

**Liberation Theology  
in Latin America**

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Little over a year ago, many were filled with a sense of outrage and shock over the brutal murder of six Roman Catholic priests along with their housekeeper and her daughter in San Salvador, El Salvador. The recently escalating civil war in that country serves to underline the nature of the oppression common throughout Latin America and also the fact that many of Latin America's people are fed up. Poverty has been enforced on the masses by the ruling elites for centuries and the cries for justice are growing stronger.

In contrast to El Salvador, in other countries there are signs of hope. Brazil two years ago held the first fully free and democratic elections based on popular vote in 29 years. While many of Latin American governments are loosening restrictions on civil liberties such as free speech and the right to dissent, it is not clear that this will necessarily alleviate the mass poverty and hunger afflicting the continent.

During the past two decades the plight of the poor has become a major concern for Christian theologians and ethicists in Latin America. Serving the poor in parishes has led many theologian/priests into a inescapable confrontation with the devastating results of oppression. They have chosen to identify themselves with the poor and to develop a theology of liberation. It is the controversy over this theology that most likely provided motivation for the above mentioned assassinations.

Liberation theologians have based their work on a marxian analysis of the roots of oppression and poverty. Right wing governments quite naturally look upon this as subversive. Those supporting Liberation Theology sometimes approach it with an enthusiasm bordering on utopianism. Many questions remain.

This paper will attempt to reflect on the hope for Latin American liberation from the point of view of Reformed evangelicalism. While this involves a critique of the liberationist perspective it is not merely an exercise in polemics. Rather this paper intends to take seriously Jesus admonitions in Matthew 25 concerning what he expects from believers in their treatment of the poor.

We will be looking primarily at the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Brazilian brothers Leonardo and Clodovis Boff. Also, the work of José Miguez Bonino will be considered. Rather than an exhaustive analysis of their work, the key ideas of the Boff's liberation theology in the Brazilian context will be treated along with an examination of Gutiérrez's and Miguez Bonino's basic contribution. It is the thesis of this paper that while the analysis of the causes of oppression and its solution given by Liberation Theology are misplaced, nevertheless, Latin America is in need of liberation and Liberation Theology can serve as a useful signpost alerting Reformed Christians to the task of helping to bring this liberation about.

### **Gustavo Gutiérrez**

Gustavo Gutiérrez's landmark book *A Theology of Liberation*, published in 1973, established liberation Theology a force to be reckoned with in the years to come. The 15th anniversary edition published two years ago demonstrates the staying power of the movement as its ideas and strategies have been refined. Gutiérrez is currently viewed as the patriarch of the movement being one of its oldest and chief champions.

In summarizing Gutiérrez one may begin by noting that his theology is a serious attempt at bringing a faith perspective to bear on the real situation in Latin America. Gutiérrez, represents an approach that has become typical of liberationists in that theology is represented

as something that must be done from the bottom up. Theology starts from the historical situation, particularly the viewpoint of the poor and begins its reflection there (Gutiérrez, 1988:xxix). A corollary to this is the notion that fixed truths are sterile. Instead, theological truth changes with the changing circumstances of history. In the Latin American context of the oppression of the poor, theology must focus on the promise of liberation.

For Gutiérrez theology is, above all, tied to history. All of history, from creation to the present, is said to be God's working out the process of universal salvation. All of history is sacred and is revelatory of God's redemptive plan and the actualizing of the Kingdom of God. Hence, all of theology is eschatological. The Kingdom of God is a historical project that is brought about when the poor take action to create a world of justice for all (Gutiérrez, 1988:97).

Salvation is defined similar to the Kingdom.

Salvation is not something otherworldly, in regard to which the present life is merely a test. Salvation - the communion of human beings with God and among themselves - is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ ... (Gutiérrez, 1988:85)

Salvation is thus, relational. It involves the actualizing of the Kingdom in a just social and political order.

