

# THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION: FAITH OR POLITICS?

Joseph Gatt, O.C.D.

This article purports to be a contribution to the current debate on the theology of liberation. The recent “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation” has come out heavily against the alleged Marxist subversive elements of liberation theology. Our aim, however, is not to evaluate the Instruction’s critique but to help in the understanding of the highly complex, at times elusive, phenomenon which is liberation theology – a complexity expressly recognised by the Vatican document (III,3; VI,8). We will present a general survey of the subject from two different points of view: the first part of this article will describe some of the main ideas of liberation theology as elaborated by the theologians of liberation themselves; the second part will list and explain the major objections which critics have been putting to the theology of liberation.

## **Part One: The Theology of Liberation according to its Creators**

### 1. *Historical Context*

Modern man has attained an acute historical and political consciousness. In such a continent as Latin America, he could not but become aware of the painful contradiction between his aspirations for freedom and justice, and a social order which effectively denied his human rights. In this living context, theologians have reopened the debate on the relation between theological reflection and political action.<sup>(1)</sup>

There have been three precedents which, in fact, have helped the creation of liberation theology. The first is the political theology of Metz which describes the basic hermeneutical problem of theology as being the relations between theory and praxis, between the understanding of the faith and the social praxis. This German political theology, however, did not set

Born in Malta, in 1953, JOSEPH GATT entered the Discalced Carmelite Order and was ordained priest in 1979. He studied for a Baccalaureate in Theology at the Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy, Dublin, and specialized in Theological Anthropology at the ‘Teresianum’, Rome. He is a lecturer in Philosophy at I.N.S.E.R.M. – the Institute for religious students in Malta.

1. G. Gutiérrez-Merino, *Movimenti di liberazione e teologia*, “Concilium”, 3(1974), pp. 163 – 164.

out to create a new theological discipline. Two other forerunners of liberation theology are the so-called "theology of development" and "theology of revolution". The word "development" became an important term at the Conference of Bandung in 1955 when it began to express synthetically the aspirations of modern man for more human conditions of life. A theological reflection on this theme began to take shape<sup>(2)</sup> and the encyclical "Populorum Progressio" was to come up with the expression "integral development". (This, however, should be taken as implying a direct link between Bandung and the encyclical.) The "theology of revolution" affirmed that, once the Gospel was purified from every ideological element which supported the *status quo* and obscured a cruel and oppressive social reality, it not only was not against revolution but in reality demanded it.<sup>(3)</sup>

It was the General Episcopal Conference of Medellín (1968) which, above all, publicly took up the theme of liberation as the "perno della comprensione della fede".<sup>(4)</sup> In that conference, the Church of Latin America made its own the tortured consciousness of the nations which at the turn of the century had celebrated their independence and which, nevertheless, found themselves again at the mercy of forces beyond their control. 'À Medellín l'assemblée des évêques. . . dénonçant le "néo-colonialisme", a repris "le cri de liberté" de vingt républiques. La "théologie de la libération" revendique Medellín comme son Vatican II'.<sup>(5)</sup> It is very significant that Medellín recognised the existence and encouraged the growth of the basic communities.<sup>(6)</sup> 'Within these communities faith, shared hardship, action for change and liturgical expression are all inseparable from each other. This forms the inspiration for the liberation theologies of Gutiérrez, Sobrino, Segundo and others'.<sup>(7)</sup>

Liberation theology was born within Christian communities engaged in the process of liberation. The new theology reflects on the faith as lived in that very process, not in order to justify ideologically such a commitment to liberation but in order to answer the problems which arise in the praxis of liberation.<sup>(8)</sup> The creators of liberation theology as such are scholars, of whom some are priests who studied in Europe (Gutiérrez, Boff, Segundo).

2. Gutiérrez-Merino (*op. cit.*, p. 166) refers to the bibliography prepared by G. Bauer and published by SODEPAX, *Towards a Theology of Development. Annotated Bibliography*, Geneva 1970.
3. Gutiérrez-Merino, *op. cit.*, pp. 164 – 167.
4. *Ibid.*, note 11.
5. Ph.-I. André-Vincent O.P., *Les "théologies de la libération"*, "Nouvelle Revue Théologique", 98(1976), p. 110.
6. René Laurentin, *Nascita dell'America Latina*, Punti Scottanti di Teologia 48, Paoline 1970, pp. 206 – 209.
7. Mary Pepper, *Liberation Theology and Basic Communities in Latin America and in Britain*, "New Blackfriars", 63(1982), p. 18. Also Marie-Dominique Chenu, *I teologi del Terzo Mondo*, "Concilium", 4(1981), pp. 51 – 52.
8. Gutiérrez-Merino, *op. cit.*, pp. 168 – 169.

