

The Rise and Fall of Liberation Theology? An Evaluative Chronicle

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Liberation theology emerged gradually in the period following the Second Vatican Council.¹ At that Council there were present, as influences on the conciliar process, a wide variety of theologies— Neo-Scholastic, Neopatristic, anthropologico-transcendental (alias Karl Rahner), as well as the inter-related theologies of the ‘signs of the times’ and of ‘earthly realities’, the latter soon to be dubbed ‘secularisation-theology’ and chiefly worked out, like its brother movement, by the French. As succeeding events have demonstrated, the resultant compound was unstable. So far as the Americas were concerned although ‘CELAM’, the Latin American Episcopal Council, had functioned since 1956, the Latin American influence at Vatican II, whether of bishops or theologians was negligible, with the exception of one or two individual voices like the Brazilian Helder Câmara, archbishop of Recife, who contributed to the making of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

Very different, during the Council’s closing sessions, was the state of affairs in Latin America itself. There a veritable theological ferment was brewing, as became clear from four meetings of theologians held at, successively, Petrópolis (Brazil), Havana (Cuba), Bogotá (Colombia) and Cuernavaca (Mexico) in the course of 1964-1965. What transpired from these pan-Latin American theological assemblies was the need for a new theology whose nature would be determined by, first, the conciliar ‘renewal’, but also by, secondly, confrontation with the often cruel human reality of that continent. Such men as the Uruguayan Juan-Luis Segundo and the Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez looked towards a new kind of evangelisation whose agents would be, when compared with their predecessors, at once more critical of contemporary culture and more engaged within it. The name originally bestowed on this prospective new theology was ‘historic theology’—selected because it was intended to provide a Christian interpretation of Latin American history, and an attempt to influence that history’s direction.²

However, these streams of thought or, at any rate, aspiration, soon encountered other currents whose source lay in the sociological analysis of regional economic patterns of dependence and under-development. Dependency theorists argued that true development in Latin America required a socialist breakaway from world capitalist domination. The

principal analytic resource of such accounts, as these terms indicate, was Marxism. Accordingly, the form taken in the concrete by the new 'historic theology' in its interpretation of Latin American history was *marxisant*, including as it did such major themes as class confrontation and the need to make an explicit option for socialism, over against capitalism. The experience of Cuba, a Marxist-Leninist political society since 1958, became a general reference-point, and credit was given to wide-ranging aspects of the Marxist analysis of social reality, albeit in varying degrees.

In such circles, though Pope Paul VI's social encyclical of 1967, *Populorum Progressio*, was well received, not least for its emphasis on the limits set by the common good to the rights of private property, that letter's social doctrine was soon regarded as insufficient. More heavily criticised still for faint-heartedness, long-term ineffectiveness and even counterproductiveness in terms of the generation of greater equality between and within societies, was the philosophy of development urged on the governments of Central and South America by the presidential administration of John F. Kennedy.³ By contrast, there was general support for a manifesto launched by archbishop Cámara in late 1966 at Mar del Plata, Argentina, on the occasion of the tenth reunion of CELAM; its key idea was that of structural transformation as liberation from under-development, itself seen as the true 'collective sin' of Latin America.

In 1967, at the eleventh reunion of CELAM in Lima, the Latin American bishops issued an appeal for a new pastoral strategy, the start of the process that would produce the epoch-making Medellín statement in September 1968. Various bodies contributed to the shaping of this strategy prominent among them was the Society of Jesus whose Latin American provincials, together with their General, Father Pedro Arrupe, published an influential letter on the topic from Rio da Janeiro in the May of the crucial year; though important, too, was the reunion of theologians, held at Chimbolé, Peru, in July, a month before the Medellín congress opened. The Jesuit letter spoke of the need for a sociological analysis which would lead to a courageous denunciation of injustice and a preferential option for freeing others from every form of servitude in the name of Christian evangelisation: the origin, apparently, of the celebrated phrase, 'option for the poor'.

The Medellín congress turned out to be a crucial moment in the history of Latin American Catholicism. One of its participants, the Spaniard Pedro Casaldáliga, bishop of São Felix in the Brazilian Mato Grosso, summed up its results as nothing less than the provision of a new identity for the Church by, on the one hand, shaking its excessively hierarchical structure, and, on the other, galvanising a 'popular Church', whose growth points would be basic communities, themselves characterised by a process of continuing social re-education, designed to raise the consciousness of their members about their situation and its causes, and to transform that situation through engagement in political struggle. To animate this process, Medellín gave an impetus, so Casaldáliga reported, to the creation of a new

theology which saw the Latin American poor as Israel in Egypt, prior to the exodus to the promised Land

Between the reality of a text, and the perception of that reality by various interested parties, there always lies some kind of gap. For the historian of theology, to read the Medellín statement is not to be made aware of anything innovative.⁴ The document, rightly, minces no words about the economic, educational and political shortcomings of Latin American society. But it moves within the familiar terrain of Church social teaching, and has nothing of its own to say about doctrine, much less about theology. Bishop Casaldáliga, however, found in it irrefutable evidence of the presence of the new 'theology of history'. The bishop who, by the 1980's, would gain a certain celebrity, or notoriety, thanks to his refusal to go to Rome for the triennial visit of local bishops *ad limina apostolorum*, as also for his enthusiastic support for the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, despite the entreaties of the episcopate there, called this new theology of history 'captivity theology'. That we now speak of LT, 'Liberation Theology', and not of CT, 'Captivity Theology', is owed in fact to the post-Medellín meetings of Latin American theologians, At Cartigny, Switzerland, in 1969, and then in 1970 at Bogotá, Buenos Aires and Oruro (Bolivia), they drew their own inferences from the Medellín congress under the title, soon to become so famous, 'the theology of liberation'.

