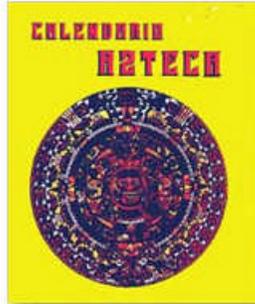

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BIO PHILOSOPHY HUMANISM SOCINIAN



**LIBERATION THEOLOGY:
RELIGIOUS RESPONSE TO
SOCIAL PROBLEMS. A SURVEY**

Published in Humanism and Social Issues. Anthology of Essays. M. Hillar and H.R. Leuchtag, eds., American Humanist Association, Houston, 1993, pp. 35-52.

Marian Hillar

INTRODUCTION

In the late 60s a new social and intellectual movement appeared on the Latin American continent. The movement is rooted in the Christian faith and Scriptures and seeks its ideological superstructure based on the religious reflection in close association with the Church organization(1). It is typical not only for Latin America but for the entire Third World and any social situation of oppression.

Members of the religious orders are committed to the vow of poverty and do not own property individually, nevertheless they enjoy a standard of living and security that separates them from the daily agony of the poor. The question then arose for some of them what is the ideal of poverty in a situation where most are suffering dehumanizing poverty, and what should the Church and Christians do about it?

Liberation theology thus emerged as a result of a systematic, disciplined reflection on Christian faith and its implications. The theologians who formulated liberation theology usually do not teach in universities and seminaries, they are a small group of Catholic or Protestant clergy and have direct contact with the grass-roots groups as advisors to priests, sisters or pastors. Since they spend at least some time working directly with the poor themselves(2), the questions they deal with arise out of their direct contact with the poor. Liberation theology interprets the Bible and the key Christian doctrines through the experiences of

the poor. It also helps the poor to interpret their own faith in a new way. It deals with Jesus's life and message. The poor learn to read the Scripture in a way that affirms their dignity and self worth and their right to struggle together for a more decent life. The poverty of people is largely a product of the way society is organized therefore liberation theology is a "critique of economic structures". Phillip Berryman described the liberation theology in the following terms:

"Liberation theology is:

1. An interpretation of Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor;
2. A critique of society and the ideologies sustaining it;
3. A critique of the activity of the church and of Christians from the angle of the poor".

NORTH AND SOUTH

Unlike in North America the Catholic Church was a major part of the machinery of conquest and colonization in Latin America. It all began with a decree from pope Alexander VI who, in 1492, divided the world not yet under the Christian rule between the Spanish and Portuguese monarchs and conferred to them the right and duty to propagate the Catholic faith. The conquest was done with unbelievable cruelty and complete disregard to any human decency to say nothing of the presumed ethical values of Christianity. There were only sporadic individual protests from some missionaries of conquest like Bartolomé de las Casas in Hispaniola (XVIth century) or from the bishop of Nicaragua, Antonio de Valdivieso (stabbed to death in 1550). The conquistadores imposed a model of Christendom where civil and religious authorities were connected - religious authority being a ruling one and the civil authority executing the orders of the religious one. Clergy remained predominantly in the cities and towns serving primarily the ruling class (e.g., in schools) and enjoyed all the comforts provided by a privileged status and the ownership of land. During the independence movement in the 19th century, bishops sided with the Spanish crown, and popes made pronouncements against the struggle for independence(3).

The social and political structure imposed on the continent had its roots in the ecclesial doctrines formulated by Thomas Aquinas. In such a religiously dominated society there was no room for innovation, for social mobility, for free and spontaneous thinking, for democracy and democratic institutions. Society represented a rigid, hierarchical, feudal structure fixed once for ever, resembling the ecclesiastical institution. All this was quite opposite to the society developed in the North.

SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

The theology of liberation, though explicitly mentioned for the first time in 1968 in a speech by a Peruvian theologian delivered in the fishing port of Chimbote, has roots in religious and social movements that swept the Latin American continent in the 50s. Catholic bishops were concerned with the increasing influence of Protestant missionaries, the growing secularization of the population and the spreading of communist ideas (these were topics of the first plenary meeting of CELAM - Latin American Bishops' Conference - in 1955 in Río de Janeiro). Church problems were aggravated by the lack of clergy to serve poor people in the country and the visible complicity of the Church with an unjust social order. The social situation in Latin American countries gave rise to revolutionary movements in Cuba, Venezuela, Guatemala, and Peru. In Brazil, peasants became militant and the radicalized middle-class people went to work directly with the poor. A Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire(4), developed a new method for teaching literacy to the masses of peasants through the process of "conscientização", consciousness-raising. All these movements and problems arose directly from the conditions of abject poverty, how 70% of the population lived. In a socio-economic analysis of the structure of Latin American society, some Christians and missionaries began to utilize Marxist tools (5) without, of course, embracing the philosophy of dialectical materialism.

The missionaries raised questions of the theological significance of a social revolution. On the religious plane, a strong impetus for changes and new vision of the world came from the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)(6). Latin American bishops insisted that the final documents should deal

with the issues of development and human progress as a historical imperative. One statement of a Latin American bishop is especially significant: "Authentic socialism is Christianity lived to the full, in basic equality and with a fair distribution of goods" (7). Father Camilo Torres exemplifies this new attitude. He realized the need for a United Front linking together peasants, workers, slum dwellers, and professionals for basic changes. He expressed the need of revolution for implementing the fundamental changes in the economic, social and political structures. The essence of revolution was the removal of power from the privileged to the poor majorities. Revolution could be peaceful if the privileged elites did not put up a violent resistance, and the Christians should become involved. He sacrificed his own life in the struggle in 1966. On the international plane, social scientists emphasized that underdevelopment was structurally conditioned by the exploitation by foreign economic powers maintaining Latin America in a system of dependency on hegemonic centers. Such a system of oppression calls for ethical indignation. The encyclical of pope Paul VI "Populorum Progressio" (1967) (8) critiqued the international economic order, explicitly condemned the capitalistic system as presently known for the social evils and called for development through consensus rather than struggle:

"[It is a system] ... which considers profit as the key motive for economic progress, competition as the supreme law of economics, and private ownership of the means of production as an absolute right that has no limits and carries no corresponding social obligation".

"We know ... that revolutionary uprising - save where there is manifest long-standing tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good of the country - produces new injustices, throws more elements out of balance and brings on new disasters".

The Magna Charta of the new pastoral approach to social problems became the documents of the second plenary meeting of CELAM convened in Medellín (9), Colombia (1968). They called for the Christians to be involved in the transformation of society; denounced institutionalized violence and named it a "situation of sin"; called for renovating societal changes; called for the defense of human rights; called for consciousness-raising evangelization and spoke of "comunidades de base" - lay-led groups of Christians as basic organic units of society and pastoral activity. The documents often used the term liberation and spoke of the interrelationship between liberation and evangelization:

"The Church ... has the duty to proclaim the liberation of millions of human beings, many of whom are her own children ... This is not foreign to evangelization "

The general assumption was that basic changes would come through a conversion on the part of the privileged and powerful. Revolutionaries were defined as those who sought radical changes and who believed that people should chart their own course and not as those who were using violence.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

Facing enormous problems in the society, some theologians realized that the traditional theology concerned with religious dogmas and abstract religious concepts lost any relevance. It became an abstract speculation removed from the original spirit of the Gospel message and out of touch with real life. On the social level it served the rich. They realized that if one really cared for and believed in the Christian ideals, one had to answer the question: how to be a Christian in a concrete historical situation? The basic concerns in Latin America shifted thus from "whether one can believe what Christianity affirms to what relevance Christianity has in the struggle for a more just world." (10) Out of such considerations was born "liberation theology," outlined for the first time by a Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez a few weeks before the Medellín conference. Gutierrez (11) defined theology as a "critical reflection on praxis in the light of the word of God." Liberation theology has two basic principles: first, it recognizes a need for liberation from any kind of oppression - political, economic, social, sexual, racial, religious; second, it asserts that the theology must grow out of the basic Christian communities and should not be imposed from above, that is, from the infallible source book or from the magisterium of an infallible Church. It explores the theological meaning of human activities:

