

# Liberation Theology a Challenge

By RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE

What is the response of First World Churches to Third World theologies?

Or, more specifically, how do the Churches in North America answer the challenge of the theology of liberation developed principally in Latin America but utilized also in Asia and Africa in the past decade?

Those questions were raised during the mid-June Theology of the Americas conference and produced a surprisingly harmonious response from the 200 participating Catholic and Protestant theologians, educators and social activists. A conference statement called on Christians in this country to take the theology of liberation seriously in terms of working out more radical political alternatives to the prevailing western capitalist system and of confronting more deeply the challenge of the Gospel to struggle on the side of the poor and oppressed for social justice.

Although the theology of liberation developed in Latin America has had important Protestant support from such theologians as Jose Miguez Bonino and Rubem Alvez, it has been largely a Roman Catholic phenomenon. The Theology of the Americas response, however, was broadly ecumenical.

Among the Protestant theologians in the New York meeting were Robert McAfee Brown, James Cone, Beverly Harrison, Douglas Meeks and Robert Handy. Catholic theologians included Gustavo Gutierrez, Joseph Holland, Rosemary Reuther, Edward Farrell and Sergio Torres.

But the harmony of the conference statement is deceiving because the theology of liberation has met intense opposition both here and in the Third World, within the Churches as well as from the ruling classes threatened by its conclusions.

In Latin America, the controversy will come to a head in the third Council of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) meeting in Puebla, Mexico, in October. The working paper for that meeting, prepared under the supervision of CELAM general secretary Archbishop Alfonso Lopez Trujillo has been criticized by many theologians and even some South American national hierarchies as undermining the liberation thrust of the famous Medellin Documents, the Magna Carta of liberation theology produced by CELAM II in 1968.

The principal criticism leveled at the theology of liberation, according to Brazilian theologian Father Bonaventure Kloppenburg, is the "temptation to reduce theology to politics," or, more specifically, to reduce it to so-called "Christian socialism."

Father Kloppenburg warns, "The new stress placed on humanism and the priority given to the social and political dimension of the Gospel may well eliminate our concern for personal interior sanctification and the eternal salvation of individual souls."

The Franciscan theologian, who is a key advisor to Archbishop Lopez Trujillo adds, "If that were to happen, we would have lost the very essence of the Gospel."

But theologians of liberation point out that trying to keep the "essence of the Gospel" in the sanctuary and out of the world of politics is in itself a political decision which legitimizes the existing situation.

According to Father Gustavo Gutierrez, one of the principal architects of the theology of liberation: "Salvation is not something other-worldly, in regard to which the present life is merely a test."

"Liberation theology is not the twisting of Scripture to fit the theory of a political activist," the Peruvian theologian argues, "but the logical consequence of understanding the Messiah in the light of the Biblical titles applied to him — king, servant, prophet and son of man. Jesus himself was poor and identified himself with poor and margined people."

The context of the "social Gospel" debate is new but not the controversy itself. Many of the liberation theology concepts — and objection to unbridled capitalism — were expounded in the United States in the earlier part of this century, first by such Protestant theologians as Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden and later by Reinhold Niebuhr and Catholic social activists Father Edward McGlynn and Msgr. John A. Ryan.

Too often, however, the liberation theology debate is analyzed only in terms of political involvement. Such analysis overlooks the more penetrating questions raised by the Third World theologians with regard to the pastoral mission of the Church.

The Christian Churches are generally united when they proclaim the meaning of Christ's birth in Bethlehem: that on the first Christmas night divinity entered into human history. But the Churches are not united when they try to show the world how Christ continues to come in the mystery of the present moment and how he will come in majesty in the future.

Many Churches, especially in the Third World, see the fundamentalists' emphasis on Christ's imminent "second coming" as a distraction that leads a Christian to withdraw from the world rather than struggle to change it. Why struggle against an entrenched bureaucracy for human rights or even a better water supply, higher wages or a new school if Jesus is coming soon?

Less conservative theologians see the recognition of Christ's second coming as a non-problem because they maintain that if Christians do not see Christ coming today, they will never recognize Him on the last day.

And while the Churches largely agree that Christ continues to come daily through faith, through the power of the Holy Spirit in Sacred Scripture, in the sacraments and in the needs of humanity, there is, nonetheless, disagreement not only on where the emphasis should be placed but also on how this mysterious coming is to be presented to the non-believer.

Fundamentalist Churches take a hard line, insisting that salvation is only possible if a person accepts Christ and is "born again."

Most mainline Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches make leeway for salvation through God's mercy and individuals' "invincible ignorance," but still place major emphasis in their pastoral outreach mission on the biblical injunction, "Unless a person is born again (through faith in Christ), he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven."

The theologians of liberation, however, see this emphasis as a distortion of Gospel priorities. According to the teaching of this school, explained by the Uruguayan theologian Juan Luis Segundo in his five-volume A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity, salvation is possible for all persons — believer or not — by living a life of "effective love."

Father Segundo claims that the answer to salvation or condemnation is principally found in the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel. In Christ's familiar "sheep and goats" description of the final judgement, there are people on the scene who never saw him, people who passed through history before his coming, people who did not know him during their lifetimes, either personally or through a church.

Thus, the vast majority of human beings, according to Matthew's account, will be "surprised" by the verdict and ask the question Christ puts on their lips: Lord, when did we see you hungry and help you, or when did we pass you by?

According to Father Segundo, Christ's answer is that it matters little that they never recognized him. The merit of the things they did for other human beings, invested with love inspired by divine grace, reaches God and brings them eternal life.

Critics charge that the Segundo school reduces Christianity to insignificance. What, they ask, is the distinctive role of the Church? What distinguishes the Christian in this judgement portrait?

The Jesuit theologian answers simply, "The Christian will not be surprised."

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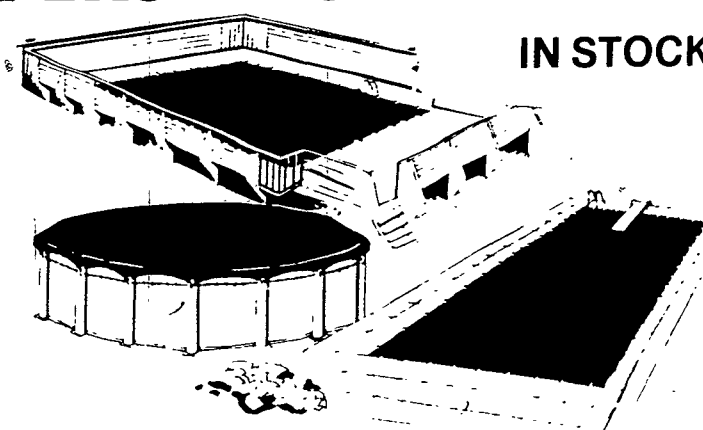
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