

THE CASE AGAINST LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Critics of liberation theology argue that it is fundamentally naïve and may deliver South America into the hands of Communism.

By Michael Novak

CHRIST LED ME TO MARX," bluntly declares Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan priest Pope John Paul II wagged an admonishing finger at during the Pontiff's arrival ceremony at the Managua airport last year. "I do not think the Pope understands Marxism," says Father Cardenal, the Sandinist Minister of Culture and an advocate of liberation theology, in a recent interview. "For me, the four Gospels are all equally Communist. I'm a Marxist who believes in God, follows Christ and is a revolutionary for the sake of His kingdom."

Leonardo Boff, the Brazilian Franciscan summoned to Rome last month to defend his decidedly proliferation theology views, wrote shortly afterward in the left-wing Rome newspaper Paese Sera that Pope John Paul II's view of Marxism, reflected in a 36-page Vatican document on liberation theology, is "a kind of caricature." Friar Boff says that the document, which endorses the Church's commitment to the poor while condemning Marxism, seems "to believe what is on the label of the bottle before trying the real contents." He sets aside the Pontiff's lifetime experience of Marxism, asserting: "Marxism is a principally European theme. In Latin America, the big enemy is not Marxism, it is capitalism."

The debate between the Pope and such Roman Catholic clerics as Father Cardenal and Friar Boff involves the United States. For the main enemy of liberation theology, according to its founder, the Rev. Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru, and many of its adherents, is the United States.

In his electrifying and seminal book, "A Theology of Liberation," Father Gutiérrez writes that "among more alert groups today, what we have called a new awareness of Latin American reality is making headway. They believe that there can be authentic development for Latin America only if there is liberation from the domination exercised by the great capitalist countries, especially by the most powerful, the United States of America."

Liberation theology is a method of defining Christian faith in the political context of underdevelopment, in a par-

tisan spirit committed to action. It is not distinctive for wishing to apply Christian faith to social action. It is not more concerned about "the working class" or "the poor" than Pope Leo XIII, whose 1891 encyclical underlined Catholicism's responsibility to these groups. Nor can it be universally defined as Marxist. Yet it gains its excitement from flirting with Marxist thought and speech, and from its

hostility to the "North."

Today, nearly 50 percent of the world's 800 million Catholics live in developing nations — predominantly in Latin America and the Philippines, but also in Africa and the small yet vital Catholic communities of Southeast Asia. If Marxism, even of a mild sort, flourishes in these lands, and if it were to be officially blessed by Catholicism, two powerful symbolic forces would then have joined hands. What would be the actual consequences of such a merger? Would the revolution — for that would be the first effect — truly eradicate past traditions of political oppression and poverty? Would liberation theology truly liberate?

"The indispensable cry for justice and the preferential solidarity with the poor need not be mortgaged to ideologies foreign to the faith," the Pope said, criticizing the new theology at a recent address to a delegation of Peruvian bishops in Rome. At the same time, he condemned "subhuman" poverty, which can and must be overcome.

About liberation theology, Pope John Paul II is less trusting than such clergy as Father Cardenal and Friar Boff. The Pope, who rebuked Father Cardenal in a vivid scene televised worldwide, has ordered the priest to quit the Marxist-inspired Sandinist Government.

Liberation theology is indeed a much broader tapestry than its Marxist thread, which is just one of its many flaws. It is a

robe of many vibrant colors. Yet, this theology is to Marxist analysis what "popular fronts" have typically been to Marxist movements elsewhere. The Vatican has carefully avoided making the mistake of thinking that all such theology is Marxist or that the condemnation of Marxist elements will bring an end to its long-term vitality.

THE WRITING AND LECTURES ON LIBERATION THEOLOGY by Gustavo Gutiérrez (Continued on Page 82)



CLAUSC MEYER BLACK STAR

Above: Friar Leonardo Boff of Brazil was summoned by the Pope to defend his liberation theology views. Far left: A priest celebrates mass in Jucuarán, El Salvador, a guerrilla-held territory.

