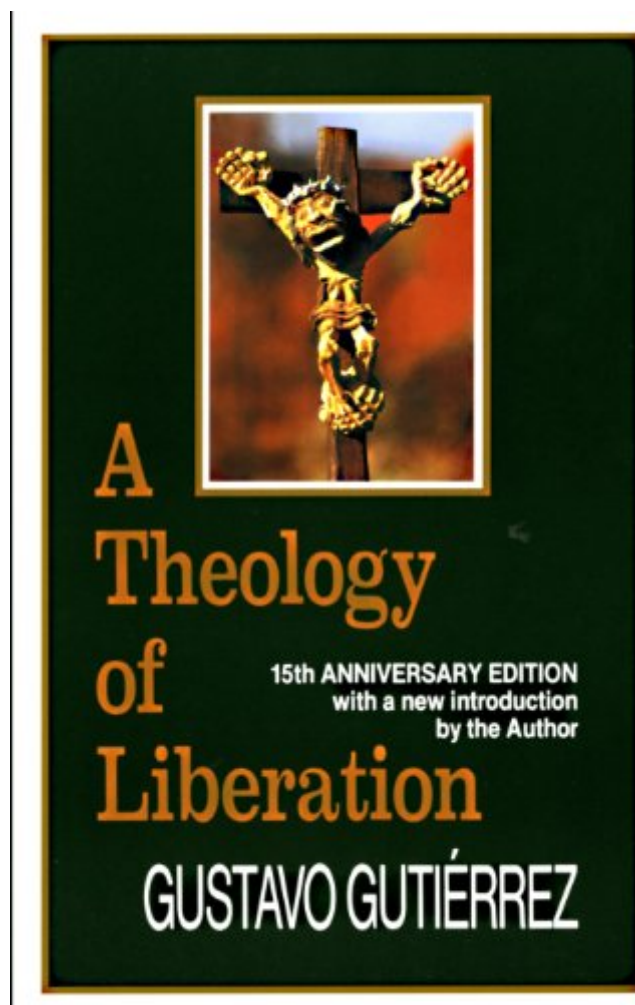


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A Theology Of Liberation: 15th Anniversary Edition



Synopsis

A pioneering and prophetic approach to theology based on creating an option for the poor at the expense of those who either maintain the status quo or abuse the structures of power for their own ends.

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Customer Reviews

Originally written in 1971, this revised edition contains a new introduction, in addition to the original, and the reworking of portions of the first edition. While many similar ideals had been circulating prior to its publication, and were expressed in the Vatican II Council documents (1965) and the Medellin Conference (1968), *A Theology of Liberation* marks the official launching of the liberation theology movement and Gustavo Gutiérrez is seen as its father. Since then liberation theology continues to spread, morph and influence the Christian community not only in Latin America but throughout the world. While not embraced in totality, many of its ideas have filtered into the evangelical church and are expressed in the latest round of the social gospel. In *A Theology of Liberation* we find the roots of this social agenda being espoused by key Christian leaders and organizations today.

Theology of Liberation is a dense, detailed, intense and difficult volume to comprehend. Esoteric language is often used and uncommon words found throughout. It probably doesn't help that the book was originally written in Spanish and translated and retranslated into English. I found it redundant, repetitive and contradictory at times, nevertheless key concepts emerge. Some of the most important ones are:

- Liberation theology is not a call for social and economic development (which is rejected) but a call for revolution (pp. 16-17), a permanent culture revolution (p. 21) that may include violence (p. 64).
- It is a rejection of capitalism and promotion of socialism (pp. 17, 20, 54-55, 65-66, 116, 158-159). There must be liberation from capitalistic countries, especially the United States, and overthrow of private ownership of property (p. 150).
- The church has become part of the evil, suppressive system by devoting itself to orthodox rather than orthopraxis (p. 8). The church must be a leader in the revolution and involved in the political process (p. 76).
- The meaning of salvation has been expanded. It includes liberation from social oppression, liberation from personal servitude and liberation from sin (p. XXXVIII-XXXIX). Salvation is more than forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God; it is transformation and fulfillment of the present life (pp. 83-85), and deliverance of society (p. 143, 217).
- "The church has two missions: evangelization and the inspiration of the temporal sphere" (p. 37).
- "To participate in the process of liberation is already in a sense, a salvific work" (p. 46); it is a building of a new society (p. 141).
- Liberation theology seeks a new meaning of Christianity, a new meaning for the church, a new way of doing theology and a new humanity (pp. XIV, 12, 59, 65, 81, 141). Until liberation theology, Latin American theology was just an echo of European theology (p. XXVIII).
- Liberation theology, while not swallowing Marxism whole, nevertheless incorporates much of Marxism's philosophy (pp. 8, 16, 19, 56, 125-126, 183), especially the idea of a classless society and a denunciation of private ownership of property.
- It makes use of a Kingdom of God hermeneutic (p. 10). That is, the Kingdom of God is making the world a better place (pp. 10-11, 29, 66, 74, 91), a utopia of sorts which will be the work of man, not God (pp. 135-140), and elimination of poverty (p. 168).

