Liberation Theology and the Kingdom of God
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In spite of the apparent collapse of Marxist regimes in Eastern Europe, liberation theology continues to thrive in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Marxist liberation perspectives also continue as a dominant influence in the West both on secular university campuses as well as in many theological seminaries. Hence, recent events in Eastern Europe are not a signal that liberation theology may now be relegated to the realm of irrelevancy by Evangelical ethicists and missionaries.[1]

Most studies of liberation theology have not focused on liberationist doctrines of the Kingdom of God. In fact, liberation theologians themselves have produced little in terms of systematic treatments of this doctrine. However, they have developed a specific view of the Kingdom scattered throughout their various works and have used this as an important tool in developing their approach to solving the problems of the poor.

The practical impact of liberation theology, particularly in the third world, is a direct result of the understanding of the Kingdom advanced by this system. In turn, this impact involves political, economic and social issues of direct concern for the prospects for evangelical

[1]In Brazil both Leonardo Boff and Frei Betto have published articles explaining why, from their perspectives, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe does not signal the end of liberation theology. Both explain that their variety of socialism differs from that of the Eastern block in its emphasis on democracy. Betto, in spite of his past favor towards Fidel Castro (for example in *Fidel and Religion*) asserts that his socialism has never been identified with a particular historical project (Betto, 1990:925). Boff understands the events in Eastern Europe as a political struggle against totalitarianism, not a rejection of socialism. He confidently asserts his expectation that socialism will eventually triumph in Latin America (Boff, 1990:86).

missions in the years to come. For this reason we ought to pay special attention to this doctrine in the theology of liberation.

In order to sufficiently address the question at hand we shall begin with a overview of the presuppositions and method of liberation theology as this establishes the parameters for all that follows in the system. Then we shall attempt to define the liberation doctrine of the Kingdom. The paper will conclude with some very brief critical remarks as the purpose here is primarily descriptive. Nevertheless, something needs to said by way of response although most of this, due to the restrictions of space, must be left for a future discussion.

Liberation Theology: Presuppositions and Method

Among the common starting points held by liberation theologians is the assumption of a stance towards the Bible rooted in liberal scholarship and the methods of higher-criticism. Behind this is a relativistic epistemology that explicitly denies the notion of fixed, universal and absolute truths. José Miguez Bonino asserts that there is no valid metaphysics of faith (Miguez Bonino, 1975:89). Truth has no existence outside of history, therefore one must start with history rather than abstract presuppositions. Miguez Bonino, in fact, claims to do just that. He supposedly holds no abstract presuppositions (Miguez Bonino, 1975:96).

Gustavo Gutiérrez, in *A Theology of Liberation*, echoes the sentiments of Miguez Bonino when he says

> A theology which has as its points of reference only "truths" which have been established once and for all -- and not the Truth which is also the Way -- can be only static and, in the long run, sterile (Gutiérrez, 1988:10).

This statement appears to create a dichotomy between the notion of universal propositional truth and "the Truth which is also the way." One is left to wonder exactly what the "Truth which is also the Way" is. It seems to be a reference to the Lord himself, but to a Lord not

encountered via true propositions but rather in some subjective sense. That this is indeed the case comes out in the next important assumption of liberation theology; that theology begins as a critical reflection on the human situation.

Gutiérrez asserts, "Theology must be critical reflection on humankind, on basic human principles" (Gutiérrez, 1988:9). This does not simply mean that theology must include such reflection as a part of its task. Instead it means that the only legitimate starting point for doing theology is the present historical situation humankind finds itself in. Human action is the starting point for all reflection, rather than a propositional revelation from God in Holy Scripture (Gutiérrez, 1988:7). Liberation theology, in particular, starts its reflection from the perspective of the poor. In fact, it is said to grow out of their own reflection (Gutiérrez, 1988: xxix). Liberation theology, in effect, reverses the traditional order of the theological enterprise. Rather than beginning with God's revelation in Scripture and developing a praxis of the faith, liberation theology first reflects on praxis and from this derives a hermeneutic for Scriptural exegesis.

