




Outlining the Practical Implications of Gustavo Gutierrez' Theology of Liberation and Comparing it to Western Theology

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Abstract

Liberation Theology's seminal text, *Teología de la liberación* (1971- A Theology of Liberation), was written by Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian priest and renowned theologian. This article describes Gustavo Gutiérrez's theology of liberation with a Christian theological-humanist study approach. As one of the modern Christian thinkers, Gutiérrez's role in fighting against injustice, oppression, poverty, and the Western colonialist capitalist system in Latin America is enormous. Gutiérrez inspires the Third World Countries to struggle against the stubbornness and greed of arrogant people. He appeared as a propagandist who fueled the spirits of marginalized groups in Latin America in the early 1970s. This article uses a qualitative method with a literature review of the theology of liberation a la Gustavo Gutiérrez. This article shows that Gutiérrez succeeded in building a revolutionary Christian ideology with a foundation of liberation theology to elevate and sustain egalitarianism among human beings. But 'there is no ivory that isn't cracked', Gutiérrez did hermeneutics that were out of context. The article will also consider and criticize liberation theology in terms of its hermeneutical approach. The author also makes a comparison between liberation theology and Western theology, the mainstream that preceded it.

Keywords: theology of liberation, western theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, church

Introduction

Poverty and the downturn of a society and its impacts are important issues that are discussed by various experts from various fields of science. A part of the clusters looked at in this study is the science of religion (theology). Talking about poverty is part of a moral responsibility to both society and God, who gives life (Nanuru, 2017:401). Christians have been given a mandate from the church's head Jesus Christ, to follow in his footsteps. Jesus himself, as an example, has set many illustrations in His ministry while on earth. He came as a deliverer of the oppressed to preach the good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). The problem of poverty is part of the moral responsibility of humanity and faith must be demonstrated both socially and to God who gave this life to redeem a fallen world (Hoy, 1986:3–16; Ngabalin, 2017:129–147).

According to Irenaeus (120 -203 CE) the Greek bishop renowned for his role in guiding and increasing Christian communities and for the development of Christian theology by combating heterodox or Gnostic interpretations of Scripture (Nicolaidis, 2023), "*Gloria Dei Vivens Homo*, the glory of God, is reflected in restoring mankind to the original plan of life. The Logos became flesh and showed to humanity the divine revelation. He is indeed the Truth and only through him we can get knowledge of the divine will which is to love one's neighbour (Nicolaidis, 2023: 10). Similarly, Oscar Arnulfo Romero (1917 – 1980 CE) the prelate of the Catholic Church in El Salvador was very convinced that humanity will not fully recover unless the oppression of the poor is overcome. The phrase "*Gloria Dei vivens pauper*" (The glory of God is the poor who live) more or less describes the core concern of liberation theologies in South and Central America (Chen, 2002:9). In the pattern of sects, in addition to the liberation sect, there were



also those known as Dalif schools in India or Minjung in South Korea in the 1970s. In the history of Islamic upheaval, there is also a liberation theology movement (Sunquist, 2001:552). Though the thought of liberation theology spread to Africa and Asia, Yewangoe argues that although liberation theology exists in various places, only vocal and systematic speakers of liberation theology come from Latin America (Yewangoe, 1995:65). The advent of the liberation theology movement goes back to the second Latin American Bishops' Conference in 1968, held in Medellín, Colombia. The many bishops that attended issued a document affirming the rights of the poor and downtrodden in society and asserted that industrialized nations enriched themselves at the expense of developing countries whom they abused. Other than Gutiérrez some important leaders of the liberation theology movement comprised the Brazilian priest José Comblin, Archbishop Óscar Romero of El Salvador, Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff, the Jesuit scholar Jon Sobrino, and Archbishop Helder Câmara of Brazil who shared common understandings on the themes put forward (Witvliet, 1985; Britannica, 2023).