The first-fruits of liberation theology were two large books published in 1971 and 1972 respectively Gutiérrez's *Teología de la Liberación* in Lima, and the Brazilian Franciscan Leonardo Boff's *Jesus Christo Libertador* at Petrópolis.⁵ While their perspectives were distinct, these two works possessed a common aim and used parallel methodologies. As to the two fathers of liberation theology, for they are no less, Gutiérrez was born in Peru in 1928 and studied at Louvain, Lyons and Rome. Influenced by his discovery of the sixteenth century Dominican defender of the Indians Bartolomé de las Casas, he was a fellow student of the Colombian priest Camilo Torres who died on active service with a guerrilla movement in that country. Gutiérrez's book broke with what would soon be called a 'European' concept of theology. Theology is not, or is not only, a kind of understanding, whether spiritual and sapiential, like that of the Fathers and many mediaevals, or systematic and scholarly, like that of the Scholastics and moderns. It is also, or should be, in the light of the signs of today's times, an eminently practical affair, placed at the service not of the ecclesial magisterium but, rather, of the poor and oppressed. Gutiérrez was preoccupied not so much with orthodoxy as with 'orthopraxy'. He insisted that Scripture, the ultimate theological source-book, could not yield 'right action' unless its interpreters were continuously aware of their own situation—their interpretative vantagepoint—in social and political terms. Theology for Gutiérrez is 'critical reflection on historical praxis' and its greatest early monument is Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, itself based on a true analysis of the late antique signs of the times, and the challenge which

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they posed to the Church of its day. For the modern reader in Latin America, socially situated self-awareness could only mean, Gutiérrez continued, awareness of Latin America's history as, in a phrase borrowed from biblical apocalyptic, a 'mystery of iniquity'. The Bible's message, as Gutiérrez saw it, would envisage three levels or stages of liberative activity: first, socio-economic liberation; secondly, the conquest of certain political freedoms, essential if a people is to construct its own history; and thirdly the making of a human brotherhood or communion, founded on faith. Whereas, classically theology has been defined as the 'science of God', in Gutiérrez's portrait of the theologian the divine mystery is to some degree displaced from the centre of the picture so as to be replaced by the mystery of the neighbour— since it is in the neighbour, in his needs, and in his potential, that the structure of redemption is disclosed. This anthropocentric tendency was in part rectified, it is only fair to add, in Gutiérrez's later work, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, a title taken from Bernard of Clairvaux.⁶ There Gutiérrez affirmed the abiding necessity of a life of prayer as the foundation of all Christian activity worth the name. However, in *A Theology of Liberation*, evangelisation concerns not so much the proclamation of a doctrinal message about God as it does the animation of the temporal order by criticism and prophecy—at once denouncing the way things are and suggesting how in the future they should be. Gutiérrez looked in part to a this-worldly resolution of the problem of evil, presenting faith as entailing an option for justice, and filling out what justice involved by an account of social inter-relationships drawn from the evidence of the Gospel, interpreting Jesus' life and ministry on the model of those of the Old Testament prophets namely, as a challenge at once social and religious to the established disorder.

Boff is Gutiérrez's junior by a decade. He was born in Concordia, Brazil, in 1938, and entered a minor seminary at the age of ten. He studied at the major seminary of Petrópolis where he now teaches, being a pupil of his later critic the Franciscan bishop Bonaventura Kloppenburg. Boff was himself ordained to the priesthood as a Franciscan in 1964, and completed his theological studies at Munich where his supervisor was a second later critic the then professor of dogma there, Dr Joseph Ratzinger. Boff's thesis was published at Paderborn in 1972 under the somewhat doctoresque title, 'The Church as Sacrament in the Horizon of World Experience'. In his first contribution to a distinctively liberation theology, Boff adopted what he saw as a new hermeneutic, a lens of a novel kind through which to look at the New Testament. Like Gutiérrez's new picture of theology as a whole, this new hermeneutic was, Boff believed, made not only desirable but necessary by Latin American reality, which he described with the help of sociology, especially the theory of dependence, and, to some degree, of Marxism. Boff's new hermeneutic was to have four features: first, the primacy of anthropology (concern for man) over ecclesiology (concern for the Church); secondly, the primacy of the utopian (the future of society) over the factual (the Church's past and present); thirdly, the primacy of

criticism over dogma, and fourthly, the primacy of the social over the personal. 'Jesus Christ the Liberator', as Boff presents him, preaches a conversion of fundamental mentality whose power revolutionises both the social order and the human being whose life that order houses. Like Gutiérrez, Boff insists that his starting-point is not something original to himself, but reflects a widespread experience in the Latin American Church, arising out of the rediscovery of the Saviour's 'option for the poor', now representatively embodied in the exploited classes of contemporary societies.

