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A New Theology from Latin America

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AMONGST THE TOP TEN most important books which have been written by Roman Catholics since Vatican II would have to be placed the extended essay, *The Theology of Liberation*, written by the Peruvian theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, and first published at the end of 1971 with a new Spanish edition in 1972 and editions in English, French and German.

How can one justify this claim? Especially as books written on theology which are not written either by a European or a North-American, or in one of the recognised theological languages (it is high time that Spanish was so recognised), can be expected to have only a very limited appeal.

Nevertheless Gutierrez's publication indicates a new mood, a new searching, a new theological coming-of-age on the part of thinkers in the 'Third World', accustomed for too long merely to reflect the latest fashions fabricated in the North-Atlantic centres of intellectual power.

What makes the book particularly significant, especially for those countries of the world struggling to throw off every kind of foreign dominance, is what distinguishes it from the generally accepted limits of theological thought and writing of the northern hegemony. Let me state and elaborate some of these differences.

In the first place, Gutierrez is vitally concerned to link his theological enterprise to a personal commitment to a particular historical situation. In his own words, 'this study attempts a reflection, starting out from the Gospel and from the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation in this sub-continent of oppression and spoliation which is Latin America. Theological reflection which is born from that shared experience which is engaged in the abolition of the actual situation of injustice and in the construction of a different society, both freer and more human'. In this sense the theology of liberation is a deliberate attempt to break with the academic and socratic tradition of theological studies so often taken for granted in an exclusive and isolated university atmosphere.

In the second place, as a direct consequence of this, the theology of liberation is an attempt to put theological reflection at the service of those within the church who have taken a definite stand, within the polarised alternatives offered by contemporary life in Latin America, on behalf of those whom Fanon calls the 'wretched of the earth'; 'our greatest concern is not to betray their experiences and their efforts, elucidating the significance of their solidarity with the oppressed'. In this respect many Latin-American theologians speak of the need for a 'liberation of theology' before there can be an authentic 'theology of liberation'—a theology done for and by those who are actually living out a concrete identification with the down-trodden and defenceless, the voice of those who have no voice. For this reason it is somewhat beside the mark to criticise the output of these theologians for its lack of academic excellence—although Gutierrez's book is well-written, well-argued and extremely amply documented—it would be like criticising the author of the Book of Revelation for his bad grammar or Paul because he did not always finish his sentences! I know of one theologian, a professor in the National University of Buenos Aires, who has deliberately chosen, with his wife, to live in a district where there is no running water in the house and no electric light, to say nothing of telephones and other amenities and luxuries accounted necessities by the majority of his contemporaries with an equal income.

In the third place, Gutierrez, and the other theologians who write in the same vein, especially Juan Luis Segundo and Hugo Assmann, maintain a very discreet and critical distance from the theology being done in Europe, even that elaborated by the so-called 'theologians of revolution', amongst others Moltmann and Metz. Of Metz, he says, for example: 'reading the works of Metz one receives the impression that his analysis of the contemporary political situation is insufficient in certain aspects. . . . What his idea of politics lacks is the experience of collisions and conflicts which marks the negation of a situation of oppression of some men by others, of some countries by others, and the aspiration for a liberation which arises from the depth of this state of things.' In other words, according to Gutierrez, the theology of revolution is being elaborated within a political situation which has tended to produce resignation and cynicism with regard to profound and more just social changes. This situation, in spite of the tremendous power of the forces of reaction (recently seen in Chile, for example), is not true for Latin America.

The fundamental difference in the situation of the Third World calls, then, for a fairly drastic rejection of theological (one aspect of cultural) dependence on the content, methods and conclusions of the northern theological enterprise: 'the Latin-American church was born dependent, and has lived this situation, which has not allowed it to develop its own peculiarities, till this day. Just as on the socio-economic and political plane, this dependence is not only an external factor but rather

it shapes the structures, life and thought of the Latin American church. The Church has been a mirror rather than a source.'

