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# Liberation Theology: Is There a Future For It?

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## **ABSTRACT**

Liberation theology was the outgrowth of radical thought within segments of the Roman Catholic clergy in Latin America. It grew from a desire to overcome the specter of poverty which dominates Latin American countries. Liberation theologians identify with the poor and see the U.S. as a capitalist oppressor which exploits the nations of Latin America through its governmental structures and economic maneuvers. The leaders of liberation theology use Marxism as a framework through which their socio-political situation is evaluated. This association with Marxist thought led them to identify with communist revolution in several countries in Latin America. They prefer to use social activism to achieve "liberation of the poor," but many are willing to use violence to achieve that aim.

Liberation Theology or a form of it will be a challenge to American foreign policy in Latin America and other nations and our policy towards such movements needs to be flexible to ensure that effective measures are taken to deal with such radical groups when the need arises.

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# **Liberation Theology: Is There a Future For It?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Liberation theology was the outgrowth of radical thought within segments of the Roman Catholic clergy in Latin America. It grew from a desire to overcome the specter of poverty which dominates Latin American countries. Liberation theologians identify with the poor and see the U.S. as a capitalist oppressor which exploits the nations of Latin America through its governmental structures and economic maneuvers. The leaders of liberation theology use Marxism as a framework through which their socio-political situation is evaluated. This association with Marxist thought led them to identify with communist revolution in several countries in Latin America. They prefer to use social activism to achieve "liberation of the poor," but many are willing to use violence to achieve that aim.

Liberation Theology or a form of it will be a challenge to American foreign policy in Latin America and other nations and our policy towards such movements needs to be flexible to ensure that effective measures are taken to deal with such radical groups when the need arises.

The growth of Liberation Theology movements in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s amazed and perplexed many who observed the phenomena. This alliance between atheistic communist movements and religious zealots surprised many people throughout the world. How could the two collaborate on the same goals? Will the philosophies of these movements outlive the fall of communism? Did the Liberation Theology movement effectively promote change for the better in Latin America? What should the response be by U.S. policy makers in the face of such philosophies couched in religious terms?

Some policymakers saw liberation theology as a threat to U.S. interests in Latin America. Recommendations for study and policy were initiated to counter that threat. The movement by liberation theologians never gained much momentum and with the fall of communism, its future is questionable.

Liberation theology works counter to U.S. interests in Latin America by advocating destabilization of existing governments. While the U.S. attempted to contain the spread of communism, liberation theology joined with Marxists in efforts to expand communist influence. The free markets of Latin America were being criticized by liberation theologians as a tool of capitalist America. Economic activity by the U.S. was and is hampered by the perception of liberation theologians that the U.S. is the most serious threat to Latin America. Liberation theology was considered U.S. policy makers as one more avenue through which communist expansion could take place and was therefore counter to U.S. interests.

The United States is caught in a quandary. A country whose aim originally is to promote religious freedoms and to protect the individual, personal liberties and responsibilities is now faced with a challenge from religious groups accusing the U.S. of

oppressing peoples of other nations simply to exploit their resources. This new "theology" is the logical outgrowth of liberal religionists and social activists identifying with the circumstances of the poor and radically interpreting the message of the Bible to achieve improved conditions for the poor of Latin America.

### **THE BASIC CHARACTER OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

Liberation theology began as an expression of the frustration that Catholic clergy experienced in dealing with poverty in Latin America. They were surrounded by masses of poor who barely survived while the wealthy of other nations and Latin American governments seemed oblivious to their plight. From this situation, early liberation theologians began to look for theological answers to the plague of poverty enveloping these nations. They intended to apply these answers in a sociological and political context.

Their identification with the poor led them to believe that no theology can be valid unless it is *locally derived*.<sup>1</sup> The process of locally derived theology essentially says that ones theology is not valid unless it is developed within the framework of the current situation. The liberation theologian uses this contextual setting to develop his theology rather than the traditional view of a universal theology.<sup>2</sup> This view combined with the use of the "critical thinking" of Marxism (at least in its purest form) led liberation theologians to believe that Marxism could be a solution to the problems of the poor. Former Marxist Humberto Belli says, "Liberation theology took christians full circle--from opposing right wing dictatorship to support for a left wing dictatorship."<sup>3</sup>



## **The "Oppressed"**

Identification with poor and oppressed peoples is the cornerstone of liberation theology. In order to understand this, one must understand the definition given to "oppressed people." Major authors of liberation theology suggest that one's level of poverty is determined by what he owns.<sup>4</sup> Those who own very little (comparatively) are considered to be exploited by those who own a lot (especially landowners). This concept has been expanded to mean that when goods are not fairly distributed, those **who do not have as much** are the oppressed, and those that possess much are the oppressors.

