Liberation Theology and Salvation: An Introduction

There is a theology which has gained ground since the late 1960's which is featured regularly in the press. It attempts to practise theology in a new way, looking at the Church's involvement in politics, and comes out on the side of the poor against those who are the cause and upholders of oppression.

Liberation Theology was born as a movement of protest within the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. In this country, ever since Gustavo Gutierrez's 'Theology of Liberation' was translated into English in 1974, there has been a steady growth of material written on the subject of Liberation Theology. There are great differences between Liberation Theology and traditional Western Theology, not least in the area of salvation where it seems there is a dispute as to whether salvation should be defined in a physical or a spiritual sense.

Definition

One of the problems we face as we try to define Liberation Theology is that because it emerges from situations of oppression which differ from place to place, it is necessarily expressed in different ways. Salvation will therefore be expressed in different terms by different theologians.

Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian theologian, defines the theology of liberation. He says it is a theological reflection "based on the gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation in the oppressed and exploited land of Latin America. It is a theological reflection born of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society freer and more human". Gutierrez rejects any dichotomy between redemption from sin and liberation from social expression of sin, as do many of the liberation theologians. This is not to say that they are uninterested in sin. They tend to see sin as a corporate or structural evil rather than something which is personal. Some liberation theologians do not talk about liberation from personal sin at all. The most important act for liberation theologians is involvement in the liberation process. The oppressed should be set free. Theology comes afterwards as a second act.

We can see that Liberation Theology wants liberation for people from all kinds of oppression. The message of Jesus, according to Leonardo Boff is "of a radical and total liberation of the human condition from all its alienating elements". One could interpret this as including liberation from personal sin, but Boff does not include that idea here at all.

Important words and concepts for liberation theologians are "social justice" and "human rights". For many of the liberation theologians these things are of supreme importance and are talked about continually. As far as most liberation theologians are concerned, socialism is the road for Christians, and they see capitalism as evil. Therefore it is not surprising that liberation theology takes Marxism very seriously and is influenced by Marxist thought. J. Andrew Kirk
says that liberation theology begins not only from a Marxist analysis of society's structures as oppressive, but from a practical identification with a process that will change them. Is this the case? How important is Marxism to liberation theology? Do liberation theologians just use parts of Marxist thought, or is Marxism dominant in Liberation Theology? We will seek to answer this question in Part Two of this article.

Many liberation theologians would advocate the use of violence to bring about the revolution that will end oppression. Some others believe that the liberation the gospel teaches must be non-violent. However, on one thing all liberation theologians agree, namely that liberation is a sharp reminder in any society that change is often brought about from the bottom up rather than through the actions of the influential 'top' people.

So we conclude that the definition of Liberation Theology overall can be summed up by saying it is an attempt to spell out the social and political implications of the Christian gospel in terms of the liberation of men and women from oppression and injustice. We recognise that the question as to whether or not this includes liberation from personal sin is largely left unanswered.

Western Theology

Liberation Theology takes issue with the theology of the West over the West's claim that 'orthodoxy' — correct thinking about Christ — is of the utmost importance. Liberation theologians make a counter claim that 'orthopraxis' — correct acting in the light of Christ — is more important and should be tackled first. Boff claims that

"liberative praxis constitutes the surest road to the God of Jesus Christ."

So liberation involves action. The oppressed want liberation from their oppression, and they try to work out how this liberation can be procured. People of a like mind group together and form 'base communities' and protest groups. Discussions between oppressed and oppressors may take place, but in most cases a general uprising of the people is anticipated and is often seen as the only way effectively to procure liberation.

We now move on to another important teaching of liberation theology, that of the historical Jesus. Liberation theologians put up the claim that theologians in the West proclaim a Jesus who is the 'Christ of faith', whereas they believe it is of fundamental importance to look behind the Christ of faith and come up with the 'Jesus of history'. As we study how Jesus acted in his day, we can see how as Christians we can act today in light of this.

Sobrino's starting point in his 'Christology at the Crossroads' is the historical Jesus. There is, however, much debate as to whether or not the historical Jesus can be found. We will again leave the discussion of this issue until Part Two.

