

GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

INTERPRETIVE METHODS OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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BY

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Liberation theology uses a sociological method of interpretation of scripture. The emphasis is on the historical context of the one reading the text. The context of the Liberation Theologian is poverty and political oppression. It is concerned with questions like; What is the true gospel? What is the whole gospel? What is the present gospel?, from the perspective of the poor and oppressed.<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>1</sup>Some editing of the format of this paper has been done in order to bring it into closer conformity to the requirements of the Turabian Style Guide.

<sup>2</sup>Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. (Grand Rapids: WBE Publishing Company, 1991), 17.

## MAJOR THEMES OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Liberation Theology as a movement in Latin America came into the forefront at the Bishops conference of 1968 at Medellín, Columbia. The word “Liberation” was used in rejection of the term development, to describe the solution of poverty stricken countries.<sup>3</sup> Poverty exists not because of underdevelopment but because the economic structures create the condition of poverty.<sup>4</sup>

Liberation theology emphasizes that the church needs to be on the side of the poor in a situation of oppression. Also, it emphasizes a holistic salvation in which spiritual and physical needs are met. Although Christ was not politically active, for a liberationist his teaching are can be interpreted as very political in nature.<sup>5</sup>

The Liberation theologian believes that theology that is “done” not something that is just thought about, this is called the *praxis approach*.<sup>6</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, who will be discussed later says that it is through *praxis*, actively being involved in the struggle against oppression, the real



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<sup>3</sup>E.A.Livingstone, *Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 341.

**This is the correct format in Turabian. Most of the subsequent full reference footnotes are not formatted correctly.**

<sup>4</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Salvation in Liberation: In Search of Balance between Faith and Politics*. (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York) 1979, 7

<sup>5</sup> Livingstone,341

<sup>6</sup> Migliore, 15

questions of theology are raised.<sup>7</sup> The bible should be read “from below”, that is through the eyes of those who are oppressed in society. When theology is done this way it promotes a theology that does not promote the maintaining of the status quo, rather insights change.<sup>8</sup>

## HISTORY OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Liberation Theology has its roots in the situation of poverty that exists in Latin American. Therefore understanding the climate from which liberation theology came from is key in understanding liberation theology. The roots go back to the colonial days of Latin America in which “prophets” criticized the way the church handled the situations of the indigenous people and the way the poor were treated.<sup>9</sup>

The governments of Latin American countries in the 50’s and 60’s particularly Peron in Argentina and Vargas in Brazil inspired a nationalistic spirit and a desire to become a “developed” country.<sup>10</sup> After this came a separation of classes in which a large portion of the population was marginalized. The countries became set up in a way in which they were dependent on rich nations for their own economic well-being.<sup>11</sup> There were revolutionary movements against this, which eventually led to the setting up of military dictatorships. These dictatorships maintained their rule through the use of military force and political repression.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Migliore, 15

<sup>8</sup>Migliore, 17

<sup>9</sup>Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*. (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York) available on-line at <http://www.landreform.org/boff2.htm>

<sup>10</sup>Boff

<sup>11</sup>Boff

During the 60's there was a great wave of involvement from the church in the situation of the poor in Latin American. Many programs such as; Young Christian Students, Young Christian Workers, and the Movement for Basic Education created a greater understanding amongst Christians about the situation and living conditions of the poor.<sup>13</sup>

The development of a theology of liberation was helped by the fact that the Vatican II council allowed a lot of freedom of thought.<sup>14</sup> The Catholic Church has had a mistrust of the socialist values that are linked with liberation theology. However, Pope Paul VI was more accepting of criticism of a "liberal capitalism" and private property.<sup>15</sup>

Liberation Theology is associated with the churches role in a specific situation in Latin America but has now spread all over the world.<sup>16</sup> Now Liberation Theology is spreading and has inspired movements around the world, particularly in southern Africa. It has also had influence with churches in the First World who have a concern for social justice.<sup>17</sup> The future of Liberation Theology is uncertain because its methods of biblical interpretation have not gained acceptance and influence in the academic world. Some of the reasons for this will be discussed later.<sup>18</sup>