1. It interprets Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor;

2. It critiques society and ideologies sustaining it, pretends not to lay down specific rules for how to struggle for justice, but stresses that a responsible commitment with class conflict is an expression of love for one's neighbor. Through solidarity with the poor theologians of liberation advocate the transcendence from class division to a new type of society;

3. It critiques the activity of the Church from the angle of the poor.

The main theme, liberation, is considered at three levels of meaning which are interconnected. At the social and political level liberation is an expression of aspirations of the oppressed classes and peoples. This liberation emphasizes the conflict in the economical, social and political process between the oppressed and the oppressors. At the human level the liberation is conceived as a historical process in which people develop consciously their own destiny through the social changes. At the religious, salvific level the liberation means liberation from sin, the ultimate source of all deviation from fraternity, of all injustice and oppression. It brings man back into communion with God and fellow men, which is the radical, total liberation. These three processes cannot be separated, they form a unique, complex process ("proceso unico y complejo"). For the first time sin was formulated in social terms as a concrete social act and not in traditional way as an abstract, and even an allegoric personification in the person of satan, or at best, a personal act. For the first time the religious, salvific plan was explicitly linked to the human experience in a society.

PRIORITY OF PRAXIS OVER THEORY

Direct source of liberation theology was the personal experience of many priests, pastoral workers and sisters who in the 60s made an effort and came close to the poor. It grew out of their reflections. E.g. Brazilian theologian Clodovis Boff spends half a year working among the poor in the state of Acre.(12) Theologians of liberation are thus "organic intellectuals" who can bridge the sharp class barrier in Latin American society. Gutierrez and other liberation theologians (13) insist that theology is a secondary reflection, the first commitment being the work among the poor. The shift is from the abstract speculation to living one's faith. This emphasis on the primacy of praxis over the abstract contrasts with the Catholic orthodoxy. Traditionally, priests preached resignation to "God's will" in a way that it reinforced the belief that the present distribution of wealth and power comes from God. Peasant society indoctrinated this way tended to internalize a fixed and even fatalistic view of the universe with symbols and rationalizations.

Gutierrez (14) found three meanings of poverty: the dehumanizing lack of material goods, the openness to God and commitment to solidarity. The Bible understands material poverty as an evil resulting from the oppression of some people by others. Therefore the Medellín document (15) suggests that a poor Church denounces the unjust lack of goods in this world and the sin that causes it, preaches and lives spiritual poverty as an attitude of spiritual openness to God and commits itself to poverty. Voluntary poverty is considered an act of love and liberation, of solidarity with the poor and those who suffer injustice. This commitment calls for giving up the relatively comfortable life and going to a barrio or a rural area to live with the people. By this act the clergy still would not become poor themselves. Next they have to develop a model of activities based on the work of Paulo Freire. The encyclical "Redemptor Hominis" (16) is pervaded by the perspective of liberation:

"Injustice, the exploitation of some human beings by others, the exploitation of the human being by the state, institutions, and mechanisms of economic systems, must be called by their name."

"... liberation must be inserted into the entire contemporary reality of human life."

"... liberation is a faith reality, one of the basic biblical themes, deeply inscribed in the salvific mission of Christ, in the work of redemption, and in his teaching."