## **Liberation of the "Oppressed"**

The concept of liberation is a transformation of the concept of salvation seen in the Bible.<sup>5</sup> To the liberationist, salvation is achieved by overcoming the social and political structures which trap the poor in their poverty. The future kingdom of God which is the aim of salvation of the Bible is replaced by a "here and now" kingdom of social restructuring through committed involvement. Peruvian priest and theologian Gutierrez says that salvation is possible through denouncing the world and living for others, not by trusting in Christ as the Bible teaches.<sup>6</sup>

There is no denying that great differences exist regarding the amount of material possessions held by various levels of society throughout humankind. This disparity is especially notable in Latin America where about two thirds of the population are purported to

be going hungry and 10% of the population of Brazil earn half of the national income.<sup>7</sup>

### Means to Achieve Liberation

Radical leaders of the liberation movement have stated that Latin American peoples must be liberated from the oppression of domination by capitalist nations at any cost. Defining "at any cost" has been difficult. For a radical few, this included the possibility of armed conflict. This led some priests to identify with rebel factions and even participate in the armed struggle in Nicaragua. Humberto Belli, a former Marxist said, "There is no other way to be a Christian in Nicaragua than by supporting the Sandanista revolution."<sup>8</sup> For most liberation theologians, toting guns to rob from the rich and give to the poor is not part of "evangelizing the poor." The majority of these thinkers have concentrated on *social activism* as the mechanism for change in Latin American society. This first meant getting the message of oppression to the poor and guiding grassroots movements to counter ruling oligarchies and military regimes.

Although the problem of the world's poor is real, the solutions the liberation theologians seek are simplistic and unrealistic. A redistribution of the wealth of the world would seem to be the panacea for all of the ills of the poor. It is not. Poverty has many causes including ignorance, laziness, and exploitation by those who have power. The Marxist ideal that equality of wealth will lead to a better society has never been successfully demonstrated. No society has ever benefited from a Marxist regime--including Cuba, which is headed towards economic collapse now that it is no longer supported by the former Soviet Union.

## FOCUS OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

The terminology of "looking at the Bible and history from the underside" has become popularized by this movement.<sup>9</sup> According to this view, the poor and oppressed peoples have been denied opportunity and material goods because someone else structured society in such a way that the poor were unable to progress. The exploitation of the people and natural resources of Latin America by Spain, Portugal and others began this wretched cycle of poverty.<sup>10</sup> Today, liberation theologians believe the cycle continues because of the external circumstances established by European and North American nations and their agents.<sup>11</sup> To the liberation theologian, poverty is the "single most significant feature of Latin America."<sup>12</sup>

The revolutionary ideas of liberation theology are to some degree reactions against actions the Catholic church initiated. In fact, the institutional Catholic church has not been received very warmly by lower classes in Latin America even in recent times because of the association of wealth and land ownership by the upper classes with the conquests aided by the church. The church's close interaction with the Spanish conquerors has left a legacy of mistrust for an institution which imposed its religion and rule upon the natives of Latin America.

Sociologist Roland Robertson says that liberation theology is characterized by three general aims:

1. Individual culpability for sin and a personal salvation through Jesus Christ's work on the cross has given way to a salvation in "collective and historic" terms. *Sin is a collective social ill.* Eisegesis (reading one's own meaning into the text) of the Bible is preferred over exegesis (seeking the original author's meaning in the text).<sup>13</sup>

2. The conditions of *poverty in Latin America are the result of aggressive imperialism*. It is the rich nations of the world who have caused them to be poor and have structured society and economies such that Latin America cannot extricate itself.<sup>14</sup>

3. The *second Vatican Council provided the spark that started the fire of liberation theology* by confirming the belief that the kingdom of God should be established here on earth through liberation of the poor.<sup>15</sup>

Scholar Charles Murphy points out that liberation theologians have redefined many central terms of Christendom and some from political ideology to suit their own philosophy.<sup>16</sup> Terms which need to be carefully decoded are:

- Marxism/communism--cannot be defined except in the context of liberation theologian usage.
- Capitalism = pre-capitalist mercantilism.
- theology = a philosophical approach to defining God.
- a christian = a member of the liberation movement.<sup>17</sup>

One must also understand that for these theologians, "gospel" is redefined to meet the needs of the new philosophy. In fact, the term "gospel" is applied to many different ideas contrary to the self-defining use of the term in the Bible.<sup>18</sup> I Corinthians 15:1-8 defines gospel (literally "good news") as containing the following elements of information:

- Christ died for our sins
- He was buried
- He was raised from the dead on the third day
- He appeared to over five hundred witnesses

For the liberation theologian, the term gospel has totally different connotations. Generally, it may be understood to mean **any philosophy of doing good** when used in their writings.<sup>19</sup>

One must not assume that words and terms used by the liberation theologians are consistently defined in the same manner. There are wide variations even among Latin

American writers--not to mention those of Black liberation theology, South African liberation theology or Feminist Theology which is closely related to liberation theology.

### **WORKING DEFINITION OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

Liberation theology defines itself through its fundamental focus on the plight of the poor and the praxis or committed involvement needed to solve the problems of the poor. According to liberation theologians, God's priority is for the poor and his presence is closely aligned with their struggle to throw off the oppression of those who exploit them.<sup>20</sup>

"Liberation theology may be defined as that theological endeavor which sees God's continuing work in the world from the viewpoint of the oppressed and understands that work to involve the reconstruction of persons and societies according to the mold of the Master."<sup>21</sup>

### **HISTORY OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

The origins of liberation theology can be traced to the earliest conquests by Spanish and Portuguese settlers in Latin America. Several liberation writers look back to the 16th century Spanish priest Bartolome de Las Casas as the originator of their movement. Las Casas attempted to defend the native population against the cruelty and injustice of the Conquistadors and probably did have some success in convincing the Spanish government that the indians were in fact humans.<sup>22</sup>

Subsequent to the Spanish conquests and settlement several uprisings took place which contained many of the elements of liberation theology. As early as 1811, Hidalgo y Costilla,

a "radical" priest, led a revolt against the Spanish in Mexico.<sup>23</sup> Oppression by elitist government, lack of access to the political process, wealth distribution, and radical identification with the poor enabled him to develop a large following among the poor. Hidalgo's beliefs led him to pursue liberation of the poor through armed revolution 150 years prior to modern liberation theology's inception. Hidalgo's understudy, Jose Maria Morelos, took up the cause after Hidalgo was executed. His venture was also short-lived and ended with his execution.<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that all the elements leading to liberation theology were already defined by the 1800's. Land ownership, wealth, racial equality, access to the political process, and oppression by exterior forces were all part of these early revolts. Popular terminology and application of biblical imperatives to the movement had not been applied to this theology yet, nor was communism present as a vehicle to implement the liberation of these oppressed peoples.

Liberation theology advocate William Fern points out that the forceful colonization of Latin America by Spain and Portugal was accompanied by mandatory adoption of the Catholic religion.<sup>25</sup> He contends that the Catholic church acted as an arm of the colonizing government and was at times indistinguishable from the government in its actions.<sup>26</sup> Early maps of South America apportioned large areas to the church in order to appease the Pope and use the power of the church to control the poor. The church was essentially an arm of government used to subjugate the primitives and provided additional control for the colonial power. The Catholic church was a willing participant in the initial exploitation.

As a result of colonial rule, the developing societies of Latin America became stratified with the Spanish at the top and the indians, mestizos, and blacks at the bottom.<sup>27</sup>

This stratification ensured that the lower classes were prevented from owning land or participating in the lucrative aspects of the economy. According to liberation theologians, from this time forward, they were disadvantaged by the actions of "rich others" who took the wealth of their country and shipped it to Europe to support the king, emperor, or government of other nations. Some Latin American people believe they are not able to escape this cycle of exploitation even though they have since achieved national independence.