These theologies, once launched, aroused very different reactions. On the positive side, the emergence of liberation theology's founding fathers was seen by some as timely. Even at Rome, it was widely held that Catholicism's centre of gravity was shifting away from Europe to other 'younger' churches, especially in Latin America. At the second General Synod of Bishops, in the autumn of 1971, the Latin American bishops' conferences, some twenty-two in all, began to make their weight felt in the context of a new pre-occupation with situations of injustice in those parts of the world where, it was believed, Catholicism's future lay. Again, it was generally recognised that, throughout Western society, the Church was afflicted by a crisis of relevance, and to this liberation theology might be heaven's answer. Indeed, it was at a 1972 meeting of the Jesuit institute of 'Faith and Secularity', founded as a result of Paul VI's appeal to the Society to come up with some answers to the spread of atheism and religious indifference, that *European* theologians first encountered liberation theology. In the improbable surroundings of the Escorial, Philip II of Spain's palace-monastery, all the chief representatives of liberation theology fore-gathered, and were observed to include an inordinate number not only of Jesuits, but also of sociologists, socialists and the European-trained. The point of this remark was to indicate the comparative absence of members of the basic diocesan priesthood, of economists, of politicians sympathetic to, at least, some middle way between socialism and capitalism along the lines of a 'partnership economy', and of theologians whose formation had been exclusively in Latin America itself. It would remain a difficulty with the liberationist claim to represent the spontaneous voice of the Latin American poor that it so clearly betrayed the intellectual ancestry of its main practitioners in such backgrounds as: the French and German theology of secularisation associated with Marie-Dominique Chenu and Johann Baptist Metz; the idea of religionless Christianity linked to the prison writings of the Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer; the theology of hope founded by his fellow Evangelical Jürgen Moltmann, and that widespread phenomenon of *bien-pensant* Europe, the Christian-Marxist dialogue. At this conference, then, liberation theology for the first time projected its own self-image on the European stage.

What was this image? Essentially that of a new, global—that is, all-encompassing—theological project, whose source lay in political activity regarded as itself a spiritual experience. The departure point of this

project lay in a rejection of social history in its local reality, while the political activity engendered by this 'great refusal' was held to challenge the traditional understanding of the Christian life and to rupture the (supposedly) otherwise continuous fabric of Christian culture inherited from the past. The new theology was to be done by the people, of whom the professional theologians, issuing from the people and constantly referring back to their experiences, were the spokesmen.⁷ The prime authority recognised by such theologians, in their scanning of the Word of God would not be Church tradition but the historical process itself. They would re-interpret the content of the faith on the basis of historical situations, although such situations were themselves also to be interrogated and interpreted by the fundamental act of faith.

The Escorial conference had a second effect. It exacerbated the negative reaction to liberation theology beginning to be expressed not only by theologians of a mere traditional stamp,⁸ but also among the episcopate and by the Papacy. The second General Synod of Bishops decided to forbid priests from accepting political office or becoming militant in political parties, a determination later canonised in the new Code of Canon Law of the Latin church. This turned out to be a largely ineffectual fulmination, as witnessed by, for instance, the large number of priests involved in the founding of the movement 'Christians for Socialism' at Santiago da Chile in later 1972, as, *inter alia*, a mobilisation of support for the ill-fated Marxist government of Salvador Allende. In the month which followed the Roman synod, November 1972, tension exploded at the fourteenth reunion of CELAM, held at Sucre, Bolivia. Whereas liberation theology was generally supported by the Brazilian episcopate and a number of other individual bishops (mostly members of Religious Orders), it was energetically attacked by many of the rest. From that moment on, CELAM began to multiply its reservations on the topic.

A source of particular anxiety was the mode of development of the basic ecclesial communities.⁹ Usually sited in rural areas or on the edges of the cities these groups were not the creation of liberationism. Their origin lay in the Brazil and Panama, especially, of the 1950's. Aimed at relieving hard-pressed parish clergy by taking over the teaching of the catechism, they were, from the first, connected with such neighbourhood concerns as health centres and schools. In the course of the 1970's, however, they were gradually adopted as vehicles of liberationist exegesis and politics. Many, it is true, remained harmoniously inserted into surrounding parishes, themselves too large for proper pastoral management. But others became so heavily politicised that to all intents and purposes, they eventually ceased to be ecclesial structures at all.

In 1974, the third Roman Synod of Bishops met to discuss the theme 'evangelisation in the contemporary world', something of interest to liberation theology with its conviction that evangelisation is inseparable from the promotion of justice. During the second part of this synod, the problems posed by the very existence of liberation theology were aired in

