

## The Theological Transformation of Original Sin: Theology a la Gutierrez

Marc Grenier<sup>1</sup>

The postmodernist ideology of ‘social justice’ was one of the central organizing principles of liberation theology as it emerged in Latin America in the early 1960s as well as many of its theological offshoots such as feminist theology, black theology, and queer theology (Novak, 1988, 1984; Schall, 1982; Bell, 2006; Restrep, 2018; Smith, 1991; McGovern, 1989). It is underscored heavily not only in the work of Alberto Gutierrez (1971), largely considered to be the father of liberation theology, but also in its subset of core founders and followers (see Segundo, 1976; 1973; Bonino, 1975, 1976; Assmann, 1975a; 1975b; Fierro, 1977; Segundo, 1973, 1976; among many others).

Therefore, the first task of this essay will be to review early Catholic sources of this central focus and other related organizing principles of liberation theology in order to place it into historical perspective. As it turns out, research indicates the notion of ‘social justice’ was not so novel at all. It originated in the teachings of a Jesuit priest (Taparelli, 1840-43), basing himself on the teachings of Thomas Aquinas more than a century before contemporary theologians ever initiated discussions about ‘just’ or righteous systems of social relationships.

Since at least two early modern Catholic popes were devoted students of this particular Jesuit priest, they both incorporated Taparellian teachings into official encyclicals (Pope Leo XIII, 1879, 1891; and Pope Pius XI, 1931) and other documents as binding church policy, well prior to the theological writings of Gutierrez and other liberation theologians. This brief historical overview will then be followed by a systematic analysis of some of the central theoretical components of liberation theology as expounded in Gutierrez’s first book, *Theology of Liberation*. These components will be briefly contrasted with equivalent Biblical concepts such as justice, liberation, freedom, and so forth, aiming to identify any notable similarities and discrepancies, if any. Afterwards, we will try to determine the extent to which any secular philosophies or theories have influenced liberation theology and, by logical extension, official policy of the Catholic Church itself.

Since existing theological literature indicates a strong Marxist influence upon liberation theology, prime attention will be focused on the influence of that particular theoretical model. The last part of this essay will be devoted to a brief criticism of some principal features of liberation theology put forth in the literature (Restrepo, 2018; Carter, 2018; Smith, 1991; Hebblethwaite, 1978; Bell, 2006; Novak, 1988, 1984; Carson, 2002; DeYoung, 2011; among many others).

### ***Social Justice: Early Catholic Sources***

As Behr (2019) emphasizes, the contemporary doctrine of social justice is by no means a particularly ‘modern’ notion. Historical research indicates that such notions originated during the early heydays of communist theory a la Karl Marx (Nunez, 2002). Luigi Taparelli, a Jesuit priest and scholar who lived during that tumultuous time period (1793-1862), a learned and well-educated man, was quite familiar with Marx’s written work and the work of related socialist thinkers and sympathizers. In his seminal book, “*Theoretical Treatise of Natural Right Based on Fact*”, Taparelli adopts a strong Thomistic approach to understanding the nature of human beings thoroughly infused with Marx’s lifelong concern with constructing a ‘just’ social order, among many other key Marxian conceptual components (Behr, 2019).

He begins by claiming an adequate understanding of the human person requires both faith and reason because humans are fundamentally ‘truth seekers’. Essentially, then, it was a natural law theory of a ‘just’ social order. The emerging social sciences were offering an assumed value-free study of society, and Taparelli swallowed it hook and line but without the sinker. That means he believed that the findings of the social, economic, and political sciences were integral to our understanding of humans as ‘social’ animals, largely accepting the Darwinian evolutionary and Marxian economic theoretical viewpoints so dominant at that time especially in scholarly circles.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Theology, Chang Jung Christian University, Taiwan.

As such, his ideas about social justice and ‘subsidiarity’ soon became fundamental components of early Catholic social thought up to the present time. His concept of ‘subsidiarity’ was just as attractive to social thinkers and to religious officials as were his thoughts on social justice. Essentially, this concept simply meant that every organization or ‘consortium’ was forced by natural necessity to conserve its own unity but without damaging the ‘unity of the whole system of consortia’. The duty of the ‘whole’ consortium, the larger society, if you will, is not to destroy the existence of the smaller individual ‘parts’ of the larger society or the ‘consortia’ (Behr, 2019).

