
The Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Jewish Exploration

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Latin America is today one of the least understood areas of the world. A Catholic continent, it is socially and theologically silent, slow to respond to the challenges of the twentieth century and the postindustrial revolution. It is a universe of unequal social and spiritual realities, exhibiting a diversity of trends that surprises the observer influenced by romanticized movie or television portrayals of the Latin character.

Though Catholicism has been the main spiritual shaper of Latin America, the contribution of the Latin Church to Catholic theology has, in general, been poor. It has followed closely the traditions of European theologians, especially St. Thomas Aquinas, and of classical Catholic thought. There is emerging, however, a change, a new trend of thinking which has made a real contribution to Catholic thought and is being seriously discussed in academic and political centers. This is the theology of liberation, based on contemporary European thought but influenced by Latin America's spiritual and economic conditions. This trend of thought deserves our attention and especially our efforts in exploring the implications for the Jewish communities of Latin America.

Vatican II and Catholic Renewal

Vatican Council II was an experience of renewal for the Catholic Church. The *Aggiornamento* advanced concepts and ideas which were supposed to bring the Church into conformity with the spiritual and cultural reality of the twentieth century. Ending its deliberations in 1965, Vatican Council II recommended changes in liturgy, ritual, ceremonies, and certain theological views which recovered much of the first century's early Christian search. The privileged and nearly official position of Thomism was thus challenged by contemporary philosophy.

Among new tendencies in Catholic thought, the theology of liberation is the most important for Third World Christianity and especially for Latin America. Its origins are related to a sociological experiment that took place in France just after the Second World War when the French Episcopal Conference allowed clergymen to work in factories. These worker priests shared the lot of fellow laborers, including factory schedules, salary, and living conditions. The experiment spread to other countries and continents, but was forbidden when Church authorities realized that many priests were collaborating with left-wing groups and even creating a common front with the Communist Party. The worker-priest movement had no theological basis and no theological background. It took time and the impact of the Third World to embody its social experiments into a coherent theological presentation. The new social activists of the 1970's and 1980's now have an ideological tool whose influence is spreading in the Third World as well as in advanced industrial societies.

Latin American Roots of the Theology of Liberation

L'Osservatore romano, in its edition of May 3, 1975, indicated the Vatican's increasing concern for the progress and activities of the left-wing Christians for Socialism movement, which started in Chile in the 1970's and spread to other Latin American countries and to Europe. The group is believed to have several thousand militant members—priests and lay people—in Latin America, Spain, Italy, and elsewhere. It is also known to have links with smaller socialist Church groups.

This new strain of Latin American Catholicism has its roots in the democratic thought of French philosopher Jacques Maritain and the personalism of Emmanuel Mounier, both of whom influenced a generation of Catholic intellectuals in the 1940's and 1950's. This came as a response to an earlier French influence that attracted such establishment sectors as the landed aristocracy and the army; that is, Charles Maurras and the anti-Semitic *L'Action française*, whose right-wing theology pervaded the Vichy regime and the Petain Catholic group in France during the Second World War.

The theology of liberation was officially recognized by the deliberations of the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM) meeting at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. Medellin represented an actualization,

an updating of Catholic religious life and ethical concerns to the realities of a continent plagued by economic and social problems. It conveyed a change in social direction. Having been allied for centuries with the aristocracy and the army, the Church—or certain sectors of it—now expressed its concern for the poor, becoming the voice of the oppressed, the victims of both terrorism and military repression. CELAM expressed the concern of various episcopal conferences on the continent, though it did not represent a unanimous opinion. It took several years, until the meeting of the Latin American Bishops Conference in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, to consolidate a common concern for social conditions and human rights. A good example of this development is the position of the Argentinian Bishops Conference, generally not known for its social involvements, which has experienced an inner spiritual transformation over the last few years, especially since the Peronista political adventure in the 1970's. The conference issued an episcopal document in August 1981, a decisive document in the religious history of the country, pointing out the economic problems related to the free-enterprise policy of the junta and denouncing the violence of the Marxist national and international guerrilla activities and the military repression after the 1976 coup d'état that overthrew the government of Isabel Peron. The Latin American Church is beginning to play a decisive role in the defense of human rights, avoiding the political games that are characteristic of certain groups, essentially fellow travelers of left-wing ideology.

A new group of theologians, mainly educated in Europe, expressed at the Medellin Conference a contemporary Catholic commitment to world problems. One of their number, Gustavo Gutierrez, wrote a best-selling book, *Theology of Liberation*, and so named the movement. Gutierrez is a Peruvian priest teaching at the Catholic University in Lima, and holding degrees in psychology and theology from Rome, Lyon, and Louvain universities. He lectures often in the United States, and his book (now in its eighth American edition) has been translated into the main European languages.

