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Latin America and Liberation Theology

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A central and fundamental theme in most world religions is liberation. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism all seek liberation from the endless cycles of birth and death until the adherents attain moksha, nirvana, or self-realization. Monotheistic faiths, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, promise and teach liberation from oppression, sin, and the fear of death. Biblical traditions and messages, including the story of the Israelites’ flight from Egyptian bondage, have been the important historical sources or foundations for various searches for liberation.

The rise of “liberation theology” in the Christian world is one of the most conspicuous and significant developments of the past several decades in this global village. Regarded by some theologians as the most important religious movement since the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, liberation theology characterizes a variety of Christian movements in many parts of the world, including Asia, Africa, Western Europe, North America, and especially Latin America. It has been expressed in many different forms and names such as Asian theology, African theology, feminist theology, Black theology, people’s theology, grass-roots theology, Native American theology, and Hispanic theology.

Because the key concepts and methodologies of these teachings originally developed in Latin America, this paper attempts to focus on liberation theology in Latin America only. A noted Brazilian journalist, Joelmir Beting, calls his country “Belinda,” meaning Belgium plus India, a combination of the two most starkly contrasting nations in the world. In other words, Brazilian social and economic development resembles a peculiar mixture of Belgium, one of the world’s most advanced, most wealthy, and most cosmopolitan societies, and India, one of the most populous, underdeveloped, and economically unequal countries in the world. He says the majority of his Brazilian people are “political prisoners of the system.” Some argue that this phenomenon of widespread poverty and enormous income inequality served as the starting point of liberation theology.

Origins of Liberation Theology

Liberation theology was originally developed by Christian theologians in the Third World, especially in Latin America, not by European
or North American counterparts. This was an epoch-making event, unprecedented in the two millennia of Christian history. In the twilight of the Roman Empire around the 5th century A.D., Christian theology made its first appearance, and since then it has been dominated by White European theologians. Throughout this transformation in authority, the North is becoming increasingly de-Christianized, while the greatest numeric gains of the Christians in general are taking place in the South. Professor Elizabeth Isichel at Otago University, New Zealand, begins her recent book, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, with a quotation: “While every day in the West, roughly 7,500 people in effect stop being Christians, every day in Africa roughly double that number become Christians.” In the year 1500, non-Whites occupied only 7.4 percent of the world’s Christian population, but today after five centuries, the combined Christian population in three continents of Asia, Africa, and Latin America occupies 68 percent of the world’s human populations.

Social and Economic Conditions

One cannot understand the origins and significance of liberation theology without an awareness of the social and economic conditions of Latin America. Latin America is made up of 33 nation-states, including Mexico, Central America (seven countries), the islands of the Caribbean (13), and South America (12). It is a bitter irony that that phrase “Latin America” was coined during the reign of Napoleon III in the 1860s by the French intellectual Michel Chevalier (1806-1879), a foremost economist and professor at the College of France. He thought that since the French culture, like that of Spanish and Portuguese America, was “Latin,” they shared the common tradition of Roman Catholicism. In the face of threats from both the Slavic peoples led by Russia and the Anglo-Saxon peoples led by England, Chevalier reasoned, France was destined to assume leadership throughout the Americas.

Latin America covers approximately 8 million square miles, about 14 percent of the world’s landmass or nearly 2.2 times the size of the United States. With a population of about 530 million as of the year 2000, one out of eleven persons, or nearly 9 percent of the world’s population, lives in Latin America. Latin America is perhaps the biggest conundrum of the Third World. Will it become capitalist and join its affluent northern neighbors, the United States and Canada? Or will it drift farther away from the prosperous advanced nations, like the Four Tigers in eastern Asia? Latin America today faces many serious social,
economic, and political problems. The gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen. Millions of people live in a miserable poverty. The region's rapidly increasing population makes it difficult for countries to provide jobs, housing and vital services for their people. Growing demands for social and economic reforms continue to explode into violent protests and civil wars.

