

# Liberation Theology: A Critical Analysis

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## Summary

*In this paper, we will explore liberation theology as defined by Gustavo Gutierrez, who is considered to be its founder. We will use it as an example to show how secular philosophy, and Marxism in particular, can influence Christianity and create new theological directions and movements. Also, we will see if there are some of its principles which we can freely accept as Christians, and which of them do we need to take with a grain of salt.*

Keywords: *liberation theology, Gutierrez, poverty, Marxism, Church*

## Introduction

Liberation theology is considered to be one of the most significant contributions of the Latin American Church to Christianity. Whether it was accepted or criticized, its care and attention to the poor has undoubtedly moved many Christians to take a more systematic and more honest approach in dealing with the problems of the poor and the oppressed. In the paper, we will be focusing on the liberation theology of Gustavo Gutierrez, who is considered to be the father of this theology, and we will also be dealing with other authors in this area, as well as its critics. We will be researching the influence of Marxist thought and criticism of religion on the development of this theology, but also on Christianity in general, and we will be looking to see which liberation theology principles can we as Christians accept, and which ones do we need to take with a grain of salt.

First, we will provide a general introduction into liberation theology, we will see how it was born, and what are its basic tenets. Then, we will see how Marxism was translated into a Christian framework through liberation theology, giving

it a Christian expression. And finally, we will take some time to review the criticism of this theology. In this research, we will mostly be using the book, "Liberation Theology," by Gustavo Gutierrez, who is considered the father of liberation theology, but also with other authors from this area, as well as its critics.

## **A General Introduction into Liberation Theology**

Liberation theology is a theological view on the practice of the Roman Catholic Church primarily, which has developed in the countries of Latin America during the 1960's. "It is a reflection of the social, political, and church circumstances there" (Vesely 1986, 18).

Liberation theology recognizes the poverty and the oppression of the people in Latin America and tries to formulate a theological framework which will provide an answer to the question of how the Church should react practically in a situation where the people it's serving is suffering under the great oppression caused by the social and political structures and relationships. At the same time, liberation theology embodies a criticism towards the passive Church, which is stuffing its head in the sand and pretending not to see the suffering and the oppression of the people it is serving. It is a critique of the Church which lauds the future, otherworldly deliverance and abundance, but it is not applying itself in the earthly deliverance from the sinful, inhumane, and humiliating living conditions nor the slave-like social and economic relationships. It is a criticism of the Church which, for its own benefit, stands alongside the government, thus supporting the existing oppression and injustice.

Liberation theology provides the answer to the everlasting issue of the relationship between the Church and the government, calling on the Church very clearly to stand with the poor and to become politically engaged against social structures and relationships which cause poverty and suffering. "What's new about liberation theology is the demand for creating new forms of social co-existence" (Vesely 1986, 18). It is not enough to feed the poor; we need to become involved in changing the unjust, sinful system which causes oppression and poverty, and in establishing new, righteous social relations which would be based on the principles of the Kingdom of Heaven, and which would in itself solve the very root of poverty and suffering. It is a call to the Church to become involved in establishing the Kingdom of God right here, right now.

## **Emergence and Basic Assumptions**

"Gustavo Gutierrez, a Roman Catholic priest, is considered to be one of the

fathers of liberation theology” (Encyclopædia Britannica 2014). However, he nor other founders can be considered to be the people who invented this theology.

Liberation theology has, for the most part, emerged among priests and pastors who have been in direct touch with the people, who have recognized the hardships of the people and the society, and who have tried to formulate theological answers and practices. Many have written various articles and spread ideas about the need for the Church to stand with the poor, and not just through the usual humanitarian work, but in a way which would resolve the root causes of poverty. The date that is generally accepted as the birth of liberation theology is the Second Latin American Episcopal Conference held in 1968 in Medellín, Colombia, when the attending bishops published a press release in which they affirmed the rights of the poor (Encyclopædia Britannica 2011).

In 1971, Gustavo Gutierrez published his influential book, *The Liberation Theology*, which is considered to be the essential text of the liberation theology. In his work, Gutierrez first described, and then systematized the existing aspirations and practices; involvement on behalf of the poor in their class struggle and establishment of social justice. By referring to Bible verses and the conclusions reached in church councils, he established a theological basis for this practice, which was already beginning to develop among the Latin American clergy. Thus, we can actually say that liberation theology was not born in the heads of theologians but emerged from the practices of the people and the clergy who have contextualized their faith in accordance to the circumstances in the Latin American society. Theologians have only provided a systematic framework, understanding, and a formulation to the liberation theology.

