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LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND LIBERAL SOCIETY

DENIS GOULET*

I. INTRODUCTION

Last summer I visited Argentina for the first time in twelve years. I found the political climate there euphoric over the nation's newly-found freedom, allied to a general sense of relief that one could now walk the streets safely at night and not fear arbitrary arrest at home. What a contrast with earlier visits, when the army and its clandestine anti-terrorist squads were waging a dirty undeclared war against Montenero guerillas. Argentina's political debate was so highly polarized then that one could readily imagine finding a poster on church doors depicting Jesus Christ as a revolutionary Che Guevara toting a sub-machine gun on one panel of the diptych, and a gentle-as-a-lamb, not to say saccharine, picture of the Sacred Heart on the other. And the caption read: Will the *true Jesus Christ* please stand up and come forward?

This, in essence, is what Latin American theology of liberation is all about. What does salvation history mean: did Jesus come to save individual souls or to redeem oppressed collectivities, landless peasant masses and marginalized city-dwellers?

Nevertheless, this imaginary poster would be grossly misleading, for it would seem to imply that liberation theologians naively champion violence. The very contrary is the truth: most theorists and practitioners of liberation theology espouse non-violent change strategies.

The most courageous and outspoken champion of human rights and social justice is Dom Helder Camara, Archbishop of Recife (in Brazil's impoverished Northeast region) between 1964 and 1985. In 1968, many pressed Camara to condemn Camilo Torres, the Colombian priest who had turned guerrilla fighter. Camara's reply reveals at once his profound commitment to non-violence and his un-

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derstanding for those Christians who have chosen other paths. Helder declared:

I respect those who feel obliged in conscience to opt for violence—not the all too easy violence of armchair guerilleros—but those who have proved their sincerity by the sacrifice of their life. In my opinion, the memory of Camilo Torres and of Che Guevara merits as much respect as that of Martin Luther King. I accuse the real authors of violence: all those who, whether on the right or the left, weaken justice and prevent peace. My personal vocation is that of a pilgrim of peace, following the example of Paul VI; personally, I would prefer a thousand times to be killed than to kill.¹

Camilo Torres' tragic option on behalf of guerrilla warfare drew its inspiration from the same Gospel which guided Camara. Torres explained his reluctant decision to stop celebrating the Eucharist in these words:

When circumstances exist which prevent men from giving themselves completely to Christ, the priest has as his proper function the sacrifice of his ability to celebrate the Eucharist—which is itself unintelligible without the commitment of Christians. In the present structure of the Church it has been made impossible for me to continue the exercise of my priesthood in matters of external cult. The Mass, which is the final objective of the sacerdotal action, is fundamentally a community action. But the Christian community cannot authentically offer the sacrifice if it has not first authentically fulfilled the precept of love of neighbor.

I chose Christianity because I thought it contained the purest way to serve my neighbor. I was chosen by Christ to be a priest forever, motivated by the desire to commit myself totally to the love of my fellow man. As a sociologist, I had wished that that love might become effective through technology and science. In analyzing Colombian society I have realized that a revolution is necessary in order to give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked and to obtain the welfare of the majority of our people. I think the revolutionary fight is a Christian and priestly fight. Only through it, in the concrete circumstances of our country, can we accomplish the love which

1. D. CAMARA, *THE CHURCH AND COLONIALISM* 109 (1969).

men must have for their neighbors.²

Liberation theology expresses itself in three distinct, albeit related, arenas. The first is the struggle for economic, social and political justice; most writings in this vein come from Latin America. A second variant centers on racial militancy in the United States and, increasingly, in South Africa. A third strand focuses on women's struggles to achieve equality and respect. Most works in this register issue from female theologians in industrialized countries, such as the United States, Holland, and Germany.