Other significant liberation theologians are Father Juan Luis Segundo, a Jesuit, Paulo Freire, a Brazilian specialist in education, Huga Assman, active politically and centered in Costa Rica, Joseph Comblin, a Belgian who spent many years in Brazil and Chile and who is presently teaching in the United States, Enrique D. Dussel, from Ar-

gentina and now exiled in Mexico, as well as José Porfirio Miranda, Jon Sobrino, and Sergio Torres, among others.

The Main Ideas of the Theology of Liberation

Gutierrez develops the idea of “theology as critical reflection on praxis.”¹ *Praxis* is a popular term among Third World thinkers, and has already achieved a sacrosanct dimension. Praxis is understood as historical action girded to transform society; it is an instrument to change existing conditions. In this he follows Friedrich Engels, who wrote that “philosophers have interpreted the world in different ways, but the task is to transform the universe.” Gutierrez, influenced by this thought, defines the new goals of theology as “man’s critical reflections on himself, on his own basic principles.” He also adds that “theological reflection would then necessarily be a criticism of society and the Church insofar as they are called and addressed by the Word of God; it would be a critical theory, worked out in the light of the Word accepted in faith and inspired by a practical purpose—and therefore indissolubly linked to historical praxism.”²

Gutierrez points out more clearly the function of this new theology by stating that “theology as critical reflection thus fulfills a liberating function for man and the Christian community, preserving them from fetishism and idolatry, as well as from a pernicious and belittling narcissism. Understood in this way, theology has a necessary and permanent role in the liberation from every form of religious alienation—which is often fostered by the ecclesiastical institution itself when it impedes an authentic approach to the Word of the Lord.”³

As a second step, Gutierrez defines the meaning of liberation in Christian religious experience. Man, the master of his own destiny, lives in a situation of poverty and underdevelopment that oppresses him both psychologically and materially. Liberation means the aspiration for a better society, but also an understanding of history, an awareness of a tragic historical situation and a human being’s responsibility for a better destiny. Gutierrez sums up his approach by saying that

to conceive of history as a process of the liberation of man is to consider freedom as a historical conquest; it is to understand that the step from an abstract where real freedom is not taken without a struggle against all the forces that

oppress man, a struggle full of pitfalls, detours, and temptations to run away. The goal is not only better living conditions, a radical change of structures, a social revolution; it is much more, the continuous creation, never ending, of a new way to be a man, a permanent culture revolution.⁴

Gutierrez does not recommend a specific political party or political action. His definition is so general that it allows for innumerable political choices. Such looseness and the lack of any specific recommendations as to political commitment have enabled different groups to commit themselves to a wide range of political action and adventures. The Peronista group of Third World priests in Argentina, the Christians for Socialism in Chile, and the Hispanic community in the United States show widely varying understandings of the theology of liberation.

Marxism is present and influential in the formulation of liberation theology. Gutierrez does not deny this, writing that “contemporary theology does in fact find itself in direct and fruitful confrontation with Marxism, and it is to a large extent due to Marxism’s influence that theological thought, searching for its own sources, has begun to reflect on the meaning of the transformation of this world and the action of man in history.”⁵

At a meeting in Detroit on “Theology in the Americas, 1975,” Father Gutierrez, explaining why Christians can adopt some aspects of Marxism, said that “Marx’s concept of a sense of history and methods of production are not antagonistic to the Christian faith” and added that “the Christian can take what is really Marxism without assuming the metaphysical materialism [of Engels], not because it is not Christian, but because it doesn’t belong to Marxism.”⁶

These subtle academic distinctions are not taken into consideration in everyday political action, and especially not in Latin American countries. Such a theology can lead, as it has in certain regions, to an alliance with left-wing ideologies that, once in power, evolve into totalitarian governments. In such a case, libertarian thought links up with terrorism in a romantic attempt which betrays a basic religious commitment. Father Gutierrez has recognized such possibilities. At the Detroit meeting he stated that “more than talking of the relationship between Christians and the left, we must talk of Christians being part of the left.”⁷ This entails, according to Gutierrez, a “rereading” of the Gospel from the point of view of the poor with the intention of

building a popular church in the midst of the popular struggle.

