

Malua Theological College
TH 202 Modern Christologies
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Lecture Notes - Week 3 (A)

Recap...

1. What is Liberation Theology?
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5. Summary

“Liberation theology is an attempt to reconceptualise the Christian faith from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed; and may be characterized as a vision of Christianity as *praxis of love* and *solidarity* with the oppressed.”

1. What is liberation theology?

The term “liberation theology” is used to refer to a family of theologies that arise within socially or politically marginalized communities, providing the basis for religious and social empowerment. It reimagines theology through the lens of the poor and oppressed, emphasizing that faith must be lived out through social justice and political engagement.

2. The Birth of Liberation Theology: A Latin American Way of Looking at God

Liberation Theology came out of the struggle against external domination and socio-economic oppression. Initially, it was a movement within Latin American Catholic theology and spirituality since the 1950s and 60s that reads the Christian Gospel from the standpoint of the poor. In Latin America, there is hardly a middle class, and 5% of the population controls 80% of the wealth. **Gustavo Gutierrez**, a Dominican priest from Peru, is considered the founder of liberation theology (*A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation* [1971]).

In 1968, at the **CELAM** [Latin American Episcopate Conference of Medellin in Colombia]¹, the cries of the Latin American people began to be heard, thus the birth of a movement that began in the Church and later expanded with the help of the priests who gathered locally with

¹ CELAM – Consejo Episcopal LatinoAMericano y Caribeño

the people. The decade from 1968 to another 1979 conference in Puebla, Mexico, was an active time for Latin America and Liberation Theology, expanding the concept of God's "*preferential option for the poor.*"

Theologians, Biblicists, ethicists, priests, educators, and people in general developed the "dependence theory" that criticized Latin America's heavy dependence on US colonization. Theologically, countries from the third world created the **EATWOT** (The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians), which was an essential organization that engaged the social realities of poor countries and expanded the voices of poor people across the globe.

Liberation Theology was not the creation of one theologian. **Gustavo Gutierrez** did not begin the movement; it was the work of the people, through grassroots movements calling for justice, in collaboration with priests and theologians that deeply shaped Liberation Theology in Latin America. Gustavo Gutierrez's book, "*A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation,*" for instance, comes as the first major practical-theoretical reference from a long history of death and oppression in Latin America. Gutierrez shaped many of the practices and much of the thinking within grassroots movements.

3. Major themes in Liberation Theology

Method

Liberation Theology expands the sources of God's revelation. Along with the documents of the church and the Bible, the lives of the poor became not only sources for the discourse of God but also a hermeneutical axis from which faith and doctrine (*doxa*) would be understood. Praxis became a complex way of engaging life, theory, tradition, and theology.

Salvation

As a consequence, one of the major themes of Christian theology, namely salvation, gained new meaning. Salvation *from* this world became salvation *within* this world. Salvation became liberation from structural social sins, and the life found in Jesus Christ could now be realized in history! The hope for another world no longer precluded the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God in our world. Instead, there was hope that the movement of the Spirit could help us live life in fullness here, in our moments of already here and not yet!

Preferential option for the poor

Liberation theologians read the Bible from the side of the poor and insisted that from the Exodus story to the prophets, from the incarnation of God in Jesus to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and from the life of the church through the salvific manifestations of God in history, God clearly shows a preferential option for the poor.

Class struggles

Through the struggles of the poor, we see that the world is marked by battles for wealth. The desire for money and the accumulation of wealth create a distinction among people and

establish class struggles. Economic disparity and hierarchical division of people into classes undergird state control of the people and the law. As Latin Americans look into the concrete realities of their own people, they look at the economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of their lives, and they see poor people being eaten up by economic and political powers controlled by a very small elite. There is no way to read the Bible and understand God's love without going through the *lenses of injustice* and death caused by class struggles.

Consciousness

The preferential love of God for the poor not only lifts up the poor as receptacles of God's love but also as agents of God's love in the world. Jesus, in the midst of the poor, naked, hungry, thirsty, and imprisoned, points to where God dwells and where salvation comes from as we consider the presence of God in history. The Gospel read within poor communities has the power to turn each person into the subject of his/her own history. Conscious of our call to determine history, we are the ones empowered by God to work with God to give rise to the *utopia* of the Kingdom of God in our midst.