The praxis of liberation theology finds its embodiment in the Christian ecclesial base communities. They are small, lay-led groups of Christians that see themselves as part of the Church and work together to improve their lot and establish a more just society. Base communities were a result of pastoral problems related to the lack of clergy in the country. They had their antecedents in the activity of Catholic Action in

Belgium and in "cursillos de Cristianidad" - a kind of weekend retreats - in Spain. In Latin America they combined the social and educational function with the pastoral activity. Their primary motivation is religiosity based on popular religiosity embodying the cults of the saints and Virgin Mary. (This popular religiosity may be an uncorrupted illustration of Karl Barth's definition of religion: all religions in history represent human effort to reach God and in fact are forms of idolatry). They were modeled on the work of Paulo Freire. They include several activities like teaching peasants to read and write, organize self-help, and raising their self-consciousness(17). Slowly some clergy adopted this method for "reevangelization of adults" meaning by this term spreading of the message of Christ to its fullness. Such evangelization covered the topics like sources of poverty and social injustice, community questions in human relations, religious tenets and assertions etc., all this in close connection with the Bible. Base communities have an enormous impact on society. They constitute the initial step in raising the consciousness of the people by giving them a broad perspective on their role and place in the society, they help people to project their vision of life and motivate them for involvement. Such communities develop a sense of solidarity within the group; generate mutual aid and support; they serve as a training ground for the experience of democracy and direct their social and political actions.

As a whole, these communities do not fit into the traditional vertical, hierarchical authority system of the Catholic Church. At some point the powerful and the Church hierarchy itself saw the community as a threat to its domination (18) and used intimidation and violence against them. However, there is no way now to turn the clock back, therefore some bishops opted to include base communities in the overall ecclesial structure and subordinate them to their rule and control as a cell in their organization. The conclusions of the Medellín conference were confirmed by CELAM meeting in Puebla (1979) (19):

"We see the growing gap between rich and poor as a scandal and a contradiction to Christian existence. The luxury of a few becomes an insult to the wretched poverty of the vast masses".

"Analyzing this situation more deeply, we discover that this poverty is not a passing phase. Instead it is the product of economic, social, and political situations and structures, though there are also other causes for the state of misery. In many instances this state of poverty within our countries finds its origin and support in mechanisms which, because they are impregnated with materialism rather than any authentic humanism, create a situation on the international level where the rich get richer at the expense of the poor who get ever poorer".

It was a great victory for the theologians of liberation when the Puebla conference adopted the vocabulary and the themes of liberation theology.

HISTORY AS A FOCUS OF THEOLOGY

The liberating message of the Gospel does not identify any social form as just. It permeates the total historical realization and places it in a broader perspective of the radical salvation. Only when the Gospel message is not implemented in life then it becomes inevitable to search for an ideology that would justify a determined social situation. For believers, therefore, the evangelization is liberating since it announces the radical liberation that includes the transformation of historical and political conditions in which they live. But without considering the social and political reality, the analysis would lack the depth and would fall into another extreme of spiritual reductionism equally erroneous, according to the theologians of the liberation theology. For many theologians appeals to eschatological "beyond" have no relevance, they must be rooted in the historical present or rejected.

In the theological literature one can find frequent references and allusions to Marxism and Marx, in the social and economical analysis. It does not mean the acceptance of marxism, and especially, of course, the concept of life, its philosophy to the exclusion of the Christian faith. Some go so far as to affirm that there is no systematic theology in North America today without the analysis of Marx.

In the realm of international relations the theologians of liberation adopt, in a somewhat naïve and simplistic way, the dependence theory which maintains that the underdeveloped countries were set up as main producers of raw materials and agricultural products by an international division of labor (20). It entails also the political dependence. Medellín Conference (1968) and Secretariat General of Celam (1973) accepted the dependence as a fact. "Nos referimos aquí, particularmente, a las consecuencias que

entreña para nuestros países su dependencia de un centro de poder económico, en torno al cual gravitan. De allí resulta que nuestras naciones, con frecuencia, no son dueñas de sus bienes ni de sus decisiones económicas. Como es obvio, esto no deja de tener sus incidencias en lo político, dada la interdependencia que existe entre ambos campos." And: "... la dependencia parece como un hecho ... sobre ese hecho se elabora una teoría que esta en búsqueda, que se critica a sí misma ... La teología de la liberación tiene en cuenta la teoría de la dependencia y es imposible, al mismo tiempo, no tener en cuenta la teoría de la dependencia. Y la tiene en cuenta con su sentido crítico, sin embargo, la teología de la liberación debe ser más atenta a estas variaciones y a estas críticas en la teoría de la dependencia, evitar generalización, enriquecerse con otro tipo de análisis y de niveles."(21)