Framing his arguments in the vernacular of ‘duty’ imparted a moral flavor that was quite palatable to Catholic Church officialdom. Evidently, the emphasis upon both faith and reason in understanding the nature of human beings also represented a serious movement away from a tradition-based or conservative view wholly dependent on standard Biblical sources towards a more modern ‘liberal’ social view incorporating some of the findings of the newly emerging social sciences. Although he constantly deconstructs and criticizes both Adam Smith’s liberal laissez-faire economic theory and the communist theoretical progeny it gave rise to in a Catholic journal he founded in 1850, firm allegiance to conservative Church tradition and papal sovereignty soon gained pontifical attention and favor.

In fact, research confirms that the central tenets and arguments of his teachings were incorporated prominently into an encyclical by Pope Pius IX (1864). That was just the beginning of the incorporation of secular theoretical ideas into official Catholic policy and teaching. Later, Pope Leo XIII sought to incorporate Taparelli’s contributions into his own encyclicals (1879, 1891). Pope Pius XI followed in the footsteps of previous popes by incorporating Taparelli’s concept of subsidiarity into his own official Church policy on social teaching (1931), even seeking to advance Taparelli studies in universities and colleges.

Taparelli’s incessant inclusion of secular philosophical and social scientific ideas about a ‘just’ social order and ‘social’ justice into official Catholic social teaching didn’t stop at the level of papal encyclicals. Its theoretical tentacles reached much deeper into the body of Church policy on social teachings more like a progressive social disease than a prescription for secular afflictions. As a prime example, it came to be included in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church:

“a large part of the Church’s social teaching is solicited and determined by important social questions, to which social justice is the proper answer” (quoted in Carter, 2018, p. 1).

Even the official Catechism of the Catholic Church devotes a prominent section to social justice with a Marxian philosophical flavor:

“Society ensures social justice when it provides the conditions that allow associations or individuals to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and their vocation. Social justice is linked to the common good and the exercise of authority.” (Quoted in Carter, *ibid.*)

### ***Liberation Theology: Basic Introduction***

As mentioned earlier, liberation theology developed in various countries of Latin America during the early 1960s primarily in response to perceived inadequacies in the established theological views and practices of the Roman Catholic Church at the time. It was conceived and developed by a small group of Latin American theologians, predominantly Latin American scholars and priests within the Roman Catholic Church itself, who were heavily involved on the ground and playing a much more activist role in ‘doing theology’ by directly helping poor and oppressed people in their respective countries. Unsatisfied with how the Church was responding in practice in a doctrinally passive manner to the sufferings and economic plight of the people, liberation theologians started to question official Church doctrine and policies.

So, they tried to construct a theological framework which would provide them with an alternative to the traditional abstract Biblical focus of Church doctrine on Christ’s promise of otherworldly deliverance, abundance, and salvation in the future. According to these theologians, the Church should not indefinitely postpone or delay responding to people suffering from immediate here-and-now bread-and-butter challenges of destitution and exploitation mainly due to real inner-worldly oppressive, unjust, and inhumane social and political structures and relationships. In their view, a Church that did not actively resist and act to transform such exploitative social structures into newer and more humane forms benefitted directly from such structures and from the government that supervised, enforced, and legitimated them.

The last point is important because it underlines what the relationship between Church and government should be within liberation theology. Liberation theologians stridently call on the Church to always side with the poor and oppressed.

Further, the Church must become *politically involved in active ways* against oppressive social structures and relationships which cause suffering and oppression. This is one of the new dimensions to theology which liberation theologians brought to the table, that is, the fervent revolutionary demand for the Church to actively push for the creation of new structures of social relationships. Obviously, political considerations enter at this point. Simply feeding the poor is not enough; in addition, and more significantly, unjust and sinful social systems which cause poverty, oppression, and suffering **must** be replaced at all costs by systems of social relations considered more 'just' and righteous, by systems of social justice, as it were.

These systems of righteous social relations should be based on the principles of the Kingdom of Heaven outlined in the Bible, these theologians proclaim. In other words, the aim of the Church should be to become directly, actively and genuinely involved without reservation in helping to establish this Kingdom in the here-and-now, not postponed to some future other-worldly spiritual dimension. The goal is revolutionary change of unjust and 'sinful' social structures into 'just' and righteous structures that reflect humane standards of social justice.