Liberation theology is built on a number of basic assumptions. The first assumption is that God is interested in man as a whole. Therefore, the freedom which is brought by the Gospel of Jesus Christ implies freedom in every segment of human existence, because “God wants us to be free from all types of slavery” (Gutierrez 1989, XLVI). Not only did sin cause internal corruption, but sinful and enslaving social relationship as well. Since God wants to deliver man from his internal sin through Jesus Christ, He also wants to deliver him from social corruption, i.e., the consequences of sin in interpersonal and broader social relationships. Christ brings salvation on all levels (Gutierrez 1989, 162), and “God’s saving work encompasses the totality of human existence” (Gutierrez 1989, 164). Thus, the Gospel does not only bring the internal freedom from sin, but political and economic freedom, as well.

The central feature of liberation theology is the so-called God’s preference for the poor. “The entire Bible, beginning with the story of Cain and Abel, mirrors God’s special love for the weak and the abused during human history. The poor are thus the privileged members of the Kingdom” (Gutierrez 1989, XXXIX).

According to this, Gutierrez concludes that “outreach efforts need to be primarily aimed at the oppressed and the poor” (Gutierrez 1989, 136). He proposed that Christians need to take the side of the poor, and against social relations which enslave, and this as a necessity and not an option, because only then can the breadth of Good News and of the freedom that Jesus Christ brings be truly understood. Gutierrez writes that “being a part of the people and sharing in their sufferings and joys, and their worries and struggles is not an academic issue, but a prerequisite of being a Christian” (Gutierrez 1989, XXXVIII), because Jeremiah 22:16 says that, “knowing God means defending the right of the poor and the miserable. Knowing God means attaining justice” (Gutierrez 1989, 211).

For liberation theology, “deliverance from Egypt was a political act, a breaking away from being robbed, and the beginning of rebuilding of a new and just society” (Gutierrez 1989, 169). Other authors also emphasized that “the Pharaoh didn’t let the Israelites go in the name of justice, but because he had been intimidated by the violence which swept over Egypt” (Vesely 1986, 25). In line with this, Gutierrez writes that, in unjust social relationships, it is “the duty of the Church to unmask all injustice through prophecy” (Gutierrez 1989, 131), that “we must participate in delivering the oppressed from others” (Gutierrez 1989, 224), and that the Church needs to resist those who are in power (Gutierrez 1989, 133). Gutierrez thus says that the Christians must become involved in the social and political areas on behalf of the poor, and against the sinful, unjust structures and relationships which oppose the Kingdom of God. Christians cannot just wait for the Kingdom of Heaven; instead, they need to begin establishing it now and, in that sense, if the Church fails to stand with the oppressed classes and enslaved people clearly and without reservation, it will stray away from the Gospel (Gutierrez 1989, 328). For Gutierrez, it was important to emphasize that “the conversion to the Gospel means a fundamental transformation; it means thinking like Christ, it means to become involved in the process of delivering the poor and the oppressed.” (Gutierrez 1989, 227). He claims that, “there’s more understanding of faith, more faith as such, and more zealotness for the Lord in the Christians who participate in the revolutionary processes in Latin America, than in the egotistical Christian circles which consider such involvement to be disturbing” (Gutierrez 1989, 225). In accordance with this, Gutierrez emphasizes that “the Church’s faithfulness to the Gospel means that it will be a visible sign of the Lord’s presence in striving for deliverance and in the struggle for a more righteous and humane society” (Gutierrez 1989, 289), and that it is “the only way the Church can bring validity and efficiency to the message it’s bringing” (Gutierrez 1989, 289).

One of the characteristics of liberation theology practice are its base groups, i.e., volunteer-lead local Christian groups who have studied the Scripture, but have also seen its flock’s need for food, water, electricity, and the like (Encyclopædia

Britannica 2011). In this way, the Church comes down to the people and is no longer lead from above, i.e., by various church interest spheres, but is instead lead from bottom to the top. According to liberation theology, “God is talking specifically to the suffering poor man, and we can only understand the Bible from the perspective of the poor” (Encyclopædia Britannica 2011), so through these base groups the voice of the poor, as well as the voice of God, is not neglected.