This essay limits itself to discussing the first category of theological writings and programs. Latin American liberation theology most explicitly and formally condemns capitalism, and poses radical challenges to the United States, the nation most often identified as the paragon of liberal society. Liberation theology has become a hot issue in the United States as well as in Latin America. Disputes between factions of bishops and theologians in Central America make front-page news, and the Vatican's condemnation of Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian theologian, is debated on *Nightline*.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A. *European Antecedents*

Latin American liberation theology was not born in a vacuum; it did not suddenly appear "out of the blue." On the contrary, it has deep roots in post-war European theology, with German and French influences most in evidence.³

In Germany, an entire generation of post-war theologians was galvanized into displaying a critical interest in the meeting-point between history and God's action in time. This encounter is best dramatized in the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who joined a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. Other theologians, coming after the war, began to explore such new themes as religion and secularity in a pluralistic diaspora, the basis for hope in a world shot through with evil, and the political role of theology itself. Like Bonhoeffer, these theologians took overt stances on conflict-laden political questions.

Of much wider influence upon theologians and Latin American society at large, however, were three Frenchmen,

2. G. GUZMAN, CAMILO TORRES 132 (1969).

3. Most Latin American liberation theologians, including Gutierrez, Bonino, Alves, Assmann, Boff, Segundo, and Scannone, studied in Europe at Louvain, Rome, Lyon, or Munich.

none of them theologians but rather practical philosophers: Teilhard de Chardin, Emmanuel Mounier, and Louis Lebret.⁴ Each of these thinkers left a distinctive message to the modern world, one which resonated widely and convincingly in Latin American ears. Chardin, with indefatigable elegance and eloquence, preached the value of history and of this world. Without enlightened human effort in realms of science, art, economic and social organization, he insisted, the *eschaton*, or final age of God's kingdom, could not come.⁵ Chardin, the solitary scientist and poetic visionary, gave a new generation of Christians a reason to live in hope within this evil world because the final advent of God's Kingdom depended on their human commitments in time and space.

Mounier, gregarious journalist and political activist, tried to formulate a "third way" in economic and political affairs, one which rejected both the atomistic individualism of capitalism and the totalitarian collectivism of communism. He called his model of society "communitarian personalism."⁶ Ever the institution-builder, Mounier created the journal *Esprit* and the movement known as "La Vie Nouvelle" (The New Life) to place concrete flesh on the bare bones of his "third way" model. That model served as direct inspiration to a cohort of Latin American Christian Democrats, three of whom rose to presidential power—Frei in Chile, Caldera and Herrera in Venezuela.

Lebret, founder of numerous magazines and movements around the theory and practice of a "Human Economy," convinced many young post-war Christians that they could save their souls only by engaging in the combat for justice and what he called "authentic" development. The tool to be used was intelligent love, for intelligence without love breeds technocracy and manipulation, whereas love without intelligence leads to simplistic activism based on sentimental good intentions which solve nothing.⁷

The cumulative impact of Chardin, Mounier and Lebret in Latin America was immense. They opened the door to a

4. On this list would also appear the name of Jacques Maritain, had not his name been relegated to oblivion because of Latin American protests over his final book, *Peasant of the Garonne*, widely interpreted as a conservative manifesto reversing Maritain's earlier image as a progressive thinker.

5. Goulet, *Secular History and Teleology*, WORLD JUST., Sept. 1966, at 5.

6. E. MOUNIER, A PERSONALIST MANIFESTO (1938).

7. D. GOULET, A NEW MORAL ORDER 23-49 (1974).

spirituality which committed Christians to transforming society. These three French Christian thinkers, however, formed only part of a larger phalanx of pioneers in search of models for a relevant Church presence in the real world. Cardinal Suhard struggled to revitalize a missionary Church after his shocking discovery, in Germany's mines and factories, that French priests had grown estranged from the cares and hopes of ordinary workers. In the same spirit, Chenu launched his theology of work, Congar his studies of modernity, Loew and the Mission de France their pastoral movements of worker-priests. Even the novelist Gilbert Cesbron, riding the crest of popular interest, wrote a best-selling book about the "Saints Who Descended into Hell."⁸ All these innovative efforts were aimed, ultimately, at refuting Marx's charge that religion is the opiate of the people.

