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4. *Substitutes for spirituality.* The liberation theology movement has spawned a multitude of substitutes for the real thing in the Christian life and experience. For example, evangelization frequently has become nothing more than an effort to create an awareness that will prepare people for political action.

5. *Confused values.* Even worse, the movement has often exhibited non-Christian values. An effort to raise a people's political awareness, for example, can easily result in bitter hatred of landlords. Any modelling of class conflict itself becomes conflictive. And when working in horizontal, social contexts, it is easy for Christians to be trapped by materialism, humanism, and other such concepts.

6. *Loss of the Holy Spirit in method.* There seems to be a certain incongruity between the exercise of the gifts of the sovereign Holy Spirit and the almost exclusively man-centred methodology of much liberation thinking. Leaders of the movement have yet to define convincingly the Holy Spirit's role in social revolution. Many observers would say it cannot be done. Pneumatology is conspicuously absent from liberation theologies.

7. *Misunderstanding of Scripture.* Instead of enhancing the work of Christ and understanding its spiritual power, liberation theologies reread the Scripture to depict Jesus as a messiah of political involvement. This rereading often distorts the truth. It misses the paradoxes of faith, the spiritual measurements of personal commitment, the quality of love, the mystery of holiness, and the sinfulness of sin. In short, it diminishes the supernatural dimensions of a personal relationship with God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit our Advocate.

In our search for a social theology to clarify the mission of the church, it is appropriate, as Samuel Escobar has pointed out, that we find in the theologies of liberation an important challenge and stimulus to our evangelical faith, but never a viable alternative to it.

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Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation

Vatican, Rome

Reprinted in two parts

This Instruction was adopted at an Ordinary meeting of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and was approved at an audience granted to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect, by His Holiness Pope John Paul II on 6th August 1984, who ordered its publication.

Evangelicals will want to identify with many of the positions outlined in this important document. The remainder of the Instruction will be published in the next issue of Evangelical Review of Theology.

(Editors)

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of freedom and a force for liberation. In recent years, this essential truth has become the object of reflection for theologians, with a new kind of attention which is itself full of promise.

Liberation is first and foremost liberation from the radical slavery of sin. Its end and its goal is the freedom of the children of God, which is the gift of grace. As a logical consequence, it calls for freedom from many different kinds of slavery in the cultural, economic, social and political spheres, all of which derive ultimately from sin, and so often prevent people from living in a manner befitting their dignity. To discern clearly what is fundamental to this issue and what is a by-product of it, is an indispensable condition for any theological reflection on liberation.

Faced with the urgency of certain problems, some are tempted to emphasize, unilaterally, the liberation from servitude of an earthly and temporal kind. They do so in such a way that they seem to put liberation from sin in second place, and so fail to give it the primary importance it is due. Thus, their very presentation of the problems is confused and ambiguous. Others, in an effort to learn more precisely what are the causes of the slavery which they want to end, make use of different concepts without sufficient critical caution. It is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to purify these borrowed concepts of an ideological inspiration which is incompatible with Christian faith and the ethical requirements which flow from it.

The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith does not intend to deal here with the vast theme of Christian freedom and liberation in its own right. This it intends to do in a subsequent [p. 116](#) document which will detail in a positive fashion the great richness of this theme for the doctrine and life of the Church.

The present Instruction has a much more limited and precise purpose: to draw the attention of pastors, theologians, and all the faithful to the deviations, and risks of deviation, damaging to the faith and to Christian living, that are brought about by certain forms of liberation theology which use, in an insufficiently critical manner, concepts borrowed from various currents of marxist thought.

This warning should in no way be interpreted as a disavowal of all those who want to respond generously and with an authentic evangelical spirit to the 'preferential option for the poor'. It should not at all serve as an excuse for those who maintain an attitude of neutrality and indifference in the face of the tragic and pressing problems of human misery and injustice. It is, on the contrary, dictated by the certitude that the serious ideological deviations which it points out tends inevitably to betray the cause of the poor. More than ever, it is important that numerous Christians, whose faith is clear and who are committed to live the Christian life in its fullness, become involved in the struggle for justice, freedom and human dignity because of their love for their disinherited, oppressed and persecuted brothers and sisters. More than ever, the Church intends to condemn abuses, injustices and attacks against freedom, wherever they occur and whoever commits them. She intends to struggle, by her own means, for the defence and advancement of the rights of mankind, especially of the poor.

I AN ASPIRATION

1. The powerful and almost irresistible aspiration that people have for *liberation* constitutes one of the principal *signs of the times* which the Church. has to examine and interpret in

the light of the Gospel.¹ This major phenomenon of our time is universally widespread, though it takes on different forms and exists in different degrees according to the particular people involved. It is, above all, among those people who bear the burdens of misery and in the heart of the disinherited classes that this aspiration expresses itself with the greatest force.

2. This yearning shows the authentic, if obscure, perception of the dignity of the human person, created 'in the image and likeness of God' ([Gen. 1:26-27](#)), ridiculed and scorned in the midst of a variety of different oppressions: cultural, political, racial, social and economic, often in conjunction with one another. **p. 117**

3. In revealing to them their vocation as children of God, the Gospel has elicited in the hearts of mankind a demand and a positive will for a peaceful and just fraternal life in which everyone will find respect and the conditions for spiritual as well as material development. This requirement is no doubt at the very basis of the aspiration we are talking about here.

4. Consequently mankind will no longer passively submit to crushing poverty with its effects of death, disease and decline. He resents this misery as an intolerable violation of his native dignity. Many factors, and among them certainly the leaven of the Gospel, have contributed to an awakening of the consciousness of the oppressed.

5. It is widely known, even in still illiterate sections of the world, that, thanks to the amazing advances in science and technology, mankind, still growing in numbers, is capable of assuring each human being the minimum of goods required by his dignity as a person.

