

Liberation Theology
God, Jesus Christ, Salvation, Sin and the Church

Submitted to
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INTRODUCTION

Despite of the point of departure of this movement being attributed to the 1968 conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellin, Colombia, it is widely known that it started being developed long before within the context of political, economic and social change of the Latin American political, economic and social environment since the dawn of the second half of the twentieth century.

Poverty, unemployment, poor education and health system were some of the elements that marked the life of the underdeveloped American countries. Therefore, this was the scenario within which the 1968 conference of the Latin American Bishops took place. Eulalio Baltazar¹ says it provided the ecclesiastical impetus for a theology of liberation and explains that *“in that conference the bishops strongly condemned unjust social structures which institutionalized violence and thereby oppressed the poor. They justified their position theologically by explaining that liberation at the economic and political levels has a supernatural dimension and is an integral part of the economy of salvation as an anticipation of complete redemption in Jesus Christ ...”*

As an instance of the line of concern of the liberationist, Gutierrez, in his book “On Job” gives the following comments:

“This is a dramatic human situation for the believer and preacher. How are we to talk about a God who is revealed as love in a situation characterized by poverty and oppression? How are we to proclaim the God of life to men and women who die prematurely and unjustly? How are we to acknowledge that God makes us a free gift of love and justice when we have before us the suffering of the innocent? What words are we to use in telling those who are not even regarded as persons that they are the daughters and sons of God. The paradox is in the words of the innocent when they say “my God, where are you?” For they believe in God. But if they didn’t, God was neither good, nor loving, nor powerful and there would be no problem. They suffer a truly harsh reality, from where they claim for God’s help.”²

¹ Eulalio Baltazar. Liberation Philosophy and Theology and Culture, Human rights and Peace in Central America.

² Gustavo Gutierrez. On Job: God-Talk and the suffering of the innocent. Orbis, Maryknoll, NY, 1987. p.xiv.

1. THEOLOGIANS WHO GAVE BIRTH TO A NEW THEOLOGY

The two most important theologians who were responsible for the development of the liberation theology were the Peruvian Gustavo Gutierrez and the Brazilian Franciscan Friar Leonardo Boff.

Gustavo Gutierrez is one of the theologians responsible for the gestation of the Liberation Theology or Theology of Liberation. Gutierrez, a Peruvian native theologian is one of those who reacted to the mismanagement of society by powerful military, populist government and dictators.

Born in 1928 in Lima, Peru, Gustavo Gutierrez is known as the Father of Liberation Theology, was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1959. He planned to be a Psychiatrist for what he got a BS in medicine from the National University of Peru and a MS in Philosophy and Psychology from the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, followed by a PhD in Theology from the Université Catholique de Lyon, France. He had a poliomyelitis that, besides placing him in bed for 6 years in his adolescence, left him a permanent limp. He lives and works among the poor in his country and practices Christian poverty what he means to be “*a loving act of solidarity with the poor and a form of protest against poverty*”³.

As a theologian he claims the praxis in the context of the church mission on earth, preaching a Gospel of servanthood and a church as a visible sign and manifestation of God’s saving work in the world.

Leonardo Boff, as a Latin American liberation theologian, is the first to raise a reflection that inserts the social and political liberation within the frames of ecological analysis. Despite of ecology being out of the main concerns of this theological thought, Boff raises the “*concern for the oppressed sons and daughters of the earth,*” in his works of the early 1990’s where he expresses his re-conception of liberation around ecological models. He believes that the exploitation of the nature by the dominant logic of the oppressing classes on the poor can not be beyond the aspirations of the theological thought.

³ Edward L. Smith The Doctrine of Providence and Revelation: An Introduction to Philosophy and Theology. The Research Center Press. Vol. 6. Chap.8. p.103.

Born on December 14, 1938, in Concórdia, Santa Catarina, Brazil, Boff followed philosophical and theological formation, joined the Friars Minor (Franciscans) order in 1959 and was ordained to the priesthood on December 15, 1964. He had Joseph Ratzinger, today Pope Benedict the Second, as supervisor of his dissertation to obtain his doctorate degree in Munich, Germany, 1971.

Back to Brazil, he became a Professor at the Franciscan institute at Petrópolis, where he lectured for 22 years. He was visiting professor the universities of Lisbon, Basel, Salamanca, Heidelberg and Harvard, and received honorary doctorates from Turin and Lund. With the implementation of the praxis of the liberation theology, he was active in the formation of ecclesial base communities.