no uncertain terms. The Brazilian cardinal Alfredo Scherer of Porto Alegre, a personal nominee of pope Paul, declared that liberation theology was provoking grave dissension in the Church. He was supported by the Jesuit archbishop of Quito (Ecuador), Pablo Muñoz, who appealed to theologians to remember that they stand at the service of the Church's unity. On the other hand, another Brazilian cardinal, the archbishop of São Paulo, Evaristo Arns, a Franciscan, thought the most important priority to be the elimination of the dualism between body and soul, temporal and eternal, which, he claimed, had damaged all traditional evangelisation. An especially influential figure at this synod was the secretary of CELAM, Alfonso López Trujillo, at that time an auxiliary bishop in the Colombian capital, Bogotá.¹⁰ Whilst admitting that acceptable forms of liberation theology did exist, he expatiated on the drawbacks of the unacceptable varieties. First, it was intellectually dubious to accept Marxist methods of analysis while disclaiming any indebtedness to the ideological content of Marxism. Secondly, the refusal to allow for the possibility of reconciliation between social groups, or the harmonisation of group interests was a recrudescence of Manichaeism, demonising certain social classes and writing them off as beyond social redemption. Thirdly, liberation theology, in its unacceptable forms, understood divine revelation in a thoroughly politicised fashion. It presented revolutionary movements as the real carriers of the history of salvation, preparing the coming of the Kingdom of God. It claimed that, to regain credibility, the Church must be transformed into a sign of revolutionary commitment. It held that she must re-define her unity and universality in a commitment to the proletariat in whom the meaning of history is deemed to reside, and it called on theologians, finally to make a class option, so that theology itself might become an instrument of revolution. Faced with these conflicting testimonies, the synod proved unable to reach any substantial agreement. Its final statement was vague, and pope Paul was left to sort out the mess, which he did in the apostolic constitution on evangelisation, *Evangelii nuntiandi*. There he underlined the inter-relation between what he termed, somewhat blandly, human promotion, integral liberation and evangelisation, but also went on to deny any identification between these terms. A single explicit reference to liberation theology says simply that it can favour attitudes leading evangelisation to deny its own nature, by forgetting that God himself is the ultimate salvation—and so liberation.

1975 witnessed two further events. Liberation theologians, feeling themselves pushed out into the cold by the growing distance of CELAM in their regard, held an impressive meeting in Mexico City under the title 'Liberation and Captivity'. Still hoping, at this juncture, that Rome might be more sympathetic than were many South American hierarchys, they invited the attendance of the papal nuncio to Mexico. He, however, in a closing speech to the Congress, used the opportunity to appeal for unity of faith within a plurality of theological methods, urged the participants to avoid all impoverishing radicalism, and advised them to link up again with

the best theology of all ages, and with what he called authentic catholicity. At Rome, despite the social humanism dear to Paul VI, there was deepening anxiety about liberation theology. Still in 1975, the Holy See entrusted the topic of the relation between evangelisation and 'human promotion' to the Pontifical International Theological Commission. This body, made up of theologians from outside Rome, but ultimately responsible to the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, took the view, in its report, that human promotion is less an aspect of evangelisation than it is an analogy for it. In the present context, the commission opined, it is preferable to emphasise the difference, rather than the similarity between the two. One rather subtle ground offered for this judgment was calculated to allay in more radical minds. The inevitable setbacks which 'human promoters' receive from the world will be less daunting, the Commission suggested, if they are not experienced as defeats of the Gospel of grace itself.¹¹ It should be noted that these words were written three years before the advent of cardinal Karol Wojtyła to the Papacy, and four years before that of cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to the Prefecture of the said Congregation.

Despite such blows, or at any rate pinpricks, liberation theology continued its diffusion, not least outside South America. In 1975 it achieved a North American platform at a major conference, 'Theology in the Americas' held at Detroit. In 1976, at an intercontinental meeting at Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania, it allied itself with the emerging indigenous theologies of Africa and Asia. From that year dates the beginning of its reception in, above all, South Africa, India and the Philippines.

In the later 1970's and early 1980's, liberation theology's library expanded in its home continent, with such works as Gutiérrez's *Fuerza histórica de los pobres*, the Spanish-born El Salvadorean Jesuit Jon Sobrino's *Jesus en América latina*, and various works by Boff, whose output soon topped thirty books selling almost half a million copies.¹² At the same time, the bishops of Latin America were gearing themselves up, for a new general assembly which would evaluate the experience of the Church in their territories in the decade since Medellín. This assembly, to be held at Puebla de los Angeles in Mexico would be convened in the presence of the new pope, John Paul II. Puebla's preparatory documents were notably unfavourable to liberation theology. Various liberation theologians found their names removed from the list of invited 'experts', and in the end they organised a parallel meeting of their own. In his opening address, on 28 January 1979, the pope remarked of the assembly:

It will ... have to take as its point of departure the conclusions of Medellín, with all the positive elements that they contained, but without ignoring the incorrect interpretations sometimes made, incorrect interpretations which call for calm discernment, opportune criticism and clear choices of position.

In his address, but without naming liberation theology specifically, the pope warned against a politicisation of the figure of Christ.

The idea of Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive man from Nazareth, does not tally with the Church's catechesis. By confusing the insidious pretexts of Jesus' accusers with the—very different—attitude of Jesus himself, some people adduce as the cause of his death the outcome of a political conflict, and nothing is said about the Lord's will to surrender himself [to his Passion] or about his consciousness of his redemptive mission.

He also spoke against a politicisation of the concept of the Kingdom of God, now interpreted as:

attained not by faith and membership in the Church, but by the mere changing of structures, and by social and political development, and as present wherever there is a certain type of involvement and activity for justice.