Karl F. H. Henry, an evangelical Protestant theologian, has clearly described the situation:

In Latin America, Marxist social criticism increasingly comes to the fore as the determinative theme that Catholic theology is made to sponsor, in large part as a penalty for a reaction to the fact that when a continent where Catholicism has been the majority religion for 400 years, the largest Christian sector of dire world poverty has remained untouched. Papal encyclicals often contain penetrating comments on the social and political scene, although sometimes they are broad enough to serve as Delphic oracles; yet encyclicals like other ecumenical resolutions and pronouncements do not change human desolation into creative deliverance.⁸

Puebla and Ideology

The Third Conference of the Latin American Bishops Conference, in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, took ideological confrontation into account as part of the spiritual struggle of the Latin American Church. In this spirit both the theology of liberation and the ideology of national security were considered critically by the bishops.

The theology of liberation adapts the biblical story of the Exodus epic to the reality of Latin American poverty. This typological application of the biblical text concerned the CELAM Puebla meeting because of its political consequences. It was clear that the involvement of clergy and lay people in certain political developments and their commitment to that involvement threatened the very meaning of Christian relevance and spiritual witnessing.

John Paul II, deeply concerned by the political adventurism of certain groups in Latin America, criticized their political involvements, especially in Peru, Argentina, and the guerrilla-type action in Colombia by Father Camilo Torres and his followers. Drawing on his own experience in Communist Poland, the Pope condemned collaboration with any form of extremism. The bishops' concern, he felt, was not participation in social change but rather participation in all sorts of political movements that endangered the very commitment of the Church.

A special section of the Puebla Document refers critically to the ideology of national security that is part of the intellectual background of the present governments of Argentina, Chile, and Brazil.

That ideology identifies the nation with the state in two stages. The first is the justification of a military presence in the name of the nation, its very existence. Examples of the first stage are the military juntas in Argentina and Chile. The second stage marks a disappearance of the distinction between nation and state: national security becomes the very incarnation of the nation and of the "national soul" over and above all conflicting party interests.

The ideology of national security is essentially elitist. It argues that the masses are easily misled by class interests. Only elites are capable of formulating the nation's goals and of inculcating them into the masses.

The Puebla Document criticized this position, recommended implementation of Vatican II, openly denounced elitism, and suggested the formation and guidance of "basic communities" (*comunidades de base*), which are a sort of *havurot* with a vocation for religious service. Basic communities have prospered in certain countries but have had serious political problems in others. In Argentina, for example, they were infiltrated by left-wing elements. Puebla commends this experiment, but points out weaknesses and dangers. The debate around the *comunidades de base* was the most passionate at the conference.

The nation-state ideology expounds security and development, an attempt to unfold economic potentials in underdeveloped countries whose societies are unwilling or unable to launch the industrial revolution. The reality of Latin American societies, especially in those countries with a middle class, testifies to this lack of economic striving that seems to make the nation-state ideology the only viable solution.

The Puebla Document was critical of national goals that disregard human and social rights in favor of economic development and improvement. Security as developed by the military is achieved through the insecurity of large parts of the population and the lack of freedom of expression for vast sectors of the population. Unfortunately, in certain situations this is the only solution that can stop social chaos and disorder, and help the country achieve a level of economic development.⁹

Theology of Liberation and Jewish Sources

Gutierrez bases his theological thought upon the Book of Exodus, the

story of Israel's struggle for liberation and humanization of its condition. The Exodus, according to Gutierrez, "is a long march towards the Promised Land in which Israel can establish a society free from misery and alienation."¹⁰ The Exodus experience of the Jewish people adds for him "an element of capital importance, the need and a place for man's active participation in the building of society."¹¹ The lesson of the Exodus experience is

to work, to transform the world, to become a man and to build the human community; it is also to save. Likewise to struggle against misery and its irritation and to build just societies already to be part of the saving action, which is moving toward its complete fulfillment. All this means that building the temporal city is not simply a stage of humanization or pre-evangelization as was held in theology up until a few years ago. Rather, it is to become a part of the saving process which embraces the whole of man on all human history. Any theological reflection on human work and social praxis ought to be rooted in this fundamental affirmation.¹²

Gutierrez's reading of the biblical text is christological. For him (and in this he follows Catholic theology), the creation of the world and the Exodus from Egypt are steps toward the salvific experience of Jesus. As the Jews were liberated from slavery, it is incumbent upon Christians to liberate their society from poverty and exploitation.

From a Jewish perspective, Gutierrez's interpretation of the Exodus is one-dimensional. It lacks any knowledge of rabbinic commentary or contemporary Jewish religious thought, regarding the Exodus as a "political act of God." Judaism certainly recognizes the Exodus as a liberation, but maintains that the liberation from Egyptian bondage became meaningful only when Israel received the law (Halakah) at Mount Sinai, and the Promised Land. The process that starts with Moses freeing an enslaved community culminates with a spiritual liberation of Israel at Mount Sinai, and the possession of Eretz Israel.

