



The Politics of Faith Liberation Theology and Latin America

With today's geopolitical climate, the United States should be whistling *South America, Take it Away*, a popular tune from the 1940s, for a number of unintended reasons. Now Latin America is like a two-edged dagger aimed at America's midsection. Illegal immigration and drug importation are not the only threats to our nation's freedom. Like so many *killer bees*, corrupt ideas can also penetrate a country's border defenses. One of the most dangerous ideas of the last 50 years has been liberation theology, which has already affected the United States with its racial and gender offspring.

A POPULAR MOSAIC

For the Church, liberation theology poses an even greater threat because it has the potential to rupture the long history of Catholicism in Latin America, where more than half of its church members live. Liberation theology is a toxic mixture of religion and politics, aimed at energizing the poor of Latin America with an explosive new combination of class conflict and armed revolution. More Machiavellian than Christian, it views life and suffering through a Marxist prism that sees violence as a long-term solution to age-old social problems.

It begins with the relativist position that all theology is biased because it reflects the socio-economic class of those who developed it. Current theology merely reflects the bias toward the wealthy and the capitalist classes. Its advocates believe that it is time that a theology emerged from the ranks of the poor. Liberation theology also holds the Church up to scorn for its presumed compliance with the *evil power structure* of society. In place of the institutional Church of hierarchies and dioceses, they want a *popular church*, a mosaic of poor peoples who have been especially blessed by God. In their popular church the people are organized into small communities under lay leaders, who in turn take their instructions from *pastoral workers*, clerical or lay. The pastoral workers teach the people how to interpret the Bible in light of their own personal experiences, including their divine right to revolt against any form of oppression.

MARXISM WITH A HALO

Liberation theology is another violent descendant of the French Revolution. From philosopher Emanuel Kant, it borrowed the idea of the autonomy of human reason. With a delicate irony, it

argued that a theology of God was no longer necessary for the salvation of mankind. Divine revelation was cast aside in favor of the revelations from secular humanists. The second part of their so-called enlightened European thinking derived from Karl Marx's argument that man's integrity can "only be realized through the violent overthrow of the political and economic structures of society.

Its modern roots owe much to the ideas of several European Protestant theologians, such as Jurgen Moltmann, Johannes Baptist Metz, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who represented the last and most radical version of the anti-poverty Social Gospel of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However their radicalized progressivism was not just *Marxism with a halo*. While they did pay lip service to Marx's idea of class conflict, their main focus was on the Church as an agent of social change, instead of merely a savior of individual souls. They believed that salvation should be viewed, not in terms of individuals, but in terms of a new social order with universal equality. Their Jesus is an earthly king with a worldly agenda, not unlike the expected Messiah of the Old Testament Zionists.

Another important influence, according to Phillip Thrower's book, *The Catholic Church and the Counter-Faith*, was Lutheran Biblical critic Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1977), who wrote about religious modernism expressed as a political faith. Bultmann's *History of the Synoptic Gospels* attempted to *demythologize* the Bible. He taught that the early Christian communities, not Jesus, had *created* Christianity by promoting *myths* about Jesus' death and Resurrection. The liberation theologians also based much of their thinking on social justice for the poor from Pope John XXIII's encyclicals, which stressed the Church's active participation with the world's poor.

THE SUBVERSIVE FROM PERU

In Latin America, liberation theology first appeared during the era of national liberation movements that were spreading around the globe like wildfire in the 1960s. Its Latinized adaptation emanated from the writings of several heterodox Latin American theologians, such as Gustavo Gutierrez (Peru) Leonardo Boff (Brazil), Juan Luis S. J. (Uruguay), and Jon Sobrino (El Salvador). Liberation theology reached its pinnacle between the second meeting of the Latin American Bishops' conference in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 and their next meeting at Puebla, Mexico in 1979, at which Pope John

Paul II condemned it for reducing Christ to *the subversive man from Nazareth*.

