

## Progressive Religion ... Is Not An Oxymoron

### **Liberation Theology: A Success Story**

Sometime back, Mike Rhodes asked me to consider a column on Liberation Theology. While I was in seminary and graduate school back in the early to mid-1970s, Liberation Theology surfaced in discussions with other students and faculty. My take on it at the time was that this was an intense and radical effort led primarily by Roman Catholic priests to focus on the plight of the poor of Latin America.

#### **Liberation Theology Today?**

As I attempted to research the state of Liberation Theology today, I found that many of the significant sources were a decade or more old. Puzzled, I sent an e-mail to my theological mentor and guide, John B. Cobb Jr. His reply:

"... [T]he fact that your material is old is not surprising. Liberation theology in Latin America is more a part of its history than a living movement by that name. There are many who claim that history as their own, but they do not function as a movement any more.

"One can point both to defeats and successes. Whereas at one time many bishops gave support, the Vatican has pretty much shut down thoroughgoing statements of liberation theology in Catholic circles, and on the whole the Protestant churches have moved to the right.

"But on the other side, the situation in Latin America has changed in the direction for which liberation theology called. Brazil and Argentina have thrown off the yoke of the IMF [International Monetary Fund] and although they are quite moderate, they no longer take orders from Washington. In Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador we have for the first time governments that put the concerns of the indigenous people in a central position. In general, except for Colombia, the U.S. no longer calls the shots."

#### **Liberation Theology: A Radical Return to Core of Christianity**

As I explored books, articles and news articles, I came away with the impression that Liberation Theology is characterized by a radical return to the core of the Christian tradition, namely the focus on the poor and the oppressed.

As I wrote in a column last May, "...Jesus of Nazareth [w]as a Jewish rabbi who lived, preached, and acted in the midst of a people who were under the fierce control of the Roman Empire. ...[W]hen Jesus is quoted as speaking of the Kingdom or Reign of God, this needs to be understood (and would have in that day) as being in direct contrast to the oppressive Kingdom or Reign of Caesar. This was a subversive viewpoint. ... Jesus' concern for the poor and oppressed, which is considered central to his ministry by most Christians, ... must be seen in this context."

There are many progressive Christians, supported by solid biblical scholarship, who believe that this radical stance is what led to his death.

## **What is Concern Without Real Change?**

After all, what does it mean to be concerned about the poor and the oppressed if this concern does not support or actually produce change? This is why care for those at the margins is so fraught with danger to the status quo. If a society's economic systems are maintaining the egregious imbalance, then those who benefit from the lopsidedness are going to resist the change and those who are seeking to effect the change.

As we have seen in the history our own nation, as well as elsewhere in the world, this process of change can easily become volatile and deadly. Many Christians, however, feel that their tradition calls them to be non-violent, despite suffering from violence directed at them.

## **Latin American Liberation Theology**

Liberation Theology, as a movement, is not easy to define. There are activists in areas of the world besides Latin America that use the name and language of Liberation Theology, including Africa and Asia. This column, however, will focus only on the history of this movement for our neighbors to the south.

One of its unique features was that its activity arose from the ground up, in sharp contrast to the hierarchical nature of the Roman Catholic Church. While local priests definitely were central to this widespread effort to focus on economic and political liberation for the poor, the laity had a great deal of say and influence because they were centrally involved. In today's language, these stake holders were included – or, perhaps better, included themselves when room was made for them.

## **Base Communities: Bible Study and More**

Much of the work has been accomplished through what are called *base communities*. A base community is literally made up of the base of a local town or village. As such, much of the concern of any particular group is focused on the issues facing that community. It might be sanitation, it might be safety ... anything that is a problem for the members of that local group.

However, these base communities are linked to the parish and the parish priest. In fact, it was the role of the priest to set these groups in motion.

## **Initial Support from the Vatican**

The official impetus to this came from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) under the leadership of Pope John XXIII, though this has been understood as the Council's response to the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) that began in 1955 and focused on the highly impoverished citizens of the region. Subsequent meetings of CELAM in Medellin, Columbia (1968) and in Puebla, Mexico (1975) helped to solidify this movement.

According to theologian Robert McAfee Brown<sup>1</sup> there may have been more than 100,000 base communities in Latin American, with 80% of those in Brazil alone. They typically have been small groups of perhaps 15-30, comprised of Christians in the

community who joined together to share concerns about local problems. They also studied biblical texts, sang, prayed, and if there was a priest present, shared in communion.

### **More Emphasis on Justice than Personal Salvation**

Like most who are oppressed, they read the biblical texts as stories and accounts that reflected their own struggles. The focus in general was not so much on personal salvation as on what I would call reformation of their local world to be more in harmony with God's aims of justice for all. This is a powerful and central theme in the Christian bible as well as in the Jewish bible. One cannot read the words of the Jewish Prophets without getting a strong sense of the importance of justice for all, in particular for those with little or no power.

### **Strong Opposition to the Base Communities**

As a result, many in these groups, and the priests and bishops that sanctioned and supported the base communities, came under fire from local and national authorities – and eventually from the Vatican itself. Laity and priests were arrested, sometimes tortured. Eventually, there were many who were killed.

The Vatican, beginning with Pope Paul VI who succeeded John XXIII, made strong moves to reign in the work done in the name of Liberation Theology. Pope John Paul II in particular strove hard to condemn and close down the Latin American church's involvement with Liberation Theology.

### **Silencing the Priests**

This has included sanctioning and silencing those who would not be still. This even has been extended to the Peruvian priest, Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, considered by many to be an extraordinary theologian and one of the primary figures in the movement.

One of the chief complaints by the Vatican is that the movement has been allied with Marxists who, by definition, are anti-religion (at least religion as it is often understood). Another is that some in the movement have advocated violence. As Brown has pointed out, however, the priests by definition are Christian, not atheists. Nor are priests likely to be anything other than non-violent in their approach.

### **Has the Movement Reached Its End?**

Nonetheless, in Latin American at least, there has been a lot accomplished through this difficult and courageous movement. The question is whether or not this movement has reached its end.

I personally do not think this is the case, whether or not it is called Liberation Theology. Why? Because of the context in which we are all living today. The extraordinarily far-reaching damage caused by the financially and politically powerful has been exposed for many to see. This revelation could result in bringing into focus the importance of the values that underlie Liberation Theology for far more people.

### **A Global Leveling?**

There seems to be the potential for a world-wide leveling that is surfacing. If this happens, it will be in part due to the actual, swift, and complex interconnectedness of information and finance.

We are literally seeing the systemic nature of our global economy, for example. Problems caused by greed in single area can no longer be limited to that area as easily. Instead of being contained, today's financial problems spill quickly into the entire global system. And, because of the amount of information available, many more of us can see the devastating effects – and know more clearly who are the ones causing the problems.

We could do worse than have the values inherent in Liberation Theology guide this great leveling if it becomes a reality.

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<sup>1</sup>See *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Guide*, by Robert McAfee Brown, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY (1993) (The section on Notes and Resources contains an excellent bibliography through the publication date. Brown is Professor Emeritus of Theology and Ethics at Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, CA.)