religious journals in Europe and the United States--the two most notable being Thomas Sanders' attack on liberation theology as "utopian moralism" (Christianity and Crisis, September 17, 1973) and the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann's "Open Letter to a Liberation Theologian" arguing that it was nothing more than "seminary Marxism"--liberation theology was still not widely discussed outside of Latin America. Two events changed this--the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Puebla, Mexico, in January-February 1979 and the triumph of the Sandinista-led revolt against the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua in July of the same year.

### The Battle of Puebla

The meeting at Puebla had originally been scheduled for October 1978, the tenth anniversary of the last CELAM General Conference at Medellín. However the deaths of Pope Paul VI and of his successor, John Paul I, and the election of John Paul II led to its postponement. The CELAM staff sent out preliminary papers that was attacked by Gutiérrez and others as insufficiently concerned with the problems of the poor. When none of the well-known liberation theologians were invited as expert advisors (periti) to the meeting, they secured invitations from individual bishops and held their own meetings and press conferences outside the meeting place of the bishops. The Puebla Conference was covered extensively by the world press, which was especially interested in how the new pope would define his position. His opening address was an indication of how seriously he took the challenge of liberation theology as well as of the influence of Vekemans' Journal Tierra Nueva which he had been receiving as cardinal before his election. The pope criticized the politicization of the Gospel message, decried the effort to promote a "people's church" in opposition to the institutional church, and called for a "Christian concept of liberation that cannot be reduced simply to the restricted domain of economics, society and culture." During the meeting a leftist newspaper in Mexico published the contents of a cassette dictaphone tape that had been inadvertently given to a journalist by the secretary of Archbishop López Trujillo. It complained of the leftism of the Jesuits and other religious orders in Latin America and urged its recipient to "prepare your bombers for Puebla and get into training before entering the ring for the world match." The liberation theologians outside the meeting worked tirelessly, criticizing speeches and draft resolutions and replying to attacks on their views. The result was a Final Document which could only be described as a draw. It condemned the politicization of theology and "a praxis that has recourse to Marxist analysis," but it also was critical of "liberal capitalism" and of



the doctrine of the national security state that was used by current military regimes to justify their rule. Most important, Puebla made a decisive commitment to "the preferential option for the poor" which was to be almost as controversial in future discussions as Medellín's reference to "institutionalized violence." That commitment was described by the Conference as "non-exclusive" in order to defuse criticisms of its possibly partisan or even Marxist (the poor vs. the rich) character but it committed the Latin American church more clearly than in the past to work with the poor as the liberation theologians urged.

The press covered the battle between the pro- and anti-liberation bishops as if it were in fact the prize fight alluded to by López Trujillo. The reporters were disappointed that the final outcome was not a decisive victory for one side or the other, but they should have known from past meetings that an effort would be made to fashion a consensus document with something for everyone.

#### Nicaragua and the Popular Church

If Puebla began to focus attention on liberation theology, it was Nicaragua which made observers aware of the movement's potential political force. After Vatican II and Medellín the Central American church had undergone a decisive shift in the direction of involvement for social justice. In 1977 the Salvadoran right-wing death squads even threatened to kill all the members of the Jesuit order if they did not leave the country. In Nicaragua, leading churchmen and women, especially the members of the religious orders, cooperated actively with the Sandinistas in the overthrow of Somoza, and four priests joined the government that they established in 1979. The Nicaraguan bishops wrote a pastoral letter that justified the revolution, and with certain important reservations initially endorsed the government that followed. While the honeymoon between the Sandinistas and the church hierarchy was of short duration, there were many others, particularly the Jesuits and Maryknoll missionaries, who continued to support them and who justified their support in terms of the categories drawn from liberation theology. While church leaders were scandalized by the publication by a government-supported research group of a picture of a guerrilla fighter, gun in hand and arms upraised, superimposed on the crucified Christ, there were others who were ready to support a "popular church" which was committed to the Sandinistas. Fernando Cardenal, a Jesuit, organized the Sandinista literacy campaign, headed their youth organization, and later became Minister of Education, while his brother, Ernesto, a well-known priest-poet, became Minister of Culture. As polarization increased in the Nicaraguan Church, anti-Sandinista Catholics blamed liberation theology for dividing the church and aiding the Marxists to expand their "totalitarian" control of Nicaragua. (See for example, Humberto Belli, Christians Under Fire, Crossway Books, 1985.) When the professors at the Jesuit Central American University in El Salvador also seemed to favor the guerrillas there, and some leading Christian Democrats joined the left in the civil war, it was liberation theology that was blamed.

