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An Evaluation Of Liberation Theology in The Light Of Its Praxis

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Abstract:

This article is presented to see how Liberation Theology uses the Scripture wrongly in interpreting their mission. Liberation Theology brings also to the new approach for the third world country. This is how Christian should response Liberation Theology from its praxis.

I. Introduction

The arising of a new theology, which is called 'Liberation Theology', brings a reflection how theology can be seen from praxis. The thrust of "Liberation Theology" is a concern to interpret the Gospel in the context of the sufferings of the poor, the crying for justice and freedom.¹ Their approach to theology and practice, however, has gone so far from the Holy Scripture. As a result of it, salvation, according to them, has become universal salvation and it is totally human works. Thus, it leads us to consider how far theology can go in practice. So, this essay will flow with three main points; firstly, we will see what the "Liberation Theology" wants to say and secondly, the assessment of it and finally, we propose the limitation of doing theology in practice.

Liberation Theology: The Historical Background of Liberation Theology

Eddy Muskus points out that the "Theology of Liberation" is a combination of the subcontinent of Latin America and Roman Catholic thinkers.² This theology reflects

¹ Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, which is cited on Conn, H M, 'Liberation Theology', *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair Ferguson and David Wright, (Leicester, IVP, 1988), p. 388, say faith + oppression equals Liberation Theology.

² See Muskus, Eddy, 'Liberation Theology: Its Origin and Early Development', *Foundation*, (No. 29, Autumn, 1992), p/ 30

upon the problems of desperate poverty, on the one hand, and extremes of wealth or injustice, on the other hand. A United Nations reports in 1950s described poverty in Latin America, where two-thirds of the population are below the starvation level in some regions.³ Jose Miguez Bonino describes the almost universal appalling poverty in 1970s with high unemployment and low wages.⁴

Developmentalism supposed to help the economy of Latin America, failed, because according to liberation theologians, developmentalism has a negative connotation.⁵ Developmentalism has become *“a synonym of reformism and modernisation and does not attack the root of the matter”*.⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez argues that the supporters of developmentalism do not attack the root of evil and instead they cause confusion and frustration.⁷ He argues more, that *“the truth is that both [injustice and poverty] in its purely sociological analysis as well as its missiological and theological reflection, spiritual, and ethical aspects remain in subjection to the economic and social factors within the context of a political ideology.”*⁸ In other words, according to Gutierrez, the solution is that, the church ought to identify itself with the oppressed and poor.

Having said that, the “Liberation of Theology” has its inception in the oppression and colonialism in Latin America. Christianity was brought by the Spanish to Latin America for the purpose conquering the world for God and Spain. For four centuries the Roman Catholic Church played a prominent role in Latin America.⁹ The Society was divided, with on the top, the church leaders and the state and, on the bottom, the blacks. Thus it leads Gutierrez to mix poverty and politics to resolve the problems, when he says, *“When I discovered that poverty was something to be fought against, that poverty was structural, that poor people were a class, it became crystal clear that in order to serve the poor, one had to move into political action...”*¹⁰

³ See Torrance, Alan J., ‘The Theology of Liberation in Latin America’, *Different Gospels (Christian Orthodoxy and Modern Theologies)*, Andrew Walker ed., (London, SPCK, 1993), pp. 121 -124.

⁴ Bonino, Jose Miguez, cited on Torrance Alan J, *op. Cit.*, p. 122

⁵ See Nunez, Emilio A., *Liberation Theology*, (Chicago, Moody Press, 1985), p. 29

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29

⁷ Gutierrez, Gustavo, cited on Emilio Nunez, *op. Cit.*, p. 30

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See Smith, David L., *A Handbook Contemporary Theology*, (Illinois, A Bridge Point Book, 1992), p. 205

¹⁰ Gutierrez, which is cited on David Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 206