Another concept which seems to be important for liberation theologians is the 'Kingdom of God'. The Kingdom of God was important for Jesus who saw it as a present reality. Jesus claimed that the Kingdom of God came through what he said and what he did. This was very hard for the people listening because Jesus acted in ways alien to their practices. The miracles were signs that the Kingdom of God had come and yet Jesus prayed "Thy Kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10/Luke 11:2), which suggests it was still something in the future. So there can be seen tensions in Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God. It could be, however, that although in one sense the Kingdom had come with the coming of Jesus, it would not be fully realized until some future date, traditionally the Second Coming.
Liberation theologians move somewhat along this line in as much as they see the Kingdom of God as a present reality. They see the Kingdom as being most evident among the poor and oppressed. As oppressive regimes are overthrown, probably through revolution, the Kingdom of God is ushered in. Christians can therefore speed up the process of ushering in the Kingdom of God by ridding the world of oppression. Boff argues that Christ did not begin by preaching himself but the Kingdom of God. He claims that Christians in the West have got things wrong and now preach Christ instead of the Kingdom. Sobrino quotes Karl Rahner on this very point, "Jesus preached the Kingdom of God not himself". R. Ruether says that Liberation Theology restores the Kingdom of God to the centre of the Christian message and like Jesus' message, the message of the Church is to announce the Kingdom.

Liberation theologians' views of the Kingdom of God do not all agree. In some cases their view of the Kingdom of God is very like a Marxist view of Utopia. Indeed Miranda clearly sees the Kingdom of God as Communism. In other cases the Kingdom of God is something which starts on this earth and is ushered in by the abolition of exploitation, but reaches its culmination in the eschatological future. As Moltmann says, "The church in the power of the Spirit is not yet the Kingdom of God but it is its anticipation in history." Not only do the liberation theologians look to the liberative actions of the historical Jesus, and his teaching and demonstration of the kingdom of God, they also look to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Boff points out that "Jesus, in order to bring salvation and liberation, first passed through suffering and death". He sees the resurrection as the realization of Jesus' announcement of total liberation especially from the reign of death.

**Biblical foundation**

Liberation theologians have a number of important texts in the Bible, to which they turn in support of their doctrine of liberation. Let us look at such texts:

The 'Exodus' is of extreme importance to Liberation Theology. (Exodus 6:6-7) Andrew Kirk points out that in the theology of liberation a reinterpretation of the Exodus is taken up, in terms of the greater and deeper deliverance which Christ effects through his death and resurrection, forming a new creation, not now of one nation, but of the whole of mankind. Allan Boesak claims that "One can safely say that the Exodus-event is as central to the Old Testament as is the resurrection to the New". Gutierrez says that liberation from Egypt is an event that will be re-read again and again to shed light on other historical interventions of Yahweh. The Exodus is seen as an event which should take place in every situation of oppression.

Liberation theologians also point in the Bible to the Messianic prophecies of the future king as the establisher of justice and the liberator of the poor (Isaiah 9:5-7; Isaiah 11:1-9; Jeremiah 23:2-8; Ezekiel 34:23-27) The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) is also pointed to here. In the New Testament, there is a passage in Luke chapter 4 which lies at the heart of the theology of liberation. Jesus applies these words to himself where he says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord". (Luke 4:18-19)
This passage, according to Boesak, ties together the main thrust of several Old Testament passages, Isaiah 61:1; Isaiah 58; Isaiah 52:7; and Psalm 107:20. But he claims that many Western commentators take little or no notice of this passage. Boesak seems to feel that this passage is side-stepped by Western theologians. By spiritualizing it rather than taking it at face value they do not see it as a model for Christians to follow. He also claims that some people in their commentaries pass no comment on this passage at all.\textsuperscript{12}

This passage from Luke 4 comes up time and time again in the writings of the liberation theologians. Jesus is seen very much as the Liberator. But Gutierrez does feel there is a problem with this and asks the question, “Why when Jesus defined his mission in terms of the liberation of the oppressed did he leave an entire people still in slavery?”\textsuperscript{13}