The primary historical reality of poverty that Gutiérrez is concerned about is analyzed using the dialectical theory of Karl Marx. Liberation theologians view reality in terms of class struggle and hence see the root of Latin American oppression in the international capitalist system. Hence, the realization of the Kingdom is taking place in the struggle for a socialist revolution. Only in this way, it is said, can humanity become the "...artisan of its own destiny"

(Gutiérrez, 1988:51-57). The coming of the Kingdom means building a just society and this must be done via socialism.

This brief and admittedly superficial treatment of Gutiérrez raises for us some of the basic themes of liberation theology. As we examine the Boff brothers we will see them in greater detail.

### **Leonardo and Clodovis Boff**

Among liberation theologians Leonardo Boff is one of the more well known and prolific. He gained a degree of notoriety with his book *Church, Charism and Power*, resulting in his being called to Rome to give an account, mainly at the instigation of Cardinal Ratzinger. The resulting year of silence imposed by the Vatican did not encourage him to repent nor to cease his writing. Along with his brother Clodovis, Boff has explored the implications of the theology of liberation for a variety of issues. Together the Boff's have also produced an excellent and concise summary of their position entitled *Como Fazer Teologia da Libertação*.<sup>1</sup> This will be our main source in exploring their thought.

#### **Context**

Consistent with the overarching concern to produce a theology of and for the people, *Como Fazer Teologia da Libertação* is written in very clear and easy to read Portuguese. Liberation Theology is intended to be accessible to the masses. Eschewing the Roman Catholic tradition of rationalistic and abstract theology it is even stated that Liberation Theology is not

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<sup>1</sup>Literally, *How to Do Liberation Theology*, this title is rendered *Introduction to Liberation Theology* in English, thus missing the whole point of the Boffs' purpose in writing.

primarily a new method of doing theology. Instead "... a Teologia da Libertação é um novo modo de ser teólogo." (liberation theology is a new way to be a theologian.) (Boff and Boff, 1986b:38) Thus, the Boff's emphasize the need for a level of personal transformation in the life of the theologian before the academic aspect of theology begins. This transformation concerns adopting the point of view of the poor.

To pretend to "discuss liberation theology" *without seeing the poor* is to miss the whole point, for one fails to see the central problem of the theology being discussed. For the kernel and core of liberation theology is not theology but liberation. It is not the theologian but the poor who count in this theology. (Boff and Boff, 1986a:11, italics theirs)

Seeing things from the perspective of the poor is not done in an abstract way, but in a very concrete way. It involves living with the poor and sharing in their struggles. A fundamental assumption implicit in the Boff's discussion is that Christians have a *compromisso* (obligation or pledge) to fulfill to the poor. This may take three forms for the theologian, depending upon what the circumstances may permit. First a theologian may have a more restricted contact consisting of sporadic visits and encounters or regular weekend visits to parishes. A second method is to alternate periods of theoretical work with practical pastoral work in a specific church. The third would be to live among the poor and the common people, working with them on a daily basis. (Boff and Boff, 1986b:39) This final option seems to be the most preferred if it is possible.

It is important to understand that this living with the poor is also not a matter of mere "participant observation" as if research were the main object. The devastation and depth of poverty is far too great for that. The Boff's give the following statistics from Latin America as evidence:

500 million starving

1 billion 600 million with life expectancy less than 60 years, many dying before age forty-five

1 billion suffering absolute poverty

1 billion 500 million without minimal medical care

500 million underemployed and unemployed with per capita income less than 150 dollars

814 million illiterate

2 billion in need of a stable and secure source of water  
(Boff and Boff, 1986b:13)

Living with the poor removes these facts from the realm of mere statistics, however, and puts names and faces to the suffering here described.<sup>2</sup>

Having set this context for the development of their theory one would expect the Boffs to move into methodology. Prior to doing so, however, they expand the context in such a way

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<sup>2</sup>The following story, told by the Boffs, provides graphic illustration of the context of poverty.