### ***Fundamental Assumptions of Liberation Theology***

According to Encyclopedia Britannica (2014, 2011), the Roman Catholic Peruvian priest, Gustavo Gutierrez, is considered to be one of the most important "fathers of liberation theology". Generally, the date that is accepted by most knowledgeable scholars as the birth of liberation theology is the Second Latin American Episcopal Conference that was held in Medellin, Colombia, better known as the 1968 Medellin Episcopal Conference. At this Conference, the Latin American bishops who attended all voted publicly to affirm and support the rights of the poor, and they published a press release to that effect.

After spending many years in Peru and other parts of South America giving a variety of talks and writing numerous papers on the need for a new kind of theology in Latin America, Gutierrez published his seminal book in 1971, *A Theology of Liberation*, even now considered the core text of liberation theology used in many theological seminaries and divinity schools across the world (1).

In this book, Gutierrez attempted to systematize the rudimentary principles, aspirations, and practices of 'liberation' theology under a largely Marxian philosophical and theoretical model of class struggle and the installation of new structural systems of social justice. Employing this materialist theoretical model, Gutierrez became quite successful in transferring the Catholic Christian principle of 'original sin' from its anthropomorphic base to the level of social structures. Essentially, the causal locus of sin came to be seen as residing in 'social structures' and not in human beings as a species trait originating in the so-called 'fall' from the Garden of Eden.

Very importantly, in this book he also referred to a large number of Bible passages and findings reached in numerous church councils trying to provide through his own Biblical hermeneutics some kind of firm, legitimate theological foundation for this new brand of 'liberation' theological practice which had already taken root on the ground for many years among the Latin American clergy working directly with 'the poor'.

So, then, this kind of theology was not born in the heads of armchair theologians ruminating about the best ways for people to reach and ensure for themselves a privileged position in some other-worldly afterlife dimension called 'Heaven'. To the contrary, it emerged from the day-to-day practices of Roman Catholic clergy and people on the ground as they struggled to contextualize their faith under the direct conditions and circumstances of Latin American society at that time.

Reading through Gutierrez's book, we can easily see that liberation theology is based upon a number of fundamental assumptions which need to be clearly identified and explained before this theology can be adequately understood. The first basic assumption is that God values humankind as a whole. Freedom and justice, therefore, belongs to every human being because God genuinely desires all of us "to be free from all types of slavery" (ibid., p. XLVI). Internal moral corruption is not only or mainly caused by (original) sin, but also by sinful, inhumane, and enslaving systems or structures of social relationships. This is the core materialist starting point of 'liberation' theology, and as such, it is most assuredly NOT in line with the life and teachings of Christ, nor strictly consistent with apostolic Christian tradition, and nor does it fit very well into official Roman Catholic Church policy and pronouncements from its beginning all the way up to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not to mention incomparability with Biblical notions of 'justice' itself.

From this theological perspective, it stands to reason that if God wants to save humankind from internal sin through Jesus Christ, then He must also want to deliver humankind from the outward structural manifestation of this internal sinful state. Sinful social structures are simply an outward or external structural manifestation of an internal sinful state. In other words, Christ delivers salvation simultaneously at all levels of human existence; "God's saving work encompasses the totality of human existence" (Ibid., pp. 162/164).

Christ in the Bible also delivers political and economic freedom or “liberation”, not just freedom from the chains of sin in some abstract sense. One of the central features of Gutierrez’s liberation theology is “God’s special love for the weak and the abused during human history”, he states categorically. Beginning with the passages referring to the Cain and Abel narrative and throughout the entire Bible, “the poor are thus the privileged members of the Kingdom” (Ibid., p. XXXIX). Since they are privileged members of the Kingdom, the Church needs to direct its support resources “primarily...at the oppressed and the poor” (Ibid., p. 136).

Therefore, the “prerequisite for being a Christian” (Ibid., p. XXXVIII) is nothing less than taking the side of the poor and being against enslaving exploitative systems of social relations without hesitation, doubt, or reservation. Only then can the ‘Good News’ and freedom message of Jesus Christ in the Holy Bible be truly understood.

On revolutionary social action, Gutierrez (ibid., p. 211) quotes Jeremiah 22:13-16 where Jesus is delivering messages to all Kings:

“Woe to him who builds his house without righteousness and his upper rooms without justice, who uses his neighbor’s services without pay and does not give him his wages...Did your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? He pled the cause of the *afflicted and needy*; then it was well. Is not that what it means to *know Me*?”.