The Tehology Of Liberation

From what has been said above, it can be drawn that the methodology of “Liberation Theology” is that “the view from below”. As a result, the starting point of theology, according to them is in the context of the pain of the downtrodden and outcast. Theology, therefore, *“gains a concrete understanding of the world in which faith is lived and therefore of question which it must respond to in order to enable Christians to test and strengthen the efficacy of their obedience.”*¹¹ David Smith sees a difference between traditional theology, which relies on the Holy Scriptures for its structure and on the other hand, “Liberation Theology” learning toward the social science.¹² For “Liberation Theology”, therefore, theology is fundamentally critical reflection on action.¹³ Gutierrez asserts very strongly that *“it [Christian community in its activity of reflection] is the soil into which theological reflection stubbornly and permanently sinks its roots and from which it derives its strength.”*¹⁴ The critical reflection on praxis according to Gutierrez, is that, *“the reflection would be then necessarily be criticism of society and the church insofar as they are called and addressed by the Word of God; it would be a critical theory, worked out in the light of the Word accepted in faith and inspired by a practical purpose and therefore indissolubly linked to historical praxis.”*¹⁵

The influence of Marxism is explicit with regard to use of praxis in the theology of Liberation.¹⁶ Gutierrez acknowledges that the concept of praxis is influenced by Marxist thought, focusing on praxis and geared to transformation of the world.¹⁷ The most important area of Marxist influence is on the base of Liberation Theology, which is history and history itself denotes the social, political and economic realities of daily existence. Leonardo Boff asserts that Liberation Theology uses Marxism as a tool to understand the world of the oppressed in terms in economic and class struggles and the

¹¹ Smith, David L., *op. cit.*, p. 204

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See Boff, Leonardo, ‘The Originality of the Theology of Liberation’, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Madura, (New York, Orbis Book, 1989), pp. 41 – 42; and see also David Smith says methodology critical reflection on praxis as a “meaning something different from the familiar practice, praxis describes the circular traffic this is always going on between action and reflection...It is the never ending dialectical process...in which action forces me to reflection and reflection forces me to action again...Through praxis people seek not merely to understand the world, but to change it.”(p. 204)

¹⁴ Gutierrez, Gustavo, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, (New York, Orbis Book, 1973), p. 3

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 11

¹⁶ Kirk, Andrew, ‘Liberation Theology’, *Christian Graduate*, (Vol. 32, No. 1, March 79), p. 26

¹⁷ Gutierrez, Gustavo, *op. cit.*, p. 9

mystifying power of ideologies, including religious ones.¹⁸ Liberation Theology, therefore, maintains a decidedly critical stance in relation to Marxism, but Marxism can never be the guide, because “You have only one teacher, the Christ (Mat. 23: 10).”¹⁹

The obvious result of Marxist philosophical influence as the point of departure for theological reflection is that not only is Latin America society analysed by social science, nor only theological reflection, but also is praxis itself. So, it is not surprising that theology is the product of pastoral activity, which is the presence and activity of the Church in the world.²⁰ In other words, theology is the second step where praxis precedes reflection.

The Hermeneutics of Liberation Theology

According to the Liberation Theology, theology has a liberating function in its close relationship to historical praxis, so then truth can change. Gustavo Gutierrez seems to deny the orthodoxy of theology himself, but he criticises the evangelical theology, as a static and in long run, sterile.²¹ He asserts strongly that theology, which “*grows and in certain sense changes a truth, which is also the way*”²², is not a matter of the relationship between systematic theology and historical theology, but the relationship between theory and practice and between understanding faith and social practice. The question arises: Does Liberation Theology move from the Word? Does not Liberation theology deny the reliability of the Bible?

