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THE IMPACT OF LIBERATION THEOLOGIES ON THE CHURCH

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Abstract: The present article investigates the impact of the liberation theologians on the Church, in special on ruptures of great magnitude in Christian theological reflection. In order to understand the action of such a group, that took place mainly in Latin America, there is a need to analyze the influences that were at work at the starting point of this theological movement. Ion special, the study focuses on the Black and the Feminist activist movements in the United States and in Europe, respectively. The research focuses also the emphasis on the poor and the conflictive system of tension between the oppressed and oppressors, and how these factors influence the Church.

Keywords: Liberation Theology, Influence, Church, Poor, Latin America.

O impacto das teologias da libertação sobre a Igreja

Resumo: O presente artigo investiga o impacto dos teólogos da libertação na igreja, em especial nas rupturas de grandes magnitudes na reflexão teológica da fé cristã. Para conseguir entender a atuação desse grupo, ocorrida principalmente na América Latina, há a necessidade da análise das influências que motivaram o surgimento dessa vertente teológica. Dessa maneira, o estudo permeia os fatores ativistas de negros e feministas nos Estados Unidos e Europa, respectivamente. A pesquisa também se depara na ênfase ao pobre e no sistema conflituoso entre oprimidos e opressores e, como esses fatores influenciam a igreja.

Palavras-chave: teologia da libertação, influência, igreja, pobre, América Latina.

Introduction

In recent times, combined influences have provoked a break of main magnitude in theological reflection. Theology began to strip itself of much of the dead weight of prior dogmatics. The often typical characterization of religion as a "private affair", which had been in effect for centuries was almost suddenly challenged by a stress on the public character of the Christian message. Theologians began to underline that the two most common interpretation of the Christian faith, i.e the **metaphysics** (present in scholastic Roma Catholic theology), and the **private** (common in many Protestant theologians, such as Bultmann and Tillich, who had been heavily dependent on the existentialist philosophy of Kierkegaard and Heidegger), were completely outdated. These interpretations, it was stressed, were anachronical in content and approach, giving "a 19th century answer to a 20th century dilemma".[1]

The first interpretation (metaphysics) was regarded inadequate because it resorted to a vision of reality and truth that modern man did not share or understand. The second, private, was no longer acceptable, mainly because is abstracted man from his real socio-political reality, and thus did not correspond to the biblical perspective. What was being proposed instead was a theological hypothesis whose central thrust was the interest in the concrete, rather them concentration on the speculative aspects of the Christian message.

With the recovery of the social implications of the gospel, theology drastically shifted from the abstract to the practical. It shifted from its traditional *academic form* to "political theology".[2] The emphasis was placed on the reactionary

[1] Harvey Cox, A Cidade do Homem (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1968), p. 275. The translation is mine.

[2] Catholic theologian Johannes B. Metz is considered the main proponent of political theology. The full exposition of Metz´s theological elaboration is found in his Zur Theologie der Welt, Theology of the World (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969). Metz´s more recent work, Faith in History and Society (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), presents his trough in a more systematic form. It should be noted that political theology does not aim at giving religious support to political system or to ally itself to any political party, rather it "designates the field, the milieu, the environment, and the medium in Christian Theology should be articulated today" (Jürgen Moltmann, Political Theology, Today articulated, 1971, p. 6. See also Elizbeth Fiorenza, Political Theology and Liberation theology, in Liberation, Revolution and Freedom, Thomas M. MacFadden, ed., (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).
Close to Metz´s political theology, is Jürden Moltmann´s "theology of hope". Moltmann´s thought is expressed in his influential Theology of Hope: on the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology, translated from the original German edition published in 1964. Moltmanns theological position has been regarded as the "closet to the perspective and interests of Latin American liberation school." R McBrien, Catholicism (Ok Grove, MN., Winston Press, 1981), p. 500. Although there are fundamental differences between Moltmann and Latin American liberation theologians, Moltmann´s ecclesiological vision of a **Volkskirche**, a people´s church, as well as his notion of God as the God of the poor, have, to some

character of faith. The spot-light was them cast on the horizontal dimensions of Christianity. Christians were being urged to break with the individualistic forms of religious devotions and parochial concerns and to commit themselves to the concrete issues facing the human family at large.

Arising mainly as a critical corrective to the privatization of the Christian faith which had taken place in existentially oriented contemporary theology,[3] political theology insist on the social and political dimensions of the Christian message. According to Johannes B. Metz, "the privatizing of theology is the primary critical task of political theology."[4] To be relevant and pertinent in modern society, which is seen as humanized and secularized, theology, Metz justifies, must serve as a critic of socio-political structures[5]. Within this theological obligation the church itself must become in history an "institution of social criticism"[6]. Positively the church must be the "memoria passionis Jesu Christi in the mists of our socity... the bearer of a dangerous and subversive memory on which... depends... the future of our humanity"[7].

As envisioned by political theology, the mission of the church does not mean merely the propagation of faith in traditional terms, and the *salvation of the soul*.[8] According to Metz, given the public and social character of revelation, the church cannot abstract itself from a public and social mission. It is present in the world to repeat incessantly and critically that "history in its totality is subject to God´s

extent, influenced liberation theologians. See Robert C. Walton, Jürgen Moltmann´s Theology of Hope: European Roots of Liberation Theology, in Ronald H. Nash ed., Liberation Theology (Milford, MI.: Moot Media, 1984), pp. 143-186.

[3] Political theology is set in deliberate opposition to the I-Thou theology of the existentially oriented neo-orthodoxy, mainly represented by Bultmann´s theology, which, influenced by Heidgger´s existential ontology, tended, to restrict the relevance of the Christian faith to the sphere of the personal or inner self, without taking sufficient account of man´s socio-political conditioning. See D. Solle, Political Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), pp. 1-9. For a summary of the theological leap from existentialism to politics, see Alfredo Fierro, The Militant Gospel (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 1977), pp. 3-47, also Andre Dumas, Political Theology and the Life of the Church (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), pp. 1-23.

[4] Metz, A Theology of the World, p. 110.

[5] Metz, pp. 107-124

[6] Metz, p. 134

[7] Metz, "The future in the Memory of Suffering," conc 76 (1972), p. 37.

[8] Following an approach very close to yhat Metz and heaving in mind the classic Marxist critique of the church, Moltmann emphasizes that "mission is not merely propagation of faith", A Theology of Hope, p. 260. The church is the church of God, Moltmann argues, "only where in specific acts of service it is obedient to its mission to the world... A church for the world", ibid., p. 327. The mission of the church, Moltmann holds in a later work, "embraces all activities that serve to liberate man from his slavery in the presence of a coming God, slavery which extends from economic necessity to God forsakenness", The church in the Power of the Spirit (New York: Harper, 1977), p. 10.

eschatological promise"[9]. Because of its eschatological orientation, the church, thus, is called to work for the transformation of the human *polis*, and for the unblocking of the way for God´s future. Its task is to be critical of society, standing against the status quo, denouncing dehumanizing forces and being at the service of men in concrete history.

Black and Feminist Liberation Theologies

Political theology, however, has not been an isolated phenomenon. In fact, the break of political theology with classic speculative theology, to a great extend paved the way to the emergence of theologies of liberation and the forms in which they have affected the church. For practical purposes, it may be adequate to classify liberation theology under three models. The first type comes out from the Third World, especially from de Latin America context. To this, because it is probably the most vocal and articulated, and has produced an immense corpus of written material, we will devote particular attention. The present study, thus, will deal with Latin American liberation theology separately, but much of our analysis of this impact on the church can be, by way of extention, be applied to the other two forms of liberationist theological thought.

The remaining two types of this innovative way of theologizing, have emerged within the United States, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the form of black[10] and feminist[11] theologies. For them, theology must have their roots not on

[9] Metz, A Theology of the World, p. 277, Portuguese edition. Metz´s theological construction has been strongly criticized. The very concept of "political theology," and other notions that appear in his work, such as "critical institution." (in reference to the church), "praxis" "critical theory", and "end of the metaphysic," are considered "generally used without sufficient basis, in a a-historical, abstract and indetermined way." K. Lehmann, "La teologia política, legittimazione teologia e aproria presente" (Queriniana Bréscia, 1971), p. 97, the translation is mine. Furthermore, it has been argue that the social and political dimension of the Christian message cannot be, in any way, used to justify the promotion of the political as an hermeneutical principle for the totality of God´s revelation. Such a promotion is in itself and act of idolatry, being contrary to the biblical data. See E. Fell, in Debattio sulla teologia della rivoluzione (Queriniana, Bréscia, 1971), p. 135-136. Finally it has also been said that unless we want to fall in a new form of *integrismo* and *clericalismo,* we cannot impose to the church any program of a particular political system. See H. Maier, Teologia politica? Obezioni di un laico" in Debattio sulla teologia politica, op. cit. pp. 41-44, also H. de Levalette, La Théologie politique allemande," in Revue des SC. Religieuses, 1970, pp. 321-350.

[10] See James H. Cone, Black Religion and Black Power (New York: Seabury Press, 1969); James J. Gardiner and J. Deotis Roberts, Quest for a Black Theology (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970); J. Denotis Roberts, Liberation and Reconciliation, a Black Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971); Gayraud W. Wilmore and James H. Cone, eds., Black Theology, a Documentary History 1966-1979 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979); G. Clarke Chypaman, Jr., American Theology in Black: James H. Cone, CrossCur (1972), pp. 139-157. For a summarized discussion see Harvier M. Coon, Liberation in Black," in Tensions in Contemporary Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976).

a cumulative body of research, as in traditional theology, but in a concrete experience and specific struggles. Thus, black and feminist theologies take the context of oppression as the norm and **locus** of theological reflection and incorporates the concept of liberation within their understanding of the function of theology as well as the mission of the church.

Each of these theologies has become critical of the inherited way of interpreting Christian symbols (feminist theology, has even extended its critique to the symbols themselves, questioning, for example, the "maleness" of the deity). Not surprisingly the exponents of these theologies pose a strong reaction against European and North American theological establishment, which, in their perception, too easily assumed that its theology was simply "Christian theology." For these theologians, traditional theology has made an ideological use of Christianity, and its very interpretation of the Bible and selective content has become strongly supportive of oppression, either from racial our sexist perspective, in benefit of white western and males in general.

Although **oppression** and **liberation** may be differently understood (black theology focuses in **racism** and stressed liberation from the oppression of white culture and white religion, while, feminist theology conceives oppression in terms of **sexism**, and focuses on liberation from male dominance, to which women historically have been subject), these theologies share a common methodology, common perspectives common themes.