These points are overlooked by Gutierrez and the theologians of liberation. They consider liberation an end in itself, not realizing that physical or economic oppression can only be overcome by a freedom that has a transcendent meaning. Otherwise, the liberation process ends in another form of tyranny or authoritarian dictatorship.¹³

The reader of liberation theology has the impression that the Jewish people disappeared after the destruction of the Temple. Neither Gutierrez nor any exponent of the theological liberation refers to the

State of Israel and its struggle for liberation. Many references are made to liberation in Latin America and the Third World, but the authors remain silent about the contemporary struggle of the Jewish people and the political consequences of Zionism.

One exception is Enrique D. Dussel in his *El Humanismo Semita* [Semite humanism], a book published by the University of Buenos Aires. Though dedicated to a “*haver* in Kibbutz Ginnosar,” the book does not refer to the State of Israel. Dussel ends the book with a christological interpretation: Jewish history is preparation for the coming of Jesus.¹⁴

In the chapter “Jesus and the Political World,” Gutierrez refers to the situation of Palestine two thousand years ago, emphasizing the political role of Jesus and his close relationship with the Zealot movement. Jesus confronts “groups in power of the Jewish people,” and is an adversary of the Pharisees, who rejected Roman domination by building a “complex world of religious precepts and norms of behavior which allowed them to live on the margin of that domination.”¹⁵ For Gutierrez, Jesus died at the hands of the political authorities, the Romans, the oppressors of the Jewish people. When he refers to Jewish participation, he says that “the Sanhedrin had religious reasons for condemning a man who claimed to be the Son of God, but they also had political reasons; the teachings of Jesus and his influence over the people challenged the privilege and power of the Jewish leaders.”¹⁶ Presenting the Passion in political rather than eschatological terms, Gutierrez stresses the role of the Romans as villains and oppressors. Third World symbology easily ties the Romans to the New Roman Empire, and contemporary capitalism to its chief representative, the United States.

Liberation Theology and the Jewish Presence in Latin America

Jewish immigrants arriving in Latin America in the years 1880–1914 imported social ideas that shaped the trade union movement. Many early union leaders were Jewish, members of the Bund, the Jewish socialist party. Anti-Semitism was inflamed in Argentina in the 1910’s and 1920’s, when conservative groups accused Jews of being agents of Marxism and promoters of the Bolshevik revolution. Fifty years later, followers of liberation theology accuse the Jewish community of being

agents of Wall Street and American imperialism.

Catholic involvement in Latin American anti-Semitism after the First World War was related to two aspects of the Christian attitude toward Jews and Judaism. One was the anti-Judaism of the Church fathers, the teaching of contempt. The other was the consequence of the close spiritual and religious relationship of local churches, especially the Argentinian church, with French Catholicism, and especially its ideological liaisons with right-wing thought. The *Action française*, though forbidden by the Vatican, appealed to and deeply influenced local ideologists, followers of the concept of *Integrismo*, the idea of corporate Catholicism.

The Jewish community of Latin America thus shuns any direct dialogue with the Church and Catholicism because of these negative associations as well as recent activities of local priests engaged in fascism and anti-Semitism.

Vatican II's efforts for a reckoning of the soul concerning Jews and Judaism had practically no repercussions in South America. The Medellín Document of the Latin American Bishops Conference (1968) did not refer to dialogue with the Jewish community and Judaism. Ironically, a few days before the beginning of the CELAM meeting, a group of Jewish and Catholic representatives met in Bogota for a week to discuss the possibilities and future of the dialogue. The meeting was organized by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and CELAM's office of ecumenism. The work afterwards was academic, with practically no action to revise the catechism or the presentation of Jews and Judaism in religious education.

The Puebla meeting of the Latin American Bishops Conference in 1979 devoted several sessions to a discussion of the ecumenical dialogue, Catholic-Protestant encounter, and the Catholic-Jewish dialogue. A first draft of the document was severely criticized by the ADL, and some of the suggested changes were incorporated in the final document. The Vatican II condemnation of anti-Semitism was relegated to a simple reference in a note rather than included in the general text. It is very sad, but symptomatic of certain pressures, especially from the Oriental churches, that the reference to anti-Semitism was deleted from the final draft. The lack of this reference goes against the very clear language of the Vatican document condemning anti-Semitism, *Guidelines and Suggestions for the Implementation of the*

Conciliar Declaration, Nostra Aetate. In this particular case, the testimony of Vatican II has been disregarded. It is equally surprising when an impartial reader of the document, alerted by CELAM's criticism of Marxism and the ideology of national security, and the denunciation of the lack of human rights, learns that a reference to the danger of anti-Semitism, as projected by Pius XI, was deleted. Condemnation by the bishops would have alerted Catholics to the danger of racism and to the official position of the Church in this respect.