The term 'liberation theology' in Christian theological thought, was originated by Gustavo Gutiérrez, and came from Latin America under the name of Liberation Theology (Steenbrink, 1987:138). This concept of liberation is a continuation of the previous idea, which had the dimension of liberation from injustice. For example, Dussel calls prophecy theology, which has the dimension of achieving the right to life of a certain community, colonization or royal theology. This theology, known as the New Christian Theology (1930–1962), focused on fighting for equality in political and social life (Villa-Vicencio, 1992; Mugambi, 2003; Wahono, 2000:18).¹ The essence and aim of liberation theology is liberation from all imprisonment and oppression, both in material and immaterial aspects. Both the imprisonment from sin and the system of oppression have an economic, political, social, and cultural face. The concern and orientation of Liberation Theology is to construct a life based on the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, namely to participate in upholding the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of peace and justice, truth, and freedom, by prioritizing the oppressed poor, according to Banawiratma (Dimitriadis, 2019:431-441; Chen, 2002:9). According to Hillar, liberation theology emerged as a result of the systematic and critical regret about Christian belief, its meaning, and practices. The theologians who formulated it were a small group of Catholic and Protestant Christian clergy. They were advisors to priests, nuns, and ministers. As such, they were in direct contact with grassroots groups and may even have taken some time to work with the poor. This direct contact raises various questions, which become a theological battle (Rudyanto, 2019: 35–42; Hillar, 1993).

Liberation theology is often suspected of being Marxism with a religious face. Because of its closeness to Marxist social analyses, this theology is often criticized from within the church as well as from outside the church (Kloppenborg, 1974). What is inevitable in the struggle for liberation theology is social reality as a whole. Discourse, in contrast to prevailing theologies in general, is frequently only concerned with clerical life. Here, social reality is transformed into a field of practice. Therefore, social analyses are needed to understand the root causes of the problem as accurately as possible and to find an effective solution. Social analysis is needed to carefully investigate problems in social life, their causes, difficulties, and possible solutions.

Liberation Theology arose in the middle of Latin American churches' reservations about the reality of society's desire for a better existence. The impoverished are fighting for their rights

¹ The Asian theology that emerged as a reaction to the early Western missionaries and some Western theologians who advocated the abolition of all that has to do with pre-Christian Asian traditions has lost significant relevance. At the same time, theology of color in Asia, with its focus on liberation from oppression and injustices such as racism and the economic exclusion experienced by European Americans and brown people in Indonesia, has declined in influence. Noting the limitations of these theologies advocate a reconstruction theology that holistically addresses the issues of racism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, bad governance, corruption and poor leadership in Asia, particularly Indonesia, problems that have caused devastation in many Indonesian countries and societies.



in order to live a more dignified life. The efforts of a group of disadvantaged people do not appear to have generated major results. This is due to a conspiracy of government elites and Western religious leaders who have purposefully allowed the situation to persist so that they might profit. The elites are also controlled by an approach to religious leaders in the form of huge tributes, which are subsequently utilized by the church to finance charity diaconal services to the poor. Charitable deacons are ecclesiastical services in the pattern of direct assistance to those in need, such as feeding, comforting the sick, providing clothing, and so on. This model of ministry has been criticized by many pastoral experts because this method will create psychological dependence and will not empower a congregation to be independent and self-sustaining (Gutiérrez, 2004; Widyatmadja, 2010:35–40). This is the kind of cycle that the Western colonialists want to perpetuate for the poor people in Latin America and elsewhere. Based on the above, this study explores Gustavo Gutiérrez's theology of liberation, compares it with western theology, and provides solutions to the practical implications thereof.

Methodology

According to Segundo and Pieris, the new breakthrough in Latin American liberation theology is first and foremost in the sort of methodology employed, in the style of theology, rather than the topic of study and substance. The path of liberation theology is transformative, beginning with praxis or faith in a certain history (Lu, 2014). Liberation theology is also known as contextual theology, humanism theology, transformative theology, and rational theology on the basis of such practical thought. While this liberation theology is known geographically as Third World Theology, with its numerous movements, these movements are founded on theological liberation, which serves as the foundation for political philosophy and governs social and cultural life. It is known as Third World Theology because it was born and developed to dominate countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Lu, 2014:62–68).

