

# Liberation Theology in Latin America

By Olivia Singer

During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, disenchanted members of the clergy and the oppressed classes of Latin America united together to reinterpret the role of the Catholic Church in everyday society and to reclaim religion towards the pursuit of social justice. Liberation theology encouraged a break from an elitist notion of the Church and the return of control to the people. By involving the poor in their own liberation and offering Christianity as a tool towards a more perfect society, liberation theologians dramatically changed the relationship between not only the Church and the state, but also the Church and the people. Guided by the innovative Peruvian priest, Gustavo Gutiérrez, this movement reinvigorated marginalized people in Peru and throughout Latin America, while still utilizing a formal theological approach. Though ultimately opposed by the Vatican because of its radical leanings, liberation theology both permanently implicated the Church in the destiny of the oppressed and allowed for the participation of the poor in the future of the Catholic Church.



Photograph of Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino, courtesy of user Mohan

## Rise of Liberation Theology

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Church aligned itself with the upper classes and only minimally addressed the grievances of the poor. The great Latin American independence movements, which had promised liberation and new hope through separation from the Iberian empire, only benefitted an elite sector of society, the light-skinned creoles (Tombs 27). Essentially, the creole class assumed the gaps in governance left behind by the peninsulares and did little to alleviate the struggles of the lower classes. These nationalistic uprisings maintained a Catholic church that tended to identify

itself with the rich (Brown 9-10). Since religion had played a major role in the conquering of Latin America, the Church naturally aligned itself with the ruling elite (Tombs 15). Rather than a reflection of the people, the Catholic Church acted as a privileged model of success and power. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite a consistent reinforcement of the status quo social structure, the Church began to exhibit evidence of slight moves towards a social tradition. The Church transitioned from simple encouragement of individual charity to an acknowledgement of distributive and social justice. Inspired by Leo XIII's 1891 *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Matters), the notion of "an option for the poor" or special consideration for lower classes began to become more prominent (Tombs 44). Throughout this time period, Latin American states experienced growing urbanization and industrialization as efforts increased to create a more independent economic system through nationalizing programs like import substitution (Skidmore, Smith and Green 358). Such rapid economic changes led to increasing pressure for similar political and social reforms (Tombs 49-50). Rapid change forced the Church to either fall behind or reevaluate its practices if it wished to maintain its position of influence. One of the most important manifestations of a changing religious ideology was the advent of the Catholic Action movement. In Peru, this movement was led by Holguin of Arequipa and Farfán of Cusco, who established some separation between the Church and the state and introduced a more militant Catholicism (Peña 1994, 39). This initial organization helped to link social activists and leftists who would later work to create liberation theology (Peña 1995, 2). The Catholic Action movement helped to alter the role of religion in society, linking the Church to political action. These changes underlay a growing desire to break the allegiance between the Church and the rich. Slowly, the Church began to recognize the possibility of a crucial role in the world of the oppressed (Brown 9-10).



Pope Leo XIII, author of *Rerum Novarum*, courtesy of the U.S. Library of Congress

Among these participants in the Catholic Action movement was Gustavo Gutiérrez, the most famous figure in the founding and promulgation of liberation theology (Peña 1994, 39). Gutiérrez was a Peruvian theologian and priest, ordained in 1959. Part Quechua Indian, Gutiérrez did not represent a part of Lima's aristocracy, but rather rose from the oppressed class. As a result of his intellectual prowess and success as a student at San Marcos University, Gutiérrez was offered the opportunity to pursue graduate studies in Louvain, Belgium and Lyon, France, where he was exposed to the canon of traditional European theology (Brown 22). This experience abroad provided Gutiérrez with

valuable intellectual skills and an understanding of traditional theology. Later on, such formal knowledge of the Catholic structure and teachings, when coupled with the views of the popular constituency, allowed for effective organizing and dramatic change (Peña 1994, 38). Upon his return from Europe, Gutiérrez began to realize how little the theories that he had learned abroad applied to the current situation of poverty and oppression in Latin America (Peña 1995, 5). The texts that he had studied covered in depth the path to salvation, but focused little on the physical situation of the poor. Gutiérrez felt that the Church had a duty to recognize these structural inadequacies and help the impoverished of Latin America. Hoping to address some of this social injustice, Gutiérrez became a lay militant of the Catholic Action movement as archdiocesan adviser and later national adviser to the UNEC (The National Union of Catholic Students) (Klaiber 238). Work for this movement allowed Gutiérrez to gain essential connections and networking opportunities that would later assist in the dissemination of liberation theology.