Hugo Assmann says that the Bible is not a direct source of criteria and a result, revelation does not exist as a reality in itself, except as historically mediated.²³ Thus Assmann believes that it is impossible to reach ‘theological purism’. However, the supremacy of historical praxis over theology and the Bible is present in the thought of Assmann. Faith, according to Assmann, “*must be understood as basically its practice, its working out in history rather than the simple sense of practising the faith.*”²⁴ Liberation Theology does not deny the reality of sin, but affirms it emphatically. The Apostle Paul,

¹⁸ Boff, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, (Kent, Burns & Oates, 1986), p. 28

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 28

²⁰ See Nunez, Emilio, *op. cit.*, p. 140

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 144

²² *Ibid.*

²³ See Assmann, Hugo, *Theology for A Nomad Church*, (New York, Orbis Book, 1971), pp. 60 - 61

²⁴ Assmann, Hugo, cited on Emilio Nunez, *op.cit.*, p. 147

according to Jose Miranda, teaches sin as incarnated in social structures.²⁵ In other words, sin is not individual, but social. Gutierrez asserts the evidence of sin is in oppressive social class structure. Therefore, *“sin appears as the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice exploitation”*.²⁶ As a result, it demands a radical liberation, which in turn necessary implies a political liberation. Thus, it leads liberation theologians to consider that salvation is ‘in historic’, not ‘a historic’, where it is the action of God here and now. Salvation is for the total man and has also economic and social dimensions.²⁷ Thus, salvation, for Gutierrez, is the work of God and the work of man in a synergism of faith and works.

According to Liberation Theology, the understanding of Jesus must be based in praxis, because Jesus is the Liberator from social injustice. It leads them to criticise classical Christology by saying that classical theology does not lead Christian to an ethic and a behaviour which is typically Christian, so that dogmatic Christology does not liberate, nor does it support Liberation movements²⁸. Thus the point of departure for Liberation Theology to understand Jesus is *“not only revealed by historical-critical studies of the New Testament, but also the Christ that emerges out of liberating historical praxis”*.²⁹ It seems that the method of Christology is no longer ‘from above’ or ‘from below’, but Christology, according to them, should give primacy to the anthropological aspects over the ecclesiological and to orthopraxis over orthodoxy. At the same time, the kingdom of God becomes universal and radical, because the norm of the kingdom becomes Jesus Himself. So, to enter the kingdom is not by orthodoxy, but through orthopraxis.³⁰ As Gutierrez says that, *“the kingdom is realised in a society of brotherhood and justice; and in turn, this revelation opens up the promise and hope of complete communication of all men with God.”* ³¹*The political is grafted into the eternal.*³²

²⁵ Miranda, Jose, *Marx and The Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression*, (New York, Orbis Book, 1980), p. 181

²⁶ Gutierrez, Gustavo, *Theology of Liberation*, *op. cit.*, p. 176

²⁷ Nunez, Emilio, *op. cit.*, p. 178

²⁸ See *Ibid.*, p. 209

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 214

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 226

³¹ Gutierrez, Gustavo, *A Theology of Liberation*, *op. cit.*, p. 231

³² *Ibid.*

II. Assessment of Liberation Theology

Evangelical Response

The 'new way of doing theology' has been seriously challenged by the Evangelicals. Andrew Kirk argues that Liberation Theology has accepted Marxism uncritically as a tool to discover and to interpret the problems in the society. As a result, *"Liberation Theology is not either an explanation of reality or future projection of theoretical ideal; rather it is a project – something that has to be worked for by stages with sacrifice and determination."*³³ The outcome is that, Marxism distorts, as well as clarifies, the total dynamic of human history and church to be a means of social change, because Marxism does not consider the reality of man's alienation from God, who is the only true foundation and meaning of existence. This leads Andrew Kirk to state that conservative Evangelical Christians, *"the uses of an ideology of Marxism as hermeneutics criterion for the study and exposition of the Scriptures is totally unacceptable."*³⁴

Dayton Roberts warns that, in Liberation Theology, a new understanding of the importance of the poor in the plan of God should not be allowed to swing the pendulum too far the other way. He argues that, *"it is not necessarily true what is good news for the poor is consequently bad news for the rich. When we take into account the entire Biblical context we shall see that we are all stand equally naked before the Holy God."*³⁵ Eddy Muskus seems to agree with him by quoting David P Seccombe's thesis that the word poor (ptokoi) is a characterisation of Israel in need of salvation.³⁶ Support for that statement comes from E J Young, who says that *"...such affliction and poverty, however, are not to be understood merely in material sense; rather these words appears to refer to the devout and pious who endures suffering patiently trusting the Lord."*³⁷ Eddy Muskus, therefore, concludes that the Gospel, which Jesus preached is intended to reach people, who are spiritually bankrupt in the sight of God and Jesus Christ himself can supply through his substitutionary atonement.³⁸