The nature of thinking in liberation theology is very different from that of Western theology, traditional theology, or dominant theology, starting from theory and from the faith that is taught and thought (Gutiérrez, 1988:18). Liberation Theology is “a theology that looks down from below”. Consequently, the starting point of theology, is in the context of the suffering of the oppressed and those who are excluded in society. Therefore, theology “gains a concrete understanding of the world in which faith lives and this is therefore a question that must be addressed in order to enable Christians to test and strengthen the efficacy of their obedience” (Wiryadinata, 2013:3).

Mateus Mali (2016) criticizes liberation theology as follows: liberation theologians believe that the basic teaching about God that has been conveyed until now has manipulated God for the sake of the capitalist social order. God is present in human success. The rich are used by God as a means of His blessing. Liberation theologians feel that this kind of teaching has led people to believe that God is unreachable. God is static and does not enter into human history. God is "up there" and "out there". As a result, most Latin Americans have become passive in the face of injustice and are superstitious in their religiosity. Liberation theology responds by emphasizing the incomprehensible mystery of God's reality. God can't be summed up in the objectivity of a known or spoken language through a list of teachings. God is found in the history of human life. God isn't a perfect and eternal entity, but a dynamic God. He existed before our future. God draws us to His power through human history to create, as conceptualized by Gutiérrez, a "permanent cultural revolution". Suffering and illness become motivations to know God. Our foreseeable future God is a crucified God who allowed himself to be born into a world of pain. God can only be found on the cross of the downtrodden, not in beauty, strength, or intellect (Mali, 2016:32). It is clear that the theology of words echoed by western theology has influenced the paradigm of Latin American society so that it is trapped in the status quo and is fatalistic, accepting reality (poverty) with the wrong perspective in view.



The Embryo of Liberation Theology

Liberation theology flourished in Latin America and Africa. In Latin America, the main character as stated was Gustavo Gutiérrez. As one of the leading Christian thinkers in modern times, Gutiérrez's role in fighting injustice, oppression, poverty, and the Western colonialist capitalist system in Latin America is enormous. Gutiérrez inspired Third World countries to struggle against the stubbornness and greed of the arrogant. In the early 1970s, he emerged as a publicist who sparked the spirit of the downtrodden in Latin America (Dimitriadis, 2019: 431-441; Rudyanto, 2019: 35-52).

As a thought that was born based on Christian reflection on the challenges of the times, the main question to be answered is, "How to preach a loving God in the midst of the lives of the oppressed?" Most of the people live/d in poverty. At first, they were controlled and oppressed by the native landowners and then by their colonial power. After independence, a new elite group emerged that controlled social and economic life. The government tried to improve the existing situation by development, especially in the economic field, but all these efforts have not succeeded in freeing its people from the shackles of poverty and backwardness that persist

Gustavo Gutiérrez describes three theological ways that can have a positive impact, namely, first, theology must be placed as a source of spiritual life. Secondly, theologies are based on rational knowledge. And the thirdly, theology is a Christian reflection to God's word for the practical life of the people (Suryawinata, 2001:19; Dimitriadis, 2019:431-441). The three ways of theology are interrelated because theology should not only be speculative and provide emotional satisfaction to humans, but must also provide guidelines for realizing a better society (Steenbrink, 1987:138).

The emergence of Gutiérrez idea of liberation was motivated by the conditions in Latin America, where, at that time, the political and social conditions were dominated by dictatorial Western colonialism and the Church, in both its Catholic and Protestant guises. The people are enslaved and controlled by capitalists and the upper class as landlords. The theology (religion) of the community is more syncretistic in accordance with the demands of the Western Church, and in addition, among the bureaucrats themselves, a new theology emerged that did not differentiate between Catholics and Protestants, so new churches were formed that did not take sides with the people who lived in bad and very oppressive and depressed conditions (Gutiérrez, 1988).