For instance, between the 1930s and 1980s, well over 100 heads of state had been replaced by other than constitutional means. Bolivia has experienced almost 200 coups d'états since its independence from Spain in 1825. During the 36-year-long civil war in Guatemala (1960-1996), an estimated 140,000 people were killed, among them many outspoken academics and student leaders. Air pollution in Mexico City is the worst in the Western Hemisphere. The city, with a population of 22 million, is now the largest metropolitan region in the world. Breathing the air there is said to be the equivalent of inhaling pollutants from 40 cigarettes a day. A significant number of the city's residents suffer from diseases caused or aggravated by air pollution.

Business leaders in Latin America report that three of their gravest problems are 1) corruption, 2) inadequate infrastructure, and 3) theft and other crimes. According to the World Bank, Latin America suffers from the highest rates of crime in the world. The United States itself has a high crime rate, including murder. But Colombia's murder rate is nine times as high. Guatemala and El Salvador's rates are 14 times as high. Crime in Latin America is widespread in all classes of society; corruption in many public institutions, ministries, agencies, and even police forces, is endemic.

Almost every Brazilian city has its slums, and roughly one-fourth of the country's 170 million people (the fifth largest in the world) are believed to live in such slums. With little in the way of public housing or social welfare programs, every increase in unemployment expands Brazil's already existing 3,500 slums. The slums of Rio de Janeiro, along with those of Bombay (India) and Cairo (Egypt), are known as one of the world's three most miserable housing areas. One slum in Rio de Janeiro, called Favela da Rocinha, is the largest of its kind in Western Hemisphere, with over 300,000 inhabitants. Meanwhile, Brazil's Planning Ministry predicts that the housing crisis will only worsen.

The Inter-American Development Bank study concludes that on the average the countries of Latin America suffer from the greatest income inequality in the world. The largest and most populous country in Latin America, Brazil, has one of the widest income gaps in the world. With
a Catholic membership of over 90 percent of the population, Brazil is also the largest Catholic country and the largest Portuguese-speaking society in the world. The poorest 40 percent of the Brazilian people receive only 7 percent of the country’s GNP. The logical result is that the country is a paradise for the few and a nightmare for the many. If the inequality in income is astonishing, the inequalities of land distribution are even more striking. Fewer than 1 percent of all landowners control nearly half of the countryside. Tracy Ann Breneman, a U.S. historian and specialist on Brazil, appropriately points out that “the two Brazils live in different worlds. They walk on the same land, they speak the same language, but they eat at different tables.”

These lopsided land policies have their origins in the earliest colonial days of the 16th century. In the 1530s, King John III (1521-1557) of Portugal divided his huge South American colony into 15 immense tracts, and distributed them to 13 settlers. These privileged landowners received not only title to the territory, but also unlimited hereditary power to make laws and enforce them. Over the centuries, this system was handed down from generation to generation without significant changes and took deep roots. These landowners were also granted powerful military titles to protect their rights and properties.

It is no exaggeration to say that, as compared to other Third World societies, Latin America has been most deeply and widely shackled to its past, especially to its colonial heritage. Its past is a scourge on the present. In the strictest sense of the word, in Latin America there have always been movements of liberation since the very first days of the Spanish and Portuguese conquest. When the Europeans launched their first invasions of the present-day Latin America in the wake of Columbus (who landed on what is now San Salvador in 1492), they encountered various indigenous civilizations such as Mayan, Aztec, Incan, and other local peoples. One by one, these civilizations succumbed and fell. They were subjected to military massacres, dispossession of land, forced labor, and harsh treatment, and millions of indigenous people were killed.

Some of the most undesirable and disastrous importations to the Western Hemisphere were various European diseases. The native peoples, with little or no biological resistance to these unknown microbes which include influenza, typhus, measles, diphtheria, chickenpox, scarlet fever, typhoid, whooping cough, and bubonic plague, declined catastrophically after the diseases of invaders struck them. Probably worst of all was smallpox, which spread from the Caribbean in 1518 through-
out the whole hemisphere, sometimes advancing much ahead of the white people. One demographic calamity reveals that the native population of Mexico was reduced from 25 million to 1 million in just 86 years (1519-1605), a total decline of 96 percent. Local peoples everywhere in the hemisphere bemoaned their fate; some scholars have calculated that up to 90 million died in Latin America. Before the white people arrived, said one Indian from the Yucatan, “There was then no sickness; they had no aching bones; they had then no high fevers; they had then no smallpox. At that time, the course of humanity was orderly. The foreigners made it otherwise when they arrived here.”

