

Liberation Theology: Whom Does It Liberate?

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FOR GOOD OR ILL the past decade of Christian theology has been occupied to no small degree by the movements loosely associated under the title "liberation theology." Such is the resilience of this style among theologians today that it is widely expected to have considerable influence for a number of years to come. It is important now to reflect upon whether it is, in fact, "for good or for ill" that theologians are thus absorbed by the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, to name the most prominent early figure, and a score of others who write within the "contexts" of Latin America, the black community, the feminist movement, and a variety of Third World situations.

Some theologians are convinced that this movement represents an important advance in the progress of theology. It prompts adulatory tones from Robert McAfee Brown, the notable and articulate Protestant leader, who credits the younger Gutiérrez with "drastically re-routing" his theology.¹ Critics, on the other hand, speak with alarm and urgency with regard to this new-styled theology. And their shocked reaction is probably not without warrant. After all, no theological movement in recent years has gained a more ecumenical audience. Few have exploited biblical language and precepts with more rhetorical skill; none, possibly, has made as great an impact upon the everyday life of

the church. The surprising feature of this critical response, however, is that it seems to give no clear, concerted, presentation of just where theology, in this case, has been derailed.

Important points have been made, such as Edward Norman's view that liberation theology is another example of the politicization and secularization of the Christian message, one which renders the church incapable of doing anything other than "limping after" the secular world in its general dismantling of culture.² Others have faulted liberation theologians for logical fallacy in arguing that the Judeo-Christian God, the God of the Bible, is one who sides with the oppressed in quite the same way Marx sided with the proletariat. And it has been observed that their willingness to absolve violent revolution as non-oppressive has only a tenuous relationship to Christian ethical principles or to sound exegesis.

Whatever the merits of these criticisms, and I believe them to be considerable, it has seemed to me that they have yet tended to leave untouched a central deviation—a bit of theological sleight of hand, actually—and thus the theologians of liberation continue to play with the assurance of holding a trump card that they simply do not have. The more I have looked the more it occurred to me that there is something oddly unconvincing about the resolute

claim, made almost without exception by the notable "liberation" figures, that this method of theology begins with the concrete rather than (as it is claimed for traditional theism) with abstract dogma, and that it adheres to real involvement in history. Critics have seldom questioned this claim, strangely enough; and yet it is a central premise, and so far as I can see it is perfectly groundless.

Let me use Professor Miguez Bonino as a spokesman for this claim, only keep in mind that his words would find agreement in Gutiérrez, Assmann, Segundo, and a dozen others:

The idealism of the "rich world" believes that it can start from abstract conceptions and objective sources. It deceives itself: it only succeeds in idealizing the existing situation and projecting it afterward—thus the "theology of the death of God" and the "theology of secularization" project the conditions of the technological world. *The only possible point of departure is the concrete situation.* It is therefore very urgent to unmask the ideologies hidden in the theologies of the past . . . and to assume the historical character of theological reflection. *We do theology "beginning from concreteness," from "particular realities."*³

Statements such as this one leave us the impression that here we have to do with the real, everyday affairs of concrete human beings. Those theologies that have spent too much time in mystifying speculation must now be related to the soil and sweat of earthly existence with its practical concerns for economic and political realities. That is, at least, the claim. And many would argue that this is the peculiar strength of liberation theology.

With due regard for the best intentions of Bonino and others, we will have to say that the only problem with this claim of "beginning from concreteness" is simply that they do nothing of the kind. Their basic concern may be concrete enough. They point to the reality of deplorable conditions, real injustices, and the human

degradation they lament deserves to be lamented—and changed. But when it comes to the analysis of these problems, and to the theological program, what we find instead of concreteness is a furious vapor of political abstractions fused to biblical concepts that sound familiar yet, also, somehow strange. Not only does their claim appear to be unwarranted, as I will try to show, but it is a claim, the defects of which explain why some major features—the encouragement of violent revolution for instance—seem to flow so smoothly and logically from the system; and yet, as it has often been noted, these features never *feel* quite right in a Christian theology. The distortion is not in the logic that follows, but it is in this central claim that the liberation theologian, as Gustavo Gutiérrez said in a primary text of the movement, "will be someone vitally engaged in historical realities with specific times and places."⁴ Perhaps it is ironic, and I want to simply suggest this possibility later, that it is in this concreteness (real concreteness, not simply the claim) that theologians might discover the imagination and moral energy to bring real liberation to impoverished and oppressed people.