It is important to understand that the process of reflection on praxis is not done in a vacuum. Liberationists claim to use a scientific method of social analysis that, as is well known, turns out to be Marxist social and economic theory. Thus, the position of the poor is viewed in terms of oppression and praxis is defined in terms of class struggle.

If truth is to be found only in the realm of history then it is here that one must also encounter God. This encounter cannot be propositional, however, since there can be no universal or abstract truths known about God. God is instead encountered in other people. "If humanity, each person, is the living temple of God, we meet God in our encounter with others;

we encounter God in the commitment to the historical process of humankind" (Gutiérrez, 1988:110).[2]

The Kingdom of God

The main hope of liberation theologians is to produce wide and dramatic changes in the political and socio-economic situation of their countries. The model for implementing this change is reflected in the liberationist doctrine of the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom is viewed by Gutiérrez as a gift of God. Oppression and injustice are deeply rooted in "...the disintegration of fellowship and communion" (Gutiérrez, 1988:132). The Kingdom brings liberation, both of the individual from sin and the poor from oppressive social structures. This liberation or salvation is not salvation in the sense of a guarantee of heaven (Gutiérrez, 1988:143). It is rather a restoration of the koinonia; the fellowship of persons with God and others (Gutiérrez, 1988:150). This eschatological hope of restoration must be expressed in

> ... the world of social revolution; the Church's task must be defined in relation to this. Its fidelity to the Gospel leaves it no alternative: the Church must be the visible sign of the presence of the Lord within the aspiration for liberation and the struggle for a more human and just society. Only in this way will the message of love which the Church bears be made credible and efficacious (Gutiérrez, 1988:148).

The Kingdom is primarily a call for historical activity. As there is no universal abstract revealed truth concerning the nature of the Kingdom, one can only discover the Kingdom via Marxian analysis of biblical historical narrative, as exemplified in Pixley (1982), as well as a

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[2]In order to decrease the length of this presentation without omitting any essential material, a further description of the assumptions and methodology of liberation theology is appended at the end of the paper.

similar analysis of present praxis. Hence the Kingdom can only be discovered and/or implemented in history.

The emphasis in liberation theology is on the Kingdom as having already begun (Miguez Bonino, 1975:133, 150). Some liberation theologians refrain from making a total identification of the Kingdom with the church or with a possible political order achievable in present history, although the emphasis on the present is so heavy that any future eschatological realm seems almost irrelevant (cf. Gutiérrez, 1988:134; Miguez Bonino, 1975:136). Gutiérrez admits that the distinction between the Kingdom and social revolution is blurred (1988:59) while for even more radical liberation theologians there is no difference at all. Miguez Bonino, for example, who refrains from identifying the church with the Kingdom, nevertheless states that, "God builds his Kingdom from and within human history in its entirety" (1975:138).

The notion of the historical presence of the Kingdom in liberation theology may be understood more precisely in terms of what it denies as well as what it affirms. George Pixley, a professor at the Baptist seminary in Mexico City, denies that the Kingdom as preached by Jesus had any reference whatsoever to the spiritual salvation of one's soul so that one might go to heaven. Jesus' main message was the preaching of the Kingdom as the liberation of the poor and oppressed in present history. His intent was to challenge the oppression of the people by the priestly class ruling in Jerusalem under the tutelage of the Romans (Pixley, 1981:72, 75).

Pixley goes on to deny that Jesus went to Jerusalem to die. The death of Jesus was not a part of his plan. It was rather an interruption of his strategy. Jesus' main mission was to do away with the system of temple domination that oppressed the poor and extracted their surplus labor from them. Therefore, his execution must be viewed as the failure of his mission (Pixley, 1981:82-83).