A German missionary wrote in 1619 that Indians “die so easily that the bare look and smell of a Spaniard causes them to give up the ghost.” The 20th-century American Indian population of Brazil was less than 5 percent of its estimated total when the Portuguese arrived. The indigenous people in the Caribbean were virtually annihilated. By 1600, some 20 epidemics had surged through the native peoples of the hemisphere, leaving less than one-tenth of the total population. Of course, Europeans and African slaves also suffered, but never on the same scale.

Who Holds the Power?

The conquerors brought with them Roman concepts of law, administration, and justice, as they developed a highly bureaucratic colonial system and imposed Spanish or Portuguese language, culture, and institutions on the native societies. Power in colonial Latin America rested with three groups: royal government officials, Roman Catholic clergy, landowners, and mine operators. The church was a major economic producer. With the exception of the governments, the church was the largest landowner and the wealthiest class in the colonies. Clergymen held high government positions and exerted almost unlimited influences on the people. The Roman Catholic Church in Latin America was inseparably allied with the governments—everywhere in Latin America, one can see the legacies of that relationship. At the heart of any city or town in Latin America is a plaza. Along one side stands a cathedral, church, or chapel, and along another side the presidential palace, city hall, or other official building, an architectural arrangement that confirms the close connection between the religions and civil powers.

Latin America today has the largest Catholic population in the world, with a membership of over 87 percent of the people. As many as 43.6 percent of the world’s Catholic population live in 33 Latin America
countries, followed by Europe (27.2%), Africa (11.3%), Asia (10.4%), North America (6.7%), and Oceania (0.7%).

Liberation theology has sometimes been called an “infant theology.” The argument is that it is very young, born only a few decades ago. But as I have explained, the roots of liberation theology date back to the earliest colonial days. Probably the most well-known and celebrated precursor of liberation theology was the 16th-century Spanish priest, Bartolome de Las Casas (1474-1566), who crusaded against the Spanish Conquistadores’ inhumane treatment of the American Indians, and devoted all his life to the betterment of the native peoples.

**Key Figures in Liberation Theology**

When we talk about liberation theology, any discussion without mentioning Las Casas is believed to be futile and meaningless. Renowned as the Apostle of the Indians, Las Casas was the first Catholic priest ordained in the Western Hemisphere in 1510. Born at Seville, Spain, and having studied humanities and law at the University of Salamanca, he embarked for the New World with Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) in 1498 at the age of 24. When he witnessed Indian massacres in Cuba and Hispaniola, Las Casas was shocked and experienced anguish un-typical of his times. When humanist historian Juan Gines de Sepulveda (1490-1574) declared it was no crime to kill heathens, Las Casas replied, “All the peoples of the world including American Indians are the same human beings, and therefore have to be treated in a human fashion.”

Drawing inspiration from Aristotle’s theory of natural hierarchy and Augustine’s battles against the Donatist heresy, Sepulveda asserted that it was not only proper, but also absolutely justifiable to compel the American Indians to submit to Christianity, because they were “barbarians, violators of nature, blasphemers, and idolaters.” In those days, most European conquerors regarded the natives as “not” human beings until the Roman Pope Paul III (r. 1534-1549) decreed the opposite (this was 49 years after Columbus landed on San Salvador).

Las Casas experienced a conversion after reading the Book of Sirach 34:22, “He slays his neighbor who deprives him of his living; he sheds blood who denies the laborer his wages.” Las Casas spent most of his long life preaching to the American Indians and defending them against the cruelties of their conquerors. Nine times he traveled between America and Spain seeking respite for the horrible miseries that the Spaniards were inflicting on innocent Indians.
Las Casas argued to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (r. 1519-1558) that the American Indians were humans, created in God’s image, and therefore deserving of respect and justice. He pointed out that the Spaniards were placing their own salvation in great jeopardy by treating the Indians so cruelly and unjustly. At that time, Charles V ruled over more countries and territories, including Latin America, than any other European monarch. Las Casas worked hard for the improvement of the native peoples not only in the Caribbean, but also in Peru, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Mexico.