Each type of liberation theology has a vision of a new society where justice will be realized in its fullest sense. They all have "passion for and vision of human deliverance"[12], and are marked by a kind of Messianism in their foundation, where salvation, liberation and humanization are envisioned almost synonymously. Furthermore, each of these theological reflection has a particular vision of the

[11] Among the most important works published by participants in the women´s liberation theology we find: Sookied Stambole, ed. Women´s Liberation Blue Print for the Future (New York: ACE Books, Chapter Communications, 1970); Rentley Doely, ed. Women´s Liberation and the Church, the New Demand for Freedom in the Life of the Christian Church (New York: Association Press, 1970); Jeanne Richie, Church, Caste and Women in New Theology, Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman, eds., (New York: Paulist Press, 1972); Letty Russel, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspetive: a Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974); Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women´s Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); Dorothee Soele, The Strength of the Weak, Toward a Feminist Identity (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). For a helpful bibliography on feminist theology, see Katheleen Storrie, Contemporary Feminist Theology: A Selective Bibliography, ThStFlBul 7 (Mary-June 1984) pp. 13-15.

[12] Paul Lehmann, Ideology and Incarnation (Geneva: John Knox Press, 1972), p. 25

church, which seeks to "commit Christians to radical, political and social change and to transform society in order to create a more human world"[13].

Latin American Liberation Theology

The contemporary attempt to relate the teachings on the Christian faith to the lives and struggles oh the oppressed, as well as the vision of salvation as a journey toward liberation and freedom seems to indicate that the conditions of oppression "have reached a level of consciousness that can no longer be ignored or set aside as unimportant by serious Christians"[14] . It is precisely within this new consciousness developed among the oppressed and their guest for liberation, that the revolutionary theological development that emerged from Latin America under the rubric of liberation theology is to be found.

It should be noted that although Latin America liberation theology is deeply rooted in contemporary theological and secular developments, to limit it to these influences would fail to perceive its distinctiveness and dynamic character. Thus, to say that liberation theology is only " bad Spanish translations of bad German an ideas"[15] is a misleading oversimplification. The background of the theology that emerges from Latin America after centuries of theological silence, involves the very history of Christianity in the continent and this impact on society and he politics in the area. But above all, liberation theology must be understood as the result of a new consciousness of its context of oppression and attempt to respond to an appalling situation of massive poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, infant mortality and illiteracy. In fact, Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff insists that is impossible to understand liberation theology as something prior to or apart from the extreme poverty to which "millions of our brothers in Latin America continent are condemned"[16] . Contrary to black and feminist theologies, Latin

[13] Paul Murray, "Black and Feminist Theologies, Links, Parallelsand Tensions," ChrCris 40 (1980), p.86
[14] Stanley Stuphin, Options in Contemporary Theology (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1977), p. 38
[15] Richard Neuhaus, The Catholic Moment, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 177.
[16] Leonardo Boff, Declaration in T. Cabestrero, Los teólogos de La liberación em Puebla (Madrid: Bilbao, 1979), p. 70, the translation is mine. Roman Catholic theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, generally regarded as the father of liberation theology, remarks that "the recent history of Latin America is distinguished by the disturbing discovery of the world of the other-the poor, the exploited class", A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 76. It shoul be not surprise that concern for socio-economic and political liberation emerged from the Third World. Comprising the great majority of mankind, four-fifths of the inhabitants of the planet here strive "to survive with the aid of a meager twenty percent of the goods of the earth." Walbert Bühlmann, The Coming of the Third Church: An Analysis of the Present and Future of the Church (Maryyknoll, NY: Orbis Bokks, 1978), p. 2. See Ronald Sider, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977). In the Latin American countries, a minority of 5-10% generally control half the wealth,

American liberation theology understand oppression and liberation from socio-economic perspective [17]. For these theologians, the prevalence of socio-economic injustices in Latin America is the basic issue around which theology and the church must orient their task.

Liberation theology consistently emphasizes that the gospel offers not only liberation in the spiritual realm, but liberation from all oppressive forces within concrete reality. Thus, under the specific conditions o Latin America, it is contented, theology must reflect on the socio-political features of the gospel and have a special function. More than anywhere else, theology in this context cannot be an academic preoccupation with the past or mere repetition of ancient dogmas, or even a critical-historical exegesis of Scripture, removed from the real world, where real people suffer and die. Theology must be incarnational. It must be above all a liberating force committed to " humanize the oppressed" and devoted more to change reality than to understand or interpret it. In the Latin America situation, liberation theologians argue, theology cannot be less than a response capable of providing a theological foundation for the church´s option for the poor in effective involvement in their struggle for liberation. As the name implies, liberation theology is concerned with the meaning of religion for social and political liberation. Thus, once a cloistered and abstract discipline, theological reflection is now placed in the context of real social experience and transformed into a reflection on concrete issues within it context of oppression.

The main notions of Latin America Liberation theology and their implications for the Church

As indicated, liberation theology emerged in the late 1960s. Today, twenty years later, the movement has undergone development, and more recent liberationist writings evidence their thinking has passed thought a process of shifts and refinement.[18] The fundamental structure of liberation theology, however,

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where as the lower third of the population may receive only 5% of the wealth. See Philip Berryman, Latin American Liberation Theology, (ThST 34, 1983), p. 386.

[17] Originally liberation theology, under the heavy influence of Marxist social analysis, understood oppression near-exclusively in terms of economic structures. More recently, however, one detects in liberationist writings a willingness to consider other types of oppression, such as sexual, political, racial, psychological and ethnic. Probably this recognition of other sources of oppression, on one hand, is a response to the criticism liberation theology had to face in this area (see for example the strong reaction against Latin American liberationist monist view of oppression by feminist liberation theologian Letty M. Russel, Human Liberation in Feminist Perspective, pp. 167-168). On the other hand, it is, probably also related with a more flexible use of Marxism.

[18] For a enlightening discussion on these changes, see the chapter "After Twenty Years: Liberation Theology Today," in Paul E. Sigmund´s recent Liberation Theology at the Crossroads (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) pp. 176-198). Sigmund points out six areas where the shifts in the thought of

remains the same. There are in liberation theology the convergence of three main notions which stand unaltered, and are central to its understanding in relation to the subject of the present study .

a)The Contextual Nature of Theology

At the core of liberation theology is the understanding of the contextual nature of theology. Theologians of liberation are acutely aware of the fact that theology is necessarily conditioned by its social situation from which to view and interpret the gospel. Thus, the fundamental difference in the situation of Latin America, they point out, called for drastic and deliberate rejection of all imported theological formulations.

Informed by the conclusions of the sociology of knowledge, liberation theology affirms the inevitable socio-economic constrains for all knowledge and human refection, and theology is not an exception. "Knowledge" liberation theologian Jon Sobrino points out, "...always contains...implicitly or explicitly a praxis-related and ethical character"[19]. The point being made is simply that there is no neutral knowledge. In this basis, liberation theology poses a serious criticism to the claim of "objectivity" and ideological neutrality of the traditional theological enterprise. This insight, further refined, leads to the conclusion that all theological refection falls on one side or the other of the oppresser-oppressed axis. Therefore, limited and conditioned by it historical context of affluence, it is argued, Western or North Atlantic theology, whether consciously or not, has functioned as an ideological instrument of the capitalist system and of the political ruling classes, to preserve the *status quo*, or the sanctify either reactionary or convenient political options.[20]

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main Latin American liberation theologians are clearly discernible. In the final part of the book Sigmund includes two articles by Gustavo Gutiérrez, when one compares these (published respectively n 1970 and 1984), it becomes apparent that Guriérrez thinking, as it occurs with others liberationist, has changed in important ways.

[19] Jon Sobrino, Theologisches Erkennen in der europaischen und lateinamerikanischen Theologie" in Karl Rahner et al., Befreiende Theologie (Sttutgart: Kaolkammwer, 19977), p. 124. The basic insight of the sociology of knowledge is that there is no such thing as "autonomous knowledge." As Reinhold Niebuhr says, "All knowledge is tainted with an 'ideological' taint, The Nature and Destiny of Man (New York: Charles Scribner´s Sons, 1964), p. 194. In others words, there is no knowledge which would not be closely tied with a given live situation. For a general discussion of the subject, see James E. Curtis and W. Petras, eds., The Sociology of Knowledge: A Reader (New York: Praeger, 1970), chaps. 1 and 2.

[20] Liberation theologians, as we have observed, contend that theological reflection arising out of Europe and the United States, allegedly merely interpretative, has served as an ideological tool of the **status quo** to legitimize situations of oppression (Gutiérrez, A Theology. p. 249). The point in question is not that Western theologians deliberately have set out to interpret the Bible in an oppressive way, but that thought a subtle and unconscious process, the values, goals and interests of their capitalist context, out

For liberation theologians, every theology is political even when is does not speak or thinking in political terms. Thus, the difference between liberation theology and academic theology, it is stressed, is not, actually, that the former is political and the latter apolitical, but that while the latter denies its relationship with politics, the former consciously and explicit accepts it.[21] This vision common to all types of liberation theologies, presupposes not only an advocacy instance (i.e. a partiality consciously accepted by theology and the church) in favor of the oppressed, but also a re-reading of Scripture from their perspective. Negatively this re-reading of Scripture includes a *deideologizing* is followed by a re-ideologization to provide support and legitimation to the liberationist program. Accordingly, Christian love is not necessarily opposed to struggle, ever class struggle. Salvation and liberation are complementary realities. Conversion is fundamentally "conversion to the neighbor". Sin is more a social and historical fact, and the struggle to build a just society is an integral and indispensable part of the church´s agenda.

Well understood, speaking out of their context of oppression, what liberation theologians propose, is not simply a theology that deals with the issues of liberation, but rather one that attempts to reactualize the entirety of Christian faith, doctrine and life from the perspective of their cultural interests. Thus, while accusing traditional biblical interpretation as ideological, liberationist hermeneutics

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of which theological refection arises are read into Scripture. See Justo and Catherine González, Liberating Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), p. 13.

[21]Liberation theologians are unquestionably right in their position that no one can be absolutely objective interpreting the Bible. At this point they have called attention to a crucial hermeneutical question. Problem arises, however, when they give the impression that objectivity is not worth striving for. Evidently, the attempt to be objective enhances the capacity of being self-critical. While one may have no illusions effort to maintain some critical distance from any form of advocacy. Interpreters of the Bible in particular have a moral obligation to be faithful to the intentionality of the text, internally defined. No matter how just or pressing the cause of the oppressed, the meaning of a text should not be twisted or stretched by a less likely interpretation selected to support that cause. Furthermore, although we must admit that to a greater or less extent much of traditional interpretation of the Bible has been conditioned by the affluent Western world, which has forged a "rich", "male", or "white" understanding of God's work, the answer, however, is not to balance a possible one-sided societal interpretation by stressing another equally one-sided societal interpretation. The kind of repentance that the classic reading of the Bible needs is not to turn to a "poor", "feminist" or "black" re-reading of Scripture, as liberation theologians in general suggest. True theological repentance must acknowledge that although Biblical theology is situation-related it should not be situation-bounded. Theologians must attempt to make God's word relevant for their context, but by the same token, they must also make a genuine effort overcome their ideological captivity. This holds true no less for liberation theologians than for "academic" theologians. Only then will theology be able to distinguish the voice of its own culture from that of a sovereign God speaking in an authoritative Bible.

is not without its own ideological slant. Under the influence of subtler forms of captivity it make the equal mistake of the scholars it wishes to refute appearing equally incapable of hearing God´s voice in Scripture.

b)The Priority of Praxis

Perceiving the Latin American economic-political situation not only as a challenge to the Christian conscience, but also as an expression of the "signs of the times", which are a theological locus and summons from God, liberation theologians have called into question the traditional task of theological reflection. What structure should the methodological and hermeneutical process adopt that theology may be true to the necessity of the liberation of those who are exploited, despised and crushed? In order to give a proper answer to this basic question, liberation theologians concluded it was necessary to make a radical challenge in traditional theological methodology.