Here he insists there are many Biblical examples confirming the legitimacy of active revolutionary resistance to effect social change. For example, the deliverance of the Hebrew people from Egyptian bondage was “a political act...and the beginning of *rebuilding of a new and just society*” (Ibid., p. 169). When social systems are unjust, as they clearly were in Egypt, then it is the “*duty* of the Church to unmask” this injustice (Ibid., p. 131), to “*resist* those who are in power” (ibid., p. 133), and to “*participate* in delivering the oppressed from others” (Ibid., p. 224). Here and elsewhere throughout the book, the messianic revolutionary message in Gutierrez’s liberation theology echoes loud and clear. If sinful, unjust, and inhumane structures of social relationships exist which oppose the Kingdom of God, Gutierrez urges, then Christians cannot simply go into delay mode, kneel to pray in solitude, and wait for another dimensional afterlife world called ‘Heaven’ to appear. Quite to the contrary, they must become actively, forcefully involved in social, political, and economic areas of society on behalf of the privileged poor to bring about the Kingdom of God. In other words, the Church and all Christians must start establishing ‘the Kingdom’ here and now on Earth.

However, Gutierrez pushes this revolutionary logic one step further. If the Church and all Christians fail to do so, they condemn themselves eternally by straying away from the principles and guidance of the Bible itself (Ibid., p.328). In the final analysis, turning to the Gospel for the solution to ‘sinful’ social structures “means a fundamental transformation” of those social structures (Ibid., p. 227) largely through local volunteer-based Christian groups who have studied Scripture and who are aware of the everyday needs of the poor for adequate food, water, electricity, shelter, and so forth. By coming down to the people in this way, the Church is no longer leading them from above in abstract doctrinal terms, but instead leading them from the ground up to agitate for social transformation of unjust social structures.

Within Gutierrez’s way of thinking, it stands to reason that if the poor are God’s privileged few and if the mission of the Church is to lead this privileged few to the promised land of God’s Kingdom on Earth (revolutionary social transformation), then the Church must set up organizational structures closer to the poor themselves, or local community-based structures. God only talks to the privileged poor, the suffering poor. So, then, the Bible can only be authentically understood from *their* perspective, from the perspective of the poor, not from the *Church’s* doctrinal perspective of established abstract Christian dogma.

Gutierrez then tied the emphasis upon revolutionary social action directly and firmly to the intensity and authenticity of the faith which Christians professed to believe. In his mind, there was greater “understanding of faith, more faith as such, and more zealotry for the Lord” when Christians wholeheartedly and fervently engaged in “*revolutionary* processes in Latin America” than if they remained in cloistered “egotistical Christian circles” frowning upon such participation (Ibid., p. 225). According to Gutierrez, if the Church cannot be a “visible sign of the Lord’s presence” by actively struggling “for a more righteous and humane society”, then the “validity and efficiency of the message it’s bringing” is morally bankrupt and truly unchristian.

### *Marx's Critique of Capitalism and Liberation Theology*

In his book, as well as throughout his various writings and the writings of proponents of liberation theology in general, there is absolutely no doubt about the nature of the oppressive and exploitative structures of social relationships that the Church and all Christians should fight against. These sinful, inhumane social structures include capitalism, the United States of America (the entire 'West' viewed in extreme pejorative terms), and all of the respective ruling national groups and organizations allied to their social, political, and economic interests (Ibid., p. 87). In fact, he claims that real social, political, and economic development of Latin America cannot take place "until it's delivered from them" (Ibid.). Here the strong implication is that the deliverance of the Hebrew people from Egyptian bondage allegorically becomes the deliverance of the Latin American people from capitalist (read 'American') bondage. The philosophical and ideological equation of 'capitalism' to the Biblical notion of 'bondage' is here quite glaring, if completely warped, misplaced, and misunderstood Biblically.

Like raw unadulterated Marxism, Gutierrez's liberation theology quite simplistically (some would say primitively) divided all people in society into two basic social segments: the oppressors and the oppressed (Veigel, 2018; Novak, 1984; 1988; Carson, 2002; McGovern, 1989; Restrepo, 2018; Smith, 1991; Bonino, 1976; and a host of others both from within and outside of liberation theology). By definition of their virtual existence (not by their character, motivation, behavior, virtue, etc.), the 'oppressors' are those who own and control capital and the proverbial means of production. Again, by definition of their actual existence (the same proviso applies here), the 'oppressed' are those who work for these capitalist 'oppressors', these owners of the means of production of society. Both social roles are systematically given.

