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Beyond liberation theology

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Beyond liberation theology: a review article

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Humberto Belli and Ronald Nash, **Beyond Liberation Theology**, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992, 206 pp.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, **A Theology of Liberation. History Politics and Salvation** (15th anniversary edition with a new introduction by the author), Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1988, xlv + 264 pp.

Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (eds.), **Expanding the View. Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Future of Liberation Theology**, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1990, xiv + 226 pp.

Paul E. Sigmund, **Liberation Theology at the Crossroads. Democracy or Revolution?** New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, 255 pp.

Christian Smith, **The Emergence of Liberation Theology. Radical Religion and Social Movement Today**, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, xii + 300 pp.

Daniel Schipani (ed.), **Freedom and Discipleship. Liberation Theology in Anabaptist Perspective**, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989, viii + 188 pp.

During the 1970s and 1980s the theological panorama in Latin America was dominated by the discourse of liberation theologians. For the sake of precision it is important to use the plural because there is not just one theological approach that could be labelled 'liberation theology'. After 20 years it is evident that some of the most radical forms of this theology, which were mainly forged within the academic world with no relation to the life of the church, are in a process of extinction. Such would be the case of authors like Hugo Assman or Sergio Arce. There is, however, a line of liberation theology that has strived to keep related to the life of the churches, with their pastoral and missiological problems. That has been the line exemplified by Gustavo Gutiérrez, which evidently is going to last even if it takes new forms. Where is this liberation theology going in this decade? This is an important question in Latin America after the

collapse of real socialism in Eastern Europe, the end of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and the shift towards a pre-Vatican II conservatism in the Catholic Church.

Humberto Belli and Ronald Nash have written their book *Beyond Liberation Theology* with the twofold aim of first describing what they consider to be dramatic changes among some proponents of liberation theology, and then evaluating positively these changes on the basis of strong criticism of earlier liberationist proposals (p. 7). Belli, a lawyer and sociologist from Nicaragua, left the Sandinista ranks in 1975, opposed their regime after 1979, and worked in the United States for the Puebla Institute, a conservative Catholic think-tank. More recently he became the Minister of Education in post-Sandinista Nicaragua. Nash presently teaches at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, and is well known as a popularizer of theological themes. In their criticism of some liberation theologians the strong point of Belli and Nash is the attack on the Marxist component of the kind of social analysis used by those theologians. Belli and Nash write from the assumption that 'Capitalism is quite simply the most moral system, the most effective system and the most equitable system of economic exchange. When capitalism, the system of free economic exchange, is described fairly, there can be no question that it comes closer than socialism or interventionism to matching the demands of the biblical ethics' (p. 110). They also believe that 'the moral objections to capitalism turn out to be a sorry collection of arguments that reflect, more than anything else, serious confusions about the true nature of a market system' (p. 109). For both defence of capitalism and attack on Marxism, Belli and Nash depend heavily on American Catholic thinkers Michael Novak and John Neuhaus.

For an evangelical reader the weaker part of this book is the actual theological argument. Little attention is paid to the theological development of themes that liberation theologians have explored widely, such as the poor, history, the nature of the church, salvation and hope. Chapter five, on 'Liberation Theology and the Bible' (pp. 115–134), is short and sketchy, and it discusses the introductory work of Philip Berryman, an

American commentator, rather than the work of liberation theologians themselves. In fact, almost all the books by liberation theologians listed in the bibliography are from the '70s. Belli and Nash do not seem to be aware of the important works on hermeneutics and biblical exposition published by liberation theologians in the '80s.