In the 1960s, a small group of Catholic priests began to reconsider the church's role in ministering to the poor. They postulated that much of the poverty in Latin America was due to the irresponsible actions of other nations who had taken the Latin American wealth and oppressed the people. They began to explore a means to correct this great injustice. To them the primary need of mankind was social restructuring to solve the problem of abject poverty for the masses. The Catholic church was at first hopeful that this new "theology" would not lead to division within the church and was slow to react formally to it. Finally in 1984, the Vatican published a document criticizing liberation theology for its intrinsic defects and close kinship with Marxist doctrines.<sup>28</sup>

### **Advent of Current Liberation Theology**

A major council of the Catholic church designated Vatican II provided much of the catalyst for the formulation of liberation theology. It was here that the Pope and the church placed added emphasis on the responsibility of "the rich" to the poor and recognition of the "have/have not" gap.<sup>29</sup> This council became the demarcation between the former "Thomistic

rationalism" which advocated a logical approach to the knowledge of God versus an experiential or intuitive approach which emphasized the "mystical experience of the inner being."<sup>30</sup> Previous to Vatican II, scholars and theologians used a rational deductive study of the Bible and its related documents to develop their understanding of theology. More recently, the liberal theologians have employed an inductive approach and read their own experience into the Bible to develop their theology. The liberation theologians adopted this liberal view and expanded it to their use of contextual theology.

Subsequent to the Second Vatican Council, the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops was held in Medellin, Colombia in 1968. It was here that liberation theology became established. The bishops agreed that a redistribution of wealth was needed and that eventually liberation for Latin America would be achieved--at any cost.<sup>31</sup> The radical leaders of liberation theology took this as a signal of acceptance for their new philosophy and pressed ahead with development of liberation theology.

### **Authors of Liberation Theology**

Several leading proponents of the newly espoused view rose to prominence after Vatican II and Medellin. Among them were Gustavo Gutierrez, Jose Miguez-Bonino, and Leonardo Boff. Gutierrez, a Peruvian priest, became the early spokesman and "godfather" for the movement and wrote the most notable text for liberation studies--A Theology of Liberation. Bonino, a Methodist from Argentina, was one of the few Protestants to embrace this movement. He became the central advocate for the use of Marxist social criticism in



liberation theology.<sup>32</sup> Leonardo Boff was born in Brazil and studied in Europe under Jurgen Moltmann.<sup>33</sup> Some of his works precipitated vehement attacks by other leaders of the Catholic church because of their radical departure from orthodox thought.

Although much has been written by these men, there is little genuine consensus among liberation theologians as to the methodology for reaching their desired goals. In fact, although many have written on the subject, there has been little expansion beyond the original ideas of Gutierrez.<sup>34</sup> The fundamental idea that theology is contextual leads to diverse opinions on the actual definition and implementation of such a theology.

According to Gutierrez, theology is situational, and defines a process, not an outcome.<sup>35</sup> Rather than simply systematically thinking upon the human condition, liberation theology combines doing and thinking.<sup>36</sup> This is not a new idea. The Bible advocates thinking and doing as a matter of course. The new part of this theology is *what* one thinks and *what* one does. For Gutierrez, what one thinks is that poverty is anathema to God and is the result of a sinful society's domination of oppressed peoples. What one does is develop a theological outlook which embraces *whatever* tools are available to change this situation.

Gutierrez should be commended for his concern for the poor and the downtrodden of the world. He brought to light the great injustices of their plight. However, his "theology" leaves much to be desired as he attempts to intertwine Biblical concepts with Marxist ideology. His bottom line is that "to live in extreme poverty is offensive to God."<sup>37</sup> He believed that God identifies with the poor against all "oppressors" and that the church must also take such a stand.<sup>38</sup>

The radicals who led in developing the structure of this "theology" were mostly

graduates of liberal European seminaries in the late 1960s.<sup>39</sup> The Cold War was well under way and Marxism had become popular on many fronts. To some it seemed to be the answer to the problems of the poor throughout the world. The goal was for the majority of the poor to gain full access to the political process and resources .<sup>40</sup>

It is predictable that such radical views are likely to sprout from liberal institutions for several reasons. First, liberal seminaries endorse as their theological foundation the idea that the Bible is a collection of books edited over millennia by various authors to promote their individual ideas about God and his programs. This redactionist view rejects the "divine inspiration of scripture" which the Bible itself claims and supports and subsequently rejects the Biblical view that God is who he says he is. Theologians such as Moltmann and his colleague, Johannes Metz from Tübingen established a frame of reference for liberation theology through Moltmann's "theology of hope".<sup>41</sup> The idea of political "praxis" (committed involvement) came directly from Metz and provided a seed from which liberation thought grew.<sup>42</sup> Committed involvement by itself sounds commendable. It is who one is involved with and to what extremes one is willing to go which brings criticism of the theology of liberation.