"Certo dia, em plena seca do Nordeste brasileiro, uma das regiões mais famélicas do mundo, encontrei um bispo trêmulo, entrando casa adentro. ' Sr. bispo, o que aconteceu?' E ele, arfando, respondeu que presenciara algo terrível. Encontrou uma senhora com três crianças com mais uma ao colo na frente da Catedral. Viu que estavam desmaiando de fome. A criança ao colo parecia morta. Ele disse: 'Mulher, dê de mamar à criança!' 'Não posso, senhor bispo!', respondeu ela. O bispo voltou a insistir várias vezes. E ela sempre respondia: 'Sr. bispo, não posso!' Por fim, por causa da insistência do bispo, ela abriu o seio. E estava sangrando. A criancinha atirou-se com violência ao seio. E sugava sangue. A mãe que gerou esta vida, a alimentava, ... com sua própria vida, com sua sangue."

(One day, during a drought in the Brazilian northeast, one of the world's worst regions of famine, I encountered a bishop trembling entering inside the house. "Bishop, what happened?" And he, gasping for breath, responded he had witnessed something terrible. He met a lady with three children and one other one in her arms in front of the cathedral. He saw that they were fainting from hunger. The child in her arms appeared dead. He said, "Woman, nurse the child!" "It is not possible, bishop," she said. The bishop continued to insist many times. And she always answered: "Bishop it is not possible." Finally, because of his insistence, she brought out her breast. It was bleeding. The small child attached violently to the breast. It sucked blood. The mother who gave it life nourished it ... with her own life, with her blood.)

to include all Christians in the task of doing liberation theology. Liberation theology is described as a great tree. The branches are the theologians, seen by everyone. The trunk consists of the pastors; less noticed but of great significance. Finally, the roots are the laity. Though hidden, they provide the source of the life of liberation theology. All Christians are theologians in this view. And it is the theology of the masses that is most important. (Boff and Boff, 1986b:24,30)

In beginning with the poor of Latin America as their context the Boffs are attempting to establish a method of social ethics that avoids the dichotomy between the ideal world of theory and the real world of practice predominant in Kantian and Niebuhrian ethics. Such theories are seen as irrelevant because they tend to support the status quo. They are also attempting to be faithful to the scriptural tradition. In it they see the primacy of the liberation of the oppressed in concrete history. So the motivation for working within the context of the poor is both religious and practical in nature. It should be noted that the Boffs do not claim that the poor are the only legitimate context for doing theology or ethics. They recognize the legitimacy of other theologies in other contexts. However, in the reality of Latin America they see liberation theology as the only option for the poor. (Boff and Boff, 1986b:91-92)

The religious sources of the option for the poor are clearly seen in the exposition of theological motivations given by the Boffs. These motivations are described as theological, Christological, eschatological, apostolic and ecclesiological. In other words, they claim to draw upon the entirety of the biblical tradition. Theologically God is viewed as a God of life whose nature it is to comfort the poor. Christ is recognized as having brought his message primarily to the poor and as being identified as a poor person himself. It is noted that in the eschatology of Jesus one's actions towards the poor are given great weight in determining the outcome of one's



fate at the final judgment. The apostles are noted for their encouragement of communal sharing so that none went in need. The ecclesiological motive appears in the concern expressed by the church, particularly in the councils at Medellin and Puebla. (Boff and Boff, 1986b:66-68)

It is clear, then, that for Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, the situation of the poor in Latin America determines the kind of ethical questions and answers that will be given as they develop their system. The direction this takes will be seen in the discussion of their method.

### **Doing Liberation Theology**

It is out of the context previously developed that the statement of what is primary for liberation theology is made.

The basic question for the theology of liberation is this: What is God for a continent of the poor such as Latin America? How does God reveal himself to the oppressed? What does it mean to be a Christian in a world of the starving? (Boff and Boff, 1986a:24)

The answer to the above is sought by means of three mediations.

A mediação sócio-analítica olha para o lado do mundo do oprimido. Procura entender por que o oprimido é oprimido.

A mediação hermenêutica olha para o lado do mundo de Deus. Procura ver qual é o plano divino em relação ao pobre.