As early as June 1981 the priests in the Sandinista government were asked by their bishops to leave their posts, as incompatible with their priestly duties. When they refused to do so, two of them were forbidden to exercise their priestly functions, another was suspended from the Jesuit order, and a fourth requested laicization. The tension between the pro-Sandinista priests and the Vatican was dramatically illustrated during the Pope's visit in March 1983 when he was seen on television shaking his finger reprovably at Ernesto Cardenal, as he knelt to receive the pope's blessing.

When the Reagan administration came to power and made the Central American struggle a central focus of U.S. foreign policy, explanations for the radicalization of Central American often cited the changes in the Central American church including the expanding influence of liberation theology. Leading neo-conservatives such as Michael Novak attacked it, and Ernest Lefever's Center for Ethics and Public Policy published a collection of critical articles. They all quoted the early Gutiérrez on the class struggle and dependency, and Segundo's definition of socialism, and criticized the liberation theologians for attributing all of Latin America's ills to capitalism while at the same time being willing to turn over political power to an undefined socialism which from their enthusiasm for those governments seemed likely to bear a strong resemblance to Cuba or Nicaragua. Others in the U.S. such as Robert McAfee Brown, Rosemary Ruether, and the publishers of The National Catholic Reporter expressed strong support and attributed the conservative criticisms to their opposition to the efforts of the poor in Latin America to end centuries of exploitation and imperialism--when in fact, the arguments of the neo-conservatives were that the poor would be better served by a free market or mixed economic system than by the statist socialism proposed, or implied, by the liberationists.

#### The Vatican Confronts Liberation Theology

More directly threatening to Latin American liberation theologians was a series of investigations and public statements ("Instructions") by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Leonardo Boff had already been subject to two investigations as to his orthodoxy in 1976 and 1980, but during the 1970's the Vatican had usually been content to leave the matter to the Latin Americans. When Joseph Ratzinger, former archbishop of Munich and a widely-published theologian, took over as prefect of the Congregation the Vatican began to take a greater interest in the subject.

Boff himself initiated action on his writings in 1982 when he sent the Congregation his reply to an investigation by the archdiocese of Rio de Janeiro, headed by the conservative Cardinal Eugenio Sales, of his book Church, Charism, and Power. Two years later (the Vatican moves slowly) Cardinal Ratzinger sent Boff a letter criticizing his "ecclesiological relativism" and his "sociological" analysis of the church as an institution engaged in production and consumption. When Ratzinger summoned Boff to Rome

for a "conversation" on the subject, the Brazilian Basic Communities rallied to his defense and were reported to have sent 50,000 letters of support to Rome. He arrived in Rome in September 1984, accompanied by two fellow Franciscans, Cardinals Lorscheiter and Arns. In April 1985 it was announced that his religious superiors had been requested to impose "obsequious silence for a convenient time" on the friar, meaning that he could not write, preach, or give interviews--but he did not retract his views. Less than a year later, the sentence was lifted, and Boff continues to function as before, writing, teaching, and editing an important Brazilian theological journal.

In April 1983 Ratzinger also sent the Peruvian hierarchy a list of "observations" on the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez. The Peruvians were divided on whether to take action against Gutiérrez, and in response to the Vatican criticism, Gutiérrez wrote an article on "Theology and the Social Sciences" which denied that he favored a synthesis of Marxism and Christianity, cited church documents on the existence of class conflict in Latin America, and argued that liberation theology's attempt to make use of the social sciences was only in its initial stages. Gutiérrez cited passages from his original writings that were critical of "historical socialism," quoted his favorable reference to the Prague reforms of 1968, and argued that it was not up to theology to propose specific political solutions. The Vatican pressed on but when the 44 Peruvian bishops came to Rome as a group in October 1984, they issued a generally-worded statement which could not be interpreted as a condemnation of Gutiérrez (The New York Times, October 10, 1984).

The Peruvian bishops announced their support of the Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation which had been published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in early September. The document had been prepared because of Cardinal Ratzinger's concern with the danger to Catholicism posed by certain versions of the new theology. Ratzinger's concerns had already been known as the result of the publication in Chile and Italy of a private memorandum that Ratzinger had written linking liberation theology with neo-Marxism, the politicization of Christianity, and advocacy of an alternative vision of the structure of the church ("ecclesiology") from that of Catholicism (see the text, published in The Ratzinger Report, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985). The memorandum limited its criticisms to those (unspecified) theologians who had "made the Marxist analysis their own" but as noted earlier, it described them as posing "a fundamental threat to the faith of the Church." The 1984 Instruction toned down this wording, speaking of the "risks of deviation, damaging to the faith and Christian living, that are brought about by certain forms of liberation theology, which use in an insufficiently critical manner, concepts borrowed from various currents of Marxist thought." (Again neither the Marxist nor liberation writers are specified.) The Instruction attacked the liberationists for accepting Marxism's "false claim to be scientific," supporting violence, and politicizing the Gospel and the Church.