The theology of liberation, sensitive to the economic realities of Latin American life, does not consider either Jews or the Jewish situation as part of its social concern. None of its theologians has recognized the contribution of Jewish workers in the formation of Latin American trade unions and social justice. No liberation group has attempted to make Latin American society conscious of the lack of pluralism and the special situation of non-Catholic groups, especially the Jews. Although many theologians have expressed great interest in international liberation movements, no attention has been given to the civil rights of non-Catholics.

There are, however, some signs of change. Recent denunciations of anti-Semitism by bishops, CELAM's interest in fostering a dialogue, the publication of Jewish critiques of this dialogue in the *CELAM Bulletin*, the distribution of interfaith Passover celebrations, are signs of an interest that needs further involvement locally by both Catholics and Jews.¹⁷

Conclusion

The theology of liberation, though by appearance an advanced form of contemporary thought, repeats, and even reinforces, the anti-Judaism that has pervaded Christian theology from its very beginning.

Church fathers and medieval Christian theologians alike denied Israel any mission or vocation after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. No consideration was given to further developments in the understanding of the God-Israel relationship, mainly through rabbinic interpretation and the process of halakhic thought. Liberation theology is even less generous, focusing only on Israel in slavery under Pharaoh's rule but saying nothing about Sinai, God's revelation, the commitment to a moral code, or the further develop-

ment of the Chosen People in its relationship to God and the world.

The biblical typology of the theology of liberation uses and abuses the text with no consideration of later biblical experiences, the rabbinic reality, or the contemporary Jewish historical experience. It is peculiar that in their search for liberation themes, the movement's theologians make no reference in any of their books to the twentieth-century epic of total exile, Auschwitz, and the return to the Promised Land through the creation of the State of Israel.

Liberation thought is indifferent to this historical experience, a unique form of God's revelation to the Jewish people in the heart of our time, and this indifference is extended to the actual situation of contemporary Jewish communities in Latin America. Liberation thought takes no account of nonconforming communities in nonpluralistic societies suffering political limitations and social restrictions, a situation that deserves the "prophetic concern" of theologians engaged in social action and liberation.

Liberation theologians are deeply troubled about social and political movements in Latin America and the Third World striving for the independence of their respective countries. There is, however, no mention of Zionism as a liberating process, a doctrine which is rooted in the biblical tradition but which found its political expression in the twentieth century. This denial of Zionism follows a certain trend of contemporary Christian thought. It is a romantic ideological mood that accepts neo-Marxists in Nicaragua, the PLO, and African guerrilla groups as authentic liberation movements but is critical of Zionism, which is their archetype.

The theology of liberation is an attempt to interpret a social condition—the poverty and oppression of Latin America. It is a manifestation of religious concern by an ecclesiastical body that has for centuries forgotten its evangelical duty to the poor. It is, however, an ideological movement more than a theological trend, and as such mixes dangerously with movements that are sources of new forms of totalitarianism. Recent events in Central America illustrate this sad reality and lack of religious prudence.

Theology of liberation needs, as did Vatican II, a reckoning of the soul to overcome the "teaching of contempt" that has darkened Christian-Jewish relations for centuries. The typological use and abuse of biblical texts face Jews and Judaism with a new triumphalism, an old

experience of Israel in its relationship with Christianity, a refusal to recognize the messianic meaning of Zionism and the social vocation of the Latin American Jewish communities.

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Notes

This article is dedicated to Reba and Ted Freedman, in friendship.

1. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), pp. 6–15.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
6. *Religious News Service* (New York), August 27, 1975.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Commonweal*, July 4, 1975, p. 240.
9. Leon Klenicki, *A Report on the Puebla Meeting of the Latin American Bishops' Conference* (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, March 14, 1979), p. 7.
10. Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, p. 157.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 159–160.
13. A recent volume refers to our critique of the typological usages of the theology of liberation; see John Pawlikowski, *Christ in the Light of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, Stimulus Books, 1982), pp. 64–65.
14. Enrique Dussel, *El Humanismo Semita* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA—Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1969), p. 170.
15. Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, p. 228.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
17. Leon Klenicki, "El Dialogo como Teshuvá—Metanoia, un Proceso de Renovación," in *Documentación Celam*, 7, no. 32 (June–August 1982).