Ironically enough, however, in nineteenth-century England, caught in the throes of its proletarian Industrial Revolution, religion no longer conveyed a centrally meaningful reality for the working classes. As Lewis Mumford put it, with a fine point of irony: "Religion ceased in large groups to be the opiate of the poor: indeed the mines and the textile mills often lacked even the barest elements of the older Christian culture: and it would be more nearly true to say that opiates became the religion of the poor."⁹

B. *Historical Evolution in Latin America*

Liberation theology has emerged as a practical response to historical events in Latin America. The response expresses itself in innovations of a pastoral, liturgical, and theological nature. One common feature of the events instigating these responses is social conflict. Specifically, Fidel Castro's victory in 1959 obliged the Church to choose sides: for or against Cuban socialism.

A major difference marks Latin discourse between Christian and Marxists and the vigorous dialogue conducted in Europe until 1968, when it was stifled by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. In Germany, France, Poland and Czechoslovakia, the Christian-Marxist dialogue was intellectual; theologians and philosophers argued over abstract issues, such as the possibility of dissociating religious from economic aliena-

8. These "Saints" are the heroes of the book; priest-workmen who "descended" into all kinds of hellish workplaces. G. CESBRON, *LES SAINTS VONT EN ENFER* (1952).

9. L. MUMFORD, *TECHNICS AND CIVILIZATION* 179 (1934).

tion, or the meaning of transcendence. However, little theoretical dialogue took place on Latin Shores; cooperation between Christians and Marxists took the practical form of joint struggles against common oppressors—dictatorial governments, exploitative privileged classes, “neo-colonialist” foreign companies or governments. Marxism’s theoretical elements served as instruments of popular mobilization rather than metaphysical affirmations of truth.

Camilo Torres’ entry into Colombia’s guerrilla ranks, closely followed by that of Domingos Lain and several other priests, created a major convulsion in the Latin American clergy. Priests who repudiated the violent option taken by Torres began to question whether necessary social changes in their societies could be wrought by working within the system. A radical transformation in the rules of society was identified as the indispensable prelude to any solution which went beyond palliatives.

Bishop Manuel Larain of Talca, Chile, raised his voice in the early 1960’s to champion land reform and the rights of the oppressed poor. By 1964, Eduardo Frei launched his Christian Democratic presidency around “The Third Way” model of social reform. Brazil’s military coup in 1964 interrupted numerous promising grass-roots pastoral experiments such as the MEB (Movimento de Educação de Base) literacy movements and the organization of rural labor unions. In the ensuing years, Helder Camara worked patiently to mobilize the CNBB (Brazilian National Bishops’ Conference) around human rights for the poor and the oppressed, those persecuted by the military regime.

Throughout Latin America, a spirit of change and resistance was in the air. Peron returned to Argentina in the early 1970’s to awaken new hopes for non-elite reform in that nation. Neighboring Uruguay saw the Tupamaros capture the world’s imagination with the promise of a new socialist democracy. The 1968 military coup in Peru revealed a new alliance of liberal Army and Church forces dedicated to a “people’s revolution.”

Wherever there was struggle, the Church had to take sides. And wherever there was torture and violation of human rights, the Church had to hope and provide sanctuary. These new practical postures inevitably bred a new theory, a revolutionary brand of theology.

III. SALIENT THEMES AND METHODOLOGY

The writings of early liberation theologians contain a common pattern of central themes, including the hope of liberation from captivity founded on God's political deliverance of his chosen people. The themes also include a critical judgment which renders loyalty to a structurally unjust *status quo* a treason of the Gospel; a new exegesis of institutionalized violence met by the counter-violence of resistance; an interpretation of the poor as both a social class and as the privileged bearers of God's word; a critical questioning of the legitimacy of private property; a Christology with anthropological rather than ecclesiological emphases; the incorporation of class struggle into the Christian concept of reconciliation; and an emphasis on the need for political commitment in all efforts to achieve change.