Theology in Context?

LIBERATION THEOLOGY has its standard historical apology and it has its own message, told in a variety of ways. As it is viewed by proponents, it is neither a systematic theology nor is it theological ethics. Its focus is narrower than the former, but broader than the latter. It is, rather, an attempt to analyze the *meaning of salvation* for specific groups within their historical circumstances. In its beginnings as a self-conscious movement, in the early 1970s, it was a theology that held in view Latin America and the Latin American poor. Spokesmen, both Catholic and Protestant, helped to articulate the new theology. Soon it was being sounded in reference to other groups: racial minorities, women, and more diverse "Third World" areas.

In its Latin American beginnings,

liberation theology represents itself as a step beyond the concern for bringing about "development" in underdeveloped nations, which was a dominant theme of the 1950s and early 1960s. And, in fact, this "step beyond" did not constitute a continuation of these former interests, but was actually a reaction against the notion of development. The early optimism concerning development turned to disillusionment as the rising expectations were continually frustrated by economic stagnation, social instability, political incompetence, and the plain intransigence of reality when met by fervent social expectations. There was the suspicion that for the Third World (those people outside the Western democracies and the Communist bloc nations) development meant (1) timid half-measures and a gradualism that, most of all, avoided endangering the vested interests of the superpowers, and (2) becoming the object of someone else's idea of world development—and therefore becoming a pawn on the chessboard of the superpowers, consequently losing the opportunity to play one's own game.⁵ In other words, development came to mean dependence and subjugation and the opposite of self-determination.

Out of this disillusionment came the increasing conviction that the people of Latin America were being alienated from their own culture and their own history. What is needed, reason certain theologians, is to be liberated from dependence upon the superpowers (especially the United States), and from those within their own countries who benefit from that dependence. Liberation, therefore, means release from being subject to an alien power's agenda for world history, and freedom to be the subject of one's own history.

Here are the beginnings, then, of thinking "concretely" and doing theology "in context." It is really a claim that is tied to a number of typical features. Briefly stated, those features are: (1) *Theology is expressed as a political interpretation of the gospel.* "Political" here does not mean party politics or even the administration of

government; matters for which liberation theologians show little interest. Rather it is to be taken in the most comprehensive sense; it has to do with living in community. Thus particular communities are held in view. For Gustavo Gutiérrez it is a theology "in the Latin American perspective."⁶ For James Cone it is a theology out of the black experience.⁷ But in each case it is a theology stated in terms of classes, institutions, and social groups that express—conveniently, but necessarily abstractly—the life of the *polis*—i.e., political language.

(2) *It is a theology that claims to arise out of the experience of the oppressed.* But the experience, in itself and as it is, is not enough. It must be developed by a process known as "conscientization" which causes the oppressed to change from "naive awareness" to a "critical awareness" of his role in the historical processes of liberation. If such an awareness of how one fits into the process of liberation is concrete, it must not be self-evidently so; for it is all part of a "pedagogy of the oppressed" in which awareness is learned—and must be relearned as historical circumstances require. Significantly, Gutiérrez warns that awareness is "relative to each historical stage of a people and of mankind in general."⁸ In short, it is not simply an awareness of one's identification with a class of people who are oppressed. Indeed it is well known that a great part of the Latin American movement is not at all made up of oppressed peasants, but of university students, European clergy, and it is led by a significant number of European-trained theologians.⁹ The important point is not real identification, but rather an identification with their quite hypothetical role in the movement of history. Nevertheless, these all are to become aware of their common identity in terms of their critical opposition to the oppressors. (Mr. Marx, who are the proletariat? Why, of course, those who oppose the capitalists!)

