

*Review Article***Rereading a Theology of Liberation 50 Years Later**

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**ABSTRACT**

More than a half century since its publication, Gustavo Gutierrez' landmark *A Theology of Liberation*, remains a fresh source of ideas and inspiration with wide implications for the ways in which people of faith understand the world and organize to act within it. This work forms part of the general transformations in Latin American Catholicism following the Second Vatican Council and the documents of Medellín. Core ideas include one history, recognition of the legitimacy of utopian action, and a vision of the world and the church from the base. Liberation theology provides no recipe for political action, but rather a general commitment to activism as a legitimate expression of faith.

**Key words:** Liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Vatican II, Medellín, One history, Utopian action, Ecclesia base, Research methods

**INTRODUCTION**

I have been rereading Gustavo Gutiérrez' *Teología de la Liberación Perspectivas* (Lima CEP 1971). Again, I use the gerund to underscore how much this is an active process. It is active; it involves the reader and pushes the reader to rethink the shape and meaning of reality and to re-imagine the world and its possibilities. I have read it again and again because this is a project that is continuously renewed and the book itself is as fresh and full of insights as it was 50 years ago [1].

As I reread, I have the advantage of using the same copy that I purchased 50 years ago in Bogotá Colombia. That copy is well worn and still has all the marginal notes and comments that I wrote the first time around. Over the years I have returned to the book (along with many other books and pamphlets written by Gutiérrez—I have a full shelf dedicated to him. I am not a theologian, but I return regularly to this book and I always come away with fresh insight and reinforced inspiration.

This capacity for continuous reinvention central to the message of the book [1].

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Here, as in all his work, Gutiérrez insists that the work of theology is not a deductive enterprise, drawing ideas and actions from a set of perfect and immutable principles. To the contrary, theology is better understood as “second act”, reflection on faith and on the world from within a concrete reality, one that evolves and changes with the times. He locates the sacred firmly within the history that we live every day. There is only one history, sacred and secular at the same time. The Kingdom of God is real and building it is our daily work. As the Gospel of Luke puts it (17,21°12,56) the Kingdom of God is not coming with signs and wonders or miracles. The point is not to suffer with patience and resignation and hope for the Kingdom after we die. The Kingdom of God with us now, it is part of us, it is our reality. In this light, it is wrong to insist on a clear separation between faith and action, religion, society and politics, which Gutiérrez

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calls the “distinction of planes’ or levels. He firmly rejects this distinction as false and misleading. All form part of the same reality our reality and the point to understand how and why are joined, not to search for separation in the hopes of greater religious purity. He uses the concept of utopian action-action that looks beyond the parameters of the present to visualize and work toward something better. Since its publication a half century ago, *Teología de la Liberación* has continued to inspire generations of believers, analysts and activists. Why has this book been able to remain so fresh and lively? In what follows, I outline a few key elements. I begin with a brief analysis of the core ideas Gutiérrez puts forward. To understand the diffusion and impact of these ideas, I locate them in the context of what has come to be known as the liberationist movement and within the historical moment in which these ideas emerged and found an audience, impacting individuals, groups and movements. I conclude with a few questions: how and in what forms can we see liberation theology in action?; how can we identify and understand possible impacts?; why is this book still important after fifty years? How can we think about its possible future role?

I still remember my first encounter with the book. In mid-1972 I was in Bogotá Colombia working on my first studies of religion, society and politics. At that time, I did not know then who Gustavo Gutiérrez was, but I saw a copy in the window of a favorite bookstore, the title drew my interest and so I bought it and took it home. Reading the book was like hearing an alarm clock go off: it woke me up, it opened my eyes, and it made me see reality in fundamentally new ways [2]. By that time, I had gradually become aware that much of what I had learned in graduate school was of little use in understanding the realities that I could see every day. I had been schooled in conventional ideas about “modernization” according to which secularization (understood as the gradual decline of religion and its confinement to the private sphere) was both desirable and inevitable. (Levine, 2018) But the “religion” (and the Catholic Church) that I found was neither static nor in evident decline. What I saw every day was a reality full of change, with intense debates and sometimes open conflict. Making sense of this reality required more than an analysis of church documents, the declarations of leaders or attention to the relations between “church and state. “The problem I faced was how to identify these currents and address them in a systematic and meaningful way. The book