Las Casas’ contribution as a foremost historian is also a well-known fact. His celebrated book, *History of the Indies* (1561), provides much valuable information on the Spanish discoveries and conquests in the New World. Chiefly through his painstaking efforts, a humanitarian code known as the “New Laws” was adopted in 1542 to protect the Indians in Spanish colonies, although it was later so altered as to be ineffective. Las Casas’ heroic exposure and indictment of the cruel practices of the Spanish Conquistadores is believed to have laid the unequivocal foundation for the rise of liberation theology in recent years.

This staunch spokesman of social justice died in Madrid in 1566 at the age of 92. Las Casas is now remembered as the earliest champion of human dignity and a central figure in liberation movements. Many other outstanding Catholic priests and missionaries defended the rights of indigenous peoples in the tradition of Las Casas during the colonial days and afterwards, among them Antonio de Montesinos, Antonio Vieira, Torbio de Mogrovejo, and Antonio Valadiveso.

After the passage of half a millennium of Christianity in Latin America, a group of theologians, clergymen, social scientists, and intellectuals from various backgrounds have set out to reexamine the whole spectrum of Christian faith from the perspective of the poor and oppressed. Liberation theologians unanimously agree that the single most significant feature of Latin America society is poverty. The two famous theologian brothers, Leonardo and Clodovis Boffs of Brazil, begin their book, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, with a heartrending episode:

A woman of forty, but who looked as old as seventy, went up to the priest after Mass and said sorrowfully: “Father, I went to communion without going to confession first.” “How come, my daughter?” asked the priest. “Father,” she replied, “I arrived rather late, after you had begun the offertory. For three days I have had only water and nothing
to eat; I’m dying of hunger. When I saw you handing out the hosts, those little pieces of white bread, I went to communion just out of hunger for that little bit of bread.” The priest’s eyes filled with tears.  

The poverty in Latin America is not the same poverty to be found in Western Europe or North America, because it is pervasive, endemic, and imposed. People do not simply happen to be poor; their poverty is largely a product of the way society is organized. According to liberation theologians, the poverty that crushes the humanity of the majority of Latin Americans is the result of sinful structures of society. Most Latin American countries to this day are ruled by a tiny number of wealthy elite who maintain their positions at the expense or sacrifice of the absolute majority. For instance, some Latin Americans easily fly to New York City, Paris, or London to shop, while most of their fellow citizens do not have safe drinking water.

Liberation theologians assert that Latin America suffers from an internal institutionalized violence against the absolute majority of the poor by ruling oligarchies and military regimes. It also suffers from an external economic dependence imposed by the advanced nations of Western Europe and North America and their multinational corporations. Liberation theologians argue that internal oppression and foreign dominance work hand-in-hand, which makes Latin America go from bad to worse.

When most Latin American countries gained political independence from Spain and Portugal in the early 19th century, they did not gain economic independence. Thus their economies have still remained under the control of foreign nations and companies, giving rise to so-called neocolonialism. It is true that Western Europe and North America have helped Latin American countries through various development projects, but liberation theologians claim that this development has always come with strings attached, and has served only to deepen foreign domination and domestic dependence.

The Official Birth of Liberation Theology

This analysis of Latin American poverty was partly responsible for the historic meeting in Medellin, Colombia, a city known today as the world’s capital of the cocaine trade. In August 1968, about 130 Catholic bishops gathered there to discuss that critical issue and others. Paulo Frieire, a Catholic educator in north-eastern Brazil, argued that the poor themselves must take the first steps in dealing with their own plight.  

This was the second meeting of CELAM, the Latin American Episcopal
Conference, often referred to as CELAM II, or simply "Medellin."

The bishops shocked the world’s Christian communities by condemning the church’s traditional alliance with governments or ruling powers in Latin America, and also by proclaiming the unique situation in Latin America as "institutionalized violence" against the people. This CELAM II is generally regarded as the official inauguration of liberation theology, and thus the name "Medellin" is almost tantamount to the Magna Carta of this newborn theological movement.