Western theology, traditionally elaborated from the perspective of philosophical idealism, has been notorious for its abstractness. Generally starting with philosophical and metaphysical categories and primarily interested in interpreting a given set of religious concepts, it has become a sort of ***fuga mundi***, almost without any reference to the concrete reality. In more recent times, as generally indicated, concerned with the secularization and consequent man´s loss of faith in a scientific world, the first question of contemporary theology has been how to talk about God in a "world come of age."
In Latin America situation, marked by the overwhelming presence of the poor, since the driving motive in doing theology is not *rationality* but *transformation*, and the interlocutor or "historical subject" of liberation theology is not the **unbeliever** but the **oppressed**, the conviction emerged that theology must have a particular function. To be relevant, since the poor are not asking theoretical questions about invisible realities, and are immediately more interested in "life after birth" than in "life after death", theology could no longer start with classical traditionalist metaphysics, but from the concrete situation of poverty and oppressing in which the majority of Latin America sub-exists. This, according to J. Miguéz Bonino, a distinguished protestant liberation theologian, is "the only possible point of departure".[22]

The first step on the theological task, therefore, was no longer to go to the Bible or to the dogmatic tradition, and only then try to apply a thereby acquired theory to a concrete situation, as it was traditionally conceived within a *word-action*

[22] José Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 72

scheme. Liberation theology, following the modern understanding of the relation between theory and praxis, took a decisive step to replace this model by an action-word relationship.

Traditional understanding which presupposes the existence of an absolute pre-existing truth, independent of its historical effectiveness, came to be rejected. For liberation theologians, drawing here mainly from Marx, the basic epistemological assumption is that truth lies not in the realm of ideas but on the historical plane of action. "Action itself is truth"[23]. To know the truth, it is further contended on the basics of the theme of "doing the truth" found in the discourses of the Johanine Christ, is to do the truth. From this perception—i.e. that truth is know not in abstractness but in **praxis** [24] in the midst of involvement in history-follows the affirmation of the priority of right-doing (orthopraxis) over right-thinking (orthodoxy).[25]

Affirming the primacy of action over thought, and insisting that the church can think its faith only as is engaged in practing it, liberation theology consistently maintains that "active commitment o liberation comes first and theology develops from it"[26]. Within this "new way of doing theology" praxis becomes the matrix that generates theological activity. As advocated by Gustavo Gutiérrez, theology is reflection of praxis, it is a second step , and it "follows" or "comes later". In the off-quoted phrase of Hegel, Gutiérrez insists, "it rises at sundown".[27]

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[23] Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p.72

[24] Praxis a (term hardly used univocally by liberation theologians), it should be noted, is a technical term in Marxism which embraces those activities capable of transforming reality and society. It is more than merely involvement in a situation or "practice". It is a particular kind of involvement (i.e., class Marxist), within the historical situation. Theology as "critical reflection on praxis in the light of faith" (Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation), pp. 11-15) points to an ongoing interplay of reflection and action.

[25] As a result of the reversal of the traditional relationship between theory and practice, a "Copernican change in theology" took place and continuity between this form of theology, defined as "a reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word", and the "academic" theology became hardly possible. With his usual agressivity, Brazilian liberation theology Hugo Assmann, affirms that "the road is cut off to any kind of reflection which represents taking refuge in a verbal world dressed up is ontological density, which reflects man's incapacity to deal with the true problems". Oppression-liberation, Desafio a los Cristianos (Montevideo: Tierra Nueva, 1971), p. 87.

[26] Gutiérrez "two Theological Perspectives" p. 247. "This Theology" Gutierrez remarks, echoing Marx's eleventh thesis against Feuerback ("These on Feuerback" in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, On Religion/New York: Schochen, 1964, p.72), "does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be a part of the process through which it is transformed (A Theology, p. 15). Space does not allow a careful analysis of liberation theology's emphasis on the priority of praxis and the dangers involved in it. I have dealt with this question on my doctoral dissertation (See A. Rodor, The Concept of the Poor in the Context of the Ecclesiology of Liberation Theology, /Th. D Dissertation: Andrews University, Berrien Spring, Mi. 1986), pp. 257-265).

[27] Gutiérrez, A Theology, p.11

It should be noted, however, that on the basis of the very nature of Christian theology, however, the liberationist contention for the priority of revolutionary praxis over theory must be seriously challenged as ultimately subversive to the identity of theological content and threatening to the fundamental structure of the Christian faith. God´s revelation, accessible through the medium of a particular kind of theory, i.e the written word of Scriptures, not only has primacy over human praxis, but also determines and judges what correct praxis is.[28]

c) The View From Below

Despite the decisive significance of liberation methodological reversal, making praxis the center of gravity around which theological work rotates, liberation theologians perceive that "it is not enough to say that praxis is the first act".[29] Actually the real hermeneutical-methodological *novum* of liberation theology does not come from the emphasis that theology must arise from praxis (other contemporary European theologians also advocate the precedence of praxis over theory). Rather, it emerges in relation to the historical subject of this praxis. Gutiérrez insists, "it is not enough to know that praxis must precede reflection: we must also realize that the historical subject of that praxis is the poor... the people who have been excluded from the pages of history."[30]

At this point the poor are introduced into the theological arena an integral part of liberation methodology, note merely as the priviledeg starting point of the theological task, but as the hermeneutical key "to an understanding of the meaning of liberation and of the meaning of the revelation of a liberating God."[31] It is not surprising therefore that for Gutiérrez "without the poor as subject, theology degenerates into academic exercise"[32] or that without him (the poor)", as

[28] Furthermore, liberation theology's too narrow and too restrictive understanding of orthopraxis should not obscure the pitfalls of pragmatism and functionalism. The biblical concept of "doing" as a presupposition of "knowing" hardly can be limited to concrete political liberation action. The question is not whether Christian theology should or should not endorse the notion or praxis, but who or what determines the meaning of the concept. The biblical gospel or an alien ideology? By stressing the dialectical unity of theory and praxis in the act of faith, liberation theologians have recovered a very important biblical insight. But, in their excessive enthusiasm about "doing the truth" in its societal form, they run the serious danger of confusing the totality of Christian practice with the praxis of their own culture, group and interests, losing sight of the comprehensive character of the "praxis" taught by God's word.

[29] Gutiérrez, The Power of the Poor (Maryknoll, NY: OrbisnBooks, 1983), p. 202

[30] Gutiérrez, Two Theological Perspective", p.245.

[31] Gutiérrez, The Power of the Poor, p. 200.

[32] Gutiérrez, "South American Liberation Theology", p. 116.

Argentinean theologian Henrique Dussel, considered the historian of the movement, puts it, "faith becomes ideology, mere doctrine, obscurity."[33]

For liberation theologians, history thus far, has been interpreted "from the standpoint of the 'winners' or rules, or upper classes."[34] Theology itself has been "written by white, Western bourgeois hands."[35] Liberation theology sees as its primary task to reinterpret history and theology to **redo**, i.e., from the opposite viewpoint, from the perspective of the poor. "Our first job today", Gutiérrez writes, "is to reread history in terms of the poor, the humiliated and rejected of society." Elsewhere he writes, "we want to do theology from the 'other' from a point outside of ourselves."[36]

Theological reflection from the perspective of the poor, however, does not occur in a *vacuum*. Convinced that there is a basic blockage of the word of God-now being held in an in-system captivity as a result of many falsifying mediations in the past, particularly the intrasytematic inclusion of biblical interpretation within the capitalist system-liberation theologians contend that God´s summons is not directly accessible. The word of God is mediated today trough the cry of the poor.[37] For liberation theologians God is not know in the midst of ontological reflection but in the midst of the poor and their liberating praxis. If for R. Niebuhr revelation is unintelligible from the spectator´s viewpoint,[38] Gutiérrez goes one step further, insisting that only someone adopting the *poverty perspective*, i.e, the perspective of the oppressed engaged in the struggle for liberation can hear God´s word. Thus it seems clear that theology, as proposed by the Latin American liberationists, is dependent not only upon a theological commitment to the poor but also upon a theological commitment to the poor but also upon a political commitment to their struggle. With this notion in mind, it becomes readily apparent what is demanded

[33] Enrique Dussel, Domination-Liberation: A new Approach, The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974) p. 51, note, 26.
[34] Gutiérrez, "South American Liberation Theology," p. 117.
[35] Leonardo Boff, Teologia do Cativeiro e da Libertação, (Lisbon: Multinova, 1976), p. 65. This change implies that theology and church have been class-oriented, defending the interests of some segments of society (the "haves") to the disadvantage of others (the "have-nots").
[36] Gutierrez, A Theology, p. 331. Quoting a compelling text of Bonhoeffer, he summarizes the decision of liberation theology to work from the viewpoint of the poor: "We have learned to see the great events of the history of the world from beneath-from the viewpoint of the useless, the suspect, the abused, the powerless, the oppressed, the despised. In a word, from the viewpoint of the suffering". Gutierrez, The Power of Poor, p. 203; cf. D. Bonhoeffer, Letter and Papers from Prison, p. 17.
[37] See Gutiérrez, Faith and Freedom, Horiz 2 (1979), pp. 32,38.
[38] Cf. William C. Sphon, What are they Saying about Scripture and Ethics? (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), p. 55.

from the church regarding to the nature of its "option for the poor". To this we will return latter.

The Role of Marxism in Liberation Theology

Before turning attention to the specifics of our discussion, one more question needs some consideration: the role of Marxism in liberation theology.[39] First of all we should keep in mind that one detects a discernable difference among liberation theologians regarding the level of approaching of Marxism. Despite a widespread negative impression, liberation theologians are not doctrinaire Marxists, or uncritical in their adoption of Marxism categories even though their formulations are not free from ambiguities in this regard.[40] Furthermore, more recent liberationist writings, as Paul E. Sigmund observes, "there is a more nuanced attitude toward Marxism."[41]

As indicated earlier, Western theology has fairly consistently cast theology into philosophical molds. Under the influence of Greek rationalism, theologians have sought to relate faith to contemporary though patterns rather than to socio-economic and political problems, tending therefore to overlook concrete issues faced by larger segments of society in daily life. At this point, since the poor are conditioned by the social rather than by the philosophical-Latin American liberation

[39] The role of Marxism in liberation theology, must be candidly understood. Some critics have implied that liberation theology and Marxism are indistinguishable, but this is hardly accurate. Some exaggerations such as that of the prestigious Colin Brown's Dictionary of the New Testament Theology, 3 Vols. (Grand Rapids MI.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), which treats Latin American liberation theology under the heading "War" (3:972-976), are not only unfair but misleading as well.