gave me an opening. The 1971 book is best understood as part of a broad effort in Latin America to rethink religion, faith, and the role of the Church in the contemporary world. This process is rooted in the Second Vatican Council and above all in the regional conference of Catholic Bishops at Medellín Colombia (1968) Although it is fair to say that the book itself did not create or even start the process, nonetheless it is important to recognize the impact it had as a synthesis and projection of a group of ideas with deep theological and biblical roots which together provided a basis for social and political activism as legitimate expressions of faith in action. To be sure, the book does not only discuss social and political issues: there is also a clear interest in spirituality an interest developed by Gutiérrez in many subsequent contributions.

Gutiérrez develops a compact set of central ideas. We have already noted some: one history, theology as “second act”, rejection of the “distinction of planes”, the idea of utopian action as a bridge between faith and activism. The book also helped me to see the Church (in those days it was still possible to speak of just one) in terms that went well beyond formal structures, leaders, and documents. I came to understand the church as a community, as *ekklesia* in the sense of the original Greek, which means “assembly” or convocation. The bottom line is that reading this book helped me to see and understand reality from a wholly different perspective, and as I suggest below, lead to a fundamental shift in my approach to studying it [3].

The concept of theology as “second act”, reflection taken within this world. Means that we need to think about how our world was formed, what makes our history, any history, what it is today? Gutiérrez is clear that any social or historical order is just that, a product of history, constructed by human beings and thus subject in principle to change. Seen in this way no social order can claim divine sanction for its structures or practices. Our task is to analyze and understand the bases of any structure of social, economic, or political life. A turn to sociological and political analysis logically follow, not as a substitute for faith, but as an indispensable tool for making sense of the world and of the challenges and opportunities it offers. Gutierrez reaches for useful sociological tools and given that in the context of the documents of Medellín (CELAM, 1970) Latin American reality is visualized as one marked by inequality, violence and conflict, it should be no surprise that concepts drawn from Marxian sociology (e.g.

Class conflict, exploitation) play a prominent role here. This recourse to Marxian tools of analysis has given rise to notable distortions. Elements of both right and left have understood this as a legitimation for rebellion and revolutionary violence. This is not and has never been the case: opening the door to activism as a legitimate expression of faith is not the same as providing a recipe book for politics. Gutiérrez makes a particular effort to underscore what he calls the “originality of the political”(1971, 68). We all live in a the same world, and in this world we come up against structures of power every day. To try to separate ourselves from this world in the same of a supposed religious purity runs the risk of being complicit with existing orders of power and privilege. To insist on the value of a clear distinction between religion and politics, and to strive for “neutrality” is in effect to make a choice in favor of what exists. The question is not whether religion and politics are related. This relation is permanent and continuous. What matters is who acts, with what goals, what methods, and which allies.

The concept of one history is fundamental. The Kingdom of God is with us, it is part of our lives and building it is our reality and our task. One need not suffer now in order to gain redemption later. Within this single history, possibilities of change can be identified and worked on. Here, as noted, Gutiérrez works with the concept of utopian action. The idea of utopia, as defined centuries ago by Thomas More, signifies both an ideal place and a place that does not exist. In sociological discourse for example in Karl Mannheim’s classic *Ideology and Utopia* (1949), utopia denotes the ability to see beyond the limits of what exists, and not confuse it with something inevitable, much less divinely sanctioned. Mannheim argues that utopias become possible only when the ideas of individuals are taken up by emerging social forces in ways that can transform the perspective of the group and lead to collective actions that challenge the existing order of things [4]. Something like this is the case with Gutiérrez’ book. This is not a collection of recipes for politics of any kind, but using the concept of utopian action as a bridge between faith and action, Gutiérrez helps us see how faith can motivate and sustain personal and collective action as part of an effort to construct a better world, to build the Kingdom. He task of liberation is moral and political, religious and social, and sustained at all times by the moral force and solidarity of a community. Many cases attest to the power of this relation

