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Gustavo Gutiérrez – Liberation Theology & Marxism

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Gustavo Gutiérrez:

Liberation Theology & Marxism

Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Dominican priest originally from Peru, was the first to articulate the concepts of liberation theology, a controversial notion that swept across Latin America in the late twentieth century. Beginning in the 1960s, the impact of this ideology is still felt to this day, though greatly fleshed out and clarified. The radical reinterpretation of the Bible required to support liberation theology has made understanding it a crucial step in interpreting the tumultuous times we occupy, and the theology's singular focus on good deeds and solidarity with suffering people all over the world has drawn both praise and criticism.

Gustavo Gutiérrez primarily articulated his spin on theology through his seminal work, *Theology of Liberation*, which was published in 1971 and translated into English two years later. Despite the radical ideas contained therein, Gutiérrez was hesitant when it came to fully articulating them and their logical conclusions. In his works, he prefers to spend a great deal of time discussing problems and then vaguely refer to a solution with broad, sweeping platitudes largely devoid of specifics. Further, Gutiérrez regularly seems to present ideas and retract them simultaneously. Richard Neuhaus notes,

There seem almost to be two Gutiérrezes. The one quotes Fanon and Che Guevara almost as Scripture, proclaiming we are on the edge of 'revolutionary anthropophany' in which historically inexorable forces are creating "the new man in the new society". . . The second Gutiérrez comes out of the closet in the notes, carefully positioning his arguments in relation to the larger theological and political discourse both of the past and of the

international community. He cautions the reader against understanding what he has just said as what he has just said.¹

Before embarking on an analysis of liberation theology, one must first examine how the founder himself defined this doctrine. In discussing the goal of his theology, Gutiérrez explained that:

[Liberation theology] is a theological reflection born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human, . . . to give reason for our hope from within a commitment that seeks to become more radical, total, and efficacious. It is to reconsider the great themes of the Christian life within this radically changed perspective and with regard to the new questions posed by this commitment. This is the goal of the so-called theology of liberation.²

Strains of Marxist thought are immediately apparent, most obviously in the notion that current society is the source of all ills, and can only be reformed by its abolition. After this, a utopian society will emerge, righting the wrongs wreaked by the previous incarnation, but apparently imparting none of its own. Gutiérrez seems to recognize that this will be the message many people receive, and makes an effort to avoid spiritualized Marxism as liberation theology's main building block. Specifically, he writes, "My purpose is not to . . . fashion a theology from which political action is 'deduced,'"³ and that

[i]t is not possible . . . to deduce from the gospel a single political course that all Christians must follow; as soon as we enter the political sphere, we are in the area of free choices in which factors of another order (social analysis; the concrete histories of nations) have a role to play. The faith does indeed set down certain ethical requirements . . . but the requirements do not entail a specific political program.⁴

1. Richard John Neuhaus, "Liberation Theology and the Cultural Captivity of the Gospel," in *On Liberation Theology*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 233.

2. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), xiii.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 175.

It is apparent that Gutiérrez is at least paying lip service to the notion that liberation theology does not recommend a specific course of political action to bring about its goals. Regardless, a particular trend toward Marxism is still prevalent throughout his writings, so much so that Dr. Edward Norman, Dean of Peterhouse at Cambridge, called Gutiérrez “the most distinguished of the Marxist theologians in South America.”⁵ Leftism seems to be central to the tenets of liberation theology, enough so that at times liberation theology appears to be more Marxism in spiritual clothing than anything else. The covering does not even need to be Christian; Gutiérrez discusses other religions’ liberation theologies on just as high a level as his own nominally Christian one.⁶

The overriding theme in Gutiérrez’ conception of liberation theology is its anti-capitalist and pro-Marxist sentiments, demonstrated partly by his continuous usage of Marxist vocabulary. In his discussion of the poor, Gutiérrez constantly refers to the bourgeois, capitalists, and multinational corporations, and always in a negative tone. Additionally, he references greed as the driving force for the world’s economy, quotes Che Guevara,⁷ and discusses how the current economic system is “designed” to funnel all resources to the top, away from the oppressed masses beneath. Gutiérrez argues,

The underdevelopment of the poor countries, as an overall social fact, appears in its true light: as the historical by-product of the development of other countries. The dynamics of the capitalist economy lead to the establishment of a center and a periphery, simultaneously generating progress and growing wealth for the few and social imbalances, political tensions, and poverty for the many.⁸

5. Edward Norman, “The Imperialism of Political Religion,” in *On Liberation Theology*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 128.

6. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xix.

7. *Ibid.*, 138.

8. Richard John Neuhaus, “Liberation Theology and the Cultural Captivity of the Gospel,” in *On Liberation Theology*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 229.