What do liberation theologians themselves think about the future of their work? Careful reading of the 15th anniversary edition of Gustavo Gutiérrez' classic book *A Theology of Liberation* is a good way to understand some of the changes and corrections required by the debates of the 1980s. Gutiérrez is a Peruvian priest who has kept his parish work in a poor section of Lima, in spite of his lecturing trips to North America and Europe. He is one of the theologians who – without actually being named – came under criticism in the two 'Instructions' about liberation theology (1984 and 1986) from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the watchdog of orthodoxy for the present Pope. Gutiérrez, however, has done whatever possible to remain in good standing in his church. This revised 15th anniversary edition of his book is preceded by a 30-page introduction entitled 'Expanding the View' (pp. xvii–xlvi), in which Gutiérrez offers evidence of the acceptance of his work by many bishops and the relationship between his thinking and the practical involvement of many persons and communities in Catholic church life. He acknowledges the criticism he has received for his use of social analysis and the need 'to refine our analytical tools and develop new ones' (p. xxiv). He goes on to describe the new world situation with the urgent demands for understanding so that 'both the scientific outlook itself and the Christian conception of the world call for a rigorous discernment of scientific data – discernment, but not fear of the contribution of the social sciences' (p. xxv). The approach to Latin American history known as 'theory of dependence' was very influential in the beginning of liberation theologies. Now in a very explicit way Gutiérrez admits: 'the theory of dependence which was so extensively used in the early years of our encounter with the Latin American world is now an inadequate tool, because it does not take sufficient account of the internal dynamics of each country or of the vast dimensions of the world of the poor' (p. xxiv).

Other changes in this revised edition are eloquent. For instance, the controversial section entitled 'Christian Fellowship and Class Struggle' in the first edition has now been replaced by a new section entitled 'Faith and Social Conflict'. Gutiérrez says that the previous text 'gave rise to misunderstandings that I want to clear up', and he explains, 'I have rewritten the text in the light of new documents of the magisterium and by taking other aspects of the subject into account' (p. 156). Also, from the viewpoint of gender the language of this edition has been corrected to make it inclusive. The Peruvian theologian tells us that he has learned much from his global exposure: 'I have found it very helpful to enter into dialogue with theologies developed in settings different from our own. . . . I have come to see with new eyes our racial and cultural world, and the discrimination against women' (p. xxiii).

For Gutiérrez, however, 'the ultimate reason for commitment to the poor and oppressed is not to be found in the social analysis we use, or in human compassion. . . . [but] in the God of our faith. It is a theocentric, prophetic option that has its roots in the unmerited love of God and is demanded by this love' (p. xxvii). This theme he has developed extensively in two books which major on interpretation of biblical texts. In *We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Orbis, 1984) he developed the idea of the spiritual life as the source of social and political action (praxis), and does an excellent work of articulating a biblical anthropology on the basis of texts from the gospels and the Pauline writings. In his exposition of the book of Job, entitled *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Orbis, 1987), he studies the biblical text starting from a pastoral question: how can a priest or a preacher talk about God to people who suffer innocently? Innocence in this case does not mean people who are not sinners but rather people who are not responsible for the cause of their pain. Evangelicals would be surprised by the quality and thoroughness of Gutiérrez' exegetical work.

It is clear from critics such as Belli and Nash, as well as from liberation theologians themselves, that we cannot understand the course of this theology apart from reference to social and

political events in Latin America and the way they impacted the Catholic Church. The value of the book *The Emergence of Liberation Theology* by Christian Smith is that it provides excellent background about the sociological matrix of liberation theologies. Smith teaches sociology at Gordon College and has used the tools of institutional and quantitative analysis in order to map the reaction of the Catholic Church to the pressure of social change in Latin America. He considers it important 'to make a distinction between "liberation theology" and the movement for which it is named. Liberation theology is simply a set of religious ideas, about and for liberation' (p. 25). His analysis of theological discourse limits itself to Catholic theologians, and he sets it in relation to the question 'How and why did the liberation theology movement emerge and survive when and where it did?' (p. 5). Evangelicals are usually little acquainted with the way the Catholic Church functions as an institution. For them this book will be helpful not only because it provides adequate background for liberation discourse but also because it shows the depth of the pastoral and missiological problems to which the liberation movement was responding in Latin America.