## 2. *A New Theology*

European theology is outrightly rejected. Segundo accuses European theology of being a scientific research on dogmas, cut off from the living faith, and becoming a conservative ideology.<sup>(9)</sup> Dussel sees the modern European theology practised in the colonies as maintaining the *status quo*: it abstracts from the problems of the under-privileged and, as a result, can in no way be critical. The new “theology of liberation” is a theology of the “periphery” and the oppressed; it is the whole of theology redeveloped in the paschal movement (of liberation from sin as domination in every sphere of human life), and whose point of departure is the suffering of the poor.<sup>(10)</sup> For Segundo, too, liberation theology is the whole of theology from the perspective which the Christian sources indicate as the only one which makes possible a genuine understanding of the divine revelation in Jesus Christ.<sup>(11)</sup>

A useful and succinct description of liberation theology is provided by Gutiérrez:

È una riflessione storica partendo da essa, nel confronto con la parola del Signore vissuta e accettata nella fede, la quale ci giunge attraverso molteplici e, a volte, ambigue mediazioni storiche, ma che rifacciamo quotidianamente. Sarà una riflessione da e sulla fede come prassi liberatrice.<sup>(12)</sup>

The context of this critical reflection is a “new rationality” which leads to a liberatory praxis as a spiritual experience. The new rationality consists essentially in the new way of knowing history: one knows history only by changing it and at the same time changing oneself; truth is lived and not simply acknowledged. Doing the truth is the liberatory praxis as a conversion which according to the Gospel means a radical change of ourselves so that we think, feel and live like Christ present in the exploited and alienated man.<sup>(13)</sup>

Given this context, liberation theology appears to have the following basic elements (but see Lepargneur’s criticism in Part Two, n.l.a.):

- i. Its point of departure is the historical praxis, that is the life of the Christian community (especially but not exclusively) in its commitment to the liberation of the poor.
- ii. It is a critical reflection on the historical praxis, which should make use of many specializations. These enable it to have a good knowledge of contemporary thought and analyse the social structures so that the

9. J.L. Segundo, *Capitalismo-socialismo, crux theologica*, “Concilium”, 6(1974), p. 140.

10. E. Dussel, *Dominazione-liberazione: un discorso teologico diverso*, “Concilium”, 6(1974), p. 70.

11. Segundo, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

12. Gutiérrez-Merino, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 169–171.

praxis can be more efficient. As theology, this critical reflection must be constantly critical of itself (“pensiero critico di se stesso”<sup>(14)</sup>) that is of its conceptual tools in reference to the liberatory praxis.

- iii. This reflection is pursued in the light of the Word of God which is lived and accepted in faith. St. John tells us that it is necessary to put the truth into practice. Therefore, the first act of theology is charity and the commitment of service, while the second act is the theological reflection as a critical attitude on the first act (theology as wisdom and as rational knowledge).<sup>(15)</sup> Segundo says the same thing when he writes that “theology comes afterwards” (“la teologia viene dopo”).<sup>(16)</sup>
- iv. The Word of God reaches us in and through many historical mediations which can be ambiguous. Our mentality and world-view are always coloured by specific cultural categories. The word “praxis”, for example, is of Marxist origin and when we apply it to liberation, we naturally run the risk of reducing the Gospel to an ideology, whether social or political.
- v. But we “remake” daily the Word of God, if we are really trying to live the Word. The Word of God should be the constant yard-stick by which we measure our historical praxis and our very reflection on that praxis. Only in this way can we avoid falling into reductionist ideologies which enslave rather than liberate man.

According to liberation theology, all theology is and must be politically committed. Theology should help the Christian’s historical discernment by constantly confronting the commitment to liberation with the word of God. Not to make political options is automatically to opt for the *status quo*.

Infatti la storia è “inconfusamente e indivisibilmente” storia politica e storia di salvezza. Per questo l’opzione concreta storica del cristiano è sempre “inconfusamente e indivisibilmente” opzione politica e opzione di fede. E questo si verifica anche quando pretende di “non optare” politicamente o di “fermarsi al generico e al puramente interiore o soprannaturale”. In tal modo sta già optando, senza saperlo, e generalmente per lo *statu quo*.<sup>(17)</sup>

### 3. *Liberation and Utopia*

It is quite useless insisting on the historical mentality of Judaism and Christianity if in our translations of the Bible we use words which are

14. G. Gutiérrez, *Teologia della Liberazione*, excerpt in *Teologia Contemporanea*, Torino 1980, p. 577.

15. *Ibid.*

16. J.L. Segundo, *Liberazione della Teologia*, excerpt in *Teologia Contemporanea*, pp. 604–605.

17. J.C. Scannone, *Teologia e politica: la sfida attuale posta al linguaggio teologico sudamericano di liberazione*, in AA. VV. “Fede e cambiamento sociale in America Latina”, Assisi 1975, excerpt in *La Teologia Contemporanea*, p. 603.

abstract and ahistorical. When the theologians of Latin America use the word "liberation", they are trying to recuperate the historical and dynamic meanings of biblical vocabulary. European theology, even the most progressive, continues to speak of "liberty" (or "freedom") and translations of the Bible in all languages use the same word(s). The word "liberation", however, changes the basic connotation of the word "liberty": it is a process-word, a word-in-situation and, therefore, able to express the dynamism of the praxis-theology-praxis.<sup>(18)</sup>

European theology has, in fact, tended to ignore the characteristic trait of Christianity, that of making the love of God and man coincide which is what Christ has done. This theology has become enslaved to the intellectual methods and techniques it has adopted. In this way, it has lost the freedom message of the Gospel. To prove all this, J. Comblin makes a radical criticism of the traditional tracts on grace, human acts and the social doctrine of the Church. The basic problem of the Church today is to work out what light the Gospel message of liberation throws on the modern world.<sup>(19)</sup>