By removing the absolute authority of the Bible, the liberals opened the door to moral relativism--even the idea that armed revolution is justified to achieve certain moral and social goals. The traditions upon which the Catholic church depends also fell under suspicion since they were the product of other human minds. This liberalism and rejection of the Bible as God's specific revelation to man led to the radical application of selected scriptural principles to support social programs. It was along this path that liberation theologians wandered until

they arrived at the idea that the "gospel" was a message of liberation directed to the oppressed poor of the world.

### **DEPENDENCY THEORY**

A great deal of animosity is expressed by liberation theologians towards nations which had a part in the colonization and early "development" of Latin America. This is clearly seen in the theory of dependency which became widely promulgated by leaders of the movement. Essentially, this theory says that, "Third world poverty is caused by the relative prosperity of the industrialized democracies."<sup>43</sup>

In the modern era, Marxists saw capitalism as the culmination of imperialism which dominated underdeveloped nations not through direct intervention, but through the exportation of capital.<sup>44</sup> The exploited nations would not reap the benefit of their labor or get any substantial reward in terms of investment since and elite few controlled the wealth and the products manufactured were destined for consumption in other nations.<sup>45</sup> Many studies have been done to attempt to show the correlation stated above, but these studies show instead that the investment decisions of the societal elite in Latin America had a more detrimental effect than the multinational corporation activities.<sup>46</sup> This failure of the "haves" to improve conditions in their own nation points back to a personal responsibility issue. If the oligarchies of Latin America had not been unwise and greedy in their use of capital, they could have greatly benefited the development of their nation rather than themselves. One must simply observe the cultural norms of bribery and conspiracy in Latin America today to

see a primary reason for their failure to progress. This is not to say that all of the transnational corporations acted altruistically or to place the blame for this failure on the poor. The poor are for the most part still the victims no matter who does the exploiting.

Dependency theory has been very closely aligned with liberation theology from its inception. However, economists such as P. T. Bauer have shown that abject poverty is more severe in countries which *did not* experience colonization and that Third World countries have benefited from the organizational techniques and production modernization brought to them by industrialized nations.<sup>47</sup> Examples such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong which are *colonies that have developed* are not mentioned in liberation theology writings. *Non-colonies* which have failed to develop such as Afghanistan and Ethiopia are also absent from their theories.<sup>48</sup>

Liberation theology has failed to demonstrate the validity of the theory of dependency, but they have taken the message of hatred for capitalist nations to the poor and have especially attacked the United States, which in their eyes is the worst of all capitalistic nations. Their alignment with Marxist doctrine compelled them to identify a capitalist scapegoat in order to support their beliefs. The subsequent collapse of Communism may initiate a moderation of this weakly supported hypothesis. Failure to abandon this position may continue to hinder economic growth for Latin America.

### **BASE COMMUNITIES**

New groups have arisen concurrently with this new social focus. They are called

"comunidades eclesiales de base," ---christian base communities (CEBs). At the Medellin conference in 1968, the Bishops sought to increase the participation of the laity in reaching the collective objectives.<sup>49</sup> This new thrust resulted in the formation of the CEBs. These groups are small, meet in homes, have little or no hierarchy, and meet for fellowship, Bible study, and prayer. CEBs work along side the priests and bishops instead of being subjugated by a smothering hierarchy. These groups are a significant departure from previous church doctrine because they advocate that "all learn from all; no one has a monopoly on wisdom."<sup>50</sup> Previous Catholic church doctrine relied upon the trained clergy to be the sole source of authority, knowledge, and guidance in spiritual matters.

The quick growth of these groups was viewed as a great benefit by liberation theologians and the institutional church, but their impact has been unsettling for the hierarchy of the Catholic church. It is estimated that there are over 80,000 such groups in Brazil alone.<sup>51</sup> The Catholic church initially viewed the CEBs as the "basic unit of church structure" where the laity could become involved in growth of the church and in the basic progress towards better social conditions.<sup>52</sup> Vatican II sought to correct an imbalance in the hierarchy versus laity roles and the CEBs were seen as one means to do this.<sup>53</sup> These gatherings have enabled people at the lowest levels to develop awareness of their condition and to build consensus for action on community needs and social actions.<sup>54</sup>