According to one North American theologian of liberation, CELAM II "initiated a revolution in Latin American church life that will finally mean a revolution in Latin American history." In their final statement, the bishops in the conference asserted that "In many places in Latin America there is a situation of injustice that must be recognized as institutionalized violence, because the existing structures violate people’s basic rights: a situation which calls for far-reaching, daring, urgent and profoundly innovating changes." When a book, A Theology of Liberation, written by Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, was published in 1971, just three years after Medellin, it was immediately destined to become the official textbook of the new movement. The book not only fascinated readers, but also gained an international reputation from the outset.

Because of his outstanding lectures and the seminal book from which the movement derives its name, Gustavo Gutierrez is often considered, against his will, the "father of liberation theology." Born in Lima, Peru in 1928 of a relatively poor family, Gutierrez received a diploma in medicine, and then studied philosophy, psychology, and theology at the Catholic University of Lima, the University of Louvain, and the University of Lyons (France), which awarded him a Ph.D. in theology in 1959 at the age of 31. During his studies at Rome's Gregorian University, he was ordained a priest for the diocese of Lima in 1959. Returning to Lima in 1960, Gutierrez served as a pastor and simultaneously taught theology at the Catholic University of Lima.

In 1968, he was a theological adviser at CELAM II in Medellin. During the 1960s he served as chaplain to the National Union of Catholic Students of Peru, and through this work came into contact with revolutionaries such as Che Guevara (d. 1967) and Father Camilo Torres (d. 1966). Torres had been a Catholic University chaplain himself, until he renounced his priesthood and joined a guerilla group in Bolivia, where he was killed while fighting against government forces.

Many of the most influential books and articles on liberation theol-
Many of the leading spokesmen and scholars of liberation theology—as yet there are no leading women in that movement—are Catholics. They include Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru; Leonardo Boff, Clodovis Boff, Hugo Assmann, and Helder Camara of Brazil; Juan Luis Segundo of Uruguay; Jose Porfirio Miranda and Enrique Dussel of Mexico; and Spanish-born Jon Sobrino of El Salvador. Because Latin America is predominantly Catholic, it is not surprising that there are few Protestant liberation theologians.

Among the few, however, and the most prominent, is Methodist theologian Jose Miguez Bonino of Argentina. Bonino received a Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and because of his active ecumenical commitment he later served as a special Methodist observer at the Second Vatican Council in Rome, and also as president of the World Council of Churches. Bonino has been a major defender of the Christian use of Marxist social analysis. In his most influential book, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, Bonino calls upon the church to become involved in revolutionary struggle on behalf of the poor and oppressed.

According to its practitioners of liberation theology, it represents a “new way of doing theology.” A foremost Catholic historian Thomas Bokenkotter points out three aspects which distinguish liberation theology from classical theology:

While classical theology aimed at a deeper understanding of faith, liberation theology aims to transform the world. Moreover, classical theology seemed removed from day-to-day experience, especially experience of the sufferings of the poor. Liberation theology, however, has grown out of the experience of certain Catholics with the harsh reality of the miserable poor. Finally while classical theology interpreted Jesus’ message of the kingdom mainly as a guide to personal morality, liberation theology sees it as above all a call to struggle against the social forces of oppression.
Defining Liberation Theology

Liberation theology has been defined differently by various authorities. A Princeton University professor, Cornel West, sees it as "the view that God sides with the struggles of oppressed people to free themselves." One Catholic scholar defines liberation theology as "the form of theological inquiry that takes as its principle and ordering idea the emancipation of oppressed peoples from unjust political, economic, or social subjection." Another Catholic priest argues, "Liberation theology is a movement within the Church attempting to unite theology with a program of social liberation that includes opposition to the economic and political oppression of the poor, promotion of minority rights, women's liberation, and in some cases the violent overthrow of repressive regimes." Indeed, it is very hard to generalize about liberation theology because each exponent views or interprets from his or her own perspective. However, a few major characteristics are common to most liberation theologians' teachings.

First, liberation theology is a fundamentally "contextual" theology, not "universal" theology. This fact is extremely important. Liberation theology makes no claim to be a universal theology applicable to all times and every situation. It is theology for the specific and unique situation of Latin America today. In other words, theology must be intrinsically linked with the specific social and cultural circumstances of a society.