Perhaps it is just worth noting that it is not only liberation theologians who see Jesus as the Liberator. John Robinson says that Jesus as Liberator is one of three understandings Jesus had at different times of his ministry.\textsuperscript{14}

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\textbf{Salvation within Liberation Theology}
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Kirk points out that one of the chief tasks of the theology of liberation for Gutierrez is to reflect on the relationship between salvation and the historical process of man’s liberation. Salvation is the key concept which explains the work of Christ as Liberator. Segundo argues from Paul’s ‘Adam/Christ’ teaching that salvation is for all. Man is saved when he puts himself within the sphere of the continuation of Christ’s saving work of liberating the oppressed.\textsuperscript{15}

Ruether feels that for liberation theologians, sin means not only alienation from God and personal brokeness of life but also the structural evils of war, racism, sexism and economic exploitation which allow some people to dehumanize others. Therefore for her, salvation means not only reconciliation with God and personal amendment of life, but a commitment to a struggle for a transformed social order where all evils will be overcome.\textsuperscript{16}

Boff sees the essential theme of the Church as salvation meaning social change, creating a more just society.\textsuperscript{17} David Wells points out\textsuperscript{18} that at a meeting of the World Council of Churches at Bangkok in 1973, where the majority of people were from the Third World, the essential definition of salvation which emerged was that of arriving at personal wholeness. To be saved means to realize one’s full potential. In the Third World the socio-economic-political order is often an impediment to this and therefore this order is sin which needs to be overcome. The Council further defined salvation in a number of interconnected dimensions namely that: salvation works in the struggle for economic justice against the exploitation of people by people. Salvation also works in the struggle for human dignity against political oppression of human beings by their fellow men. It is at work in the struggle for solidarity against the alienation of person from person. And finally salvation works in the struggle of hope against despair in personal life.

Wells points out that Bangkok, in its interpretation of salvation, was characterized by strong anti-Western feeling. It is possible that to some extent they have overstated their case. Although in general probably many liberation theologians would be happy with this definition of salvation.

Many liberation theologians, however, neglect the concept of personal forgiveness. It would seem difficult to arrive at personal wholeness ignoring this aspect of personal forgiveness for one’s sin. In Part Two it will be asserted that any view of salvation which neglects personal forgiveness is defective and that, for this reason, Liberation Theology needs to be restated.

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Summary

For Liberation Theology, salvation equals liberation. Salvation is demonstrated by working for liberation, by standing firmly against all oppression, and by identifying with and showing solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.

"Evangelization or the proclamation of the good news is the proclamation of Christ's liberation" \(19\) (Matthew 25:31-45)

"Jesus Christ wanted nothing else in this world but to free all human beings and bring them to complete fulfilment.\(20\)

Jesus said: "I have come that men may have life and may have it in all its fullness". (John 10:10 N.E.B.)

Notes

1. Gutierrez, G Theology of Liberation (1974) ix
2. Boff, L Jesus Christ Liberator (1980) 80
3. ibid 284
4. Sobrino, J Christology at the Crossroads (1976) 9
6. Boff, op cit 281
7. Moltmann, J The Church in the Power of the Spirit (1977) 196
8. Boff, op cit 151
11. Gutierrez, G The Power of the Poor in History (1979) 6
17. Boff, L Church, Charism and Power (1985) 10
18. Wells, D.F The Search for Salvation (1978) 121
19. Gutierrez, G The Power of the Poor in History (1979) 18

Andrew G. Pilcher

1987: That Marvellous Year!

In spite of its sorrows and distresses 1987 was for my wife and me a most marvellous year. Some mournings have been severe indeed. David Evans, a deacon at Sutton, one of the best loved men in Pembrokeshire; Irene Davies the beautiful and well-loved doctor in Narberth and deacon at Bethesda, Haverfordwest, cut off in and even before their prime; my wife's only and younger sister, Dilys Treharne of Cardiff; the passing of these and so many others, fellow-students and students, brings so many gaps and gashes in our earthly fellowship. Illness too in various bodily organs showing where the last enemy will probably make its final attack. But, nevertheless, a year of great experiences and privileges.

The first notable event of the year was the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of the removal of Regent's Park College from Regent's Park in London to its new