6. The scandal of the shocking inequality between the rich and poor—whether between rich and poor countries, or between social classes in a single nation—is no longer tolerated. On one hand, people have attained an unheard of abundance which is given to waste, while on the other hand so many live in such poverty, deprived of the basic necessities, that one is hardly able even to count the victims of malnutrition.

7. The lack of equity and of a sense of solidarity in international transactions works to the advantage of the industrialized nations so that the gulf between the rich and the poor is ever widening. Hence derives the feeling of frustration among third world countries, and the accusations of exploitation and economic colonialism brought against the industrialized nations.

8. The memory of crimes of a certain type of colonialism and of its effects often aggravates these injuries and wounds.

9. The Apostolic See, in accord with the Second Vatican Council, and together with the Episcopal Conferences, has not ceased to denounce the scandal involved in the gigantic arms race which, in addition to the threat which it poses to peace, squanders amounts of money so large that even a fraction of it would be sufficient to respond to the needs of those people who want for the basic essentials of life.

II EXPRESSIONS OF THIS ASPIRATION

1. The yearning for justice and for the effective recognition of the dignity of every human being needs, like every deep aspiration, to be clarified and guided. **P. 118**

2. In effect, a discernment process is necessary which takes into account both the theoretical and the practical *manifestations* of this aspiration. For there are many political and social movements which present themselves as authentic spokesmen for the

¹ Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 4.

aspirations of the poor, and claim to be able, though by recourse to violent means, to bring about the radical changes which will put an end to the oppression and misery of people.

3. So the aspiration for justice often finds itself the captive of ideologies which hide or prevent its meaning, and which propose to people struggling for their liberation goals which are contrary to the true purpose of human life. They propose ways of action which imply the systematic recourse to violence, contrary to any ethic which is respectful of persons.

4. The interpretation of the *signs of the times in the light of the Gospel* requires, then, that we examine the meaning of this deep yearning of people for justice, but also that we study with critical discernment the theoretical and practical expressions which this aspiration has taken on.

III LIBERATION, A CHRISTIAN THEME

1. Taken by itself, the desire for liberation finds a strong and fraternal echo in the heart and spirit of Christians.

2. Thus, in accord with this aspiration, the theological and pastoral movement known as 'Liberation Theology' was born, first in the countries of Latin America which are marked by the religious and cultural heritage of Christianity, and then in other countries of the third world, as well as in certain circles in the industrialized countries.

3. The expression, 'Theology of Liberation', refers first of all to a special concern for the poor and the victims of oppression, which in turn begets a commitment to justice. Starting with this approach, we can distinguish several, often contradictory, ways of understanding the Christian meaning of poverty and the type of commitment to justice which it requires. As with all movements of ideas, the 'theologies of liberation' present diverse theological positions. Their doctrinal frontiers are badly defined.

4. The aspiration for *liberation*, as the term itself suggests, repeats a theme which is fundamental to the Old and New Testaments. In itself, the expression 'theology of liberation' is a thoroughly valid term: it designates a theological reflection centred on the biblical theme of liberation and freedom, and on the urgency of its practical realization.

The meeting, then, of the aspiration for liberation and the theologies p. 119 of liberation is not one of mere chance. The significance of this encounter between the two can be understood only in light of the specific message of Revelation, authentically interpreted by the Magisterium of the Church.²

IV BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

1. Thus a theology of liberation correctly understood constitutes an invitation to theologians to deepen certain essential biblical themes with a concern for the grave and urgent questions which the contemporary yearning for liberation, and those movements which more or less faithfully echo it, pose for the Church. We dare not forget for a single instant the situations of acute distress which issue such a dramatic call to theologians.

2. The radical experience of *Christian liberty*³ is our first point of reference. Christ, our Liberator, has freed us from sin and from slavery to the Law and to the flesh, which is the mark of the condition of sinful mankind. Thus it is the new life of grace, fruit of justification, which makes us free. This means that the most radical form of slavery is

² Cf. *Dei Verbum*, n. 10.

³ Cf. [Gal. 5, 1ff.](#)

slavery to sin. Other forms of slavery find their deepest root in slavery to sin. That is why freedom in the full Christian sense, characterized by the life in the Spirit, cannot be confused with a licence to give in to the desires of the flesh. Freedom is a new life in love.

3. The 'theologies of liberation' make wide use of readings from the book of Exodus. The exodus, in fact, is the fundamental event in the formation of the chosen people. It represents freedom from foreign domination and from slavery. One will note that the specific significance of the event comes from its purpose, for this liberation is ordered to the foundation of the people of God and the Covenant cult celebrated on Mt. Sinai.⁴ That is why the liberation of the Exodus cannot be reduced to a liberation which is principally or exclusively political in nature. Moreover, it is significant that the term *freedom* is often replaced in Scripture by the very closely related term, *redemption*.

4. The foundational episode of the *Exodus* will never be effaced from the memory of Israel. Reference is made to it when, after the [p. 120](#) destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon, the Jewish people lived in the hope of a new liberation and, beyond that, awaited a definitive liberation. In this experience God is recognized as the Liberator. He will enter into a new Covenant with His people. It will be marked by the gift of His Spirit and the conversion of hearts.⁵

5. The anxieties and multiple sufferings sustained by those who are faithful to the God of the Covenant provide the theme of several Psalms: laments, appeals for help and thanksgivings all make mention of religious salvation and liberation. In this context, suffering is not purely and simply equated with the social condition of poverty or with the condition of the one who is undergoing political oppression. It also includes the hostility of one's enemies, injustice, failure and death. The Psalms call us back to an essential religious experience: it is from God alone that one can expect salvation and healing. God, and not man, has the power to change the situations of suffering. Thus the 'poor of the Lord' live in a total and confident reliance upon the loving providence of God.⁶ Moreover, throughout the whole crossing of the desert, the Lord did not fail to provide for the spiritual liberation and purification of his people.