On 1985, Boff was called by the Vatican to explain sections of his book, *“The Church: Charisma and Power”*, which criticized teachings Church, being officially silenced until his resignation from the priesthood in 1992. In the following years until retirement he was a faculty at State University of Rio de Janeiro UERJ, where he taught Ethics, Philosophy of Religion, and Ecology. This is what said an article published about Boff in a magazine about of Faith and Development:

*“Those in risk of extinction in the nature aren’t the Pandas of China, they are the poor of the world condemned to die before the right time”. These are the passionate words Leonardo Boff used to present his reflection for a new “Map of the Land” last year in Fribourg, Switzerland”. The Brazilian ex-Franciscan is one of the “fathers” of the Liberation Theology. After many years of debate with the Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and the Congregation for the “Doctrine of Faith”, Leonardo Boff was condemned to silence by the Vatican on May 1985, reinstated in 1986 and left voluntarily in the beginning of the nineties.*⁴

The greatest concern of Boff as founder of liberation theology has always been the oppressed and the poor of the world. Aggressive critics to his works were motivated by his social scientific analysis rooted in the Marxism through the lights of faith. His later writings are directed to an “eco-spirituality,” under the assumption that the fate of the oppressed is earth related.⁵

⁴ Leonardo Boff .Une éthique nouvelle pour le troisième millénaire. Article publié dans Foi et Développement. Centre L.J. Lebreton, 43-ter, rue de la Glacière - 75013 Paris, France. No 291, février 2001.

⁵ Iain S. Maclean, James Madison University

2. GROUNDS OF A BORNING THEOLOGY

The sixties decade was a period marked by many social movements that had huge influence in reshaping the society in terms of philosophy and theology, politics, economy, and, particularly, government in the years ahead. Just to mention some, we have seen the rise of the feminist movement, the students uprising throughout the world, great manifestation of the civil rights movement, sexual liberation and others. The Latin America was going through a very difficult political situation because of its weak economy performance in terms of development, enhanced by the harassment of the west political order (capitalism) leading the “cold war”, headed by the United States, against the east political order (communism) and its expansionism. The political order happened to impose government changes in the poor Latin American countries that would prioritize the investment in the army and military industry to secure the border and face possible inside or outside socialist movements, under the master mind, consultancy and technical help of the United States. For instance, in Brazil, under the help of foreign super-power, the military took over the government in 1964 and governed for twenty years

Poverty, unemployment, poor education and health system were some of the elements that marked the life of these underdeveloped American countries. Therefore, this was the scenario within which the 1968 conference of Latin American Bishops took place. Eulalio Baltazar⁶ says it provided the ecclesiastical impetus for a theology of liberation and explains that

“In that conference the Bishops strongly condemned unjust social structures which institutionalized violence and thereby oppressed the poor. Not only did they denounce violations of human rights, they called also for action to remove oppressive structures and systems. They justified their position theologically by explaining that “liberation” at the economic and political levels has a supernatural dimension and is an integral part of the economy of salvation as an anticipation of complete redemption in Jesus Christ. It was left to Latin American theologians to articulate the new ecclesiastical and theological language and the category of “liberation.” This signified a new approach and style of theological reflection, which today is known as “liberation theology” or “theology of liberation.””

Lois Ann Lorentzen, University of San Francisco. <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/bron/PDF--Christianity/Maclean+Lorentzen--Leonardo%20Boff.pdf>

⁶ Eulalio Baltazar. Liberation Philosophy and Theology and Culture, Human rights and Peace in Central America.

3. BASIC CONCEPTS

The most impacting concepts developed within the frames of the liberationist approach refer to sin and salvation. First, sin is understood as wrong acts of the society as a whole and not only of the individual, therefore an oppressing system that requires liberation. This leads to the liberationist definition of “economy of salvation” as an anticipation of redemption in Jesus Christ. Second, salvation is related to the liberation from unjust social structures, which institutionalized violence, oppressed the poor, become grounds for violations of human rights. It is implied that it is the role of the ministry to call also for action to remove oppressive structures and systems.