(3) *Thus liberation theology is necessarily a partisan theology.* Using political language, it faces problems in terms of the

oppressed and the oppressors, the rich and the poor, the advantaged and the disadvantaged. In Christ, God shows that he identifies with the one who is called a blasphemer and rebel, the one who is a stranger and oppressed. Identifying his passion with the passion of one oppressed, God reveals his partisanship. Just as he suffered the death of his own son, he now identifies with those under the heel of oppression. Furthermore, his own future is bound to the plight of the dispossessed.¹⁰ As long as we follow this line of logic (looking neither to the left or right) it renders simply: God is a partisan God.

(4) *This also means that liberation theology does not shrink from the conflicts involved in God's partisan identification with the oppressed.* All conflict is not violent: but most liberation theologians, including Gustavo Gutiérrez, find it necessary to absolve violence directed toward revolutionary purposes, making a distinction between just and unjust violence.¹¹ For them, it is no longer only the magistrate who "bears not the sword in vain."

(5) *"Liberation" is thus taken from the biblical theme of Christian freedom from the bondage of sin.* Everything hinges on the socio-politico-economic language. Those circumstances that keep people in servitude are identified as sin. Thus overcoming sin is overcoming conditions imposed by others. The liberated man is no longer the dependent object of another's history, he is free to be the "master of his own destiny."¹² Following Hegel and Marx, the historical process is seen as man's growing self-consciousness of his own history, and thereby his radical freedom to plot its course.

Whom Does It Liberate?

ALL OF THESE FEATURES are buttressed by the claim that "doing theology" in this manner is concrete. It is concerning this claim that I would beg pardon to ask if it is really so. And, in doing so, I want to make a point (actually three points that connect with each other) that I think not only calls

into question this central claim, but also helps to explain many of the other genuinely alarming features.

The first point is this: liberation theology's claim of concreteness is based on the fact that it devalues universal, man-as-man, categories, going straight to the subject of nations, classes, and social forces in contemporary history. The fact is that, as it does so, it becomes less concrete and more abstract. While it professes the virtue of doing one thing, it in fact does just the opposite.

There are two ways that one can speak fairly concretely about man. Both of these are found in biblical literature. One way is to speak *simply* concretely—about particular people, with names, and places, and so many children, and with specific personal histories. To speak *so* concretely makes it possible, also, to speak to men of any age and place. The parable of the prodigal son is so concrete that it depends for its sense on the customs of a day long past; yet it is also so concrete that it awakens sympathy in hearts two millennia and half a world removed. Or as Peter reacts impulsively to the prediction of Christ's crucifixion, we can each say, "And that is just how I would react!" Because it is really concrete, really history (and not "forces of history"), we each draw the connection on our own; and it turns out that the smallest circle possible, that which circumscribes a real individual or a real family, corresponds to a circle that encompasses the world. No matter how concrete and particular we get, there is something so common, so inalienable, in humanity that we can each view that bit of experience with sympathy and profit. But if we draw that circle around only those that are Missourians, or Africans; around workers or Third World nations; around the rich or the poor; the circle, by definition, has excluded the rest of the world.

But one can also speak of man as man, in universal terms, and still be more concrete and real than the liberation theologians. One purpose, at least, of speaking of man in universal terms, in terms of his loves, his passions, his sexuality, and his

fears is that one can thereby speak of *each* human being as well as *all* human beings. "Our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee": so said St. Augustine of man's thirst for God. This psychological observation was made sixteen centuries ago, amid conditions vastly different from those today, yet it speaks *so* universally that it speaks to me, quite concretely, today.

On the other hand, just as Gutiérrez begins to speak of a theology of the Latin American experience, and Cone of the black experience, they speak neither of universals nor of individuals. Their categories, they assume, are more concrete because they are more particular. But instead they have attempted to define concrete human beings in terms of the rather exclusive categories of race, nationality, or economic class. The result is that although I might speak of Latin American workers, or North Carolina sharecroppers, I cannot move the discussion easily to the level of a concrete individual or a real human family. For the moment I do, I find all sorts of particulars—quite important to the individual—which have nothing whatever to do with his belonging to an oppressed class. And when I say "North Carolina sharecropper" and apply it to a particular individual, I have only told one aspect—and perhaps an insignificant aspect—of that person's life. To say that he is a sharecropper is not to exhaust the possibilities of describing who he is: his daughter graduated third in her class and his wife was ill most of last year; and besides that he plans to work at the local factory next year! In other words, as long as we have in view a really *concrete* human being, to describe him merely by a socio-economic label is being grossly abstract.