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have been influential far beyond his native Peru. His book, published in 1971, has since been followed by those of an intellectual school of clergymen that includes Juan Luís Segundo of Uruguay ("A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity," five volumes); José Miguéz Bonino of Argentina ("Christians and Marxists: The Mutual Challenge to Revolution"); Hugo Assmann of Brazil ("A Theology for a Nomad Church"); Alfredo Fierro of Spain ("The Militant Gospel"), and Friar Boff ("Jesus Christ Liberator"). Most of the intellectual leaders, in Latin America especially, have been trained in Europe; a few are European or North American missionaries.

Still, some Latin American experts say that liberation theology affects only a minority of the clergy, even among theologians, and that the symbolic strength of the movement is exaggerated internationally by the apparent marketability of writing by liberation theologians, whose works are translated far more often into other languages than those of their critics.

Strong defenders of liberation theology such as Arthur F. McGovern, professor of philosophy at the University of Detroit and author of "Marxism: An American Christian Perspective," point out the large differences among the major proponents of liberation theology. Father McGovern, who is a Jesuit, says most are neither atheist nor materialist, as their critics contend, and they are generally careful to avoid or to modify concepts of class hatred, violence and "class struggle." Their starting point is not Marxism but an awareness of the structural causes of poverty; their faith commitment leads them to use the insights from Marxist critiques of society. However, in the liberation-theology advocates' sharp critiques of the status quo, he says, their critics "hear" Marxism when they are saying something quite different.

More significant, the new theology has given rise to a teaching body made up of hundreds of activist priests and sisters — and it has inspired hundreds of thousands of the Catholic faithful.

Many theologians take liberation theology seriously as a theology, rather than regarding it as merely a political vision. Some Christians who are

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Pope John Paul II, in front of a mural of Augusto Sandino, blesses the crowd during his visit last year to Nicaragua.

nonpolitical find that its analysis helps them escape self-centered pietism. At the very least, it describes Christian faith in terms closer to those of today's newspapers and magazines, making faith seem less distant from reality. Since Marx modeled his theory on key items of Christian faith, even the Marxist tendencies of liberation theology seem less like political parody than like theological mirrors.

Through United States missionaries, liberation theology has reached the United States not only to the many Catholics in Congress but to the Speaker of the House, Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr. Sister Jeanne Gallo of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, a former missionary in Brazil and a member of the Nicaragua Action Group in Cambridge, Mass. (Speaker O'Neill's home district), keeps him informed on political currents. "We realized that Mr. O'Neill was key to what happened in the House," she says. "The group decided to work on educating him about Central America."

Mr. O'Neill's aunt had been a Maryknoll. "I have great trust in the order," he says. "When the nuns and priests come through, I ask them questions about their feelings, what they see, who the enemy is, and I'm sure I get the truth. I haven't found any of these missionaries who aren't absolutely opposed to this policy," he adds, referring to the Reagan Administration.

IT IS NOT DIFFICULT TO imagine how so much confusion has arisen over the solution to Latin America's poverty. Put yourself in the place of an idealistic priest or sister during the 1960's, fresh from theological studies in Europe or North America, fired with a vision of social justice and the relevance of Christian teachings to this world and sent to work among the poor of Latin America's teeming cities. On unpaved streets, in shacks with no plumbing, among children badly clothed and poorly fed, most of these priests and sisters arrived with political-social ideals

formed by social-democratic currents in Europe and North America — but without the traditional support of the middle class. To many, the Christian Democratic parties of Latin America, by then at least a generation old, seemed far too weak. They felt faster action was needed.

These ardent spirits encountered two solid cultural problems. First, folk Catholicism in Latin America has long emphasized personal, familial piety — but not much social action or public responsibility. Second, the traditional church itself — not only in the history of its bishops but also among the upper classes who have supported its schools, orphanages and other good works — seemed to be part of the very establishment responsible for Latin America's social ills. These two powerful Latin-Catholic traditions appeared to block progress for the poor.

