It is brilliantly delivered, but the rendering is that of a *poseur*: we feel that we are in the presence of one of our finest musical ventriloquists. By the time of the bootleg tape of *I Shall Be Released* Dylan's voice strains and almost over-reaches itself: he comes across as being too weary, pushed into sound only by the directionless energy of total despair. But *Nashville Skyline* has an assured, comfortably mellow tone to it throughout, the one exception being *Girl From The North Country,* on which he is accompanied by Johnny Cash. Here Dylan's voice seems to reach back to a quality it had formerly, but the performance is almost nostalgic—anguish recollected in tranquillity. On the later album *New Morning* he seems to be simply too tired to sing much at all. We are left with the picture of Dylan, the family man, providing entertainment for the folks. The cowboy who stares out at us from the cover of *Nashville Skyline* has the contented look of one who can leave the public world behind and go home to his wife's country pie, perhaps even accompanied once again by Johnny Cash, though hopefully not (not yet) that friend of a friend, Billy Graham.

# Liberating Theology: Gustavo Gutierrez

## by Páraic Réamonn

A theology of liberation purports to answer the question of the relation between Christian faith and the struggle for human liberation. From within the Bolshevik party, Bukharin and Proebrazhensky thought the two antithetical: 'A communist who rejects the commandments of religion and acts in accordance with the directions of the party, ceases to be one of the faithful. On the other hand, one who, while calling himself a communist, continues to cling to his religious faith, one who in the name of religious commandments infringes the prescriptions of the party ceases thereby to be a communist'.[1] But Gutierrez is a Peruvian who writes as a Latin American. Things in that strife-torn continent are less ossified, as in the third part of his book[2] he makes clear. The struggle for liberation is not the possession of one revolutionary group or set of groups who can

[1]Bukharin & Preobrazhensky, The ABC of Communism (Penguin), p. 300.
[2]Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973) pp. xi, 323.

dictate the terms on which others may participate, and while the bulk of the church (for Gutierrez, the *Catholic* church) is still reactionary, many Christians are coming to see that their commitment to Christ places them within and not against or just outside the liberation process. Indeed, Gutierrez would claim, the scope and seriousness of the process of liberation is such that no one in Latin America, and no one in the world, is outside it (p. 143). Ostensible neutrality is a fraud, real neutrality a fiction. Gutierrez does not address himself to the world, though the world may have something to learn from him. He writes in a Latin American perspective, and for his own, for the oppressed and for the exploited.

At the same time, this is no political work in the ordinary sense, but genuinely a *theology* of liberation. To ask about the meaning in the light of faith of the struggle for liberation is to ask about the very meaning of the faith itself.

Gutierrez is a Catholic, and has written a very Catholic book, although the Cuban S.C.M. turns up in a footnote (p. 124 n. 27). This is a source both of strength and of weakness. The weakness shows in, for example, the disproportionate attention to magisterial pronouncements, although when he finds these inadequate, as often he does, they are marked down as transitional views, way-stations in the long march of the people of God from folly to wisdom. The strength can be seen in the clear rejection of the Barthian tradition, which too often sees in the real alienations of man but the semblance, the cloak, the exoteric form of the alienation of man not, as in Hegel, from the Idea, but from God.

His book is exciting, and even disturbing. It is also scholarly, with over seven hundred footnotes and a delightful index that places Bultmann between Bukharin and Buñuel, and Barth between Barabbas and Being.

Real human alienation is for Gutierrez no appearance, but a fact. Theology recognises it as real, and reveals its depth-meaning within the horizon of faith. Thus, by a sort of Chalcedonian arithmetic, the alienation of man from other men and so from himself is also the alienation of man from God. The struggle for communion among men and for liberation from all that alienates is equally the struggle for the communion of men with God. The disjunctions of dialectical theology wilt and die. Where their *groteske Felsenmelodie* lingers on, there is a gentle counterpoint in retort: 'Moltmann would give the impression that he does not keep sufficiently in mind the participation of man in his own liberation. . . . The present is denied because of the Promise and not because of a human, concrete historical experience' (p. 182 n. 41, p. 217).