The 1984 Instruction promised a second statement on the broader theme of Christian freedom and liberation. Eighteen months later, after what were rumored to have been several revisions at the pope's behest to give it a more positive tone, The Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation was published in April 1986. While it denounced those who propagate "the myth of revolution," it admitted that armed struggle might be resorted to "as a last resort to put an end to an obvious and prolonged tyranny." The Instruction generally took a much more positive approach to liberation theology being particularly favorable to the Basic Christian Communities, "if they really live in unity with the local Church and the universal Church," and to theological reflection developed from particular experience "in the light of the experience of the Church itself." Rather than the controversial term, "option," it endorsed the "preferential love for the poor" by the Church, and called for a "Christian practice of liberation," based on solidarity (against individualism) and subsidiarity, the initiative and responsibility of individuals and intermediate communities (against collectivism).

The second Instruction was greeted very favorably by the liberation theologians. Gutiérrez said, "It closes a chapter, a new more positive period is beginning." But what really overjoyed the liberationists was a papal letter sent to the Brazilian hierarchy--who had consistently supported the liberation theologians--which was written following a two-week visit by the Brazilian bishops to Rome in March 1986. In that letter after reasserting the church's identification with "the poor, the suffering, and those without influence, resources, or assistance...with a love that is neither exclusive nor excluding, but rather preferential" the pope referred to the two Instructions published "with my explicit approval" and endorsed the Brazilian effort to find responses to the problems of poverty and oppression that are "consistent and coherent with the teachings of the Gospel, of the living tradition, and of the ongoing magisterium (teaching) of the church. As long as this is observed, we are convinced, we and you, that the theology of liberation is not only timely but useful and necessary.... May God help you to be unceasingly watchful that a correct and necessary theology of liberation can develop in Brazil and in Latin America."

Cardinal Ratzinger is said to have described his efforts in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as a "Restoration" in the church. His critics argue that this means turning the church back to the period of centralization and authoritarianism before the Second Vatican Council. Ratzinger himself prefers to see his goal as curbing extremist tendencies which have emerged since the Council, and he points out that he attended the Council as an advisor to Cardinal Frings of Munich who was one of those most active in promoting its reforms. However one interprets the Cardinal's intentions, the result of the Vatican's confrontation with the liberation theologians has not been a repudiation of their theology but its incorporation in modified form within the mainstream of theological discussion. The modifications include an abandonment in practice of its initial emphases on the class struggle, the near-inevitability of violence, and the rejection of "reformism"--all of which were characteristic of the period of lyrical leftism from the late 1960's to the mid-1970's.

The more biblical and spiritual orientation of contemporary liberation theology is evident in the latest book by Gustavo Gutiérrez, We Drink From Our Own Wells (Orbis 1984). The title itself is taken from the spiritual writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. The book is filled with biblical references, and the class struggle, dependency, and Marxism are not even mentioned. The main themes of the book are a criticism of "individualism" and "spiritualism," and a call for social involvement and awareness of the spiritual dimensions of bodily existence. Gutiérrez quotes from St. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 25 ("I was hungry and you gave me to eat, thirsty and you gave me to drink"), to argue for "a new approach to the human body" and "concern for the material needs of the poor" (pp. 102-03). It is true that traces of the old revolutionism remain in his quotations from the writings of Christian guerrilla fighters, but the basic message of the book is the Christian duty to take action in community to help the poor.

As Gutiérrez notes, his thinking along these lines had already been anticipated in a section of A Theology of Liberation. More striking is the transformation of the thinking of Hugo Assmann, often regarded as the most radical of the liberation theologians. In a paper delivered in 1985, Assmann seems now to equate revolution with democracy. Arguing that the Left is aware "that they must now reestablish their organic relation to the popular majorities which never understood their abstract revolutionism," he asserts that "many of them have begun to understand that democratic values are revolutionary values." ("Democracy and the Debt Crisis," This World, Spring/Summer 1986, no. 14, p. 93.) While Latin America now is dominated by "an absolutely savage and inhuman form of 'capitalism'...no socialism exists presently or around the corner." "Real revolutionaries have learned to value democratic participation and the authentically popular movements (and) are no longer interested in chaotic social explosions...." Instead of the Manichaeian dualism of "certain leftist circles" that engage in "divinization or demonization" it is time to develop "a spirit of openness to negotiate minimal consensus...."