The theology of liberation takes its directing inspiration from the Gospel. The point of departure is the sign of the times – the cry of the oppressed. This cry is interpreted on the level of faith, by means of the mediation of the interpretation which the social sciences give of that poverty, as a situation of sin which has its source in the personal sin of the individual person. Thus liberation theology does not superimpose the two levels of political liberation and eschatological salvation but sees the paschal theme of the new man as embracing both levels in the dialectic of the eschatological "already and not yet". For liberation theology there is one, sole history, secular and religious at the same time. Nevertheless, one current of liberation theology views history primarily from a secular point of view and according to a Marxist interpretation of the Latin American process of liberation: the very real danger here is to treat the revolutionary choice as an ideological absolute. Another current of liberation theology sees the one history first of all from the point of view of the faith, thus avoiding the danger of absolutizing the praxis of liberation.<sup>(20)</sup>

Three levels of meaning of "liberation" can be distinguished. They correspond to the complex reality of the liberatory process. There is first of all liberation at the level of economy, society and politics, a liberation which opposes the exploited poor to the oppressors. At a deeper level, there is the liberation of the human person when, by means of a cultural revolution, he

18. H. Assman, *Teologia dalla prassi di liberazione*, excerpt in *La Teologia Contemporanea*, pp. 593–4.
19. J. Comblin, *Libertà e liberazione – concetti teologici*, "Concilium", 6(1974), pp. 114–127.
20. J.C. Scannone, *Evangelica o ideologica la teologia della liberazione?*, "Concilium", 3(1974), pp. 180–182.

becomes able to control his destiny in a creative freedom. Thirdly, there is a religious liberation from sin which is the ultimate cause of every injustice. The three levels just described condition each other but without confusion; they are distinct but go together; they are at different levels of depth as parts of a whole, unified process. For political liberation is a growth of the Kingdom of God, which is above all a gift, but it is not the whole of salvation. And the process of liberation can only eradicate the very roots of oppression by means of the realization of the Kingdom of God. Consequently, it is in Christ that the process of liberation reaches its highest point.<sup>(21)</sup>

Now what mediates between and unites the first level of political liberation and the third level of religious liberation is the notion of "utopia" as a historical plan for a qualitatively different society. There are three aspects of the notion of utopia. Firstly, "utopia" is applied to historical reality in a complex and dynamic way: it condemns oppression in all its forms so that it is not only content with reforms but proposes a revolution, a global change; at the same time, it announces what will be according to the alternative values proposed. Secondly, the utopia must be verified in praxis for, while it establishes what political actions are to be realized, it is thereby confirmed or corrected as the case may be. Thirdly, the utopia has a rational quality. All utopias are born in times of crises when the existing rational explanations of social reality have reached their limits and can no longer explain the new situation. A utopia emerges which pushes the human sciences to a new understanding of society so that political action can become more efficient.<sup>(22)</sup>

It is clear that the utopia, as explained above, belongs to the second level of liberation. 'Il progetto storico, l'utopia della liberazione come creazione di una nuova coscienza sociale, come appropriazione sociale non solo dei mezzi di produzione ma anche della gestione politica e, in definitiva, della libertà, sono il luogo proprio della rivoluzione culturale. . . Per questa ragione, tale creazione è il luogo di incontro fra la liberazione politica e la comunione di tutti gli uomini con Dio.' By means of the mediation of the utopia, faith and political action enter into a direct and immediate relation: when political and economic liberation are carried out with human love and in the light of the Gospel, liberation reveals God and this, in turn, becomes a motive for a deeper commitment. The mediation of the utopia should not lead to an easy political or religious messianism which does not respect the autonomy of the political order. Christian hope prevents us from mistaking the Kingdom of God for any particular historical stage because hope opens us to the gift of the future promised by God.<sup>(23)</sup>

21. G. Gutiérrez, *Teologia della liberazione*, excerpt in *La Teologia Contemporanea*, pp. 576 – 578.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 578 – 579.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 580.

#### 4. *Christology*

It is Leonardo Boff who, in his writings, is trying to work out and promote a Christology in the light of liberation theology. According to him all Christology is "partisan" and "committed". Christology has usually made its own the stand of those who hold political power. No theologian can really abstract from the historical and social context in which he is living. So the question arises: with whom is Christology going to side? The Christology of liberation is clear about its commitment: because it wants to promote the cause of the poor, it exalts Christ the liberator.<sup>(24)</sup>

We can investigate the mystery of Jesus and ask, "who is Christ?" We can also ask ourselves, "who is Christ for us today?" that is we confront our existence with the life of Christ and we feel challenged by his person.<sup>(25)</sup> From the standpoint of liberation theology, an exegesis of the Gospels which would reveal the *ipsissima vox et facta* of Jesus, is not enough. We must work out a Christology guided by the Latin-American experience of the faith.<sup>(26)</sup> A Christology, therefore, has two aspects. It is autonomous as a theological discipline with a coherent epistemology and its own particular laws. On this level, it does not make sense to speak of a Latin-American Christology as different from a North-American one. But a Christology is, at the same time, dependent for its choice of themes and the emphasis with which they are treated, on the social place of the theologian and the actuality of the Christological reflection in that historical context. The Christology of liberation is dependent on the fundamental option for the liberation of the oppressed. The indignation contained in this option is, however, mediated by an analysis of reality which shows the cause of misery and works out a plan of action. This is what Boff calls the socio-analytical mediation. It is this kind of Christology that Boff himself is developing.<sup>(27)</sup>

