

Liberation Theology



(A Cuban poster in honor of Father Camilo Torres who died fighting for revolution in Columbia in 1966.)

Christianity is the most important religion in North America. Many students have grown up in families where either their parents and/or themselves often attended a Christian church. However, Christianity is generally seen as having a conservative bias, as if the Christian Right represents the entire spectrum of believers. In contrast to the oppressive rhetoric and practices of the Christian Right, there stands a revolutionary tradition within the faith that not only calls for Christians to take action for justice, but actually requires it:

LIBERATION THEOLOGY.

When analyzing Christianity's liberating potential one must first admit its history of failures. The hierarchical Christian churches have used the Bible for evil. From medieval times it was used by kings and queens to justify their rule as coming from a "divine right." Governments invoked Church support in their wars against neighboring states, both in regular wars and in explicitly "holy wars" such as the Crusades. European imperialists used religion to justify their colonization of Latin America, Africa, the invasion of North America, and to pacify the indigenous inhabitants who were killed by European genocidal policies. From slavery, to South

African Apartheid, to segregation, Christianity has reinforced racism. According to Max Weber's "Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," Christianity (or specifically Calvinism) helped build early capitalism, and since then it has often sided with the capitalist elites. The conservative churches have sidelined women, subjugating them to their husbands and often barring them from the ministry. Finally many "Christians" are leading the struggle against equal rights for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals – such as same-sex marriage.

However there are alternative traditions in Christianity dating back to the foundations of the faith. One should recognize that there is an extremely wide range of views and practices contained within Christianity. In the sixteenth century, the Church went through a revolution against the traditional hierarchy that sought to make the Church more real for its members and to practice the authentic message, untainted by centuries of Church Authority. The revolution was largely compromised (used by feudal politicians and the growing bourgeoisie to serve their own ends) and is now known as the Reformation.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Isaiah 61:1-2).

In the Sixties, another social revolution swept much of the world. Liberation Theology emerged in Latin America in that time. It came out of the peoples' experience of poverty, dictatorship, and war. They began to relate these experiences of oppression with the message of the Gospel, reinterpreting the theology which previously had been taught top-down by the Catholic Church – making it their own. Since then it has spread from Latin America to every imaginable oppressed group (women, blacks, queers, Palestinians, etc) who have replaced a foreign (white / male / straight / European) God, with one that comes from their group. One who suffers and struggles with them for liberation.

Bias

Liberation theology recognizes the bias in mainstream theology that was denied by its practitioners (and still is), and decided to replace the elitist (white / male / European / rich) bias with one for the poor, and later for all oppressed groups. Mainstream theology is created by trained experts, who constitute a privileged class due to their educational requirements (seminaries and universities), who must often be certified by the Church elite. Thus its bias should not surprise. Liberation theologians looked at the Bible and found stories of the Old Testament prophets speaking out against injustice, and of Jesus walking with the poor, women, Gentiles, prostitutes, and criminals. Jesus spoke out for liberation, rebelled against the state, and was killed with the cooperation of the Roman and Jewish elites. It is here that liberation theology finds its bias.