### **Jürgen Moltmann- a European foundation**

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<sup>12</sup>Boff

<sup>13</sup>Boff

<sup>14</sup>Boff

<sup>15</sup>Robert MacAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key: Responding to Liberation Themes*. (The Westminster Press: Philadelphia) 1978,33

<sup>16</sup>Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*. (Intervarsity Press: Downer Grove, Illinois) 1996, 518

<sup>17</sup>Bray, 518

<sup>18</sup>Bray, 518

One look at his name and one knows that Moltmann is not from Latin America but his ideas are said to be an early influence on liberation theology. He is known as one of the few European theologians who take Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology seriously.<sup>19</sup> He was a professor at the University of Tübingen from 1967 until his retirement in 94.’ Moltmann is a German Reformed theologian whose theology is influenced by his experiences in Nazi Germany. He himself was drafted in the German Army when he seventeen years old.<sup>20</sup>

He had to deal with the embarrassment and guilt for his country and the church after the atrocities on the Jewish people and anguish Nazi Germany brought on the rest of the world. He was left to question why the majority of the German church either actively or supported the Nazi cause rather than stood up against it.<sup>21</sup> He was attracted to the theologies of those Christians who did denounce the Nazi regime such as; Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth.<sup>22</sup>

He believed in a *praxis* of Christian discipleship in which the church is actively involved in the needs of the world.<sup>23</sup> He believed that the church must have a mission to give the “wretched of the earth” a voice. He believes that faith needs to be relevant to the time that is in. He believes that the church must assume responsibility to the world situation. To him the church is “in” the world and must make a contribution to it.<sup>24</sup> The church must make a contribution of

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<sup>19</sup>Thorwald Lorenzen, *Jürgen Moltmann in A New Handbook of Christian Theologians*, Musser, Donald W., Price Joseph L. eds., (Nashville: Abingdon Press) 1996,305

<sup>20</sup>Lorenzen, 304

<sup>21</sup>Lorenzen, 304

<sup>22</sup>Lorenzen,304

<sup>23</sup>Lorenzen, 305

<sup>24</sup>Lorenzen, 307

its' own and find its identity in the cross of Christ who was risen.<sup>25</sup> Theology must not only be something that interprets the world but be something the transforms the world. Theology for Moltmann should not just support the status quo but strive to change the world for the better, in anticipate for the return of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

## **Leonardo Boff**

Leonardo Boff is a Brazilian theologian who began his religious studies at age thirteen. He attended Franciscan high schools and seminaries and was ordained at in 1964.<sup>27</sup> From 1965-70 he pursued graduate studies in Germany and Europe. He received his Doctorate in Theology from Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich, Germany. He later returned to Brazil to continue his studies and received a Ph.D in Philosophy of Religion.<sup>28</sup> He began to consider a theology of liberation when he saw European theology as inadequate to address the problems of poverty and oppression in Latin America.<sup>29</sup>

Boff sees theology as an attempted response to encountering the divine though concrete circumstances of the human experience.<sup>30</sup> He has said, "A theology-any theology-not based on spiritual experience is mere panting-religious breathlessness."<sup>31</sup> Boff sees all believers as theolo-

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<sup>25</sup>Lorenzen, 307

<sup>26</sup>Lorenzen, 307

<sup>27</sup>Otto Maduro, "Leonardo Boff," in *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians*, Musser, Donald w., Price Joseph L. eds., "(Nashville: Abingdon Press) 1996,74

<sup>28</sup>Madurno, 74

<sup>29</sup>Madurno, 74

<sup>30</sup>Madurno, 76

<sup>31</sup>Boff: Liberation in Salvation, 2

gians, this includes the poor and disadvantaged.<sup>32</sup> Orthopraxis(correct acting in the light of Jesus' character) is more important than orthodoxy (correct theology) to Boff.<sup>33</sup> He sees scripture as a compilation of writings by believers about their experience about God. He regards scripture and church tradition and inseparable from theology but not as absolute and beyond critical reflection.<sup>34</sup> For Boff scripture is called into question because it had been used to justify horrible atrocities throughout history.<sup>35</sup> Boff emphasizes an examination of scripture done by those who are poor and oppressed.<sup>36</sup> Boff examines the social factors that have affected theological debates though out history, especially in reference to how the affected the poor.<sup>37</sup>