Latin liberation theologians resurrected the Old Testament themes of prophecy (the voice of the voiceless raised in defense of widows and orphans) and the insistence that true sacrifice and worship consist in accomplishing justice. Social sin assumes a central place in their moral preaching—one has to *denounce* the present sinful structures in order to *announce* the coming Kingdom of God. The distinction between collective guilt and collective responsibility implies a new urgency for them. The French theologian, Pierre Antoine, had analyzed that distinction in the following terms:

Individuals, groups and nations which, even by ethical means, have secured themselves an advantageous, strong and prosperous position in the world, and by so doing have impeded (even if only indirectly because goods available on this planet are limited) the economic development or the social promotion of other individuals or other peoples, are responsible to the latter for their deprivation and they ought to remedy it, by making use of the very possibilities which their better position confers on them. . . . *An obligation rooted in justice can exist, as a consequence of our acts, even when no fault of injustice has been committed.*¹⁰

Liberation theologians are distinguished from their traditional counterparts not only by their roster of themes, but also by their methodology, their existential way of reading the signs of the times. They appeal to empirical research

10. Antoine, *Responsabilité sociale de la personne*, 1959 REVUE DE L'ACTION POPULAIRE 1055, 1059 (translation by present author).

and the social sciences, rejecting earlier deductive approaches and the appeal to authority.

Latin American liberation theology is traceable to two sources: European political theology and the critical reflection conducted by Latins on the innovative praxis of basic Christian communities on their continent. After Medellin (1968), however, liberation theology rapidly took a form of its own and freed itself of European influences.

IV. THE PRESENT SITUATION

Latin American theologians have benefited greatly from criticisms voiced by their Asian and African counterparts. Asian Christians fear that Latins may be too triumphalistic and uncritically assume that a Christian culture lies in the background of all Third World societies. In countries like India and Sri Lanka, however, Christians constitute a tiny minority of the population and cannot realistically aspire to shape society at large in accord with Gospel values. Their task as agents of liberation, therefore, is to collaborate with others in defending human rights, promoting authentic development, and protecting cultural identity.

Africans, in turn, view the Latin stress on class struggle as largely irrelevant to their own struggle for racial justice. African blacks know that they need allies from all classes if they are to achieve racial liberation. Consequently, their analysis of systemic sin is not structured around class concepts.

Latin liberation theologians have also received responses from the church at large, which are certainly no less important than constructive criticism coming from fellow Christians in other continents. Latin America's hierarchical establishment has moved sharply to the right, with its collective stance at Puebla (1979) reversing many of the progressive postures taken earlier at Medellin. At the Puebla meeting, conservative bishops vetoed the official participation of liberation theologians, even those personally chosen as theological advisors (*periti*) by individual bishops. More recent disputes over the writings of the Brazilian theologian, Leonardo Boff, have brought to light sharp differences between the Brazilian episcopate and the Vatican bureaucracy. And earlier, of course, the assassination of Oscar Romero by right-wingers in El Salvador had sharply polarized the Church in that country.

Latin theologians have matured greatly under the twin goads of historical challenges and criticism from within their own Church. They now recognize the dangers of reduction-

ism present in some of their early formulations. This danger was perhaps most clearly expressed by the French spiritual theologian Rene Voillaume when analyzing the twin temptation faced by the Christian:

[t]o commit himself with his whole being to all sorts of scientific, economic, social and political activities, so as to bring Christian influence to bear on the structure of tomorrow's world, at the possible cost of reducing Christianity to being no more than the best solution to worldly problems, *de facto* if not *de jure*, and losing the sense of a spiritual kingdom, of the transcendent nature of Christ's mission, of worship, and of the divine supernatural destiny of all humanity.¹¹

As previously stated, since 1968, the Church at large has shifted to the right. Perhaps this is not unequivocally the case, for the signals are mixed. Indeed Pope John Paul II's words bring solace to all factions, and his actions are interpreted by all as providing warrant for their own choices. Notwithstanding the issuance of a highly critical "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation,"¹² the Vatican has promised to issue a second, more "positive," statement on the matter.