## **The Influence of Marxism**

In his Liberation Theology, Gutierrez leaves no doubts as to what is this social relationship that the Church should fight with alongside the poor. Those include capitalism and the United States of America, as well as their allies in the form of the ruling national groups (Gutierrez 1989, 97). Therefore, he writes that “there can be no authentic development of Latin America until it’s delivered from them” (Gutierrez 1989, 97); i.e., he’s identifying capitalism with the “condition of robbery, oppression, and alienation” (Gutierrez 1989, 141).

The influence of Marxism on the liberation theology is very clear. The 1960’s were a time when Marxism was spreading through the Cuban revolution and was becoming popular across Latin America, and through its noble goals it was gaining the sympathies of the people who felt repressed, as well as the clergy who were serving these people.

Just like Marxism, under its influence the liberation theology also divides people into two classes: the oppressors and the oppressed. The oppressors are those who possess the means and the capital for work, while the workers are the oppressed. Gutierrez explains how “the Latin American society has been structured in such a way to benefit the few who are appropriating the fruits of other people’s labor” (Gutierrez 1989, 223), and that it is necessary to “transform this society, which has been built on private property over the means of production” (Gutierrez 1989, 223). So, just like in Marxism, private property is something that needs to be changed, because the relationship between the owner of the means of production and the worker cannot possibly be righteous, as it inherently represented appropriation, robbery, and injustice. It is clear that the liberation theology is using the Marxist interpretation of society, history, and justice itself, and is providing it with a Christian expression.

Just like Marx himself claimed that “the philosophers only interpret the world, but the world needs changing instead” (Gutierrez 1989, 236), Gutierrez also criticizes the Church, which is only providing theological explanations of the world, and he calls on it to become actively involved in changing the world. Liberation theology provides a Christian appearance to the fight against oppressors and proclaims it to be a Christian duty. A Christian must take the side of the poor

through his social and political involvement in the struggle against injustice, i.e., against elements in society and those social relationships which have been perceived as being oppressive.

So, the influence of Marxism is clear. The same analysis and the division of society is used, the same vocabulary is used, and capitalism is also juxtaposed as the main enemy of righteous relationships. In line with this, and based on everything we have listed so far, and by following the thesis of José Miranda, one of the founders of liberation theology, that “Communism is the obligation of Christians” (Miranda 1982, 8), we can summarize liberation theology in the following way: to fully understand the Gospel means to become involved and to act not just for the sake of establishing the Kingdom of God in the hearts of people, but also in social relations, by establishing the Marxist model of political and economic structure and of interpreting social relations.

## **A Reflection on the Criticism of Liberation Theology**

Due to such a strong influence of Marxism, some criticism has arisen against liberation theology. Thus, the liberation theology critics emphasize that “there’s a risk of Marxist analysis introducing the Marxist understanding of history into liberation theology, as well as selective Bible reading, equating the Biblical poor people with the oppressed classes in the capitalist system, and the thinking that the fight for freedom is an experience of God” (Vesely 1986, 30).

In “Liberation Theology (Emergence, Development, Struggles)”, Vesely paraphrases some personal attitudes which have already been pointed out by Cardinal Ratzinger in the preparation document for creating the *Instructions of the Congregation* as prefect of the Congregation for instructions in the faith, and he states that, “in liberation theology, hope became trusting in love, and love became siding with the poor and the class struggle.” Vesely states, “the Kingdom of God is no longer spiritual kingdom, but taking a stance for establishing the Kingdom in a political and economical reality.” Thus, the very phrase, “the people’s exodus from Egypt, the central image of the salvation history, became an act of revolution,” and the act of Eucharist has been “turned into a celebration of deliverance.” By this very fact, “the word ‘redemption’ has been replaced with the word ‘liberation,’” which has been “reduced to just the earthly and temporal” (Vesely 1986, 33). In his conclusion of the analysis of Ratzinger’s remarks, Vesely writes that, as a result of all this, “liberation from sin has been pushed aside, and the Gospel has been turned into the proclamation of economic and political deliverance, which has led to the politicization of faith.” In that sense, the liberation theology equates the Biblical poor with Marx’s proletariat, and the “class Church, the Church of the poor, the people’s Church is juxtaposed against the hierarchical Church, which

has identified itself with the ruling class (Vesely 1986, 34).

Liberation theology adopts Christian images and events, takes them out of context and provides them with a new, political, Marxist interpretation, which is separated not only from the context of the image or event, but also from the context of the entire Bible, and in this way liberation theology loses its balance in interpreting the Scriptures.