[40] See J. Miguel Bonino, Christian and Marxists. The Mutual Challenge to Revolution (Grand Rapids, MI.: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1979); J. Emmette Wier, "Liberation Theology, Marxist or Christian?" ExposT 90 (1978) :260-275; Juan L. Segundo, Liberation Theology (Naryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 1976); R. MacAffe Brown argues that Marxism may be considered from three different perspectives: first, as a world-view, an all-encompassing framework including historical materialism, the inevitability of class struggle, economic determinism, strong critique to religion, etc.: second not so much a totalworld- view but as a plan for political action; and third, chiefly as an instrument of social analysis (Theology in a New Key, /Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978/, p. 66). In this context, Brown, underlines that the majority of liberation theologians adopt Marxism only as an instrument of social analysis; See also Willian C. Sphon, What are they Saying About Scriptureand Ethics? (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).
While Brown tend to separate "class struggle" from "social analysis" giving the impression that the former is not implied in the latter, less sympathetically Stephen Neil criticizes liberation theologians for accepting the Marxist analysis of society with its underlying notion of class struggle in toto, "hook, line and sinker"(Salvation Tomorrow / Nashville: Abingdon, 1976/, p. 82). For an enlightening discussion of liberation appropriation of Marxist constructs, see Joseph Laishle, "Theology Trends: The Theology of Liberation", The Way 17 (1977):217-228; 301-311. The pressing question posed to liberation theology, however, is whether it can use Marxism as a tool of sociological analysis without at the same time adopting its concept of life, anthropology, view of history and political solution (see below).

[41] Sigmund, Liberation Theology at the Crossroads, p. 177.

theology breaks with former theologies.[42] Contrary to traditional philosophical approaches to reality, liberation theologians, led by the inescapable presence of overwhelming poverty in their continent, have chosen the social sciences as patterns for dialogue, endorsing the Marxist analysis of the Latin American situation in terms of the domination theory and class struggle. The Marxist theme of the dialectic of history with its implicit notion that society is sharply divided into two groups the oppressors and the oppressed,[43] appears, in fact to supply an effective method for producing liberation in a situation which hitherto had managed to neutralize all progressive forces for change.

To prevent the spiritualization of the terms poor and poverty, so common in traditional church exegesis, and the deflection of the liberation movement, the identity of the poor and the character of their situation, therefore, is determined scientifically by Marxist analysis of the Latin American economic and political context. It is the "class struggle", the cornerstone of the Marxist vision of history, that the situation is defined. As Gutiérrez points out, "liberation theology categorizes people not as believers and unbelievers but as oppressors or oppressed".[44]

This vision of the world where the Latin American church finds itself, naturally, as one might expect, puts on the church´s agenda a radical view of its

[42] According to Philip Berryman, in Latin America it "is the reality itself which impels Christian to go back to Marx" ("Latin American Liberation Theology", ThS (1973):374. Penny Lernoux also notes that "Marx helped Latin Americans to clarify their situation of neocolonial dependence on capitalism", particularly through the "Knowledge of its reality which is the first step in the transformation of society" ("The Long Path to Puebla" in Puebla and Beyond, eds. John Eagleson and Philip Schraper / MaryKnoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 1979/, p. 10). J. Andrew Kirk enumerates the reasons why Marxism so forcefully attracts Latin American liberation theologians. (Liberation theology / Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979/, pp. 160-162). Significantly, it should be noted that while in Europe the relation between Christianity and Marxism is conceived in terms of "cooperation" or more precisely, as Fidel Castro described it, an "alianza estrategica" (a "strategic alliance"). Cf. Hugo Assmann, ed., Habla Fidel Castro sobre los cristianos revolucionarios/ Montivideo: Tierra Nueva, 1972, p. 49.

[43] According to Marxism, the history of humanity demonstrates a coherent pattern and development. All relationships between people are founded on the relationships of the means of production (Marx, The 1844 Manuscripts cf. B. Ollmann, Alienation: Marx's Critique of Man in Capitalist Society / Cambridge: University Press, 1977/, chapts. 2 and 3); and these relationships, due to the monetary system of exchange in society, have given rise to the class struggle. For Marx "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto / New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964/, pp. 2, 57); for a summary seen Hans-Lutz Poetsch, Marxism & Christianity / St. Louis, MO.: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), pp. 28-44). Society, thus, consists of two groups: the oppressors and the oppressed. Only two classes stand against each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat (The Communist Manifesto. P. 61).

[44] Gutiérrez, South American Liberation Theology, p. 110.

participation in the Mission Dei. The church must move out from ghetto place in culture, and participate in the revolutionary process, an involvement which bears the "Marxist sense of participation in the class struggle to bring about the creation of a new society".[45] Since the existence of the poor as demonstrated by social analysis, "is not politically neutral or ethically innocent,"[46] an effective option for the poor demands not mere lyrical and vague appeals in defense of "human dignity", or even generous actions, but *political charity*, i.e. a decisive political stance against the deep roots of poverty, which presents itself in flat contradiction to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As Gutiérrez sees it, Christian love and solidarity with the oppressed, to be relevant, must manifest itself in class option.[47] Such a commitment, to be sure, is bound to cause division in the church and poses a problem for its unity as well is for the universality of Christian love.[48] Yet, though the church must work for reconciliation, it is contended, there can be no reconciliation until the walls of class, race, and culture that divide the Latin American society as well as the church constituency are destroyed.

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[45] Stephen C. Knapp, A Preliminary Dialog with Gutiérrez Theology of Liberation, Sojournes (September 1976), p. 17.

[46] Gutierrez, "Liberation Theology and proclamation", p. 59; "Faith and Freedom: Solidarity with the Alienated and Confidence in the Future", Horiz 2 (1976), p. 34. Poverty in Latin America, liberation theologians perceive, is not fatality, or "God's will", but the result of the massive domination of North American capitalism in "Liberation Theology and the Multinationals", ThT 41 (1984): 51-60.. American Roman Catholic scholar Michael Novak in his The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism (New York: Smon & Schuster, 1982), for a summary see Novak's "A Theology of Development for Latin America", in R. Nash, ed,. Liberation Theology (Milford, MI.: Mott Media, 1984), pp. 2-44; also Sigmund, Liberation Theology at the Crossroads, pp. 143-150. Although liberation theologians still blame most of Latin America's ills on "dependent capitalism", Sigmund observes a change regarding to this question (pp. 178-179).

[47] Gutierrez, A Theology, p. 273. Liberation theologians see no choice for the church, "when the church rejects the class struggle, it is objectively operating as a part of the prevailing system.". (ibid., 275). Sigmund points out that there has been an altered attitude in liberationist thought toward the possibility and desirability of violence in the pursuit of social justice (Liberation Theology at the Crossroads, p. 177). It seems that one finds in liberation theology today "a recognition that the poor are not going to be liberated by cataclysmic political transformation, but by organizational and personal activities in Base Communities" (ibid.).

[48] Gutierrez does not ignore this danger (A Theology, p. 273). In his view, however, the division already exists within the church (South American Theology", pp. 11011-9). Furthermore, while for liberation theologians love is universal it is not possible to love everyone in the same way: "We love the oppressors by liberating them from their misery, and the oppressors by liberating them from their sin… (thus) the liberation of the rich and the liberation of the poor are realized at the same time" (Miguez Bonino, Doing theology, p. 122; Gutierrez, A Theology, p. 285, note 56). For Gutierrez the question is not "having not enemies, but rather of not excluding them from our love". "The struggle, therefore, "must be a real and effective combat, not hate" (A Theology, p. 276). The question to be asked, however, is whether it is realistic to envision class struggle without exacerbation of hate, violence, resentment and rivalries which are precisely the driving force of the oppressed/oppressor polarization.

Heavily influenced by their study of Marx,[49] liberation theologians do not limit their appropriation of Marx´s insights to their concept of praxis as the starting point for theological reflection or to their vision of society. Without exaggeration, Gerard Berghoef and Lester Dekoster, single out four central elements Marxism in the writings of liberation theologians: a) the class struggle, b) the rejection of private ownership of the means of production, c) the promotion of evolution, and d) the belief in redemption though the development of "the new man."[50] In fact, one finds a noticeable convergence between some views sustained by liberation theology and Marxism though. Marxism anthropology and eschatology, particularly expressed in the notion of the proletariat as the class with a special destiny in history, seems evident in liberation theologians. [51]

[49] Liberation theology Jose P. Miranda seems to speak for all when he affirms that "we are all riding on Marx's shoulders". Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Book, 1974), p. xiii.

[50] These are identified by Gerard Bergohoef and Lester Dekoster A "the four pillars of liberation theology", Liberation Theology, Tgw Church's Future Shock (Grand Rapids, MI." Christian Liberty Press, 1984), p. 180. J. Andrews Kirk also challenges liberation theology claim of its use of Marxism only as a "tool of analysis". Liberation Theology, An Evangelical View from the Third World (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1979), p. 164 ff.

[51] One finds a clear convergence between the role Marx assigned to the proletarian masses and the mission liberation theologians attribute to the poor. In both the resolution of history and the process through which the here-and-now justice is achieved lie in the struggle of the oppressed. Marxist's utopianism and idealistic view of human nature is reflected in the liberationist optimistic view of the role of the poor as the creators of justice in the historical process of change. Gutierrez eschatology, for example, lies in the work of the materially poor, "The future of history", he affirms, "belongs to the poor and exploited. True liberation will be the work of the oppressed themselves" (A Theology, p. 208). They (the poor) are the force to transform history (Gutierrez "The Irruption of the Poor", p. 120), "the true liberators and the artisans of the new humanity" (Gutierrez, "South American Theology", pp. 110-111) "The salvation of humanity passes thought them", he goes on to affirm. "They are the bearers of the meaning of history", (A Theology, p. 203). In all this, liberation theologians echoe Marx's affirmation in the Communist Manifesto that the proletariat "is the class that holds the future in its hands" (cf. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Words / New York: International Publishers, 1968/ p. 44) Marx believed with remarkable faith that the proletariat are the only people who can achieve changes. They would destroy the present oppressive type of society eliminating alienation by making men for the first time master of their destiny. They need only to be taught the way to change things ant they will hasten the inevitable bread-down of the capitalist system of private property. Liberation theologians seem to follow this belief, insisting that the Christian identification with the calls that is destined to be the whole could help toward social unity (cf. Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 122: Gutierrez, pp. 113-114). See Rodor's Concept of the Poor, pp. 161-168; 203ff; 281ff). Its hold be noted, however, that there is no factual basis for the Marxist view of history as an inescapable march toward the liberation of the proletariat and a classless society. Furthermore, there is in liberation theologians treatment of the kingdom an unsolved ambiguity. On the one hand attempting to protect man's autonomy and free creativity, they suggest that the kingdom is a work of man (see Gutierrez, A Theology, p. 122). On the other hand, however, to protect God's sovereignty they underline that the kingdom is above all a gift (ibid., p. 177). As Dale Vree observes, liberation theologians succeed in truncating man's autonomy (because man cannot finish what he has started), and compromising God's omnipotence (because God cannot start what he alone can finish; "Christian Marxists", p. 42).

