

'LIBERATION THEOLOGY'

New Thesis Stirs Religious Debate

NEW YORK (AP)—In church journals, seminaries and scholarly conferences, discussion is mounting about so-called "liberation theology." It has its supporters, but is also getting some brickbats.

It's the "new fad" of left-wing intellectuals, say critics.

It's as old as the Bible, say defenders, and criticism of it is what's now becoming the fashion among the academic elite.

Basically, "liberation theology" challenges the status quo, demanding changes in behalf of the weak and oppressed. That's what the biblical prophets and Jesus did, advocates say, and it should be the Christian objective.

However, the conflict comes over the ways to do it and just how "liberation theology" is interpreted.

It has become a familiar theme in the last decade among Christian activists in Latin America, where it is embraced by "Christians for Socialism" groups formed in several countries which attack capitalist regimes as exploitative and unjust.

"We aim at a church in solidarity with the interests and the struggles of the workers," says the Rev. Gonzalo Arroyo, an American Jesuit and leader in the movement, which holds that justice—and authentic Christianity—require socialism.

The thesis has spread to some Christian circles in Europe and Africa and most recently has become an issue among some American theologians, some of whom took part late last year in a Detroit conference about it.

"Liberation theology discounts or omits the hard historical lessons," says lay Catholic philosopher Michael Novak of Bayville, N.Y. He says it is "naive about economics" in its "romance with socialism and Marxism."

Disputing him in the weekly National Catholic Reporter, Auxiliary Bishop Gilberto E. Chavez of San Diego says "liberation theology" is primarily concerned not with intellectual theories but with real conditions.

He says those conditions include "grinding poverty and institutional violence" against the poor.

However, a Catholic priest-sociologist, the Rev. Andrew Greeley of Chicago, says "liberation theology" in the views of its proponents does not mean freedom but rather state control of every aspect of life.

It spurns traditional freedoms—such as rights of political dissent, free speech, free press and free opinion—as "bankrupt liberal democracy" and "bourgeois capitalism," he writes.

On the other side, the Rev. Frank X. Riley, a San Ysidro, Calif., priest, argues that "liberation theology is mostly biblical theology" and the core of it will be around as long as truth endures.

Part of the friction has to do with whether "liberation theology" necessarily involves Marxist economic theories, as conceived in some areas under authoritarian regimes, or whether it also allows for other solutions in differing situations.