

**Divine and Human Freedom
in the Work of Gustavo Gutierrez**

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“Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.”

1 Peter 2:16¹

1. Introduction

The roots of what later became known as “liberation theology” are usually placed back to the 1960’s. At that time many Christians, especially in Latin America, started to feel that the dire circumstances in which a large part of the population lived needed more than just a conventional theological reflection.² Liberation theology was not born at theological faculties, but in grassroots Christian communities. That on one hand allowed “its great impact”,³ but at the same time led to great diversity that makes any systematization of liberation theology difficult. It is not only a specific stream of theology, “a way to understand the grace and salvation of Jesus in the context of the present and from the situation of the poor”,⁴ but it also has an important sociological, political and philosophical dimension.⁵ Two caveats should be borne in mind when talking about liberation theology – first, it can differ quite considerably among different authors (including the difference in being “both with and without the influence of Marxist analysis”⁶); and second, the fact that in cases of many authors, their approach to liberation theology underwent a shift over time.⁷

This text therefore cannot (and does not) deal with liberation theology as a whole, but only with its particular aspect - the relation between divine and human freedom. Moreover, it limits its scope to one author and one book only – Gustavo Gutierrez’s *A Theology of Liberation*.

The next part of this text briefly introduces Gutierrez and his book. In Part 3, I present his treatment of the problem of divine and human freedom. The next part provides a critical discussion of his views, using documents of Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and tries to identify in which aspects this criticism can (or cannot) be applied to Gutierrez’s arguments. The final part concludes.

¹ All biblical quotations taken from New International Version (available on-line at biblegateway.com)

² See Gutierrez, Gustavo: The task and content of liberation theology, in: Rowland, Christopher (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. 19.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Pottenger, John R.: *The Political Theory of Liberation Theology*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1989, p. 2.

⁶ See Gutierrez, Gustavo: The task and content of liberation theology, in: Rowland, Christopher (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. 22.

⁷ Gustavo Gutierrez is one of them – compare for example his early position in his *A Theology of Liberation*, analyzed below, and his later position in his contribution to Rowland, Christopher (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, Chapter 1, or his interpretation in Petrella, Ivan: *The Future of Liberation Theology*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, 2004, Chapter 1.

2. Gutierrez and his *A Theology of Liberation*

Gustavo Gutierrez (born in 1928) is a Peruvian theologian and a member of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans).⁸ He has been involved in the liberation theology movement from the very beginning.⁹ His book *A Theology of Liberation*, whose first edition appeared in Spanish in 1971 (with an English edition only two years later) is usually listed among the first and most important works on the topic.¹⁰ In the context of Gutierrez's work, the book represents an early attempt to develop systematic understanding of liberation theology.

Gutierrez's approach to liberation theology in *A Theology of Liberation* will be probably best summarized by exposing his understanding of the two parts of this term: to theology and to liberation.

His *theology* is characterized by a strong emphasis on *praxis*. By theology he does not mean only its "classical tasks", such as "wisdom" and "rational knowledge",¹¹ but he includes one more perspective – "theology as a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word".¹² This *praxis*-oriented perspective is a key stone of his treatment of topics included in his book. His criticism of theology is based on a disagreement with, as he calls it, the "distinction of plans", that is with a sharp border between the Church and the world, the priests and the laypeople; both having different ends, existing independently on each other, not interfering with each other directly, but only through the "conscience of the individual Christian", which was to be influenced through the Church's moral teaching.¹³ According to Gutierrez, this model has got in a crisis – the modern world, with its interconnected structures blurring the causality between individuals' actions and social results, can no longer rely on it. When the Church silently overlooks wrongdoings by dictatorial regimes or other oppressive structures in the "temporal sphere", it lends them legitimacy.¹⁴ Thus, the Church must perform an active role – it must fight these structures and stand on the side of the oppressed.

When explaining the term *liberation*, Gutierrez starts by distinguishing what liberation *is not*. It should not be equaled with the term *development*, used in economics or politics. Development is synonymous with reformism and modernization, with "timid measures" and

⁸ Pottenger, John R.: *The Political Theory of Liberation Theology*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1989, p. 192.

⁹ See part „Chronology“ at www.LiberationTheology.org.

¹⁰ See Dodson, Michael: Liberation Theology and Christian Radicalism in Contemporary Latin America, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 1979, 11(1), p. 203 (note 2), or bibliography on the topic in Rowland, Christopher (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. 310.

¹¹ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation*, SCM Press, 1974, p. 3.

¹² Op. cit., p. 13.

¹³ Op. cit., p. 57.