A mediação prática, por sua vez, olha para o lado da ação e tenta descobrir as linhas operativas para superar a opressão de acordo com o plano Deus.

(The social-analytical mediation looks at the world from the perspective of the oppressed. It attempts to understand why the oppressed are oppressed.

The hermeneutical mediation looks at the world from the view of God. It attempts to see what the divine plan in relation to the poor is.

The practical mediation, for its part, looks from the perspective of action and tries to discover the operative lines for overcoming oppression in accordance with the plan of God. Boff and Boff, 1986b:40)

The development of these mediations provides the heart of liberation theology.

The social-analytical mediation is carried out from the dialectical perspective. While denying that they are marxists the Boffs insist that marxist analysis is the only one that allows the poor to be seen as poor because they are oppressed. The empirical approach is superficial because it tends to blame the victims for being indolent and lazy. The functionalist system imagines that through gradual growth under the status quo the poor will share the benefits of capitalist development and be raised from their backwardness. The dialectical method, however, understands poverty as the fruit of the current economic system which exploits the workers and excludes masses of others. (Boff and Boff, 1986b:42-44)

Marxist analysis provides three crucial insights to understanding the oppression of the poor according to the Boffs:

- a importância dos fatores econômicos,
  - a atenção à luta de classes,
  - o poder mistificador das ideologias, inclusive religiosas, etc.
- (--- the importance of economic factors,  
 --- attention to the struggle of classes,  
 --- the power of ideologies, including religious, etc. to mystify, Boff and Boff, 1986b:46)

However, it is also asserted in no uncertain terms that liberation theology maintains a decidedly critical attitude towards marxism. Marxism, as is all thought in liberation theology, is submitted to the judgment of the poor. Quoting Matthew 23:10, they state that only Christ is our guide. (Boff and Boff, 1986b:45-46)

Consistent with marxist analysis, the system of international capitalism is credited with the continuing oppression of the poor. Leonardo Boff summarizes the attitude of the people as

"... the main root of this oppression is the elitist, exclusive, capitalist system..." (Boff, 1986b:35)

The capitalist system is seen to require the cheap labor of third world countries as well as third world markets to sell goods. It cannot, therefore, allow these countries to become competitors in producing goods for themselves. They must be the source of the raw materials.

An inherent aspect of the dialectic is not simply that the oppressed are oppressed, but that they also resist oppression. (Boff and Boff, 1986b:44) Thus, in liberation theology, "...a fé é *tambem e sobretudo* política." (the faith is *also* and *above all* political. Boff and Boff, 1986b:60, italics theirs) The point of liberation theology, as in Marxism, is to change things. How this is done becomes plain as the other two mediations are developed.

The hermeneutical mediation comes after the social analytical. It attempts to take the information concerning the causes of oppression and understand how the scriptures and tradition of the church would respond to this situation. Thus, while not claiming that the theme of liberation of the oppressed is, in itself, the only or most important theme in the Bible, it is the theme most important and relevant to the poor. (Boff and Boff, 1986b:52)

From the scriptural point of view faith has an obligation to justice. Justice involves what are viewed as basic economic rights such as the right to a job, and to adequate food and shelter. It becomes a key ethical norm in this system and is achieved through the liberative process as demonstrated in the biblical narrative. Liberation theology shows a preference for certain biblical narratives as being more relevant to its purposes. The *Exodus* with its story of divine deliverance, the prophets with their denunciation of injustice to the poor, the gospels describing the centrality of the person of Jesus and his liberating message of the kingdom are emphasized along with the *Acts of the Apostles* and the *Apocalypse*. The latter two describe the ideal of Christian community and the symbolic struggle of the people of God with the forces of evil in

history respectively. In addition to the scriptures liberation theology draws on the work of the church fathers and the saints, many of whom suffered persecution in their own times. (Boff and Boff, 1986b:52-54,57)

The hermeneutical mediation may be best described as the point at which formal theological reflection takes place. The experience of the poor is interpreted from the standpoint of revelation and then related to the social doctrine of the Church. The social doctrine of the church is depicted by the Boffs as a more abstract construction in need of being related to the concrete situation of the third world. This is one of the tasks of liberation theology. The Boffs attempt to demonstrate that liberation theology is consistent with the line of Catholic church teaching on social doctrine for the past century.