For the meeting in Medellin, Gutierrez presented two theological arguments that came to be considered the basis of Liberation Theology as is put by Smith⁷ “(1) *The need for liberation from any kind of oppression – political, economic, social, sexual, racial, religious. And (2), an assertion that theology must grow out of the “grassroots Christian communities” and not be imposed from above.*

Violence was seen as the gross outcome of an unjust social system and, thus, condemned by the liberationist Gutierrez, who said that it doesn’t begin only when a gun is fired at someone as it is already present in a structural violence that drives majority of Latin American to poverty, hunger and death.⁸ His proposal was to turn the church from its affiliation with ruling class, assume a character of church based on a Gospel of servanthood to the oppressed.

Rebecca Chopp makes quite a summary of the claims of the liberation theology by saying that “*bringing suffering into the midst of reflection, liberation theology rethinks human existence, Christian tradition, and present Christian experience. What can theology say to the problems of human suffering? Who is the human subject created by God and destroyed by humanity? Who is God and where is God when history is marked more by suffering than by caretaking? Is the Bible an occasion for existential encounter or a witness of memory and hope?*”⁹

⁷ Edward L. Smith. *The Doctrine of Providence and Revelation: An Introduction to Philosophy and Theology*. The Research Center Press. Vol. 6. Chap.8. p.103.

⁸ *Ib.Id.*

⁹ Rebecca S. Chopp. *The Praxis of Suffering*. Orbis, 1986.

4. RELATION TO MARXISM

The political systems in the sixties and seventies used to stereotype any kind of social discourse as dangerous through the eyes of the “National Security Doctrine” for it was the basis of communism. As the flag of Liberation Theology has the color of social justice, it was stereotyped as containing Marxist ideology. Ron Rhodes¹⁰ says that

“According to Marx, man once existed in a simple, primitive state. At that time, there was happiness and tranquility. This primitive state of happiness was disrupted, however, by the rise of economic classes where one class sought to oppress and exploit another for its own economic advantage. Marx believed all of man's problems are the direct result of this class exploitation. He portrayed capitalism as the chief culprit that gave rise to this undesirable state of affairs.”

In his strong criticism of the Liberation Theology and the related theologians, Joseph Ratzinger¹¹ (now Pope Benedict the Second), says that:

“Love consists in the ‘option for the poor’; i.e., it coincides with opting for the class struggle. In opposition to “false universalism”; the liberation theologians emphasize very strongly the partiality and partisan nature of the Christian option; in their view, taking sides is the fundamental presupposition for a correct hermeneutics of the biblical testimony. Here, I think, one can see very clearly that amalgam of a basic truth of Christianity and an un-Christian fundamental option which makes the whole thing so seductive: The Sermon on the Mount is indeed God taking sides with the poor. But to interpret the “poor” in the sense of the Marxist dialectic of history, and “taking sides with them” in the sense of the class struggle, is a wanton attempt to portray as identical things that are contrary.”

Ratzinger does not analyze the liberation theology softly. At the same time he says that it contains orthodox assumptions as he says that *“the fundamental concept of the preaching of Jesus is the Kingdom of God. This concept is also at the center of the liberation theologies”*. However he turns it down when he claims that the theologians are

¹⁰ Ron Rhodes. Christian Revolution in Latin America: The Changing Face of Liberation Theology. Part One in a Three-Part Series on Liberation Theology. Reasoning from the Scriptures Ministries. *Christian Research Journal*, page 8. Rancho Santa Margarita, CA, Winter 1991.

¹¹ The Ratzinger Report. An interview with Cardinal Ratzinger and Vittorio Messori. Ignatius Press, Ft. Collins, CO 1984.

reading it “*against the background of marxist hermeneutics*”. Ratzinger becomes intrepid when, without pointing names, he says that “*according to one of these theologians, the Kingdom must not be understood in a spiritualist or universalist manner, not in the sense of an abstract eschatological eventuality.*”

When the liberationist drives through the suffering of innocents and the role of the oppressing systems in it, they make a deep impression in the minds caught out of balance. A comparative study, as the reflections developed by Ratzinger, may imbalance the firmness of some of their concepts.

5. LIBERATION AND GOD

The concept of God for the liberationists is that God is a liberator God. In this line, the Bible is all about liberation, as far as God liberates the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians, liberates in various the people from suffering in their journey in the desert, liberates the people after they possessed the land. And when they were taken to exile, they were also liberated. And the higher liberation is accomplished with Jesus Christ.

According to Ron Rhodes, the liberationists argue that

“The traditional Christian doctrine of God manipulates the divine being such that He appears to favor the capitalistic social structure. They claim the orthodox view of God is rooted in the ancient Greeks who saw God as a static being - distant and remote from human history. This distorted view of a transcendent deity has, they say, yielded a theology that understands God as "out there," far removed from the affairs of humankind.

