

# A Christian Response to the Poor

Liberation theology? What is it? Why are so many people concerned and alarmed by it?

In 1962, Pope John XXIII convened the Ecumenical Council known as Vatican II. Not since 1870 had the Catholic Bishops of the world gathered to examine the teachings and practices of the church. In 1965, Pope Paul VI brought Vatican II to its conclusion. Much was achieved in those three years—especially since it was the first Ecumenical Council to include so many indigenous bishops from Asia, Africa and Latin America.

When these Third World bishops returned to their countries, most did so with a more sensitive attitude. The cry of the poor, of those persecuted for the sake of justice—including many pastoral agents—was now heard by a growing number of bishops. The Church began to reflect more on its prayer that “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” The goal of that prayer certainly included the “liberation” of people from any and all poverty and oppression caused by human greed, exploitation and prejudices.

Pope Paul VI supported this movement with his encyclical “On the Progress of Peoples—a strong bill of grievances against the “international imperialism of money.” His condemnation of the socio-economic injustices resulting from this imperialism was so strong that *The Wall Street Journal* accused the Pope of Marxism. In 1968, Paul VI opened the Conference of the Latin American Episcopate (often referred to as CELAM II, or Medellín.) In its conclusions, the Latin American bishops denounced the “institutional violence” inflicted on the poor by a handful of powerful, wealthy classes and nations.

Medellín called for a deeper commitment of the faithful to the “liberation” of the oppressed: liberation *from* oppression, liberation *for* building a more just and peaceful world according to the gospel of Jesus.

From 1968 onwards, Latin American dioceses and parishes, especially where people are suffering under conditions produced by harsh dictatorships, have increasingly followed the call of Paul VI and Medellín. They have taken a preferential option to work with the poor and assist them in their efforts to achieve socio-economic justice, political freedom and world peace. Similar processes have taken place throughout the world.

However, there has often been a violent backlash against this movement. Armed forces, both governmental and private, have physically and psychologically repressed church groups working on behalf of the poor.

The victims of repression are multiplying. In Latin America alone, more than 100 priests, religious Sisters and Brothers and more than 100,000 peasant women, men, and children have been killed for their outspoken, albeit peaceful, advocacy of the downtrodden. Among these victims was Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, shot to death while celebrating Mass.

Theology is our reflection on God’s presence in our lives. In Third World Christian communities this presence is articulated in

original and creative ways. Something similar is happening in affluent North American parishes. They are questioning themselves about their responsibility as Christians toward the poor—a process encouraged and promoted by Pope John Paul II’s recent encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (“The Social Concerns of the Church”). This understanding sparks the fire of new and emerging theologies, theologies of liberation.

Probably the first theologian to name and write on liberation theology was Gustavo Gutiérrez, a diminutive, warm, 59-year-old Peruvian parish priest of native American descent. Shortly before Medellín, he wrote an article entitled, “Toward a Theology of Liberation” which later became a book and the definitive statement of liberation theology.

Liberation theology is not a set of new dogmas, or an ideology to be accepted or rejected. It is actually the restatement of the oldest theology: the meaning of God in the lives of all human beings struggling for liberation from a “Godless” existence. As proclaimed by the Hebrew prophets and Christian apostles, this theologizing is alive, varied, growing, and awakening the unaware.

No wonder Pope John Paul II—after years of honest effort to know and understand liberation theology—wrote to the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil that “liberation theology is not only useful, but also necessary.”

With the publication of his revolutionary and immensely influential book, *A Theology of Liberation*, published in Spanish in 1971 and in English in 1973, Gustavo Gutiérrez became the founding father of liberation theology. Born and raised in Peru, he trained first as a medical doctor in Lima and then got his theological education in Europe. He returned to live and work as a priest in Rimac, a slum in Lima. He also teaches at the Catholic University there.

Gutiérrez was a theological advisor at Medellín, and there introduced the concept of “a preferential option for the poor.”

He has developed a personal devotion to Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Spanish priest of the 16th century who supported

the natives against Spanish invaders.