6. In the Old Testament, the prophets after Amos keep affirming with particular vigour the requirements of justice and solidarity and the need to pronounce a very severe judgment on the rich who oppress the poor. They come to the defence of the widow and the orphan. They threaten the powerful: the accumulation of evils can only lead to terrible punishments.

Faithfulness to the Covenant cannot be conceived of without the practice of justice. Justice as regards God and justice as regards mankind are inseparable. God is the defender and the liberator of the poor.

7. These requirements are found once again in the New Testament. They are even more radicalized as can be shown in the discourse on the *Beatitudes*. Conversion and renewal have to occur in the de the heart.

8. Already proclaimed in the Old Testament, the commandment of fraternal love extended to all mankind thus provides the supreme rule of social life.⁷ There are no

⁴ Cf. [Ex. 24](#).

⁵ cf. [Jr. 31, 31-34](#); [Ex. 36, 26ff](#).

⁶ Cf. [Ze. 3:12ff](#).

⁷ Cf. [Dt. 10, 18-19](#).

discriminations or limitations which can counter the recognition of everyone as *neighbour*.⁸

9. Poverty for the sake of the kingdom is praised. And in the figure [p. 121](#) of the poor, we are led to recognize the mysterious presence of the Son of Man who became poor himself for love of us.⁹ This is the foundation of the inexhaustible words of Jesus on the judgment in [Mt. 25:31–46](#). Our Lord is one with all in distress; every distress is marked by his presence.

10. At the same time, the requirements of justice and mercy, already proclaimed in the Old Testament, are deepened to assume a new significance in the New Testament. Those who suffer or who are persecuted are identified with Christ.¹⁰ The perfection that Jesus demands of His disciples ([Mt. 5:18](#)) consists in the obligation to be merciful ‘as your heavenly Father is merciful’ ([Lk. 6:36](#)).

11. It is in light of the Christian vocation to fraternal love and mercy that the rich are severely reminded of their duty.¹¹ St. Paul, faced with the disorders of the Church of Corinth, forcefully emphasizes the bond which exists between participation in the sacrament of love and sharing with the brother in need.¹²

12. New Testament revelation teaches us that sin is the greatest evil, since it strikes man in the heart of his personality. The first liberation, to which all others must make reference, is that from sin.

13. Unquestionably, it is to stress the radical character of the deliverance brought by Christ and offered to all, be they politically free or slaves, that the New Testament does not require some change in the political or social condition as a prerequisite for entrance into this freedom. However, the *Letter to Philemon* shows that the new freedom procured by the grace of Christ should necessarily have effects on the social level.

14. Consequently, the full ambit of sin, whose first effect is to introduce disorder into the relationship between God and man, cannot be restricted to ‘social sin’. The truth is that only a correct doctrine of sin will permit us to insist on the gravity of its social effects.

15. Nor can one localize evil principally or uniquely in bad social, political or economic ‘structures’ as though all other evils came from them so that the creation of the ‘new man’ would depend on the establishment of different economic and socio-political structures. To be sure, there are structures which are evil and which cause evil and which we must have the courage to change. Structures, whether they are good or bad, are the result of man’s actions and so are consequences more than causes. The root of evil, then, lies in free and [p. 122](#) responsible persons who have to be converted by the grace of Jesus Christ in order to live and act as new creatures in the love of neighbour and in the effective search for justice, self-control and the exercise of virtue.¹³

To demand first of all a radical revolution in social relations and then to criticize the search for personal perfection is to set out on a road which leads to the denial of the meaning of the person and his transcendence, and to destroying ethics and its foundation which is the absolute character of the distinction between good and evil. Moreover, since

⁸ Cf. [Lc. 10, 25–27](#).

⁹ cf. [2 Co. 9](#).

¹⁰ cf. [Mt. 25, 31–46](#); [Ac. 9, 4–5](#); [Col. 1, 24](#).

¹¹ Cf. [Jm. 5ff](#).

¹² Cf. [1 Co. 11, 17–34](#).

¹³ Cf. [Jm. 2, 14–26](#).

charity is the principle of authentic perfection, that perfection cannot be conceived without an openness to others and a spirit of service.

V THE VOICE OF THE MAGISTERIUM

1. In order to answer the challenge levelled at our times by oppression and hunger, the Church's Magisterium has frequently expressed her desire to awaken Christian consciences to a sense of justice, social responsibility and solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, and to highlight the present urgency of the doctrine and imperatives contained in Revelation.

2. We would like to mention some of these interventions here: the papal documents *Mater et magistra*, *Pacem in terris*, *Populorum progressio*, and *Evangelii nuntiandi*. We should likewise mention the letter to Cardinal Roy, *Octogesima adveniens*.

3. The Second Vatican Council in turn confronted the questions of justice and liberty in the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et spes*.

4. On a number of occasions, the Holy Father has emphasized these themes, in particular in the encyclicals *Redemptor hominis*, *Dives in misericordia*, and *Laborem exercens*. These numerous addresses recall the doctrine of the rights of man and touch directly on the problems of the liberation of the human person in the face of the diverse kinds of oppression of which he is the victim. It is especially important to mention in this connection the Address given before the 26th General Assembly of the United Nations in New York, October 2, 1979.¹⁴ On January 28 of that same year, while opening the Third Conference of CELAM in Puebla, John Paul II affirmed that the complete truth about man is the basis for any real liberation.¹⁵ This p. 123 text is a document which bears directly upon the theology of liberation.

5. Twice the *Synod of Bishops* treated subjects which are directly related to a Christian conception of liberation: in 1971, justice in the world, and in 1974, the relationship between freedom from oppression and full freedom, or the salvation of mankind. The work of the Synods of 1971 and 1974 led Paul VI in his Apostolic Constitution *Evangelii nuntiandi* to clarify the connection between evangelization and human liberation or advancement.¹⁶

6. The concern for the Church for liberation and for human advancement was also expressed in the establishment of the Pontifical Commission, *Justice and Peace*.