Gutierrez's position is a reaction against what he calls the 'distinction of planes' model of the relation of faith and the secular. On this

model there is a very clear division of labour, within the unity of God's plan whose goal is the Kingdom, between Church and world. The building up of the earthly city is an autonomous endeavour existing in its own right and in it the Church as institution is not to interfere, save only through abstract moral pronouncement to be mediated to the concrete by the individual christian conscience. The Church's mission is evangelisation and that peculiar activity, the inspiration of the secular: I'll huff and I'll puff, and you'll build your house up. This model is thrown into crisis whenever Christians advert to the scope of misery and the oppressing and alienating relations in which the great majority of mankind exist, subsist, or perish: in this divided world, can it honestly be said that the Church does not interfere in the secular sphere? Is not neutrality a myth?

In fact, the principle of non-intervention does not hold across the board. By its silence or its friendship the Church as institution colludes with dictatorial and oppressive governments, while rapping on the knuckles those Christian movements or ministers who dare to embody their faith in subversive action. In fact, this model conceals the real option of a large section of the Latin American Church—support of the established order—and in dispensing it from effective defense of the exploited sets it free to preach a lyrical spiritual unity of all christians. But if the Church is not to be a distraction from reality, a subordinate amusement and a political satrap,[3] it has no choice but to put politics and the struggle for liberation at the centre of its life. And if the facts of life rebel against a distinction of planes, so do the reflections of theology.

Crucial, then, is Gutierrez's discussion of the theme of liberation and salvation (chapter 9). The related concept of sin makes its first entrance on page 35 in slightly alarming guise. It is a selfish turning in upon oneself which refuses to love one's neighbours and, therefore, the Lord himself. As becomes apparent, however, this is not to reduce the world's evil to an essentially subjective affair in the grand manner of Moral Rearmament, with its seductive programme of reaching socialism through the melting heart of Mr Heath. Rather does it react against the temptation of objectivist reduction, with its idolatry of fetishized structures. Egoism is no interior decor or attitude, but a social *praxis*. Alienation *is* alienated structures, but also this alienated human activity. An unjust situation is the child neither of chance nor of a fatal destiny: it is the work of man. The prophets said it clearly and energetically and we are discovering their words now. The Medellín characterisation of the Latin American situation as sinful and a rejection of the Lord refers not merely to the individual abuses of the powerful: it challenges all their practices. Sin, then, is not an individual, private, or merely interior reality, but a

[3]The phrases are C. Wright Mills'. See his The Causes of World War III.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1973.tb07207.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

social, historical fact: 'the absence of brotherhood and love in relationships among men, the breach of friendship with God and with other men, and therefore, an interior, personal fracture' (p. 175).

A transformation in one's understanding of sin demands and evokes a corresponding change in one's notion of salvation. Yet one of the great deficiencies of contemporary theology, in Gutierrez's view, is the absence of a profound and lucid reflection on precisely this theme. New edifices are erected on the old foundations. 'The moment comes, however, when the whole building totters; this is the time to look again to the foundations' (p. 149). History, luckily, has prepared the way. Confronted with the awkward fact of the 'pagans' (ah, nostalgia, how the memories flood back!), and with the question of their salvation, the Church moved over centuries from excessive preoccupation with itself as mediator of grace to a firm affirmation of the universality of salvation (cf. I Tim. 2:5). In so shifting, however, it has called in question the very notion of salvation with which it began.

In this notion, salvation is a cure for sin in this life attained in a life beyond. The perspective is moralistic, with the present life a test and one's performance relative to the transcendent end adjudicated by a heavenly choir of assessors. We graduate to heaven, and our spirituality is one of flight from the world. This notion is undermined as soon as it was affirmed, in the search for a way to extend the possibility of salvation to all, that man is saved when he opens himself to God and to others, even when he does not clearly understand that he is doing so. For then salvation cannot be merely otherworldly and the present life just a test. To speak of the presence of grace in all is to place a Christian value on the whole of human activity. Human existence, in the last instance, is then nothing but a yes or a no to the Lord. Salvation—the communion of men with God and of men among themselves—embraces all human reality to transform it and lead it to its fullness in Christ. The world beyond is not the 'true life' contrasted with the shadowy existence of this vale of tears, but rather the transformation and fulfillment of the present. The prophetic perspective is vindicated before the wisdom outlook. The content of history is retrieved, and the criticism of the young Engels rebutted: 'It is rather the Christians who with the setting forth of a separate "history of the Kingdom of God" deny all inner significance to actual history and appropriate this significance only for their partisan, abstract and even also fictional history which, by the perfecting of the human race in their Christ, has history reaching an imaginary goal, breaking it off in the midst of its course, and now compelled as a result to picture the following 1,800 years as barren folly and sheer emptiness'.[4]