Moved by the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and increasing pressure for similar change, progressive clergy members began meeting to discuss the future of the Church and its role in the politics of society. CELAM or the Latin American Episcopal Conference worked to push the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican or Vatican II, a series of meetings from 1962 through 1965 that focused on Church unity and renewal, toward a more progressive stance. Vatican II represented an international conference where high-level Catholic religious figures rethought Church policy and discussed processes of modernization (Vatican II Online Documents). In 1968, CELAM organized a meeting in Medellín, Colombia, with the hope of supporting base ecclesiastic communities and continued reformation of the Church (Sigmund 23). It was at this conference that Gustavo Gutiérrez first presented the term “liberation theology” in a paper called “Toward a Theology of Liberation” in which he articulated a commitment to actions and expressed the importance of theology as critical evaluation, stating that “theology is reflection” (Tombs 105). The concepts referenced during this talk in 1968 were more clearly laid out in his 1971 magnum opus, “A Theology of Liberation.” In an atmosphere of increasing clerical reform, liberation theology emerged as a new way of “being human and Christian” (Gutiérrez in Gibellini, 2). A highly networked group of religious figures began a movement to align Christianity with the needs of the poor.

### Major Components of Liberation Theology

Liberation theology looks to understand Christianity and religion through the salvific process of liberation. Such a theology does “not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be a part of the process through which the world is transformed” (Gutiérrez 1973, 12). People are encouraged to become active agents of their own destiny and in effect to liberate themselves from the confines of injustice. This theology extends beyond development to three distinct levels of real freedom or liberation, representing the aspirations of oppressed peoples, a means to look at history and a new approach to Biblical interpretation (Gutiérrez 1973). At the first level, the poor were to liberate themselves from economic exploitation. Overcoming poverty became a fundamental tenant of liberation theology. At the second level, the hope was liberation from fatalism, the recognition of free will. Lastly, at the theological level, liberation from sin would result in ultimate liberation and communion with God (Tombs 123-125). Espousing these three tenants helped to recognize the varying ways in which Catholic teachings could be applied, creating a space for liberation in both a worldly economic and highly spiritual sense.

By creating a process to overcome historical constraints, liberation theology presented the possibility of liberation at the political, existential and theological levels (Tombs 125). Rather than focusing

solely on the potential of the afterlife, liberation theologians encouraged the pursuit of a satisfactory life on Earth. Proposing a “preferential option for the poor,” the Church was encouraged to extend its work to directly address the struggles of the impoverished and to work specifically to ameliorate “physical and spiritual oppression” (Sigmund 21-22). Rather than small ineffective reforms, liberation theology supported work towards systemic change and even the possibility of revolution as a means of freeing the poor from oppression (Hillar). While violence was not encouraged, it was justified as a possible last resort or necessity of the revolution (Lynch 1991). For the first time, formal religious theology used Biblical interpretation to promote the political and social influence of the Church in the empowerment of the poor.

### *Traditional Opposition to the Movement*



Pope Benedict XVI during a trip to Brazil in 2007, courtesy of Agência Brasil

As followers of liberation theology grew in numbers, the Vatican felt increasingly threatened by the movement’s connections to radical movements and leftist tendencies. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a part of the Vatican’s office, issued a number of critical instructions that questioned the movement’s Biblical usage and its emphasis on Marxist notions of class struggle. Then Prefect Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) writes that the purpose of the instruction is to alert religious figures and the faithful of “the deviations, and risks of deviation, damaging to the faith...brought about by certain forms of liberation theology which use, in an insufficiently critical manner, concepts borrowed from various currents of Marxist thought” (CDF Vatican Website). The Vatican felt that the connection between the movement and Marxism were incompatible with Catholic teachings. Marx encourages class struggle and social disruption that conflicted with the traditional order and stability of the Church (Peña 1995). The Vatican feared that these forms of social unrest and questioning would weaken the power and influence of the Church.

However, the connections between Marxism and liberation theology are not as clear-cut as critics have tried to argue. Though liberation theology recognizes the power of man as a master of his own fate and proposes revolutionary praxis in a manner similar to Marxism, liberation theology lacks

many fundamental aspects of Marxism. Liberation theology attempts to draw on certain aspects of Marxist theory, while denying others, which directly conflicts with Marx's requirement that his work be taken as a whole. The theology makes no claims against the incompatibility between religion and empiricism and maintains Christian doctrine, which Marx vehemently opposed. When more carefully compared to each other, the sole clear connection between Marxism and liberation theology is a focus on empowering the poor and class struggle (Lynch 20, 26). Despite the fairly scant theoretical connections between the two, words like revolution and socialism linked and continued to link liberation theology with the highly controversial and often feared doctrine of Marx, preventing more widespread acceptance and formal approval of the Vatican. Opposing the notion of class struggle, supporters of traditional theology felt that the movement's promotion of a "people's church" could undermine Catholic institutions by departing from classic doctrine and weakening the authority of Catholic teachings (Peña 1995).