Theology cannot be created or developed without links with the particular social and cultural milieu: theology is always contextual, never universal. For instance, the theology developed in one place, whether Tubingen, Paris, Edinburgh, or Chicago, cannot be imposed on every other place, such as Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, or Rio de Janeiro. Such theology "from above" is anathema to the eyes of liberation theologians. Liberation theologians seek a truly indigenous Latin American theology that arises out of an involvement in its unique social, cultural, economic, and political realities.

Second, liberation theology is a movement for the poor and oppressed. Over the centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has been closely allied with the governments or ruling powers in Latin America. This must now cease. According to liberation theologians, the church must cast its lot with the poor and oppressed, because in history God himself is always on the side of the poor. Gutierrez observed that "the poor deserve preference not because they are morally or religiously better than others, but because God is God, in whose eyes 'the last are
Liberation theologians assert that the church must be committed to the poor. Thus it is not enough to talk about the church of the poor; the church itself must be a poor church. Bonino was equally clear: “Poverty is a scandalous fact which must be eliminated. God himself is engaged in the struggles against it; he is clearly and unequivocally on the side of the poor.” In fact, liberation theology is an interpretation of the Christian faith from the experience of the poor and oppressed. It is an attempt to read the Bible through the eyes of the poor. Liberation theology focuses on Jesus’ life and message. For instance, during his early ministry in Galilee, Jesus quotes Isaiah, “He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives,” and he said “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears” (Luke 4:18, 21).

In their Medellin statements, liberation theologians coined the expression “the preferential option for the poor.” But it does not mean that poor persons automatically stand in a right relationship with God and will go to heaven simply because of their disadvantaged economic situation. Preference for the poor means that even though God loves all people, he identifies with the poor, reveals himself to the poor, and sides with the poor in a special way. Above all, it means that in the class struggle, God sides with the poor against every oppressor.

It is noteworthy to see that the word “poor” appears as many as 204 times in the Bible. We have to keep in mind that Jesus himself lived a very poor life in his mortality, as we read in scripture: “Jesus said, foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has not where to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). Liberation theologians’ claim that the church must side with the poor has received substantial support from Pope John Paul II, who sent a letter to the Brazilian episcopate on April 9, 1986, saying that “liberation theology is not only timely but useful and necessary.”

Third, liberation theology is, as the name indicates, a theology of deliverance and hope. Without doubt, one of the most important events in the Hebrew Scriptures is the Exodus, which transformed the enslaved Israelites into a free people. This is the watershed in the 4,000-year Jewish history. In the biblical narrative, Moses encounters the Lord in a burning bush and is commissioned to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt. The account of the Exodus is very lively and to the point:

I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slavedrivers so I know well what
they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from
the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good
and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:7-8).

This act of deliverance is a powerful manifestation of God’s con-
cern to liberate his chosen people from bondage and oppression. To the
liberation theologians, Jehovah is not only the God of ancient Israelites,
but also the God of Latin American people. The notion of liberating
leaders in Latin America is extremely familiar from its half-a-milleni-
um, history. History books call Simon Bolivar (1783-1830), the most
prominent independence leader, the Liberator. Sometimes called the
George Washington of South America because of his outstanding role in
the liberation of the region, Bolivar is a South American hero. Few
political figures have played so dominant a role in the history of an
entire continent as he did. To the liberation theologians, the Exodus of
the ancient Israelites is not simply a separate event, but a pattern of
deliverance that can happen to Latin America, too.

The Medellin conference received a great stimulus from Western
theologians, especially from Tubingen theologian Jurgen Moltmann
(1926- ) and his famous Theology of Hope (1964). As the leading
Protestant theologian of the generation following Karl Barth (1886-
1968) and Rudolph Bultman (1884-1966), Moltmann developed three
major themes: theology of hope, political theology, and theology of the
cross. He argued that “the church is like an arrow sent out into the world
to point to the future.”45 The goal of the Christian mission is not merely
an individual, personal, spiritual salvation; it is also the realization of
the hope for justice, the socializing of humanity and peace for all
mankind. He said that this “other side” of reconciliation with God has
been almost neglected in the traditional Christian church. The church is
to work for social change “now,” on the basis of future hope.