³³ Kirk, Andrew, 'A Christian Understanding of Liberation', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, (Vol. 10, no. 2, April 1986), p. 131

³⁴ Kirk, Andrew, which is cited o Emilio Nunez, *op. cit.*, p. 52

³⁵ Roberts, Dayton W., 'Liberation Theologies: Looking at poverty from the Underside', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, (Vol. 10, no. 2, April 1986), p. 111

³⁶ Muskus, Eddy, *op. cit.*, p. 37

³⁷ Young, E. J., *Isaiah vol. 3*, (Grand Rapids, William Erdmann, 1972), p. 91

³⁸ Muskus, Eddy, *op. cit.*, p. 39

Nunez argues against the Liberation Theology, who stating that, the traditional Evangelical theology *“uses ‘Greek’ categories, but they do not do so in the name of Biblical categories, but of sociological ones and incidentally as specific one.”*³⁹ He says strongly that majority conservative Evangelicals do not come to the Scripture under the influence of ideology, but the Bible, which is the Word of God and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to communicate the Word to people.⁴⁰ He insists clearly that, *“Evangelicals are convinced that the scale must be the Word of God, which is totally inspired and not a social or political prejudice.”*⁴¹ On the other hand, he sees that Liberation Theology is more interested in the Words and deeds of Jesus than in discussion of His person. As a result, it is no wondering that Liberation Theology situation.⁴² They [Liberation Theologians] make disproportionate emphasis on the self liberating praxis of man for the edification of the Kingdom of God. McKay, however, argues that Liberation does not see throughout the Bible that *“salvation is directed to man’s total well-being and this underlined by the Christian hope of resurrection of the body.”*⁴³ So, the essence of salvation is the restoration of a proper relationship between God and man and consequently between man and his fellows and his environment through the atoning death of Christ, not liberating in terms of social justice.

A Critical Evaluation

We have already seen how Liberation Theology tries to re-read the Bible and Church pronouncements from the perspective of the oppressed classes. They, however, challenge evangelicals to see how theology can put it into practice. The author agrees with McKay when he says that *“it has become common in this century to find evangelical being dismissed as socially irrelevant or having concern only soul of men and women, regardless of the conditions in which they must live and work.”*⁴⁴ Evangelicals often react to the “Social Gospel” by an exclusive concentration on the saving of soul and limiting the aspects of life addressed by the Good News. As John Corrie see the

³⁹ Nunez, Emilio, *op. cit.*, p. 168

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 208

⁴³ McKay, D. J., ‘Salt in Society: A Kingdom Perspective’, *Evangel*, (Vol. 6, no. 3, Autumn, 1988), p.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13

inadequacy of the relevance of the Western Church in a post modern context, because the Church is not involved and identified as the 'church-with-others'.⁴⁵

Evangelicals, perhaps, are afraid of social issues, because they can lead to an abandonment of evangelism.⁴⁶ The argument, however, is that 'social issue' has deteriorated in the past years, because of poor theology. The sad thing is that those who have the right theology have not applied it to social issues. We, however, have to ask: how far can we go for social action? It is true, for Evangelicals, that we must continue to believe the Bible and in fact the Bible is the Word of God. In other hand of the Holy Spirit, it is capable of communicating its message to our life as well as to Latin American people.⁴⁷ This means in no way that we ignore the contribution of the Biblical sciences, nor does it mean that we do not listen to the cry of Latin American people.

