
A Bibliographical Essay

by George Plasterer

One of the primary writers of liberation theology is Hugo Assmann. His primary concern is in showing how traditional Christian symbols have become a means of oppression. Assmann's main work is *Theology for a Nomad Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976). Included is an extensive essay by Frederick Herzog, in which application of liberation theology to the American scene is attempted.

The book is defined as a word of action. It has value only as it relates to the action of liberation. Faith is participation in the liberating process. The context for liberation theology is the oppression of the Latin American people. Thus, liberation must be political. A parallel with the Exodus of Israel is clearly drawn. Orthodoxy must be replaced by orthopraxis. There is severe criticism for Jürgen Moltmann and European political theology. There must be rejection of development and reform. Instead, revolution must be the starting-point. All "dualism," such as God and history, church and world, etc., must be removed.

Another writer is Gustavo Gutiérrez. His writing emphasizes epistemology, which is based on an understanding of *praxis* and a Marxist theory of knowledge. The work he is most noted for is *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973). The stated purpose of the book is that one must allow oneself to be judged by the Word, rethink faith, strengthen love, and give reason for hope within a commitment which seeks to be more radical, total, and efficacious. The author concludes by saying that liberation theology is fundamentally concerned with the meaning of Christianity and the mission of the Church. The Church has value only as it can be verified by its commitment to exploited classes.

In an article entitled, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation" (*Theological Studies*, 31:1970, 243-261), Gutiérrez continues these same themes. He rejects development, reform, and capitalism as possibilities for the Latin American continent. Theology is critical reflection on pastoral action. This action consists of liberation at three levels: political liberation for the oppressed, mankind's liberation in the course of

George M. Plasterer is a senior Master of Divinity student at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is a graduate of Marion College.

history, and liberation from sin.

For support of his liberation views Gutiérrez cites the Biblical themes of creation and eschatological promise. He also cautions that poverty is not to be idealized, but rather is an evil. The church becomes poor in order to be one with those who suffer, as Christ became one with man.

Other articles by Gutiérrez include "The Hope of Liberation" (*Worldview*, 17:1974, 35-37) and "Faith as Freedom: Solidarity with the Alienated and Confidence in the Future" (*Horizons*, 2:1975, 25-60).

Gutiérrez also edited a book with Claude Geffré, *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974). He contributed an article, "Liberation, Theology and Proclamation" (pp. 57-77). Faith is commitment to the liberation process. He calls for a wholly different social order which can be developed only by experimentation.

A third person involved in the theological movement is Juan Luis Segundo, a priest from Uruguay. His writings have attempted a more systematic development of liberation theology. Segundo's first major work was *A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*, (5 vols., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973). This book was written because of the crisis of faith. More and more people are losing their faith as they become mature human beings grappling with the issues of the modern world. The theology developed is rooted in the world in which people live. These volumes are written for seminars and discussion groups. Questions and summaries are included at the end of each chapter. The areas covered are: The Community Called Church, Grace and the Human Condition, Our Idea of God, and The Idea of God.

Segundo's most recent work is *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976). Theology must be liberated from the professionals. It can no longer be part of the curriculum of a school. This liberation will free theology for its original purpose, involvement in human liberation. As with his previous work, this book arises out of the urgent problems of modern life. This is also intended to be an offensive against those who would relegate liberation theology to a naive and uncritical effort. The subjects covered are hermeneutics, sociology, politics, ideology, popular religion and the Gospel message to all men.

Segundo also contributed an article to the above-mentioned book, edited by Geffré and Gutiérrez, entitled "Capitalism – Socialism: A Theological Crux" (pp. 105-123). The thesis presented is that the only political-economic option for Latin American Christians, is a com-

mitment to socialism. In the process, the German political theology of Jurgen Moltmann is severely criticized. He concludes with six points: First, eschatology binds Christian theology to the absolute, rather than relativizing it. Second, this gives rise to a dialectic, for there is always reassessment of the present time. Third, justification by faith is not the key to Biblical exegesis; equal weight must be given to building the kingdom. Fourth, the focus of theology is not trying to foresee the future, but must be on what to liberate now. Fifth, eschatology forces one to the left-wing, for it is always looking to the future. Sixth, the relationship with a liberating event derives its strength from God.