Christian faith is viewed from the perspective of future hope in
general, and the resurrection of Christ in particular. From first to last,
according to Moltmann, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward
looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and
transforming the present. The Church is to be open for God, for men,
and for the world. This demands renewal in the church as it faces a rap-
idly changing world. The world is not static; it is dynamically moving
and changing, and the church should be ready and willing to respond to
the needs of the world. Moltmann’s theology of hope has had a great
influence on the birth and formation of liberation theology.
Fourth and last, liberation theology teaches that salvation means "integral liberation." On this subject, Bokenkotter's explanation is very persuasive and to the point:

Liberation theologians prefer the term liberation to salvation in order to get away from unworldly ideas of salvation and to stress the need of Christians to struggle for a just society. They stress the mission of the Church to take part in building the kingdom by being a visible sign of the presence of the Lord within the struggle. Therefore they insist the Church must again become poor in solidarity with the poor if it is to be an authentic sign.46

This is a diametrically opposite concept of salvation from the traditional Roman Catholic teaching. On the whole, the adherents of this new movement advocate a vigorous new approach to theology in which the primary focus of the church should be on social deliverance, the freeing of poor and oppressed people across the world through the application of the resources of the church. It is no wonder that Pope Paul VI (1963-1978) noted the danger of such a theological outlook and proclaimed, "The Church connects but never equates human liberation with salvation in Jesus Christ."47

To understand this new interpretation of salvation, we need to sketch the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), along with its principal theological adviser Karl Rahner (1904-1984), because the Council provided the direct impetus for the rise of liberation theology. When we discuss liberation theology, we must keep in mind that the Second Vatican Council directly paved the way for the new movement. The Council stands as one of the greatest episodes in Roman Catholic history. It may have been the most widely discussed religious event in two millennia of Christianity. The Council revolutionized many aspects of the Roman Catholic Church, opening the doors to radical social and political involvement by Catholic laity and clergy. The Council's extensive 16 documents breathe a spirit radically different from that of earlier councils. They are pastoral rather than dogmatic; the tone is conciliatory rather than confrontational, especially regarding other world religions, such as Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, as well as other Christian communities.

The documents reject religious persecution and inquisition, which have played a major role in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, and acknowledge that the Church has made mistakes, including Galileo's condemnation by Pope Urban VIII (1633). The Church needs to catch up with the changing modern world. While dogma does not
change, its form of expression can and must. Protestants are now to be seen as “separated brethren” rather than wicked heretics.

For the first time in its two millennia Roman Catholic history, the Council invited non-Catholic observers. At the opening session on October 11, 1962, 31 observers attended, and 93 by the time the Council closed its last session on November 21, 1965. The composition of the assembly itself shows the Church’s international character; it is unprecedented in its history. Out of 2,540 participants worldwide, only 46 percent came from so-called advanced nations in Europe, Canada, and the United States, and fully 42 percent represented Latin America, Asia, and Africa.48

**Revolutionary Church Changes**

Some of the revolutionary outcomes of the Council were these: (1) The Church permitted the use of the vernacular in place of Latin in the Mass. (2) It condemned any form of discrimination, particularly anti-Semitism, stating that the Jews had no collective responsibility for the death of Christ. (3) It rejects nothing that is “true and holy” in such other religions as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and others. (4) It rejected atheism, but said that atheists should be respected and loved because they are God’s creatures. (5) It called for all nations to organize and work to relieve the suffering of poor and starving peoples. (6) It pledged to work for the unity of all Christianity, and encouraged Roman Catholics to participate in the ecumenical movement. It permits Catholics to join non-Catholics in common prayer, with the permission of local bishops.

In 1983, the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s (1483-1546) birth was celebrated around the world, not only by Lutherans, but by other Protestants, Roman Catholics, and even the authorities of Marxist East Germany. During the Advent season, Pope John Paul II (r.1978-) himself participated in a Lutheran church service in Rome, the first time such an event had occurred in almost five centuries since the Reformation.49 (7) On October 4, 1965, Pope Paul VI (r.1963-1978) made a historic journey to speak before the United Nations General Assembly in New York City. The Pope made the trip in the name of the entire Council “for the cause of peace in the world.” He pleaded for the support of all nations in promoting peace and outlawing war.