The result of the hermeneutical mediation is a call to action. The biblical story presents a God who works through the lives of the people of God for real historical liberation. The biblical response to present oppression, then, is "... a *revolução* entendida coma transformaçã o das bases do sistema econômico e social. ( a revolution intended as a transformation of the bases of the social and economic system. Boff and Boff, 1986b,44) This leads directly to the third mediation: practice.

The mediation of practice is concerned with concrete action designed to produce social change. Action is pursued for justice, conversion, renovation of the Church and the transformation of society. (Boff and Boff, 1986b:60) At this level the work of pastors and the people is considered most important for they are in contact with the specific situations in need of change. The practical mediation is carried out by determining what type of change is viable and the development of strategies and tactics to produce such change. Non-violence is preferred but the possibility of force is not ruled out. People are organized for resistance of oppression

and determination is made as to whether there are other forces one may align with that are also pursuing change. (Boff and Boff, 1986b:61-62)

A primary locus for organizing the people for action is the Christian Base Communities. These communities, often lay led, are expressions of a people hungry to understand how the Bible and their faith relate to their reality, which for many of them is one of oppression.

Leonardo Boff observes that

The basic communities are a response to the question: How may the community experience of the apostolic faith be embodied and structured in the conditions of a people who, in Brazil as throughout Latin America, are both religious and oppressed? (Boff, 1986b:37)

In these communities the Bible is studied, faith and life are shared and strategies for change are developed and implemented.

With these three mediations now before us, the basic system of the Boffs is in view. It is a logical and coherent methodology for constructing and implementing a theology that will speak to the context of oppression. However, it is fatally flawed by a false analyses of the causes of Latin American poverty and the value of socialism for curing it.

### **Ethical Implications**

From the above discussion several ideas that could be considered ethically normative for the Boffs emerge. These norms appear to be derived primarily from their analysis of the context and the dialogue between scripture and the dialectical methodology. The understanding of the scriptural emphasis on justice has been noted even by more conservative Catholic theology, but it is the dialectical interpretation of the context that leads to the conclusions found in the practical mediation.

José Miguez Bonino assumes essentially the same context as the Boffs and works out of the same type of dialectical methodology. His contributions will be considered in discussing the ethical norms and implications of the Boffs system.

Perhaps the foremost ethical norm for the Boffs is that of liberation itself. The scriptural norm of justice is implicitly equated with liberation for the poor and oppressed as liberation is the historical form that justice takes, both in the Bible and in the Latin American context. Whereas Jesus came to provide justice, and did so by providing liberation through his death and resurrection, it would follow that there is no justice without liberation. (Boff and Boff, 1986b:77-79)

José Miguez Bonino argues for justice as the central ethical concept of scripture. He understands this as a relational concept having to do with the fulfilling of obligations to God and his people and the whole world. Justice is tested by way of one's faithfulness to Jahweh as God and one's commitment to the rights of the poor and oppressed. (1983:85) This relational aspect of justice is also found in the Boffs, who as noted earlier, propose that Christians have a *compromisso*, that is an obligation or pledge to the poor that must be fulfilled. This *compromisso* could be seen as an ethical norm in its own right.

Fulfillment of the obligation to the poor takes place in the context of lived solidarity with the poor for both the Boffs and Miguez Bonino. For Miguez Bonino solidarity with the poor is the historical mediation of justice. (1983:44) For the Boffs this involves personal transformation such that one becomes a liberation theologian in one's being and not just an academic theologian doing liberation theology. Thus, we see that solidarity with the poor and the need for personal transformation also appear to be ethically normative for the Boffs.