A fourth writer is José Miguez Bonino, now teaching at the Highes Institute of Protestant Theological Studies in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He has written two books, both of which emphasize the place of Marxism. Bonino's first work, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1975), centered on the need for critical reflection by those who have made the liberating process their own struggle. There is a new generation of Christians who are involved with the struggles of the poor. There is considerable discussion of traditional theological concepts. His views of Marxist commitment, the place of revolution, and the political orientation of the movement are important.

His second book is *Christians and Marxists: The Mutual Challenge to Revolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976). In this book, he states three propositions: (1) Jesus Christ is his Lord and Savior; (2) revolutionary action aimed at basic economic, political, and social structures is imperative; (3) Marxism, as a socio-analytical tool, is necessary for revolutionary change. The possibility of development and reform are disregarded. The central portion of the book concerns a criticism of religion from both Marxist and Biblical perspectives. There is also a chapter evaluating Marxism. The elements usable by Christians are: (1) history is dependent on man's organization of the means of production; (2) "man" is not a single individual but functions in a communal setting; (3) the fact exists of class struggle and the revolutionary role of the proletariat, and (4) the notion of praxis, which means that true knowledge starts from the concrete actions of men.

Bonino has written two articles of importance as well. "Violence: A Theological Reflection," (*The Ecumenical Review*, 25:1973, 468-74). Here, he attempts to define violence in relation to liberation. Violence includes oppression, as well as insurrection. All people participate in one form of violence or another. Too often, violence has

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been understood so as to protect the status quo. Liberation means going beyond what "is," and that means violence. The Bible shows violence in the "announcement-commandment" of God. The results of this are: (1) violence is not an end; (2) it derives meaning from its relationship with God's Word; (3) it must include, but not absolutize, rationality and order; (4) the human cost must be evaluated, (5) the struggle for liberation must be as "human" as possible.

Another article is "Five Theses Toward an Understanding of the Theology of Liberation" (*Expository Times*, 87:1976, 196-200). Here, Bonino sets forth the principles which unite those involved in liberation theology. First, the point of departure is in the socio-economic situation of Latin America. Second, liberation is a totally historical project which sees the situation of Latin America as oppressor/oppressed. Only a revolutionary change, from capitalist to socialist, will suffice. Third, liberation theology proposes a qualitative change in the relationship between Christianity and Latin American society. It can no longer be mystical and interpersonal. Rather, the historical and political relationships must be emphasized. Fourth, there must be a new form of theologizing which arises out of historical praxis. This means Marxism, which is rooted in concrete experience. Fifth, liberation theology sees the Biblical and historical tradition from the perspective of the struggle for liberation. Questions of method and hermeneutics must here be confronted; that is, whether it is legitimate to start with the historical situation.

The book edited by Geffré and Gutiérrez contains an article by Bonino, "Popular Piety in Latin America," (pp. 148-157). He analyzes the popular religion as a manifestation of a slave-consciousness. Two other articles which may be of interest are: "Theology and Liberation" (*International Review of Mission*, 61:1972, 67-72), and "Violence and Liberation" (*Christianity and Crisis*, 32:1972, 169-72).

José Porfirio Miranda, who now resides in Mexico City has written a work entitled *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (New York: Orbis Books, 1974). This is an obvious attempt to be scholarly, as the twelve pages of bibliography show. There is also the desire to interpret the Bible in the light of liberation. An index to Greek and Hebrew terms and a 16 page index to Scriptural quotations are included. After challenging the concept of private ownership, the author goes on to describe the God of the Bible as one who is known only in concrete action toward the oppressed. His is a God who intervenes historically for the poor. Any other God is a man-made idol

that deserves destruction. Only after this analysis of Scripture does Miranda turn to Marx. Both Marx and the Bible challenge civilization at its roots. This present capitalistic system not only takes oppression for granted, but also accepts the crushing of the poor as a “natural” condition of the Universe. A confrontation with the self-revelation of God necessitates a demand for justice for the oppressed.

Several other works may be of interest to the reader. One is by Rubem Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* (Cleveland: Corpus Books, 1969). This book starts with the experience of the struggling Christian communities. The author’s goal is to explore the possibility of a new language for theology, which he finds in the language of freedom. Another work is by Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970). This writer is distinguished from the others in that he is not writing from within a Christian context. He proclaims himself a humanist, interested in liberation from an educational perspective. The work is respected among theologians, however, so it is worthy of mention. Freire’s emphasis is on dialogue, using a question technique to bring about the consciousness necessary for liberation. This consciousness can only occur as people are made aware that they are oppressed.