Without being able to develop in detail the theological-cum-political-economic reflections of Gutierrez we would like to note some of the more cardinal points of his work.

It should by now have become fairly obvious that the *hermeneutical* key to this theology is a certain, reasonably well-defined, political commitment of certain groups within Latin-America. This commitment, at least at its verbal level, is with the oppressed, the poor, the dispossessed, those who have no voice and no rights. Plenty of direct biblical justification for this stance is forthcoming: the Exodus, the prophetic witness of condemnation and the gestures [literal translation from the Spanish] of Jesus Christ. Indeed Miranda in his book *Marx and the Bible* argues at length that *mishpat* (justice) in the Old Testament means exactly all these things.

This leads on to a particular socio-political analysis of Latin-America which, in general terms, is called, the Latin-American 'reality', which is the fundamental cause of the exploitation and misery of the Latin-American peoples. This reality is the thrust of international imperialism, the last phase of capitalism, as Lenin remarked, allied to the interests of the established national oligarchies, principally the military and the big land-owners.

The one, all-inclusive and self-authenticating (according to the semi-determinism of the marxist dialectic) answer to this situation is 'socialism'. Socialism will probably only be achieved by violent revolution (more so after the 'democratic' failure of Allende, although Helder Camara is a well-known advocate of non-violence) which is justified in the terminology of Lenin as 'revolutionary violence' over against 'bourgeois violence'. This socialism, at least in the writings of Gutierrez, may take various forms in concrete national situations but, as the least, will include the take over by the State of the means of production, the levelling off of the gross inequalities in the incomes situation, the abolition of the great discrepancy in the ownership of private property and the active participation of the workers in the process of government (something which Allende found impossible under the present Chilean constitution, which is bourgeois-liberal according to his supporters).

However, socialism should not be limited to merely structural changes—here at least the 'theologians of liberation' show themselves partially aware of their formal critics. It should point to a complete process of 'humanisation', defined by Gutierrez as 'the liberation from everything which limits or impedes man from his own self-realisation, everything which blocks access to the exercise of his freedom'.

This humanisation which also includes 'spiritual' and psychological dimensions can be brought about by man who is the agent of his own destiny, the lord of creation and the co-partner of his own salvation. This note which is fundamental (and theological!) is expressed by

Gutierrez in various ways: it is 'the historical realisation of the kingdom', the 'proclamation of fulness'; it is 'political liberation', part of the radical liberation from sin which Christ offers as a gift through his death and resurrection; it is man recreating himself through the dialectic of opposition to the present alienating systems.

In this vision of a new humanity coming-into-being it is important to Gutierrez's theological system to maintain what he calls a unitarian historical project: creation (the domination of the world by science) and redemption (the definitive liberation of man from anti-human structures) are two sides of the same coin. There is only one history, divided into present historical actions and an ever-open-ended future, not two histories, one natural and the other supernatural. Philosophically Gutierrez, in his fear of being contaminated by any kind of dualism, opts for a total monism; not so much a pantheism of nature—already rejected by the early Israelites with their totally distinct cosmogony—but a historical pantheism. God is totally absorbed in, and by, the dialectical forward movement of liberation. Another way of describing historical pantheism would be to call it a personalisation of History. History becomes, suddenly, an entity, the subject of specific verbs.

The new humanity can be thought of, using theological terms, as God's temple, i.e. the newest and ultimate presence of God in the one historical process. To arrive at this theological (or anthropological?) conclusion Gutierrez employs an interesting, if questionable hermeneutical procedure. Starting out from the priority of contemporary praxis as the place (*topos*) of hermeneutics and Marx's 'scientific' analysis of the economic interplays of advanced capitalist society as the key to hermeneutics, Gutierrez proceeds backwards to the canonical text to see what light it throws on God's eternal, incarnational, purpose of man's total liberation. The key text becomes the Exodus because in it, supremely, can be discerned the dual or reciprocal pattern of domination/liberation which we have already discovered is the key concept to an understanding of the basic situation of the Third world nations. Our 'scientific' analysis allows us to use this concept as the over-ridingly basic pre-understanding which we take to the Biblical text.