To some extent, the fears of the Vatican were indeed enacted by the liberation theology movement through the creation of Christian Base Communities (CEBs) and Theological Reflection workshops. Christian Base Communities were small Christian groups led by lay figures in individual towns or small areas that embodied the teachings of liberation theology. They encouraged popular participation and worked to try to avoid pastoral problems by creating an emphasis on community work and support. CEBs taught peasants basic skills like reading and writing along with religious teachings in an effort to empower and liberate them (Hillar). From these groups, the poor were able to organize and create a sense of unity that allowed for social questioning. Later into the movement, the base communities not only acted as a means to disseminate liberation theology, but also as a means of inspiration for the liberation theology movement. CEBs allowed the poor to direct the movement and to emphasize the struggle of the oppressed (Tombs 199).

Similar to the CEBs, Gustavo Gutiérrez organized the *Jornadas de Reflexión* (Theological Reflection Workshops). These workshops, held throughout the summer, allowed for discussion of liberation theology and created a space for dialogue between activists, theologians and all those who had an interest in learning about the theology. Initially started in 1971 with two hundred participants, the workshops grew over the 1970s and 80s to reach 2,496 participants by 1987 (Peña 1994, 42). The workshops created a space for popular exchange and allowed for deeper explanation of the concepts of the movement. The sense of power and autonomy that the CEBs and the Theological Reflection Workshops created within the lower classes was exactly what the Vatican had feared. The ability of the poor to work to redefine their own fate and their own relationship with the Church exemplified the kind of loss of traditional authority of which Ratzinger spoke. However, rather than the feared deviation from the Christian faith, this empowerment of the poor and inclusion of a popular sentiment created a more tangible way for the oppressed to access and interact with their Christianity. Though the opposition greatly feared this empowerment, liberation theology and its programs undeniably educated and enhanced the lives of lower classes by providing the outlets and tools to more actively address their own situations.

#### *Ultimate Decline and Lasting Impact of Liberation Theology*

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the movement had begun to lose its push as new economic and social concerns arose that liberation theology could not directly address. Even the once "new-age" theories of liberation began to seem outdated as notions of revolution and the hopes of the impoverished altered with the falling of the Berlin Wall and the continued rise of neoliberalism (Tombs 272). The Vatican's continued pressure against the movement began to take its toll. By arguing that liberation theology could lead to disunity and excessive focus on material success, opposition was able to successfully undercut the more noble goals of this movement (Lynch 1994,

3). Evidence that the movement was clearly in retreat could be seen by the frequent changes that it began to undergo, leaving little certainty as to its true direction. A new focus on spirituality added an “other-worldly” dimension that liberation theologians had long sought to avoid. By arguing that this movement secularized the Christian faith and effectively rid Catholicism of its connection to the afterlife, John Paul II and other prominent religious leaders were able to quell the movement and alarm people enough to associate liberation theology with a loss of faith (Lynch 1994, 10). By the 1980s, the Catholic right proposed reconciliation theology in direct opposition to liberation theology. Supported by the Vatican, reconciliation theology suggested that by reconciling oneself to God and to others, conflict could be avoided and class struggle skirted (Peña 1995, 23). Essentially, the Vatican and more traditional sects of Catholicism proposed a watered-down version of the theology that avoided the physical and social disruption that liberation entailed.

Despite its ultimate fall in popularity, liberation theology changed the role of the Church in Peru and all of Latin America forever. By giving a voice and sense of empowerment to the impoverished, liberation theology held the Church accountable for the welfare of the lower class, recognizing the essential role of social justice in Christian teachings. This movement rethought the power structures of Latin American society and showed that religion could promote highly politicized campaigns. Although the prospect of radical change alarmed the Vatican, the potential for an uprising finally incorporated the voices of the poor in religious discourse. Religious figures like Gustavo Gutiérrez helped to use formal clerical training to integrate the liberation of the working class into Biblical interpretation. Followers of the movement demanded that the Church move beyond simple charity work towards a more active role in the promotion of social justice. Liberation theology brought the focus of the Church away from solely eternal salvation to the more pressing necessity of earthly liberation of the poor from oppression and suffering.

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#### Annotated Works Cited:

Brown, Robert McAfee. *Gustavo Gutiérrez*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1980.

This book provides an innovative look at the life of one of the founders of Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez. The book focuses primarily on describing the movement as a peoples movement and acknowledge Gutiérrez as one of the people. It fights against giving a solely fact oriented biographical account, looking into deeper themes and patterns.