7. Numerous national Episcopal Conferences have joined the Holy See in recalling the urgency of authentic human liberation and the routes by which to achieve it. In this context, special mention should be made of the documents of the General Conferences of the Latin American episcopate at Medellin in 1968 and at Puebla in 1979.

Paul VI was present at the Medellin Conference and John Paul II was at Puebla. Both dealt with the themes of conversion and liberation.

8. Following Paul VI, who had insisted on the distinctive character of the Gospel message,¹⁷ a character which is of divine origin, John Paul II, in his address at Puebla,

¹⁴ Cf. AAS 71 (1979) pp. 1144–1160.

¹⁵ Cf. AAS 71 (1979) p. 196.

¹⁶ Cf. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 25–33, AAS 68 (1976) pp. 23–28.

¹⁷ Cf. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 32, AAS 68 (1976) p. 27.

recalled the three pillars upon which any authentic theology of liberation will rest: *truth about Jesus Christ, truth about the Church, and truth about mankind*.¹⁸

VI A NEW INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIANITY

1. It is impossible to overlook the immense amount of selfless work done by Christians, pastors, priests, religious or laypersons, who, driven by a love for their brothers and sisters living in inhuman conditions, have endeavoured to bring help and comfort to countless people in the distress brought about by poverty. Among these, some have tried to find the most effective means to put a quick end to the intolerable situation.

2. The zeal and the compassion which should dwell in the hearts of all pastors nevertheless run the risk of being led astray and diverted to works which are just as damaging to man and his dignity as is the poverty which is being fought, if one is not sufficiently attentive to certain temptations. p. 124

3. The feeling of anguish at the urgency of the problems cannot make us lose sight of what is essential nor forget the reply of Jesus to the Tempter: 'It is not on bread alone that man lives, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God' ([Mt. 4:4](#); cf. [Dt. 8:3](#)).

Faced with the urgency of sharing bread, some are tempted to put evangelization into parentheses, as it were, and postpone it until tomorrow: first the bread, then the Word of the Lord. It is a fatal error to separate these two and even worse to oppose the one to the other. In fact, the Christian perspective naturally shows they have a great deal to do with one another.¹⁹

4. To some it even seems that the necessary struggle for human justice and freedom in the economic and political sense constitutes the whole essence of salvation. For them, the Gospel is reduced to a purely earthly gospel.

5. The different theologies of liberation are situated between the *preferential option for the poor*, forcefully reaffirmed without ambiguity after Medellin at the Conference of Puebla²⁰ on the one hand, and the temptation to reduce the Gospel to an earthly gospel on the other.

6. We should recall that the preferential option described at Puebla is two-fold: for the poor and *for the young*.²¹ It is significant that the option for the young has in general been passed over in total silence.

7. We noted above (cf. 3) that an authentic theology of liberation will be one which is rooted in the Word of God, correctly interpreted.

8. But from a descriptive standpoint, it helps to speak of *theologies* of liberation, since the expression embraces a number of theological positions, or even sometimes ideological ones, which are not simply different but more often incompatible with one another.

9. In this present document, we will only be discussing developments of that current of thought which, under the name 'theology of liberation', proposes a novel interpretation of both the content of faith and of Christian existence which seriously departs from the faith of the Church and, in fact, actually constitutes a practical negation.

10. Concepts uncritically borrowed from marxist ideology and recourse to theses of a biblical hermeneutic marked by rationalism are at the basis of the new interpretation

¹⁸ Cf. AAS 71 (1979) pp. 188–196.

¹⁹ Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 39; Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno*: AAS 23 (1931) p. 207.

²⁰ Cf. n. 1134–1165 and n. 1166–1205.

²¹ Cf. *Doc. de Puebla*, IV, 2.

which is corrupting whatever was authentic in the generous initial commitment on behalf of the poor.

VII MARXIST ANALYSIS

1. Impatience and a desire for results has led certain Christians, [P. 125](#) despairing of every other method, to turn to what they call 'marxist analysis'.

2. Their reasoning is this: an intolerable and explosive situation requires *effective action* which cannot be put off. Effective action presupposes a *scientific analysis* of the structural causes of poverty. Marxism now provides us with the means to make such an analysis, they say. Then one simply has to apply the analysis to the third-world situation, especially in Latin America.

3. It is clear that scientific knowledge of the situation and of the possible strategies for the transformation of society is a presupposition for any plan capable of attaining the ends proposed. It is also a proof of the seriousness of the effort.

4. But the term 'scientific' exerts an almost mythical fascination even though everything called 'scientific' is not necessarily scientific at all. That is why the borrowing of a method of approach to reality should be preceded by a careful epistemological critique. This preliminary critical study is missing from more than one 'theology of liberation'.

5. In the human and social sciences it is well to be aware above all of the plurality of methods and viewpoints, each of which reveals only one aspect of reality which is so complex that it defies simple and univocal explanation.

6. In the case of marxism, in the particular sense given to it in this context, a preliminary critique is all the more necessary since the thought of Marx is such a global vision of reality that all data received from observation and analysis are brought together in a philosophical and ideological structure, which predetermines the significance and importance to be attached to them. The ideological principles come prior to the study of the social reality and are presupposed in it. Thus no separation of the parts of this epistemologically unique complex is possible. If one tries to take only one part, say, the analysis, one ends up having to accept the entire ideology. That is why it is not uncommon for the ideological aspects to be predominant among the things which the 'theologians of liberation' borrow from marxist authors.

