

The Hope of Liberation

Gustavo Gutierrez

The resistance of those who persist in maintaining old ways of thinking theologically and their accusations that the faith is being distorted are reminiscent of the opposition to the use of Aristotelian philosophy in theology. Notwithstanding the unfounded alarms and episodic condemnations these protests might provoke in the present, they, like their predecessors, have no future.

The future is in the hands of a faith which has no fear of the advances in thought and no fear of the social practice of man, a faith which allows itself to be interrogated by these phenomena, but also challenges them, a faith which is enriched but does not submit acritically.

Such a task is complex and must have recourse to multiple specialties, to a serious knowledge of the different facets—both philosophical and scientific—of contemporary thought. It is a task of understanding the faith which can be undertaken only from within historical praxis, from within the place where men struggle to be able to live like men. It is a task inspired by hope in Him who, by revealing himself, reveals man in all the fullness within him, a task inspired by hope in the Lord of history, in whom all things were and by whom all things were saved.

Commitment to the process of liberation introduces Christians into a world quite unfamiliar to them and forces them to make what we have called a qualitative leap—the radical challenging of a social order and of its ideology and the breaking with old ways of knowing (“epistemological rupture”). For this reason theological reflections carried out in an-

other cultural context say very little to them. Such reflections transmit the consciousness which preceding Christian generations had of their faith. Their expressions are a reference point for these committed Christians; they do not, however, rescue them from their theological orphanhood, because such expressions do not speak to them in the strong, clear and incisive language which corresponds to the human and Christian experience which they are living.

But, simultaneously, the buds of a new type of understanding of the faith are emerging within these same experiences. In them we have learned how to link knowing and transforming, theory and practice. A rereading of the Gospel forces itself upon us. And in this rereading we will discover something traditional, authentically traditional—and perhaps therefore forgotten by more recent “traditions”: The Gospel truth is done! We must work the truth, John tells us, and that truth is love. To live love is to affirm God. To believe in God is not to limit ourselves to affirming his existence; to believe in God is to commit our lives to Him and to all people. To have faith is to go out of ourselves and to give ourselves to God and others. Faith works through charity, as Paul makes clear.

Faith thus appears to us ever more as a liberating praxis. Faith—the acceptance of, and the response to, the love of the Father—goes to the deepest root of social injustice, namely, sin, the sundering of friendship with God and of brotherhood among men. But it will not reach this depth by sidestepping historical mediations, by avoiding the sociopolitical analyses of these historical realities. Sin occurs in the negation of man as a brother, in oppressive structures created for the benefit of the few and for the exploitation of peoples, races and social classes. Sin is fundamental alienation which, because it is such, cannot be reached in itself; it occurs only in concrete, historical situations, in particular alienations.

GUSTAVO GUTIERREZ is Professor of Theology at the Catholic University of Peru and advisor to the Committee on University Pastoral Problems of CELAM (Conferencia General del Episcopado Latino-Americano). A version of this article appeared in *Fe cristiana y cambio social en América latina*, published by Ediciones Sígueme (Salamanca, Spain).

Sin requires a radical liberation, but this necessarily includes a liberation of a political nature. Only by participating militantly and effectively in the historical process of liberation will it be possible for us to discern the fundamental alienation present in every partial alienation. This radical liberation is the gift which Christ brings. By his death and resurrection he redeems man from sin and from all its consequences. As the Latin American bishops assembled at Medellín said:

It is the same God who, in the fulness of time, sends his son so that, made flesh, he might come to liberate all men from *all* the enslavements to which sin has subjected them—ignorance, misery, hunger, and oppression, in a word, injustice and hatred, which have their origin in human selfishness.

To have faith is to accept the gratuitous gift of divine sonship. The mystery hidden from all time and revealed now is the love of the Father which makes us sons in his Son. The Son was made man and thereby transforms men into brothers. Sonship and brotherhood require each other. By working to make brothers of all men we accept, not in word, but in work, the gift of sonship. To struggle against all injustice, despoliation and exploitation, to commit ourselves to the creation of a more brotherly and human society, is, in a single act, both to live the love of the Father and to witness to it.

