

THE CAMBRIDGE
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LIBERATION
THEOLOGY

Liberation theology is widely referred to in discussions of politics and religion but not always adequately understood. This *Companion* offers an introduction to the history and characteristics of liberation theology in its various forms in different parts of the world. Authors from four continents examine the emergence and character of liberation theology in Latin America; Black and Feminist theologies; Asian theology; and the new situation arising from the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa. The major Christian Churches' attitude to liberation theology, and the extent of the movement's indebtedness to Marxism, are examined; and a political theologian writing from another perspective of Christian theology offers an evaluation. Through a sequence of eleven chapters readers are given a comprehensive description and evaluation of the different facets of this important theological and social movement. There is also an Introduction relating liberation theology to the history of theology, and a Select Bibliography.

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THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
LIBERATION
THEOLOGY

EDITED BY

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Holy Scripture, University of Oxford*

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PREFACE

Liberation theology has been one of the most significant movements in Christian theology in the last thirty years. For a decade or more liberation theology dominated the intellectual horizon of theologians in universities and seminaries throughout the world. Recent evidence of a declining profile cannot mask the enormous influence this approach to theology has had on the contemporary Church. It emerged in Latin America, though there have been parallel developments in other parts of the world, in which experiences of oppression, vulnerability or marginalisation have led to a sustained reflection on the Christian tradition. The Third World setting in situations of abject poverty and human need has given the theology a particular urgency and distinctive outline. The concern with human well-being and an understanding of the Church's mission which includes practical measures for human betterment have embraced theologians as co-workers in practical expressions of Christian commitment. The agenda is distinctive in its emphasis on the dialogue between Christian tradition, social theory and the insight of the poor and marginalised into their situation, leading to action for change. Liberation theology is not only of interest to theologians but also to all those studying the role of religion in contemporary society. The emphasis on the political dimensions of the Church's mission within situations of extreme poverty has made it the most compelling example of political theology in the late twentieth century. Liberation theology has a certain novelty value in the popular imagination. Many of its practitioners, however, have been quick to point out how deep are its roots in Christianity's emphasis on the life of prayer and commitment to neighbour as the necessary contexts for understanding God.

The initial dynamism may have been in Latin America, but there have emerged parallel movements in Africa, Asia and also Europe and North America. Not all of these are called liberation theology. Contextual theology is a term now widely used to designate theological reflection which explicitly explores the dialogue between social context and Scripture and

tradition.¹ It is not an ideal term, however, as it suggests that there exists a form of theology in which context plays no determining role, a notion that many, including liberation theologians themselves, would want to challenge. The greatest examples of Christian theology down the centuries (Augustine's *City of God* is a case in point) have all arisen from, and been directed to, specific historical and social contexts. There are enough common threads linking theologians in Asia, Latin America and South Africa to justify a common perspective, not least organisations like the Ecumenical Alliance of Third World Theologians which have enabled dialogue and common interests to emerge as the result of a series of influential conferences with a common sense of direction and purpose.

The chapters of this *Companion* offer a survey of examples of theology in different parts of the world which may be labelled liberation theology. The chapters have been written by contributors, some of whom live and work in the countries whose theology they write about. The first part enables readers to have some understanding of the main features of contemporary liberation theology in Latin America, Asia and Africa and the related feminist theology. In Part two specific issues which arise in the emergence of liberation theology are explored in chapters on the emergence of the base ecclesial communities, so important for the growth of liberation theology in Latin America, and the distinctive ways in which Scripture is studied. One new issue to have arisen since Gustavo Gutiérrez's pioneering *A Theology of Liberation* was published thirty years ago has been the emergence of a situation in which theologians of protest have found themselves engaged in reconstruction and reconciliation. That new situation is reflected in a chapter which examines the case of South Africa. In Part three writers turn to analysis of aspects of liberation theology and specific criticisms made of it. This starts with a posthumously published essay by Peter Hebblethwaite on the emerging critique of liberation theology from the Vatican. I am particularly grateful to Peter's widow, Margaret Hebblethwaite, for all her help in providing me with material which Peter left in a fragmentary state at his death. The extent of the indebtedness to Marxism has also been a subject of controversy from liberation theology's very earliest days, as also has the extent of the influence of a particular economic theory. Finally, its distinctive standpoint on political theology is contrasted with other traditions of political theology.

