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Constructive Theology

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Gustavo Gutiérrez and Liberation Theology

Profile of a Christian Theologian

While Gustavo Gutiérrez is considered the founder of liberation theology, Gutiérrez himself suggests that “the often anonymous poor, especially as people ‘who die before their time’, are the real originators of his liberation theology” (Taylor 1996 p. 189). Liberation theology places God as the God of the poor and the focus of liberation theology centers on the struggles and hopes of the poor and marginalized of the world at the hands of the powerful. “For liberation theology, accordingly, all sin is idolatry: turning away from God – and thus inevitably away from God’s preferred poor – to worship the dominion of our own greedy selves” (Maduro 2003 p. 304).

Gutiérrez was born in 1928 in Lima, Peru. His parents were Hispanic and Amerindian, and were part of the poor and oppressed of Lima, Peru. Osteomyelitis, an infection in the bone, confined Gutiérrez to bed and for a time in a wheelchair between the ages of twelve and eighteen; it was during these years that he became a strong academic and voracious reader. Gutiérrez’s academic talents allowed him entry to university in Peru where he began as pre-med, later switching to philosophy and then theological studies. His academic studies eventually led him to Europe where he completed a Master’s degree in psychology and philosophy while studying in Belgium and later worked with the theological faculty at the University of Lyons in France to complete a M.A. thesis entitled, “Religious Liberty”.

In 1959, Gutiérrez was ordained in the Roman Catholic Church. He then went back to his native Peru to teach part-time at a Catholic University in Lima and also began working with the poor of Peru. Because the theology that Gutiérrez learned while at university conflicted with the poor who he worked with daily, Gutiérrez began a process of deconstructing the theology he was taught and transitioned toward a place of ‘theological alignment’ with the poor (Taylor 1996 p. 191). His theology became one of action and response instead of “merely standing alongside the poor, advocating their cause, or ‘speaking for’ them. Gutiérrez’s own ministry sought to be an entry into their world and to work from a vision from within, which might lead to a healing transformation of their world” (Taylor 1996 p. 191).

Father Paul, a priest who worked with Gutiérrez in Peru during this time frame remembers:

It was almost like the beginning of creation because he (Gutiérrez) had been calling it a theology of development, but later he said, ‘No – it’s deeper than that. Development would imply catching up to a Western model. I don’t think that’s the image at all for us in the Third World. I think it’s about liberation from the slaveries that hinder us’ (Nepstad 2004 p. 64).

In 1968, liberation theology was a focal point at a conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellin, Columbia. The purpose of the conference was to discover ways to implement the ideals of Vatican II (Nepstad 2004 p. 58). Over the next several years, Gutiérrez and liberation theologians continued their call and work, however, things changed in 1979 when Gutiérrez and the ideals of liberation theology began receiving criticism from the current Vatican. In 1980 an investigation around liberation theology began within the church (Taylor 1996 p. 193-194).

The year 1980 also brought the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador. Romero was killed while participating in Mass at the hands of a ‘military-condoned death squad’ for speaking out on behalf of the oppressed poor (Taylor 1996 p. 195). Even as Gutiérrez’s world was becoming increasingly violent, he was not deterred and continued to strive for a liberative theology “in the protest against trampled human dignity, in the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of humankind, in liberating love, and in the building of a new and just and comradely society – to the gift of the kingdom of God” (Taylor 1996 p. 189).

Maduro offers that the future of liberation theology is controversial, he suggests on one hand globalization, the rise of Pentecostalism and conservatism suggest the ‘death of liberation theology’, yet on the other hand, new liberation movements “suggests something akin to a growth crisis, more hopeful and promising than its foes want it to be” (Maduro 2003 p, 305). The continued need and importance of liberation theology is expressed by Compier in Jones and Lakeland.

Liberation theology’s stress on God’s preferential option for the poor that expresses the notion that a deity who values the autonomy and dignity of each creature must first work to overcome the forces that stand in the way of the capacity to exercise genuine personhood. Liberation (or at least the initial stages of consciousness raising, recovery of the voices of the silenced and marginalized, and so on) is the indispensible perquisite for entry into the beloved community that maintains difference and otherness. Liberation offers a concrete exemplification of what love is and of what love requires” (Compier 2005 p. 59).

As someone who identifies as queer, I am thankful for Gutiérrez’s work and for the new movements like queer theology that have been developed out of liberation theology. I suggest liberation theology will continue its relevancy and importance as long as there are the poor, the homeless, the powerless and the marginalized who continue to be oppressed and suffer at the hands of those with power.

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