# Liberation and the [Indigenous] Poor

J. B. Metz has interpreted contemporary sociological, ecclesiastical, and theological developments as indicative of "the end of the Eurocentric era of Christianity."[1] While this shift is more than just demographic in nature, the continued expansion of Christianity in the Third World and the demise of the Western church are concurrent, numerically significant events. We should not find it surprising that the victims of the colonial era are now making their voices heard, as Christians on the underside of history once again comprise a majority of the worldwide church.

As the "father" of Latin American liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez articulates the aspirations of Latin American Christians caught in a prolonged experience of injustice, poverty, and oppression. His A Theology of Liberation is an attempt to address the content of Christian faith in light of this reality of oppression and in light of its antithesis, liberation. At stake is a foundational understanding of theology, questions "about the very meaning of Christianity and about the mission of the Church."[2]

Gutiérrez's thoroughgoing discussion of theology from the Latin American context offers much in the way of creativity and innovation. In attempting to locate the most significant contribution to theological thought, one might mention: the centrality of the theme of liberation; the idea of God's preferential option for the poor; or the fresh understanding of the doctrines of salvation, eschatology, and the kingdom of God. These possibilities point to an

overarching methodological question which gets at the very root of theological discourse: Who is doing the theologizing? Gutiérrez points out that the work of social scientists is enhanced when carried out from the perspective of those under study,[3] and he employs this method in his own theological approach. The key contribution of Gutiérrez's book, as representative of the Latin American liberation theology body of literature, is that it assumes a new locus and a new focus for theological reflection. Liberation theology originates from the locus of challenges facing Latin American Christians, and in turn is focused on bringing about transformation of this reality.

Gutiérrez's recognition that theological reflection "arises spontaneously and inevitably in the believer, in all those who have accepted the gift of the Word of God,"[4] lays the foundation for a theology which moves in a bottom-up rather than a top-down direction. Theology as critical reflection on praxis is inextricably linked both to the faith experience and to the temporal realities of the Christian. What results is a theology with the potential to be truly pastoral in nature. "Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it."[5]

This egalitarian trust in the Spirit as it indwells individual believers naturally leads to "the bare, central theologico-pastoral question: What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be Church in the unknown circumstances of the future?"[6] The pre-Constantinian paradigm of church as underground movement is more appropriate for those on the underside of history than is the contemporary manifestation of church as imperial

institution. "A radical revision of what the Church has been and what it now is has become necessary."[7] This revised—and revived—church, rather than sanctioning and assisting the powers-that-be, will take on a prophetic role and denounce worldly systems that deny the God-givenness of the world and its inhabitants.

Thus, this theology of liberation is authentically both pastoral and prophetic in nature; far from being a naïve reaction by the "losers of history," it recognizes that social structures are the result of power struggles. As Gutiérrez points out, the church capitulates to this power struggle insofar as it sees itself as "the center of the economy of salvation."[8] But the church of the poor, existing as a movement and characterized by bottom-up theology, knows only the power of the Gospel, which it experiences as empowerment. The church's role in the world is not to wield power in the face of dissent, but to dispense empowerment in the face of adversity.

The methodological shift evident in Latin American liberation theology is not without precedent in Christian history, though it is true that "it is only in the last few years that people have become clearly aware of the scope of the misery and especially of the oppressive and alienating circumstances in which the great majority of mankind exists."[9] Early in the twentieth century, the Social Gospel movement among American Protestants sought to address the effects of the rise of industrialization and urbanization. While this was a theological movement, it failed to operate in a bottom-up fashion and thus lacked a grassroots foundation. Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker

movement did incorporate an incarnational approach to their ministry, also among the victims of industrialized urban America, but never attempted to articulate an explicit theological program. Liberation theology offers an understanding of God that is both from the poor and for the poor, as well as a recovery of the Christian belief that God is evident as a dynamic presence for transformation in the world.

The trends which Metz cited, and which Gutiérrez is taking advantage of, point to the possibility for a true democratization of theological reflection in the next (imminent) era of Christianity. As Gutiérrez points out, what is at stake is "a more accurate understanding that communion with the Lord inescapably means a Christian life centered around a concrete and creative commitment of service to others."[10] The Latin American theologians, in solidarity with the poor and oppressed of their lands, have established the methodological access to just such an understanding.

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In "Liberation and the Poor: The Puebla Perspective," Gutiérrez takes us into the heart of Latin American liberation theology.[11] While his essay is an openly apologetic effort to demonstrate the continuity of theological reflection and praxis from Medellín (Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, 1968) to Puebla (Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, 1979), it is also a valuable summation of the movement's central themes: "The perspective of the poor, and, in relationship with it, the subject of liberation."[12] Other Latin American theologians have expressed their enthusiastic fidelity to

the Christian tradition, not only to the Bible but to the magisterium as well. Gutiérrez reinforces this position throughout his essay; "the assertions of John Paul II . . . corroborate precisely what is clearest and sanest in recent Latin American theological experience and reflection."[13]

Gutiérrez asserts that "the most significant fact in the political and church life of Latin America in recent years is the active presence that the poor are coming to assume in it."[14] During the past two decades the Latin American church has been galvanized by the emotive presence of the poor, not only in basic Christian communities but also, through the advocacy of Gutiérrez and others, in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. But in recent years a number of observers, particularly theologians and church leaders outside of Latin America, have raised questions about the appropriateness of using poverty as a comprehensive unifying principle for understanding the Latin American, or any other, situation. They have asked whether there exist in Latin America <u>other</u> personal and institutional dynamics of injustice, based on differences in race, gender, age, religion, and indigeneity. In particular, the Latin American theologians have been criticized for their inability or unwillingness to step outside of the Christian tradition and to consider the religious realities of their societies. In light of recent interest in theological transposition,[15] it seems appropriate to focus on this question of interreligious engagement among Latin American theologians. More specifically, let us examine the ways in which their deficiency in this regard is evident in three aspects of Gutiérrez's elaboration of the related themes of poverty and liberation.