On that basis, Gutiérrez put forward several liberation ideas, including these below (Gutiérrez & Müller, 2004; Humphrey, 2011; Steenbrink, 1987:138; Dimitriadis, 2019:431-441):

1. He responded to Karl Marx's theory in an effort to improve the Western dictatorial political system, which contrasts the rich or landlord class with the proletariat, and the issue of collective property rights. According to Gutiérrez, the proletariat or poverty is a condition that is not commendable because the existence of poor people or poverty is not God's creation, and poverty is a sinful condition. Therefore, there is a need for rescue and liberation from this situation from all socio-political structures that lead to poverty.
2. Regarding the ethical attitude of theology so far, it seems that micro-ethics has only been prioritized. Western churches often provide strict guidelines individually, such as issues of sex, while in the socio-political field, labor wages and others of a macro nature are not strictly applied; therefore, liberation theology expresses its principle firmly that an ethics of theology must be based on the principle of "macro ethics" (macro ethics versus micro ethics).



In the field of worship (liturgy), it is based on the worship of the “National Awareness Course”. The implementation tends to be mass meetings, group discussions, and other patterns of meetings, which are also attended by church leaders (bishops) and political authorities (Gutiérrez, 2009). This factor also influenced educational activities, which had been controlled by the Church by way of boarding houses and then changed by opening up possibilities for education in various remote areas.

Comparison of Western Theology and Liberation Theology

According to McAfee Brown, western theology has fundamental differences compared to liberation theology (Bucher, 1976). The difference lies in the methodology, the perpetrators of theological activities, the analysis of society, and the *locus theologicus*. Western theology's locus theology is based on a synthesis of church authority and colonialism. Meanwhile, the locus of the synthesis of liberation theology is based on religiosity, which is oriented towards the liberation of political conflicts based on colonialism, liberation from an unjust social system of life, and liberation from the influence of Western cultural domination (colonizers) in all aspects of life (Wahab, 2013:220; Humphrey, 2011). Western *locus theologicus* is the tendency to privatize faith in the midst of secularism. *Locus theologicus* liberation theology is a person who lives his religiosity in the challenges of conflict.

The perpetrators of liberation theology activities are the oppressed people themselves. Theologians such as Gutiérrez and Segundo synthesized passages circulated by the common people, as well as from biblical study groups and socio-political discussions, even from speech and action in poor villages. In contrast to the methodology of Western theology, which starts from a reaction to the infiltration of modern science and secularism, the methodology of liberation theology starts from a reaction to an unfair social system. Western theology deals with people who have lost their faith, while liberation theology deals with people who are considered non-persons. Liberation theology is thus a Christian theological approach accentuating the liberation of the oppressed. It participates in socio-economic analyses, with social concern for the poor and political liberation for oppressed peoples which is its key concern and addresses other forms of inequality, such as race or caste (Gutiérrez, 1998).

In terms of object and content, they both talk about the same theological issues, namely the image of God, human sin, the Kingdom of God, Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and so on. But in terms of methodology, Western theology and liberation theology depart from different points of view. Western theology emanates from the point of view of threatened faith, while liberation theology is from the point of praxis of suffering in life.

For Western theology, theology (discourse) is the first-step activity, while for liberation theology, theology (discourse) is the second-step activity (Nitiprawiro, 2000; Humphrey, 2011). For Gutiérrez, theology is neither wisdom nor rational knowledge but rather a critical reflection on the praxis illumined by the Gospel Word. In Latin America, it means critical reflection on the historical praxis of liberation (Nitiprawiro, 2000; Humphrey, 2011).

Table 1		
Spektrum	Western Theology	Liberation Theology
<i>Locus theologicus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on a synthesis of church authority and colonialism. Tendency to privatize faith in the midst of secularism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build upon religiosity oriented to the liberation of political conflicts based on colonialism, Liberation from an unjust social system of life. Liberation from the impact of Western cultural domination (colonizers) in all aspects of life.



The starting point of theological concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Starting from theory, from faith taught and thought. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looking from below, the starting point of theology is in the context of the suffering of the oppressed and excluded.
Actors of theological activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clergy, missionaries, theologians, academics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oppressed commoners, social activists, biblical study groups.
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Started as a reaction to the infiltration of modern science and secularism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Starting from a reaction to an unfair social system.
Personal focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People who have lost their faith. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People who are considered non-persons.
Object and content of theology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The image of God, human sin, the Kingdom of God, Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The God's image, human sin, the Kingdom of God, Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, etc.
Theological approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From the standpoint of threatened faith. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From the standpoint of suffering practice.
Priority in action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities of the first step, application to community renewal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The second step activity, following the praxis in the pattern of teaching.