Here the pope was able to cite some words of his short-lived predecessor, John Paul I:

It is wrong to state that political economic and social liberation coincides with salvation in Jesus Christ: that the *regnum Dei* is identical with the *regnum hominis*.

And any case, the pope went on, the understanding of the human being subjacent to such 're-readings' of the Gospel and the 'perhaps brilliant but fragile and inconsistent hypotheses flowing from them' is defective. The Church's faith in man's supernatural dignity and destiny is something greater than the anthropological reductionism now in vogue, what he called 'forms of humanism that are often shut in by a strictly economic, biological or psychological view of man'. At the same time, however, the pope spoke out strongly against violations of human rights in Latin America, urged the bishops to form the social consciences of their people by making known to them the social doctrine of the Church, and spoke of a 'correct Christian idea of liberation which he described as primarily salvific, but as releasing energies for the liberation of others in the economic, political, social and cultural domain.'¹⁴ The final document of the Puebla assembly faithfully reflected these comments to which no doubt, a number of the Latin American bishops had contributed in advance.

Some months later, at the seventeenth meeting of CELAM, at Los Teques (Venezuela), a new wave of criticism of liberation theology crested with the election of López Trujillo as successor to the Franciscan cardinal Alois Lorscheider of Fortaleza (Brazil) in the post of president of this standing 'conference of conferences'. About the same time, the Jesuit general addressed a letter to the Society's provincials in Latin America on the subject of Marxism. Father Arrupe summed up:

In brief, if Marxist analysis does not directly involve adhesion to the Marxism philosophy in its completeness, still less to 'dialectical materialism', as understood currently, it does in fact imply a conception of human history which is at variance with the Christian vision of man and of society, and leads to the adoption of strategies which threaten Christian values and behaviour.¹⁵

It is true that Arrupe added some important qualifications to this statement. He insisted on the relationship between liberation from oppression and the Christian project itself (a relation for which his chosen word was 'affinity, perhaps half way between the terms 'aspect' and 'analogy', as used by other authorities). He denounced liberal or capitalist social analysis as equally materialist and opposed to Christianity. He called for dialogue and even occasionally co-operation with Marxists, though within a clear affirmation of a Jesuit's priestly and religious identity, and urged the members of the Society to resist any manipulation of his letter which might weaken their commitment to the pursuit of justice. Nevertheless, his attack on the utilisation of Marxism was couched in strong terms.

A further straw in the wind was the condemnation, by an archdiocesan commission at Rio da Janeiro, of Boff's *Igreja: Carisma e Poder*. Hopeful of a better hearing at Rome, Boff sent the work, and the condemnation, to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on his own initiative, in February 1982. That this was a misjudgment on his part became obvious when, late in 1982, cardinal Ratzinger, the new prefect of that office, communicated to the bishops of Peru ten critical observations on the work of Gutiérrez. These were made public in the course of 1983.¹⁶ In March 1984, the Italian monthly *30 Giorni* printed a leaked report by Ratzinger on liberation theology, which he treated with scant respect as a mixture of bad politics and worse exegesis.¹⁷ In September 1984 his Congregation published 'An Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation', a text which concentrated almost exclusively on the negative features of the liberation theologians' work. The present writer introducing *Libertatis nuntius* in London, suggested that it offered a critique of liberation theology in terms of three principles: a principle of totality, a principle of catholicity, and a principle of theological autonomy.¹⁸

The first of these has it that the Church must address herself to the total human being, by bringing to bear the total Christian revelation. The total human being is more than his secular self, and our secular self is more than our political self. Similarly, while the total Christian revelation has social-political aspects or implications, the totality of that revelation is more than these social-political correlates.

Secondly, the document appeals to a principle of catholicity. The biblical theme of liberation cannot simply be juxtaposed with particular human situations so as to generate a Christian theology while at the same time bypassing the theological tradition of the Church—whether that be seen diachronically, as spread out over time, or synchronically, as manifested in geographical space. A specifically Catholic Christian theology cannot be spun out of Bible plus experience. It needs a reference also to Tradition, a necessary medium in the reception of Scripture, and, indeed to that articulation of Tradition which is found in the formal teaching of the episcopal and papal magisterium.

Thirdly, the instruction invokes a principle of theological autonomy

vis-à-vis the conceptual apparatus of philosophy and the natural sciences. Since theology is the intelligent expression of divine revelation, it cannot be subordinated to the deliverances of philosophy or the findings of the social sciences. While theology needs concepts drawn from other disciplines to carry out its own reflection in an organised fashion, it treats these concepts as tools and instruments. Were the concepts and hypotheses of philosophy or social science to dictate the content of theology, then, as in the fable of the sorcerer's apprentice, the instrument would have taken over those who thought themselves its master.

Yet the Instruction spoke of the theme of liberation as 'full of promise' for Christian reflection and practice, and announced a successor document on the positive side of our subject. Meanwhile, however, the Congregation made it clear that its role would not be confined to the making of general statements. That same month, Boff was summoned to Rome for interview by Ratzinger, and, despite the protective presence of the two Brazilian cardinals devoted to liberation theology, his fellow Franciscans Arns and Lorscheider, the interrogation issued in the publication, in March 1985, of a series of negative animadversions on his ecclesiology.¹⁹ Two months later, the Congregation served notice that he should observe an 'obedient silence' by abstaining from lecturing or writing for an unspecified period. 1985 was surely the year of bitterest feeling in this entire controversy, well expressed in the response to the first Roman critique of liberation theology by Segundo in his *A Reply to Cardinal Ratzinger*, sub-titled, somewhat ominously *And a Warning to the Whole Church*.