It is true that Israel emerged during a long time spent in the desert in poverty (Deuteronomy 8:3), and that Jesus establishes that being poor (in spirit) is the basic prerequisite for entering God's inheritance (Matthew 5:3), and that the Bible is "interested in social justice" (Arnold and Beyer 2008, 446). However, that does not mean that it is exclusively on the side of the poor, as is reflected in liberation theology, nor that it is on their side just because they are poor, and it is far from a call to revolution. For example, the Scriptures in Exodus 23:1-6 and Leviticus 19:15 talks about how we should never show any partiality, neither to the rich nor to the poor, although we should definitely show consideration for those who are in need.

The thing that is probably most problematic about liberation theology is that it is insisting on dividing people into two classes, as well as automatically siding with the poor, which makes it seem like it is turning its back against anyone who's got certain assets. Biblical justice is justice for all, and not even the poor must be privileged simply because they are poor. Biblical justice is primarily tied to the application of the law with no partiality whatsoever, and not to any particular social regime. It does not look at who's who and it does not interpret the world nor justice in line with Marxism, which automatically sides with the poor, and against the rich.

In this way, Jesus fed the hungry, but he also practically drove away from himself people who were craving food (John 6). He healed the sick, who were often oppressed by demonic forces, but he also refused to heal them when he had a more important task ahead, such as preaching the Gospel (Mark 1). Also, when he had the chance to take a stand against the oppressive political and social circumstances, Jesus Christ pointed out that it is important to give to the king what belongs to the king (Matthew 22:21), thus clearly showing that following him does not mean changing social systems. Jesus was referring to the emperor who had usurped Israel's territory and was taking its resources, which is what liberation theology is accusing the Western countries of doing to Latin America. It is to such an emperor, a representative of the oppressive government, that Jesus recognizes the right to be given what belongs to him! This doesn't mean that Jesus condones such relationship, but it does make it clear that "Jesus didn't come to be a social reformer." (Got Questions Ministries 2018) in the sense in which liberation theology is calling us to be.

Furthermore, the prime theologian of the New Testament, the apostle Paul emphasizes the importance of work as a way of becoming free from poverty and dependence from other people (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12), and he is not asking Christians to automatically help the poor because they are in need. He does not even do it when he talks about widows, who have been even more financially needy then than they are today (1 Timothy 5). Paul does not even ask the Christians to free their own slaves, but rather to treat them with respect (Ephesians 6:9), and he even asks the slaves to serve their Christian masters even more zealously (1 Timothy 6:2). This does not mean that Paul is proposing slavery, but it does mean that he is not calling for the changing of a the system nor that he considers it a basic Christian duty which is supposed to prove that we have been truly transformed by the Gospel.

The change in society will come about as the people begin to accept Christ as their Lord, just as many historical renewals have shown before. The main task of the Church is to make people Jesus' disciples, and the change in society is a byproduct of that. "The only way to spread the Kingdom of God is for the sinner to renounce his sins and self-righteousness and bend their knee before Jesus the King." (DeYoung and Gilbert 2011, 121). It seems like the liberation gospel theology ignores the main task of the Church and wants to create Heaven on Earth right now, and in no way other than shaped by Marxism.

Also, in Ratzinger's words, in liberation theology the line is blurred when it comes to who is part of the Church. "Ultimately, whoever takes part in the class struggle is part of the 'people's church'" (Wikipedia 2018). Ratzinger's remarks and fears are not without cause because, according to Gustavo Gutierrez, "ever since God became man, the entire humanity has become the living temple of God; every person. The profane, which is outside the temple, now no longer exists" (Gutierrez 1989, 210). It would also seem that liberation theology divides people in such a way as to group them and pit them against each other. According to Gutierrez, even the Christians who refuse to partake in the class struggle have somehow become the oppressor (Gutierrez 1989, 146). How is that affecting the unity of the Church, and is this the example of the Church that we see in the New Testament?

## **Conclusion**

We have seen that liberation theology emerged from the need for the Church to define its response and practices when faced with the specific challenges of Latin American society. It is an attempt to engage the Church into becoming involved with the life of society. We have seen that the basic assumption in liberation theology is the belief that God cares about man as a whole, and that He brings deliverance to everything that makes humans what they are. According to liberation



theology, being a Christian means to act together with God in bringing freedom on all levels, including the social and political levels. We have also seen that liberation theology is clearly influenced by Marxist philosophy, i.e., the Marxist analysis of society, history, and Scripture itself.