Furthermore, not only does liberation theologians tend to define the poor in terms of Marxism categories, but ironically, in attempting to avoid the traditional "romantic" interpretation of the poor, it also ends up adopting Marxism "romantic" and often dogmatic views about the *sinless proletariat*. Divide society sharply between oppressed and oppressors, the impression is given that the former are the good guys and the latter the bad guys, with the underlying idea that only the rich and their capitalist structure are capable of evil[52] and suggesting that, as John Mckenzie notes in his review of Miranda´s Marx and the Bible, "the is nothing wrong with the poor, except that they are poor.[53]

This notion, which tend to equate the oppressors with sin, and the oppressed with virtue, seems to be a new formulation of the *saints-and-sinners* dialectic of Christianity, is too often a oversimplified division between good and evil. It fundamentally overlooks the fact that sin involves more than the sin of "oppressive structures." Though not completely wrong, this view is superficial. Liberation theologians seem to pay insufficient attention to the basic failure of Marx to understand the true nature of man´s alienation: rebellion against God as reveled and exposed in biblical revelation.

Marxist insights are also an integral part of the hermeneutic method of liberation theology, marked by selectiveness and radicalization. Coming to the Bible after their commitment to Marxism class analysis of society, held as the indispensable *pre-understanding* or Scripture, they tend to put God´s word in a hermeneutical strait-jacket. Thus doing, liberation theologians run the risk, on the one hand, of creating a neo-Marcionite approach to Scripture by which only certain parts are selected as an acceptable, authentic witness to God´s revelation today. On the other hand, there is also the risk of a neo-Alexandrine hermeneutical practice, which uses the text in a basically uncontrolled paradigmatic, figurative and inspirational fashion. It both cases, the impression is given that the Bible is being used to sustain positions developed outsides its orbit.[54]

As indicated before, liberation theologians are not uncritical in their appropriation of Marxism. However, even taking into consideration their serious

[52] H. Lepargneur refers to this tendency as "the Manichaeism of liberation theology" (Theologies de la liberation et théologietout court" Nouvelle Revue Théologique 98/1976/:165-168)., ie., all evil comes from the "other", their oppressor.

[53] McKenzie, Book Review: Marx and the Bible, JBL (1976), p. 280.

[54] A clear example of liberationist hermeneutical dogmatism and selectiveness can be seen in their interpretation of the historical Exodus. For a good analysis, see Atilio R. Dupertuis, Liberation Theology's Use of the Exodus as a Soteriological Model (Th. D Dissertation: Andrew University, Berrien Spring, MI.: 1981).

effort to isolate Marxism as an instrumental tool of social analysis from Marxism as a systemic whole, one wonders whether it is possible to separate parts of this epistemologically unique complex. Not surprisingly Vatican pronouncements on liberation theology have warned against the danger of "embracing certain elements of Marxism analysis without taking due account to their relation with its ideology."[55] Furthermore, can an ideology that traces the origins of all alienation to class struggles be made an autonomous guide for the church´s commitment? Giving to Marxism an almost "religious" importance, liberation theologians too readily accept the definition of the human condition and possibilities as offered by a class-oriented ideology which is hardy in agreement with either the historical facts or biblical revelation.

Liberation Theology and the Church

Although black and feminist theologies have also a functional vision of the church, it appears that such a concept is not explicitly articulated in a clear ecclesiology.[56] Latin American liberation theologians, however have devoted thought and effort to set forth in somewhat precise terms their notion of the Christian community.

Faithful to its theological methodology, from within active commitment to praxis[57] liberationists have attempts to redefine the understanding of the church, to overcome the traditional ecclesiocentric and conservative view of the church´s presence in the continent. Focusing on the key role it must carry in its participation in the struggle for liberation and justice, the theologians of liberation demand a complete uncentering of the church and outline a radical ecclesiology in stark contrast to the one which has been operative in the past.

A New Ecclesiological Perspective

[55] Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation, p. 18.

[56] Avery Dulles, for example, in his Models of the Church hardly mentions either black or feminist theologies.

[57] For Liberation theologians the church's pastoral action is not arrived at as a conclusion from theologies premises. Theology does not lead to pastoral activity, but is, rather reflection on it. See Gutierrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation", ThS 31 (1971): 144-145. For this reason, Gutierrez insists that if the church whishes to deal with the real question of the modern world and to attempt to respond to them, it must open a new chapter of theological-pastoral epistemology. Thus, "instead of using only revelation and tradition as starting point …it must start with facts and questions derived from the world and from history" (A Theology, p. 12).

To give theological interpretation to the engagement of the church in behalf of the poor and their cause, liberation theology seeks first to bridge the huge gap between the normal life of faith and the revolutionary commitment advocated by its proponents. Gutiérrez, in particular, addresses himself to the question of relationship between the church´s mission and social praxis, between salvation and the process of liberation. He stars his vision of the church with the fundamental affirmation that all ecclesiology must be rooted in a proper understanding of salvation. The church´s traditional notion of salvation-which , tainted with near-exclusively other-wordly connotation, became a sort of flight from reality[58] - is radically challenged by liberation theology´s rejection of any split between the spiritual and the material.[59]

For liberation theology, salvation is no longer a quantitative and extensive issue (i.e., a matter of how many will be saved, and the role which the church plays in this process), but rather a qualitative and intensive one (i.e., a matter of how to exercise the saving grace that has been made extensive to everyone in the Christ event). While the qualitative approach stresses the individual, ecclesiocentric and futuristic aspects of salvation, the qualitative, on the contrary, emphasizes its corporate, universal, and current dimensions. From this emerges the inevitable conclusion: stripped of the monopoly of the means of grace and redemption, the

[58] Under the influence of a dualistic Greek philosophy, the church traditionally perceived reality in two-storied dimensions, in two separate spheres. On the one hand, the non-historical universe, the superior and exalted realm of timeless truth, spirit, soul, and supernatural salvation, all beyond the human world of history. On the other, the inferior and mundane sphere, usually associated with the evil realm of matter, body and nature. The option between the two realities, viewed irreconcilable, seemed clear. The church became overconcerned with the supernatural realm, displaying a decided lack of interest in the temporal, empirical side of human life, which one only feel outside of its interest but was also considered religiously and morally irrelevant.
As a significant corrective to this spiritualizing bias, liberation theology has exposed the infiltration of Platonic dualism into traditional Western theology which has made the gospel and salvation overly individualistic and other-wordly. Gutierrez, as liberation theologians in general, advocates a broader view of salvation, one "which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ" (A theology, p. 153). However, liberation theology swings the pendulum too far toward the political sphere of life. See Carl E. Braaten, "The Christian Doctrine of Salvation", Interp (1981): 127-130: also Orlando Costas, Christ Outside the Gate (Marykoll, NY.: Books, 1982). Pp. 139-130.

[59] Understood as an "intra-historical reality", is contended, salvation can no longer refer to another realm separate and distinct form the realm of material conditions of human life. Salvation, liberation theologians insist, must be oriented to the transformation of human reality in history, thus it begins in the construction of the "historical project". Gutierrez, "Freedom and Salvation", 86. Hugo Assmann, Theology for a Nomad Church (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 1976), p. 67. Since the liberation which Christ offers is universal and integral, it is contended, embracing all men and the whole men, it is not without political consequences: therefore, it is not limited to a purely "spiritual plane".

church must cease "considering itself as the exclusive place of salvation, and orient itself toward a new and radical service to mankind."[60]

Denying any claim of ecclesial universality base on spatial notions, liberation theologians place the question into a new context. The church´s universal significance must be understood dynamically, in terms of vocation and special task, doing the works of love in the world, being in the service of men, and making manifest to the rest of humanity with whom it makes its way the message of God´s plan for the world.

The church is, thus, essentially a visible sign and sacrament[61] of liberation of men and history. As such it does not exist for itself. It has no meaning in itself except in the measure in which it is able to signify the reality in function of which its exists. What does this understanding of the church mean for the ecclesial community in a context where it faces struggles for liberation and a just society? It means that the church should find its mission in signifying the reality of salvation, in becoming a visible sign of the presence of the Lord in the effort to break with an unjust social order, to liberate and humanize the oppressed.

The Church and the World

For liberation theologians the traditional notion expressed by the formula "the church and the world" has functioned as a dualism which has served to cut the church off from history: supernatural and natural, salvation history and secular history, the sacred and the profane. Thus, rejecting traditional answers to the question of relationship between the church and the world, liberation theologians stress that this bifurcation becomes an "outworn phrase that should be replaced by 'church in the world' or 'church of the world'.[62]

For Gutiérrez, the church is not a *non world* or an "order apart", the order of salvation and holiness in the world. Rather the church "must turn to the world, in which Christ and his Spirit are present and active; the church must allow itself to

[60] Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 261.

[61] Ibid., p. 261. Second Vatican Council had already conceived the church as the sacrament of salvation (Lumen Gentium, nos. 1, 48; Gaudium et Spes, no. 45). This notion, considered the most important milestone of Vatican II in the field of dogmatic theology (see K. Rahner, The Christian of the future / Montreal: Pam Publishers, 1964/, p. 82). However, did not win the acceptance of all theologians for it was feared that it would lead to "reducing ecclesiology to the study of outward elements" (Jerome Hamer, The Church Is a Communion / New York: Sheed and Ward/, 1964), p. 88).

[62] Assmann, Practical Theology of Liberation (London: Search Press, 1975), p. 91, / This understanding puts theology on the track of a new way of conceiving the relation between the historical church and the world.

be inhabited and evangelized by the world... the theology of the church in the world should be complemented by a theology of the world in the church."[63] Since for liberation theology, history is one[64] "the frontiers between the life of faith and temporal works, between church and world, become more fluid in both directions. To participate in the process of liberation is already in a certain sense, a salvific work."[65]

In short, consistent with the historical orientation which pervades their writings, liberation theologians stress that there is a solidarity of the church with the world. The salvation to which the church witness is intimately related to the liberation of man on the political level. The mission of the church, therefore, is determined more by the political context of the society in which it exists than by intra-ecclesiastical concerns. Living in a world of social revolution, the identity of the church, its ecclesial structures and mission as well as its approach to society, must be defined in relation to historical reality. Where does all this leave the church's transcendence? There is no question that for theologians of liberation it is only becoming immanent to the world that the church will really witness to its transcendence; conversely, failure at immanence only reveals an inappropriate transcendence.

The Church of the Poor

Perhaps the strongest and most shocking feature of recent developments in Latin America Roman Catholicism is the assertion that the church, during most of its life in the continent, was transformed into a church of the rich, far removed from the world of the poor who make up the majority of the population of Latin America. Belonging to the same criticism, but presenting further radical overtones is the affirmation that having its sympathies linked with a thin, excessively wealthy upper stratum, the Latin American Roman Catholic Church has sanctioned the use of the gospel for satisfying the religious needs of the masses, thus definitely

[63] Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 260-261.