7. The warning of Paul VI remains fully valid today: marxism as it is actually lived out poses many distinct aspects and questions for Christians to reflect upon and act on. However, it would be 'illusory and dangerous to ignore the intimate bond which radically unites them, and to accept elements of the marxist analysis without recognizing its connections with the ideology, or to enter into the practice of class-struggle and of its marxist interpretation while failing [p. 126](#) to see the kind of totalitarian society to which this process slowly leads'.²²

8. It is true that marxist thought ever since its origins, and even more so lately, has become divided and has given birth to various currents which diverge significantly from one another. To the extent that they remain fully marxist, these currents continue to be based on certain fundamental tenets which are not compatible with the Christian conception of humanity and society. In this context, certain formulas are not neutral, but keep the meaning they had in the original marxist doctrine. This is the case with the 'class-struggle'. This expression remains pregnant with the interpretation that Marx gave it, so it cannot be taken as the equivalent of 'severe social conflict', in an empirical sense. Those

²² Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, n. 34, AAS 63 (1971) pp. 424-425.

who use similar formulas, while claiming to keep only certain elements of the marxist analysis and yet to reject this analysis taken as a whole, maintain at the very least a serious confusion in the minds of their readers.

9. Let us recall the fact that atheism and the denial of the human person, his liberty and his rights, are at the core of the marxist theory. This theory, then, contains errors which directly threaten the truths of the faith regarding the eternal destiny of individual persons. Moreover, to attempt to integrate into theology an analysis whose criterion of interpretation depends on this atheistic conception is to involve oneself in terrible contradictions. What is more, this misunderstanding of the spiritual nature of the person leads to a total subordination of the person to the collectivity, and thus to the denial of the principles of a social and political life which is in keeping with human dignity.

10. A critical examination of the analytical methods borrowed from other disciplines must be carried out in a special way by theologians. It is the light of faith which provides theology with its principles. That is why the use of philosophical positions or of human sciences by the theologian has a value which might be called instrumental, but yet must undergo a critical study from a theological perspective. In other words, the ultimate and decisive criterion for truth can only be a criterion which is itself theological. It is only in the light of faith, and what faith teaches us about the truth of man and the ultimate meaning of his destiny, that one can judge the validity or degree of validity of what other disciplines propose, often rather conjecturally, as being the truth about man, his history and his destiny. p. 127

11. When modes of interpretation are applied to the economic, social and political reality of today, which are themselves borrowed from marxist thought, they can give the initial impression of a certain plausibility to the degree that the present-day situation in certain countries is similar to what Marx described and interpreted in the middle of the last century. On the basis of these similarities, certain simplifications are made which, abstracting from specific essential factors, prevent any really rigorous examination of the causes of poverty and prolong the confusion.

12. In certain parts of Latin America, the seizure of the major part of the wealth by an oligarchy of owners bereft of social consciousness, the practical absence or the shortcomings of a rule of law, military dictators making a mockery of elementary human rights, the corruption of certain powerful officials and the savage practices of some foreign capital interests constitute factors which nourish a passion for revolt among those who thus consider themselves the powerless victims of a new colonialism in the technological, financial, monetary or economic order. The recognition of injustice is accompanied by a *pathos* which borrows its language from marxism, wrongly presented as though it were scientific language.

13. The first condition for any analysis is a total openness to the reality to be described. That is why a critical consciousness has to accompany the use of any working hypotheses that are being adopted. One has to realize that these hypotheses correspond to a particular viewpoint which will inevitably highlight certain aspects of the reality while leaving others in the shade. This limitation which derives from the nature of human science is ignored by those who, under the guise of hypotheses recognized as such, have recourse to such an all-embracing conception of reality as the thought of Karl Marx.

VIII SUBVERSION OF THE MEANING OF TRUTH AND VIOLENCE

1. This all-embracing conception thus imposes its logic and leads the 'theologies of liberation' to accept a series of positions which are incompatible with the Christian vision of humanity. In fact, the ideological core borrowed from marxism, which we are referring

to, exercises the function of a *determining principle*. It has this role in virtue of its being described as '*scientific*', that is to say, true of necessity.

In this core, we can distinguish several components.

2. According to the logic of marxist thought, the 'analysis' is inseparable from the *praxis*, and from the conception of history to p.128 which this *praxis* is linked. The analysis is for the marxist an instrument of criticism, and criticism is only one stage in the revolutionary struggle. This struggle is that of the proletarian class, invested with its mission in history.

3. Consequently, for the marxist, only those who engage in the struggle can work out the analysis correctly.

4. The only true consciousness, then, is the *partisan* consciousness.

It is clear that the concept of *truth* itself is in question here, and it is totally subverted: there is no truth, they pretend, except in and through the partisan *praxis*.

5. For the marxist, the *praxis*, and the truth that comes from it, are partisan *praxis* and truth because the fundamental structure of history is characterized by *class-struggle*. There follows, then, the objective necessity to enter into the class struggle, which is the dialectical opposite of the relationship of exploitation, which is being condemned. For the marxist, the truth is a truth of class: there is no truth but the truth in the struggle of the revolutionary class.

6. The fundamental law of history, which is the law of the class struggle, implies that society is founded on violence. To the violence which constitutes the relationship of the domination of the rich over the poor, there corresponds the counter-violence of the revolution, by means of which this domination will be reserved.

7. The class struggle is presented as an objective, necessary law. Upon entering this process on behalf of the oppressed, one 'makes' truth, one acts '*scientifically*'. Consequently, the conception of the truth goes hand in hand with the affirmation of necessary violence, and so, of a political amorality. Within this perspective, any reference to ethical requirements calling for courageous and radical institutional and structural reforms makes no sense.

8. The fundamental law of class struggle has a global and universal character. It is reflected in all the spheres of existence: religious, ethical, cultural and institutional. As far as this law is concerned, none of these spheres is autonomous. In each of them this law constitutes the determining element.