Gustavo Gutierrez, often called *the father of liberation theology*, became its leading spokesman. A Catholic priest still preaching his gospel today, Gutierrez grew up in the squalor of Peru. In his book, *The Power of the Poor in History*, he wrote that liberation theology is a movement *of critical reflection from within, and upon concrete historical praxis, in confrontation with the word of the Lord as lived and accepted in faith*. Praxis is a term meaning strong action which is derived from the Sardinian and Brazilian Marxists, Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire.

While Gutierrez's teaching might share some resemblance with the spirit of Catholicism, the application of his theology warranted the disdain of the Vatican. With more of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx than Jesus, Gutierrez wants to free the poor and the marginalized from all *things that limit their capacity to develop themselves freely and in dignity*. He urged liberation from selfishness and sin as if they were conditions imposed from without. To him the Catholic faith was a vehicle for revolution and social change, not personal piety. With a debt to Machiavelli, Gutierrez believed that when necessary, violence should be applied with full measure in order to secure the needs of the poor and the oppressed. Such a willingness to approve violence, no matter how good the cause, in the name of the Catholic faith, is blatantly contrary to Church teaching.

In his second book, *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutierrez coined the term, *the preferential option for the poor*. To Gutierrez, to be poor was contrary to the will of God. He admonished the poor for acquiescing in their own oppression. Those who passively accept their fate commit a grievous sin against mankind. On the contrary, they must be active agents in opposing all oppression, even with violence. Turning the other cheek changed to *lock and load your weapons*.

THE SACRAMENTAL POOR

Gutierrez's *preferential option for the poor* became the central tenet of liberation theology. It sees Jesus more as a Liberator of the poor from their oppression and poverty, instead of the Savior of mankind. In a continent that is both Roman Catholic and mired in poverty, Gutierrez raises an important question for the Church. *How can we say to the poor peasants of an entire continent that God loves you?* With this in mind, one of his disciples, Leonardo Boff, raised the poor to the level of a sacrament. He stressed that the poor are God's favorite children with a special place in Heaven with Him.

Historically Marxism has always been long on theory and short on viable solutions for what may be insoluble social problems. Liberation theology has politicized the Gospels to the extent that the poor are offered solutions with or without Jesus Christ. It is the last resort for people who have lost their faith in the Church and God's Divine Providence.

Belief is the key to salvation not poverty or wealth. Nowhere is it implied that the poor, who Jesus *said will always be with us*, deserve favoritism. Love thy neighbor transcends classes and culture. Gutierrez's theology is the *ultimate share the wealth* scheme, which is contrary to Acts 10:34-36, stating that God shows

no partiality.

The *option for the poor* is little more than a Marxist slogan that mocks the idea of moral equality found in the New Testament. It clearly demonstrates why politics and faith mix like oil and water. A theocracy tends toward religious tyranny as illustrated by the countries dominated by Islam. In countries where religion is controlled by politics, such as in China, religious teachings and practices become secularized to the point of excluding God and His morality. Socialistic countries also devalue true religious faith.

SOUTH OF THE BORDER

With the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 90s, it appeared that Marxism and its sister movements such as liberation theology were moribund. Its internal critics stressed that its narrow economic focus on class struggle was out of step with the tenor of the times. It had egregiously neglected the other issues of social relations, such as race, ethnicity, and gender. It had also overlooked the emotional nature of man, and the *spirituality* that most progressives seek from religion.

In the last two decades, a flowering of Latin American feminism, including a massive push for legalized abortion, homosexual rights, and an end to racial discrimination has changed the battlegrounds. Pope Benedict XVI recognized its new wineskin when he warned that liberation theology is still *a fundamental threat to the faith*. There are still 80,000 base communities, the grassroots building blocks of liberation theology from the 1960s in Brazil alone. There are nearly one million *Bible circles*, which meet regularly to read and discuss Scripture from the viewpoint of liberation theology. It is readily apparent that liberation theology is alive and well South of the border.