A close study of the Gospels from the point of view of liberation will reveal the praxis of Jesus. He was nonconformist in speech and action. His praxis was liberating because he sided with the poor. He broke down barriers and opened the way for a new communion between men. And in Jesus the Kingdom of God is already present in the world.<sup>(28)</sup> But the exemplary reality of every process of true liberation is that of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Cross implies the shedding of all human self-sufficiency and the possibility of divine fulness in human life. The resurrection is the total self-communication of God who fills the emptiness of the Cross.<sup>(29)</sup>

24. L. Boff, *Jésus Christ libérateur*, "Lumière et Vie", 134(1977), pp. 86–88.

25. L. Boff, *Gesù Cristo Liberatore*, excerpt in *La Teologia Contemporanea*, pp. 599–600.

26. L. Boff, *Salvezza in Gesù Cristo e processo di liberazione*, "Concilium", 6(1974), pp. 100–101.

27. L. Boff, *Jésus Christ libérateur*, *op. cit.*, pp. 99–111.

28. L. Boff, *Salvezza in Gesù Cristo e processo di liberazione*, *op. cit.*, pp. 105–107.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 107–109.

The other side of the coin is that the salvation which Jesus brought to us in his paschal mystery, demands that we work for the coming of the Kingdom. For Latin Americans, this means working for the liberation of millions of people. In this way, their faith becomes praxis. However, the process of liberation cannot be identified purely and simply with the Kingdom because the latter is an eschatological totality. And what is to be done concretely cannot be deduced from the evangelical model nor from the model of the person of Christ. What is specifically Christian is on another level: renunciation of vengeance, disinterested love, universal forgiveness and constant reference to the mystery of God the Father. It is a common temptation of Christians to try and justify their praxis by means of a text of the Gospel or an action of Christ.<sup>(30)</sup>

### **Part Two: The Theology of Liberation according to the Critics**

This part will be based, in its structure and essential content, on François H. Lepargneur's article *Théologies de la libération et théologie tout court*.<sup>(31)</sup> The author presents himself as a European theologian who has lived in Brasil for seventeen years (until the date of writing). In his criticism of liberation theology, he appeals to his theological, pastoral and teaching experience. This method demands a certain trust on the part of the reader. Nevertheless, precisely because he has been living in the life-context of liberation theology, Lepargneur's criticism is probably more objective and realistic than that of theologians in Europe (who, as a matter of fact, base their evaluation of liberation theology on an exegesis of the writings of liberation theologians).

#### 1. *Ambiguities*

##### 1.a. The two faces of liberation theology

The theology of liberation finds its best theoretical exposition in the works of G. Gutiérrez: 'ses écrits ont de quoi tranquilliser Rome'. Unfortunately, the theologies of liberation lived and expressed in the reunions of basic communities do not always pay the same attention to Church tradition and to the declarations of the magisterium. Hence they are less orthodox than the liberation theology expressed in scholarly books and articles. A big diversity of attitudes is hidden in the name "theology of liberation".<sup>(32)</sup>

The question arises: when we criticise liberation theology, which theology or attitude of which author are we trying to evaluate? This methodological question is crucial for a proper assessment of the value of

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 109 – 112.

31. "Nouvelle Revue Théologique", 98(1976), pp. 126 – 169.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 140 – 141.



liberation theology. However, given the limits of this work, the present writer has to content himself with a kind of "reportage" of others' criticism.

### 1.b. The term "liberation"

How could Christianity have waited so long before it became aware of a concept which best reveals its very essence? Is it not truer to say that the importance of the word "liberation" is culturally determined, in vogue in a particular place, at a particular time? But then, many other doctrines (Buddhism, Marxism, Maoism, Spiritism, psycho-therapeutic techniques, Women's Lib) have spoken of liberation, many times as if they had the ultimate key to man's liberation. The term "liberation", used in so many different contexts, tends to mean everything and hence nothing specifically. Is it not very risky to apply it to movement of the masses? Because one wants to appeal to a vast public, especially the people in the process of being "secularised", the fact of divine grace as a medium of liberation is often forgotten.<sup>(33)</sup> But there is no authentic freedom except in the Spirit of Christ. Man cannot by himself build a future free from all forms of alienation. The concept of "liberation" must be applied with caution to the economic and political changes in a society of which only a small number of members let themselves be guided by the Spirit.<sup>(34)</sup>

### 1.c. The notion of "praxis"

J. Moltmann has accused the authors of liberation theology of substituting Marxism and sociology for contact with the oppressed people: they develop their analysis of the concrete history of Latin-American people by means of certain fundamental concepts of Marx which are used in such a general way that one learns nothing of the plight of the Latin-American people.<sup>(35)</sup>