Boff sees God as the God of the oppressed. He embraces the maternal and feminine attributes of God and rejects a patriarchal view God in favor of seeing God as trans-sexist.<sup>38</sup> "Christology is done in the context of oppression, unjust suffering, and death, such as that's as most Latin American Christians."<sup>39</sup> Through Jesus God has sided with the poor and oppressed not simply because they are poor but because the existence of poverty is opposition to God's jus-

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<sup>32</sup>Madurno, 76

<sup>33</sup>Madurno, 79

<sup>34</sup>Madurno 77

<sup>35</sup>Madurno 77

<sup>36</sup>Madurno 78

<sup>37</sup>Madurno, 78

<sup>38</sup>Madurno, 78

<sup>39</sup>Mandurno, 79



tice. This is important because Jesus preached the reign of God in which evil would be overcome.<sup>40</sup>

In preaching the reign of God there has to a critique of all institutions and that contradict the “divine filtration” of neglect, oppression, discrimination, and violence.<sup>41</sup> This is where the purpose of the church comes in to play. Jesus death brought in the reign of God, and his resurrection confirmed it. Now it the church is to continue in establishing the reign of God.<sup>42</sup> For Boff this means dealing with the poor differently then it has in the past. In the past the church has given the poor assistance of help with out bringing change. Boff sees it as the church’s job to join the poor as a community of faith and in their struggles.<sup>43</sup>

Boff has suffered for his beliefs and teachings in the past. A period of “obsequious silence” was imposed on him in 1985 but was later lifted. Many of his works were censored and he lost his teaching license, he eventually left the Franciscan order.<sup>44</sup>

### **Gustavo Gutierrez**

Gustavo Gutierrez was born in 1928 in Lima, Peru to an economically underprivileged family. He got a lot of his Education in Europe, specifically Belgium and France he later returned to Peru where he was ordained in 1959.<sup>45</sup> Like Boff he found that his formal education did

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<sup>40</sup>Mandurno, 80

<sup>41</sup>Mandurno, 80

<sup>42</sup>Mandurno, 81

<sup>43</sup>Boff in Salvation In Liberation, 3

<sup>44</sup>Madurno, 75

not provide answers to the struggles of the Latin American poor. He went through a time in which he had to “unlearn his hard won education.”<sup>46</sup>

Gutierrez sees theology as two things; first it is a critical reflection of the Christian faith, second it is a reflection on the struggle of the poor.<sup>47</sup> Gutierrez believes that Christians must “enter the world of the poor.” This is not just advocacy but being able to see the world the way they do and follow through with that vision.<sup>48</sup> He believes that the Christian church cannot merely speak on behalf of the poor but must first grow in understanding their way of life and hopes for the future. Gutierrez feels as if traditional theology has ignored the necessity to respond to the class struggles throughout history. However he believes that scripture is not silent on the issue. He points to the liberating language of Paul who says in Galatians 5:1 “For freedom Christ has set us free.” The issue here is sin and sin is the root cause of the conditions for poverty.<sup>49</sup>

The issue of sin and its role in the situation of the poor was very important to Gutierrez. He refers to the condition in Latin America as a “sinful situation.” He said that by saying this he criticizes the whole state of things, not just individual instances of injustice, rather, “the whole existing system-to which the Church itself belongs.”<sup>50</sup> For Gutierrez there needs to be two types of redemption from sin, the first is spiritual the second is a redemption from sins effect on hu-

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<sup>45</sup>Mark McClain Taylor, “Gustavo Gutierrez” in *A New Handbook of Christian Theologies*, Musser, Donald w., Price Joseph L. eds., (Nashville: Abingdon Press) 1996, 191