In this hermeneutical procedure, which up to this point more or less follows the process laid down in the modern debate, though with a different content, for no modern theologian outside Latin-America has used Marx quite so consistently as a pre-understanding, the Exodus becomes the first topographical point in an attempted hermeneutical circle, or 'circulation'. From there Gutierrez proceeds, sometimes unconsciously, by way of Ricoeur's notion of the 'surplus value' of meaning in a text. The Exodus is continually re-interpreted in the life of Israel, and not as a result of 'theoretical' meditation but strictly as a result of God's new actions (new praxis) in the on-going

historical process.

There are, in effect, three supreme moments in which this action is clearly manifest. The first is the time of the prophets, when Israel as a nation is still under the old Covenant. The Exile is God's new opportunity to bring to pass his processes of liberation within the history of his chosen people. In order to do this he uses pagan agents who do not recognise either his action or his sovereign world-rule. The second moment is that of Jesus Christ who brings to pass the supreme and unrepeatable liberation of the whole man through his death and resurrection. From the New Testament we learn that man can live openly before God by grace. The third moment is that of our present situation. God continues to reveal himself in and through historical processes of liberation. This revelation is as valid, and as clear, as that given in and through the biblical witness to God's process of liberation in Israel and in Jesus Christ. Indeed just as Paul talks of two eons, the theologians of liberation use the Marxian concept of pre-history and history to describe the actual state of affairs. Marxist analysis is the new revelation which enables us to see the link between God's act of liberation in the past and in the present.

As can be seen from this unfortunately too brief description, the theology of liberation in so far as it is a theology and not a sociology, or anthropology, brings to the fore the paramount question of hermeneutics. It is true to say that in Gutierrez the hermeneutical problem does not come to the surface in a systematically conscious way, whereas in Assmann it is seriously depreciated by his emphasis on the self-authenticity and unity of Marx's own political-economic hermeneutic. Nevertheless Gutierrez does allude to the problem in a quite uncharacteristic passage which follows on from an exegetical discussion of the political relevance of Jesus' public ministry and death, 'the deeply human and socially-transforming charge which the Gospel possesses in its interior is both permanent and essential because it allows us to clear the narrow limits of given historical situations in order to go to the root itself of human existence: the relationship to God in solidarity with other men. *The political dimension (of the Gospel) does not spring from any precise option which comes to the Gospel from the outside but from the very heart of its message*' (my italics). I say that this is uncharacteristic because it would appear that Gutierrez's characteristic methodology takes the opposite path, as we have outlined it above. At any rate Gutierrez needs to be much more explicit with regard to his hermeneutical method. In order to achieve theological lucidity it is essential that every interpreter of Scripture be able to discover and *justify* his own unconscious hermeneutical pre-suppositions.

Other theologians of liberation are more systematic and careful in stating their understanding of this task. One such is the Argentine Severino Croatto in his new book, *The Hermeneutics of Liberation*. In

closing I would like to ask three basic questions with regard to the hermeneutical process as it is assumed consciously or unconsciously by the theologians of liberation, in the hope of eliciting greater clarity and a continuing discussion of the methods, objectives and achievements of this new theological enterprise.

In the first place, if we admit that the archetypal events (the Exodus etc.) are definitive manifestations of God, are we not also obliged to admit that the original interpretation given to these events (also archetypal events in themselves), by means of promises and subsequent reflection, is also definitive? The whole question of the relationship between the two testaments enters here. Even if it is true that there are 'new readings' of the events and interpretations of the Old Testament in the New how is it possible to go one step further and justify new questioning of or adding to the original interpretation of the Christ-event, especially taking into account that the resurrection inaugurates the definitive new era? The revelation given in Jesus Christ, which the apostles consciously clarified as the word of God, is final in the sense that its meaning is unique and self-explanatory. Naturally its meaning has to be continually laid bare for each new generation, but this can hardly mean ignoring it or changing the essence of its content. In other words, a new reading of the Old Testament by the New does not automatically authorise us, from our historical perspective, to engage in a new reading of the New Testament of *exactly the same kind*.