After that general observation, we must show what dangers the Marxist concept of "praxis" introduces in the theology of liberation. The Marxist process of liberation is work. It is work which creates the essence of man. As a result, the perfect society will emerge only when the Revolution will have been accomplished. But this notion of praxis has no place for the transcendence of God. 'Significatif est le silence qui couvre d'ordinaire, dans la "conscientisation libératrice", non seulement le thème des fins dernières en général, mais encore et spécifiquement la prédication de la fin du monde et l'événement unique de la Parousie'.<sup>(36)</sup> Another author wonders whether the faith of liberation theology still has God as its object

33. Lepargneur, *op. cit.*, pp. 136–137.

34. W. Pannenberg, *Résurrection de Jésus et avenir de l'homme*, "Lumière et Vie", 134(1977), pp. 66,72.

35. J. Moltmann, *Lettera aperta a José Míguez Bonino*, in AA. VV. *Ancora sulla teologia politica*, Queriniana 1975, pp. 209–210.

36. Lepargneur, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

since faith is no longer adhesion to the First Truth but voluntary commitment in the movement of history where Truth is reflected. The act of faith becomes no more than a political act.<sup>(37)</sup> But which theology of liberation are we criticising? The necessary balance (and corrections?) seems to be provided by Marie-Dominique Chenu: theology must be dialectically both inductive (the ecclesial praxis is its *locus theologicus*) and deductive (a rational reflection which respects orthodoxy).<sup>(38)</sup>

#### 1.d. Universal or Particular

'La théologie de la libération est une sacralisation occulte de mouvements nationalistes latino-américains, la captation de l'énergie religieuse à des fins politico-sociales auxquelles on conserve en principe la perspective de l'eschatologie chrétienne (dans ses versions orthodoxes)'. When this theology wants to appear as legitimate and orthodox, it emphasises the pole of universality: it is different from other theologies in language and concrete situation rather than in content. When it is concerned with praxis, the theology of liberation becomes very "provincial". At the time when Europeans, Christians or otherwise, are trying to overcome national frontiers, liberation theology still cultivates national resentments and has not yet elaborated a plan for the integration of Latin America. It would be better for this theology to limit itself to the theological task and leave political options and projects to other Christians.<sup>(39)</sup>

### 2. Exaggerations

#### 2.a. Its theory of dependence

One of the major elements and principal sources of the political and theological movement of liberation is the hypothesis of the international economic dependence, a hypothesis which in a few years has become a myth. This theory of dependence has been applied first to the economy, then to politics and finally to theology itself.<sup>(40)</sup> Although not without foundation in the economic and political life of Latin America, the theme of dependence represents an elitist interpretation of an ideology which has its origins in Hegelianism (master-slave relationship).<sup>(41)</sup> The theory of dependence-underdevelopment is not enough to explain the complex situation of the Latin-American third world. Nor is the reduction to the

37. Ph.I. André-Vincent O.P., *Les "théologies de la libération"*, "Nouvelle Revue Théologique", 98(1976), p. 116.

38. *I teologi del Terzo Mondo*, "Concilium", 4(1981), pp. 49–51.

39. Lepargneur, *op. cit.*, pp. 141–143.

40. Would Enrique Dussel's *Dominazione-liberazione: un discorso teologico diverso* ("Concilium", 6/1974, pp. 46–72) be a case in point?

41. Lepargneur, *op. cit.*, pp. 147–148. Cf. H.U. Von Balthasar, *Histoire du Salut et Théologie de la Libération*, "Nouvelle Revue Théologique", 99(1977), pp. 525–526.

choice between socialism or capitalism adequate: a third way could be the margin of independence won by Brasil and the economy of Chile.<sup>(42)</sup>

The fashion of liberation theology is opposed to the use and the refining of the techniques which traditional theology employs in its elaboration: exegesis, patristics, history of the Church etc. These techniques become a source of alienation and dependence only if one consents to their use. In this context, the attacks against "traditional theology" tend to be more like caricatures due perhaps more to ignorance than ill-will.<sup>(43)</sup> J. Moltmann accuses liberation theology of re-importing western ideology: 'Udiamo una dura critica alla teologia occidentale e alla teologia in genere – ma poi ci si viene a raccontare qualcosa di Karl Marx e di Friedrich Engels, come se fossero scoperte latinoamericane'. The theology of liberation has not come up with anything new which can compare with the African or Japanese theologies.<sup>(44)</sup>

## 2.b. Religion made political

There are some theologians of liberation, for example P. Segundo Galilea, who are preoccupied with the problem of reducing Christianity to politics. But the existence of a dimension which transcends the world and history is hardly ever preached: religion serves only to claim those rights which are judged to be natural. (Once more the expression "theology of liberation" covers many different currents whose common denominator is a more or less common vocabulary.) Theology thus becomes an ideology, a theology of pure immanence.<sup>(45)</sup> The dialectic of the "one history" leads to a political interpretation of the Gospels with the result that sin is no longer seen as a break in the friendship of man with God, but is identified with the capitalist structures themselves.<sup>(46)</sup>

But the Church is endowed with a social dimension which the Ancient Alliance lacked, that is the communion of saints whose centre is the paschal mystery of Christ. 'L'évangélisation chrétienne peut, elle doit toujours commencer directement par l'annonce aux pauvres de cette libération profonde (et par l'exigence corrélatrice signifiée aux riches et aux oppresseurs), pour passer ensuite de là – autant que possible sans recours à la force, à l'exemple du Christ – à la libération politique et sociale (cf. Ep. à Philémon)'.<sup>(47)</sup>