READING THE BIBLE

Reading the Bible and interpreting it from the viewpoint of the poor is an essential element in the theology of liberation (22). Without that religious aspect, the theology of liberation would be just an extension of social analysis. A few examples will give a clear idea of what is involved in here. In the story of Genesis, creationism is not an issue. The peasant masses are able to appreciate the poetical account of creation better than anyone else since it deals with the objects of their everyday experience. Liberation theology stresses the goodness of creation, the dignity of the poor as God's image and their dominion over the earth and their rights to its fruits (it cannot escape in this analysis that only few own the land - "tierra"). Sin assumes social dimensions in the story of Cain and Abel and is not rooted in the story of Adam and Eve (the traditional basis of the abstract and mythical concept of the sin). The story of Exodus becomes a prototype of liberation constituting a basic paradigm of God's saving action. Little attention is given to the miraculous, the emphasis being put on the oppressive rule and liberation. Prophets and prophecies are seen as conscientizers of the people. Christ is a figure representing struggle, death, and vindication - in short - liberation:

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore, he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19)

No doubt this reads like a social manifesto! Jesus himself lived like a poor, in real material poverty, not a spiritual one. His criterion of a just life was practical material aid for one's neighbor! Jesus made enemies by denouncing the organized and ritualized religion of his time that was not committed to the love of one's neighbor. He was executed by the order of the Church authority that felt threatened in its organization and power. The New Testamental communities of the faithful are seen as the first "comunidades de base". How revealing this reading of the Bible is in the light of the fact that the Catholic Church also felt that its power was threatened by the base communities and objected to that aspect of the theology of liberation. It did not hesitate to use intimidation and silencing on the most prominent expounder of liberation theology, Leonardo Boff (23). Also as an excuse for persecution of the theologians of liberation the Church hierarchy used their presumed espousal of the Marxist doctrines. Liberation theology is thus based on the Bible. However, Bible is not taken literally, but symbolically as a sign.

METHODOLOGY

From the discussion presented we deduce three basic planes of operation or mediation of liberation theology (24):

1. The socio-analytical i.e., the perception of social reality. In this context it is the condemnation of the capitalistic system as the source of evils (explicitly expressed in the quoted fragment of "Populorum Progressio");
2. The hermeneutic i.e., the theological reading of social reality in the light of faith based on the Bible. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff (25) succinctly formulated it in this way:

"... Faith helps the Christian endorse and support those historical movements that have a greater affinity with the ideals of the gospel. Today, for example, we perceive that the Christian ideal is closer to socialism than to capitalism. It is not a matter of creating a Christian socialism. It is a matter of being

able to say that the socialist system, when actually carried out in reality, enables Christians better to live the humanitarian and divine ideals of their faith";

3. The pastoral service, the praxis i.e. search for the viable avenues for the praxis and embodiment of the theology of liberation in pastoral activity. Again we find a formulation of it in the Boffs' work:

"... Church has the duty to act as agent of liberation. It must attempt to articulate its words, its catechesis, its liturgy, its community action, and its interventions with established authority, in the direction of liberation."

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the social situation by concerned Church workers leads to the formulation of a social theory and provides a tool for liberation theology. The social theory becomes dialectical if it envisions the possibility of a systematic change. Liberation theology too opts for the social changes. Often the Marxist analysis is selected as the best suited tool to describe the socio-economic situation.

The Church hierarchy itself has a difficulty in choosing either the socialist or the capitalistic system, both with their advantages and limitations, as the model to be propagated for current economic structures.

Interesting is that throughout all the deliberations and sincerity of the theologians of liberation, not a single word was said about the disparity between the overgrowth of population and the economic growth in countries with endemic poverty.