Apparently as mankind moves towards these achievements it will enable the Lord to return (p. 168). As a biblical base Gutierrez applies OT scriptures, which in context describes the millennium, to the modern society (p. 97). He also interprets Matthew 25 as caring for all the needy of the world (pp. 112-116, 228).

- Understanding the meaning of poverty is at the heart of liberation theology (pp. XXXIII-XXXIV, 162-173). It can mean either spiritual poverty (a good thing) or physical poverty, which is seen as sin and evil and out of the will of God (p. 165). Here the author

confuses poverty (which Scripture never condemns) with mistreatment of the poor, which Scripture consistently condemns (pp. 165-168). This is a fundamental flaw in the philosophy behind liberation theology. Gutiérrez is a Peruvian Roman Catholic priest and as such accepts the authority of Rome. He looks to Vatican II (see pp. XXXVII, 22, 29, 73, 81, 145, 162) and the watershed conference at Medellín (pp. 63, 73, 156) for support. The post Vatican II Catholic church has become clearly inclusive in its soteriology and liberation theology incorporates this into its philosophy. It sees every human as a temple of God (pp. 84-86, 109-111, 115-116), and all who follow their own faith sincerely are in the Kingdom of God already (p. 45). This changes the mission of the church from evangelism to liberation from unjust social situations, especially poverty. Gutiérrez states the goal of his book as: "It is to reconsider the great themes of the Christian life within this radically changed perspective and with regard to the new questions posed by this commitment" (p. XIII). He summarizes liberation theology as: "This kind of theology, arising from concern with a particular set of issues will perhaps give us the solid and permanent albeit modest foundation for the theology in a Latin American perspective which is both desired and needed" (p. 11). The final statement in the book summarizes it well: "Only by rejecting poverty and by making itself poor in order to protest against it can the Church preach something that is uniquely its own: 'spiritual poverty,' that is, the openness of humankind and history to the future promised by God. Only in this way will the Church be able to fulfill authentically-and with any possibility of being listened to-its prophetic function of denouncing every human injustice. And only in this way will it be able to preach the word which liberates, the word of genuine fellowship. Only authentic solidarity with the poor and a real protest against the poverty of our time can provide the concrete, vital context necessary for a theological discussion of poverty. The absence of a sufficient commitment to the poor, the marginalized, and the exploited is perhaps the fundamental reason why we have no solid contemporary reflection on the witness of poverty. For the Latin American Church especially, this witness is an inescapable and much-needed sign of the authenticity of its mission" (p. 173). While I disagree strongly with liberation theology, this foundational book is a must read for any who hope to understand it, and its implication for modern evangelical theology. Reviewed by Gary E. Gilley, Pastor/teacher Southern View Chapel

The importance of this book can't be overstated for the serious Christian, especially in the US. "Liberation Theology" has decades of mythology-accretion--here is the wellspring. A careful book, separating reality from myth, crediting its sources and inspirations meticulously, it brings a new understanding and appreciation for the love of God in and through confrontation with people whose

health, families, lives are damaged by poverty.