When Pope Paul VI addressed the 15th ordinary reunion of CELAM (which was held in Rome on the occasion of the Synod of Bishops), he reserved the word "liberation" to the authentic liberation from sin and

42. André-Vincent, *op. cit.*, pp. 114 – 115.

43. Lepargneur, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

44. Moltmann, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

45. Lepargneur, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

46. André-Vincent, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

47. Von Balthasar, *op. cit.*, pp. 524 – 525.

adamantly refused to apply it to the economic and political spheres. Referring to changes on these levels, the Pope spoke of “integral promotion”, “true liberty”, “authentic justice”.<sup>(48)</sup>

### 2.c. Neo-triumphalism

The true spirit of Christianity has been at last rediscovered. A new functional theology has been worked out, a theology which expressed in the language of the people the needs – latently Christian – of the contemporary world. The traditional Latin theology used to speculate; the new theology liberates. Like all new forms of triumphalism, the movement of liberation theology (the reactions voiced during meetings, discussions, popular reviews etc.) carries a considerable dose of contempt of those who do not share its views.<sup>(49)</sup>

One hears repeatedly, ‘Notre théologie n’est pas un idéal, ou une nouvelle conception abstraite, c’est un accomplissement. Nous l’avons fait.’ And yet, the oppression of the poor continues almost unabatedly; one can rightly wonder what progress Latin America has achieved on the economic and political levels.<sup>(50)</sup> The triumphalism of liberation theology is out of place. The Church must set out to perform her mission with a keen sense of realism. All secular progress is ambivalent and no liberation can progress in a straight line. Moreover, the scandal of the Cross opposes the will to power of all secular forces so that the Church can only follow, in its earthly pilgrimage, a path like that of her Lord.<sup>(51)</sup> ‘Une “mutation totale” de l’humanité, telle que les théologiens de la libération l’appellent de leurs vœux ou la postulent, ne serait pensable que sous la forme de l’emprisonnement définitif de l’individu dans les mailles d’un système de distribution socialiste (“juste”)’.<sup>(52)</sup>

## 3. *False Conclusions*

### 3.a. Revelation today is our present history

God speaks to us in the history which we are living. For this reason, we must read the signs of the times. However, it is not just a question of reading the signs of the times in the biblical sense evoked by Pope John XXIII and Vatican II.<sup>(53)</sup> History is the new *locus theologicus*: there is nothing in history which is not the Word of God just as there is nothing in the Bible which is not historical. History is a process of liberation.

48. André-Vincent, *op. cit.*, pp. 120 – 122.

49. Lepargneur, *op. cit.*, pp. 156 – 157.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

51. Von Balthasar, pp. 528 – 529.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 528.

53. Lepargneur, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

Therefore it is this process which is the source of God's Revelation for those who can read the signs of the times.<sup>(54)</sup>

Under an abusive influence of Marxism, the theology of liberation frequently defies history. When one recalls that this theology has its origin in a revolt against an historical alienation (the historical passivity of ancient Christianity), its own sacralisation of history can only appear as blatantly contradictory.<sup>(55)</sup> The real danger of liberation theology is, therefore, to confuse history with the Kingdom of God, to install itself in a fictional eschatology which, ignoring the effects of original sin, lives impatiently the course of history or creates for itself a sterile utopia.<sup>(56)</sup> But one cannot treat the message of Jesus, especially in its eschatological dimension, as being purely and simply tied to the construction of a better worldly future. 'Telle est la "réserve eschatologique" (Käsemann), qui ne tolère ni un monisme ni un dualisme entre l'histoire et Royaume'. The Kingdom of God is eschatological because in the last analysis it has its foundations in the death and resurrection of Christ, events in history but which transcend history. At the same time, the Church has to perform her mission in the world and to the world according to the economy of the Incarnation of God.<sup>(57)</sup>

Marie-Dominique Chenu seems to strike the necessary balance when he writes about history as revelation.<sup>(58)</sup> For him, history and economy of salvation are correlative (nor purely identical and, on the other hand, not opposed or independent): 'Contro una malaugurata deviazione verso le prospettive secolari delle scienze-sociali, affermiamo il principio che quest'unica storia deve essere vista, letta, vissuta dall'angolazione della fede, anche se questa comprensione di fede subisce delle mediazioni attraverso una determinata interpretazione della politica di liberazione'.<sup>(59)</sup>

### 3.b. Towards a new left-wing Christianity

The "socialist option" is the Christian reply to the process of liberation revealed by a Marxist reading of history according to the dialectic of master and slave. There is no third option: socialism or capitalism. Liberation means the taking of power of the class of the poor. The "liberatory commitment" of document of Medellín is interpreted as a Marxist, socialist option.<sup>(60)</sup>

The rejection of all dualisms, even of the distinction between the spiritual and the temporal, has led liberation theology to confuse theology