Thus, in almost any case, to speak in terms of any less-than-universal category is to reduce the possibility of speaking concretely. I am not saying that this is not sometimes necessary and desirable: but to claim that it is more concrete than the universal, man *qua* man language, and to claim that this is adequate for understanding the human situation, cannot be defended. The most telling argument

against racism, in fact, is that no sub-category of humanity describes concrete human existence as adequately as the universal description of man as man.

There is a second point that follows what we have said. Liberation theology tends to deal with man in dualistic terms. In this system we are dealing with oppressors and the oppressed, the developed nations and the developing, racial majorities and minorities, the rich and the poor. Since social and political ills are found in situations that arise between these groups, the locus of moral choice comes to be one of deciding partisanship. Thus God sides with the oppressed; ethical choice hinges on allegiance to the cause of the oppressed.

Keeping in mind the degree of abstraction this involves, it leads us to see why the language of violence comes so easily and antiseptically to the pages of liberation theology. It is all very well to say that there may be justification for violence; but this is the stuff of which genocide is made. Sin is analyzed in terms of the structures of society rather than in reference to the order or disorder of the soul. Disorders are seen, instead, in social arrangements. The division between good and evil coincides with divisions within mankind. Great deposits of selfishness and evil design lie in those classes or nations that represent the oppressors. Ergo, to combat evil is to combat *them*. Violence against a whole class of people becomes an instrument of redemption. The result, of course, is that real human lives are sacrificed to the abstractions of a political view of redemption. It is not that political language is irrelevant here; but rather it points out the real danger of making abstract political language the *starting point* instead of the result of theological reflection.

Finally, I think it is worth noting that we have at least one representative of an oppressed people, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who has his own sort of "liberation theology" and yet has an entirely different outlook on this matter. A major point of his three-volume *Gulag Archipelago* is that the evil he found in prison camps was not confined to the authorities, nor was right

always residing with the prisoners. Instead he was constantly surprised by the fact that the very evil that created the vast Archipelago of human suffering could be found in the actions of its victims, of the prisoners and slave laborers themselves, of those whom the system had condemned to die. Indeed, he found that this evil could surface in his own life! Personal repentance was then the beginning of inward, and ultimately an outward, liberation from the Archipelago. Yet because he found that evil, and the personal responsibility for it, lying within, that did not blind him to the evil of the broader political life. Far from it! It cleared his vision to see it for what it

really is. One has only to read his memoir, *The Oak and the Calf*, to understand how fiercely this inner search for the sources of peace turned upon the evil of political oppression.

No liberation theologian has been as concrete in his theology as Solzhenitsyn has been in his crusade for justice in the Soviet Union. And if I were to guess which of these crusades for liberation ended in a real advance of justice, I would pick the one for whom concreteness means Ivan Denisovich—and not those for whom historical concreteness is found chiefly in the elusive metaphors of revolution.

¹Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), p. 11. ²Edward Norman, *Christianity and the World Order* (Oxford University Press, 1979). See especially chapters 2 and 4. ³José Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 72. *Emphasis mine.* ⁴Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 13. ⁵Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-42. ⁶*Ibid.*, p. 14. ⁷James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 14-15. The extent to which theology, written from the perspective of particular communities, can be compartmentalized and isolated from a broadly human perspective is illustrated by the following remark out of these same pages: "It is alright to say as did Athanasius that the Son is *homoousia* (one

substance with the Father), especially if one has a taste for Greek philosophy and a feel for the importance of intellectual distinctions. And I do not want to minimize or detract from the significance of Athanasius' assertion for faith one iota. But the *homoousia* question is not a black question," p. 14. ⁸Gutiérrez, *op. cit.*, p. 91. ⁹See, for instance, Norman, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-47. ¹⁰Examples of this argument are numerous in the literature of liberation theology and associated writings such as Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975). Two passages which argue in this light are found in Gutiérrez, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-208, and in Bonino, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-131. ¹¹Gutiérrez, *op. cit.*, see arguments on pp. 48-49 and 108-109. ¹²Gutiérrez, pp. 27-33.