¹⁴ Op. cit., p. 65.

is counterproductive in the long run, because it only postpones real transformation. Liberation is something deeper, something more genuine; not only an imitation of subtly oppressive advanced industrial societies, but a new quality.¹⁵ Gutierrez distinguishes three different levels of liberation: liberation (1) as the “aspirations of oppressed peoples and social classes”, who are suffering in unjust economic, social and political conditions (“political liberation”); (2) as “understanding of history”, in which “man is seen as assuming conscious responsibility for his own destiny”; and finally (3) as liberation from sin, brought to man by Christ the Savior, who “enables man to live in communion with him”.¹⁶

Due to the collapse of the model of the two planes in today’s world and the failure of various doctrines based on the concept of development, the Church must find a new response. Gutierrez lists several steps the Church should take: (a) prophetic denunciation of the oppressive structures, (b) conscientizing evangelization orienting the people in our complex world, (c) becoming a poor Church instead of only a Church for the poor and (d) reforming the structures of the Church to be able to meet all demands of our age.¹⁷

The reason why Gutierrez demands an active role of the Church in liberation is the link he sees between liberation and salvation. Unlike in the past, when most attention was paid to the “quantitative” dimension of salvation (“salvation of the pagans”, or the number of people saved), today we are faced with the “qualitative” dimension of salvation – what should people (Christians and non-Christians alike) do to be saved? The criterion of only belonging to the Church no longer provides an answer as the emphasis is moved to everyday *praxis*.¹⁸

Salvation, “communion of men with God and the communion of men among themselves”,¹⁹ also has a historical dimension with the following milestones: (a) **Creation** as “the first salvific act”. God created (we could perhaps say “liberated”) the world from chaos, created order of things; creation also marks the beginning of history;²⁰ (b) **Exodus** – similarly as God at the moment of creation lifted the world from the oppression of chaos, in the events of Exodus God liberated the people of Israel from the oppression of Egyptians, allowing them to create their own society, “free from misery and alienation”;²¹ (c) **Jesus Christ** as “re-creation” or a “new creation”;²² (d) **Eschatological Promise** as the complete fulfillment of history. Eschatological coming of the Kingdom of God provides hope necessary for changing the world, for creating “a new man”.²³

¹⁵ Op. cit., p. 26.

¹⁶ Op. cit., p. 36.

¹⁷ Op. cit., p. 114-119.

¹⁸ Op. cit., p. 151.

¹⁹ Op. cit., p. 152.

²⁰ Op. cit., p. 154.

²¹ Op. cit., p. 157.

²² Op. cit., p. 158.

²³ Op. cit., p. 213.

Because the Church has to operate in the world, it must reconsider its relation to politics. Building on J. B. Metz's concept of "new political theology", Gutierrez wants the Church not to take over politics, but to "de-privatize" religion and become an "institution of social criticism".²⁴ While traditional approach to politics stresses a peaceful coexistence of privatized faith and a secularized world,²⁵ literally giving to Caesar what is Caesar's, Gutierrez's vision of political Jesus is different. Jesus has been "iconized", placed outside his human context, outside of history.²⁶ He quotes O. Cullmann's reinterpretation of Jesus' political message: Jesus cared more about individuals and not so much about politics mainly because he expected an imminent end of history and this "attitude of Jesus cannot therefore be transposed to our times without qualifications".²⁷ The heart of Jesus' message is, according to this view, political. It represents an utopian vision, denouncing and shaking the present system, and announcing "what is not yet, but will be".²⁸

Gutierrez's book is concluded with a closer look at poverty in the light of the Scriptures. One way of thinking stresses the fact that because people were made in the image and likeness of God, the oppression of the poor is an offense for God himself.²⁹ There is also a second perspective of poverty: poverty as spiritual childhood, "ability to welcome God, an openness to God", as memorably stated in the Beatitudes of the New Testament.³⁰ The question regarding this notion of poverty is what is actually meant here – spiritual poverty (as in Matthew), or material poverty (as in Luke)? Gutierrez warns against the latter: it would lead to "canonization" of a social class (the materially poor) and "sacralization" of misery.³¹ He offers a synthesis of these two views: poverty as authentic solidarity with the poor and real protest against poverty.³²

3. Freedom in *A Theology of Liberation*

The title of this text refers to *divine* and *human* freedom. But in Gutierrez's perspective the question about divine and human freedom is to some extent artificial, because it stresses a difference where there in fact is none. In his view, God cannot be bound to a place outside of human beings. Together with the prophets, Gutierrez stresses that God is not hidden in the

²⁴ Op. cit., p. 221-223.

²⁵ Op. cit., p. 224.

²⁶ Op. cit., p. 225.

²⁷ Op. cit., p. 230.

²⁸ Op. cit., p. 233.

²⁹ Op. cit., p. 295.

³⁰ Op. cit., p. 296.

³¹ Op. cit., p. 297-298. On the problem of the "iconization" of the poor in liberation theology see also Noble, Tim: *Keeping the Window Open*, IBTS, Prague, 2009.