Enter Father Gutiérrez. His book enunciated a new approach to Latin America's problems, which were unlike those in Germany, Switzerland or France. With him, Latin Americans claimed they were rediscovering a Judeo-Christian theme as old as the Exodus itself. They were also declaring their intellectual independence from the prevailing theological models of Western Europe and North America.

Some European theologians have praised liberation theology, but they find little that has not been closely pioneered by Europeans who had learned their methods of political analysis from social democracy and from the "young, humanist" Marx. Some ask, what is so "new" about liberation theology? Critics assert it will naively deliver Latin America to the Communists.

If this debate had been contained solely among intellectuals, perhaps nothing much would have come of it. But as Brazil's "economic miracle" in the 1960's faded and military rule commenced; as the elected Government of Salvador Allende was toppled and replaced by the repressive dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet; as a broadly based revolution in Nicaragua overthrew the autocracy of Anastasio Somoza, and as leftist guerrilla movements arose in Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and elsewhere, liberation theology appeared to leap to life.

At the same time, beginning with the Second Vatican Council, from 1962 to 1965, the Latin American bishops had discovered a new unity and a resolve to attack their sociopolitical problems head-on. While some

bishops remained traditionalists, many more grasped the challenge of social action in terms analogous to those of their colleagues in Western Europe and North America. Others adopted more "radical" views. Meeting in 1968, at Medellín, Colombia, the entire episcopal conference of Latin American bishops issued a letter that became the manifesto of a new church clearly committed to a much-needed, long-delayed social transformation of the continent.

The Medellín document spoke of "External Neocolonialism," asserting that "the countries which produce raw materials — especially if they are dependent upon one major export — always remain poor, while the industrialized countries enrich themselves." While the bishops urged ways of nonviolence and peace, their use of "liberation" — introducing the term before Father Gutiérrez — was charged with the energy of revolutionary expectation. To the astonishment of many observers, they concluded: "We wish to emphasize that the principal guilt for the economic dependence of our countries rests with powers" — foreign powers — "inspired by uncontrolled desire for gain. . . ."

It is not a long jump from Medellín to the judgment of one of the most explicitly Marxist of the liberation theologians, Hugo Assmann, that Latin Americans are "being kept in a state of underdevelopment."

The judgments of Medellín most useful to liberation theologians are not its theological judgments. Rather, the bishops' empirical assessment of the continent, as mapped out by James V. Schall, an American Jesuit and author of "Liberation Theology in Latin America," described the following chain: poverty — dependency — exploitation — "conscientization" — revolution.

Writing from São Paulo, the critic and theologian François Hubert Lepargneur condenses the message: "By casting all the blame for Latin American underdevelopment on the shoulders of international capitalism, these believers are too ready to excuse the responsibility of Iberian Christianity and of its Latin American clerical representatives.

"We are the good guys, the oppressed. The others are bad, the oppressors. Who are they? Principally the United States when it is a question of economics and hence of imperialism. . . ."

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Father Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua was ordered by Pope John Paul II to quit the Marxist-inspired Sandinist Government.

THE NEW TEACHING of the Medellín conference coincided with the rise of a new school of thought among secular social scientists — the so-called dependency theory. For some social activists, this new theory articulated two vague self-perceptions: Latin American nations have been disproportionately dependent on external economic activities and decisions, and the inequalities between the very rich and the very poor (with an unusually small middle class) was analogous to Marx's "class struggle" between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This revisionist theory gave Marxism a new lease on life.

These two movements — the birth of social conscience in the church and the rise of secular theories of dependency — appeared to many to go hand in hand, although there is no necessary reason why they should. Even if dependency theory is largely false, as many of its original propagators now believe, Catholic social thought retains its own validity.

Prominent Catholic leaders associated with liberation theology typically mix these two streams of discourse. On the one hand, they try to show at every opportunity that Catholic social thought has implications for the restructuring of unjust societies. And so it does. Ever since Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 and Pope Pius XI's sequel, "Reconstructing the Social Order" in 1931, this point has not been in dispute. The Catholic Church has in recent decades placed itself firmly

on the side of human rights, economic development and the defense of religious liberty.