So, then, social relationships are already formed and cemented into place in society. All of society consists of social structures put into place by the oppressors "to benefit the few who are appropriating the fruits of other people's labor" (Gutierrez, p. 223). Since these power relationships between the oppressed and the oppressors have been created by the oppressors themselves and solidified at the institutional level of society, they can only be really changed or remedied at that level. The sufferings of 'the poor' due to 'sinful' structured social relationships can only be cured at the objective organizational level of society and not at the subjective level of individual poor people.

This is the meaning inherent in the term social 'structure', denoting solidification. Dissolving this solidification or hardening of power relationships into systems or 'structures' requires equally powerful dissolving agents of social change. Hence Gutierrez's emphasis upon 'the poor' as powerful *structural* agents of social change who, unfortunately, and for a variety of largely structural reasons, exist in a temporary state of dormancy or inactivity. Just like Marx's proletariat class that needs to be awakened from its dormancy and moved into an invincible structurally predestined revolutionary state of being, the poor also need to be awakened to change by force the system of exploitative structured relationships they are imprisoned within. Here the 'sinful' inhumane system of private property or private ownership and control over the means of production in society is at fault and needs to be overthrown and transformed into an assumed to be 'non-sinful' humane system of public property or public ownership, or into a glorified socialist 'Kingdom' on earth. Simply put, capitalism is pushed aside and transformed into socialism.

Since it is impossible for the structured relationship between the private owner of the means of production in society (the 'oppressor') and those who work for them (the 'oppressed') to be 'just' or righteous in any way, shape, manner, or form because it is viewed as being inherently wrongful appropriation or robbery, it must be forcefully overthrown. The assumption here is that oppressors will not give up power willingly, so the full unreserved support of the Church and all Christians must be enlisted to convert this social transformation from a mere dormant potential into an active revolutionary material force. Armchair theological philosophizing is over because "the world needs changing" (Ibid., p. 236). This is the true 'mission' of the Church.

It's easy to see here how Gutierrez transforms the political battle cry contained in the Marxian socialist theoretical framework into a theological equivalent. Like Marx criticized the capitalist economy for its weaknesses and failures especially towards the exploited working class so, too, does Gutierrez criticize the official Roman Catholic Church for its failure to actively get involved in protecting the poor by pressuring for social transformation of the capitalist economic system. Here Gutierrez appears to be constructing and *arming* a religious hermeneutic that functions to transform the Bible into a revolutionary *weapon* to be used in confrontations on the ground in Latin American society.

Given the widespread revolts and rebellions which subsequently took hold and devastated much of Latin America at around the same time as liberation theology started to take root and spread, Gutierrez's ideas about using the Bible to effect revolutionary social change begins to make sense.

However, it is highly likely that his socialist idealism did not fully appreciate the wide range and scope of actual potential outcomes. Surely, one of those outcomes was the rapid installation of a plethora of merciless reactionary right-wing and guerrilla left-wing dictatorships across South America.

Once established, these dictatorships hastily proceeded to kill and oppress the very 'poor' which Gutierrez was seeking to 'liberate', as well as other citizen populations as 'collateral' damage, to a much greater extent than any 'sinful' capitalist structured power relationships could have ever done over many lifetimes. When all the populations involved in these various political activities are blinded by their own inflexible idealist and messianic ideologies, culture dictates outcomes, not Christ nor the Bible. It is unlikely Gutierrez held himself directly accountable or responsible to any degree for any of these unanticipated outcomes.

In a manner of expression, what Gutierrez was 'doing' was not theology per se. He was actually painting over theology a Marxian socialist gloss, a shiny but largely false Christian religious veneer to make it attractive and acceptable to innocent, naïve, simple, and vulnerable minds existing in Latin American society. Many people throughout Latin America at that time, elites especially, were falling prey to all manner of Marxist socialist ideas spreading through the Cuban revolution and becoming popular in Latin America at that time, falsely offering a fast and 'free' track to advanced political and economic development and a greater share of material wealth. So, then, as many other scholars have made clear, even many of those within liberation theology itself fell under the direct hypnotic influence of Marxist socialist ideas about human history and the meaning of human existence.