³² Op. cit., p. 302.

Ark of the Covenant, but “God will be present in the very heart of every man”.³³ This is a promise which was completely fulfilled by the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Christ and everyone building on him can be seen as a temple of God, as Paul writes in 1st letter to the Corinthians.³⁴ Gutierrez claims that through the events of the New Testament the presence of God has been both universalized and internalized - “from being localized and linked to a particular people, it gradually extends to all the people of the earth” and “from dwelling in places of worship, this presence is transferred to the heart of human history.”³⁵ Because the God has become man, he cancelled the distinction between sacral and profane – “the ‘profane,’ that which is located outside the temple, no longer exists”.³⁶

In other words, Gutierrez stresses the link between God and the neighbor, which is expressed both in the Old and the New Testament.³⁷ Since God lives in the hearts of the people, he cannot be loved if the people are not loved, he cannot be free if the people are not free. The question of God’s freedom is therefore inseparably intertwined with human freedom.

But what does it mean for a man to be free? Gutierrez, recalling St. Paul and D. Bonhoeffer, answers: one is free only as *being free for the other*. Freedom is not perceived as a state, an attribute, or a thing, but as “a relation and nothing else”.³⁸ One loves the neighbor and because of that one cannot tolerate when the neighbor is in a dreadful situation. Liberation is not completed if there still are people who are suffering from unjust oppression. This in a sense universalizes the suffering of others and makes it a matter of concern for everybody. Every Christian not only *should*, but *must* take part in the process of liberation, because there is a “radical incompatibility of evangelical demands with an unjust and alienating society”.³⁹

The root of all injustice and oppression in our world is – sin. It does not appear by itself, but there is always “human responsibility behind it”.⁴⁰ Sin can no longer be considered an attribute of an individual, but it is – similarly as freedom – also seen in relation of people to each other and to God. Sin is “the absence of brotherhood and love in relationships among men, the breach of friendship with God”⁴¹ and it has “collective dimensions”, which are manifested as oppressive structures, leading to exploitation of people by people. A sinner is refusing to love his neighbor and – in him or her – the Lord himself.

³³ Op. cit., p. 192.

³⁴ 1 Cor 3:16-17.

³⁵ Gutierrez: *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 193.

³⁶ Op. cit., p. 194.

³⁷ His references here include for example Isaiah 1:10-17, Isaiah 58:6-7, Matthew 25:31-45 or Luke 10:29-36.

³⁸ Gutierrez: *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 36.

³⁹ Op. cit., p. 145.

⁴⁰ Op. cit., p. 175.

⁴¹ Op. cit., p. 175.

One of the key messages of the Gospel is that one should love not only the neighbor, but also the enemies.⁴² Gutierrez applies this rule on the oppressed and their oppressors: spiritual love alone is not enough, if it remains without an action. One must liberate not only the neighbor, who is suffering under the oppressors, but also the oppressors themselves: “One loves the oppressors by liberating them from their inhuman condition as oppressors, by liberating them from themselves.”⁴³

Given the collective nature of sin, Gutierrez regards the usual solution to sin that is inner personal conversion, as inadequate. Because sin is so deeply rooted in the social and economic structures of our world, the fight for a just society must be much more radical than inner conversion. He even states that in the world dominated by these structures “authentic conversion” is impossible and such a world is a world of never ending fight, conflict and class struggle. Only elimination of the oppressive structures, chief among them being private ownership,⁴⁴ can lead to just, human, free society and can open way to salvation.

4. Criticism

Given the revolutionary nature of liberation theology,⁴⁵ it should come as no surprise that it has been severely criticized from different perspectives and any treatment of this topic would be incomplete without mentioning at least the criticism of Vatican authorities expressed in two documents of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.⁴⁶

Without denying the terrible and intolerable situation of the poor in many countries of the world, the main claim is that liberation theology does not bring any solution to this situation, but instead it radicalizes the masses and offers them an attractive, but false picture of the future. It sees theology of liberation as a continuation of certain tendencies, starting back in the time of the Enlightenment, attempting to liberate man not only from oppression and misery, but also from responsibility and – at the end – from God himself.⁴⁷

The documents differ in the style and harshness (the 1984 mainly criticizes, while the 1986 tries to come with a positive response). Though they do not provide any names, given the influence of Gutierrez and his writings he is certainly among the authors that the

⁴² Matthew 5:44: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

⁴³ Op. cit., p. 276.

⁴⁴ Op. cit., p. 111.

⁴⁵ Gutierrez’s book is no exception in this respect: laudatory quotes of Marx, Lenin or Che Guevara, praise of Russian revolution of 1917, calling socialism a system where “man can begin to live freely and humanly” (op. cit., p. 30), seeing the world through the optics of class struggle, or open calls for revolution can serve as examples.