On the other hand, in diagnosing the specific ills of Latin America, particularly the economic order, Latin American church leaders, traditionally anticapitalist, sometimes identify their societies as "capitalist." But most Latin American countries exhibit economies that are precapitalist — disproportionately state-directed. The three leading classes are still government officials, landholders and the military. Yet it is precisely here, in its economic theories, that liberation theology comes dangerously close to Marxist analysis — and where most of the confusion arises.

"Today the only thing we can do is to decide whether we are going to leave to individuals and private groups, or to take away from them, the right to possess the means of production which exist in our countries," Father Segundo writes. "That is what we call the option for capitalism or socialism."

While clear-eyed in his analysis of Marxist popular fronts, Pope John Paul II has frequently criticized "rigid capitalism." During a recent visit to Canada, he denounced what the press accounts summarized as "unfettered capitalism," attacking those who ignore "the needs of the many in pursuit of profits for the few." The Pope spoke of "imperialistic" monopolies among the rich nations. Yet, he did not mean to condemn capitalism, only to criticize its excesses. Advocates of lib-



Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote the seminal work on liberation theology.

eration theology are clearly wrong if they think the Pope is soft on capitalism. He recognizes early the disguises in which Marxists hide their purposes.

In his book, "Christians and Marxists", José Bonino, the Methodist theologian, quotes Fidel Castro as exclaiming in wonder, "The theologians are becoming Communists and the Communists are becoming theologians!" While elsewhere in the world Marxism as an intellectual current seems on its deathbed, in Latin America Marxism and the church may need each other. Eric Hobsbawm, a leading Marxist historian at the University of London, explains in a 1978 article that "the churches are now left free to move left, for neither the right nor the state can any longer protect them against erosion. Some Christians may thus hope to retain, or more doubtfully, regain the support of the masses believed to be identified with the left. It is a surprising development. Conversely, parties of the Marxist left, seeking to widen their support, are more inclined to abandon their traditional identification with active opposition to religion."

But the dependency theory, whence socialism in Latin America seeks to derive its legitimacy, has serious factual problems. First, countries such as Canada and the United States have become far larger exporters of raw materials — grain, lumber, coal — than all of Latin America put together. As the

economist John Kenneth Galbraith says, "If to be part of the third world is to be a hewer of wood and a supplier of food and natural produce, the United States and Canada are, by a wide margin, the first of the third-world countries."

Second, such countries as Taiwan, Japan and South Korea of the East Asia rim, are far poorer in natural resources than Latin America, yet have in recent years been far more successful in building highly intelligent and dynamic free economies, overcoming poverty worse in 1945 than that of Latin America.

Dependency theory ill explains why Latin America is poor; poverty existed long before capitalism was a gleam in Adam Smith's eye. Even more inadequately does it explain why Latin America has done so much worse with its own vast resources than stellar performers like Singapore, Hong Kong and others with infinitely less.

THERE ARE, then, both theological and practical reasons for rejecting the main claims of liberation theology. Its single greatest flaw lies in combining two quite different methods of analysis in an effort to overcome "dualism," rejecting European and North American distinctions between religion and politics, church and state, theological principles and partisan practice. Liberation theology says that truth lies in revolutionary praxis. So extreme is this position that Fa-

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"A Theology of Liberation."

ther Segundo can claim that the choice of socialism — "human life in society, liberated as far as possible from alienations" — constitutes the highest real value, at the "theological crux," and that to say otherwise reduces the Gospel to "no value at all."

Needless to say, Catholic faith, whose chief guardian is the papacy, cannot accept such a claim. From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II has built a case against "liberation theology." He believes that religion must transcend politics, and that the primacy of the spiritual can be surrendered by no Christianity worthy of the name.