The theology of the cross is seen by Pixley as a Pauline invention, influenced by Greek philosophy, and its inclusion in the gospel narratives is a "theological overlay" that obscures the actual events (Pixley, 1981:76). After the death of Jesus the message of his movement was supposedly co-opted by middle class Greeks who had no desire to challenge the existing system. Instead, they transformed the Kingdom into a Platonic abstraction representing an eventual escape from history altogether. Pixley writes,

> It has been our hypothesis that the Jesus movement was one of several responses to the oppression that the peasants of Palestine bore in the first century of the Christian Era. With the execution of Jesus, the momentum of the movement was lost, and the movement itself was wiped out as a historical factor by the war of 60-70. Nevertheless, through the efforts of people attracted by the gospel account who were not tied to the Galilean peasantry, the story of Jesus and his preaching of God's kingdom was widely spread through the cities of the empire. In the process the "good news" of the kingdom became a spiritual message of individual salvation. In this unhistorical form it has been justly characterized as a religious opium, because it enables a suffering people to endure, by offering private dreams to compensate for an intolerable public reality (Pixley, 1981:99-100).

Such spiritualizing of the Kingdom is said to work against the possibility of historical action (Miguez Bonino, 1975:133). Accordingly,

> ... to maintain that the kingdom is in the other world is equivalent to denying the very content of the gospel. And to say in escapist desperation that the kingdom is "partly in this world and partly in the other" is to launch a thesis totally without support in Jesus' teaching (Miranda, 1982: 170).

Liberation theology, in denying that the Kingdom is a realm of spiritual salvation clearly identifies it as an historical project of liberating the poor from oppression. Let us turn now to the question of what such an historical project is supposed to look like.

Proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom constitutes a challenge to existing structures of oppression. The first step in this challenge, often referred to as "conscienticization", is to inform the poor that they are oppressed so that they "... feel impelled

to seek their own liberation" (Gutiérrez, 1988:153). The proclamation of the Kingdom to the poor politicizes them so that they may begin implementing the Kingdom.

In addition to politicizing the poor, working for the Kingdom "... means to participate in the struggle for the liberation of those oppressed by others" (Gutiérrez, 1988:116). One must recognize that in liberation theology people qualify for the Kingdom of God by virtue of their poverty. Hence, if one is not poor, then one must identify with the poor and join with them in solidarity with their struggle. This identification is not merely symbolic. While it will entail political activity it also means becoming poor oneself or rather, ceasing to be rich.

One ceases to be rich by renouncing private property in favor of socialism (Miranda, 1981:173). In the context of liberation theology this involves a challenge to the international capitalist system led by U.S. multi-national corporations and the governments that support them. Since the present order of oppression is a result of capitalism, and since this order is antithetical to the values of the Kingdom, then the Kingdom is necessarily structured along socialist lines (Gutiérrez, 1988:55, 66-67). Miguez Bonino notes that the Kingdom must choose sides in the class struggle (1975:120). He further contends that capitalism is a heresy and hence the side of the poor is that of socialist revolution (1975:121). The essential structure of Kingdom socialism is defined in terms of the Marxist classless society (Miranda, 1981).

On a practical level the coming of the Kingdom is signified by the struggle for a just world (Gutiérrez, 1988:97). Justice involves providing for the essential needs of food, shelter, clothing and other necessities basic to human dignity. Thus, the means of production, whether industrial or agricultural, must be seized by society (Miguez Bonino, 1983:77). Redistribution will create broader access to these but ownership will remain common to society as a whole.

Up to this point we have seen that the Kingdom, in liberation theology, is defined as a present historical project of social transformation in which the poor are liberated from the oppressive structures of international capitalism into a socialist society providing for fellowship and justice. For liberation theologians such as Pixley this society appears to be identical to the Kingdom, while for others this society is not identical to the Kingdom but allows the Kingdom to be, because the conditions are set forth for the full communion of all persons with God (Gutiérrez, 1988:1355).