The Holy See's second, positive, critique, dated March 1986, is not only the longest document ever published by the Congregation but also entailed in its making an unprecedentedly wide process of consultation, involving thirty-five episcopates and forty theologians in different parts of the world. Curiously, *Libertatis conscientia* hardly ever mentions liberation theology by name. Only once is there a reference to the 'theology of freedom and liberation'. We can see in this a will to restrict the 'legitimate and orthodox' liberation theology which Rome desires to the limited ambit of a sectorial theology—one, that is, which deals with some particular area of reality, rather than serving as a global, all-purpose, account of the world in its relation to God.

In what, then, for this 'Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation' does such a 'legitimate and orthodox' liberation theology consist? It consists in relating Catholic social doctrine to a traditional soteriology—a classically understood doctrine of salvation, itself seen as founded on the christological and Trinitarian faith of the ecumenical councils of the patristic age. This linkage has never been properly achieved in the past. A Christianised society was unimaginable for the definitely minoritarian communities of the New Testament. The Fathers after Constantine, the mediaevals, and the sources of the early modern period, offer suggestive hints as to what the ethos of such a society should be. But only with the crisis in European Christendom caused by the upheavals of

the Great Revolution of the West, from 1789 to 1815, together with the timely invention of the papal encyclical as a *genre* suited to authoritative comment on major issues of the day, were these hints gathered up into a 'social doctrine'. Even then, from pope Gregory XV to Paul VI, that social doctrine was expressed chiefly in terms of natural law thinking, increasingly incorporated into Catholic theology as a way of speaking about the created order, since the patristic period. Although this social doctrine of the Church did not lack all reference to the Gospels, and the more specifically Christian virtues taught or exemplified in the New Testament, it was to some degree cut off from the fundamental dogmas of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption, and the life of grace. This is where, by implication, the document locates the positive significance of liberation theology. That theology can help to catalyse the process whereby the Church's social doctrine becomes more fully integrated with her basic beliefs about the God of salvation. The political economy and the 'economy' of salvation are being re-united, and for this liberation theology can claim much of the credit.

It is true that this linkage was already apparent in the present pope's first encyclical *Redemptor hominis*. It might have happened anyway, given his personal determination to interpret all the Church's activity in thorough-going christocentric terms. It is also possible that this notion of uniting the Church's social teaching to the great dogmas, and notably to Christology, came to the pope thanks to his own experience of the difficulties which the episcopate faced in the matter of relating evangelisation to human promotion. After all, at the third Roman Synod, the archbishop of Cracow had been responsible for drafting the working document which, eventually shelved, was replaced by Paul VI's *Evangelii nuntiandi*, a document disappointing to some precisely for its lack of system in inter-relating the proclamation of salvation to the work of justice.

Be that as it may, the position of the Holy See in the wake of the second Instruction was clear: liberation theology's task is the construction of a suitable theological ethics for Christian political activity. It is not to offer itself as a total expression of the Gospel, with the concomitant danger that evangelisation will turn itself, naturalistically, into work for human promotion, leaving over no significant remainder. Instead, liberation theology is to show how the doctrine of salvation requires from the redeemed an ethos of a distinct kind in their social acting. As the Instruction puts it in an epitome:

The salvific dimension of liberation cannot be reduced to the socio-ethical dimension, which is a consequence of it. By restoring man's freedom, the radical liberation brought about by Christ assigns to him a task: Christian practice, which is the putting into practice of the great commandment of love.²⁰

Rome's seal of approval of this pruned-back liberation theology was granted during a special synod of the Brazilian bishops, in Rome itself, in the spring of 1986, the communiqué of which followed hard on the

promulgation of the second Instruction. At the same time, Boff's enforced sabbatical was brought to an end. Gutiérrez declared the new document epoch-making. The debate about the legitimation of liberation theology had ended with the latter's substantial vindication. Boff took the same optimistic view, though these judgments were, at least in the latter's case, more hopeful than descriptive.

Since 1986, liberation theology has remained on the defensive, and even perhaps entered into a period of relative decline, at any rate in its homelands. The reasons for this are fourfold. First, and most obviously, the Holy See has not lessened its animosity towards those types of liberation theology of which it disapproves. This is expressed not only in matters of preferment, or in the treatment of schemes for Church policy, but also in the continuing criticism of such actual practitioners as Boff. His 1986 study *E a Igreja se fez povo* ('And the Church Became People') with its claim that the Christian people of the poor must assert a 'hegemony' in the constitution of the ecclesial community led to the re-opening of the doctrinal process against him. If the American Protestant observer of liberation theology Harvey Cox is right, Boff is presenting a doctrinally innovatory version of the 'four marks of the Church' as given in the Creed (one, holy, catholic, apostolic): apostolicity, now defined as a certain praxis or life-style; holiness, now defined as service of the poor; catholicity, now defined in terms of a de-centering to allow Catholicism to exist in radically diverse ways in a variety of cultures; and unity, now defined in what Cox, paraphrasing Boff, calls 'venturesome love'. Cox, though far more sympathetic to Boff than to Ratzinger, at least gives the latter credit for appreciating the thorough-going nature of these proposals, and the need on the side of Rome to offer a coherent alternative picture of the Church of comparable attractiveness, so as to re-pristiniate its doctrinal vision. In this respect, Cox awards Ratzinger higher marks than he does those liberals who simply want to see a happy co-existence on both sides, or, again, those bishops who find in the more radical kinds of liberation theology no more than the expression of an urgent pastoral concern. However, owing to dislike of Roman intervention (often based on a doctrine of the local church not too high, for there can be none such, but faultily constructed), Roman disapproval is currently to some extent counter-productive, which does not mean to say that the wisdom of her overall policy may not be recognised in time.