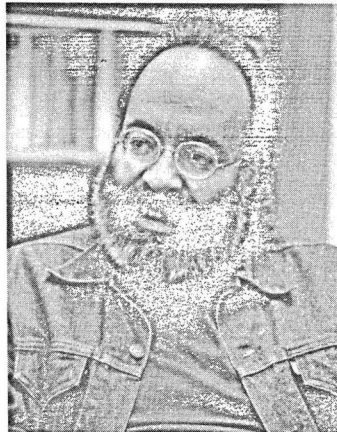
Gutiérrez is certainly the best-known Third World theologian, whose message is the basic one of liberation: that God wants to send good news to the poor, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; and that we must direct Scriptural exegesis, social analysis, economic reform, and all of human knowledge to deliver that good news.

Otto Maduro, a sociologist of religion, has been a University Professor in his native Venezuela and at Notre Dame in Indiana, and currently teaches at the Maryknoll School of Theology. His social analysis has included particular concern for nuclear issues, sexism and destruction of the environment as well as a strong critique of social injustice in Latin America. Like other liberation theologians, he sees base Christian communities as the true hope and the true mission of the Church in the Third World.

GUSTAVO GUTIERREZ



OTTO MADURO





TISSA BALASURIYA

Tissa Balasuriya, born in Sri Lanka in 1924, has advocated a worldwide liberation that will include all people and all religions. Greatly influenced by Gandhi, he received his theological degree from the Gregorian in Rome, was ordained in 1952, and became an Oblate of Mary Immaculate in 1965. He began early in his priesthood to seek ways to reconcile Catholic thought with Asian and Buddhist values. After studying for a degree in economics at Oxford in the early sixties, he moved to the Institut Catholique and the University of Paris to study sociology. In 1968 he first read Gustavo Gutiérrez and was deeply impressed. He returned to Sri Lanka and established a Center for the Study of Society and Religion at Talahena, where he committed himself fully to the problems of the poor and oppressed in Asia. He points out that 90% of the world's poor live in Asia, and that 40% of the world's poor are under 15 years of age. He reminds Latin American theologians that Asians have been exploited for thousands of years—500 of those years by Europeans. In *Planetary Theology* (Orbis, 1984) he says that "We live in a capitalistic world system dominated by western powers. By and large capitalism as a system of economic relationships based on maximization of private interests has been and is the principal enemy of economic growth and social justice in the Third World." The only possibility for healing is a more equitable distribution of land and resources. In his book, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (Orbis, 1979) he proposes the Eucharist as a central model for human liberation—adding that all the sacraments should be cleansed of their "irrelevant sentimentality" and made part of the struggle against evil.

A Christian feminist born in Ghana in 1934, Mercy Oduyoye claims that the term "Third World" refers not to certain geographical areas, but to any group in the world which is submitted to injustice, poverty, and dehumanization. Her work seeks to present a model of liberation for all human communities which will free them, in particular, from sexism and racism. She writes, "With African culture, Islamic norms, western civilization, and the Church's traditional anti-feminism piled upon the African woman, the world has been led to see African women as not more than the quintessence of the status called: 'the oppressed.'" Educated at the University of Ghana and Cambridge University, Mercy Oduyoye has taught at Union Seminary and Harvard Divinity School and currently serves as Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of



MERCY AMBA ODUYOYE

Churches. She is a lay preacher in the Methodist Church who hopes to expand African women's contribution to theological discourse. She has criticized other Third World liberation theologians for not recognizing sufficiently the role of sexism in the broader picture of oppression. She says that some liberation theologians have actually praised those women of their culture who "know their place" and submit to it without complaint. Mercy Oduyoye envisions true Christian community as one where responsibility, dignity, and fullness of life are shared by women and men equally. She is the author of *Hearing and Knowing* (Orbis, 1986) and co-editor of *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (Orbis, 1988).

Responding to the charge that liberation theologians reduce Christian salvation to a political issue, Leonardo Boff tries to find a balance between theological and political liberation. He calls this balance "integral liberation." In *Jesus Christ Liberator* (Orbis, 1978), Boff claims that the risen Jesus lives among us in the persons of those who actively carry out his commandments in history.

Anyone who tries to overcome their own egoism in order to establish loving community is doing the work of the Gospel, whether or not they are professing Christians. Thus, Boff says, Jesus came not to establish a church as much as to establish a new model of human being.

Born in Brazil in 1938, Boff is a Franciscan priest who identifies deeply with the human Christ. Through his ministry in a desperately poor slum in Petropolis, Brazil, and through his ongoing experience of active base communities in the remote Amazon jungle, Boff has conceived of a model of the Church which shares power with the powerless and brings salvation to the broken and marginalized.

