

# **A Concise History of Liberation Theology**

By Leonardo and Clodovis Boff. From the book, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, published by Orbis Books, 1987. Reprinted by permission.

## **Antecedents**

The historical roots of liberation theology are to be found in the prophetic tradition of evangelists and missionaries from the earliest colonial days in Latin America -- churchmen who questioned the type of presence adopted by the church and the way indigenous peoples, blacks, mestizos, and the poor rural and urban masses were treated. The names of Bartolomé de Las Casas, Antonio de Montesinos, Antonio Vieira, Brother Caneca and others can stand for a whole host of religious personalities who have graced every century of our short history. They were the source of the type of social and ecclesial understanding that is emerging today.

## **Social and Political Development**

The populist governments of the 1950s and 1960s -- especially those of Perón in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil, and Cárdenas in Mexico -- inspired nationalistic consciousness and significant industrial development in the shape of import substitution. This benefited the middle classes and urban proletariat but threw huge sectors of the peasantry into deeper rural marginalization or sprawling urban shantytowns. Development proceeded along the lines of dependent capitalism, subsidiary to that of the rich nations and excluding the great majorities of national populations. This process led to the creation of strong popular movements seeking profound changes in the socio-economic structure of their countries. These movements in turn provoked the rise of military dictatorships, which sought to safeguard or promote the interests of capital, associated with a high level of "national security" achieved through political repression and police control of all public demonstrations.

In this context the socialist revolution in Cuba stood out as an alternative leading to the dissolution of the chief cause of underdevelopment: dependence. Pockets of armed uprising appeared in many countries, aimed at overthrowing the ruling powers and installing socialist-inspired regimes. There was a great stirring for change among the popular sections of society, a truly prerevolutionary atmosphere.

## **Ecclesial Development**

Starting in the 1960s, a great wind of renewal blew through the churches. They began to take their social mission seriously: lay persons committed themselves to

work among the poor, charismatic bishops and priests encouraged the calls for progress and national modernization. Various church organizations promoted understanding of and improvements in the living conditions of the people: movements such as Young Christian Students, Young Christian Workers, Young Christian Agriculturalists, the Movement for Basic Education, groups that set up educational radio programs, and the first base ecclesial communities.

The work of these -- generally middle-class -- Christians was sustained theologically by the European theology of earthly realities, the integral humanism of Jacques Maritain, the social personalism of Mounier, the progressive evolutionism of Teilhard de Chardin, Henri de Lubac's reflections on the social dimension of dogma, Yves Congar's theology of the laity, and the work of M.-D. Chenu. The Second Vatican Council then gave the best possible theoretical justification to activities developed under the signs of a theology of progress, of authentic secularization and human advancement.

The end of the 1960s, with the crisis of populism and the developmentalist model, brought the advent of a vigorous current of sociological thinking, which unmasked the true causes of underdevelopment. Development and underdevelopment are two sides of the same coin. All the nations of the Western world were engaged in a vast process of development; however, it was interdependent and unequal, organized in such a way that the benefits flowed to the already developed countries of the "center" and the disadvantages were meted out to the historically backward and underdeveloped countries of the "periphery." The poverty of Third World countries was the price to be paid for the First World to be able to enjoy the fruits of overabundance.

In ecclesial circles by now accustomed to following developments in society and studies of its problems, this interpretation acted as a leaven, yielding a new vitality and critical spirit in pastoral circles. The relationship of dependence of the periphery on the center had to be replaced by a process of breaking away and liberation. So the basis of a theology of development was undermined and the theoretical foundations for a theology of liberation were laid. Its material foundations were provided only when popular movements and Christian groups came together in the struggle for social and political liberation, with the ultimate aim of complete and integral liberation. This was when the objective conditions for an authentic liberation theology came about.