Another writer is Dom Helder Camara. He is an Archbishop from Northeast Brazil and has been accused of being a communist. He is under constant threat of assassination. Two works which will be noted here are *Spiral of Violence* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1971) and *Revolution Through Peace* (Evanston, OH: Harper & Row, 1971). The author’s primary concern is to awaken the consciousness of the West to its responsibilities to the oppressed of the third world. He wants to see the oppressed – one-third of the world – liberated through reform of existing social structures with the help of the technology of the West. Camara differs from the other theologians at the point of violence and reform. He admits that institutionalized violence forces the oppressed to revolt. This is why he calls on those in institutional life to reform themselves. He cannot, however, justify violence for any cause.

Liberation theology is no longer confined to Latin America. There are efforts now to discover what liberation means for Black Africa and Asia. There are also some in America who seek to understand what liberation means here. Two of these are James Cone, a Black theologian at Union Seminary, New York, and Rosemary Radford Reuther.

Cone believes that since the American system oppresses a group of people because of their blackness, their Christian theology must become

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“Black,” for this is the symbol of oppression. He has sought to root liberation theology in the traditional religious expressions of the Black American. Three books by him are: *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Pr., 1975), and *The Spiritual and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Pr., 1972).

In *Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power* (New York: Paulist Pr., 1972), Ruether has two emphases. One is that liberation must be for all who are oppressed. Thus, one involved in liberating a group must be aware of the needs of others for liberation. A second emphasis is that all dualisms must be rejected.

There are at least two movements which are necessary to look at in forming the background for liberation theology. A few sources will be mentioned in passing. Most important, is the Christian-Marxist dialogue. The articles on historical and dialectical materialism in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* by J. B. Acton explain these Marxist concepts. Two other books are helpful. One is *The Essential Left: Four Classic Texts on the Principles of Socialism* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1961) by Marx, Engels, and Lenin. The other book is a collection of writings by Karl Marx, *Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1956). Roger Garaudy, *Marxism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), is a book showing how Marxism is being torn away from the authoritarianism of its past. Many in the Marxist movement want to see Marxism recover its humanistic side; resulting in democracy and freedom.

The Christian-Marxist dialogue extends back to the turn of the century. Both movements are seen as historically-oriented, seeking to overcome alienation, to have emphasis on action, community, openness to the future, and interest in freedom. At root, both are revolutionary. Two helpful recent articles are Eugene C. Bianchi, “Point of Convergence in the Christian-Marxist Dialogue” (*Encounter*, 36:1975, 37-52) and Henry Morrison, “Theoretical Questions of Marxist-Christian Unity” (*Radical Religion*, 2:1976, 32-37).

The latter article says “No” to any possibility of convergence. Two aspects of Marxism make unity impossible. One is that Marxists maintain renunciation of religion as essential to Marxism. Secondly, Marxism rejects the possibility of transcendence, because the material world is not taken seriously.

The movement which forms a background of liberation theology is

the political theology on the European continent. The present spokesman is Jurgen Moltmann. He has written many books on the subject. The two most important are *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) and *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). Another book to which he and others contributed is *Religion and Political Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). The emphasis of this movement is on the significance of eschatology. This relativizes all systems of thought; thus, there is rejection of ideology. Liberation is sought at all levels – economic, political, and personal. Moltmann's own commitments are to democratic socialism.

As with any new movement, criticism of liberation theology arose quickly and from several different perspectives. Moltmann, in "On Latin American Liberation Theology" (*Christianity and Crisis*, 36: 1976, 57-63), makes three criticisms. One is the danger of provincialism; the second is putting ideology ahead of people in need; and the third, is people's reaction against an elite group that becomes obsessed with itself. He then points out that society is more than economics.

A Catholic criticism comes from Bonaventure Kloppenburg, *Temptations for the Theology of Liberation* (Chicago: Fransiscan Herald Pr., 1974). This tract is fundamentally appreciative and distinguishes between temptation and sin. There is a list of 11 "temptations" included. One is to give priority to the situation over the Gospel. The second is to minimize the importance of the ontological dimension. The third is to reduce theology to politics. The fourth is to dangerously minimize personal sin. The fifth is to identify the gospel with socialism. The sixth is to fail to recognize that the term "liberation" is ambiguous. The seventh is to neglect eschatology. The eighth is to be unfair while being prophetic. The ninth is to create a new kind of clericalism. The tenth is to too readily justify violence. The eleventh is to replace orthodoxy with orthopraxy.