Along the lines of Smith's approach we find also helpful the historical material compiled by Paul Sigmund in *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads*. This work deals with the context from which liberation theologies emerged and the impact of the debates they generated, especially within the Catholic Church. Sigmund is Professor of Politics and Director of the Program of Latin American Studies at Princeton University. He is convinced that at this time 'democracy and human rights need "all the help they can get" in Latin America. . . . [because] the possibilities for the development of genuinely participatory policies and institutions is greater in Latin America than ever before' (p. 13). Sigmund offers a good interpretative chronicle of the responses generated by liberation theology in the United States and in the Vatican (pp. 134–175). In chapter 10 he identifies six key changes in liberation theology that he welcomes, among them the change 'from an infatuation with socialist revolution to a recognition that the poor are not going to be liberated by cataclysmic political transformations' (p. 177), and 'a more nuanced attitude towards marxism' (p. 177). Sigmund reminds us that 'At no point did the [Catholic] liberation theologians reject the hierarchical structure of the Church' (p. 178), though they were critical of her position on social and political issues. An interesting example of this is that 'While they challenged the position of women in the church, there was no public questioning of the Church's position on birth control, abortion, even divorce – of the type that has been voiced frequently in Europe and the United States' (p. 178). Sigmund has tried a critical but sympathetic approach to this theology and its future, but he summarizes his own stance in this way: 'I believe that the liberation theologians are wrong in holding (a) that the primary source of oppression is capitalism and of liberation is socialism, (b) that the poor have a superior insight into religious truth, and (c) that liberalism is to be rejected by biblically oriented Christians' (p. 182).

The repercussion of liberation theologies around the world could be assessed in 1988, when Gustavo Gutiérrez approached his 60th birthday and there was an ecumenical celebration in Maryknoll, New York, attended by almost 100 scholars, theologians and activists from all parts of the world. The commemorative volume that developed from this meeting was edited by Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro with the title *The Future of Liberation Theology* (Orbis, 1989). In its 518 pages, 53 contributors are included, representing all kinds of theological disciplines. The same editors published part of that material in a more accessible, shorter version entitled *Expanding the View*. This contains 15 essays, including the one by Gutiérrez himself that gives its title to the volume, and happens to be the introductory essay to the 15th edition of his book already reviewed above.

What has been developing during the 1980s by way of evangelical evaluation of liberation theologies? Several evangelicals are included among the authors of essays collected by Daniel S. Schipani in a volume entitled *Freedom and Discipleship. Liberation Theology in Anabaptist Perspective*. Schipani is an Argentinian psychologist and theologian who teaches at the Associated Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana. This book includes eight essays by Mennonite and Baptist theologians and three responses by liberation theologians. Specially valuable in

this collection are the essays by René Padilla, John H. Yoder and Ronald J. Sider. Padilla's systematic evaluation starts by acknowledging the fourfold contribution of liberation theologies which he derives especially from the new theological method they propose. He then develops a criticism built around the same points. First, Padilla says, 'liberation theology rightly emphasizes the importance of obedience for the understanding of truth, but is in danger of pragmatism' (p. 40). Second, 'liberation theology rightly emphasizes the importance of the historical situation, but is in danger of historical reductionism' (p. 43). Third, 'liberation theology has rightly emphasized the importance of the social sciences but is in danger of sociological co-optation' (p. 44). Finally, 'liberation theology has rightly emphasized the importance of recognizing the ideological conditioning of theology but is in danger of reducing the Gospel to an ideology' (p. 46).

The first point in Padilla's approach touches on a key insight from liberation theologies that coincides with Anabaptist theology, namely the emphasis on the practice of discipleship as a precondition for true knowledge of God. How this principle may be applied with Padilla's provisos is illustrated by the way in which Yoder and Sider tackle issues of biblical interpretation in this book, focusing on two favourite themes of liberation discourse, namely Exodus and the poor. Yoder demonstrates how an understanding of the Exodus story in its own context must avoid the ideological approach that dilutes its unique message: 'the seriousness with which we should take the centrality of Exodus in the Hebrew Canon forbids our distilling from it a timeless idea of liberation that we would then use to ratify all kinds of liberation projects in all places and forms. God does not merely "act in history". God acts in history in particular ways. It would be a denial of the history to separate an abstract project label like *liberation* from the specific meaning of the liberation God has brought' (p. 84). Sider examines the biblical material about the poor and points out God's preference for the