But, as we have already noted, political action has its own demands and its own laws. To recall the profound meaning which this action has for a Christian is something very different from taking a leap backward toward stages in which man was unable to understand the internal mechanisms of an oppressive society and political action had not yet come of age. To accept the gift of divine sonship by working to make all men brothers will be no more than a phrase, useless except to satisfy ourselves with the nobility of our ideal, unless we live this sonship daily (and amid conflict) in history, unless we translate it into a real identification with the interests of people who suffer oppression by other people and with the struggles of the exploited classes, unless we make use of the instruments offered us by the social sciences for understanding those social realities which deny the justice and brotherhood which we seek.

In this context, theology will be a critical reflection in and on historical praxis in confrontation with the word of the Lord lived and accepted in faith. It will be a reflection in and on faith as liberating praxis. It will be an understanding of a faith which has as its starting point a commitment to create a just and brotherly society, a faith which should enable this commitment to become more radical and fuller. It will be an understanding of a faith which is made



truth, is verified, in a real and fruitful insertion into the process of liberation. To reflect on faith as liberating praxis is to reflect on a truth which is done and is not only affirmed. In the last instance our exegesis of the word, to which theology hopes to contribute, occurs in deed. The creation of brotherhood among men is the acceptance of the gratuitous gift of sonship. It is to live in and through Christ and his Spirit.

The context of liberation changes our way of doing theology. We do not stand before new fields of application for old theological notions; rather we stand before the challenge and need to live out and think through faith in different sociocultural categories. Such a challenge has occurred before in the history of the Christian community. It always has given rise to fear and anxiety. But in the quest we are driven by the urgent need to say the word of the Lord in our everyday words.

This approach distinguishes the theology of liberation from theologies such as those of development, revolution and violence, to which it is at times connected and even erroneously reduced. With regard to these theologies, the theology of liberation is characterized not only by its different analyses of reality and its more comprehensive and radical political options, but above all by its differences in the theological task itself. The theology of liberation does not try to justify in a Christian way postures already taken; it does not yearn to be a revolutionary Christian ideology. Rather it seeks to think through the faith from the starting point of the way it is lived within the commitment to liberation. Therefore its themes are the great themes of all true theology, but the focus, the way of approaching them, is different. Its relationship to historical praxis is different. To say that the

theology of liberation does not hope to be a revolutionary Christian ideology is not to assert that it is unrelated to the revolutionary process. On the contrary, its starting point is precisely its insertion into this process, and it tries to assist this process in becoming more radical and more comprehensive. This will be done by situating the political commitment to liberation within the perspective of the gratuitous gift of Christ's total liberation.

Christ's liberation is not reduced to political liberation, but it occurs in liberating historical events. It is not possible to bypass these mediations. On the other hand, political liberation is not a religious messianism; it has its autonomy and its own laws. It supposes social analyses and well-determined political options. But to see human history as a history in which Christ's liberation is at work enlarges our perspective and gives to what is involved in political commitment its full depth and its true meaning. We are not speaking of facile and impoverishing equations or of simplistic and distorting reductions of one liberation to the other, but rather of an illumination and of reciprocal and fruitful demands.

The theology of liberation is a theology of salvation in the concrete historical and political circumstances of today. These present-day historical and political mediations, evaluated by this theology itself, change the experience of, and the reflection on, the

mystery hidden from all times and now revealed, that is, the Father's love and human brotherhood—salvation. This change is what the term *liberation* hopes to make "present."

A theological reflection in the context of liberation starts from the perception that this context obliges us to rethink radically our being Christian and our being Church. In this reflection we will have recourse to the different expressions of contemporary human reason, to the human sciences, and not to philosophy alone. But above all we will refer to historical praxis in a new way. This historical praxis is a liberating praxis. It is an identification with men, specifically, the interests and conflicts of those social classes which suffer misery and exploitation. It is an insertion into the political process of liberation, in order to live and to announce Christ's liberating love from within that process. And his love goes to the very root of all exploitation and injustice—the sundering of friendship with God and among men.

But we definitely will not have an authentic theology of liberation until the oppressed themselves can freely and creatively express themselves in society and among the people of God, until they are the artisans of their own liberation, until they account with their own values for that hope of total liberation which they bear within them.