Latin America is also awash in a sea of other menacing problems, including food shortages, financial mismanagement, double-digit inflation, and vicious drug cartels that have provided a fertile field for the return of old style Marxist politics. While Fidel Castro lingers in suspended medical animation, his heir apparent, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, who fancies himself the *Second Coming of Simon Bolivar*, is assembling a squad of Marxist cronies. When Fidel finally does die, Chavez will more than likely completely dominate the continent. Chavez has already taken majority control of the world's largest oil company projects and now reportedly controls 3/4 of the world's oil reserves, larger than Saudi Arabia. He has forged an alliance with Iran and a close relationship with Russia, and his motto is "Fatherhood, Socialism or Death."

Chavez's formidable political cartel includes such Marxist partisans as Daniel Ortega, who has returned his Sandinistas to Nicaragua, Lucio Gutierrez of Ecuador, Peru's Alejandro Toledo, and Uruguay's Tabare Vazquez. Arguably, all this socialist ferment could not have happened, had it not been for two generations of Gutierrez's labors for a *politics of faith*, based on a *preferential option for the poor*, aka liberation theology.

A CIVILIZATION OF LOVE

With his visit to Brazil in May of 2007 to open the 5th general meeting of CELAM, the pan-continental conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, Pope Benedict entered a region of

the Catholic Church that has been beset by a storm of political, economic, social and religious unrest. The Pope is well versed in the seductive nuances of liberation theology.

In 1984 he called it a singular heresy. That same year, then Cardinal Ratzinger's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome issued two relevant documents. The first one dealt with the errors of liberation theology and the second one set out the Christian notions of freedom and liberation. According to the first document, *the theologies of liberation...go on to a disastrous confusion between the poor of Scripture and the proletariat of Marx.*

The second document stated that liberation theology *perverted the Christian meaning of the poor* and made the fight for the rights of the poor within the ideological perimeters of a Marxist-inspired class struggle. On the contrary, the Church encourages its members to lay a foundation for a *civilization of love* that will transform society through its faithful members. In plain language, it is the charitable obligation of the *haves* of the world to help the Church minister to the have-nots.

Another problem for the Church in Latin America is that since the 1960s the Protestant population of Latin America has surged from about 15 million to nearly 40 million. Because of the evangelical fervor generated by liberation theology's emphasis on the Social Gospel, Catholics are switching to Protestantism at a faster pace than did Central Europe in the 16th century.

During his brief stay, the Pope conceded that the great gains made by Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians have been, in part, a result of the Church's failure to fully instill the Catholic message of doctrinal fidelity, respect for family and human life, thrift, responsibility and modesty. He also reaffirmed the family as *the patrimony of humanity* and one of the most important treasures of the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean. He warned that because of contraception and legalized abortion, the area's Catholic identity is under assault.

But the most important disclosure of the Pope's trip was his remark that the real enemy is not evangelicalism but modernism and secularism. Abortion, divorce, and even same-sex marriage are slowly but surely becoming part of the Latin American social landscape. In resisting this creeping modernism, as well as its crypto-Marxist cousin Hugo Chavez, the Pope stressed that Catholic leaders must realize that these Protestant denominations are not enemies, but needed allies against Chavez and his henchmen.

A CHURCH WITHOUT ARMS

Liberation theology and its concurrent political unrest is nothing new for the Catholic Church. It has withstood threats from around the globe during its 2000-year history. The Church hierarchy has been vigilant in watching the events unfolding with liberation theology's discordant application of Gospel teachings to the poor in Latin America over the last four decades. Even Pope John Paul II, who stressed an activist clergy with regard to social justice, forewarned against the dangers of Marxist methods.

The Church can never be a vehicle for revolution and stay faithful to its Deposit of Faith. Violent revolution often leads to chaos, repression, and greater inhumanity to the survivors of the turmoil. In 1985 Bishop Hoyos, a leader of the conservative wing of the Church in Latin America stated *that when I see a church with a machine gun, I cannot see the crucified Christ in that church.* The Church does and can take care of the poor as part of its pastoral mission to the world but in no way does this suggest that a Communist ideology or praxis is the way to solve the problems associated with poverty. Birth control, abortion, and euthanasia can never be the answer.

The idea that everyone is meant to share in the good things of the earth, provided they have not exempted themselves through use of their free wills is a thoroughly Christian idea. The Church cannot say too many times that it is not in the business of producing earthly paradises. Her divine mandate was and still is the salvation of individual souls and it will always remain that way.