More important at present is, secondly, the fact that the opponents of liberation theology in Latin America have passed from the condition of critics who take pot-shots from the sidelines to that of constructive organisers, out to create an alternative theology which will take over the ground liberation theology has, in the past, made its own. This became apparent in February 1988, at a congress of the opponents of liberation theology in Caracas, Venezuela, with participants from ten Latin American countries, as well as from the United States and Europe, including not only a variety of theologians but also two cardinals, five archbishops, nine

bishops and two rectors of Catholic universities. Paid for by the theologically conservative charitable organisation Aid to the Church in Need, this congress was addressed by the new president of CELAM Dario Castrillon Hoyes of Pereira (Colombia). Although at the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops to consider the Church since Vatican II (October 1985), Castrillon Hoyes had remarked that a Church with a machine gun is hard to mistake for the Church of the crucified Christ, his paper was the mildest given. The assembly called for the replacement of liberation theology by what it termed a 'theology of reconciliation'. Moving from an initial 'theology of Marginality' (a recognition of the social problem in its Latin American form), this would move, through a 'theology of development' (thus rescued from the obscurity into which the later 1960's had cast it), to a call for the reconciliation of all classes via mutual accommodation within the framework of a reformist social democracy. Although the name, and some of the content, of this would-be successor to liberation theology derives from the papal constitution *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, promulgated after the Roman Synod of 1983 on the sacrament of confession, Ratzinger cancelled his initial acceptance of an invitation to attend. This may be because, at the congress by contrast with the Roman documents, liberation theology was hung, drawn and quartered without mercy. The Gutiérrez and Boff of the new movement are the Peruvian Luis Fernando Figari and the Ecuadorian Julio Team Dutari.

The third case of the decline of liberation theology is the general disorder into which socialism of a Marxian, or any systematic, kind has fallen since the collapse of the Marxist-Leninist system in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe in the course of 1989. In terms both of diplomatic and military assistance and ideological succour and inspiration this collapse has dealt a serious blow to the fortunes of 'tropical Marxism', which has been officially abandoned in Ethiopia and Mozambique, as well as defeated at the polls in Nicaragua. Such a domino effect is not universal: China secure in her centuries-long policy of isolation from the outside world will doubtless continue as she is for many a long year. But commitment to the introduction of democratic accountability and acceptance of, at any rate, many free market mechanisms, are now generally de rigueur. In Latin America, as in Africa, civilian régimes and multi-party representative democracies are increasingly the order of the day.²² Cuba, still held up as, implicitly, the model of a socialist community in the Brazilian Dominican Frei Betto's best-selling book interview with Fidel Castro in 1982, is generally regarded as a somewhat quaint, relic of bygone days. Haiti, it is true, has just acquired a liberationist priest-president, but that unhappy country's political culture is so primitive that it is difficult to regard this as anything other than a sport. Marx himself will remain an important figure in the history of sociological thought, though among some Parisian *universitaires* there is a tendency to take intellectual delight in standing Marxist theses on their head: for instance by treating cultural trends as the true causes of social and political patterns.²³ Academic Marxism is

reported to be alive and well only in the more privileged universities of the United States where it may hang on as the preferred philosophico-political position—just as, throughout, the seventeenth and much, even, of the eighteenth century, Jacobitism did at the university of Oxford. The declining appeal of Marxism or of any systematic socialism is certainly relevant to liberation theology's fortunes, even though liberation theologians have varied greatly in the extent of their appeal to Marx. Meanwhile the question of land reform, round which most violent conflict in Latin America revolves, is still as grave as ever.

In the Latin American church itself, however, the agenda is changing. Twenty years ago, the Catholic Church was still secure in its religious hold on the masses of the population who were, therefore, available to be mobilised by liberation theology should the latter succeed in its aims. Today—and this is the fourth and final cause of the relative decline of liberationism—we are facing a quite different situation: the dramatic advance of Protestant sectarianism, which bids fair to reduce the number of the Catholic faithful (or not so faithful) by as much as a third, in some countries, by the early years of the next century. The reasons for this massive departure from the Church are controverted. The *Catholic Herald*, as part of the liberal Catholic press's relentless campaign for the abolition of the law of priestly celibacy, ascribed this phenomenon, perhaps inevitably, to the lack of a married priesthood.²⁴ A more plausible explanation would take the form of an inference from what it is that Protestant sects offer: namely, certainty about salvation. Thanks to the Council of Trent, Catholicism can hold out no subjective certainty of salvation for any named individual (short of some private revelation). But the Church can offer the reality of the God of salvation, present through Christ and the Holy Spirit, in her mysteries, just as she can offer an objectively certain teaching about salvation, and how men and women enter upon it for their true and definitive 'liberation'.