[64] Gutierrez, ibid., pp. 53-167. Arguing from a theological standpoint which attempts to eliminate all dualism, liberation theology affirms that all history is unified. There is no separate salvation history. All history must be understood as a general history of salvation. This monistic vision of history has attracted strong criticism. See B. Kloppenburg, The People ´s church (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974), pp. 100-105; also Peter Wagner, Latin American Theology: Radical or Evangelical? (Grand Rapids, MI.: Wm. B. Eeerdmans, 1970), p. 42. If everything is salvation history, as liberation theologians claim, one its tempted to agree with Morris Inch's remark that "then, nothing is salvation history, and man as a whole remains alienated from God" (Doing Theology Across Culture, /Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), p. 69).

[65] Gutiérrez, ibid., p. 72.

contributing to sacramentalize and secure social order which is set up an dominated by a few.[66]

In reaction to this situation, from the bulk of the writings of liberation theologians emerges an overwhelming emphasis on the need for the church to shift sides and to converts itself to another world, i.e, the world of the poor and oppressed. Convinced of the direct and explicit socio-cultural relevance of the church for society in Latin America, liberation theologians in opposition to a disincarnate and purely *religious image* of the church have strongly defended an ecclesiological vision capable of elisting the weight of the church's influence in hastening the needed social transformation.

For the church to turn in on itself, to fail to place itself squarely with the poor within the revolutionary process of liberation, would be its greatest omission. In fact, as argued, "not to exercise this influence in favor of the oppressed is really to exercise it against them."[67]

Reflecting its new-found awareness, the church must side with those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and structures. To be true to its vocation, it must make its presence felt in the midst of a world of suffering, by "proclaiming the good news the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and joy to the afflicted."

Coherent with this emphasis, there is in the ecclesiological formulation of the theologians of liberation, as already hinted, a theology primacy of human liberation over the *intra-church* interests. The stress falls on the priority of the anthropological element over the ecclesiological. The oppressed and their struggle, thus, as suggested earlier, are the force that determines not only the self-understanding of the church and the content of its agenda, but also the church´s approach to socio-economic realities. At this juncture it seems inescapable that

[66] Throughout the history of the continent, conservative political forces have used the Roman Catholic Church in particular and the role of religion, in general, as moral stabilizing forces, the guardians of traditional values and as a means of preserving "law" and "order", which generally meant the "law" and "order" of the oppressors (see O. Costas, Theology of the Crossroads/ Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1976/, p. 81). Religion has been misused to sacramentalize the status quo and to interpret backward political policies as the "will of God". S. Galilea, "Pastoral popular, liberación y política", in Pastoral Popular y Liberación en America Latina, coleción IPLA 14 (Quito: Dept. Pastoral CELAM 1972), p. 29.

[67] Gutierrez, A Theology, p. 139. The image of the church which does not intervene in the temporal order came to be seen as an idealistic abstraction. For liberation theology, the church's position is never neutral; any "claim to noninvolvement in politics … is nothing but a subterfuge to keep things as they are" (Gutierrez, ibid., p. 256). Therefore, now that the poor and exploited classes are making their voices heard within the church, to return to its "purely religious function" would mean to "legitimize the status quo" (pp. 272-273).

liberation theology has essentially shifted the question of the church from: **"what is the church?"** to primarily, **"why the church?"**

Liberation theologians not only discuss in their vision what the church is or why it exists, but also point out **where** it is to be found. The church must not merely be **for** the poor, but above all it must be the church **of** the poor. As Gutiérrez contends, to be "faithful to the God of Jesus Christ, it (the church) has to rethink itself from below, from the position of the poor."[68]

At this point a revolutionary conception of the church began to surface in Latin America, the **Iglesia Popular**, the "people´s church", or the church that springs from the people.[69] Justifying this new ecclesiological vision, Gutiérrez remarks that "the gospel read from the point of view of the poor and the exploited, militancy in their struggles for freedom requires a people´s church: a church which arises from the people, a people who wrest the gospel from the hands of the great ones of this world and thus prevent it being used to justify a situation against the will of the liberating God."[70]

Convinced that it is not enough to be **for** the poor, a notion that, from the view of liberation theology, connotes paternalistic idea, liberation theologians underline that real, effective striving to eliminate poverty must be linked with the poverty perspective of those within the movement of the poor for liberation. To really incarnate and give content to its option for the poor, the church must convert itself to the world of the exploited and oppressed and become a church **of** the poor.

While the concept of the church for the poor is understood as a ethical question the vision of the church of the poor is a theologically justified on Christological/ontological grounds. If "a Christian understanding of the church begin with Christology,"[71] the church finds its true identity when it conforms to Jesus Christ, when it assumes his "spiritual structure, his way of being."[72] The

[68] Gutiérrez, "The poor in the Church," in The Poor and the Church. Norbert Greinacher and Alois Mülle, eds., (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), p. 13.

[69] In Latin America this vision actualizes itself through the Basic Ecclesial Communities, a widespread Catholic phenomenon regarded as an effective way to bring the ecclesia into close contact with the masses of the common people. This type of grass-roots church formation is in fact giving rise to a new model of the church. In the words of L. Boff, "a real ecclesiogenesis" has been taking place at the vertical ecclesial structures" (Boff "Theology Characteristics of a Grassroots Church", in The Challenge os Basic Christian Communities, Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, eds., / Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 1981/, p. 133. For expanded discussion and bibliography, A. Rodor, The Concept of the Poor, pp. 178-194.

[70] Gutiérrez, The Poor in the Church, p. 15.

[71] Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 210.

[72] Míguez Bonino, Fundamental Questions in Ecclesiology, in The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities, p.147.

church, therefore, must be present where Christ promised to be present. It must follow Jesus where he already preceded it, or in the famous ecclesiological formula of Ignatius of Antioch, **ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia**.[73]

Because of Jesus identification with the poor,[74] it is precisely among them that the church it is be found. The dominant element of the ecclesiology of

[73] The church, liberation theology contend, received from Jesus a pradigmatic image, drawn from his ministry to the poor, his solidarity with them, his compassion for the multitudes, and his attacks on the mighty. All this, as Jon Sobrino argues is his The True Church and the Poor, makes the place where the poor stand normative for what the true church is and is to be (Sobrino, The True Church, / Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 194/, pp. 84-124). Hence the church must live a concrete life of identification with the poor and minister to their needs. Since Jesus identification with them, the poor are not merely recipients of Christian charity, or an external entity to which the church must be related in one way or another. They belong to the understanding of the very nature of the church and become an ecclesiological criterion, a test of authenticity. In Miguez Bonino's words, "the church which is not the church of the poor puts in serious jeopardy its churchly character" ("The Struggle of the Poor and the Church", The Ecumenical Review, 27 / 1975/:40). The church's identification with the poor, therefore, is not a matter of preference, but a choice that derives from its constitutive essence. In fact according to Chilean theologian Pablo Richard, "The church is either of the poor or it is not the church" ("The Latin American Church 1959-1978" CrossCur 28/1978/:36).

[74] Gutierrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation" p. 259. For most liberation theology this just order means an ideal socialist society, which will be in some fragmentary fashion the eschatological kingdom. Juan Luis Segundo leaves no doubt that the church has to decide in favor of socialism ("Capitalism-Socialism: A Theological Cruz", Conc 96 /1974/:105-233). For a critique of this notion, see Arthur F. McGovern, Marxism: An American Christian Perspective (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 1980), p. 201. More cautious, Gutierrez, except of this "politicing and conscientizing" idea of evangelization, gives no specifications as to how and when the church should involve itself. With the recent changes in the Soviet bloc and socialism in Europe, one may wonder where the new events leave liberation theology in relation to its idealization of socialism. Recently, an entire issue of Brazilian theological magazine Tempo e Presença, nº 252 (July-August 1990), published by progressive Roman Catholics, was devoted to this question. In the various articles it becomes clear that for liberation theologians what has fallen in Europe was only a kind of State Capitalism, or a distorted socialism. For some, the crisis of modern socialism has even a positive dimension, because it can bring about a better alternative. It should be remembered that from the beginning liberation theologians have argued that Latin American must find a model of socialist society according to its own characteristics and which will fit to its reality, without recurring to any foreign import. Although most liberation theologians continue identify themselves as socialists, significant change is noticeable in liberation theology's traditional infatuation with socialism. Hugo Assmann describes the initial capitalism-socialism dichotomous way of thinking as "an original sin of liberation theology the must be overcome" (cf. Sigmund, Liberation Theology at the Crossroads, p. 178). Another Brazilian liberation theology, J. B. Libanio, in a recent work even argues that "in place of socialism, liberation theology now speaks of an alternative to capitalism". Teologia da Libertação (São Paulo: Editorial Loyola, 1987), p. 27. There has been in the writings of liberation theologians, however, a disappointing paucity and vagueness when they discuss socialism. It seems that for them, socialism remains a utopian ideal of a cooperative equalitarian, non-exploitative social order – with details to be filled in later. But, as Sigmund observes, it was "the lack of a blueprint in Marx for the socialist society that was to follow the overthrow of capitalism that enabled Joseph Stalin to create-in history" (ibid., p. 178). Precisely the type of socialism liberation theologians argue is today in crisis. Leonardo Boff, "Implosão do Socialismo e Teologia da Libertação". Tempo e Presença, pp. 32-36; Frei Beto, "O Socialismo Morreu, Viva o Socialismo" ibid., pp. 17-20; also Argemiro Ferreira, "Nem fim do Socialismo e nem fim da História", ibid., pp. 14-16.

liberation which emerges from this notion is the understanding of the church fully committed to the concrete situation of the poor and oppressed. Since sin is "basically a social reality," salvation is located in the historical social realm. The church must abandon self-centered concerns and find its mission in the service of the oppressed, not ethically or paternalistically being "for the poor", but being essentially "of the poor" adopting their perspective and struggles. Distinction between the life of faith and temporal works must be abolished.

Without evasion, it is contended, the church must "participate actively in constructing a just order."[75] Its function, therefore, cannot be to implore the poor to resign themselves to the exploitation that causes them to suffer so grievously, or merely to advocate moderate reform. Responsive to God´s call, the church must live up its true vocation in at least three forms, namely, **celebration, denunciation and annunciation**.[76] With the joy, thought the Eucharist, it celebrates God´s salvific action of liberation and brotherhood.[77] The church is also bound to exercise a social critique a prophetic denunciation of every dehumanizing situation. In a more positive way, however, beyond criticism, it must announce the

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[75] Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 259-279. See Costas The Church and Its Mission: A Shatering Critique from the Third World (Wheaton: Thindale House, 1974), pp. 237-240), for a helpful discussion of these three levels of the church involvement.