<sup>46</sup>Taylor, 191

<sup>47</sup>Taylor, 189

<sup>48</sup>Taylor, 191

<sup>49</sup>Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*. (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York) 1973, 33

<sup>50</sup>Taylor, 175

manity. Sin is not a just a individual problem but one that is communal. Liberation is from the all the type slavery that sin brings us into.<sup>51</sup>

This leads us to Gutierrez view of the Jesus Christ as the liberator of man from sin and all of its consequences. According to Gutierrez accepting Christ's gift of salvation we are making a, "transition from sin to grace, from death to life, from injustice to justice, and from subhuman to human."<sup>52</sup> We as believers enter a new communion with God, in which we being a new search for fullness and are opposed to the sin that is the negation of love.<sup>53</sup>

One of the major themes of liberation theology is the Kingdom of God, this is no different for Gutierrez. Gutierrez sees liberation as a process that causes Kingdom Growth.<sup>54</sup>

He worked hard to try to get the church involved in the plight of the poor and to adopt a theology of liberation. He wrote the radical documents "peace" and "justice" and presented them during the conference of Episcopal bishops in Medellin, Columbian in 1968.<sup>55</sup> Gutierrez wanted Christian thinkers to see that socialist resistance was needed to combat imperialism.<sup>56</sup> He faced large opposition in the eighties in his struggle for justice for the Peruvian poor. He opposed the military domination of the government and the violent revolutions against it at the same time.<sup>57</sup> He remains a key thinker in liberation theology and has published many books on the subject.

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<sup>51</sup> Taylor, 176

<sup>52</sup> Taylor, 176

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, 176

<sup>54</sup> Taylor, 177

<sup>55</sup> Taylor, 195

<sup>56</sup> Taylor, 195

<sup>57</sup> Taylor, 196

## Juan Luis Segundo

Juan Luis Segundo was born in the capital city of Uruguay in 1925. He became an ordained Jesuit priest in 1955 and received his doctorate of letter from the University of Paris in 1963.<sup>58</sup>

One common theme of Liberation Theology that Segundo emphasized was that, theology was something that was lived out by the church community, rather than just a individual academic study. His writing stress that the method in which one does theology affects results of ones theological scholarship.<sup>59</sup> In works such as “*The Liberation of Theology*” he points out that ones social context, or living situation, will greatly affect the way one interprets the scriptures, or other theological writings.<sup>60</sup> In that work he states that “(The Liberation Theologian’s) suspicion is that anything and everything involving ideas, including theology, is intimately bound up with the existing social situations in at least a subconscious way.”<sup>61</sup>

He expresses this idea in what he calls “the hermeneutical cycle”, which has four steps. The first is that those confronted with theological truth will become suspicious of it if it conflicts with their social context or experience. Second is the application of these questions to ones interpretation of the Christian faith in general. The third is application of “theological suspicion” to

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<sup>58</sup>Roberto S. Goizueta, “Juan Luis Segundo” in *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians*, Musser, Donald W., Price Joseph L. eds., (Nashville: Abingdon Press) 1996,420

<sup>59</sup>Goizueta, 420

<sup>60</sup>Goizueta, 420

<sup>61</sup>Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York), 1976, 8

specific scripture, and the forth says that you will have a interpretation scripture that will better bring forth Gods word into the contemporary world.<sup>62</sup>

He further explains this as a system of inter-working faith and ideology. He defines an ideology as a system of goals that one structures one's life around. Ideologies give meaning to life and give us symbolic, religious, and political ways of expression.<sup>63</sup> For Segundo, faith is knowable in the context of ones ideology. Devine revelation is received and made possible by ones own personal history.<sup>64</sup>

The question must be asked that if everyone's personal interpretation of Christianity if limited by their personal experience how can one know the real Jesus and the real Christianity? Once again here Segundo states that faith is inseparably bound to ones own historical situation, including in those in the scripture text themselves, such as, Paul, Abraham, and Moses. What one has to do is to translate the ideological language of the time of writing into the same ideological language of today. Segundo says that taking the literal words from the text and into our social context will distort their meaning.<sup>65</sup>