The same analytical framework is employed, the same conceptual apparatus is used, the same political-economic vocabulary is applied, and the same enemy is explicitly identified and roundly condemned as irredeemable or irreparable or, in religious terms, 'sinful'. Capitalism is mercilessly and ceaselessly juxtaposed as the central villain against what would otherwise be a harmonious and just social order based on naturally righteous social relationships.

No wonder, then, liberation theologians tend to claim stridently that "Communism is the obligation of Christians" (Miranda, 2004 (1982), p. 8). This means that in order to properly understand the real significance of the Holy Bible, it is a religious 'duty' of all Christians to actively agitate against ALL authorities to install the Kingdom of God not solely or simply internally within the hearts of individual people but also, and more importantly, into the external structure of social relations at the societal level. The Bible becomes something to be used to initiate, sustain, and win a revolutionary transformation of social systems.

### ***Some Criticisms and Hermeneutical Reflections***

Understandably, numerous weaknesses have been identified within liberation theology from both inside and outside its theoretical camp although far less commentary compared to its alleged strengths. So, then, to balance the ledger a bit, a strident critical posture will be proffered. However, it is not practical here to provide a comprehensive overview and in-depth analysis and assessment since this is a task which has already been adequately provided by several scholarly works mentioned above and noted in the reference section. Here it would seem to be more appropriate to focus attention upon a small number of obvious telling criticisms in a more critical manner than already implied above especially as they reflect the opinion of notable Catholic officials and scholars or other Christian denominational professionals.

The first and perhaps foremost weakness contained in liberation theology is its wholesale irreflexive incorporation of the Marxist socialist theoretical framework into the form and content of its own theological framework, effectively converting Marxism itself into a theology, a kind of theology of Marxism. In particular, the introduction of the Marxist view of human history contrasts markedly with the conventional Biblical view of human history across most if not all theological persuasions. Stemming from this predominant weakness, the problem of selective Bible reading has also been a weakness noted in the research literature. That is, liberation theology consistently applies a Marxist hermeneutic in its interpretation of Biblical passages.

Also resulting from the unfiltered application of a Marxian socialist theoretical model is the highly questionable ethical equation of the Biblical poor with the 'oppressed' classes under a capitalist economic system. Lastly, there is the thorny problem of perceiving the staged or planned battle against the 'oppressor' capitalist class and allies as a *God-ordained activity* (Carson, 2002; Vogel, 2018; Novak, 1988, 1984; Bell, 2006; DeYoung, 2011; Restrepo, 2018; Smith, 1991; Behr, 2019; McGovern, 1989; McCann, 1981; Griffin, 1979; Yoder, 1972; Cullman, 1970; Sobrino, 1976; Bonino, 1975; Fierro, 1977; Lehman, 1978; Davies, 1976; Kirk, 1980; Brown, 1993; De La Torre, 2004; Rowland, 2007).

### ***Biblical Considerations***

Profound criticisms have also been laid by various Catholic and other Christian officials, most notably by Joseph Ratzinger himself when he was both a high-ranking Cardinal or prefect in charge of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) at the Vatican during the emergence years of liberation theology and also eventually as Pope Benedict XVI. In one of his preparatory documents at the CDF titled, “Instructions on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation”, Ratzinger notes explicitly how liberation theologians equate the love of Jesus in the Bible predominantly but wrongfully with taking the side of the poor in the historically predestined class struggle against the capitalist class.

In this view, the sacred spiritual foundation of the Kingdom of God in the communion of Christian believers emphasized by Jesus and others throughout the Bible is reduced to a mere physical material political-economic reality as *Kingdom of God on Earth*. This misleading theological conception falsely pressures Christians to transfer attention, focus, and hope from God’s sacred Kingdom to an imagined profane Kingdom on the Earth. In other words, here in liberation theology the profane itself is presented as sacred and effectively substitutes for the sacred. Therefore, from this theological viewpoint the core symbolic presentation of salvation history, namely, the exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt, becomes a revolutionary physical act rather than a sacred salvific act by God in human history. bestowed uniquely upon his own chosen people.