His philosophy offers supposed release from this system. While he remains vague on how relief will be accomplished and what the end result will be, he says,

The historical plan, the utopia of liberation as the creation of a new social consciousness and as a social appropriation not only of the means of production, but also of the political process, and, definitively, of freedom, is the proper arena for the cultural revolution. That is to say, it is the arena of the permanent creation of a new man in a different society characterized by solidarity.⁹

This elucidates Gutiérrez' Marxist influence. Dr. Ron Nash, the late philosophy professor at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, summed up Gutiérrez' liberation theology in this fashion:

The foundation of liberation theology is a set of three claims: (1) Christians ought to become politically active on behalf of people who are poor and oppressed; (2) *The major cause of poverty, injustice, and oppression in the contemporary world is capitalism; [and] (3) Christians should attack capitalism and work to see it replaced by socialism.* Although assorted liberation theologians may assert a great deal more than this, it seems fair to say that all liberation theologians agree with these three basic claims.¹⁰ (emphasis added)

Nash goes on to further discuss and critique liberation theology, with the assistance of several other distinguished authors. His work in question, *On Liberation Theology*, is highly recommended for an in-depth examination of the nature of liberation theology and the problems associated with it.

Further evidence of Gutiérrez' Marxist leanings can be seen in his references to the nature of history. His continued references to "the historical process of human liberation"¹¹ showcase his extra-Biblical conception of history as continually marching on, bringing along

9. Ibid.

10. Ronald H. Nash, "The Christian Choice Between Capitalism and Socialism," in *On Liberation Theology*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 49.

11. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 29.

irresistible positive change. This bears striking similarity to Marx's Hegelian dialecticism in regard to history, resulting in delineated phases of time through which history inexorably passes. Moreover, Gutiérrez writes of history as if there were only two actors therein: those who oppress others and those who are oppressed. He refers to the latter as "absent from our history."¹² They are dominated and subjugated by the ruling classes, who exploit them for resources and source the "institutionalized violence"¹³ that oppresses the poor and weak. As noted before, Gutiérrez is vague on the exact nature of the liberation theologian's response to these crises, but Miguel de la Torre later clarified:

The ultimate aim is to go beyond reform, for reform attempts to make sinful societal structures more bearable while maintaining capital in the hands of the few. Liberationists envision a new creation free of injustices, where human dignity and the freedom to seek one's own destiny reign supreme. Liberationists call for social revolution, a radical change of the structures that cause oppression, a move closer to Jesus' explanation of why he came: to provide an abundant life.¹⁴

Another interesting aspect of liberation theology is a distaste of absolutes, even religious ones. This can first be seen when Gutiérrez is discussing the concept of salvation. Maintaining his anti-Western attitude, he writes:

Normally, only contact with the channels of grace instituted by God can eliminate sin, the obstacle which stands in the way of reaching that life beyond. This approach is very understandable if we remember that the question of "the salvation of the pagans" was raised at the time of the discovery of people belonging to other religions and living in areas far from those where the Church had been traditionally rooted.¹⁵

Gutiérrez' discomfort with absolutes is evidenced by his apparent sarcasm (as seen via his use of quotation marks around words like "pagan") towards the conception of non-Christians being

12. Ibid., xxi.

13. Ibid.

14. Miguel A. de la Torre, *Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 57.

15. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 84.

considered unsaved and thus damned. Further elaborating on this idea, de la Torre writes the following while referencing Gutiérrez' *Theology of Liberation*:

In the midst of trials and tribulations, Gutiérrez seeks a new way to do theology in order to make Christianity relevant and liberative at the underside of history. Theology ceases to be doctrinal truths created by the intelligentsia for the common people to believe; instead, it becomes a reflection of actions taken to end human suffering – a critical reflection based on praxis in light of God's word, especially the exodus [*sic*] narrative and the incarnation of Christ.¹⁶

As noted here, orthopraxy is valued far more than orthodoxy. Knowing and believing the “right” things seems relatively unimportant to Gutiérrez; what matters is that one *does* the right things for the right people. In this manner, liberation theology becomes heavily works based.

Following this examination of liberation theology, attention can now be turned to the convoluted and controversial tale of its origins. Liberation theology took shape at the Latin American Bishops Conference of 1968 in Medellín, Colombia. The term itself had emerged several years before, but the concept took flight from Medellín. Gutiérrez was there, working as a theological adviser, and authored several of the resulting publications and assisted on several more. A follow-up to this conference, intended to clarify the idea and officiate its spread to the wider church, was held in Puebla, Mexico in 1979.¹⁷

At this point, the story becomes interesting, and those seeking further knowledge on the topic must turn to an equally interesting source: Lieutenant General Ion Mihai Pacepa. General Pacepa was a three-star general in the DIE, Romania's intelligence service, from the 1950s to the late 1970s, and his career included six years as its director and personal advisor to unbalanced President Nicolae Ceaușescu. Due to Romania's status as a member of the USSR, Pacepa's DIE worked closely with the KGB, Russia's own intelligence service. At this time, it was the practice

16. de la Torre, *Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians*, 66.

17. Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, viii.

of the KGB to use the intelligence services of their subordinate republics as contractors to increase their own reach. In 1978, disgusted with Ceaușescu and Communism, Pacepa brought his career to an abrupt end and defected to the United States, which earned him two death sentences and a \$2 million bounty on his head from his former employer. With this, Pacepa became the highest-ranking defector the West ever received from the Soviet Bloc and began his work with the US intelligence community, rapidly becoming “an important and unique contribution to the United States,”¹⁸ according to the CIA. In 2013, Pacepa published *Disinformation*, a book dedicated to showcasing Soviet psychological warfare efforts focused on undermining the United States, weakening it from within, and persuading its citizens to buy into pro-Soviet falsehoods. Former CIA Director R. James Woolsey wrote the introduction for *Disinformation*, dubbing it a “remarkable book” and stating that it would “change the way you look at intelligence, foreign affairs, the press, and much else besides.”¹⁹

General Pacepa pulls no punches in this book, stating early on that, “the Kremlin . . . invented liberation theology, a Marxist doctrine that turned many European and Latin American Catholics against the Vatican and the United States.”²⁰ In Chapter 15 he elaborates. According to Pacepa, liberation theology originated from Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s passionate desire to be the Soviet dictator to export Communism to the Americas. Knowing the state of Latin America in the 1950s and ’60s (predominantly poor, uneducated, religious peasants), Khrushchev believed that a “judicious manipulation of religion,”²¹ in Pacepa’s words, would be

18. *The Washington Times*, “Red Past in Romania’s Present,” January 2004, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2004/jan/13/20040113-085236-5919r/> (accessed April 8, 2015)

19. Ion Mihai Pacepa, *Disinformation* (New York, NY: WND Books, 2013), i.

20. *Ibid.*, 5.

21. *Ibid.*, 106.

sufficient to usher them into the Communist fold. Pacepa continues, referencing the very same 1968 conference discussed earlier in this paper:

In 1968, the KGB was able to maneuver a group of leftist South American bishops into holding a conference in Medellin, Colombia. At the KGB's request, my DIE provided logistical assistance to the organizers. The official task of the conference was to help eliminate poverty in Latin America. Its undeclared goal was to legitimize a KGB-created religious movement dubbed "liberation theology," the secret task of which was to incite Latin America's poor to rebel against the 'institutionalized violence of poverty' generated by the United States.²²

The 1968 conference put its stamp of approval on liberation theology, and passed it on to the World Council of Churches (WCC) for further endorsement.

The WCC, headquartered in Geneva and representing the Russian Orthodox Church and other smaller denominations throughout more than 120 countries, had already come under the control of today's Kremlin through the many Orthodox priests who are prominent in the WCC and are at the same time Russian intelligence agents . . . World Council of Churches general secretary, Eugene Carson Blake – a former president of the National Council of Churches in the United States – endorsed liberation theology and made it part of the WCC agenda.²³

Regrettably, due to the nature of intelligence work, very little Pacepa writes can be corroborated through third parties, for the simple fact that there are no third parties willing or able to speak to these issues. It is worth noting, however, that whenever Russia and other former Soviet Union countries open their archives to journalists, those who make allegations like Pacepa's are rarely shown to be wrong. Regardless, if even some of what General Pacepa writes concerning the origins of liberation theology is true, a whole new element is introduced into the debate.

Given the fascinating backstory and remarkable makeup of liberation theology, it is no surprise that it contains a variety of implications for government, from its goal to how it should promote religious ideas to who should be in charge and how. Unfortunately, Gutiérrez rarely lends enough clarity to his writing to allow an exposition of these implications here. Ultimately,

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 107.

he appears more concerned with what religious individuals should do in response to the status quo. He stops just short of recommending violence, but clearly recommends a replacement of the current governmental system with something more just.

The primary strength is clearly the concern for orthopraxy. In the Holy Bible, James argues that “Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead,”²⁴ so there is clearly a prominent place for good deeds in the thinking Christian’s life. Orthodoxy on its own will produce little fruit that benefits others, and such fruits clearly must become an aspect of the Christian’s life. Gutiérrez recognizes this. Unfortunately, he does so to the complete detriment of orthodoxy. One receives the impression while reading Gutiérrez that he would be perfectly happy to put his stamp of approval on whoever endorses his idea of liberation, regardless of religious stripe. What the supposed believer believes is all but irrelevant in his worldview; all that matters is that one *does* the right thing. Finally, there is the crushing weakness of the overt reliance on Marxist ideals found throughout Gutiérrez’ writings. Contained here is the idea that the Christian’s sole responsibility is to participate in a poorly thought-out revolution with the grandiose goal of “liberating” the poor from oppression. This is supported by an extra-Biblical reinterpretation of the nature of Christ himself as a revolutionary.

At the 1979 Puebla conference in Mexico, Pope John Paul II had these strong words in response to this idea: “The conception of Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive of Nazareth, does not tally with the Church’s catechism.”²⁵ As it turns out, Gutiérrez’ liberation theology as a whole does not mesh with either the Church’s catechism or the broader teachings of Scripture, and as such should be rejected.

24. James 2:14-26, The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

25. Pacepa, *Disinformation*, 107.

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