⁴⁶ *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”* from 1984 and *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation “The Truth Makes Us Free”* from 1986.

⁴⁷ *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation “The Truth Makes Us Free”*(1986), Part I, § 19.

documents condemn. I summarize the main arguments below and try to assess to what extent they can be applied to Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation*.

- (1) Liberation theologians seem to unilaterally emphasize "liberation from servitude of an earthly and temporal kind" and "seem to put liberation from sin in second place".⁴⁸

NO: Gutierrez stresses that the earthly, material dimension of sin (the existence of the oppressive structures) is rooted in and caused by sin. They are connected and inseparable, which is exactly the opposite of this argument. Liberation from sin is an important level of liberation as understood by Gutierrez. The Congregation's position is an example of the "distinction of plans" that Gutierrez criticizes.

- (2) Their stress on human praxis decreases the role of God. It is "God, and not man, has the power to change the situation of suffering".⁴⁹

NO: People were made in the image and likeness of God. They have free will and are able to decide and act. Denunciation of oppressive structures, evangelization and reforms of the Church proposed by Gutierrez are certainly in the hands of people (but they all should be led by the Holy Spirit). Gutierrez does not endorse the use of violence, though his calls for revolution can be misinterpreted in this way. On the other hand, the Congregation's position can be seen as supporting passivity and lending legitimacy to suffering causing settings.

- (3) Oppressive structures do exist, but the causality of their creation is quite opposite to what liberation theologians say: they "are the result of man's actions and so are consequences more than causes. The root of evil, then, lies in free and responsible persons who have to be converted by the grace of Jesus Christ".⁵⁰ Calls for revolutions should therefore be replaced by calls for conversion.

PARTLY YES: The dynamics of social processes and their causes seems to be too complex to be easily categorized in one way or another. Both points of view are not necessarily in contradiction – we can assert that people's actions are the cause of oppressive structures, and yet argue that once these structures are set up, they can be very difficult to be eliminated even if the actions that caused them have ceased (economic theory uses terms "path dependency" or "lock in effect").

⁴⁸ *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"* (1984), Introduction.

⁴⁹ *Op. cit.*, Part IV, § 5.

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, Part IV, § 15.

- (4) The distorted view of reality in the liberation theology is caused by the analytical framework of Marxism, which is only dressed up in Christian terms, but creates the fundament and keystone of liberation theology, as its “ideological principles [that] come prior to the study of social reality”.⁵¹ The situation of the poor is complex and requires “plurality of methods and viewpoints”.⁵²

YES: As far as I can judge, Marxism is a predominant approach used in Gutierrez’s social analysis (I am not speaking about his theology). His class-struggle perspective reduces social problems to superficiality and is unable to explain some important issues (such as differentiated economic development of Latin American countries since the 1950’s). His choice of social scientists he quotes is rather selective and his analysis is influenced by his revolutionary zeal.⁵³ On the other hand, in the 1970’s Marxism was popular in social sciences and Gutierrez’s approach to social problems was not as exceptional as it seems from today’s perspective.

5. Conclusion

Liberation theology can be seen as a specific reaction to the situation of the poor especially in the Latin American countries. It represents a notable and original mixture of Christianity, social analysis and social activism. However, two events essentially impaired its development: the rejecting reaction of the Vatican authorities in the mid 1980’s and the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989, followed by a retreat of Marxist-based analysis from social sciences. Petrella⁵⁴ offers several responses of liberation theologians to these challenges:

- (a) “reasserting core ideas” as an attempt to separate liberation theology from Marxism,
- (b) “revising basic categories” as an attempt to “open space for the implementation of new sociopolitical, economic and cultural mediations”,⁵⁵
- (c) “critiquing idolatry” as an attempt to develop “critique of the idolatrous nature of capitalism and modernity more generally”.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Op. cit., Part VII, § 6.

⁵² Op. cit., Part VII, § 5.

⁵³ For more criticism of liberation theology in general from the position of a social scientist see Dodson, Michael: Liberation Theology and Christian Radicalism in Contemporary Latin America. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 1979, 11(1): 203-222.

⁵⁴ Petrella, Ivan: *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004.

⁵⁵ Op. cit., p. 5.

⁵⁶ Op. cit., p. 8.

The sensitivity of Christians to poverty and social problems is (or should be) a part of their identity. Poverty and injustice may change forms and names, but “You will always have the poor among you”⁵⁷. The prophetic voices, crying out loud all the injustice and oppression of our world and shaking our unconcern, will always be necessary to prevent us from resting on our laurels. Gustavo Gutierrez’s *A Liberation Theology*, can even today serve as a very good example of one of them.

First draft finished on November 17, 2009, the day of the 20th anniversary of liberation from socialism

⁵⁷ John 12:8

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