underscoring ways in which faith and solidarity have played central roles in sustaining people in difficult and unequal struggles. In his work on Central America, Philip Berryman (1984, 1996) shows how faith can sustain individuals and groups. Faith provides moral support, inspiration, and human solidarity. Berryman emphasizes what he calls a “wager of faith”, a bet that it is possible to create a better world, a commitment that carries with it moral legitimation and human solidarity. Latin America offers many cases, but it is not alone. Consider the struggle for civil rights in the United States, with its base in the African American churches, the fight against apartheid in South Africa (Borer 1998); and many campaigns for peace and human rights all over the world (Levine, 2015). In the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther, Jr. King recognized that the struggle for civil rights would be hard and the repression often ferocious and cruel. But he was confident that “We shall overcome [anthem of the movement, now sung around the world] because the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice.” To earlier critics among the (mostly) white clergy who claimed that he was “too political” and that that he should confine himself to “religion”, stay in his church and just preach the Gospel King responded by firmly rejecting the idea of a necessary distinction between religion and politics, faith and action. His famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail (King, 1963) is worth quoting at some length “I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the argument of “outsiders coming in.” I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth-century prophets left their little villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Greco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid. Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United

States can never be considered an outsider [5].

### **Understanding impacts**

It is no simple matter to consider the impact of a book or body of work. Such impacts are almost always and necessarily indirect. The ideas in the book may affect the reader, readers may be inspired to organize and undertake actions consonant with these ideas. To be sure, most people acting in these ways have probably not read the book in its entirety: they are more likely to have read pamphlets or flyers or attended courses. They may have been invited to a meeting on issues of interest, or listened to an audio tape or a radio broadcast. In any event, more than a half century since the book's publication, many institutions groups and movements consciously identify with the liberationist current: study centers, institutes, publishing houses, grass roots and community groups, rural and urban, student groups, human rights or ecological movements. Although no one book can in itself be taken as the source of these changes, nonetheless its publication in 1971 marked an important point in the process, offering a powerful synthesis with indications on how to understand the relation between faith and social and political action as a legitimate expression of faith. Liberation Theology is not a movement organized as such, much less a political party with the kind of structures and programs common in the political world. Its impact is necessarily indirect a matter of indirect diffusion. If we ask ourselves why these ideas should have emerged and found audience and impact at this particular moment and in these particular ways, it is worth remembering that the decades following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the meetings of the Latin American Catholic Bishops at Medellín (1968) were a time of great conflict and profound socio cultural change: dramatic political changes were accompanied by notable demographic transformations, massive internal migrations and urbanization, and exploding access to mass media and education. Together these changes created a context and a population open to new messages and available for new forms of organization and mobilization. With the passing of military regimes a newly vigorous and widespread civil society emerges with claims for voice and action [6].

If there is any single characteristic that stands out in Liberation Theology it is the consistent emphasis on linking ideas with action, faith with society and politics. How does this work? Despite the dreams of many on the left, and the fears and nightmares of the right, as I have suggested, the

book provides no recipes or plans for specific action. Its pages contain no formula for political action but rather a general activism as a legitimate and necessary expression of authentic faith. To make sense of impact, it is helpful to think in terms of three levels or moments; impact on the lived reality of religion, society and politics; impact on the position of "religious" issues or studies "within the sociological analysis of these questions; and finally, personal impact. Some large scale impacts are clear: the very ideas of liberation, of rights, and of an intimate relation between faith and action are all widely diffused now with a secure place on the public scene and within religious and political discourse. There is also a clear commitment to the idea of rights, human rights, all across the continent. The working concept of rights has expanded beyond classic civil rights of freedom from torture and coercion to embrace the right to a fully human life, with health, education, freedom of movement, of thought and of association. A careful examination of the experience of human rights movements in Latin America reveals the presence of many actors with experience of religious activism and multiple connections within religious networks. Religious connections and networks have also facilitated coordination between widely scattered groups at all levels.