¹²

Their claims is that this is the reason way the Latin Americans are so passive concerning their oppression and exploitation by the ruling classes.

Holding this reflection, the liberation theologians come together with view of the liberals in terms of an immanent God, a God operating and active in the world. Therefore, they say that *“to communicate to their compatriots that God is not impassive. Rather, He is dynamically involved on behalf of the poor and downtrodden. And because God stands against oppression and exploitation, those who follow Him must do likewise. Indeed, Gutierrez says that "to know God is to do justice”*.¹³

¹² Ib.id. Ron Rhodes.

¹³ Ib.id.

6. LIBERATION AND SALVATION

The liberation theology reflection about salvation is very complex for vis-à-vis the traditional Christian concept. By attributing to sin a communal idea, salvation assumes a social characteristic. In this line Rhodes say that it “*is viewed not primarily in terms of life after death for the individual*”, this is the traditional view about the salvation, but it is seen “*in terms of bringing about the kingdom of God: a new social order where there will be equality for all*”. Rhodes comments that they affirm not to be denying the eternal life but affirming that the eternal and the temporal intersect in liberation theology. The assumption about intersection is that in the traditional concept Christians’ goal is to gain access to eternity, while if history and eternity intersect and salvation promises a new order, it encourages people to break any obstacle that may deny access to that order.

7. LIBERATION AND JESUS CHRIST

The most emphatic arguments of the liberation theology reside in the liberating actions of Jesus Christ and his affection and compassion for the poor and the oppressed, and the suffering of the people.

The significance of Jesus Christ lies in His example of struggling for the poor and the outcast. The Incarnation is reinterpreted to represent God's total immersion into man's history of conflict and oppression. By His words and actions, Jesus showed us how to become true sons of God - that is, by bringing in the kingdom of God through actively pursuing the liberation of the oppressed.

The liberationists understand that his divinity incarnated in the human form makes him sensible to the suffering of the people, thus he takes the side of the people against oppressing rules. Rhodes says that “*Jesus died because He upset the religious and political situation of His time*”¹⁴. The most astonished assumption is made by Leonardo Boff against the transcendence of Jesus by arguing that it was fabricated by his followers that understood that Jesus death is transcendent and has salvation significance.

The real Jesus in the liberation view is the historical Jesus that is submitted to the judgment, condemnation and crucifixion by the political rulers, what carries the meaning of transcendence, a man-God suffering in his body and blood the real pain of the human suffering. Rhodes quotes Boff saying that “*he historicizes in exemplary fashion the suffering experienced by God in all the crosses of the oppressed*”¹⁵.

¹⁴ Ib.id. Rhodes.

¹⁵ Ib.id.

8. LIBERATION AND SIN

The first aspect of the liberationist reflection about sin is that it is not seen from the perspective of the individual but that of the community. Gutierrez explains that “*sin is not considered as an individual, private, or merely interior reality. Sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood and love in relationships among men.*”¹⁶

The liberation theology sees the structure of the society as evil and as a result of the imposition of the rules of the capitalism. The assumption that makes the church angry is that the “*capitalist nations are sinful specifically because they have oppressed and exploited poorer nations. Capitalist nations have become prosperous, they say, at the expense of impoverished nations. This is often spoken of in terms of "dependency theory" - that is, the development of rich countries depends on the underdevelopment of poor countries*”¹⁷.

It is sin in the liberationist eyes to adopt a passive position towards the oppression and the oppressors. Here comes the point that strikes hard the church, which is assuming that to go along passively with oppression rather than resisting and attempting to overthrow it, even if it has to be by violent means, is sin.

The highest critique to liberation theology is that it has roots in the Marxism. Its claim and emphasis on the use of violence, if it is necessary, puts it side by side with the Marxism. This emphasis, says “*has been one of the most controversial aspects of liberation theology. Such violence is not considered sinful if it is used for resisting oppression. Indeed, certain liberation theologians "will in some cases regard a particular action (e.g., killing) as sin if it is committed by an oppressor, but not if it is committed by the oppressed in the struggle to remove inequities. The removal of inequities is believed to result in the removal of the occasion of sin [i.e., the oppressor] as well*”.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ib.id.

¹⁷ Ib.ib.

¹⁸ Ib.id.