Does this mean that liberation theology has become deradicalized, in a way that is parallel to the deradicalization of social democracy in Western Europe? In a way it has, since the emphasis has shifted from conflict to negotiation, from the class struggle to solidarity with the poor. Yet the change is also a recognition that theologians seriously interested in the empowerment of the poor and oppressed should look for other ways than revolution to do so. While the revolutionary fervor of the early seventies has died down, there is still a strong strain of anti-capitalism in the liberationist writings. However, the main emphasis is upon the second theme in liberation theology, learning from and promoting the self-learning of the poor.

Once their revolutionism was tempered, it was easier for the liberation theologians to become part of the mainstream of Catholicism, which had always had an anti-capitalist strain and from early Christian times had thought of itself--in theory, if not in practice--as a church of the poor. This left only the problem of the liberationist theories of church organization. But



even here because of the organizational reforms associated with the Second Vatican Council, the liberation theologians were not that far out of line with the mainstream. They had never rejected the hierarchy, but tended rather to accept it in theory, but de-emphasize its importance, in relation to the communitarian aspects of Christian tradition. Now they have discovered that the bishops of Brazil, the largest Catholic country in the world, are increasingly favorable to their work, and they have initiated, with the approval of a number of Brazilian bishops and religious superiors, a 50-volume series of theological expositions which will attempt to develop their theology in greater detail. If past experience and public statements are any indication, the volumes devoted to the structure of the church will argue for the necessity of both hierarchy and people rather than for conflictual "popular" vs. "institutional" church models.

### Liberation Theology and Liberalism

If an outside observer who is not a theologian but a social scientist could be permitted to make some suggestions as to topics to be discussed in the new series which might respond more adequately to the criticisms which have been made of the earlier writings, the following are some questions which might be explored:

1) Does theological reflection on the experience of the poor and oppressed always lead to the conclusion that capitalism must be replaced by a socialist system? If not, are there alternatives which combine the efficiency of the market with the equity of the "preferential love for the poor?" If socialism is the alternative, what would an ideal socialist state look like? (Here Joseph Comblin might be asked to develop further the ideas he wrote about ten years ago.)

2) What is the relation of private property and liberation? Is it always to be viewed as an obstacle to liberation, or are there important ways--for instance, the small family farm or innovative new business--in which it can contribute to free man from oppression, whether by private interests or public authorities?

3) How can human rights, especially but not only the rights of the poor, be best promoted in the modern state? What is the place of courts, or private groups, and of the media in guaranteeing those rights? Does the dialectical approach that many liberation theologians employ make it conceptually difficult to develop a theory of rights? Does the preference for the poor imply a kind of "affirmative action" that may undermine the ideal of equal treatment under law?

4) What is liberation theology's attitude toward the redemocratization of Latin America? Is it to be rejected as "fraudulent," as was the case in the early 1970's? Can the fragile new democracies of Latin America promote participation and greater opportunity for the poor and oppressed, or is total socialist transformation--all or nothing--the only possibility? If so, what lessons in revolutionary praxis in terms of its impact on the well-being of the poor are to be drawn from the failure of the revolutionism of Latin America in the 1960's?

5) What is the "prophetic" role of the theologian? Is it only to remind the people of their moral duties to others, especially to the poor and oppressed? Or are there more specific criticisms, denunciations, and proposals that theologians can offer? Does the Bible in fact offer a blueprint for the good society? Do not those liberation theologians who believe that it does so run the same risk of identifying a particular ideology with God's purposes in history that was run by the right-wing Catholic integralists and reformist Christian Democrats whom they denounce?

6) Finally, if the cure for the weaknesses and failures of democracy is more democracy, should not the liberation theologians devote their primary energies to the development of a spirituality of socially-concerned democracy, whether capitalist or socialist in its economic form, rather than to denunciations of dependency, imperialism, and capitalist exploitation? If those theories are inadequate explanations of poverty and underdevelopment ("the rich are not rich because the poor are poor"), should not the very considerable abilities of the liberation theologians now be devoted to the promotion of democratic participation, the protection of human rights, and the satisfaction of basic needs rather than to the sterile revolutionism that characterized their earlier writings?

It took the official Roman Catholic church a century and a half to recognize that democracy and freedom were central elements in the Christian message. As I hope this essay has shown, it has taken only two decades for it to relate that message to human liberation. The secular left earlier defined liberation either as the overthrow of capitalism and the abolition of private ownership of the means of production (Marx) or as the extension of democracy and equality to all human beings, regardless of sex, race, or social class (Rousseau). Liberation theology will have to choose which it is to represent--democracy or revolution.