Gutiérrez's theology of liberation can be said to be not only orthodoxy (consolidating teachings) and not only orthopraxis (demand to be carried out in global actions and towards God), but heteropraxis, namely orthodoxy insofar as it originates from orthopraxis (teaching formulations insofar as they originate from concrete experience and return to life, new to the action required by the doctrinal formulation). The comparison between Western theology and liberation theology is clear in Table 1 above.

Furthermore, the differences in the methods of Western theology and, according to Segundo Galilee's, liberation theology, are described again by Hennelly in Table 2 (Nitiprawiro, 2014: 62–68; Gill, 2002: 87–89; Murray, 1999: 7–18; Hoy, 1986:3–16).

Table 2	
Western Theology	Latin American Theology
Restore the meaning of faith threatened by atheism.	Returns the meaning of a grave situation that is inhumane, both atheistic and non-human.
Free the mind from all patterns of authoritarianism. Rationalization.	Liberating the reality of misery. Transformative.
Harmonization of the reality of suffering, which still means living while still believing in God even in a world of suffering.	Reconciliation is only possible in an attempt to resolve the crisis of reality. Belief in God is possible only in the praxis of liberation.
Transformation of meaning or theory.	A praxis that encourages reflection, for world transformation.
The driving force of theology is the human nature of curiosity.	The mover of theology is the cry of the oppressed.
The "death of God" in Christ heals the crisis of faith.	"Man's death" in Christ heals social crisis.
Eschatology relativizes concrete programs.	Functional and partial solutions are important in treating aporia.
The historical anachronisms that apply to European history apply to the general public as well. Geographical anachronisms that apply to the central society also apply to peripheral societies.	Starting from the liberation history of Latin America without wanting to universalize it for all histories and countries.
Explain the reality of the sources of faith.	The source of faith illuminates reality as far as the source of faith is illuminated by reality.
Overcome dualism (spirit and body, person and society, transcendence and history) at the stage of reasoning.	Overcome the most radical dualisms (theory and praxis, believing subject and existing history) at the stage of not only reasoning but also existence.

Building upon the comparative description above, we can agree with the conclusions given by Segundo Galilee regarding the four tendencies in liberation theology (Gutiérrez & Müller, 2000:189–190; Gill, 2002:87–89) namely:



1. Emphasize Bible verses about liberation and apply this concept to society.
2. Focus on Latin American history and culture (particularly the social context) as a starting point for their theology.
3. Confronting class struggles, economics, and ideologies that are different from the Christian faith.

Liberation theology is more of an ideology (i.e., a shift from society to theology), which came under the influence of Marxism. The basis of the Bible as a benchmark for them is clearly not interpreted correctly and is out of context. They do not issue God's words to be later applied to the life of this social world, but take the context that occurs in society and match it or relate it to Bible verses that for them support the context.

There are several passages of the Bible that liberation theologians often use as the basis of their teaching, namely (Gutiérrez, 1997:7-8; Roelofs, 1988:549–66; Dimitriadis:431-441; Mali: 19–36):

1. In the story in the Book of Exodus, when the children of Israel were in the land of Egypt, God heard their cry and delivered them from slavery and suffering.
2. The hymn of Mary is found in the Gospel of Luke 1:46–55.
3. The prophecy of the prophet Isaiah regarding the Messiah's work is in Luke 4:18–19 (cf. Isaiah 61:1-2). The concept is that Jesus has the power to deliver us from fear, disease, and evil. Christ as a liberator.
4. The final judgment is contained in the Gospel of Matthew 25:31–46, where God's judgment is based on a person's attitude towards people who are suffering and poor.