Liberation theology has inherited from Marxism a tendency towards extreme ambiguity when confronted with the question as to what type of political structures will be put in place after its goal of social revolution is achieved. The notion of a societal appropriation of political power in some type of democracy is widely supported (cf. Miguez Bonino, 1983:77; Gutiérrez, 1988). However, Miguez Bonino notes that achieving the revolution will probably involve participation with guerrillas or the military and the establishment of a strong centralized state as a necessary step towards the new order (Miguez Bonino, 1975:39-41).[3]

The above statements of Miguez Bonino bring to our attention the issue of violence as a means of advancing the Kingdom of God. This is perhaps one of the most controversial points

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[3] Little attention is paid to what steps might be necessary to avoid continuing repression of the poor by this strong centralized government as has been the case in many Eastern block socialist states. This has given the appearance that liberation theology is guilty of a naive utopianism, holding that the establishment of the socialist state will somehow make everything work out. Miguez Bonino asserts that, even though violence is necessary to overthrow the oppressors and establish a just order, violence will disappear naturally once its structural causes (mainly capitalism) are eliminated (Miguez Bonino, 1975:129). In light of the continuing violence and oppression of socialist regimes such as Castro's, statements like this lend credence to the charge of naive utopianism. On the other hand, the transition from Sandinista rule in Nicaragua to democracy, however fragile it may be, is at least a sign of hope that with proper planning a socialist revolution need not always result in a perpetual dictatorship. But the point is, there must be a process in place. It *is* naive to suppose that it will just automatically happen.

of liberation theology and it is not universally agreed upon. While some liberation theologians oppose the use of violence others either grudgingly accept it or actively endorse it. Miguez Bonino, for example, argues that to oppose the use of violence is hypocritical because such a stance lends support to the already existing violence of oppression (Miguez Bonino, 1975:127). He rejects the arguments of Christian pacifists stating that "...they cannot block through Christian scruples the road clearly indicated by a lucid assessment of the situation" (1975:128). Since involvement in violence is inevitable one must use violence in the interest of justice.[4]

We have before us now the essential elements of the liberationist doctrine of the Kingdom of God. They may be summarized as: 1) The Kingdom of God is the koinonia of all humankind with each other and through each other, with God, 2) This communion does not refer to some type of spiritual salvation to an ahistorical realm, but it can and must take place only or primarily within history, 3) The present order of international capitalism destroys this communion by creating poverty and oppressing the poor, hence, 4) The preaching of the Kingdom is primarily the message of liberation of the poor from these oppressive structures, 5) The Kingdom must be established in the context of a socialist society that eradicates the evil structures of oppression, and 6) The Kingdom may be advanced by means of violent revolution if necessary.

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[4]Gutiérrez also supports the use of violence in the revolutionary process with his implicit approval of the French and Russian revolutions (1988:30) as well as his statement that we must

> ...study the complex problems of counterviolence without falling into the pitfall of a double standard which assumes that violence is acceptable when the oppressor uses it to maintain "order" and is bad when the oppressed invoke it to change this "order" (1988:63-64).

Other liberation theologians come out in support of violence leading to the conclusion that the advancement of the Kingdom is compatible with violent coercion.

Response and Conclusion

The liberationist doctrine of the Kingdom may be viewed as the practical result of the secularizing influence of the assumptions of liberal biblical and theological method, primarily German, on Latin American theology. While the claim is made by liberation theologians that this theology was born among the poor and oppressed, often it reads much more like the German tradition under which many of these theologians received their theological training. Indeed, Marx himself was far from being a member of the proletariat and, of course, his theories were not worked out in the environment of Latin American oppression. The upshot of this is that liberation theology finishes up with a secularized Kingdom, and a secular political gospel that has removed or redefined the supernatural or other worldly content of traditional Christian teaching.

I will refrain from offering a theological or philosophical critique of liberation theology because such critiques already exist and are easily obtained (Nash, 1988; Novak, 1986). Instead I would like to note some of the social implications of this theology based on my recent research in south Brazil during the summer of this year.