Although "liberation" as idea or loose network of groups may not dominate the field, by now it has become part and parcel of the normal order of discourse. In all societies there is an ongoing struggle to control the core idea "reality that shapes our perspectives of what is right and possible, what is bad, good, or necessary. It never stops. This is where the book (and the larger liberationist movement) plays a clear role. The concept of utopian action opens doors to seeing beyond the parameters of what exists, and identifying legitimate and possible ways to get there, starting from a base of faith and community [7].

With the growth of Protestantism (above all evangelical and pentecostal Protestantism in Latin America, it has become commonplace to ask if the theology of liberation is moribund, if its moment has simply passed and no longer has relevance or impact. In the absence of major public conflicts (like those over human rights in the 1970s and 1980s, some analysts conclude that religion is no longer present in public life, no longer inspires or sustains movement activism, and that there for there is "no there there". I have read many accounts of the presumed death of the ideas and the "movement" But these

obituaries are premature.

If we look more closely it is possible to see multiple instances and venues in which religion, social movements, and politics converge. There is an entirely normal and widespread phenomenon of lobbying, on issues ranging from local schools to bus service, water, health care or community kitchens. These efforts may acquire public visibility (say in campaigns for or against same sex marriage or gender equality, abortion, human rights or, lately environmental issues. A great deal remains “under the radar”, granular as it were. But the fact that it is not on the front pages or TV, does not mean that it is not there. All this is an ongoing part of the struggle for the real, a never ending effort to frame what is important and to turn it into concrete facts: clinics, public transport, schools, voting rights, clean water and sanitation.

It is all the more important now to underscore the central role of motivation, of the generative link of faith to action, because so few sociologists or political analysts seem willing or able to take it into account in any systematic way. Taking motivation into account requires a style of work that is difficult and time consuming. It takes time to listen and to share. Worse, the patient patient (religion) is assumed to be dying or dead, and for those working in the now popular frame of “rational choice theory” questions of ideas, motivations, solidarity or commitments just do not matter. These are set aside in favor of a focus on individual interest, narrowly understood. Moving to personal impacts, in my own case they have been very important, and once again it take several different forms. As I noted at the outset, the book moved me to a different understanding of what “religion” and “church” meant in the first place. This realization required a basic shift change in research methods, in how i conceived of the working context and of how to approach the basic issues of religion and politics in my work. I have long had a core concern with the sociology of knowledge: asking how and why certain ideas emerge and find agents and audiences in some contexts and not others. The question was now how to understand and define these contexts, how to see the process from a different angle, this time not beginning from the institution, but rather “from the base” understanding “base” not only in the sense of the bottom of a hierarchical structure, but also and more important, as a generative source of inspiration and source of action, what in liberation theology is taken as inspiration from the poor [8].

Working from the base with a special concern for issues of meaning and signification made me zero in on faith as an experience of community, an experience within community. This led to a major shift in structure of my research. In my first book, *Religion and Politics in Latin America: The Catholic Church in Venezuela and Colombia* (1981) the core data came from interviews I conducted with 60 Catholic bishops in Venezuela and Colombia, supplemented with organizational studies at the national regional and local levels in the two countries. In contrast, for the second book *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism* (1992, in Spanish *Voces populares en el catolicismo latinoamericano*) (1996) the core data came from the base. I carried out extensive field work in six communities, rural villages and urban barrios in Venezuela and Colombia. I recorded lengthy interviews, I recorded life histories i sat in on numerous community meetings of all kinds (base communities, Bible study, cooperatives of coffee growers, sessions of the Legion of Mary, community planning events) I also traveled with pastoral teams of parishes and dioceses. I took a lot of peasant buses with chickens around my feet I swallowed dust and waded through mud.