(8) On January 4, 1964, Pope Paul VI met in Jerusalem with Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I of Constantinople (r.1948-1972), head of the Eastern Orthodox Church. It was the first meeting between
a pope and an Orthodox patriarch in 526 years. On December 7, 1965, exactly 15 days after the close of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI read a declaration removing a sentence of excommunication on the patriarch of Constantinople that dated back to 1054. A similar declaration was read in Istanbul by the Patriarch Athenagoras I, which removed a sentence of excommunication passed against a group of papal legates in 1054. All these developments from the Council not only revolutionized the Roman Catholic Church, but also made an important contribution to liberation theology.

The main architect of the Second Vatican Council’s statements and its major theological adviser, Karl Rahner (1904-1984), is regarded as probably the most prominent and influential theologian of the 20th century. This erudite Jesuit Catholic priest is famous for his theory of “anonymous Christianity.” The traditional Roman Catholic position, enunciated with brutal clarity by the 3rd-century Church Father Cyprian (c.200-258) and restated at the Twelfth Ecumenical Council (1215), is that there is no salvation at all outside the one visible organized Roman Catholic Church.

This was reinforced even more precisely by Pope Boniface VIII (r.1294-1303) in his famous bull Unam Sanctam: “We declare, state and define that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pope.” These statements are still accepted in the Roman Catholic Church, but “reinterpreted.” In 1854, Pope Pius IX (r.1846-1878) reaffirmed the traditional doctrine, but with a vital qualification. The Council’s document, under the title of The Church (2:16) reads:

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.

Again another document of the Council, The Church in the Modern World (1:22) declares:

Salvation is not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.

Karl Rahner is widely known as the most significant advocate of an
“inclusivist” model of the relationship of Christianity to other world religions. His argument is that Christianity is the absolute religion, founded on the unique event of the self-revelation of God in Christ. But this revelation took place at a specific point in history and in a specific place in the world. Those who lived before this point, or who have yet to hear about this event, would thus seem to be excluded from salvation, which is contrary to the saving will of God. Rahner’s “anonymous Christians”—the faithful adherent of a non-Christian religious tradition of the world—have the chance to gain salvation, just as the Christians do. This is the position of the Second Vatican Council and its chief theological adviser Karl Rahner.

His point is that God is love, and he wishes that all shall be saved, even thought they do not know Christ. Somehow all people must be able to be members of his church. This theory, stipulated by the Second Vatican Council and Rahner, has become the foundation of liberation theology’s salvation doctrine. It is wrong, they say, to just divide history into “sacred” and “secular.” God works out his salvation plan in “all” of human history. The church’s role is not to define the boundaries of salvation. Salvation is the central theme of Christianity, but it is wrong to look only for individualistic, spiritual salvation. Salvation virtually equates with liberation, and the liberation that truly saves the individual and society should be “integral.” It involves all dimensions of human existence.

Liberation theology has brought to the world’s Christian communities attention to the plight of the suffering poor and oppressed in Latin America. It has inspired hope and courage in the hearts of millions of people and prophetically denounced the apathy and injustices underlying at the root of their plight. The movement also has brought to the Church’s attention the desperate need to know the true meaning of Jesus’ teachings in a world deeply divided into “haves” and “have-nots.” We are told to keep in mind Jesus’ commandment, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:39).

NOTES

Dong Sull Choi


18. Walvin, p. 2.


24. Walvin, p. 2.


27. Chidester, p. 359.

28. Ibid., p. 360


33. Ibid., p. 212.


37. Grenz and Olsen, p. 214; Lane, p. 250.


40. Cornel West, The Cornel West Reader "(New York: Basic Civitas
Dong Sull Choi


41. McBrien, p. 768.


43. Grenz and Olsen, p. 218.

44. Ibid.


46. Lane, p. 222.

47. Bokenkotter, p. 411.


52. Lane, p. 238; Bunson, p. 136.

53. Lane, p. 238.

54. Ibid.