"Would you go to communion alongside General Pinochet?" asks the British religious writer Peter Hebblethwaite, graphically describing the visible distortion liberation theologians introduce into Christianity. "On the whole, they answer 'no.' He is a class enemy. But if someone raises the objection that Christians are commanded to love their enemies, the theologians of liberation do not demur. But they go on to produce a whole casuistry which enables them to combine class war with, so to speak, a postponed love of enemies."

Many liberation theologians deny they reduce everything to revolutionary praxis. If true, this defense robs this theology of its most important claim to originality, its identification of theologizing with revolutionary action. A more moderate judgment seems to be that most liberation theologians do

want to save the transcendent claims of Christianity on the one hand, while on the other hand insisting that Christian faith demands choice, partisanship, action. Most do not reduce Christianity to class struggle or to the commitment to socialism. Yet the Marxist vulgate of so much Latin American intellectual life obliges them to think in terms of Marxist analysis.

Pope John Paul II lived his entire adult life in the bosom of Marxist analysis, far more rigorously and cynically applied than anything Latin Americans have yet experienced, except in Cuba and possibly Nicaragua. No Marxist thinker in Latin America has attained the stature of the Pope's Polish compatriot, the Marxist philosopher Leszek Kolakowski. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Pope's longtime ally, also has firsthand knowledge of Germany's bitter ideological struggles among Stalinists, Trotskyites, democratic socialists and social democrats. These men know well the sociology of the "slippery slope" — principles one generation accepts provisionally harden into icy dogmas for a next generation brought up on nothing else.

The Pope believes that whoever accepts Marxist analysis sooner or later authorizes the bold and the ruthless to draw consequences for action. The clergymen who employ it without drawing its inexorable consequences would have won the contempt of the young Marx of the Manifesto: "Christian socialism is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat."

Surprisingly, no liberation theologian has yet clarified what Marxist analysis means. But the indications that they give are not consoling. Consider the following elements:

The new man and the new earth. Father Gutiérrez writes in "The Theology of Liberation" that "emancipation" is "to see man in search of a qualitatively different society in which he will be free from all servitude, in which he will be the artisan of his own destiny. It is to seek the building of a new man. Ernesto (Che) Guevara wrote, 'We revolutionaries often lack the knowledge and the intellectual audacity to face the task of the development of a new human being by methods different from

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the conventional ones. . . ."

The utopian sensibility. According to Father Segundo, writing in "Liberation North, Liberation South," the goal of liberation theology is "the permanent opening up of society to its future."

A naive vision of the state. One might well ask, has any government been concerned solely for the common good — and not for the particular goods of the ruling elite? The trust shown by liberation theologians in state ownership shows how close they are

to traditionalist Latin American conceptions of authoritarian control. Even today in most Latin nations, state authorities control more than 50 or 60 percent of the economy (including banks and many basic industries), and in some cases as much as 80 percent, directly or indirectly, of all employment.

No theory of wealth creation. Marxist analysis, which has as its precondition capitalism's successful creation of wealth, simply takes affluence for granted and assumes

poverty is caused solely by exploitation. Nothing is said about creating new wealth, about invention, about entrepreneurship. My poverty is ipso facto someone else's fault, and its cure is the expropriation of the expropriators. The *dependista* theory, placing the onus for poverty and oppressor on exogenous forces, primarily North America, has been invented to apply this myth to precapitalist lands.

The abolition of private property. This notion recurs as the crucial theme of virtually all liberation theologians. There is, to be sure, some confusion on this score. I once heard Paolo Cardinal Arns of Brazil say something

to the effect that "it is not for the Church to pronounce on capitalism or socialism. One thing is clear, however: We must reject capitalism, which is based on selfishness. We believe in the right of workers to own their own land and to keep their profits for themselves, and therefore we incline toward socialism."

Class struggle. Father Gutiérrez writes that "the class struggle is a fact, and neutrality in this question is not possible." He may mean only that the poor must be helped, that poverty is neither necessary nor acceptable. Adam Smith said as much. One does not need Marxist analysis in order to liberate the poor.