### **Theological Development**

The first theological reflections that were to lead to liberation theology had their origins in a context of dialogue between a church and a society in ferment, between Christian faith and the longings for transformation and liberation arising

from the people. The Second Vatican Council produced a theological atmosphere characterized by great freedom and creativity. This gave Latin American theologians the courage to think for themselves about pastoral problems affecting their countries. This process could be seen at work among both Catholic and Protestant thinkers with the group Church and Society in Latin America (ISAL) taking a prominent part. There were frequent meetings between Catholic theologians (Gustavo Gutiérrez, Segundo Galilea, Juan Luis Segundo, Lucio Gera, and others) and Protestant Emilio Castro, Julio de Santa Ana, Rubem Alves, José Míguez Bonino), leading to intensified reflection on the relationship between faith and poverty, the gospel and social justice, and the like. In Brazil, between 1959 and 1964, the Catholic left produced a series of basic texts on the need for a Christian ideal of history, linked to popular action, with a methodology that foreshadowed that of liberation theology; they urged personal engagement in the world, backed up by studies of social and liberal sciences, and illustrated by the universal principles of Christianity.

At a meeting of Latin American theologians held in Petrópolis (Rio de Janeiro) in March 1964, Gustavo Gutiérrez described theology as critical reflection on praxis. This line of thought was further developed at meetings in Havana, Bogotá, and Cuernavaca in June and July 1965. Many other meetings were held as part of the preparatory work for the Medellín conference of 1968; these acted as laboratories for a theology worked out on the basis of pastoral concerns and committed Christian action. Lectures given by Gustavo Gutiérrez in Montreal in 1967 and at Chimbote in Peru on the poverty of the Third World and the challenge it posed to the development of a pastoral strategy of liberation were a further powerful impetus toward a theology of liberation. Its outlines were first put forward at the theological congress at Cartigny, Switzerland, in 1969: "Toward a Theology of Liberation."

The first Catholic congresses devoted to liberation theology were held in Bogotá in March 1970 and July 1971. On the Protestant side, ISAL organized something similar in Buenos Aires the same years.

Finally, in December 1971, Gustavo Gutiérrez published his seminal work, *Teología de la liberación*. In May Hugo Assmann had conducted a symposium, "Oppression-Liberation: The Challenge to Christians," in Montevideo, and Leonardo Boff had published a series of articles under the title *Jesus Cristo Libertador*. The door was opened for the development of a theology from the periphery dealing with the concerns of this periphery, concerns that presented and still present an immense challenge to the evangelizing mission of the church.

## Formulation

For the sake of clarity and a better understanding of the advances made, the formulation of liberation theology can be divided into four stages.

### The Foundational Stage

The foundations were laid by those who sketched the general outlines of this way of doing theology. Besides the all-important writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, outstanding works were produced by Juan Luis Segundo: *De la sociedad a la teología* (1970), *Liberación de la teología* (1975); by Hugo Assmann: *Teología desde la praxis de liberación*; Lucio Gera: *Apuntes para una interpretación de la Iglesia argentina* (1970), *Teología de la liberación* (1973). Others who should be mentioned were Bishop (later Cardinal) Eduardo Pironio, secretary of CELAM, Segundo Galilea, and Raimondo Caramuru, principal theological consultant to the Brazilian Bishops' Conference. There was also a great ferment of activity in the shape of courses and retreats during this period.

On the Protestant side, besides Emilio Castro and Julio de Santa Ana, the outstanding contributions were made by Rubem Alves: *Religion: Opium of the People or Instrument of Liberation* (1969), and José Míguez Bonino: *La fe en busca de eficacia* (1967) and *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (1975).

Lay persons such as Héctor Borrat, Methol Ferré, and Luiz Alberto Gómez de Souza did valuable work in linking theology with the social sciences, as did the Belgian priest François Houtart and the Chilean G. Arroyo.

### The Building Stage

The first stage was characterized by the presentation of liberation theology as a sort of "fundamental theology" -- that is, as an opening up of new horizons and perspectives that gave a new outlook on the whole of theology. The second stage moved on to the first efforts at giving the liberation approach doctrinal content. Three areas received most attention as corresponding to the most urgent needs in the life of the church: spirituality, christology, and ecclesiology. There was a wide range of publications from many Latin American countries. The main writers: in Argentina, Enrique Dussel, Juan Carlos Scarmone, Severino Croatto, and Aldo Bütig; in Brazil, João Batista Libânio, Frei Betio, Carlos Maintains, José Comblin, Eduardo Hoornaert, José Oscar Beozzo, Gilberto Gorgulho, Carlos Palácio, Leonardo Boff; in Chile, Ronaldo Muñoz, Sergio Torres, and Pablo Richard; in Mexico, Raúl Vidales, Luis del Valle, Arnaldo Zenteno, Camilo Maccise, and Jesús Garcia; in Central America, Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino,

Juan H. Pico, Uriel Molina; in Venezuela, Pedro Trigo and Otto Maduro (sociologist); in Colombia, Luis Patiño and Cecilio de Llorca.