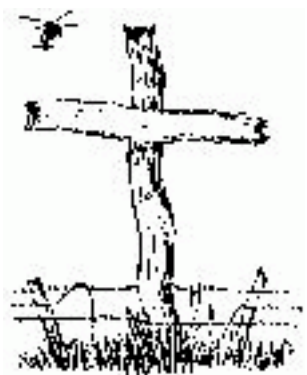
Some principles of Liberation Theology

- **Institutional Sin** — Why do we live in a time of untold wealth, resource exploitation, and production – and yet despite it all there are so many poor and oppressed? This question sparked the creation of liberation theology in Latin America. Liberation theology uses a semi-Marxist analysis to find the answer – namely that institutional forces (military, political, economic, and social) such as the state, armed forces (death squads, army, and police), capitalism, patriarchy, racism, sexism, and heterosexism are responsible for much of the sin in the world. For instance if someone steals to feed themselves, they are not sinning, it is the system that made them poor that is sinful.
- **Collective Salvation** – While conservative Christians tell people to stop individually sinning to save their own soul, liberation theology recognizes the necessity of social change to end the root institutional causes of sin.
- **Grassroots Democracy** – Adherents form Christian base communities, to do theology for themselves. Their own life experience is critical for the development of theology. Liberation theology is spread by priests, nuns, and laity – and suppressed by the Church hierarchy.
- **Praxis** – Members of these base communities use Praxis (a combination of practice and theory – action and reflection). They both studied the Bible (developing theory), and worked on practical issues of how to make their life better (e.g. end poverty).
- **Heaven on Earth** – While conservatives use promises of heaven, to keep exploited people inactive and apolitical, liberation theology requires that people work to uproot sinful systems of domination – trying to, at least partially, recreate heaven on earth.
- **Just Revolution** – A minority of liberation theologians believed that violence is an acceptable (non-sinful) means of a community liberating itself from oppression, because living the oppression is more violent (more evil). This is similar to Just War theory, except that the right to do violence lies in the oppressed people, NOT the traditionally oppressive state. Catholics were involved in leftwing guerilla struggles in Latin America, notably with the Nicaraguan Sandinistas who overthrew an U.S. supported dictatorship in 1979.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God. (Matthew 5:9)

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. (Matthew 19:24)

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (Luke 6:20)



Some Varieties of Liberation Theology

Liberation theology is a system of analysis that generates slightly different theologies when applied in different contexts. Here is a sampling of some varieties.

- Latin American – the original variety. It emphasizes the oppression of the poor.
- Black – developed out of the U.S. civil rights movement, and notably black power theory. It focuses on racial inequality and challenges the traditionally white blue-eyed Jesus image asserting that Jesus was of African / Middle-Eastern origin.
- Women’s – came out of the Seventies women’s movement. Focuses on gender inequality. Challenges the patriarchal God/Father, sometimes replacing God with a feminine deity: the Goddess.
- Gay / Lesbian / Bisexual / Queer – reads Biblical passages, that are used to condemn homosexuals, and reinterprets them based on their historical context. Some such passages are from the Old Testament (which includes statements against unclean menstruating women... and others that aren’t followed), whereas others are likely aimed at pagans (or “idolaters”), marital infidelity, or relationships between older men and boys. Same-sex long-term relationships (our modern day “homosexuality”) did not exist in Jesus’ Palestine, and a Christian faith based on love should support them.

The Catholic Church at first accommodated and incorporated some of the teachings of this theory (Ex. Catholic social teaching’s preference for the poor), but has attacked its larger thrust as being Marxist. And the Catholic Church is critical of Marxism based on a cold-war interpretation – i.e. the “Marxism” of the Soviet Union, which isn’t Marxism. Especially with John Paul II, the Catholic Church has moved to the right, transferring, firing, and silencing liberation theologians.

What to do

In practice... if you belong to a church – challenge it and its members to side with the oppressed, announce rallies and other events (during the service or in the bulletin), bring in a radical speaker/preacher/priest, and start a peace and justice committee. If you don’t belong to a church – recognize that there are Christians who are just as radical/activist as non-Christians, that the Christian religion (like other religions) has both its radicals and conservatives, activists and non-activists. So build coalitions with the radicals. If you “used to go to church” – consider opening a phone book, calling around, try to locate a progressive church in your neighborhood where you’d feel at home, or take on conservatives at their home turf.

Webpages

- http://www.americas.org/News/Features/199907_Catholic_Church/index.asp
- <http://www.lma.org/league/religion/PT.religion.html>
- <http://www.bway.net/~halsall/radcath.html> — Radical Catholic page
- <http://www.ufmcc.com/> — GLBT friendly church
- <http://www.sojourners.com/>
- <http://www.spanweb.org/>