The Catholic church is not enamored with such groups now because their members have begun to take over roles which previously belonged only to the priests.<sup>55</sup> There were simply not enough priests to minister to all of the Catholics in Latin America, so a compromise was accepted by the church in the form of the CEBs. Now, the CEBs have

become a dynamic voice for political and social concerns throughout Latin America. They embody grassroots participation in reform and enable communities to initiate self directed action against the longstanding problems around them. One of the major activities the CEBs undertook was the trade union movement. Their objective was to replace the state sponsored union officials with people who viewed the plight of the worker more favorably.<sup>56</sup> The Catholic church has acknowledged the value of CEBs, but they do not endorse them wholeheartedly because they run counter to the hierarchy of church government that they believe to be required for cohesive strategy and oversight of activities within church operations.<sup>57</sup>

### **CHANGES SINCE THE FALL OF COMMUNISM**

Although the tendrils of liberation theology run throughout Latin America, it has not been a cohesive force for change. The very nature of its decentralized grass roots organization led to a variety of ideas and concepts for change which in turn led to disagreement over the best solutions for the poor. Popular support for a cohesive plan executed by the CEBs did not spread. According to philosophy professor Kevin O'Higgins, no new champions of liberation theology arose subsequent to Gutierrez and the fathers of the movement became stale and detached from the very people they were trying to help.<sup>58</sup> The resulting lack of stimulus led to the dilution of the movement. There was no central figure to provide the vision and leadership necessary to bring success. Liberation theology did not make much progress towards solving the plight of the poor--in fact, the problem seems to be

growing worse. Key factors of population growth and economic growth presented in Chaliand and Rageau's Strategic Atlas indicate stagnation of living conditions for Latin American poor people.<sup>59</sup>

### Growth of Protestant Groups

A growing concern for the Catholic church and liberationists is the rapid expansion and growth of Protestant groups in Latin America. It disturbs the Catholic church that the Protestant "sects" are gaining ground faster and with better results than the previous CEB movements did. In fact, many people from CEBs in Brazil have been aligning themselves with Pentecostal groups--much to the dismay of the Catholic clergy.<sup>60</sup> The traditions of the Catholic church became superseded by the discovery that one could operate as an individual Christian within the liberty of New Testament Christianity without guidance from priests. Once the CEBs were not dominated by the clergy and discovered the message of the Bible for themselves, they were ripe for inclusion in the evangelical groups. Protestant groups grew at over twice the rate of the Catholic church during recent years.<sup>61</sup> The way the two groups count members adds more significance to the Protestant number. The Catholic church considers any baptized child a member which is why their growth rate barely matches the increase in population. Protestants depend upon each person's voluntary decision to identify with their church and so their numbers include only those old enough to make such decisions. Significant inroads have been made by Protestants in places such as Guatemala, where greater than 30% of the population are now *evangelical* Protestants and condemn

liberation theology.<sup>62</sup>

The question that must be answered is, "Why do the Protestant groups achieve such results?" Authors struggling with this issue have found some fundamental differences in the approach of the evangelicals which help provide an answer. First, the central focus of evangelical groups is on the family unit and not on the workplace.<sup>63</sup> This focus provides a foundational reference from which all other change is initiated. Whether the social initiatives live or die, the fundamental unit of the family is intact and provides the nucleus for a cohesive group. This supplies "long term stability" and "linkage for growth through family networks" for the Protestant groups.<sup>64</sup>

Secondly, unlike the liberationists, they teach personal moral improvement over and above political activism.<sup>65</sup> The moral basis this supplies enables the individual to see his role in responsible change and to participate in an orderly process rather than anarchial revolution.

Associate general secretary for the Latin American Theological Fraternity, Guillermo Cook, notes that there are vast differences among evangelical groups and their results. He recognizes that *lasting social change* has been confined to those areas of Latin America where *conservative evangelical movements* are strong and growing and not where liberal denominations are at work.<sup>66</sup> One may hypothesize from this that social change which does not begin with alteration of individual lives, then family units, will be shortlived and cannot achieve honorable goals. According to Robert Royal, Vice president for research at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, the Protestant groups have become "mediating institutions" and work to settle problems in the social realm.<sup>67</sup>



The Pope went so far as to characterize evangelical protestant groups as "ravenous wolves" in singling out some of their rhetoric about material wealth.<sup>68</sup> This kind of response to the evangelical Protestant groups is unfortunate and reveals the animosity the Catholic church has for any group which runs counter to its traditions and control. It remains to be seen whether these groups will have continued success, but their initial accomplishments have caught the attention of the Catholic church and stirred new life into both sides.