9. In particular, the very nature of ethics is radically called into question because of the borrowing of these theses from marxism. In fact, it is the transcendent character of the distinction between good and evil, the principle of morality, which is implicitly denied in the perspective of the class struggle. p.129

A Christian Understanding of Liberation

Andrew Kirk

This article is one of three Abraham Malpan Memorial lectures given at the Mar Thoma Theological Seminary in Kottayam, South India. The other two were entitled, 'The Bible and the Oppressed' and 'Acceptance and Opposition'. They were published by The Christian

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(Editor)

There are many ways of describing the essence and driving force of Western societies today. Many commentators would say that the most obvious aspect of the life of most people, even when this is not fully recognized, is their devotion (in the religious sense) to 'freedom'. Successive revolutions since the end of the 18th century have reinforced the belief that human happiness is to be measured fundamentally by the degree of personal freedom which each individual is able to achieve. In the debate about human rights, for example, people in the Western nations assume naturally that it is civil liberties that are being talked about: freedom from undue constraint by the State; freedom to own private property; freedom to buy and sell in the market place; freedom to choose a particular kind of education for one's children; freedom to travel; freedom to terminate pregnancies and freedom to have sexual relationships with members of the same sex. The latest freedom which seems to be on the horizon already is that of being able to do all one's household transactions, and a lot of office work, by computer from one's house. We might call this last freedom, the freedom not to have to converse with people!

There is a sense in which this concept of freedom is linked to advances in modern technology (e.g. the realm of fertilization in the field of medical science). Likewise oppression is easily understood as that which modern science is able to liberate us from: the drudgery and monotony of life and physical disabilities.

Without doubting the many, lasting, beneficial uses to which scientific discovery has and can be put, the Western notion of freedom is largely an illusion—a chasing of shadows—for, in many ways, Western peoples have lost the art of *being* human. Life (as in the parable which Jesus told) tends to be measured by the abundance of things which are possessed. Perhaps, it would not be too far fetched to suggest that the only real freedom people actually have is that of choosing which bondage they are going to live under. This conclusion [p. 130](#) should not be taken as a desire to detract from technological knowledge as such—for physical and spiritual freedom ought not to be set against one another—rather it is a warning against an increasingly narrow definition of what it means to be human, the result of the loss in the West of any firm base for moral and spiritual values.

In many parts of the Third World there ascends up from 'the wretched of the earth' a cry for freedom. There is no illusion here! Where life consists of a 24 hour struggle to exist, personal and social freedoms take on a wholly different meaning. People living under the daily constraints of physical necessity feel deeply that the whole of life is being subordinated to a set of structures or circumstances (in a quasi-religious sense) over which they have absolutely no control. Life is a matter of survival within a system which is controlled by others, ultimately hostile to their interests: a political mafia, a military caucus, the international banking system, landlords, middle-men. At the bottom of the heap in society it looks very much as if the whole of existence is the result of an inextricable fate working itself out. Such a view is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the belief that life is about the freedom of choice.

In spite of the fact that the vast majority of humankind has to toil in circumstances of poverty and oppression, the longing and demand for freedom is never wholly extinguished. There are substantial reasons therefore, for affirming that the main characteristic of our modern world, despite all the counter signs, is that it is intoxicated with the idea of freedom and incensed against every form of oppression (whether real, or imagined). Ruben Alves, a Brazilian theologian and sociologist, captures well the modern mood:

‘Man is free for the simple things of life ... Free to chat, to drink and eat, to remain inactive in pure contemplation, to enjoy the sex game, to play. He is liberated for humour, which exists only when man does not take himself too seriously, when he is not dominated by messianic obsessions about his power to create history ... Man is free, even to live in captivity, without either losing the erotic sense of life because of the frustration of a future made closed, or without becoming drunk by eroticism as a compensation for the loss of future’ (*A Theology of Human Hope*, p. 157).

THE INFLUENCE OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY ON CHRISTIAN THINKING

The essential emphasis of Liberation Theology as a Christian reflection on freedom and liberation has been that human liberation is of one piece. Liberation, as it effects human beings, cannot be divided into an inner and an outer realm. In this sense, it has become a protest against **P. 131** the long tradition of thought in both the West and the East that attitudes and intentions can be substitutes for actual change in society. It is also a powerful protest against the churches for making liberation into something purely individual, internal, otherworldly and future. The effect of the dichotomy between the inner and the outer realm of life has been to divorce faith from political action.

José Miguez calls this belief a Hellenistic view of liberation: ‘... the emancipation of the soul from the cares, appetites, and ambitions of the body and the world, in order to be dedicated to contemplation and communion with God’.

Moreover, he accuses modern theology of perpetuating this ‘internal and individual concept of liberation by linking liberation ... to the integration of man with the universe of moral values ... to the emancipation of the spirit ... to a flight from ‘the objective’ from the world of things ... to a world where objective reality can be explained, dissolved or ignored in mental and mystical processes’ (*‘Theology and Liberation’*, *I.R.M.* 61, 2411 Jan. 1972, pp. 68–69).

It is a firm conviction of Liberation Theology that it is by a judicial, not uncritical, use of the Marxist understanding of the way in which societies work that one may come to a more complete perspective on liberation.

Firstly, liberation is not either an explanation of a reality or the future projection of a theoretical ideal, rather it is a project—something that has to be worked for by stages with sacrifice and determination.

Secondly, liberation has to do with the whole of human life and with every human being. No-one can be free until all are free. My personal liberation can only be achieved in the liberation of others. The first, in some circumstances, may be just as difficult to realize as the second—to quote José Miguez again:

‘The project of liberation embraces the interests of all because it offers to all better possibilities of human fulfilment. But the ideology of oppression hides this reality from the dominant classes and hardens them in their resistance to change. Hence the importance of the de-ideologizing task.’ (*Toward a Christian Political Ethics*, London, SCM Press, 1983 p. 108).