The evils accompanying private property, the profit motive, multinational corporations, international finance and, in a word, capitalism. Here, the liberation theologians, standing almost entirely outside the Anglo-American intellectual tradition, totally fail to grasp the genius of the free economy in the free and pluralistic polity. Most liberation theologians tend to have a naïve faith in socialism, despite scores of socialist experiments around the world since 1945. They have an uncommon trust in the political elites to whom they intend to confide all economic (and other) decisions. They adamantly believe that selfishness, sin and injustice

are inherent in, and do not just *accompany* the institutions of a free economy. They believe this despite abundant evidence that the world's freest communities, with the strongest (albeit flawed) institutions of human rights, have relatively free economies.

WHILE THE Vatican has brilliantly diagnosed the ways in which some liberation theologians risk confounding authentic Catholic belief, my own objections are directed more centrally at their flawed vision of political economy. Most liberal theologians are so intent upon revolution against injustice that they give little thought to the shape of the institutions of political economy they intend to put in place *after* the revolution.

Cardinal Ratzinger's instruction last month was fairly succinct: "Millions of our own contemporaries legitimately yearn to recover those basic freedoms of which they were deprived by totalitarian and atheistic regimes which came to power by violent and revolutionary means, precisely in the name of the liberation of the people. This shame of our time cannot be ignored: While claiming to bring them freedom, these regimes keep whole nations in conditions of servitude which are unworthy of mankind. Those who, perhaps inadvertently, make themselves accomplices of similar enslavements betray the poor they mean to help."

To the skeptical eye, liberation theology for all its good intentions promises a mirror image of the Latin American authoritarian societies of the past, but this time of the left rather than of the right. Once again, economic decisions will be state-controlled. Once again, many theologians will identify Christianity with the Latin American state.

The missing link in liberation theology is the absence of a concrete vision of political economy. It refuses to say how safeguards for human rights, economic development and personal liberties will be instituted after the revolution. Liberation theology appears to trust its own fervent Christianity as a sufficient brake on tyranny. This is naïveté — already unmasked in Nicaragua.

A crucial condition for genuine liberation is that no one group of men gains all power over politics, economics, morals and culture. The absorption of all life by a state ideology is the Achilles' heel of existing socialist systems. The

separation of systems — the hard-won lessons of liberal societies — do achieve liberation.

FRIAR LEONARDO Boff of Brazil left his "dialogue" with Cardinal Ratzinger in Rome, smiling, confident and cocky enough to continue upbraiding the Vatican for its alleged naïveté. Two Brazilian cardinals flanked him, somewhat symbolically. Friar Boff will probably not be further reprimanded. Now liberation theologians will busily begin to show how the Cardinal Ratzinger declaration does *not* apply to them. Perhaps, in so doing, they may become more "critical" — precisely the chief recommendation of Cardinal Ratzinger — about the vaguely Marxist thinking their works have exhibited.

If traditional Latin American societies are unacceptable, and if Marxism is unacceptable, then what? Estimates based on demographic statistics project that Latin America will need at least 76 million new jobs by 1999. Will generals, landholders or commissars create these new jobs? Even a little economic sophistication — learned perhaps from East Asia — will suggest that Latin America needs an unprecedented burst of entrepreneurship and industrial and commercial activity. Revolutionaries in Cuba, Nicaragua and Vietnam, among other Communist countries, mostly create huge armies. Only economic activists create jobs. Sooner or later, liberation theologians will need to grapple with how new wealth can be created and sustained systematically.

Regrettably, liberation theologians never look northward except in anger. They will not concede that the United States, too, embodies a kind of liberation theology — liberal, pluralistic, communitarian, public-spirited, dynamic and inventive. Such a liberal society is not, has never promised to be, either a utopia or a sinless paradise. Especially regarding Latin America, our society has committed a full complement of sins. But mutual criticism does not presuppose innocence. Let us hope that the Latin Americans can build free societies, uplifting all their poor, better than we have done. In any case, there are more liberation theologians in this world, committed to practice, to trial and error, and to self-reform, than the liberation theologians of South America have yet to dream of. ■