

The context and emergence of Liberation Theology

Liberation Theology is the name given to a wide-ranging movement which began in Latin America in the 1960s and which seeks to detach Christianity from its political and cultural roots. The movement claims that, over the centuries, the Church has supported ideological power structures which have oppressed the weakest members of society. It is broadly Roman Catholic in outlook and looks at the Christian faith from the point of view of the poor and oppressed, who are searching for hope in a world of poverty and injustice.

The movement had its roots in the extreme poverty of Latin America – an area which had been deeply Christian for centuries, but which felt abandoned by the Christian Church. The founders of the movement believed that such suffering was against the will of God and contrary to the teaching of Christ. Many of the ideas of liberation theology came from European political theology and the work of scholars such as Moltmann and Bonhoeffer, who had called for Christianity to enter the political and social life of the people.

The impact of Liberation theology on the Christian Church

Liberation theology, though Roman Catholic in origin, differs from traditional theology in that it looks first at conditions in the world, and then at how God is manifested in human history. It took on a new urgency when Vatican II (1962-65) examined the social and economic conditions of the world, and opened up the chance for a re-examination of the situation of the church in Latin America. This was undertaken at the Medellin Conference of Latin American Bishops in Columbia in 1968. This conference made the stunning admission that the Roman Catholic Church had often sided with oppressive governments in Latin America and that, in future, the Church would be on the side of the poor. In *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Augsberg 1985) J.M. Bonino wrote: "Theology has to stop explaining the world, and start transforming it." However, since then, the Roman Catholic Church has been suspicious of the liberation theology movement and its supposed Marxist connections. In the Puebla Conference of Bishops in 1979, Pope John Paul II declared that, "...those who sup with Marxism should use a long spoon."

In 1986, the Pope's instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation adopted a more reconciliatory tone, and the Church recognised some forms of liberation theology and gave a higher priority to the relief of the poor in Latin America. J.M. Bonino notes: "God is clearly and unequivocally on the side of the poor." (*Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Augsberg, 1985). However, the links between liberation theology and Marxism remained a thorny issue, particularly with the use of notions of "class struggle" and the economic system as a "factor of oppression".

At first, liberation theology was found in the universities and among the educated middle classes, but it has since moved into the lives of the common people of Latin America and elsewhere. Moreover, there has been a growth of "base ecclesial communities", which are small groups of ordinary people who meet to pray and address the social and political issues that affect their lives. Writers such as Gustavo Gutierrez use the language of ordinary people, while the priests try to restore the faith of the people into mainstream Catholicism.

The mission of the Church is seen in terms of the historic struggle for liberation, and theology is something to be "done", not "learned". This is the concept of praxis, or "action", whereby Christians are urged to change society on behalf of the poor.

Liberation theology talks about "structural sin", meaning that it is society rather than individuals, which is corrupt and requires redemption. However, critics of liberation theology say that it is too simplistic and avoids some of the deeper theologies concerned with sin, salvation and Atonement. They claim it has reduced salvation to a worldly problem and ignores the spiritual dimension. Nevertheless, it has brought new challenges and raised important questions that cannot be ignored. In *God of the Oppressed* (Orbis,

1997), James Cone wrote: “Is there a “hidden agenda” in our theological formulations that has helped to make the world-wide church more comfortable with the middle and upper classes than with the poor?”

The teaching of Gustavo Gutierrez

In *A Theology of Liberation* (SCM 1988) Gustavo Gutierrez introduced a new style of theology, which was based on the view that a Christian’s first duty was to fight against oppression and that theology itself should come second to that and act as a reflection of it: “The starting point of liberation theology is commitment to the poor, the “non-person”. Its ideas come from the victim.”

Gutierrez called the oppressed masses the “non-human beings” (*hombres cactus* – “the cactus people”). These people are the victims of exploitation which strips them of their right to a human and dignified existence. He said that the message of Christianity demanded solidarity with the poor.

“Charity is God’s love in us...loving us as a human, Christ reveals to us the Father’s love. Charity, the love of God for human beings is found incarnated in human love – of parents, spouses, children, friends - and leads to its fullness (*A Theology of Liberation*, SMC, 1988)

Gutierrez argue that proclaiming the good news of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ also required the dismantling of those structures that lead to human poverty and oppression. Announcing the coming of the kingdom of God meant working in solidarity with the poor. This action, the “praxis of solidarity”, he called the “option for the poor”, and it was at the very heart of liberation theology.

Today, in Latin America, due to unrestrained capitalism and global economic policies, there are millions of poor and oppressed people. Changes in church structures have resulted in the rise of popular movements, such as the Movement of Landless People and the Children of the Street Movement, which is supported by many Christian Churches as a way in which professional people can give help to the most needs. Gutierrez states: “We are on the side of the poor, not because they are good, but because they are poor” (*A Theology of Liberation*, SMC 1988)

Read and summarise the key points of Liberation Theology.

What do you think are the benefits and problems of such an approach?