At this point Segundo criticizes European theological perspective. Traditionally theologians have said that historical ideologies are incompatible with Christian faith. When interpreting scripture the reader is taught to separated his personal bias as far as possible from their reading

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<sup>62</sup>Segundo, 8

<sup>63</sup>Segundo, 8

<sup>64</sup>Goizueta, 421

<sup>65</sup>Goizueta, 421

of the text. However, Segundo says the text themselves are meaningless without being interpreted in ones social context.<sup>66</sup>

The Bible is not just information about God but it is to teach us how to learn about God through our own experience.<sup>67</sup> In reference to faith experience he says, “(it) is a process of learning in and through ideologies how to create the ideologies needed to handle new and unforeseen situations in history.”<sup>68</sup> It is this understanding that Segundo says makes account for apparent contradictions in Scripture. It is no a difference of God or faith but a difference in ideologies.<sup>69</sup>

Now, how does understanding relate to how Segundo encounters the problem of the poor? Well there is the examination of Jesus commands how Christians are to treat the poor, they are commanded to love and serve the poor. In Jesus time, the most practical way was to love the poor was through alms giving to the poor.<sup>70</sup> In our time the economic situation is much more complicated. Oppression of the poor is a result of the entire economic structure. As a member of the structure you can give to the poor but still be a part of the problem.<sup>71</sup> According Segundo to be obedient to Christ commands to love and serve the poor alms giving is not enough, it must be accompanied by social action.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Goizueta, 421

<sup>67</sup>Goizueta, 422

<sup>68</sup>Segundo, 120

<sup>69</sup>Goizueta, 422

<sup>70</sup>Goizueta, 422

<sup>71</sup>Goizueta, 423

<sup>72</sup>Goizueta, 423

## POSSIBLE PROBLEMS WITH LIBERATION THEOLOGY

It was mentioned earlier that generally the academic world is suspicious of Liberation Theology; here we will discuss some of the reasons for this. These reasons center around the suspicion of using the bible in specific situation and place (such as Latin America) and using texts to support political goals. Some say that it distorts the message of Christianity. Some believe that liberation theologians use scripture to fit their own temporary political goals while ignoring the spiritual message of Christianity.<sup>73</sup> Defenders of Liberation Theology would say that very few liberation theologians would deny the importance of the broader spiritual message of the Christian faith and say that this criticism is unwarranted.<sup>74</sup>

Another criticism that is given to Liberation Theology is that it gives a one-sided interpretation of the Bible on the point of human (or the church's) activity in the process of liberation. The more extreme liberation theologians many overemphasize the need for political revolution regardless of the method.<sup>75</sup> In other words, they may go beyond the biblical command to love and serve the poor and use scripture to justify violent revolution.

A third criticism is that Liberation Theology supports their political ends. In other words Liberation Theology reads Marxist political ideologies.<sup>76</sup> This criticism may be true of some liberationist thinkers. Some say that this is justified in the belief that if Marxist ideas are ignored the

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<sup>73</sup>Bray, 517

<sup>74</sup>Bray, 517

<sup>75</sup>Bray, 518

<sup>76</sup>Bray, 518

situation in Latin America will not change. Liberation theology offers a Christians alternative to Marxist thinking.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Bray, 518



## **CONCLUSION**

Liberation Theology takes a different approach to interpreting scripture than traditional ways of doing theology do. Liberation Theology often times runs the risk of using scripture in the context of a narrow, specific situation and forcing the two to fit. From an academic perspective there are holes in the methods used to reach the conclusions that liberation theologians do.

However, the questions that are being raised about the church's role in injustice and poverty of the world by liberation theologians are valid questions that the church must ask. Scripture does have a lot to say about these issues and many of the conclusions that are drawn are valid. The church must never forget that an important task of theology is to be able to accurately make themes of scripture relevant to the situations that the church finds itself in. Liberation theology attempts to do that and deserves to be heard. If they are wrong in their conclusions we must search for the answers because the questions they are asking are important.

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