Peter Hebblewaite offers another criticism in "How Liberating is Liberation Theology?" (*Frontier*, 18:1975, 199-203). His critique centers on the idea of making political commitment the basis for theological acceptability. He believes this is caused by the movement's rejection of dualism, such as church and state, God and history, etc. To have this monism leaves open the possibility of totalitarianism.

Clark Pinnock has also been led to criticize liberation theology at various points. In "Liberation Theology: The Gains, the Gaps" (*Chris-*

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tianity Today, 15:1976, 13-15), he centers on four points. One is that politics takes precedence over Biblical theology; second, salvation is purely historical; third, the Holy Spirit dwells in mankind, who then effects the liberation process; and, fourth, the mission of the church is defined in purely political terms. He then commends the movement as pointing to areas that evangelicals need to become aware of. The Christian should be involved in building a more just and human society. There should also be recognition that socialism is a live option for the believer. Pinnock develops further what liberation means in a two-part article, "An Evangelical Theology of Human Liberation" (*Sojourners*, 5:Feb. 1976, 30-33, and March 1976, 26-29). His purpose is to give an outline of a systematic theology for public discipleship. He reacts strongly against "privatizing" the Biblical message. The Bible has a social message, and the Biblical person must also. Pinnock begins with revelation in Scripture, in which principles must be grasped. Then he points to the Trinity as crucial to political theology, and describes the significance of each person of the Trinity. Third, history must be understood in light of creation, providence (i.e., God working out his purposes), and eschatology. In the second part, he begins with man created in God's image, whose life is sacred, and who was given government for the just ordering of society. He then discusses the effects of the Fall. Sin is always social; demonic powers dominate in society; man's dominion has become twisted. In conclusion, he states that salvation must extend to the reconciliation of all that exists under sin. Lastly, redeemed existence is the church, which has its own set of values apart from the world. This new set of values must be applied to the totality of society. Thus, for Pinnock, traditional evangelical theology has the foundation for political discipleship. He is also aware, however, that this has not been proclaimed by its adherents.

A final criticism is that of Rene de Visme Williamson, "The Theology of Liberation" (*Christianity Today*, 19:Aug. 8, 1975, 7-13). The article gives a point-counterpoint approach, five being discussed. Liberation theology contends that liberty is the center of Christianity; for evangelicals it is service to God. For liberation theology, liberation comes from poverty and oppression, but for evangelicals liberation and equality are contradictions. Liberation theology says that the poor need to have their consciousness raised to realize their condition is not inevitable. Evangelicalism says God is no respecter of persons; the poor cannot be singled out as God's people. Liberation theology contends that violence is necessary to liberate the oppressed; whereas

evangelicals contend that this is contrary to Romans 13. Lastly, liberation theology believes the secularizing process must continue, but evangelicals contend that secularization cannot be Christian.

In summary, liberation theology has aroused much controversy, whether with the older developmentalism, political theology, or evangelicalism. As has been seen, evangelicals have had widely differing responses. Pinnock represents a group which sees value in much of what this movement wants to accomplish. Williamson, however, represents those who would reject the movement almost totally.

For this writer, some positive points have been made. The Christian in society surely must be on the side of justice and righteousness. There is a social dimension to the gospel which has all too often been ignored. This emphasis on meaningful action is to be welcomed. The church cannot continue to sit on the sidelines. Liberation theology can also awaken the evangelical community to the possibility of socialism as a viable alternative. This leads to the concept of church and society. In a sense, the church must always be a counterculture movement. It must never align itself dogmatically with any economic or political system. This having been said, however, there are clearly areas where evangelicals will have difficulty.

Most of these difficulties have already been mentioned. Some of the main areas will be reiterated here. The whole idea of starting with the present situation, rather than with Scripture, is highly questionable. At this point, liberation theology seems to emphasize social liberation almost to the exclusion of personal liberation. Though time may correct this, it represents a serious problem now. In relationship to this, there is the tendency to see society in purely political and economic terms. The evangelical has an understanding of how far politics and economics can go in confronting the issues of society. The rejection of all dualism is also a problem. The evangelical sees that a distinction must be made between God and history, church and society, etc. Though relationships exist, to identify them is to destroy them. Fourth, there does not appear to be a hope for the consummation of history by God in liberation theology. Surely this hope is fundamental to any evangelical theology. Lastly, though the emphasis on action is good, an unbending approach may bring about a new elitism. The ambiguity of social involvement must never be forgotten by those participating in it. The issues are not always as clear as one might like.