A further extension of the relational concept for the Boffs is that the theological and ethical task is a community activity. It involves reflection and action by all, since all Christians are perceived as theologians and are held to be accountable for participating in the development of ideas and strategies for liberation. Failure to be involved is not an option. It is, in fact, choosing to support the status quo and thus becoming an enemy of the gospel.

The base communities are the place where community is occurring at present. The model for community proposed by the Boffs is based on the doctrine of the Trinity. It is this model that is also held forth as the goal of the new society, after the revolutionary transformation.

Distintas entre si, convivem eternamente em relações de absoluta reciprocidade e igualdade. No princípio não se encontra simplesmente a solidão de uma natureza divina, mas comunhão plena e perfeita das três Pessoas eternas. ... A sociedade assim como hoje se encontra, com toda sorte de divisões, antagonismos e discriminações, não oferece uma experiência que nos permita experimentar o mistério da Santíssima Trindade. Ela deve ser transformada para que possa ser imagem e semelhança da comunhão das Pessoas divinas. (Distinct among themselves, they live together eternally in relationships of absolute reciprocity and equality. Initially, it is not simply solitude that is encountered in the divine nature, but a full and perfect communion of the three eternal Persons. ... Thus, society as encountered today, with all sorts of division, antagonism and discrimination, does not offer a experience that allows us to experience the mystery of the Holy Trinity. It (society) should be transformed so that it would be possible to be in the image and semblance of the communion of the divine persons. Boff and Boff, 1986b:75)

The possibility of such transformation appears to be presented as real. How it is to occur we are not told. But such relations may be understood as ethically normative for the Boffs.

In the Base Communities and the vision of community articulated by the Boffs, the idea of the church as a manifestation of the kingdom of God, bearing witness to the world, is implicit.

A final normative position for the Boffs is this identification of faith as political. Political action is normative and imperative in the ethics of the Boffs. This is congruent with Miguez Bonino's position which argues that all ethics are by nature political. (1983:16) If all decisions and all ethics are political in nature, again it would follow that to avoid working for positive social change would be tantamount to supporting the present system.

### **Social Change**

As seen earlier, the Boffs promote accomplishing social change through non-violent resistance and the use of the political process. However, they are not naive enough to believe that those who hold power will give it up easily. Therefore, they do not rule out violent revolution as an option, if all else fails. Miguez Bonino, on the other hand, is much more open on the subject of violent revolution. Since the current situation is said to be inherently violent, violence is unavoidable. Therefore, Christians are to be found working for change in guerilla movements as well as in other contexts. Violence is an intrinsic part of the revolutionary process which the oppressed must carry to its radical conclusion (Miguez Bonino, 1975:107).

The Boffs do not give an elaborate description of the type of society they hope to build. Given their Marxist orientation with its strongly anti-capitalist position it is clear that socialism is the model. The concern for community and the participation of the people in the political process would favor a democratic form of socialism.

Miguez Bonino is much more explicit about the political model he promotes. He adopts the 4 options proposed by Gustavo Gutiérrez: "(1) societal appropriation of the means of production; (2) societal appropriation of political power; (3) societal appropriation of freedom; and (4) the creation of a new social consciousness." (Miguez Bonino, 1983:77) This statement bears close resemblance to classic Marxism, pointing as it does to the abolition of private



property and of state control of each of these areas. However, beyond this general description there is no discussion of what types of institutions might be put in place to accomplish these goals.

The ambiguity of Liberation Theology when discussing the practical results of social change is a grave weakness. Leftist socialist revolutions in Latin America have tended to emulate the model of the more traditional marxist societies. However, considering the shambles of the Soviet economy along with the recent events in eastern Europe culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is increasingly obvious that this form of political and economic organization is a failure. Not only has it produced massive political repression, it has not delivered the economic benefits it promised either. Clearly this is not a viable model for social change in Latin America.