In 1985 Boff was "silenced under obedience" by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome for his criticism of the hierarchical Church, set forth in his book *Church: Charism and Power*. The order was lifted after a year. Of his submission to the silencing order, Boff said at the time, "I would rather walk with the Church than walk alone with my theology."

Although his career as a theologian has been concerned with economic issues, and has been characterized by attacks on capitalism as a system of enforcing injustice and inequality, Boff flatly denies that he is a Marxist. As a Franciscan, he claims that his central ministry is to pray with the poor.

His books include: *EcclesioGenesis* (Orbis, 1988), *Trinity and*

LEONARDO BOFF



*Society* (Orbis, 1988), *Passion of Christ—Passion of the World* (Orbis, 1987), and *St. Francis: A Model of Human Liberation* (1982).

A Jesuit priest who was born to a Basque family in Spain and currently teaching in El Salvador, Jon Sobrino has recognized in the situation of Latin America today many of the qualities of the time and place into which Jesus was born. He has applied his experience of living among the Latin American poor to an orthodox Roman Catholic Christology. He has built a "liberation Christology" on his observation of the poverty of Latin America, pointing out that the living Jesus acted and proclaimed and was crucified before he was glorified. Sobrino's Christology is based on his belief that the oppressed of Latin America are a crucified people, who can identify with and be liberated by the person of Jesus. Through full discipleship they can achieve fullness of life.

His theology is written out of the situation of violence in El Salvador that has claimed the lives of religious, priests, and even an archbishop, as well as an estimated 70,000 of the faithful. In *Spirituality of Liberation* (Orbis, 1988), he has written of the need for a new "political holiness," based on an encounter with God in the suffering of a faithful Church committed to the cause of justice.

His other books include *Christology at the Crossroads* (Orbis, 1978), *The True Church and the Church of the Poor* (Orbis, 1984), and *Jesus in Latin America* (Orbis, 1987).

Elsa Tamez, a professor of Biblical Studies at the Biblical Seminary in San Jose, Costa Rica, is probably the best-known woman liberation theologian in Latin America. She has recently written a doctoral dissertation at Lausanne, Switzerland on a Latin American re-reading of the doctrine of justification by faith.

Born into a very poor family of eight children in Mexico in 1950, Elsa Tamez, a Methodist, has founded her beliefs about liberation on Scripture. She explains that the model of oppression vs. struggle for liberation described in many parts of the Bible provides the essential critique of sexism and of the oppression of the poor throughout history and today.

Growing up in extreme poverty, with a deeply religious mother who taught her to seek always to try to discern God's will, provided Elsa Tamez with the groundwork for liberation theology. She found throughout the Scripture the good news

JON SOBRINO



ALLAN BOESAK

that it is not God's will that his people be enslaved—either by poverty or by wealth. She develops this theme in *Bible of the Oppressed* (Orbis, 1982).

In her book, *Against Machismo*, a series of interviews with leading male liberation theologians, she points out that the propagation of sexism by Latin American men, even by theologians, is a grave sin. Incalculable resources are lost to the development of Latin America by the marginalization of its women. She recalls the experience of Hagar and her child,

Ishmael—whose name means "God Hears"—exiled and marginalized, but sustained in the desert by God. The women and children of Latin America, like Hagar and Ishmael, will be sustained and will eventually be free, Tamez claims, because God will hear them.

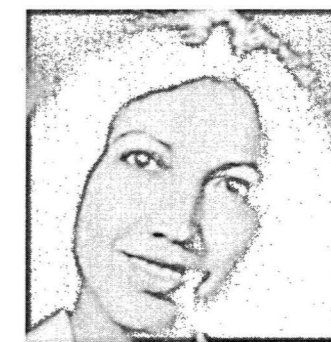
Tamez is the editor of the forthcoming book, *The Feminine Face of Theology*, a collection of essays by Latin American women theologians (Orbis, 1989).