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see that this particular theological approach to history effectively dilutes and devalues the import of the Bible’s sacred ‘Good News’ message. What’s more, the dilution process doesn’t stop at that point. Just as the concept of ‘salvation’ is corroded (some would say corrupted) by secular philosophy, so, too, is the Bible’s concept of the Eucharist. The sacred behaviors and acts associated with the Eucharist in Jesus’ spiritual world are watered down to a physical celebration of deliverance from exploitation by a capitalist class in material reality. By logical extension, the concept of ‘liberation’ in liberation theology comes to be the substitute for eternal ‘redemption’ in Christian doctrine.

In his concluding remarks, Ratzinger firmly warns all theologians and especially Christian believers to beware about the false conception of ‘sin’ contained within and championed by liberation and allied theologians, whether intentionally or unknowingly. This theology pushes aside the traditional Biblical notion of eternal freedom from the chains of sin offered by the crucifixion and death of Christ and replaces it with deliverance from political-economic exploitation by a capitalist class. In this conception, the salvation offered by Jesus Christ is replaced by a salvation offered by leaders of the revolution of the poor against the capitalists, a complete abomination and corruption of the true spiritual Christly message in the Bible.

The materialist philosophy of Marxism emphatically rejects the existence and import of a Christian spiritual reality or any other kind of spirituality, for that matter. It effectively equates and confounds the Biblical ‘poor’ with Marx’s proletariat class as well as the Church of the privileged ‘poor’ now localized in small community settings with official hierarchical Church as a ruling class agent that must be avoided and disobeyed. Within the myopic theoretical confines of liberation theology, the established hierarchical Church has identified itself as a ruling class agent simply by the very fact of NOT actively supporting the privileged ‘poor’ in their God-ordained task of overthrowing the *sinful, inhumane capitalist class*.

As mentioned earlier, liberation theology can also be faulted for cherry-picking biblical passages that appear to conform more easily to its general theological principles and philosophical presuppositions, values and assumptions, and then attributing highly questionable meanings to them. It scours Scriptural verses looking for Christian events, activities, and images that it can take out of context and attach a new contextual meaning to them by applying a Marxian-based hermeneutic.

For example, it may be at least partially true that the Hebrew people emerged from spending a very long time in the desert in dire poverty (Deut. 8:3). It may also be at least partially true Jesus asserts at some places in the Bible that being poor in spirit is one of the fundamental requirements for being admitted to God’s inheritance (Matt. 5:3). It may indeed be at least partially true that the Bible is interested in promoting what is righteous and just. However, that doesn’t mean by any stretch of the theological imagination that the Bible in part or as a whole is a trumpet call for a socialist revolution.

Much more importantly it also doesn’t mean by any theological sleight of hand, as what liberation theology heavily underscores, that the Bible is always and exclusively on the side of ‘the poor’ with its spiritual swords drawn exclusively against ‘the rich’. What it does say is that we should always demonstrate genuine consideration for ALL people in need, especially but not solely ‘the poor’, including ‘the rich’. There are many passages in the Bible which suggest that it does not ‘take sides’ between the rich and the poor.

For example, Leviticus 19:15 and Exodus 23:1-6 mentions how we should never exhibit in our behavior or words any partiality toward neither ‘the poor nor the rich’. Proverbs 22: 2 declares unashamedly, “The rich and the poor have a common bond, for the Lord is the maker of them all”. In 1 Samuel 2:7, “The Lord makes poor and rich; He brings low, He also exalts”.

Perhaps one of the most profound statements on the theme of rich versus poor in the Bible comes from one of the apostle Paul’s letters (2 Corinthians 8: 9): “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich”. Nowhere in the Bible do we find any reference whatsoever to “social” justice or to an irredeemable, despicable, ‘sinful’ class called ‘the rich’ whose riches and power at the societal level needs to be resisted and overthrown by a God-ordained class of ‘the poor’ cum poor people in some kind of historically predestined ‘revolution’. The only genuine ‘revolution’ referred to extensively in the Bible is the salvation offered by Christ to all humanity, not exclusively to the poor. Christ’s salvation is presented in the Bible as inclusive to all humanity, not conceived mainly as an exclusive gift for ‘the poor’.

### ***Concluding Reflections***

Due to time and space considerations, this essay has focused mostly on providing a brief theoretical history and general descriptive aspects of liberation theology as well as some of its most telling shortcomings in relation to traditional Biblical theology and Scriptural authenticity. However, that doesn’t mean liberation theology has not made any valuable contributions to Christian church doctrine, policies, or practices, let alone significant contributions to other Christian denominations. Still, it is all too often the case that modern scholars, especially those from Latin America and East Asia, are many times too quick to cast a deferent eye upon theological systems which touch a positive emotional cord somewhere in their personal life experience or in their one-sided views of their own cultural history. Most scholars tend to avoid dealing critically and reflexively with theories they subjectively cherish for personal and or ideological reasons.