In the second place, the absolute priority given to the event as revelation is questionable. The Old Testament is insistent, for example, that God created by the *word of His mouth* (the very first happening!). If we only mean that the event is always prior to the word *in the sense of the written word* then the priority of the event is acceptable. However in innumerable cases the event presupposes a prior promise—a God-to-man communication—that later will be fulfilled, confirmed (e.g., the famous definition of prophecy) and given fuller significance in the event itself. Amongst other questions our concept of God is in play here. For if we lay too much emphasis on the knowledge of God, starting out from historical acts alone, are we not in danger of postulating a silent god? Both event and word (interpretation) are inseparably necessary. The word without the act becomes gnostic, esoteric, mystical and incommunicable. The act without the word remains dumb, at the best ambiguous; at the worst the object of hermeneutical manipulation.

In the third place, there are certain implicit assumptions about history as a revelatory process which are difficult to accept. If God reveals in the present event, somewhat independent of the biblical revelation, or if it is possible, in principle, to discover qualitatively new revelations today, would there not also need to be a qualitatively new interpretation which could recognise this event, and not that one, as genuine revelation? And if it is not forthcoming what sense does it make to talk

about revelation at all? Perhaps some kind of new language with new content would be terminologically less confusing. Otherwise all of history may be baptised in the name of God, of revelation, of the process of liberation or anything else—a highly arbitrary and alienating proceeding. The main problem is that the kind of critical pedagogy demanded, for example, by Paolo Freire ('Education as the Practice of Freedom'), which addresses itself to a very concrete praxis, cannot arise solely from that same praxis without the probability of legitimising totally contradictory interpretations. If we do not begin from, or take into account as the decisive hermeneutical pole, the fact that God has acted and *spoken* definitively in the history of his Son, *the New Man*, we will end up, as does so much modern theology, with ingenious but empty symbols fabricated by man still under the alienating influence of their distorted world-views. And then a kind of curious circle will have been drawn. The new symbols—but empty because of the rejection of the controlling influence of God's communication to man in Jesus Christ—will respond to Feuerbach's famous judgment of religion as both the cause and the effect of man's alienation of himself (*The Essence of Christianity*), and to Marx's even more famous dictum that 'religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of an unspiritual situation' (*Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1844).

However, none of these questions are intended to imply a rigid and closed *formulation* of the Biblical faith. It should be evident that no *orthopraxis* can be decided by an 'orthodoxy' petrified in traditions, confessions or dogmas, from which no appeal can be made. Today's events, the modern world, philosophies and ideologies may be able to liberate our understanding of revelation, so that shocked out of our complacent prejudices we allow it to function critically as a protest in relation to every formulation and every praxis. It is not that God has closed himself up in one given moment of history, but that he has deliberately self-limited his verbal communication to the 'fulness' of history and he, the same non-contradictory God continues to act, bringing to pass afresh in every generation his plan of salvation (2 Tim. 3:15-16). Man needs the same kind of liberation today as he did yesterday, although, and this is the novelty and challenge of the theology of liberation, its form will vary according to new perspectives on God's revelation captured from the biblical text, or from history, and according to man's ever-changing circumstances in society.

The socio-political reality of the Third World as over-all dependence and the reality of Western Europe and the United States, with their near monopoly of academic theology and their societies as privileged, selfish and arrogant with regard to the oppressed two-thirds of the world, is *the* crucial issue of our time. Both to this issue and from it theology must respond in a radically altered way as the servant of the 'servants of God' and of mankind.

If we feel that marxism as a world-view is too limiting and too corrupting to provide a trenchant and relevant pre-understanding for the hermeneutical task, then it is incumbent on us to provide a better alternative, one which does justice to the reality of God's purpose of redemption, here and now, in his convulsed and contradictory world.