Thirdly, Marxism is both a useful tool to analyse concrete slaveries in the political and economic spheres from which human beings need liberating and also a programme for action. Nevertheless, it is ultimately insufficient, for it does not consider the reality of man’s alienation from God, who is the only true foundation and meaning of existence. As a result Marxism distorts as well as clarifies the total dynamic of human history and relationships between different sectors of society. **p. 132**

Fourthly, full liberation is reconciliation with God through, and by means of, the historic work of salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ within, and only within, the concrete conditions of human existence. Liberation is the freeing of the whole of life from its basic contradictions, antagonisms and divisions, in order that it might become what God intends it to be.

LIBERATION AND THE MESSAGE OF THE SCRIPTURES

Unquestionably, liberation is one of the key themes of the Bible. One of the leading New Testament scholars of this generation, F. F. Bruce, has called the Apostle Paul, 'the Apostle of Freedom'. Within the Pauline writings the key conviction is that 'Christ set us free, to be free people ...' ([Gal. 5:1](#)). There is a freedom which can only be measured by the scope of Christ's sacrifice for sin and his conquest of death.

The starting-point for understanding the biblical view of liberation is its analysis of the human predicament of oppression (which we looked at earlier). The biblical writers have their explanations of the causes of human misery. In my opinion these are just as valid a statement of reality, which can be observed empirically, as those provided by secular sociology or economic analysis. The biblical perspective (we may call it a theological analysis, if we like) has its own internally consistent methodology and is intrinsically open to verification.

If Paul has a great vision of the liberation which is possible in Christ he is also thoroughly realistic about the causes of its absence. To grasp his in-depth understanding of the problem we should begin where he himself begins to develop the meaning and scope of the Gospel, [Rom. 1:18f.](#): 'The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against every form of godlessness (*asebeia*) and injustice (*adikia*) practised by men who suppress the truth by their injustice.'

This is a magnificently condensed statement of the nature and consequences of sin. The passage which follows is possibly a commentary (technically, a midrash) on the account of the fall of Adam and Eve. Let us notice some of the pertinent arguments:

(a) The fundamental human predicament is ungodliness (*asebeia*). This is later identified as idolatry ([Rom. 1:21-23](#)). Idolatry is, briefly, a decision not to recognize that the world belongs to God, and positively to substitute other created objects as a focus of worship and service. It is a displacement or refashioning of one's understanding of God and his replacement with another object of devotion or [p. 133](#) dedication. This *exchange* is the fundamental cause of all oppression; it is the bottom line, as it were, in one's explanation of the cause of every kind of ill-treatment of some human beings by others. It is, therefore, also the place where authentic human liberation has to begin. Equivocation at this point leads to a superficial assessment of the possibilities of liberation throughout society and the spinning of unnecessary and often dangerous illusions concerning change.

(b) The most fundamental consequence flowing from the decision to exchange the truth of God for a fabrication of human ingenuity is that all human reasoning and emotional life has become warped and twisted. Both in theory and in practice humankind has bartered a God-centred view of reality for one centred on only one aspect of life. In political terms, this one reality may be freedom, justice, revolution, order, democracy or the class-struggle. The human view then becomes elevated to the level of an absolute verity, usually substantiated by an appeal to one religious value or another (creation, nature, law, kingdom) or to a 'scientific' explanation of society and its workings. Paul has no hesitation in calling this whole process one of 'exchanging the truth of God for a lie ...' (the lie about which we spoke earlier). We might say that, insofar as human beings refuse

to recognize with seriousness the self-manifestation of the God and Father of Jesus Christ, their perception of the world is bound to be distorted at every level.

(c) As a result of faulty reasoning and a corrupt emotional life many other important, negative consequences flow. Paul describes these in terms of the perverted human relationships which were typical of the Gentile world of the first century. We might well use the word 'oppression' in its individual, political and economic dimensions to cover the list of shameful acts given in [Rom. 1:29–31](#). The result of corruption is the destruction of human life in all its aspects (v. [27](#)), summed up by the one word 'death' (v. [32](#))—God's final judgement on human beings as they remain in their stubborn unbelief.

(d) Human beings find themselves caught in a vicious circle: the more they believe the fundamental lie about reality, the more they practise a perverted form of existence, the more they believe the lie—'they suppress the truth by their injustice' (v. [18](#)).

This passage from Romans gives us, then, the substance of Paul's analysis of the human predicament. At one level it is clearly a matter of belief (a faith-commitment) that this analysis is true. At another level, that of practice, verification is possible as a matter of observation of normal human behaviour. Idolatry is a fundamental, diagnostic tool for explaining the meaning and dynamic of oppression in all its forms. [p. 134](#)

The fulness of liberation arises out of a correct assessment of both the causes and the symptoms of oppression. The means of liberation are set out in the whole letter to the Romans, and in particular in chapter [8](#). The conclusion of Paul's writings, as indeed the whole of the New Testament, is that liberation is impossible without redemption. A price has to be paid to atone for both sin (idolatry) and sins (injustices and oppressions). Human beings cannot pay the price themselves, either by moral earnestness, political action or compassion for the distressed. Only the Son of God, totally free of all idolatry and injustice, could atone, by becoming a sin offering ([Rom. 8:3](#)). The New Testament is totally realistic in recognizing that this view of basic liberation is a scandal to those who possess power, wisdom, authority and status and to those who trust in their religious rites and practices ([1 Cor. 1:18ff.](#)). The message of the Gospel is, as we say, totally unacceptable, to those who are not poor or poor in spirit.

Liberation is one model of salvation in the New Testament. It speaks of freedom from the authority and power of the law, sin, the powers and, eventually, of death itself. It is far from being an abstract ideal. It needs to become a concrete reality at every level of human existence. As José Miguez has eloquently argued, it manifests itself in love, reconciliation and justice—each one the practical embodiment of 'doing the truth':

'true love cannot remain as intention, in the abstract: it demands to be made concrete. However, in order to do this one must choose a way to concretize it ... When love is confronted with human need in its widest sense, it must choose a strategy ... and become involved in forms of organization' (*Room to be People*, p. 63).