### **Evaluation**

In evaluating Liberation Theology is necessary to note its strengths as well as its weaknesses. Among its obvious strengths are its prophetic call for an awareness of and solidarity with the poor and their experience of oppression. Its concern for activism and its attempt to be historically relevant are also valuable contributions. However, there are two areas in which Reformed theologians ought to applaud the liberationists.

First, the liberationist movement has had a major impact on lay people both in a Catholic and Protestant context. The notion that Christian theology is an enterprise of the church as a whole, not just trained theologians, is one that is sorely lacking in Evangelical churches. In the Christian base communities real and substantial progress has been made towards turning parishes into local study centers where serious theological reflection is taking place. The fact that these reflections may suffer from the influence of Marxist presuppositions imposed by the

European educated priests should not blind us to the significance of what is taking place. Certainly there is a lesson here for the North American Church.

Second, in some ways the liberationists have captured the biblical call of the cultural mandate and are seriously seeking to implement it. That is, they have rejected the sacred - secular dichotomy that has disastrously infected evangelicalism during the past century. In some ways they seem to be following more in the footsteps of Kuyper and others in the Reformed tradition than many of us today. Again, the particular political program they are proposing may be severely flawed, nevertheless they are doing *something* and that is more than can be said for most of us.

In evaluating the problems of Liberation Theology I am not challenging the notion that third world peoples are oppressed. My disagreement is about how to help the poor best. I have found that in seeking this end some of the best criticisms of Liberation theology come from the pen of Michael Novak.

### **Michael Novak**

One of the more prominent of the critics of liberation theology is the neo-conservative Catholic theologian, Michael Novak. In his book *Will It Liberate?*, Novak presents an attempt at a comprehensive analysis and refutation of liberation theology. His thesis is that rather than liberating, liberation theology, as all forms of socialism, will result in greater oppression, while liberal capitalism will provide true liberation of the poor. While space does not allow for a full treatment of Novak's work, a few observations, both pro and con, are in order.

One of Novak's chief criticisms of liberation theology is its political naivety. He argues that history has demonstrated all forms of socialism to result in politically oppressive regimes. A socialist state cannot tolerate individualism or dissent because it must coordinate and control all

political and economic activity. (1986:189) Furthermore, socialism involves a misplaced trust in the benevolence of the ruling elite. It argues for turning all political and economic power over to a ruling elite in the hope that it will be more just than the previous ruling elite. Novak believes that because of human sin this will not happen. He argues that all institutions are corruptible and hence a set of checks and balances are needed (1986:114). In support of his position Novak points to the failure of Soviet style socialism as well as fascist socialist states to successfully produce civil and economic freedom. Socialism demands centralized control that is inherently incompatible with civil rights such as found in the U.S. Bill of Rights.

A second major concern for Novak is economic. Capitalism, with its right of private ownership and free markets, provides strong incentives for the creation of wealth through entrepreneurship. Socialism, he claims, stifles creativity and undermines the inventiveness needed for the creation of new wealth because its all encompassing state controls of wages and profits remove the incentives for individuals to engage in such activities. The track record of mediocrity, absenteeism and backwardness of Marxist economies is again produced as evidence (1986:77-90).

In light of recent changes in the Soviet block and in communist China, the validity of this critique is obvious. Both economies suffer from a lack of productivity due, in part, to the lack of incentives for creativity. Hence, a move towards allowing some degree of free markets is taking place. Novak's contention that small businesses in a more or less free market produces creativity appears valid and ought to be considered by liberation theologians in their vision of a new society.

However, Novak, fails to discuss the ramifications of the massive multi-national corporations that function, for all practical purposes, as states in their own right. Corporations

also discourage creativity when they require scientists and engineers to sign over all rights to their inventions and ideas to the company for a salary rather than royalties. The corporate ownership of expensive laboratories and other means of production necessary for much technological innovation may have the same stifling effect as government control of these same resources. In each case the system needs to be adjusted so as to allow individuals a just proportion of the economic fruits of their labors.