There is also good news for Catholicism in Brazil, according to Prof. Edward Cleary, Director of Latin American Studies at Providence College in Rhode Island. There are over 30,000 lay Catholic missionaries who go out into the remote areas of Brazil and there are currently 492,000 Brazilian catechists, who have become the key instrument in countering the Pentecostal movement in Latin America. The number of Brazilian priests has almost doubled since 1957, and the number of Seminarians has dramatically increased. These are all signs that the Church will never abandon this region to Marxism under any form.



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HONORING VICTIMS OF COMMUNISM

On June 12, 2007, the 20th Anniversary of President Ronald Reagan's bold demand, "Mr Gorbachev take down this (Berlin) wall!" President George W. Bush dedicated the long-overdue Memorial in Washington, DC honoring the victims of Communism. Historian Lee Edwards and his non-profit foundation pursued this goal for 17 years to recognize and memorialize those 100 million souls who seemed to cry out "remember us." The statue in the Memorial is modeled after the Statue of Liberty and it is hoped that momentum will be generated to make a museum possible.

WHAT'S RED, WHITE AND BLUE AND MADE IN CHINA?

Many U.S. Flags, that's what. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that \$5.3 million of U.S. Flags were imported from other countries, mostly from China.

"For there will come a time when they will not endure the sound doctrine; but having itching ears will keep themselves teachers according to their own lusts, and they will turn away their hearing from the truth and turn aside rather to fables."

— 2 Timothy — 4:3-4

Mindszenty Report Reprints

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1 copy	\$.50	100 copies	\$ 20.00
20 copies	\$ 5.00	500 copies	\$ 85.00
50 copies	\$ 11.00	1000 copies	\$ 160.00

THE CHURCH TEACHES FORUM LOUISVILLE-KY

This summer I had the tremendous opportunity to work with Eleanor Schlafly at the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation. I was given the privilege of representing CMF at the 22nd Annual "Church Teaches Forum" on July 20-21st at the Galt House in Louisville, KY. The theme of the Forum was the Church's teaching on the sanctity and dignity of human life. The Conference was an impressive success with 450 attendees, including Bishops, priests, seminarians, religious, families, and young people. The inspirational speakers gave dynamic presentations on topics including the meaning of human suffering, stem cell research, the Marian aspect of the Church's pro-life teaching, and the role of both the clergy and the laity in evangelizing the pro-life movement. Fr. Abbot Edmund McCaffrey, Fr. Dr. Tad Pacholczyk, and Fr. Roger Arnsparger were among the vibrant leaders during the Forum.

The Forum is co-sponsored by the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation and Catholics United for the Faith. CMF's work had an incredible response at the Forum, for instance we gained many new members and continued to advance the apostolate of Faith, Family, and Freedom. The dedicated and fruitful work of President Eleanor Schlafly was given special honor. CMF also successfully promoted Fr. Dr. Tad Pacholczyk's valuable stem cell DVD by distributing several dozen copies. This brilliant and informative DVD is available for \$10.00 each including shipping from CMF at P.O. Box 11321, St. Louis, MO 63105, 314-727-6279.

In addition to the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation, many other faithful Catholic organizations were represented at the Forum, including Eternal Life, the Coming Home Network, the Fathers of Mercy, Ignatius Press, and others. The day's full program included Mass, powerful talks by clergy, and an opportunity to select literature from many Catholic resources and bookstores. The recitation of the Rosary by all attendees took place at the conclusion of the Conference. The Church Teaches Forum is truly a testament to the exuberance and growth of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

Five superb talks given at the Conference can be purchased for \$25 from the Church Teaches Forum, 902 W. Stephen Foster Ave., Bardstown, KY 40004, 800-842-2871. Plans are already underway for the 2008 "Church Teaches Forum" to be held July 18-19 at the Galt House in Louisville, KY. His Eminence Francis Cardinal Arinze of Rome will lead the distinguished speakers for next year. Contact the Church Teaches Forum or CMF for more information.



Angela Miceli
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