Gutiérrez comments that Medellín's identification of institutionalized injustice and Puebla's description of it as "social sinfulness" arouses protest among those concerned about the implications of such statements for the Latin American church.[16] Calling the widespread poverty an "anti-evangelical situation," he is correct in pointing out the disparity between the justice demands of the gospel message and Latin American social reality. But in discussing "the scandal of social injustice in a society claiming to be Christian,"[17] Gutiérrez seems to imply that the hypocrisy of Latin American society is greater than it would be if some other religious tradition were dominant. Such a position obviously leads to (or perhaps stems from) the belief that non-Christian religions do not possess the degree of ethical and moral refinement found in the teachings of Christianity. In this view, the widespread poverty of Latin America is all the more shameful because Christians more than anyone ought to be able to establish a just and humane social order. While this indeed may be the case, and the point is certainly open to question, we cannot come to such a conclusion on the basis of the available historical evidence.

Recognizing the potential for religious vanity here, we can also call into question the conception of the church as the agent of liberation in Latin America. Again, there is certainly nothing wrong with the bishops' commitment to the poor or with their desire to let their past experience "serve as a starting point for seeking out effective channels to implement our option in our evangelizing work in Latin America's present and future."[18] The gospel

dictates that Christians can and must be involved in the liberation struggle (and this regardless of whether or not they were responsible for the causes creating and maintaining injustice). But just as Gutiérrez implies that a Christian society possesses the potential for greater hypocrisy, he seems to imply that it is only through the church that God's liberatory agenda can be realized. In this view, the church's decision for solidarity with the poor is what allows God's "preferential option for the poor" to have real consequences in Latin American society. Again, this may be the case, but the historical evidence is inconclusive.

But even more important than the issue of religious elitism is the conception of liberation made famous by Gutiérrez in his A Theology of Liberation and incorporated into the Medellín and Puebla documents. Gutiérrez quotes himself in referring to the three-dimensional "integral liberation" which consists of "three levels of meaning of a single, complex process."[19] This liberation is focused on the goals of freedom from oppression, freedom of self-determination, and freedom from sin. He goes on to say that this process must be carried out "on three inseparable planes: our relationship to the world as its master, to other persons as brothers and sisters, and to God as God's children."[20] If Gutiérrez is intending to establish a correlation between the goals (that is, the freedoms) and the planes (that is, the relationships) of the liberation process—and I believe that he is—then his vision of liberated humanity, and his theology of liberation with it, depends on the correct understanding of these three dimensions of human relationship.

Two questions deserve our attention: Are these understandings of relationship true to the Christian tradition? Would these understandings change in the light of an authentic interreligious engagement?

In just two decades Latin American liberation theology has changed the way many Christians around the world think about their relationship "to other persons as brothers and sisters, and to God as God's children." But it would seem that Gutiérrez and his colleagues have spent as little time considering our relationship to creation as they have the question of interreligious engagement. The Puebla document asserts that "mastery, use, and transformation of the goods of this earth and those of culture, science, and technology find embodiment in humanity's just and fraternal lordship over the world—which would include respect for ecology."[21] Were this a biblical text, we would probably be justified in interpreting that last phrase, "which would include respect for ecology," as a textual gloss. The phrase appears to be an apologetic aside, adding a dimension of meaning which the rest of the sentence implicitly contradicts. But let us remember that, in human societies, lordship augmented by respect is paternalism. In this context, paternalism is an oppressive social relationship which the Latin American theologians have successfully unmasked in their deconstruction of the ideology of development. Paternalism with respect to the environment is an equally ineffective, destructive, and unjust relationship.

The idea that human beings bear the responsibility of mastery over the created order has deep roots in the Christian tradition, but current

environmental realities and our deepening understanding of them make this position increasingly untenable. The orthodox understanding of the relationship may not be justified, however, and just as the Latin American theologians have turned a critical eye on the gospel message, perhaps it is time for them (and for us) to give renewed attention to the theological significance of the Judeo-Christian creation account as found in Genesis. We should remind ourselves that two versions of the creation of humanity are present; in the first humans are created to "fill the earth and subdue it" by exercising "dominion over all the earth,"[22] while in the second they are placed in the garden "to till it and keep it."[23] If we made a detailed comparison of the two versions, we would find that they lead to significantly different understandings of the theological relationship between humanity and creation. It would seem that, historically, the first has won out at the expense of the second. Gutiérrez, like most Christians, is committed to this position, yet around him and the other Latin American theologians are indigenous peoples whose traditional faith provides them with a deep appreciation for the symbiotic relationship between humanity and creation. Tied as it is to the three planes of relationship, Gutiérrez's conception of integral liberation becomes problematic if one rejects the traditional understanding of human mastery over creation. The growing global awareness of the environmental crisis would seem to indicate that this process of rejection may soon take place, even among many Western Christians.

The three questions we have considered here—the religious character of society, the role of the church in the liberation process, and the relationship of

humanity to creation—seem to indicate that Latin American liberation theology has much to gain from interreligious engagement. Perhaps they, and we, should look to their African and Asian and indigenous American counterparts to lead the way in theological transposition.

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