In the realm of international relations the theology of liberation adopts, not with a certain naïveté, after certain Church pronouncements, the dependence theory which maintains that the underdeveloped countries were set up as main producers of raw materials and agricultural products by an international division of labor.

The main theme of the theology of liberation - liberation - is understood as a break with the present order, an integral development, and an embracing of its three levels of meaning (Gutierrez) (26):

1. an aspiration of the poor and liberation from oppression;
2. gradual expansion of freedom and actualization of the ability of human beings to take charge of their own destiny;
3. on the religious level, attainment of freedom of Christ as a communion with God and with other human beings.

The liberation thus is a complex process and for a liberation theologian it has human, historical and political dimensions of salvation. For an atheist, agnostic or Marxist, the liberation process has a purely historical sense and nothing else. Salvation is the artificial transcendent dimension of liberation. The traditional Catholic view was that our earthly life was a transitory phase to the way of heaven, treated as a trial. This tradition is reversed by the theology of liberation which asserts that there is a continuity between the temporal process and ultimate transcendence. The Church and Christians should be involved in human history - the one human history where people are shaping their destiny! The theology of liberation says that politics is the most important dominant dimension today. After the Medellín meeting, the reactionary forces mounted an offensive against the new way of thinking. The attack came from the CIA and conservative, traditional circles of the Church. Bishop Alfonso Trujillo and Belgian Jesuit Roger Vekemans organized a campaign and eventually bishop Trujillo became elected the secretary of the CELAM. The encyclical of Paul VI "Octogesima Adveniens" (27) (1971) suggested caution and restraint. At the same time repression against progressive clergy and archbishop Helder Camara, later also against Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and others (28), was instigated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. During the preparation for the CELAM conference in Puebla, the preparatory document was rejected by the conservative bishops. However, the final document was accepted upon the insistence of the Latin American bishops. The document is rather inconclusive, and tries to replace the liberation

theology terminology. In 1973, Trilateral Commission was instituted in the U.S., primarily as a means to making imperial domination function more smoothly under the cover of the advocacy of human rights and the ideology of national security (29). The Church hierarchy shows essentially a devious character. It claims not to be involved in politics, however, it sides explicitly with one side only depending on the convenience of the situation. In a new situation in the modern world and the new Church-State relationship, the Church is losing control over societies. This new situation is sometimes defined as the end of Christendom understood as the unity of Church and State. The Church therefore feels threatened and some members of its hierarchy are searching for a new justification of its existence.

Liberation theology may be the solution. It happens that the Marxist analysis serves heuristically to discern the evil of the social injustice and pose the questions. Some see the convergence between the Marxist analysis and the original Christian ideals. Both ideologies are striving for a utopia, one for a classless society, the other for a Kingdom of God. Thus Marxist socio-economical analysis is fully vindicated in liberation theology. Traditionally, the Church claimed to be the Kingdom of God. Liberation theology redresses the errors of the Church, reminding it to serve the Kingdom of God, but understood as an earthly affair. Its service should consist of the ongoing humanization of the human realm at every level and in every situation.

The theology of liberation is not unique to Central and South America. Parallel movements exist in Africa and Asia and in various cultures with various religions or ideologies. They represent a reaction against the European and North American theological establishment. In Asian cultures, people talk about "liberation both human and cosmic" which represents a struggle for a full humanity. The foundation is cosmic religion - the attitude of all human beings vis-à-vis Nature. Non-Christian religions do not envision the ultimate reality as a "personal being", therefore are metatheistic or nontheistic. The starting point for collaboration between the Christians and non-Christians is liberation. (30)

As the Protestant Reformation began as a revolt against corrupt practices in the Roman Catholic Church stressing the personal convictions and was more in tune with the modern age than Roman Catholicism, so the liberation theology is also a manifestation of a new worldwide movement for human emancipation. It constitutes a new, timely phenomenon and strives to implement the full realization of a human being in harmony with the Nature and for the believer, in harmony with the original Christian message.

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