54. André-Vincent, *op. cit.*, pp. 112–113.

55. Lepargneur, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

57. Von Balthasar, *op. cit.*, p. 527.

58. *Op. cit.*, pp. 46–49.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

60. André-Vincent, *op. cit.*, pp. 114–115.

and politics. It is in the name of the faith that the new theology makes the socialist option.<sup>(61)</sup> But the Church is in its very essence non-political. The theologians of liberation who tie the faith to political choices lay themselves open to the attacks of Marxists and others who have different political ideas. And if the short-term fraternal socialism promised by liberation theology is not realized, at the end of the century we could have a wave of atheism. Moreover, should the oppressed class attain power, how would it behave towards the former oppressors? Would the communist experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat be repeated? The slave must in turn enslave the master; but this is against the spirit of the beatitudes which demand solidarity with the great and the small.<sup>(62)</sup>

### 3.c. A trace of manichaeism

The art of the colonizer consisted in giving the colonized a bad conscience (Hegelian dialectic of master and slave). The theology of liberation has retained the very same scheme: it wants to give a bad conscience to all those who are not on its side, who may or may not be guilty. It is a simplistic dialectic of the good on the one hand and the bad on the other. The good are obviously all those who are committed to the socialist option of liberation. The bad are the United States, Europe, Russia and Japan and, not least, European theology. Besides, while the revolt of the younger generation is described in glowing terms, the religion of forty- or fifty-year-olds is, in fact, ridiculed.<sup>(63)</sup>

It is highly improbable that whole nations are without any responsibility whatsoever for the evil which they have had to face during the long period of more than four centuries. And from the point of view of the Gospel, we must affirm that the Kingdom of God is built on personal conversions and not on scholarly dialectics of power. 'Une idéologie, même si elle s'attribue le titre de "théologie", qui repose essentiellement sur l'accusation de l'autre, auteur de tout le mal, ne peut pas être confondue avec une interprétation valable du christianisme qui est, en son principe même, appel à la conversion de celui qui reçoit l'appel de la grâce, du salut'.<sup>(64)</sup>

## 4. *Puebla*

The Third General Conference of Latin-American Bishops met in Puebla in 1979, exactly ten years after Medellín. The theme chosen was 'The Evangelisation in the Present and the Future of Latin America'. The bishops were conscious that they had sufficient experience and knowledge of the problems of their peoples so that they could elaborate a proper

61. Lepargneur, *op. cit.*, pp. 160 – 161.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 161 – 163.

63. *Ibid.*, pp. 165 – 166.

64. *Ibid.*, pp. 167 – 168.

pastoral programme.<sup>(65)</sup> All the work of the conference was inspired by a single intuition: the choice in favour of man. The final document (n. 410) expresses this using the very same words of the inaugural discourse of Pope John Paul II: “La chiesa vuole mantenersi libera di fronte agli opposti sistemi, per optare solo in favore dell’uomo. . .” This fundamental option of the conference explains the positive tone throughout the whole document which, instead of condemning the excesses of liberation theology, expounded a healthy Christology (nn. 95 – 127), a precise Catholic ecclesiology (nn. 128 – 301) and the true meaning of Christian liberation (nn. 351 – 378).<sup>(66)</sup>

But did the Pope condemn once and for all the theology of liberation? His speech has sounded in Europe as if it were a return to “integralism”, an exorcism of all liberal tendencies.<sup>(67)</sup> However, the liberation theologians themselves, even the most progressive, have tried to interpret the Pope’s intervention in an objective and balanced way.<sup>(68)</sup> According to the judgement of the same theologians, Puebla has confirmed the direction which the theology of liberation has taken. What the conference and the Pope have condemned is what the majority of the theologians of liberation would in any case condemn – the ideological reduction of the theology of liberation.<sup>(69)</sup> Nevertheless, hardly a year later, J.C. Scannone could write that theologians in Latin America were (already) interpreting the theological and pastoral conclusions of Puebla not only in different but also in contradictory ways.<sup>(70)</sup> This shows that the theology of liberation is, after all, a young theology which needs to mature. Although one can ask whether it will eventually go out of fashion and something else (another theology? a political ideology?) will replace it. Time will tell.

## Conclusion

A certain lack of harmony between the two parts of this article is apparent: not all the criticism reported in the second part seems to apply to the liberation theology as described in the first part. This is to be expected: the first part only deals with a few key-ideas as elaborated in scholarly books and articles, while much of the criticism of the second part would be levelled against attitudes and “praxis” adopted under the umbrella of liberation theology. The question asked in part two, number 1.a has thus

65. Bartolomeo Sorge, *Puebla 1979: Un segno di Dio per tutta la chiesa*, in *Puebla, Il Messaggio della Speranza*, Roma 1981, p. 9.

66. *Ibid.*, pp. 20 – 23, 29 – 30.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 22; G.F. Svidercoschi, *Diario di Puebla*, *ibid.*, p. 44.

68. Svidercoschi, *ibid.*

69. AA. VV., *La Teologia Contemporanea*, Torino 1980, pp. 571 – 572.

70. *Diverses interprétations latino-américaines du document du Puebla*, “Lumen Vitae”, 2(1980), pp. 211 – 227. Referred to by Jacques Van Nieuwenhove, *Puebla e Chiesa universale*, “Concilium” 4(1981), p. 123.

proved to be very pertinent: we have to ask ourselves which liberation theology we are criticising; or, to put it more concretely, we must distinguish carefully between the different liberation theologies even though they are all inspired by the "preferential option for the poor". If this exegetical necessity is not itself a condemnation of this paper's method of dealing with the subject, it is only because we have deliberately stopped short of a personal evaluation and limited ourselves to a reportage of necessarily main ideas and criticisms (it was for the sake of orderly presentation that we divided this work under common themes).