This volume should enable the student beginning a course in liberation theology to have some idea of the contours of the varied aspects of this

¹ In the Pontifical Biblical Commission's recent document (ed. J. L. Houlden, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, London, 1995) liberationist and feminist interpretations are both given the label 'contextual approaches'.

PREFACE

significant movement and will permit someone who wants a panoramic view of the various forms of liberation theology to get some sense of the overall situation. As editor I am aware of the many other matters which could legitimately have been included in a volume of this kind: the relationship of liberation theology and evangelisation, Catholic and Protestant; the evidence of an indigenous liberationist tradition in Europe and North America; the story of Christianity in post-revolutionary Nicaragua, and an analysis of the way in which liberation theology has revolutionised much Christian pedagogy in the Northern Hemisphere even when it seems to remain peripheral to the life of most of the Christian churches.

I am grateful to colleagues at the Centro Missionário de Evangelização e Educação Popular in Valença, Bahia, Brazil for giving me permission to take photographs of their popular education material during my visit to them in 1990, an example of which forms the illustration on the front of this book. My daughter, Rebekah, has helped with proof-reading and the preparation of an index. I am grateful to her for her help and her continuing interest in, and support for, the subject of this book.

GLOSSARY

apophatic theology: that which is beyond expression in language. It involves a denial that human language can ever be properly be affirmed of God. It contrasts with **cataphatic theology/cataphaticism**.

caste, a hereditary group which maintained social distance from members of other castes.

catechesis/catechetical: teaching or instruction, a way of describing the preparatory teaching given to a candidate for baptism in the Christian Church.

chiliasm: the expectation of a 1000-year reign of God on earth based on Revelation 20, but which has come to be linked with any this-worldly expectation of God's eschatological reign.

christology: teaching about the person of Jesus Christ.

Dalit: the name chosen for itself by the outcaste group in India; it means 'crushed' or 'oppressed'.

dialectical: concerning the understanding of or reconciliation of contradictions, e.g. in theology between God and humanity and different social and economic phenomena. It is a word used both in political philosophy influenced by Hegel and Marx, where it is used of the progressive resolution of contradictions in history, and also in the theology of Karl Barth, which contrasted human ways of knowing and the revelation of God.

encyclical: in modern Roman Catholicism refers to a circular document sent to the church by the Pope.

epistemology: concerned with the theory of knowledge and how humans know anything about themselves, the external world, and God.

eschatology: the hope for the future, both for the individual and the world. There has been a divide in Christian theology between a this-worldly hope and an other-worldly hope.

exegesis: the practice of interpretation and exposition, specifically of the Bible.

fetishism: according to Marx, the bestowal in a capitalist society on material objects of certain characteristics, such that they appear to possess these naturally.

Feuerbachian: referring to Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), who demanded that theology be understood as a projection on to the transcendent of ideas concerning humanity and society.

fideism: a doctrine which places emphasis on the need for faith and rejects the ability of the human mind to understand God, with the consequent denial of the possibility of the need for rational justification.

hermeneutics: the task of reflecting on how we go about doing our interpretation of texts, life and culture.

hermeneutics of suspicion: interpretation linked with what Paul Ricoeur has called the masters of suspicion, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. Its major characteristic is suspicion of the validity of received narratives and explanations with a demand to probe to get at the underlying truth behind appearances.

immanence: in contrast with **transcendence** in theology this doctrine stresses God's nearness and involvement in history, including ordinary events and situations.

neo-liberal: a way of characterising the free-market economic theory which has been influential in global economics in the last decades of the twentieth century.

orthopraxy: right way of behaving, contrasted with **orthodoxy**, right belief, which is held to be less interested in the practical demands of faith.

praxis or practice: action, a term often used in liberation theology to describe the actions and commitments which provide the context for theological reflection.

proletariat: the working class which in Marxist theory would be the agent of the defeat of capitalism.

Promethean: referring to Prometheus, the figure in Greek mythology who stole fire from the gods and taught humankind divine wisdom, for which he was imprisoned for having aspired to divinity.

soteriology: the doctrine of God's saving work, especially through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

typology: the relation of different persons and narratives (usually in the Old and New Testaments), so that the character of one is informed by the character of the other (so the sacrifice of Isaac informs the understanding of the death of Jesus).