- 1 For documentation, see B. Chenu and B. Lauret (eds.), *Théologies de la libération. Documentation et débats* (Paris 1955), This collection includes a French translation of M. Alcalá's account of the history of liberation theology up to the early 1980's, which originally appeared in Spanish in *Razón y Fe* for June 1984, and to which the early sections of my article are indebted. See also now A. T. Hennelly (ed.), *Liberation Theology. A Documentary History* (Maryknoll 1990).
- 2 The original inspiration of 'historic theology' is best reflected in the work of the Argentinian E. Dussel, who combines liberation theology with Church history, as in his *History and the Theology of Liberation* (Et New York 1976); *A History of the Church in Latin America* (Et Grand Rapids 1981).
- 3 The background was the Bandung Conference of 1955 with its deepened awareness of third world countries. Also of this phase was the creation in 1968 by the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace together with the World Council of Churches of the joint venture 'SODEPAX': the Committee on Society, Development and Peace. See e.g. for the theology of development and its ethics: G. H. Dunne, *The Right to Development* (New York 1974); D. Goulet, *The Cruel Choice: A New Concept on the Theory of Development* (New York 1971); and some remarks in J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God: the Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Et New York 1974), pp. 317–340.

- 4 For the text, see 'The Medellín statement by the Bishops of Latin America', *New Blackfriars* 50. 582 (November 1968), pp. 72-78.
- 5 G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Et New York 1973; London 1974); L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator* (Et London 1980).
- 6 Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* (Et New York 1984); a parallel attempt to provide a spirituality for liberation theology would be L. Boff and C. Boff, *Salvation and Liberation: In Search of a Balance between Faith and Politics* (Et New York 1984).
- 7 J. L. Segundo's, five volume *Teología abierta para el laico adulto* is perhaps the fullest attempt to provide for Church workers a theology so understood. In his manifesto *The Liberation of Theology* (ET Maryknoll 1982), he proposes a ministerial training composed partly of the study of social pathology, and partly of the critical use of Scripture and Church dogma, 'suspecting that the whole present way of training clergy or pastoral agents is merely a way for society to protect itself right from the start from theologians by replacing their ability to analyse and criticise with endless erudite bibliographies', *ibid.*, p.xvi.
- 8 See for example B. Kloppenburg, O. F. M., *Temptations for the Theology of Liberation* (Et Chicago 1974); C. P. Wagner, *Latin American Theology: Radical or Evangelical?* (Grand Rapids 1970).
- 9 A. Barreiro, *Basic Ecclesial Communities. The Evangelisation of the Poor* (New York 1982).
- 10 D A. Lopez Trujilló, 'Les problèmes de l'Amérique latine', *Documentation Catholique* No. 1816 (18. 10. 1981).
- 11 Commission Théologique Internationale. ('Promotion humaine et salut chrétien', in *idem.*, *Textes et documents*, 1969-1985 (Paris 1988), pp. 167-168.
- 12 D. W. Fern, *Third World Liberation Theologies. An Introductory Survey* (New York 1986).
- 13 G. Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Et New York 1983); J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Et New York 1978). For Boff, see the bibliography in H. Cox, *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff. The Vatican and the future of World Christianity* (London 1989).
- 14 See *Documentation Catholique* No. 1758, for 18. 2. 1979.
- 15 P. Arrupe, 'L'analyse marxiste. Lettre aux provinciaux jésuites d' Amérique latine', *Documentation Catholique* No. 1808 (17. 5. 1981), para. 13.
- 16 Congrégation pour la Doctrine de la Foi, 'Dix Observations sur la théologie de Gustavo Gutiérrez', *Dialogue* No. 925 (22. 3. 1984).
- 11 *Trenta Giorni* for 3. 3. 1984.
- 12 My analysis appeared in: Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *Briefing* 84, Vol. 14, No. 20, for 7. 9. 1984.
- 19 Congregazione per la dottrina della Fede, 'Notificazione sul volume Chiesa: *Carisma e Potere. Saggio di ecclesiologia militante* del padre Leonardo Boff, O. F. M.', *Osservatore Romano* for 20.-21. 3. 1985.
- 20 *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* V. 71. 21H. Cox, *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff*, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-188. 22
- 21 It should be noted, however, that as early as 1986 liberation theologian in Latin America were already stressing the importance of political democracy as providing a space where the poor could gain a voice. See A. McGovern, S. J., 'Liberation Theology is Alive and Well', *Tablet*, 15. 9. 1990, pp. 1156-1157, and more widely his *Liberation Theology and its Critics* (Maryknoll 1989).
- 23 See P. Higgonet, 'When Man eats Man', a review of three studies of revolutionary France, in *Times Literary Supplement* No 4565, for 28.9. - 4. 10. 1990, pp. 1028-1029.
- 24 G. MacEoin, 'Latin America turns its back on the faith of its past' *Catholic Herald* for 5. 10. 1990.