Brazil, as the rest of Latin America, is an intensely religious society. Evangelicalism has been growing rapidly in recent years and this growth has been paralleled by a great proliferation of every variety of cult and sect imaginable. In particular, the Afro-Brazilian spiritist sects have made steady inroads into all segments of society. To be Brazilian is to be born into a world that is literally permeated by spirits or the spiritual.

The nearness of the sacred may be manifested in a multitude of ways, such as prayers to the dead, both among Roman Catholics and spiritists, or in the practice of charismatic spiritual gifts among evangelicals. Those in the spiritist traditions may engage in more direct

communication with the sacred by means of channeling. In addition, it is not uncommon to see syncretism of the various competing traditions, a practice going back to the earliest days of slavery in Brazil. Even today many of those practicing spiritism consider themselves to be good Catholics.

The point to be made here is that in such a context, where the majority of the population take the supernatural for granted without reducing it to the world of the profane, how will people respond to a religious vision that is essentially secular? In discussing liberation theology with a variety of Brazilians I discovered the reaction usually to be one of dissatisfaction. Faced with priests denying that salvation involves a future life after death these people indicated they had little use for a kingdom of this world only. Some expressed their disdain for this view by simply seeking spiritual fulfillment elsewhere. While a careful statistical study has yet to be done, it is my hypothesis that this secularization of Latin American Roman Catholicism is a contributing factor to the growing defection of Brazilian Catholics to other religions, particularly charismatic evangelicalism and spiritist sects. Groups such as the Mormons and a variety of others are, no doubt, profiting from this as well.[5]

Having said this I do not mean to imply that liberation theology is irrelevant to the Brazilian social situation. Obviously it has enjoyed a good measure of acceptance in the hundreds of Ecclesial Base Communities in Brazil and the rest of the continent. It has also been widely supported in the universities now that the miltary dictatorship has ended hence ending censorship as well.

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[5]Sociologists Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge have demonstrated that the growth of cults and sects is directly related to the secularization of society and of existing religious denominations (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985).

The fact is that liberation theology effectively points out the very real and devastating oppression of the poor. Whether or not one agrees with the explanation of the causes for this is beside the point in understanding how liberation theologians have been able to win the allegiance of many. However, I do believe that in a culture such as Brazil this kind of a secularized approach, even though couched in religious language, will ultimately be limited.

Some liberation theologians are apparently aware of this limitation as well. Leonardo Boff has focused some of his recent writings on spirituality. Among black Latin Americans there is a growing interest in developing a liberation theology in the context of Afro-Brazilian or other forms of African religious traditions (Associação Ecumênica de Teológos do Terceiro Mundo, 1986). It is likely that a theology of liberation that affirmed both the possibility of liberation in this world and in the world to come would be much more acceptable.

The opportunity for evangelicals to present the gospel of the Kingdom in the Latin American context has never been better. However, if we are quick to point out the reductionism of the liberationists, we must no longer continue to perpetuate the reductionism of early 20th century fundamentalism by rejecting or ignoring the social implications of the gospel. It was my observation that too much of Brazilian evangelicalism, at least in the Baptist circles I am familiar with, is left with the cultural baggage of the fundamentalism of the early missionaries. We need to divest ourselves of this anti-biblical baggage and proclaim the Kingdom which is both present and future. In addition we must see that, as valuable as they are, simply establishing relief organizations is not enough. We need to be about the business of working for structural changes that will bring justice. At the same time we must recognize that political and economic systems are only as ethical and just as the people working in them.

Therefore, through evangelism and discipleship we will help create the changes in the lives of the individuals who live and work in these structures.

Based on God's revelation in Scripture, evangelicals should agree that liberation needs to occur in much of the world. Nevertheless, we will not create a false dichotomy between spiritual and temporal liberation. We will proclaim the gospel of Christ and Him crucified that frees one from individual sin and grants eternal life in the next world, while *at the same time* we will proclaim that the gospel demands social and economic justice in this present world. We will note that the Kingdom *is* both present and future. But we will also realize that there is a continuity between the two. This means that the future cannot be used as an excuse not to strive for justice in the present.