Poverty, corruption, and unjust social relations are indeed huge problems, and liberation theology has been doing a good thing by calling on the Church to become actively involved in the society instead of being just a passive observer that pretends to be blind to the problems in society. It presents a justified criticism of the Church which is absorbed with itself and which has, through becoming dependent on privileges, become tied to the government and inefficient in regards to its mission. By starting a strong dialogue about the role of the Church in society and about how it can be the salt and light of the world in this world full of evil, liberation theology is surely contributing greatly to making the Church leave its four walls.

However, it is a great mistake to take such a strong political stance and have the Church risk losing its identity and mission, and instead become just an instrument in the political games of the powerful. Besides, with a distance of several decades, it turns out that there was less justice and more oppression of the common man precisely in the countries which have embraced and attempted to implement Marxism. Thus, when the Church starts getting involved in politics in this way, it is in danger of discrediting itself because it is promoting something that has been historically proven to not be the best option.

Liberation theology fails to work within the system. It is a fact that the elites in Latin American countries have been breaking their own laws. The elites would have been breaking those laws even if the society was Marxist, as was seen in the example of enormous corruption in the Soviet Union and in the resulting suffering of the common man in the former Communist block. So, the problem is not so much in this or that social structure, but in corruption, and in the fact that corrupt men are in power. Therefore, if liberation theology really wanted to be more politically involved in society, it should have done it by calling the Christians to become involved by using the mechanisms that exist within the system. This is a call that all Christians would be able to accept, regardless of where they stand on the political spectrum, and by doing that the Church would not have been in such a direct conflict with the government, nor would it lead to any divisions in the Church. However, by ignoring the options which existed in the system and by calling for the establishment of the Marxist model of society, it turns out that Gutierrez's political taste simply does not tolerate capitalism, so he is finding a theological justification in it for Marxism. By doing this, liberation theology is in danger of losing its clear Christian identity and risks being perceived only as an attempt to push the worker-believer into a revolution.

Another problem with liberation theology is in the fact that, not only does it divide the society into two opposing classes, but it also does the same to Christians, thus turning them against one another in a way. Gutierrez uses various statements to belittle the Christian honesty and the depths of love for God of those who disagree with Marxism or the need for revolution and, I believe unintentionally, risks dissensions in the Body of Christ. The unity of the Body of Christ is more important than class struggles and establishing God's Kingdom here and now. This unity is much more important than our limited capacity to understand justice and all the consequences of our preferred social structure. It is not at all good to create animosity between brothers and sisters over politics! Besides, Jesus Christ will, in due time, have no problem establishing the Kingdom of Heaven with a truly righteous structure, and he is not dependent on our help in thinking and acting upon it. We are called to love one another in the same way he loved us, different as we are, and that is how the world (i.e., society) will know that we are his disciples, and that is how God will be glorified and the Kingdom of God will be able to influence social circumstances. The Church has something unique to offer the world, something only it can give, something that nobody else can offer, and that is the Good News of Jesus Christ! The Church does it best, and that should be the focus of its social involvement, and it cannot do that while it is divided.

Therefore, the call to get involved in the needs of society definitely needs to be welcomed and accepted. Besides, Jesus said that people need to see our works of love. We also need to accept the call for Christians to become involved in political events and influence society in that way. However, we should also be careful about the dogmatic determination of the liberation gospel to establish a Marxist society; the determination which rises itself to the level of true faith. Our experience in the Balkans teaches us how easy it is to divide people by their political views, and that includes brothers and sisters, and not just in two different countries but inside one local church, as well. In these times of political turmoil and polarization in Europe and America, it is becoming increasingly more important to keep the unity and to avoid the pitfalls of divisions and animosities when it comes to our political opinions, or even when it comes to our favorite politicians.

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*Translated from Serbian by Davor Edelinski*

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## **Teologija oslobođenja: kritička analiza**

### Sažetak

Ovim radom istražićemo šta je teologija oslobođenja onako kako ju definira Gustavo Gutierrez koji se smatra njenim osnivačem. Na njenom primeru ćemo pokazati kako sekularna filozofija, konkretno marksizam, može vršiti uticaj na kršćanstvo i stvarati nove teološke pravce i pokrete. Također, videt ćemo koja njena načela kao kršćani možemo slobodno prihvatiti, a koja treba uzeti sa zdravom dozom rezerve.