It's obvious that the beginning point or source of a person's theology will greatly determine his theological description. If the beginning point of one's theology is wrong, then the whole explanation is wrong. Likewise, with liberation theology. It is obvious that all of its theological descriptions are not in accordance with the truth of God's word because it does not base its theology on the Bible, and even though it uses the support of Bible verses it contains subjective interpretations of the verses. Some examples: teaching universal salvation (cf. Jn 3:16, 14:6); neglecting the church's tendency to be different from the world, despite the fact that they must be in and 'enter' into this life whose purpose is to be light (cf. John 17:14–19, 2 Peter 2:9); teaching that Christianity must engage in political action, even acts of violence, if it is to impact a classless society, considering that Jesus himself is the creator of subversion. This clearly contradicts the word of God. Christianity teaches unconditional love and does not reciprocate (Matthew 5:38–48). (Gill, 2002:87–89; Humphrey, 2011; Dimitriadis, 2019:431-441). Christ himself always emphasized that He didn't make His kingdom on earth as the concept and hope of the Israelites (including Jesus' disciples) to defeat the opponents of the Israelites; liberation theology also emphasizes praxis as the only answer to social problems, not the person and work of the Triune God in the Bible (Roelofs, 1988:549–66; Dimitriadis, 2019:431-441). However, we can neither argue totally against liberation theology nor close our eyes to the positive contribution of liberation theology as such, despite its many key arguments that are also its weaknesses.

Liberation theology isn't Christianized Marxism. This is a revival of biblical radicalism, which has been buried in the Judaeo-Christian tradition since its commencement. As such, liberation theology is reviving part of the West's most fundamental religious, economic, social, and political challenges to entrenched hierarchies. Modern Marxism is used by liberation theologians to gain a thorough grasp of class conflict and contemporary poverty (Smith, 1991). Their main concern remains to define themselves as the biblical concept of "emerging church," as well as to consider the practice of the "basic community" movement that they have established throughout Latin America. The major liberation theologians of our time, on the contrary, point to a persisting ambivalence about how individuals should relate to their



communities. The biblical text proposes remedies for them, but they are so radical that even the most extreme liberation theologians do not appear to be willing to accept them (Roelofs, 1988:549–566; Chen, 2002; Yewangoe, 1995; Mali, 2016:19–36).

Conclusion

This article is theoretical in nature, but the concept offered by Gustavo Gutiérrez remains relevant in the history of the struggle of life, in which Gutiérrez later defines theology as being a "critical reflection on praxis in the word of God's light." From the results of the discussion above, it can be concluded that there are two important dimensions of the birth as well as the advancement of liberation theology, namely its historical dimension and the area of generalization. Historically, liberation theology, which was originally better known as "theological liberation", originated from a thought formulated by Gustavo Gutiérrez that was motivated by the social conditions of society and a theology controlled by the dictatorial powers of colonialism and the authoritarian Western Orthodox Church. And as a result of these conditions, the state and society fell. The thought of Gutiérrez's liberation theology was then followed by theologians of other countries in the pattern of theological thought and movement that emerged, so historically other theological concepts of thought were born, namely Independent Churches Theology. The issue of liberation was at the core of theological thought and praxis which influenced numerous political agitations (Methula, 2015).

The method of theology that begins with Gustavo Gutiérrez's praxis becomes an alternative to theology that enriches the treasures and also the diversity of theology. Liberation theology emphasizes praxis as the only answer to social problems, not the person and work of the Triune God in the Bible. Regrettably, liberation theology tends to manipulate theological messages from quoted Bible verses. The basis of the Bible as a benchmark for liberation theologians is clearly not interpreted correctly and often out of context. They do not issue God's words to be later applied to the life of this social world, but take the context that occurs in society and match it or relate it to Bible verses that for them support the context. However, we also cannot close our eyes to the positive contribution of liberation theology, despite the many main points that are its weaknesses. The weakness of Liberation Theology lies in the application of hermeneutic principles, which are somewhat misguided, and in its starting point in the historical Christian faith. Liberation theology correctly condemns a tradition that attempts to utilize God for its own ends while wrongly rejecting God's self-revelation in the revelations of Scripture.

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