poor: 'By contrast with the way you and I, as well as the comfortable and powerful of every age and society, always act toward the poor, God seems to have an overwhelming bias in favour of the poor. But it is biased only in contrast with our sinful unconcern. It is only when we take our perverse preference for the successful and wealthy as natural and normative that God's concern appears biased' (p. 98). At the same time Sider stresses the fact that 'Knowing God involves much more than seeking justice for the oppressed – although it does not involve less. People enter into a right relationship with God and enter the church not by caring for the poor but by confessing their sins and accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour' (p. 98).

Some proposals of liberation theologies were too closely linked with the Marxist faith that history was moving towards socialism. Recent events in Eastern Europe and China have taken away any basis for that faith which was at the core of Marxist social criticism in Latin America. However, questions of inequality, corruption, racism, and all kinds of abuses against human rights have not disappeared in Latin America. In fact they have become worse in some countries. From this context come the theological and ethical questions related to the life and testimony of the churches that continue to challenge evangelical theologians in Latin America, Asia and Africa, as well as among the poor in North America and Europe. The end of the Marxist hope has not yet been adequately assessed by liberation theologians in relation to their theology. Evangelical theologians who did not share that hope will continue to work in their own agenda of relating their hope in the Lordship of Christ and his final victory to the struggle of a growing number of poor people for survival. This task is even more urgent because there is abundant factual evidence now that while liberation theologians took a 'preferential option for the poor', in Latin America the poor have evidently preferred to join the growing evangelical and Pentecostal churches.

Trends of theology in Asia

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The 1980s saw the multiplication of attempts to do 'contextualization', which was the cry of Two-Thirds World (especially Asian)¹ theologians of the 1970s. This article gives a 'bird's-eye view'² of the various trends of theological approaches and issues in the Protestant churches in Asia as they approach the dawn of the third millennium.

Historical background

Actually, even before the '70s, the 'indigenization of theology' was going on. 'Indigenization' is the method of beginning with issues and questions arising from Christian mission in particular contexts and then reflecting on those concerns from the Scriptures and with the help of church traditions and social scientific knowledge. But this time 'contextualization' is done with fuller awareness that theologizing should include contemporary settings, such as the secularism and modernism of the booming cities of the 'developing world'.³

By the 1970s, the differences between the two major branches of Protestant theology had emerged and developed from the stances of the churches to the trends developing in the World Council of Churches (WCC) and its related National Councils of Churches (NCC).

On the one hand, those who were WCC-related became labelled 'ecumenical', 'conciliar' or 'mainline' churches. The WCC's continental network is called the Christian Conference

of Asia (CCA). The national faculties of their seminaries have been developed in the theological schools in the West (mostly in the USA and Germany) through the WCC's Theological Education Fund (TEF) and have returned to their posts and slowly occupied administrative posts as their expatriate colleagues gradually decreased in number. These schools formed the Association of Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA) and the North East Asia Association of Theological Schools (NEAATS), which together with the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College co-publish the *Asia Journal of Theology*.⁴

On the other hand, those who were wary of (if not against) WCC were called 'fundamentalist' or 'evangelical' churches, networked continentally as the Evangelical Fellowship of Asia (EFA) and globally with World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF). As they were developing their many Bible schools, they were also just starting to establish their denominational graduate seminaries in the 1970s. The recruitment of national faculty for academic theological careers began at about this time, too. Some inter-denominational graduate-level seminaries were established and developed in India, the Philippines, Malaysia, South Korea, Hong Kong and Indonesia. Most of them are active members of the Asia Theological Association (ATA).⁵

Theological methodologies

What are the general trends in the theological approaches of these two streams? They have developed slight but significant differences in their approach to theologizing.