I ended up with almost three thousand pages of interview transcript. The interviews centered on people’s experience of faith and prayer (prayer for what and to whom) on the process of reading the Bible and forming community, how they saw and evaluated the church and the clergy, on their own experience of life and work and how they understood poverty. Life histories tracked the experiences of the ordinary men and women of the communities, and also of religious sisters and pastoral agents, the people who carried in their persons the relations between the community and the larger institution of “the church” I studied the social history of pamphlets or audio cassettes, to be clear about how they got to the communities and who actually read or listened to them. None of this is automatic; making sense of it requires starting from the “base” but never losing sight of how the base is related to larger structures among them, the church.

In both books, but above all in *Popular Voices*, I strove to see and to present the issues in an open and dynamic manner, to be clear that the issue was not faith or action, or religion or politics, as if they were alternatives, but instead to see the two as part of a unified whole. Together they comprise a reality in which solidarities and group actions grow out of a common

faith, a faith that provides moral support, a familiar context, solidarity and community support. This is a faith that is expressed and in basic ways fulfilled in action. These are bearing witness in the classical sense of actions that model and carry out shared ideas and commitments [9].

Reading the Bible was central to the life of the groups I studied. With the Bible, I was told, “we discover the reality in which we live.” The point, this persona insisted, was “not just to read it we have to put it into practice, right here and now, like Jesus himself, like Christ we need to be at the service of others, for others, that is how it needs to be”. Or as one woman in Colombia commented: “I tell everyone that we need to be Christians, walking in our faith. Walking to the truth, not Christians just with a rosary in our hands. Not just waiting for manna to fall from heaven. Because the manna is all used up by now. “One conversation with a Colombian peasant re-mains etched in my memory. Summing up his faith he told me, “I believe that Je-sus Christ did not come to found a new religion but to bring an integral liberation, one that reaches all aspects of life” (Interview, 18 March 1983) In all likelihood this man had not read not have read Teología de la liberación, but he was living it.

Seeing things in this new way humanized religion for me, and helped me enter more fully in to the experience of the faithful. As academics and sociologists we are taught that it is essential to maintain a distance from our subjects, that being “objective” in this way is essential to achieving a valid study. We are regularly warned about the dangers of becoming too absorbed in what we study, of “going local” But I believe that it is possible to enter into the experience of others without losing a vision of the whole. In part this is a question of listening and learning people’s vocabulary, discovering how they speak about things that matter to them like life, faith, work, friendship, commitments. Listening for long hours and working to understand these vocabularies, I have met and come to know extraordinary people, perhaps not very educated but certainly insightful and often eloquent, with clear ideas and a broad vision of relations. I do not say that it is possible for me to become a Colombian peasant or a barrio dweller in Venezuela, but I do insist that making the effort to listen and to be present it is possible to capture a richer and more authentic reality. One emerges with a real sense of what it means to link faith to action.

Reading the book a half century ago reinforced by a lifelong

interest in meaning and signification as central elements in any sociological study. In this ca-se, it is the meaning and significance of faith and how it relates to “the world.” It changed my entire approach and opened me more fully to other experiences. To reread the book fifty years I find a source that remains utterly fresh, with a broad reach and great confidence in the capacity of human beings to grow and change, no matter the challenges and dangers they face. To reread the book is to appreciate once again, and even more, how Gutiérrez combines optimism about the human condition with great realism in his social and political understanding. This is a utopian vision in the best sense of the word.

Teología de la Liberación has been a central reference point for over fifty years, inspiring generations of activists, analysts, and ordinary faithful How has this been possible? Why does this book remain so alive and fresh after so long.? Throughout his work Gutiérrez makes it very clear that any social or historical order is, well, historical: made by humans and as such, subject to change. In this light, no social order can claim divine favor for itself. To the contrary, all require careful analysis to assess their strengths and flaws, to understand how they function and why and how they succeed or fail. For this reason, theological reflection (which you will recall is taken as “second act”, arising as reflection within a particular order) requires the analytical tools of sociology, economics, and political science [10].

At Medellín Latin American reality was defined in terms of conflict and inequality, structural injustice and “institutionalized violence, “ a phrase made famous in those documents. As noted earlier, key concepts like class, exploitation, and conflict were adapted from classical Marxist thinking. This has been the source of great distortion, from both right and left, as activists and politicians and numerous church leaders as well have understood the use of such concepts as a direct opening to the promotion of revolutionary violence. This is not and never has been the case Opening a door to activism as an expression of faith is not the same as providing a recipe for political action.