Stretching the imagination a little, it is possible to see how the ambiguities, exaggerations and false conclusions which have been described in the second part and which are as radical as and sometimes identical with the criticisms of the recent Vatican Instruction on the theology of liberation, could derive logically or not so logically from what was said in the first part. But a "false" conclusion could be the result not only of "false" premisses but also of a misinterpretation of the premisses or the surreptitious introduction of a new term (especially under the influence of a particular bias) or the failure to maintain throughout the balance which was recognised to be necessary at the start of one's theologizing. Hence an evaluation of liberation theology will have to take into account the uniqueness of each theology of liberation, the possibility that unorthodox conclusions are the fruit of aberrations in the theological process, and finally but most important the possibility that the whole theological effort was doomed to failure from the very start because the foundational presuppositions and principles were false or ambiguous enough to give rise to subsequent aberrations.

It is this third critique that the Vatican Instruction has adopted: the Marxist analysis of VII is thought to be presupposed by all liberation theologies so that they all end up with the same far-reaching theological subversions. However, we are not at all sure that the liberation theologians can be lumped all together and one can speak with an almost naive self-assurance of "a real system, even if some hesitate to follow the logic to its conclusion" (XI,1). If we want, therefore, to incorporate the Instruction's critique into our own, the burden of emphasis shifts to the following reformulation of the above crucial question: to what extent is "the ideological core borrowed from Marxism" (VIII,1) present as a determining factor in each exposition of the theological current known as theology of liberation?

## Bibliography

### 1. *Liberation Theologians*

ASSMANN, H., *Teologia dalla prassi di liberazione*, Cittadella, Assisi 1974.

BOFF, L., *Gesù Cristo Liberatore*, Cittadella, Assisi 1976.

BOFF, L., *Jésus-Christ libérateur*, "Lumière et Vie", 134 (1977), pp. 85 - 113.



- BOFF, L., *Salvezza in Gesù Cristo e processo di liberazione*, "Concilium", 6(1974), pp. 98 – 113.
- CHENU, M-D., *I teologi del Terzo Mondo*, "Concilium", 4(1981), pp. 44 – 53.
- COMBLIN, J., *Libertà e liberazione – concetti teologici*, "Concilium", 6(1974), pp. 114 – 127.
- DUSSEL, E., *Dominazione-liberazione: un discorso teologico diverso*, "Concilium", 6(1974), pp. 46 – 72.
- GUTIERRÉZ, G., *Teologia della Liberazione*, Queriniana, Brescia 1972.
- GUTIERRÉZ-MERINO, G., *Movimenti di liberazione e teologia*, "Concilium", 3(1974), pp. 163 – 176.
- SCANNONE, J.C., *Diverses interprétations latino-américaines du document du Puebla*, "Lumen Vitae", 2(1980), pp.211 – 227.
- SCANNONE, J.C., *Evangelica o ideologica la teologia della liberazione?* "Concilium", 3(1974), pp. 177 – 187.
- SCANNONE, J.C., *Teologia e politica: la sfida attuale posta al linguaggio teologico sudamericano di liberazione*, in AA. VV. *Fede e cambiamento sociale in America Latina*. Cittadella, Assisi 1975.
- SEGUNDO, J.L., *Liberazione della teologia*, Brescia 1976.
- SEGUNDO, J.L., *Capitalismo-socialismo, crux theologica*, "Concilium", 6(1974), pp. 128 – 149.

## 2. Medellín – Puebla

- LAURENTIN, R., *Nascita dell'America Latina*, Punti Scottanti di Teologia 48, Paoline 1970, pp. 149 – 209 on Medellín.
- Medellín – Reflexiones en el CELAM*, Biblioteca de autores cristianos, Madrid 1977.
- Puebla – Il Messaggio della Speranza*, testo integrale del documento della terza conferenza generale dell'episcopato latinoamericano, con contributi di B. Sorge e G.F. Svidercoschi.

## 3. Critics of the Theology of Liberation

- ANDRE-VINCENT, PH.I., *Les "théologies de la libération"*, "Nouvelle Revue Théologique", 98(1976), pp. 109 – 125.
- LEPARGNEUR, F.H., *Théologies de la libération et théologie tout court*, "Nouvelle Revue Théologique", 98(1976), pp. 126 – 169.
- MOLTMANN, J., *Lettera aperta a José Míguez Bonino*, in AA. VV. *Ancora sulla teologia politica*, Queriniana 1975, pp. 202 – 217.
- PANNENBERG, W., *Résurrection de Jésus et avenir de l'homme*, "Lumière et Vie", 134(1977), pp. 65 – 83.
- PEPPER, M., *Liberation Theology and Basic Communities in Latin America and in Britain*, "New Blackfriars", 63(1982), pp. 16 – 24.
- VON BALTHASAR, H.U., *Histoire du salut et théologie de la libération*, "Nouvelle Revue Théologique", 99(1977), pp. 518 – 531.