[4] *Review of Thomas Carlyle's 'Past and Present'* in Selsam & Martel, ed., Reader in Marxist Philosophy (International Publishers), p. 237.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1973.tb07207.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

There is, then, only one history: the history of man. But this is not, as it was for Engels, the history only of man, of man without God. The growth of the Kingdom is not reduced to the liberation of man. It is a process which occurs historically *in* the liberation, yet liberation will not conquer the very roots of oppression without the coming of the Kingdom, which is above all a gift. The distinction is made from a dynamic viewpoint, so that nothing in history is outwith the sphere of action of Christ and his spirit. Those 'who reduce the work of salvation are indeed those who limit it to the strictly "religious" sphere and are not aware of the universality of the process. It is those who think that the work of Christ touches the social order in which we live only indirectly or tangentially, and not in its roots and basic structure. It is those who in order to protect salvation (or to protect their interests) lift salvation from the midst of history, where men and social classes struggle to liberate themselves from the slavery and oppression to which other men and social classes have subjected them. It is those who refuse to see that the salvation of Christ is a radical liberation from all misery, all despoliation, all alienation. It is those who by trying to "save" the work of Christ will "lose" it' (pp. 177-178).

The position is lucidly exposed and defended with a wealth of Biblical argument, which we shall not notice here. This is also true of the expansion of the position in the four chapters following: in analysing the way we meet God in history, the connections between eschatology and politics (the liberation and salvation theme from the viewpoint of the future), what the Church should be doing but isn't (mission), and the complex Biblical meaning of poverty.

Perhaps the most interesting section of the work for this reviewer, because of its intimate bearing on the most recent concerns of the S.C.M.[6] is that on the spirituality of liberation. Latin Americans who opt for the liberation struggle are in many ways a first Christian generation, lacking a theological tradition. If their revolutionary choices seem to estrange them from the Christian community, this is in part because for some the encounter with the Lord, a God filtered by longtime Christian indifference to oppression, dissolves in the struggle, but in larger part, perhaps, because they are looked upon as deviant and even dangerous by Christians who domesticate the gospel. If they are not always able to spell out the profound meaning of their commitment, this is because existing theological languages are inadequate to express it. Yet their inarticulate commitments and stumbling explanations show forth a greater understanding of the faith, indeed, greater faith, than does the desiccated Christianity of respectable Christian circles. Still, if the revolutionary Christian needs a theology, even more he needs a spirituality, a 'concrete manner, in-

[5]Alistair Kee, ed., Seeds of Liberation (SCM Press, forthcoming).

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1973.tb07207.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

spired by the Spirit, of living the Gospel', a 'definite way of living before the Lord in solidarity with all men, with the Lord, and before men' (p. 204). There are presented an invaluable set of clues on the topics of conversion, grace, prayer, joy, and communal celebration, culminating in a succinct discussion of the Magnificat.

Equally telling is the discussion of the political attitudes of Jesus. The very question may surprise: even those who reject an etherealized christianity can retain the residue of a 'religious' Jesus, a 'Jesus of hieratic, stereotyped gestures, all representing theological themes'. Here Gutierrez is quoting Joseph Comblin: 'To explain an action of Jesus is to find in it several theological meanings. In this way, the life of Jesus is no longer a human life, submerged in history, but a theological life—an icon. As happens with icons, his actions lose their human context and are stylized, becoming transformed into signs of the transcendent and invisible world'. Jesus and those whom he befriends, or whom he confronts and whose hostility he earns, are there 'reciting a script' (p. 226).