### **The Settling-in Stage**

With the process of theological reflection well advanced, the need was seen for a dual process of "settling in" if the theology of liberation was to become firmly established. On the one hand was the understanding that the theological current needed to be given a firm epistemological basis: how to avoid duplications and confusions of language and levels while giving coherent expression to the themes arising from original spiritual experience, taking in the analytical *seeing* stage, moving on to the theological judging stage, and so to the pastoral action stage? Good liberation theology presupposes the art of linking its theories with the explicit inclusion of practice; in this arm liberation theology found fruitful collaborators, not only for its own purposes, but for those of the overall theological process. On the other hand, the "settling in" process was effectively achieved through the deliberate mingling of theologians and other intellectuals in popular circles and processes of liberation.

More and more theologians became pastors too, militant agents of inspiration for the life of the church at its grass roots and those of society. It became usual to see theologians taking part in involved epistemological discussions in learned congresses, then leaving to go back to their bases among the people to become involved in matters of catechesis, trade union politics, and community organization.

Names again are many; a selection should include António A. da Silva, Rogério de Almeida Cunha, Clodovis Boff, Hugo d'Ans, Francisco Taborda, Marcelo de Barros, and Eliseu Lopes, all from Brazil; Elsa Tamez and Victorio Araya from Costa Rica; D. Irarrazaval, Carmen Lima, Riolando Ames, R. Antoncich, and the late Hugo Echegaray from Peru; Victor Codina from Bolivia; Virgilio Elizondo from Texas; J. L. Caravia from Ecuador; P. Lâennec, from Haiti.

### **The Formalization Stage**

Any original theological vision tends, with the passage of time and through its own internal logic, to seek more formal expression. Liberation theology always set out to reexamine the whole basic content of revelation and tradition so as to bring out the social and liberating dimensions implicit in both sources. Again, this is not a matter of reducing the totality of mystery to this one dimension, but of underlining aspects of a greater truth particularly relevant to our context of oppression and liberation.

Such a formalization also corresponds to pastoral requirements. The last few years have seen a great extension of situations in which the church has become involved with the oppressed, with a very large number of pastoral workers involved. Many movements have come into being under the tutelage, to a large extent, of liberation theology; these in turn have posed new challenges to liberation theology. In Brazil alone, there are movements or centers for black unity and conscientization, human rights, defense of slum-dwellers, marginalized women, mission to Amerindians, rural pastoral strategy, and so forth -- all concerned in one way or another with the poorest of the poor seeking liberation.

To cope with this broad pastoral need and give theological underpinning to the training of pastoral workers, a group of more than one hundred Catholic theologians (with ecumenical contacts and Protestant collaborators) have been planning a series of fifty-five volumes under the heading *Theology and Liberation*, with Portuguese and Spanish publication starting in late 1985 and translations into other languages planned. Its aim will be to cover all the basic themes of theology and pastoral work from a liberation viewpoint. There are too many persons involved at this stage to list them here: all those from the earlier stages would be included, together with a number of new collaborators.

### **Support and Opposition**

Liberation theology spread by virtue of the inner dynamism with which it codified Christian faith as it applies to the pastoral needs of the poor. Meetings, congresses, theological reviews, and the support of prophetic bishops -- Hélder Câmara, Luis Proaño, Samuel Ruiz, Sergio Méndez Arceo, and Cardinals Paulo Evaristo Arns and D. A. Lorscheider, among many others -- have helped to give it weight and credibility.

A series of events has been instrumental in spreading this theology and ensuring its "reception" among theologians the world over:

- The congress at El Escorial, Spain, in July 1972 on the subject of "Christian faith and the transformation of society in Latin America."
- The first congress of Latin American theologians, held in Mexico City in August 1975.
- The first formal contacts between liberation theologians and advocates of U.S. black liberation and other liberation movements-feminist, Amerindian, and the like.
- The creation of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in 1976 and the congresses it has held: Dar es Salaam in 1976, Accra in 1977, Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka, in 1979, Situ Paulo in 1980, Geneva in 1983, Oaxtepec, Mexico, in 1986. All these produced Final

Conclusions with their particular characteristics, but all within the framework of liberation theology.