[76] Gutiérrez, ibid., p. 262-265. Gutierrez conception of the Eucharistic is however, at least problematic. He sees the rise as a symbol of the human brotherhood, thus, he concludes, "Without a real commitment against exploitation and alienation and for a society of solidarity and justice, the Eucharistic celebration is an empty action" (ibid., p. 265). His insight is a valid one, but he provides no suggestion as to how the church might make its Eucharistic celebration a symbol of genuine unity in a radically divided world. He limits himself to affirm that "unity of the church is not truly achieved without the unity at the level o material possession will secure unity within the church? Shall the Christian celebration wait for the ideal world unity or should the dilemma be resolved by preventing the oppressors from participation among militants? Liberation theology's notion of church unity, reduced to a mere expression of human reality, is superficial and falls short to Paul's vision of the church, where in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there neither male nor female"(Gal 3:28).

[77] One of the central notions of liberation theology stresses that God, as a liberating God, unconditionally takes the side of the poor (Gutierrez, "Two Theological Perspectives", p. 247; for an expanded discussion, bibliography, see Rodor's The Concept of the Poor, pp. 214-252). Scripture text such as the exodus narrative Luke 4:18-21, and many others, are frequently used to validate this theological proposition. Over and over again we are told that the poor are God's favorites; the first ones to whom Jesus mission was directed. This identification becomes a kind of inspirational paradigm and gives justification for the theological and ethical stance of the church joining the poor (see above, note 74). The idea that God shows special concern for the defenseless in society is unquestionably rooted in rock-solid biblical ground. Yahweh's care and love for the poor and his revelation as a God who is the compassionate vindicator of the oppressed are recurring themes in both, Old and New Testaments. Difficulties, however, emerge with the ambiguities inherent in the liberationist Marxist-influenced formulation of the theological thesis and from the implications that liberation theologians draw from it. (see Rodor, pp. 326.ff).

good news of a new order. This leads to the concept of a **politicking evangelization**[78] of the poor. Deciding in favor of a given political system, i.e., socialism, the church must support the revolutionary changes that this new order demands. Committing itself to educate the poor regarding the true nature of their own misery, enlisting them in the struggles for justice and liberation.

Liberation Ecclesiology: An Evaluation

As indicated before, although this study places considerable emphasis on Latin America liberation theology, a movement that has taken place almost exclusively within the Roman Catholic Church, many the our remarks and the evaluation that now follows can rightly be applied to any theology which attempts to enlist the church´s weight on the side of a particular group or party, disregarding some fundamental notions about the Christian ecclesia.

What was said before takes us to a point where some conclusions must be drawn. Liberation theologians are justifiably critical of the church´s facile accommodation to the **status quo** in the Latin American society, where by the rich were confirmed in their riches and oppressive structures and poor consolated in their poverty and misery, and what is worst, all in the name of religion.[79]

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[78] Gutiérrez underlines that the gospel has "a politicizing function" (ibid., p. 269). Liberation theologians insist that the poor "being scarcely aware that they are men" (Gutierrez, "Liberation Theology and Proclamation", pp. 57-59), need to experience at the psychological level, an "interior liberation" (Gutierrez, A Theology, p. 91), which is a accomplished through the process of conscientization (i.e., an awakening of the critical consciousness which produces an experience of social discontent). For Miguez Bonino, "the mobilization for a serious and extended work of politization of the masses, helping them to become aware of the contradiction of the system under which they suffer" (Doing Theology, p. 141). It is precisely the "conscienticizing evangelization", which, to a great extent provides the rationale for the Basic Ecclesial Communities. Through this enlightenment the BECs trigger the process as responsible subjects, capable of forging a truly egalitarian fraternal and just society. It should be noted that this "rising of consciousness" moves beyond Marx's critique of religion. Contrary to Marxist conclusion that religion is only an alienating influence wholly at the service of the dominant classes, keeping the oppressed ignorant of their true reality and giving them false consolation for their present sufferings, liberation theologians are determined to refute such criticism by engaging Scripture and Christian symbols as liberating forces in the proletariat's struggle.

[79] Roman Catholic liberation theologians have strongly protested against their own church for largely neglecting the social demands of the gospel. Evangelical Christians can hardly in good conscience plead "innocent" to similar charge. Harvie Coon properly describe liberation theology as arising because of the "unpaid bills of the church" ("Theologies of Liberation: An Overview", in Tensions in Contemporary Theology, p. 131). There is a basic truth in Ronald Sider's affirmation that, by largely ignoring the centrality of the biblical teaching on concern for the poor and oppressed, "evangelical theology has been profoundly unorthodox" (Ronald Sider, "An Evangelical Theology of Liberation", in Perspectives on Evangelical Theology, Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry, eds., / Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980/. p. 314). Afraid of horizontalism, Evangelicals frequently take refuge in verticalism, but, as Wilhem A. Vissert Hooft puts it so well, "A Christianity which has lost its vertical dimensions has lost its

Liberation theologians Marxist-influenced view of society. However, determines their understanding of the church with grave implications. The church´s "option for the poor" as they so passionately emphasizes, tends to be expressed in terms of class struggle and the *church of the poor* is transformed into the church of one social class. One wonders, however if, liberation theology is not repeating the traditional mistake they accuse, merely rephrasing it in a new form. Instead of linking the church with the past regime it links the church with the new one, assuming that the error was to link the church with the wrong side (rich/oppressors), as over against questioning whether it should be linked with any regime. Past alliance of the church and the social structures of power is replaced by a new alliance with the poor,[80] and reliance on the ideologies of the left.[81] Liberation theology must be reminded that the one-sided alliance it recommends could not more be accepted by an adequate ecclesiology than the one-sided alliance it opposes.

As we have pointed out, liberation theology tends to idealize the poor. But, once admitted that a particular group is the bearer of the gospel and of the meaning of history, the group´s cause is absolutized and endorsed in God´s name and confused with God´s own cause. The concept that one class or group can represent the *mission Dei*, in opposition to the other which being evil needs to be overthrown is self-defeating. It ends up in merely reversing the roles of oppressor and oppressed, and ultimately reverts to an essentially pagan view of God as a tribal deity. This vision also runs the risks of creating a modern version of the exclusivist understanding of *extra-ecclesian nulla sallus*. Furthermore, if the church is identified with a political party, its role as moral critic on public issues, as liberation theologians demand, is in danger of being neutralized and its own religious integrity of being endangered.

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salt and is not only insipid in itself, but useless for the world. But a Christianity which would use the vertical preoccupation as a means to escape its responsibility for and in the common life of man is a denial of the incarnation of God's love for the world manifested in Christ". Cf. Sider, "Evangelism, Salvation and Social Justice" p. 6.

[80] The liberationist "option for the poor", tends to limit the universality of the church and compromise its offer of salvation to all in a way which transforms the ecclesia into a partisan political faction. As Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar notes, the church cannot "célébrer l'Eucharistie uniquement avec ceux que son matériellement pauvres, limiter son unité catholic au 'parti' des pauvres, autrement dit ne vouloir l'étendre à tous les hommes qu'aprés une 'lutte des classe' victorieuse". ("Historie du salut et théologie de la libéracion", NovTTh 99 /1977/: 529.

[81] As David J. Booch observes, "A theology of the status quo and a theology of revolution are in essence exactly the same. Each accepts a specific structure as normative manifestation of God's kingdom" ("The Church and the Liberation of People" Missionalia 6 /August 1977/:18). Unquestionably the church must take its stand on the side of the weak and powerless, but it cannot commit itself absolutely to any societal structure, whether it be the existing one or one hoped for. It cannot compromise its vision either for the oppressor of for the oppressed.

As Catholic theologian Avery Dulles puts it, "can the church be at home with a theology of conflict and class struggle rather than a theology reconciliation?"[82] Liberation theologians attempt to justify their vision of the church siding with the poor, by arguing that the "gospel is for the poor". However, can the gospel be legitimately used as a divisive element of humanity along the categorical lines of the world? Does not the gospel aim precisely at the abolition of all such cleavages? In its correct protest against the historical deviation from the gospel, which has caused the church to obscure the relationship between man´s spirit and his material situation trough a false pietism without roots neither in man´s nature nor his historicity, liberation theology swings from their other-wordliness to politization. From passivity to revolution, from rejection of the world to assimilation. The real revolutionary character of the church, however, is not to be found in activism, but in faithfulness to the divine calling, as a microcosm of what life can be under God´s rule. Because a more just order cannot be established with the strategies and weapons of the old age, the church confronts the world and temporal powers with the values of the new aeon. Therefore, contrary to liberation theologian´s notion, the church needs renewal, deep conversion, rather than mere shifting of class alliance.

The analysis of the liberationist ecclesiological thought reveals further difficulties. In their attempt to enlist the church as an instrument of change, liberation theologians tend to understand it in terms of the world and to judge its validity in terms of **effectiveness**[83] and social impact in the transformation of society. Within this functional vision of the church, the *ecclesia* is basically conceived as one more power block following all governing social organization.[84]

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[82] Avery Dulles, in Theology in the Americas, Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, eds. (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 1976), p. 95. Liberationist's vision of the church envolved in class struggle in favor of the oppressed retains the seeds of violence and crusade mentality. This observation, however, is made in deep sympathy towards liberation theologians concerns. Christians must recognize that the most violent people in society are often not those struggling for liberation, but rather those who dehumanize them and keep them in oppression; those who use their power to suppress change. Liberation theologians are correct in being suspicious of many calls to "nonviolence" among the oppressed while similar protest is not made against those who use "institutionalized violence", those who create and maintain oppressive and violent structures.

[83] Liberation theologians demand from the church effectiveness in terms of the world. However, if revolutionary effectiveness in terms of secular standards is the measure of the church's relevance, how shall we maintain a Christological focus, when Christ by the world's standards was ineffective? Stanley Hauwer was has pointedly observed that this may suggest that "the most effective politics cannot be open to Christian participation exactly because the means required for effective politics are inappropriate to the kind of kingdom we serve as Christians" ("The Politics of Clarity" Interpretation 31 /1977/: 254).

[84] This understanding, however, pays inadequate attention to the church's invisible and divine reality. Liberation theologians ten to minimize those realities in the church which reach beyond the limitations

Where them, one is tempted to ask, is the significance of the church and where does its essential nature lie? While on the one hand Gutiérrez, for example, insists that the church must be "seen in terms of the world,"[85] on the other hand he considers it as the sign of a reality beyond the grasp of the world.[86] But where does the validity of that sign rest? Is it in the fact that the world seems to appreciate now the effectiveness and utilitarian value of the church, or is this value intrinsic to the sign regardless of what any particular historical moment may think?[87]

Liberation theologians correctly call the church to take social reality seriously. Yet they assign to the church a role in society in such way that it discharges more it terms set by the world than those found in the gospel. According to Gutiérrez, the church-world frontiers are fluid[88] to the extent that many committed Christian-joining forces with various secular groups committed to the social revolution-make no distinction between working for the kingdom of God and working for the social revolution.[89] How far can the church be engaged in political activism and class struggle and still be faithful to its divine calling for a ministry of reconciliation?