Moreover, the social context must be seriously taken into account for a legitimate contextualisation of the Biblical text. Nunez is right when he says "*the interaction in theological task between the Biblical text and the social context is only valid as long as Scriptures is allowed to speak for itself.*"⁴⁸

For the Liberation Theologians, theology does not consist of a critical, sociological analysis of the Latin American situation, but includes much more than a description of economic, social and political reality.⁴⁹ Their philosophy level emphasises action or praxis, which is the philosophy of transforming the society. If they have done so, would their work be described as a philosophy or sociology, rather than theology of Liberation? For Liberation Theology, using Marxism as a tool to analyse the form of society is unwise because this leads to the creation of a new humanity and a new world.⁵⁰ McKay sees Marxism providing a complete worldview, which cannot be reconciled with a consistently Christian worldview.⁵¹ He seems to be right, because it is not surprising to see that Liberation Theology defines creation as the first salvific act, because God, according to them, creates a new man.⁵² They affirm that if there is an old creation, thus

⁴⁵ See Corrie, John, 'A New Way of Being the Church?', *Evangel*, (Vol. 14, no. 2, 1996), p. 50

⁴⁶ See Chester, Timothy, *Awakening to a World of Need*, (Leicester, IVP, 1993), p. 75

⁴⁷ See Nunez, Emilio, *op. cit.*, p. 168

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168

⁴⁹ Gutierrez, Gustavo, 'The Task and Content of Liberation Theology' (trans. Judith Condor, *Liberation Theology*, Rowland Christopher ed.), (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 27-29

⁵⁰ Bockmuel Klaus, which is cited on MacKay, *op. cit.*, p. 14

⁵¹ McKay, *op. cit.*, p. 14

⁵² See Gutierrez, which is cited on Nunez, p. 184

there is possibility of a new creation, because history is a continual process in which man carries out creative work.⁵³

Gutierrez seems to prove his thesis by asking a question, but *“if man does not contribute to his own creation, but rather is merely an object of the divine fiat, how can creation become integrated into history, which is constructed by the effort of man? Did God bring about creation by the help of man?”*⁵⁴ We, however, need to challenge them by asking a question: if the ‘creation is the first salvific act’, does it really mean that all people are saved by having been created? The writer is not sure whether Gutierrez wishes to go on such a journey. Surely there is no connection between creation and salvation, which Gutierrez proposes, because the Old Testament passages⁵⁵ do not prove that the creation is the first salvific act of God for all human beings, but rather Yahweh redeems His people with the same power when He created men.

The Limitation of Theology

From what has been said above, it follows that the Bible must be the scale of theology as a reflection on praxis, because the basis for genuine Evangelical thought is not what particular theologians says, but what the Lord says in His written Word. Thus the Bible must be the main source of knowledge for the Evangelical Theologians and his maximum authority.

On the other hand, Rene Padilla is right when he argues for Liberation Theology by saying: *“the conclusion is that if theology must be a critical on praxis in the light of faith, the hermeneutical circulation between past and present, in Scripture and historical situation, is inevitable. The answer for a rationalistic theology preoccupied by orthodoxy, as well as for pragmatic theology preoccupied by orthopraxis, is a contextual theology preoccupied simultaneously by loyalty to the Word of God and pertinence to the historical situation.”*⁵⁶

III. Conclusion

Liberation Theology is an alternative way of doing theology. Its point of departure and hermeneutical norm is not the written revelation of God, but the social context of Latin America and the revolutionary praxis striving to create there a new man

⁵³ See Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation, op. cit.*, p. 154

⁵⁴ Gutierrez, which is quoted by Nunez, *op. cit.*, p. 185

⁵⁵ See Isaiah 43: 1; 44: 24 and 55: 4

⁵⁶ Padilla, Rene, which is quoted by Nunez, *op. cit.*, p. 170

and a new society within a socialist system, as a supposed manifestation of the Kingdom of God. Evangelicals, however, are right to argue that the Bible must be the means of putting theology into practice. Evangelicals need to remember that we are the citizens of the Kingdom, described by Jesus as the salt and the light in society (Matt. 5: 13-16). So the image of the salt is to be rubbed into society to exercise a persevering influence and the image of the lights is to bring the light into this dark world. On the other hand, we urge Liberation Theologians to see their practice in the light of what God says in His written Word, the Bible.

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