One way to capture the possibilities of impact is to compare the experiences of Camilo Torres with the long term arc of the theology of liberation. Camilo Torres was a young Colombian priest. After a series of frustrated reform initiatives, and faced with the rigid structures of church, state and economic power, he searched for something more effective. After a brief public

career he famously concluded that “revolution is a Christian imperative” and took up arms. He was killed in his first combat operation. Torres is a tragic figure, and has become an icon of the revolutionary spirit, much like Che Guevara, but his followers have been few: there was the young Bolivian Nestor Paz, another young guerrilla priest also killed in action; the Argentine Montonero movement had a Camilo Torres unit (Commando Camilo Torres) The closest to emulation with impact may be the actions of Christian groups who allied with the Sandinistas in the early years of the Nicaraguan revolution.

The impact of liberation theology follow quite a different trajectory, less direct but arguably longer lasting. The point is not that those with liberationist ideas or connections always win. Of course they do not: one effort may end, but the openness to activism remains and other efforts arise emerge from the same base. Changing norms, facilitating connections and alliances has given rise a process that endures and which reminds of the enduring power of moral discourse Camilo Torres famously said “The struggle is long let us begin now” but his own beginnings were cut short The inspirations of liberation theology, perhaps for the very fact of being diffuse, last longer and still have social resonance [11].

If we shift the lens and consider how liberation theology has been treated in official circles and academic literature, the panorama is also mixed A strong current notes and fears (or welcomes) the supposed opening to revolution.. The theme of danger is visible in the famous Rockefeller Report on the Americas (1969) which responded to Medellín and early Christian Marxist initiatives and continues in a series of well-known books from the 1970s until the present day, What these works have in common is that they all consider the issues from the point of view of the foreign policy of the United States. They stress the potential danger of losing a secure and trusted ally (the traditional church) and then facing a new enemy in the form of leftist fronts with religious allies and inspiration. Work of this kind centers attention on links with Marxist sociology but regularly confuses the use of tools of analysis like class or conflict with a commitment to violent revolution. (Sigmund, 1990) This is simply not true. The confusion of liberation theology with the impulse to revolution is not limited to the political or academic right. A case in point is the Nicaraguan Revolution which in its early years generated an extensive and for the most part ill

researched literature that took liberation theology as source and almost inspiration for the revolution (Lancaster, 1988, Farooq, 1989). What is actually visible in the Nicaraguan experience is something quite different, not just the ideological commitment but also and importantly an alliance that emerged in opposition to the Somoza family dictatorship. There was religious inspiration but no political recipe. The alliance was in any case short lived.

### **Possible Futures**

Will all this remain relevant in the future, or at least in the future as we can see it from where we stand in the world of 2021? Perhaps it may be known by other names, perhaps no one will speak about “liberation” theology” or Gustavo Gutiérrez. But no matter what the name, the convergence of moral resources (faith, solidarity, commitment) and material resources (networks of organization and communication) will continue to sustain individuals and groups in something they understand as right and proper, as legitimate, as liberating. The theology of liberation is a moment: the desire for liberation is permanent we now have before us a host of movements which raise the banner of liberation in causes old and new (voting rights, freedom from torture, civil rights, racial or gender equality, sexual liberations including homosexuality and same sex marriage) The theology of liberation is a moment: the desire for liberation is permanent. How this will evolve is a question for the future [12].

### **CONCLUSION**

Clearly, Teología de la Liberación has left a strong intellectual and social legacy not only in Latin America but across the world. In closing I want to add a personal note/ the rich life of faith and commitment that I witnessed and experienced affected me on a personal level. Having had the privilege of knowing Gustavo Gutiérrez and his associates and colleagues, having experienced their intelligence and their commitment. Having made friends and having come to understand the deep faith that motivates and sustains them, not only opened my eyes but also, and more importantly, brought me close to values and experiences that have enriched my life in ways I continue to discover every day .

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