9. LIBERATION AND THE CHURCH

If from one side the Marxism character of its reflection makes the Liberation theology too controversial, their model of church takes to the other side and becomes one of the most challenging aspects of their thought to the institution. Leonardo Boff in his book *Saints Francis*¹⁹ develops an analysis of the historical church in parallel with the problem of poverty through the centuries, and says that the primitive church was a “church with the poor”, meaning that there was no rank, no classes, all were equal: after Constantine and its institutionalization the church became the church for the poor, meaning that in its power and riches, among the wealthier, the church ruled the society to reach out to help the poor. The claim now is that the church becomes neither a church with or for the poor, but a church of the poor. This drives to the a position of not asking what the church is, but rather what it means to be the church in a context of extreme poverty, social injustice and revolution. In the context of liberation theology the mission of the church seems to be more important than its nature.

The greatest aspect of the concepts of the liberation theology which was very much embraced, developed and implemented by Leonardo Boff is the faith base community. These base communities are the prototype of the Church of the poor. There are thousands of base communities in these days. They are so much easy to develop because they are shaped according to the condition, the needs and the image the people have of what a church should be. The leadership of those communities is a result of boldness, because they succeeded to leave the church in the hands of the laity.

We infer from the message of these theologians, mostly from Gutierrez that the mission of church moves from the idea of number to quality of souls and always to be side by side with the oppressed and protest against injustice and anything that is inhuman.

The shape of the ecclesial base communities is of small, grassroots, lay groups of the poor or the ordinary people, meeting to pray, conduct Bible studies, and wrestle concretely with social and political obligations in their settings. It has a great similarity with the revival movements of some branches of the Protestants with the so called home

¹⁹ BOFF, Leonardo. *Saint Francis: A Model for Human Liberation*. Crossroad: New York, NY, 1985.

study groups. It is so much so that the catholic segment called “charismatic” is a fast growing religious movement in Brazil.

CONCLUSION

The Philosopher said that there are much more under the skies beyond our vain philosophy. We should transpose it to the Christianity context to mean that there much more in terms of redemption, salvation, rescue and lost sheep from the house of the Lord to be found, beyond the comfort zone of the four walls, decorated ceilings, rich altars, and comfortable seats of a church. Above all, church is not that place we go mostly on Sundays for worship. The church is out there, in the daily life, struggling to survive under the oppression and persecution of the “Cesar”. We shall give what is Cesar’s, but claim back what is Jesus’.

We shall also understand the anthropological aspects of revelation by viewing the Word of God as a promise to the world and the *“the revealing God to us, the Gospel message revealing us to ourselves in our situation before the Lord and with other men. The God of Christian revelation is a God made man”*. This takes us to a *“reevaluation of the presence and the activity of man in the world”*.²⁰

The liberation theology is open to the gift of the Kingdom of God in terms of the protest against trampled human dignity; in terms of the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of people; in terms of liberating love; and in terms of building of a new, just, and fraternal society (Wogaman & Strong, 1996, p.343).

We should invest on a reflection about *“what does it mean to be a Christian”* and *“what does it mean to be a church in the context or circumstances of the oppressed”*²¹. In this direction *“we must take a new look at Christian life;”* we must be aware that the church has to take a *“participation in the process of liberation as an obligatory and privileged locus for Christian life and reflection. In this participation will be heard nuances of the Word of God which are imperceptible in other existential situations and without which there can be no authentic and fruitful faithfulness to the Lord”*²².

In short, concerning what a Christian life means, it is *“to accept and to live – in solidarity, in faith, hope and charity – the meaning that the Word of the Lord and our*

²⁰ Phillip Wogaman and Douglas Strong M. Readings in Christian Ethics: A Historical Sourcebook. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 1996. p.341.

²¹ Quotation just to stress the need of reflection.

²² Ib.Id. Wogaman & Strong. P.344.

encounter with Him give to the historical becoming of mankind on the way toward total communion ... the people of God march on accounting for their hope toward a new heaven and a new earth”²³.

To summarize the liberation theology we can assume that

“the theology of liberation attempts to reflect on the experience and meaning of the faith based on the commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society; this theology must be verified by the practice of that commitment, by active, effective participation in the struggle which the exploited social classes have undertaken against their oppressors. Liberation from every form of exploitation, the possibility of a more human and more dignified life, the creation of a new man – all pass through this struggle”²⁴.

²³ Ib.id.

²⁴ Ib.Id. Wogaman & Strong. P.345.

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