- Finally, the international theological review *Concilium* (published in seven languages) devoted a complete issue (vol. 6, no. 10, June 1974) to the subject of liberation theology, with all the articles coming from Latin American liberation theologians.

A number of important reviews in Latin America have become regular vehicles for the publication of articles and discussions by liberation theologians: in Mexico, *Christus, Servir, and Contacto*; in Venezuela, *SIC*; in Chile, *Pastoral Popular*, in Brazil, *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira (REB)*, *Grande Sinal, Puebla*, and *Perspectiva Teológica*; in El Salvador, *Estudios Centroamericanos (ECA)* and *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología*; in Panama, *Diológico Social*.

Most countries in Latin America also have centers for theological and pastoral studies: CEAS (*Centro de Estudos e Ação*, Salvador), CEP (*Centro de Estudos y Publicaciones*, Lima), ITER (*Instituto de Teologia do Recife*), DEI (*Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones*, San José, Costa Rica), CAV (*Centre Antonio Valdivieso*, Managua), and many more. They have been important for training students imbued with a liberation approach.

While all these developments were taking place, reservations and opposition began to be expressed by some who feared the faith was becoming overpoliticized, and by others who mistrusted any use of Marxist categories in analyzing social structures. Also many were unable to accept the deep changes in the structure of capitalist society postulated by this theology. This negative reaction crystalized around three figures in particular: Alfonso López Trujillo, formerly secretary and later president of CELAM, Roger Vekemans of CEDIAAL (*Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo e Integración de América Latina*, Bogota) and the review *Tierra Nueva*, and Bonaventura Kloppenburg, formerly director of the Medellín Pastoral Institute, later auxiliary bishop of Salvador, Brazil, and author of *Christian Salvation and Human Temporal Progress* (1979).

### **The Magisterium of the Church**

As a general rule, the magisterium watches the development of new theologies with close attention but rarely intervenes and then only with great caution and discreet support or opposition.

As far back as 1971, the final document "Justice in the World," the topic of the second ordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops, already showed traces of liberation theology. Its echoes had become much stronger by 1974, at the third assembly of the Synod, on "Evangelization of the Modern World." The following

year, Paul VI devoted fifteen paragraphs of his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* to the relationship between evangelization and liberation (nos. 25-39). This discussion forms the central core of the document, and without attempting to summarize the Pope's position, we can just say that it is one of the most profound, balanced, and theological expositions yet made of the longing of the oppressed for liberation.

The magisterium has also produced the "Instruction on Some Aspects of Liberation Theology," under the auspices of the Prefect and Secretariat of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, dated August 6, 1984, and published September 3. The main points about this document are its legitimation of the expression and purpose of liberation theology, and its warning to Christians of the risk inherent in an uncritical acceptance of Marxism as a dominant principle in theological endeavor. The subject had been studied in Rome since 1974, and had been the concern of innumerable sessions of the International Theological Commission, though it did not publish my results until 1977, when it produced a "Declaration on Human Development and Christian Salvation" (included as an appendix in Kloppenburg's book mentioned above), which shows a grasp of the questions such as was to be expected from such an august theological body.

The magisterium of the church in Latin America has expressed itself primarily through the documents of two conferences. The second general conference of the episcopate of Latin America, held at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968, spoke of the church "listening to the cry of the poor and becoming the interpreter of their anguish"; this was the first flowering of the theme of liberation, which began to be worked out systematically only after Medellin. The third general conference, held at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, shows the theme of liberation running right through its final document. The liberation dimension is seen as an "integral part" (§§355, 1254, 1283) of the mission of the church, "indispensable" (§§562, 1270), "essential" (§1302). A large part of the document (§§470-506) is devoted to evangelization, liberation, and human promotion, and a whole chapter (§§1134-56) to the "preferential option for the poor," a central axis of liberation theology.

The general tenor of the pronouncements of the magisterium, whether papal or coming from the Synod of Bishops, has been to recognize the positive aspects of liberation theology, especially with reference to the poor and the need for their liberation, as forming part of the universal heritage of Christian commitment to history. Criticisms of certain tendencies within liberation theology, which have to be taken into account, do not negate the vigorous and healthy nucleus of this form of Christian thinking, which has done so much to bring the message of the historical Jesus to the world of today.