This evangelical awakening should be seen with great hope, for it was from such roots that our own nation was established and the great experiment of our government was formed. Royal sees Latin America now working through "a Reformation after the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution."<sup>69</sup>

The Catholic church is attempting a comeback to counter this surge of Protestantism in Latin America. Latin America is the stronghold of Catholicism with almost 50% of the total Catholics in the world.<sup>70</sup> This predominantly Catholic (87%)<sup>71</sup> population also supplies a great many immigrants to the U.S. and they bring with them the baggage of oppression and search for liberation. While the Pope has not yet endorsed the theology of liberation, he has appealed to Catholics of Latin American descent to work against the social ills of American society.<sup>72</sup> Such exhortations could lead to radicalism here in the U.S. sponsored by future "liberation theologians."

## **PERCEPTIONS OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

Liberation theology is perceived as a significant threat by some U.S. policy makers. The "Committee of Santa Fe" meeting in May 1980 for the Council for Inter-American Security stated that a national strategy should be devised to deal with the problem.<sup>73</sup> However, the impact of liberation theology in promoting revolution in Latin America has not been as severe as some had feared. Armed rebellion sponsored by religious groups has been sparse and closely associated with the Marxist movement. The CEBs have been marginally effective in most locales and have helped to promote some changes which stabilize democratic governments. In fact, liberation theology paved the way for significant changes as the CEBs continue to align themselves with the evangelical movement and further democratic aims through responsible citizenship, especially in Brazil.

As theologians in the U.S. become increasingly liberal in their views, we are likely to see greater empathy with the views of liberation theology. The problems of the poor are becoming the focus of much debate in our media and the U.S. is moving further away from its religious heritage and the associated social practices. This drift will more than likely result in the socialization of theology and attempts to implement new "theologies" which promise to solve the poverty problem.

## **POST-COMMUNISM PROSPECTS**

The reduction of communist influence throughout Latin America has taken the wind

out of the sails of liberationists. Marxism (even by their definition) is a dismal failure and leaves them groping for identity. They are trapped by their own "theology" which was developed not from careful exegetical study of the Bible, but from an attempt to counter capitalist ideas by using Marxist principals mixed with the Bible. Their rejection of capitalistic principals led them down a path which at first looked promising, but is now lost in the underbrush. The primary force behind any renewal of liberationist thought is the North/South problem of our globe. Poverty still reigns throughout the Third World. No one has been able to find an adequate solution and the gap between the poor and rich continues to grow. This resource gap will keep the smoldering ideas of liberation of the poor alive. If the liberationists manage to come to grips with the failure of Marxism and align their ideas with other ideologies, they may be able to influence large groups of people in the future.

Failure of the democratic governments in Latin America also could provide an opening for renewed liberation dogma. Many of the Latin American nations are heavily in debt to industrialized nations of the world. The debts cannot be forgiven without the possibility of precipitating bank failures, especially in the United States. The United States has taken the lead in helping the debt crisis in Latin America and substantially reduced the probability of any near term debt crisis. If we fail to deal with their debt, we may be the long term losers. Our economy will be affected by their defaults, and their defaults may lead to further internal difficulties.

## **POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FUTURE OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

Liberation theology does not presently threaten U.S. security. The seeming vigor of the movement was lost when communism took its fall and liberation theologians are looking for a way to implement their ideas apart from communism. Governments in Latin America have stabilized in recent years and although there are problems with ongoing corruption and military control, the overall situation is marginally improved.

The philosophy that the "have nots" deserve the same material goods, "rights"(not basic human rights), opportunities, or living standards as the "haves" could become one of the greatest challenges for the future.

This philosophy seems to be growing throughout societies of the world and is leading to urban violence and extremist movements at a growing rate. When one group finds that they do not have what they deem to be desirable, those who do have "it" are considered oppressors, and don't deserve to have "it" all to themselves.

Sin (the act of wrongdoing--not sin as defined by the Bible) is any sociological ill which keeps the "have nots" from getting what they "deserve." Black theology, feminist theology, and liberation theology all share these common themes. As our liberalized society and others around the world develop these "theologies", they will increasingly turn to activism and even violence to achieve their goals. The disparity between the haves and have nots continues to grow. The have nots believe they have lost their power to have an effective voice in their government and see government as unresponsive to their needs. When their belief system conflicts with the reality of the present, they will be tempted to turn to violent

means to get their way.