Yet it is important not to reject this docetism only to fall into the reductionism of a Brandon, which would simply substitute one irrelevant Jesus for another. Gutierrez knows about Brandon, but he does not follow him. Concentrating on three aspects of the political Jesus, he draws the lines of similarity and difference between him and the Zealots, brings out his consistent confrontation of those in power, and finds with Cullmann that the Romans condemned him *as* a Zealot, although the accusation was not 'solidly established' (p. 229). But he cannot agree with Cullmann that the political stance of Jesus stemmed from a mistaken 'eschatological radicalism'; rather, it flows from the very heart of the gospel message.

Finally, Gutierrez asks about the meaning of Christian unity in a divided world,[6] and answers that the meaning is a myth. Class divisions confront the Church and, what is more, exist within it. Christ is not divided, but Christians are. Pious attempts by popes of this or other names to cloak division with the fiction of a 'spiritual' unity are at once flight from reality and adhesion to the ruling class. Under the rubric of a religion floating mystically above society, the true character of christian community is falsified. Authentic christian unity has as its premise the option for the oppressed, but conversion to the oppressed requires the recognition and understanding of class struggle, that is, of a reality which contradicts the ecumenical myth. Authentic unity is not a given, but the gift of God and the historical conquest of man. There is born a new ecumenism in opposition to the old, established brands.

Theology for Gutierrez is a critical reflection on historical *praxis* conducted within the horizon of faith. It is to be critical not merely

[6]Compare Mario Miegge, *What is the meaning of christian unity in a divided world?* Student World No. 1, 1968.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1973.tb07207.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

by allying itself with a critical *secular* reflection on that *praxis* (broadly speaking, with marxism) but also epistemologically (p. 11). Theologians have minds and use them, and can advert to that use in order to study it. Only so will theology become a *self-critical* discourse. Gutierrez does not thematise this self-criticism in any systematic fashion. Yet his views on methodology emerge fragmentarily in the book, and it is worth noticing two of them. First, theology grows out of theology. In every christian and in every christian group there is a rough outline of a theology, something like a pre-understanding of the faith which shows itself in life, action, attitude. This pre-understanding provides the foundation on which the theological edifice properly so called may be erected. It is a jumping-off point, but also the soil in which theology sinks its roots and from which it derives its strength. Theology as critical reflection grows out of precritical theology. Secondly, theology allies political discourse to itself as an autonomous moment within a larger viewpoint. A direct, immediate relation of faith to political action is denied (p. 236). Faith is mediated to action by theology but also, and importantly, by 'rational analyses of reality'. Where the autonomy of politics is not sufficiently respected, the result is a politico-religious messianism. Such messianism regularly is the reaction to a situation where the messianists find themselves unable to respond in appropriate political terms: it is a substitute for political *praxis.* It is not the function of theology so to substitute itself for politics, but to 'take on, transform and fulfil in an unsuspected way' politics (p. 270): to *sublate* it.[7] On this position, the answer to the hoary old question, whether theology depends on politics or politics on theology, is that both claims are true.

The problem which the theology of liberation poses, as Gutierrez argues, is simultaneously traditional and new (p. x). The answer he proposes is thus also traditional and new. The clues to the answer are scattered throughout the pages of contemporary theology, and to that extent are traditional. But to reach that answer one has not merely to advert to the clues. What in Gutierrez is new and startling is the insight that places the clues in a uniquely illuminating and inspiring perspective. He closes this work with a paraphrase of Pascal: 'we can say that all the political theologies, the theologies of hope, of revolution, and of liberation, are not worth one act of genuine solidarity with exploited social classes' (p. 308). Yet to take this humble acknowledgement as an excuse to forsake theology for a narrowly conceived *praxis,* at a time and in a situation of great theoretical confusion is, as Lenin was quick to observe in a related context, 'like wishing mourners at a funeral many happy returns of the day'. Gutierrez's book is no less important for not being narrowly practical. The theology of liberation is the liberation of theology.

[7] Bernard Lonergan, Method in Theology (Darton, Longman & Todd) p. 241.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1973.tb07207.x Published online by Cambridge University Press