A Theology of Liberation is a recognized classic in its field, which, one can even say, the author, Peruvian Dominican monk, Gustavo Gutierrez, literally invented the field since he coined the term "Liberation Theology" in a 1969 paper on the subject, shortly after the 1968 Medellin conference of Bishops, at which he was a consultant. The book may be one of the first full explorations of what is now called "contextual theologies", presentations of Christian theology "from the underside", from the point of view of the severely, chronically disadvantaged peoples of the world. The long and the short of this book is that the importance of Gutierrez message deserves its weighty title, but Gutierrez weakens his case by slighting contemporary and historical theology and ignoring some central "theological" issues. But the book has reached the status of "classic" and for that reason deserves to be read today. What may surprise some people is the fact that Gutierrez is not presenting a radical point of view. The book follows hard on a decade of dramatic moves by the Catholic Church, beginning with Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, the first addressed to the whole world, rather than to the Catholic faithful. The eventful half decade ended with the close of the Vatican Council II, under Pope Paul VI and his 1968 encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, which stated that the economy of the world should serve everyone, not a privileged few. Thus, Gutierrez is firmly within the heart of Catholic teachings, when he speaks for the disadvantaged of the almost entirely Catholic continent of South America. The sense of "contextual theology" is that doctrines grow out of the circumstances and practice (praxis) of a particular part of the world. The first thing is to have an accurate assessment of those circumstances. In reading this book, I was surprised to find that the poverty of 'third world countries' is locked into the nature of global economics. It is simply not possible for underdeveloped nations to 'catch up' with developed nations because of the economics of exchange in raw (basic) ingredients for manufactured goods. This argument has the same structure that many 'have not' situations. It is simply not enough to give a person the opportunity to excel. If they begin in a hole compared to middle class contemporaries, they will simply never catch up. Gutierrez shows that conventional charity will simply not do the job. If we 'give stuff', it will not magically lift these economies up by their bootstraps. We must establish 'solidarity' with them based on Christian love. It is an attitude of 'we are all in this together'. The notion of 'solidarity' brings up the remarkably close association Gutierrez' though has to Marxist analysis of economies. But he arrives at a Marxian point of view without following Marx' path (and his later writings downplay any Marxist leanings.) This brings up the danger that Gutierrez' thinking is changing the church into a political party. The author goes a

fair distance in attempting to show that his theology is 'general', arising out of, but not limited to, the experience of the wretched poor of South America, and his Catholic context supports him in that sentiment, even if some of his theological positions may seem strange when compared to the likes of Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, or even Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI). There is a very Old Testament air about the theology, citing the freeing of the Hebrews from Egypt as the first great liberation and salvific action. There is also much said about the role of prophesy. Even though St. Paul cites prophesy as a Christian function, little was made of the notion compared to the great prophets of the Old Testament. What is unfortunate is that both Gutierrez' use of the Old Testament and his thumbnail sketch of the history of Catholic theology seems slanted and self-serving. The book may have been much better if he had left these discussions out. The book would also have done a much better job of being a theology for all of us if he had mentioned a few minor details such as the crucifixion and the resurrection. 'Christ' hardly shows up at all (although it is not surprising to find Luke as the most often quoted Gospel, as Luke has the greatest concern for the poor. The one great category of Christian theology which Gutierrez does address is eschatology, history, last things. But he does it in one of the most surprisingly odd ways, by invoking Sir Thomas More's notion of Utopia. On the face of it, this seems odd, because More wrote his book as a satire, and 'Utopia' is based on the Greek words for 'no where'. Gutierrez admits all this and plunges ahead, using the notion of a well ordered society, like the one in Utopia, is a proper ideal for our destination, at the end of time. I have yet to read Augustine's "City of God", but I have a strong suspicion that Gutierrez' Utopia is a far, far cry from the conception of the ancient church's greatest theologian. My seminary colleagues get oh so tired of hearing me say this, but I believe it is a legitimate question to ask whether what Gutierrez and the other "context theologians" are doing is really theology. I am quite happy calling it "contextual hermeneutics" or "preaching to the context". But I can sense that this is not enough. Since Gutierrez is addressing a problem with origins on a world-wide stage, a sermon on conditions in Peru hardly seems like enough. He needs to get our attention. On that basis, Gutierrez' agenda and 'label' has some merit. The problem is that if one takes on the mantle of theology, you must expect to be judged by the standards of theology. And on that count, Gutierrez falls short, while going about preaching a very, very important message to the world. It is worth noting that Gutierrez' message, ironically, does seem to have been picked up by academic theology especially by the (Protestant) theologians of hope such as Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann.

This is a tough book for me. I lean libertarian, honestly. But this has made me reassess, and leaves

me with a lot of questions for myself. I am still pretty skeptical of grand plans made from on high, by human beings, even to give the poor the preferential option that I think we are called to. I still believe capitalism can be tamed and turned to liberate. But not all by itself. It is a philosophy that must be tempered by theology.

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