That being said, the other much more important point that can be made as part of final remarks is that it is ethically and hermeneutically questionable at best for scholars in general and theologians in particular, especially theologians claiming to be full-blooded genuine ‘Christians’, to cherry-pick Scriptural passages, events, images, parts, or sections of the Bible looking to force feed correspondences to components or elements of their own cherished theoretical perspectives, nor hoping to construct new theological skyscrapers with which to impress others or to employ as stepping stones to enhance material human status and achievements.

There are serious problems inherent in alienating Bible passages from the immediate context in which they were written in the effort to attribute foreign meanings to them for whatever purposes may be desired, let alone scholarly or theological or otherwise. There are also serious interpretative ramifications involved in separating such passages from the systemic conceptual context of the entire Bible itself. A suitable and proper Biblical hermeneutic would be to interpret Biblical passages from within Biblical contextual terms. This means not only to comprehend such passages as they were intended to be interpreted at that time by the intended audience but, as well, interpreted as they fit in relation to a larger conceptual apparatus constituting the Bible itself.

This is not a wholly difficult idea to digest, as it were. Who would dream to interpret Shakespeare’s Macbeth in terms of Mark Twain’s “Tale of Two Cities”, and still hope to absorb the essence of Shakespeare’s intended messages in writing Macbeth? No one would hope to play selectively with passages from Shakespeare to create another version of Shakespeare, would they? Shakespeare’s intended messages to be understood in penning Macbeth cannot be alienated from his authorial intentions and foreign meanings attributed to them without diluting and devaluing the genius and authenticity of Shakespeare himself. Why should it be any different when considering the relationship between liberation theologians like Gutierrez and passages from the Bible viewed as an integral system of ideas?

As a final word on the subject of Biblical interpretation, it may be useful to point out another, often overlooked consideration, namely, the serious hermeneutical and spiritual significance of the attitudinal and ideological disposition of the reader of the Biblical passages during the interpretative process. If Christians genuinely and honestly ‘believe’ that Jesus Christ passed on to humankind His “living Word” (Hebrew 4:12), then they must also believe in their hearts that the Bible itself ‘speaks’ to us when we ‘read’ it; it has a voice, its own voice, only not the kind of physical voice we are accustomed to hearing. It follows, then, that those readers and interpreters who do not possess this particular hermeneutic predisposition cannot hear the ‘voice’ of the Bible.

In other words, what is perhaps required to hear the authentic voice of the Bible, the “living Word of God”, is a genuinely faithful aortic hermeneutic, what Watson (2015) called a hermeneutic of faith.



If it is possible for Norman Habel and his entire Earth Bible team of scholars and other professionals to treat the voice of the Earth in the Bible as a 'subject' which has its own voice and speaks to them (Habel, 2001-2002), then most assuredly the same logic be applied at a higher general level to say that the Bible itself as a whole can be treated as a 'subject' that has its own organic, wholistic 'voice', if you will.

If a small part of the Bible can be subjectivized to have its own voice, then the same hermeneutics can be applied to the entire Bible as a whole system. A profound contaminating influence occurs precisely when readers and interpreters of the Bible steadfastly refuse to adopt this hermeneutic of faith before, during, and after a wholistic interpretation of Biblical passages and then proceed to attribute foreign secular, rather than sacred, meanings to them misrepresented as scholarly 'fact' or truthful 'logic'. Without this kind of wholistic interpretative approach to Biblical passages, the result is cherry-picking of Biblical passages that lend themselves more readily to meanings contained or implied within the theoretical model and ideology of the scholar rather than to authentic Biblical meaning.

Many contemporary scholars have pointed out all of these problems noted above and other problems inherent in contemporary biblical interpretation and theology as well as the historical relationship between Marx and the Bible. Space and time limitations prohibit a broader review here. The reader is referred to the many excellent citations in the 'References' section.

### **Footnotes**

1. For example, in a course offered at Princeton Theological Seminary called, TH 3444 Liberation Theology of Gustavo Gutierrez, it is the standard core text.

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