A third and major contention of Novak is that liberation theology blames capitalism for the problems of Latin America while, in reality, Latin America has always had a pre-capitalist, mercantile economy. The landed aristocracy is responsible for the oppression of the poor. Bureaucratic red tape and anti-capitalist, pro-mercantilist regulations prevent people from access to credit and other resources to start their own enterprises necessary for successful capitalist development. Japan is pointed out as an example of a country, devastated by WWII, that is eliminating poverty through capitalist practices. (1986:85,89,92,136)

It should be noted that while the Latin American economy has never developed the type of capitalist economy of the north, it certainly has been brought under the sway of its international capitalist economy. Multi-national corporations and international loans play a major part in the current Latin American economic scene. Novak would blame the resulting problems on the Latin American aristocratic leadership that uses international capitalism for self aggrandizement while blocking the masses from participation. The question is, to what extent does international capitalism benefit from and promote this state of affairs? I would argue that multi-nationals have, to some extent, colluded with Latin American elites but, that this is in fact, detrimental to their own interests. They would benefit more if the economies of Latin America were robust enough to provide them with markets for their goods.

## **Cultural Problems**

In addition to Novak's comments, I would point out that Liberation Theology overlooks some basic realities in Latin American culture. Historically the development of prosperous, wealth creating economies occurred as a fruit of the Reformation. The theology and work ethic of Calvinism was shown by Max Weber to be one of the driving forces behind the rise of Capitalism. Roman Catholic cultures have never had the world view that allows for such development. With its commitment to an elitist, medieval system of authority, the Catholic Church has fostered feudalist economies wherever it has been dominant. The tendency towards massive bureaucracies and deference to authority that, on the surface appears to pervade Brazilian culture, is a fruit of this. Rather than celebrating the leadership of laity in the churches, I remember during a recent visit to Brazil, listening to the complaints of pastors and church workers as to how difficult it was to get Brazilians to be involved in leadership. There seemed to be an attitude that ministry is to be done only by paid clergy while the laity is to follow its direction. This attitude also seems to inform the apparent Brazilian acceptance of government corruption and incompetence. It is as though authority should be followed because no one has the right to demand any better, and besides, nothing can be changed anyway. Whether or not my perceptions are correct is certainly debatable. But these do appear to be areas worthy of investigation. Liberating the poor in Latin America implies liberation from the Papacy and the instilling of the values that result from a regenerate life.

In addition to the Catholic context, Liberation theologians have also failed to assess the impact of various forms of spiritism in their countries. While most Brazilians are nominally Catholic, a large part of the population's actual religious practice is based on an occult world view. Candomble and Umbanda are two afro-brazilian religions widely popular among the poor

and working classes. Folk magic, the belief in spirits and the need to placate and communicate with these spirits is widespread. These practices and beliefs enjoy a history that extends to the earliest days of Brazilian society. (Cintra, 1985) They are deeply ingrained. Among the middle and upper classes spiritism is also quite fashionable. Usually it tends to take the more intellectually sophisticated form developed by the French spiritualist Allan Kardec, who is extremely popular in Brazil. In many cases, both forms are combined with Catholic tradition so that the result is to baptize the occult religions with Christian language. The occult practices are little changed but are given an appearance of Christian legitimacy. With the immense popularity of these religious systems it is impossible to think that the cultural ethos and creed of Brazil is unaffected. The implications of this creed needs to be explored.

### **Conclusion**

Liberation theology may be viewed as a well intentioned attempt on the part of some theologians to bring about change in the midst of disastrous poverty and oppression. However, the results of Liberation theology, as long as it is hitched to Marxism, will result in disaster. Even with the recent return of Soviet Communism to a more hard line, most observers believe this is the last gasp of a dead system. With president Yeltsin of Russia talking openly on American TV about secession from the Soviet Union such an observation appears plausible. `

The dangers of a Marxist revolution degenerating into left wing totalitarianism is high in light of the refusal of Liberation theologians to articulate a specific system of safeguards to prevent it. Future political institutions need to be discussed *now* rather than after the revolution. Otherwise failure is certain.

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