With this in mind, perhaps the best apologetic response to liberation theology would be to roll up our sleeves and get to work; evangelizing, feeding the hungry, giving aid to the poor, the sick, and the oppressed, and working for the transformation of society as we demonstrate the reality of God's Kingdom in our lives, churches and communities.

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Appendix

Perhaps the best summary of the method of liberation theology is found in the little book *Como Fazer Theologia da Libertação*[6] by Leonardo and Clodovis Boff (Introduction to Liberation Theology, Orbis Books). Liberation theology is described in terms of three mediations.

> 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, 1986:40).

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 dialectical method understands poverty as the fruit of the current economic system which exploits the workers and excludes masses of others (Boff and Boff, 1986:42-44).

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

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[6]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.

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

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 their guide (Boff and Boff, 1986:45-46).

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, 1986:35). 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, 1986:44). Thus, in liberation theology, "...a fé é *tambem* e *sobretudo* politica." (the faith is *also* and *above all* political. Boff and Boff, 1986:60, 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, 1986:52).

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, particularly historical narratives such as Exodus and Acts, and apocalyptic literature such as Revelation (Boff and Boff, 1986:52-54, 57). It is then related to the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, which 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 transformação 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, 1986,44). 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, 1986:60). 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, 1986:61-62).

Some Critical Remarks

The liberationist doctrine of the Kingdom is a case study in the effects of nonbiblical presuppositions on theology. Beginning with the assumptions that there are no fixed and eternal truths, and that all knowledge is derived from the autonomous human mind and its reflection on its temporal situation, liberation theology reveals its world view to be based ultimately on a form of philosophical naturalism. The universe is all there is. There can be no propositional revelation from a God distinct from the creation, breaking into history and telling humankind what the Kingdom is and how one might be saved. Whatever kind of God exists must be a part of the larger reality of the universe.

Since all that is, or all that is knowable, is historical circumstance, liberationist attempts at advancing the Kingdom are limited to a view that all Kingdom work is necessarily social and historical. With the eradication of spiritual salvation, soteriology is equated with temporal liberation. Hence, evangelism involves converting people to the struggle for liberation. Thus, liberation theology has nothing to say to those concerned with the larger questions of eternal life, resurrection and judgment. Indeed, notions of spiritual salvation in an ahistorical realm are explicitly rejected as contributing to the oppressive status quo system. Such a position, it is feared, only serves to make the oppressed accept their situation in the hope of a heavenly deliverance.

The presuppositions of liberation theology have resulted in a theology that, with all its well intentioned and justifiable concern for the problems of oppression, truncates the gospel,

gutting it of its essential content and in the process, undercutting the only valid theological basis for condemning the oppression of the poor. Without a transcendent basis for ethical norms, rooted in the character of the Triune God of the Bible, there is no rational reason to oppose the oppression of the poor.

It is impossible, of course, for any theology to operate without assumptions. Having discarded Christian supernaturalist presuppositions, liberation theology rather arbitrarily imports a different set of abstractions in the form of marxist theory and proceeds to construct the Kingdom of God on this basis.[7] Liberation theology, therefore, *does* have its own set of abstract assumptions from which it builds its case, regardless of the claims to the contrary made by its proponents.

An evangelical response to this theology will begin with the presupposition of the Triune God of the Bible and the Creator-creature distinction. On this basis we will recognize that such a God has given us propositional revelation in the Bible, that while bound up in the warp and woof of history, nevertheless contains universal ethical standards of Kingdom justice. Our knowledge of the Kingdom of God rests on God's interpretation of history and the Kingdom, not on subjective human speculation starting from anti-Christian presuppositions.

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[7]I will refrain from discussing the validity of marxist analysis of the causes of poverty in this paper as this has been done cogently by numerous writers. Suffice it to say that the claim that marxism represents the only truly scientific method of social analysis is highly dubious. Marxian explanations of the poverty of the third world are far from decisive. cf. Novak (1986) and Nash (1988).