A lifelong victim of apartheid, Allan Boesak has committed his career as a theologian to reconciliation. Born in South

Africa in 1946, educated in segregated schools, at the University of the Western Cape, the Theological School at Bellville, Union Theological Seminary in New York, and Colgate Rochester Seminary, Boesak has consistently claimed that "Christian faith transcends all ideologies and all nationalistic ideals" (*Farewell to Innocence*, Orbis, 1977). At Union Seminary he studied the non-violent methods of Martin Luther King, and while doing doctoral work in Holland he wrote a comparative study of the ethical views of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

He claims that the protests in Soweto in 1976, when 700 blacks were killed and many hundreds injured, represent a turning point in his life. He describes his experience of terrible violence against unarmed black people in his book *Black and Reformed* (Orbis, 1984). Since then Allan Boesak has spoken out strongly for a radical reform of the South African government, and for international economic sanctions against the apartheid regime. He has implored the Christian churches of South Africa to become more active in establishing reconciliation based on true justice and true forgiveness.

He claims, however, that racism—both in the U.S.A. and in South Africa—is a symptom of a deeper disease, a disease of rampant social inequality caused by unchecked capitalism. He advocates a new social order which is neither capitalist nor Marxist, but formed on a human community based on the values of the Gospel.



ELSA TAMEZ



# Who's Who in Liberation Theology?

**The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutierrez,** Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, editors

Ana Flora Anderson and  
 Gilberto Da Silva Gorgulho  
 Tissa Balasuriya  
 Gregory Baum  
 Frei Betto  
 Ana Maria Bidegain  
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 Edward Schillebeeckx  
 Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza  
 Jon Sobrino  
 Dorothee Solle

With additional essays by Gustavo Gutierrez and others on "the future of liberation theology"

Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez has been called the "Father of Liberation Theology," since the publication of his *A Theology of Liberation* in 1971 (Orbis Books published the English translation in 1973). It was widely hailed in both the secular and religious press; with tens of thousands in print, Orbis this year re-issued a Fifteenth Anniversary Edition. From little-known beginnings, through controversy and maturation, the theology of liberation has become one of the most powerful and widely discussed of modern theological movements, with reverberations around the globe.

In July and August of 1988, many of the world's foremost theologians will come to Maryknoll to honor Gustavo Gutiérrez and his work. This unprecedented international gathering will not only celebrate, but will serve to chart the course ahead for liberation theology, and for the dialogue between First and Third World theologies.

In the Spring of 1989, Orbis Books will publish *The Future of Liberation Theology*, collecting the tributes and essays from the Maryknoll gathering. These original contributions, the most current thought of a diverse and renowned group of theologians, will address the past, present, and future of theology of liberation. *The Future of Liberation Theology* will be a landmark volume for years to come.

ISBN 0-88344-421-6 Clothbound \$29.95  
 April 1989.

Special Prepublication Price: \$23.50

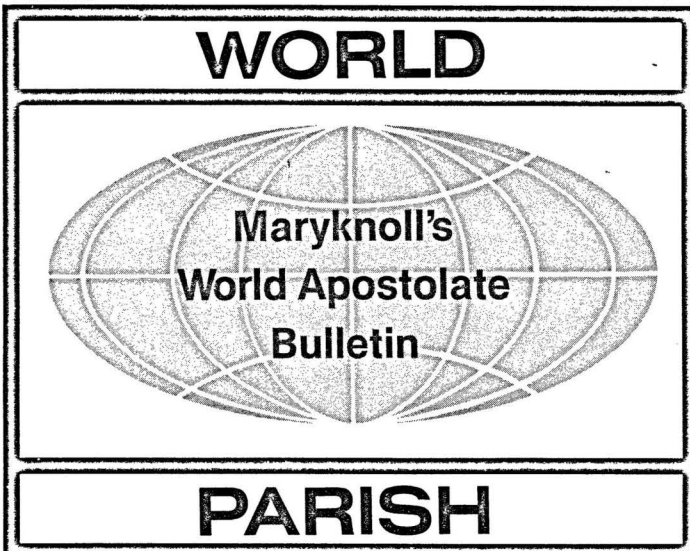
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Publisher: Ronald Saucy, M.M.  
 Editors: M. Vittengl, M.M. and P. Ellisberg  
 Published by **WORLD PARISH, (USPS 6924-6000)**  
 Third Class postage is paid at Maryknoll, N. Y.  
 POSTMASTER: Send address changes to:  
 WORLD PARISH, Maryknoll, N. Y. 10545.

VOLUME 28

NUMBER 250



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