Whereas must be fully aware of the dangerous tendency toward traditional theological dualism, liberation theology´s drift toward historical monism is not a

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of human institutions and accomplishment. Stressing the importance of the church's presence in the process of structural changes in Latin America, should not liberation theology give attention to the call to conversion and holiness that the church makes to men? Or the force of the church is to be found exclusively in sustaining the class struggle?

[85] Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 67.

[86] Ibid., pp. 262-265

[87] Going one step further, we must stress that if the sign is of intrinsic value, then the church hardly can be evaluated in terms of world's standards, and liberation theology faces here the challenge of an unresolved paradox. The meaning of a sing, is dependent on the belief that those who uphold the sign have placed on it, rather than on the value that outsiders may attribute to it. That being the case, while for the believers, the church may be a sign of salvation, for the world it may be only a sign of contradiction, as in the case of Jesus himself and the cross. Hence, how can the church be seen in "terms of the world", when the world naturally cannot discern the meaning in the reality that the church as a sign points to?

[88] Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 72

[89] From the New Testament, it is clear that final triumph over evil is not brought about by any human or political means. God's intervention in history, not human progress, is the ultimate resolution of the mystery of history. "Christian's responsibility for defeating evil", as Yoder says, "is to resist the temptation to meet it on its on terms. To crush the evil adversary is to be vanquished by him because it means accepting his standards" (John H. Yoder, Peace Without Eschatology, p. 111). To expect or demand from the church to join secular forces, in secular terms, order to create an economic or social system that will reflects the ethics of the kingdom, is to ask much more than the church can actually deliver, and it can lead only to disillusionment.

satisfactory exchange. Its propensity so syncretism and universalism is particularly distorting to the gospel. Obliterating the distinction between the church and the world, liberation theology ends up transforming the church into a political party among the others, attempting to say and do what other secular movements are saying and doing. Inasmuch as the church wants to be Christian, and not merely another "world-changing" emancipator agency, its practice must be dependent and determinate by God´s revelation and fall under the critical judgment of the word of God.

Liberation theologians attempt to pattern their ecclesiology after their concept of Jesus identification with the poor. Liberationist Christological formulation, however-which tends to transform Jesus primarily into a historical liberator in the economic and political sphere, proclaiming a gospel partisan to the materially poor-hardly finds much biblical support.[90] Furthermore, based on its understanding of the poor as identified in terms of Marxist class analysis, liberation theology seems to conceive the "church of the poor," as we have seen, as the church of a specific revolutionary class. In this case, the church´s option for the poor, is in fact an option for the proletariat, in terms of class struggle – those who conform to the theoretical exigencies of ideological demands. But this emphasis virtually eliminates the Christological basis liberation theologians want to give to their understanding of the church.

How shall we maintain the theological notion of **ubi Christus**, **ibi ecclesia** and at the same time tie the church to one social class? Are we supposed to assume that Jesus employed the same *scientific social analysis* that the theologians of liberation have adopted? Jesus "option for the needy," whoever they were.[91]

[90] The portrayal of Jesus ministry in the Synoptic Gospels touches often upon his fellowship with the lowly and the outcast. In fact in seems indisputable that Jesus teaching and deeds, fulfilling the Old Testament pronouncements concerning God's saving actions, were liberating and marked by an "option for the poor". In striking fashion Jesus seeks out the sick, the lowly, sinners, women, children, the despised, foreigners, the outcast and the poor. However, since the kingdom is universal, Jesus option for the poor does not constitute the founding of a party of the poor in opposition to the wealthy. The rich are not cursed but rather invited to conversion (Lk 18:18-22; 19:1-10), etc.). Furthermore, the fact that in Jesus time it was possible to be materially well-to-do and yet an outcast of society (as in the case of the tax collectors), must make one cautious about making too easy and exclusive an identification between "the poor" to whom Jesus was partisan with the economically deprived exclusively. Thus unless liberationist go beyond what Rosemary Ruether has called liberation theologian's "apocalyptic and sectarian model of the oppressor/oppressed" (Liberation Theology / New York: Paulist Press, 1973/, p. 13), they risk to reduce the church into another secular emancipator formation.

[91] An "option for the poor" Faithfull to Scripture, then, must spring from the gospel and not from sociopolitical pragmatism, ideological motivations or humanistic hopes for utopia. The Church must identify with the poor and oppressed because, as evident in God's eschatological act in Jesus Christ, this is the sign of the kingdom (Lk 4:18-21; 7:22). Because Jesus and his gospel took the side of the poor, his

Liberation theologians overstate their case when they seek to give an ontological basis to Jesus identification with the poor. This emphasis ultimately results on a questionable externalization in which the poor, based in their social condition, are automatically included in the church. Can we legitimately affirm that the poor and oppressed **qua** poor and oppressed are the "true church" as liberation theologians suggest? Or are they, because their external socio-economic condition, to be automatically transformed into the "People of God"? If the Bible suggests that God is in the side of the poor, it hardly means that the poor is automatically in the side of God.

Liberation theology has positively challenged the individualistic ethic of traditional Christianity. Correctly it exposes the traditional all-absorbing concentration of the spiritual and the beyond, and calls attention to the social implications of the gospel. Placing emphasis on the collective nature of sin and salvation, it trys to open the way for the church´s activity in the political sphere. Within this vision, however, salvation is temporalized and this-wordly bound to the extent that it is virtually equated with socio-economic-political liberation.[92] This immanentist paradigm of salvation, though timely and appealing, is not sufficiently satisfactory. If the essence of the good news the church has to proclaim has to do with immediate material well-being, **hic et nunc**, how then shall we distinguish this intra-historical salvation from the solution offered by the politician, the social worker or the economist? By the same token the exclusion of the oppressor becomes a fatal consequence of this view of salvation, for, one could rightly ask, why should the gospel be addressed to those who already have what it offers?

Furthermore, does not liberation theology´s understanding of salvation a notion fundamental for its conception of the church radically sever the decisive

church cannot do less than that. But this option must be cleansend from all ambiguities. Jesus message and "option for the poor" transcends social classes and ideological alignments. Therefore "option for the poor" should not mean an the light of Scripture "option for the poor" means that the church must show particular concern for people alienated on all levels, avoiding, thus, ideological captivity. Furthermore, the church must transcend any idealization of the poor. It must recognize that the redemptive power of the poor, contrary to liberationist's emphasis, does not lies in their moral superiority, but in the fact that through them God signals the changes required for the welcoming of his kingdom. The poor are redemptive not because of their revolutionary potential, but in the sense that in them the whole society discovers the truth about itself. In them the human community confronts its own inhumanity.

[92] This does not mean that liberation theologians deny the reality of the other-wordly salvation-there are in their writings sufficient qualifying comments to suggest that this is not their intent-but clearly they do not deal with that aspect adequately. Costas remarks that although Gutierrez speaks of liberation as taking place in three levels: the political, the psychological and the religious or spiritual, and argues that the three are part of a single salvific process, he rarely goes beyond of the political in his exposition of liberation (Christ Outside the Gate, p. 129).

correlation between salvation and faith?[93] Articulated within the framework of what can be called a Marxist-Pelagian view of sin and ability, it is the oppressed, through their own initiative, who liberate themselves. Salvation becomes mainly a political act to secure a political utopia. As K. Braaten remarks, "The kind of salvation liberation theology lifts up generally is something Athens could in principle discover without the help of Jerusalem... something which will come about through human praxis without any necessary dependence on God´s act in Jesus Christ."[94] There is here the danger of utterly collapsing into the abandonment of the gospel to secularity and the political realm, offering to the oppressed a salvation that could be provided without reference to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. However, if it is true that for Marxism human life has needs and meaning solely in relation the historical process, according to biblical teaching, the meaning of human existence is not exclusively found in relation to the present, but also in the ultimate destiny of the individual. In Jesus words, "man does not live by bread alone" (Matt. 4:4).

Liberation theology has correctly insisted that the church must transcend the traditional paternalistic approach to the poor and start dealing with the deep causes of poverty. This, to a great extent means that the emphasis must be placed on political responsibility. One wonders however, whether it is justified to expect the church to operate directly in the political field with the efficacy and certitude demanded by the theologians of liberation. Furthermore one also wonders if it was not precisely the church´s historical involvement in the secular sphere and fighting with secular means, trying to do what secular powers should be doing, that answer for most of the distortions liberation theologians accuse.

While one way agree with liberation theology´s emphasis on the imperative of Christian presence in those efforts that aim at the ideals reflected in the kingdom of God, they must, at the same time, avoid the pitfalls of a secularized eschatology. Christians must remain aware that the most and best they can do is to witness to the kingdom, working as "light" and "salt" in the world. Without collapsing into apocalyptic pessimism and passivity, we should maintain that from a biblical perspective one can hardly see man´s political participation as "furthering," "building," or "realizing" the kingdom of God. The kingdom will come at God´s initiative in God´s own time and way. It "cannot be coerced into existence by any amount of social or political effort. It remains a gift of God and of the returning Lord to a world that cannot perfect itself by its own efforts."[95]

[93] Significantly, liberation theologians in general do not pay enough attention to the Pauline doctrine of justification and its place in a total biblical view of salvation.
[94] K. Braaten, The Christian doctrine of Salvation, pp. 127-128.
[95] Hans Urs von Balthasar, Current Trends in Catholic Theology, CommunioICAR (1978), pp 84-85

The praxis of the kingdom, as Schillebeeckx remarks, is expressed above all in metanoia.[96] In fact, the kingdom only exists on earth where men submit themselves to God´s rule, and this aim does not and cannot come within the scope of politicals struggle. It seems, unfortunately, that for liberation theologians the gospel values do not transform social reality. It is the oppressed, struggling to overcome alienation and oppression, that transforms himself and society. It this construction, however, there is little room, if any, for the parousia. The kingdom does not come from above, it proceeds from below, from the process of liberation which is, at least fragmentarily, the work of the oppressed. The kind of discontinuity implied by the radical breaking into history by Christ at his second coming – which is a main teaching of Scripture (Matt 16:27 ; Luke 9:26 ; John 14:3 ; 21:21-23 ; Acts 1:9-11; I Thess 4:16 ; Heb 9:27 ; Rev 1:7) – does not seem to function within liberation theology eschatological thought.

Finally, as much as Marxists, genuine Christians want the resolution of the problem of injustice and oppression, and the conflict between classes. The church, however, as the community of the new age, while awaiting for God´s final intervention in history, must take a different road. The church transcend human ideologies, not by imitating them, but by being itself. It is by living God´s will, by true sacrificial love and authentic Christian witness, that the church and the Christians challenges and subvert the world´s values and systems. Those who have themselves experienced God´s love towards their own poverty, weakness, and misery find in divine grace the moral identity for their compassionate service for the poor and needy. Probably this is why in the books of Acts, where Luke pictures the life of service of the early Christian church, the focus of attention is not the poor themselves, but those who are ministering to them (Acts 6:11ff, 9:36ff).

[96] Edward Schillebeeckx, The God of Jesus and the Jesus of God, in Schillebeeckx and Bas van Iersel, Jesus Christ and Human Freedom (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1974), p. 116.