'Reconciliation means in the Bible not the ignoring or explaining away of the contradiction, but its effective removal.... The differences are not conciliated in the new fellowship, but are overcome through repentance and conversion and the creation of a new man. The "new age". does not coexist pacifically with the "old age" but engages in a death struggle. Reconciliation is ... achieved ... through the defeat of the old and the victory of the new age' (*Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Age*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1975, p. 120).

There are two issues which still remain for consideration. Each has generated a certain amount of controversy among Christians. We mention them, though we are not able to resolve all the tensions which exist in each case.

The first issue concerns the relationship between the view of the Old and New Testaments concerning liberation. It is often claimed that the Old Testament has a concept

of salvation which is rooted in this [p. 135](#) present world, whereas the New Testament speaks of a final salvation beyond the end of this world order. It is further stated that the New Testament is not concerned fundamentally with liberation in social terms, but only within personal relationships. Finally, many would argue that God's people existed as a nation in the Old Testament, and that as a consequence, interest is centred upon freedom and order in political terms, whereas in the New Testament the Church, a universal and non-political body, replaces Israel. The Church is a spiritual fellowship, not a political agency.

There is some truth in these assertions. However, they are often exaggerated and frequently wrong conclusions are drawn from right premises. Because of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ the New Testament is conscious of the defeat of death. Death is no longer to be considered the end of human existence, but the transition to a new realm of living. Nevertheless, the new age is portrayed in material terms. Moreover, liberation in the New Testament is clearly offered to all peoples, without discrimination or favouritism, no longer to the members of one nation alone. It is, therefore, entirely separate from any ideas of race or tribalism. At the same time, it is inseparable from belonging to a new universal family, which is essentially inter-racial and inter-cultural. Nevertheless, liberation has to be worked out within this new grouping, whose motto is 'Jesus Christ is Lord', in such a way that every kind of political and cultural assumption and division is challenged. It is vitally important to bear in mind that the 'enemies' that Christ told his disciples to love unconditionally were political and national ones. Liberation may not be directly equated with any particular political action—all of which is ambiguous in terms of the final liberation of the kingdom—; nevertheless, it has extensive political implications.

The second issue concerns the dilemma as to whether it is any longer true to say that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church there is no salvation). This is a controversial issue. Dogmatic statements which seem to be rigidly exclusivist do not tone well with modern notions of tolerance and pluralism. They seem to be arrogant, unnecessarily provocative and in danger of inducing a fatal spiritual pride. The difficulty is enhanced by the modern individualistic notion of salvation. Salvation is the result of an individual's search for the truth of God, and is expressed in terms of a one-to-one relationship with the Saviour.

I do not believe, however, that we can allow such a restricted view of salvation. There is a real sense in which there is no salvation outside the church, for God's purpose of salvation is to form a new kind of [p.136](#) community. It is true that Christian opinion down the ages has tended to oscillate between individual and institutional notions of salvation. In the first case everything seems to depend on the individual and his initiative, salvation is the result of individual free-enterprise and risk-taking. In the second case everything depends upon the institution. The Church takes care of the relationship. Salvation is the result of having paid one's contributions to a welfare system. Needless to say, both models are entirely inadequate. The New Testament uses organic models to describe the new corporate reality which God is creating—body, family, race, people. God's purposes of salvation only begin with the individual being reconciled to his creator. His ultimate plan is to remake humanity in the context of creating new social structures and relationships. The good news of the Gospel is not that a private salvation is available to those who feel their need of it, but that God is reconciling together peoples who have been divided by walls of hostility and fear. The death and resurrection of the Messiah has, as its end product, the causing of hitherto antagonistic groups to belong to one another ([Eph. 2:14, 16; 3:6](#)). Belonging can only be expressed in a community. That community is the Church. In this sense there is no salvation outside the Church. Liberation has to express itself in

wholly new kinds of human relationships: it needs, therefore, a social context in which to do it.

I understand this reality, not so much as a matter of spiritual pride, or the basis for a false assurance, but as an amazing gift of God and a demand that what is a potential reality by God's grace become a fact through our collaboration.

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Black Theology

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I BLACK THEOLOGY: ITS ORIGIN

While it may be admitted that black theology was made prominent by writers of the 1960s and 1970s, the roots of black theology go further back in history. Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), a strong Jamaican advocate of black religion is regarded by many as the apostle of black theology in the United States of America. Ferm describes him as a forerunner Of the Black Muslim and other black protest movements in America, who advocated a black God and a black Jesus.¹ The brilliant Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., concedes that Garvey was indeed the apostle of black religion. Speaking at Garvey's memorial shrine in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1965, King is quoted by Drake as saying:

'Marcus Garvey was the first man of colour in the history of the United States to lead and develop a mass movement ... He was the first man on a mass scale and level to give millions of Negroes a sense of dignity and destiny, and make the Negro feel he is somebody.'²

Marcus Garvey was a religious teacher. Garvey's concept of God may not have been as radical as his more recent counterparts, yet one cannot fail to see an intimation of black theology in his teachings. Garvey is quoted by Burkett as saying:

'Whilst our God has no colour, yet it is human to see everything through one's own spectacles, and since the white people have seen their God through white spectacles, we have only started out (late though it be) to see our God through our own spectacles ... We Negroes believe in the God of Ethiopia, the everlasting God—God the Father, God the Son

¹ Dean W. Ferm, *Contemporary American Theologies* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), p. 41.

² Clair Drake, Foreword to *Garveyism As a Religious Movement* by Randall Burkett (Metuchen, N.J. & London: Scarecrow Press, 1978), p. 15.