If Latin American theology of liberation has now entered a new phase, so has the Church at large. Twenty years after Vatican II, Rome has created a Pontifical Institute for Culture whose mission is to dialogue with the modern world. And the Catholic Church in the United States, formerly a consumer of theology of liberation, is now beginning to challenge the systemic and structural evils of its own society. The U.S. bishops are timidly groping for a more prophetic stance toward society, as evidenced in the pastoral letters on nuclear war and on the U.S. economy. Nevertheless, the U.S. Church remains far from adopting a theology of relinquishment or emancipation, which represents the other side of the coin of theology of liberation.¹³ Although new ecclesial models have been adumbrated by the process used to draft the recent pastoral letters, that model has not penetrated parish life nor has it found its way into the conduct of synods or in the redefini-

11. 2 R. VOILLAUME, *AU COEUR DES MASSES* 532-33 (1969) (translation by present author).

12. August 6, 1984.

13. M.A. NEAL, *A SOCIO-THEOLOGY OF LETTING GO: THE ROLE OF A FIRST WORLD CHURCH FACING THIRD WORLD PEOPLES* (1977).

tion of women's roles in the Church.

V. THE STAKES

Liberation theologians see themselves as playing for high stakes. For them, what is at issue, and at risk, is nothing less than the nature of the Church. Will the Church be merely a sociological bureaucracy, or a prophetic sacrament of God the Liberator? Will the Christian community become a champion of vested interests or of the Gospel poor? Throughout the Third World—in India, Indochina, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Latin America—the Christian Cross accompanied the sword of colonial conquest. Can this unholy alliance now be unmade so that Christianity will incarnate the integral liberation of God's people in history? Latin theologians firmly believe that Jesus is Lord of history and that the Spirit moves through human causal agents, collective movements as well as personal actors. For this reason, they gladly assume the mantle of God's co-creators and co-liberators, "ransoming the time," to use St. Paul's phrase.¹⁴

Integral liberation is emancipation from sin and all its consequences, including the institutional and structural expressions of sin—social exploitation, oppression, and privilege. The Church, by making a preferential option for the poor in all countries and in international relations, gives concrete expression to the requirements of the common good in situations of structural injustice.

Ultimately, no real conflict need exist between the so-called "horizontal" Church and the "vertical" Church. As Helder Camara is fond of saying: "Jesus gave us one cross, but it has two bars: one horizontal and one vertical. Christianity needs both. And there is only one Church: of the hierarchy and of the people."¹⁵

VI. LIBERAL SOCIETY: A CRITIQUE

Latin American liberation theologians see no conflict between liberal society as an ideal and their model of the authentically developed society. Their criticisms are aimed elsewhere.

Liberation theologians deny that the United States practices liberal policies, particularly in Latin America, where the

14. *Ephesians* 5:16.

15. Dom Helder Camara, interview with Denis Goulet in Recife, Brazil (June 27, 1985).

powerful nation from the north habitually allies itself with illiberal, dictatorial regimes which are the main props of structurally unjust systems. Domestically, as well, the United States does not match the liberal ideal inasmuch as its apparent affluence for the many marginalizes (and this systemically) millions of poor. Moreover, even if it were granted that prosperity is the lot of the majority in the United States, that blessed condition was achieved historically at an outrageously high price: black slavery over several centuries, the destruction of native Indian communities, exploitation of immigrant labor for a century, and continuing depredations imposed on the Third World.

Liberation theologians do not deny that capitalism brings benefits to North Americans, including the workers and the middle-class descendants of poor immigrants. They simply question the moral validity of a system which exploits the poor while giving the rich good conscience. Liberation theology aims at freeing from their illusions both the uncritical accomplices of impersonal systems of exploitation as well as the victims of those structures. Along with Camus,¹⁶ it believes that a liberal society truly exists only when there are neither victims nor exploiters.

16. A. CAMUS, *NEITHER VICTIMS NOR EXECUTIONERS* (1972).