We see the beginnings of this in the U.S. today. Urban violence touched off by an isolated incident continues as a display of outrage against those who run legitimate businesses in urban areas. District of Columbia statehood is seen as an oppression problem where the Federal government is refusing to give the have nots the representation they believe they deserve. How long before the chasm between these groups becomes so great that violence becomes organized and widespread?

The United States may become the focal point for liberation theology in the future. Immigrants from Latin America flood our shores to take advantage of the wealth and strength of our nation. They bring with them the baggage of their past. They are being encouraged by some to undertake a "war" of liberation here inside the United States. Argentine Enrique Dussel suggests Hispanic immigrants within the U.S should realize that they are the poor and oppressed within an "imperial nation" so they can liberate themselves and other poor nations of the world.<sup>74</sup> Our inner cities exist in a delicate tension of poverty and racism. The message of liberation through violent means is more likely to initiate violence here than in Latin America for the near term, but Dussel's exhortations send an ominous message of the spread of such liberationist thinking.

### **POSSIBLE POLICY OPTIONS**

Scholar Charles Murphy believes the U.S. should learn to distinguish between the supporters of democratic principle, human rights and market economy versus those radicals

who promote subordination of all other systems to some type of socialist ideology.<sup>75</sup> There are genuine liberation theologians who promote those things which support the interests of the U.S. We should be able to differentiate between the social activists and the radical actors. Careful dialogue with those espousing these views could be pursued to help us separate the two. Unfortunately, dialogue leads to formal recognition, and recognition leads to a sense of power. It would be unwise to imbue the liberationists with an aura of power over the U.S. because it could provide new fuel for their movement and expand their sphere of influence.

Murphy believes that since (in his opinion) liberation theology is a political ideology veiled in religious garb, the U.S. should not be afraid to trample their religious beliefs.<sup>76</sup> He did, however, see potential for this movement to gain a large following and cause serious problems.<sup>77</sup> Murphy's ideas are illuminating in defining liberation theology for what it is, but his conclusions are dated by the fall of communism.

A writer from the State Department thought that it would be inappropriate for the U.S. to ignore liberation theology 10 years ago and let it run its course.<sup>78</sup> Time has shown ignoring liberation theology to be the best course of action. Recognition and dialogue with the leaders of liberation theology and the Catholic church probably would not have changed the course of events and may have gained the movement much needed validation from the United States. In addition, dialogue with the Catholic church would not be enough since they have little control over these radicals. Protestant liberals have also been involved. Would the U.S. want to initiate dialogue with some religious sects over others? Considering the current confusion in the U.S. over its own constitutional laws regarding religion, continued dialogue with various religious bodies to the exclusion of others would not be wise.

## CONCLUSION

The problem with designing a policy to deal with liberation theology is that it is a symptom and not the disease. **Poverty is an overriding issue for Latin America.** Corrupt oligarchies and brutal military regimes are providing the environment from which revolutionary ideas foment. Stamping out liberation theology will not solve or even contain the problem. Dialogue with liberation advocates will not feed the poor. The U.S. must do all it can to help developing nations become self-sustaining democratic societies which tackle their own problems. Only through the maturation of Third World economies and political systems can the best possible social situations be achieved. The outlook is grim. Poverty continues to rise worldwide and the gap between the rich and poor becomes wider. Liberation theology is a mere blip on world's oscilloscope. To expend extraordinary effort countering it will not be productive and will waste energy we should expend to assist Latin America and other nations in growing their economies and democratic governments.

A resurgence of the liberation theology of the past probably will not occur. The failure of socialism to deliver any concrete progress towards utopia leaves liberation theologians groping for a political doctrine upon which they can rest their hopes. They are moderating somewhat but reform will be difficult as long as they reject capitalism and American democracy. Social activism will continue among the energetic clergy of the Catholic church. Its impact will be limited due to the inherent difficulties with change in the Third World. The core of the philosophy of liberation theology will remain with us for the future.

There is little danger to any U.S. interests in Latin America from liberation theology. The hazard for the U.S. is the mutation of liberation thought from a "religious" ideology to a social ideology within our own borders. Any organized attempt to spread grassroots movements through our urban areas could promote prolonged strife and turmoil for millions.



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