4. Two Key Latin American Theologians

4.1 Rubem Alves

Brazilian Protestant theologian and pastor Rubem Alves was the one who helped shape the history of Protestantism in Brazil. In 1964, he became a pastor of a church in the countryside of his own state, Minas Gerais, Brazil, where he was taken by the military dictatorship. Alves became an enemy of the government, mainly because his beloved church, the Presbyterian Church of Brazil, denounced him to the dictators as a *dangerous thinker*. Church leaders at that time were aligned with the military and helped the government to get rid of dangerous minds. He migrated to the USA, where he did his Ph.D. at Princeton Theological Seminary, titled "**Towards a Liberation Theology.**" A Roman Catholic editor wanted to publish this dissertation, but his only condition was to change the title because nobody would understand the meaning of "Liberation Theology." Influenced by Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, the book was then published with the following title: "**A Theology of Human Hope,**" containing the seeds of the agenda of Liberation Theology.

Alves believes that *academic work would not actually change people*, thus admitting that *transformation was possible only by speaking to the hearts of the people*. He began to draw freely from the works of Nietzsche, Freud, St Augustine, Bonhoeffer, and others, as they *weave the word made flesh* and love through poetry, politics, cooking, beauty, theology, alchemy, memories, and desires. Theology for Alves took the form of playing with words as an attempt to understand the mystery of God.

4.2 Ivone Gebara

Philosopher, theologian, and nun Ivone Gebara worked mostly with poor people and battered women in northern Brazil. For Gebara, God is not a fixed being beyond creation and sufficient in itself, as male theologians insist, so as to control both the knowledge of God and

people. This understanding of God is used by the patriarchal leadership to claim that they alone hold the truth of God. This control and teaching shut down the voices of women, and those who do not operate with that understanding of God. Instead of considering God as an essence, a self-enclosed being to whom we go to find wisdom, she sees God as a mystery that penetrates the lives of men and women and the whole creation.

In her book “*What Is Theology?*” Gebara writes that theology is the cloth we wear on top of our experiences and deep feelings. The problem is that we wear only one piece of clothing and we never take it off. Instead, she says, *we should take off our religious clothes often so we can discover our bodies, our feelings, and then experiment with different clothes* so we can learn other ways to talk about our experiences with God. Theology is a process of knowing, and patriarchy has forced us to think in univocal ways, offering us only one piece of cloth to understand God and ourselves.

For Gebara, religious experiences are born and lived in and through our bodies, and it is in these bodies and bodies’ relations that we can find the threads of what God might be in our midst. There is a tapestry of solidarity and connection that gives us, in different bodies and unique feelings, a sense of what and who God might be: a mystery that graces us in many forms and shapes. It is this mystery, lived in the plural ways of living, that begs for different forms of knowledge to give different accounts of God, of ourselves, and our lives together.

For Gebara, women have to fight the patriarchal system that has oppressed them as neither proper nor capable of theological thinking. Along with women, black people, indigenous people, and queer people, they have been downgraded to a marginal space.

5. Summary

Liberation theology is an attempt to ‘reconceptualise the Christian faith from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed’. The poor were a privileged channel of God’s grace. Liberation theology was ‘an interpretation of Christian faith through the poor’s suffering, their struggle and hope, and a critique of society and faith through the eyes of the poor.’ As liberation theologians, we insist that our interpretation of theology is not just a ‘re-interpretation of what is generally known as Western theology’, but an ‘*irruption*’² of God, active and living among the poor.

Liberation theology is a critique of the structures and institutions that create the poor, and offers a theological anthropology that is political, an interpretation of Christianity that may be characterised through the term ‘liberation’, and a vision of Christianity as *praxis of love* and *solidarity* with the oppressed. Faith is not just about belief but about action, transforming unjust social structures.

² Irruption – a sudden, violent, or forcible entry.