“Documents of the II Vatican Council.” *The Holy See Archive*. Web. 10 May 2010.

<[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/index.ht](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.ht)>.

This website has online versions of some of the documents created during the Vatican II meetings. These include transcripts of some of the conferences and general declarations formed as a result of the meetings.

Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973

This book is the magnum opus of liberation theology. Written by the movement’s founder, Gustavo Gutiérrez, this book outlines the major components of the theology providing theoretical explanation and historical perspective. This work was the transformative piece that essentially began the more formally published aspect of the movement.

Gutiérrez, Gustavo. "Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith." Ed. Rosino Gibellini. *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America. (La Nuova Frontiera Della Teologia in America Latina, Engl.)* Ed. by Rosino Gibellini. 1979.

This chapter is written by the founder of Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez. The piece focuses mainly on liberation praxis and the relationship between action and the Christian faith. It outlines some of the major components of liberation theology.

Hillar, Marian. "Liberation Theology: Religious Response to Social Problems. A Survey." Ed. Marian Hillar and H. Richard. Leuchtag. *Humanism and Social Issues: Anthology of Essays*. Houston: Humanists Involved in Greater Houston, 1993.

This article provides a very effective, critical survey of liberation theology with an explanation of its rise and fall along with the major features of the movement. The sections are separated to cover various themes of liberation theology such as the priority of praxis over theory or history as a focus of theology.

Klaiber, Jeffrey L. *The Catholic Church in Peru, 1821-1985: a Social History*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1992.

This book provides a comprehensive look at changes that occurred within the Peruvian Catholic Church from 1821 to 1985. It covers all the major movements and events that the Church experienced throughout this time period.

Lynch, Edward A. *Religion and Politics in Latin America: Liberation Theology and Christian Democracy*. New York: Praeger, 1991.

Lynch focuses the majority of the section on liberation theology discussing the conflicting relationship between Marx and the movement. He argues that liberation theology takes a great deal more from Engels than it does Marx.

Lynch, Edward A. "The Retreat of Liberation Theology." *The Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, Feb. 1994.

In this article, Lynch outlines some of the reasons for the ultimate retreat of liberation theology. He focuses on the inability of the movement to maintain popular support and the influence of the Vatican on the Church's end.

Peña, Milagros. "Liberation Theology in Peru: An Analysis of the Role of Intellectuals in Social Movements." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33.1 Mar. 1994: 34-45. *JSTOR*.

This article describes the influence that European trained intellectuals like Gustavo Gutiérrez had on the movement. Peña argues that their formal training significantly improved the effectiveness of the movement and allowed for a more widely accepted appreciation.

Peña, Milagros. *Theologies and Liberation in Peru: the Role of Ideas in Social Movements*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1995.

This article provides a more in depth look at some of the arguments that Peña covers in her article. It looks at the role of intellectuals like Gutiérrez and also provides some excellent description of the opposition to the movement along with a clear account of the rise of reconciliation theology.

Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal. "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology Of Liberation'" *Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*. Web. 10 May 2010. <[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19840806\\_theology-liberation\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html)>.

This document is an online version of the original instruction issued by then Prefect Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. It clearly expresses some of the Vatican's major preoccupations with liberation theology, noting that its uncritical relationship to Marx might cause deviation from traditional Catholic teachings.

Sigmund, Paul E. "The Development of Liberation Theology: Continuity of Change?." Ed. Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth. *The Politics of Latin American Liberation Theology: the Challenge to U.S. Public Policy*. Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, 1988.

This article discusses the rise of liberation theology, discussing the history of the movement, the environment in which it formed and the critics to the movement. Sigmund discusses the Vatican and specifically former Prefect Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's opposition to the theology.

Skidmore, Thomas E., Peter H. Smith, and James Naylor Green. *Modern Latin America*. New York: Oxford UP, 2010.

This book provides relatively comprehensive coverage of the history of modern Latin America. For this paper, the section on economic systems in Latin America has been used in order to provide some understanding of economic changes towards ISI and neoliberalism that occurred in Peru.

Tombs, David. *Latin American Liberation Theology*. Boston: Brill Academic, 2002.

This book provides an incredibly detailed analysis of the rise and fall of liberation theology in Latin America. It gives an in-depth look at the way in which liberation theology gained popularity and similarly explains how liberation theology came out of style. It also gives a detailed explanation of the theology itself.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> <https://library.brown.edu/create/modernlatinamerica/chapters/chapter-15-culture-and-society/essays-on-culture-and-society/liberation-theology-in-latin-america/>