ABBREVIATIONS

CCA	Christian Conference of Asia
CDF	Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The major institution of the Roman Catholic Church responsible for the church's faith and morals
CEB/BCC	Basic Ecclesial Community or Basic Christian Community
CELAM	The Latin American (Roman Catholic) Bishops' Conference
CIIR	The Catholic Institute for International Relations
CISRS	Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society
CLAR	The Latin American Conference of Religious
CSR	Centre for Social Research
EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
ECLA	Economic Commission for Latin America
EFECW	European Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women
ESWTR	European Society for Women in Theological Research
GATT	The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GS	<i>Gaudium et Spes</i> . The major document of the Second Vatican Council dealing with relations between the Church and the World
IMF	The International Monetary Fund
ISB	Institute for the Study of the Bible
MNC	Multi-National Corporation. Also called Trans-National Corporation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation. A term used to describe organisations like charities or intermediate groups engaged in development work in the Third World
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ST	<i>Summa Theologiae</i> of Thomas Aquinas
URM	Urban-Rural Mission
WCC	The World Council of Churches
WSCF	World Student Christian Fellowship

PART ONE
CONTEMPORARY LIBERATION
THEOLOGY

I

G. GUTIERREZ translated by JUDITH CONDOR

The task and content of liberation theology

The urgency and the richness of the commitment that many Christians in Latin America and the Caribbean began to feel in the 1960s as part of the struggle for justice and solidarity with the poor raised new questions, as well as pointing to fertile new pathways in the discourse about faith. These circumstances helped convert such reflection into a theology of liberation; that is, a way to understand the grace and salvation of Jesus in the context of the present and from the situation of the poor.

From the start, therefore, this theological perspective is bound up with the life of grassroots Christian communities and their commitment, as well as with the evangelising mission of the Church. This is the reason for its great impact, also from the outset, in the magisterium of the Church. Medellín and other Latin American Bishops' conferences, as well as many other texts, bear witness to this fact.

The theology of liberation, like any theology is about God. God and God's love are, ultimately, its only theme. But since for Christian revelation (the starting point for any theology) the love of God is a mystery, the immediate question is how to talk of a mystery? The humble and respectful advice of Thomas Aquinas remains valid: 'we cannot know what God is, only what he is not' (ST I.9.3 introd.). It is in this context that, nearly thirty years ago, we asked ourselves what path the theological task ought to take in the context of Latin America.

In order to try to answer this question it is useful to remind ourselves about the challenges that are posed for such a reflection; how this reflection understands its present and future tasks; and its orientation towards the proclamation of the God of life in a reality characterised by the premature and unjust death of many people.

Challenged by poverty

There is one clear and determining fact about the last few decades in the life of the Latin American Church: the way of understanding the task of announcing the gospel changed from the moment that the Church took new consciousness of the 'inhuman misery' (Medellín, *Pobreza* n. 1) in which the majority of the population lives. Poverty continues to be the great challenge to Christian witness in our continent. The attempts of some, on the eve of the Bishops' conference at Puebla – and at Santo Domingo – to tone down the concern about this situation of poverty and to shift the focus of attention to other matters were in vain. Our reality and the demands of the gospel combined to head off any possibility of evading these issues.

Thus, theological reflection cannot be the same either. It sets out on new pathways which lead – not without difficulties or misunderstandings – to rich possibilities for the proclamation of the Kingdom of God as these last years have proved.

The presence of the absent

The participation of Christians in the process of liberation in Latin America that some time ago we used to call the 'most important fact' (*hecho mayor*) in the life of the Church is nothing other than an expression of the immense historical process that we know as the 'irruption' of the poor. This has helped us see with unusual force and clarity the longstanding, cruel poverty in which the great majority of Latin Americans live. These people have burst upon the social scene with 'their poverty on their shoulders' – as Las Casas commented referring to the Indian nations of his time. But this situation of poverty has led to a better appreciation of the energies and values of these people.

These times, therefore, bear the imprint of a new presence of the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed. Those who were for so long 'absent' in our society and in the Church have made themselves – and are continuing to make themselves – present. It is not a matter of physical absence: we are talking of those who have had scant or no significance, and who therefore have not felt (and in many cases still do not feel) in a position to make plain their suffering, their aspirations and their hopes. But this is what has started to change.

It is always difficult to date the beginning of any historical process; in these examples, dates are often approximate and conventional. Nevertheless, we can affirm that the process we have described has been going on for thirty or forty years in Latin America and the Caribbean. Initially, it was evident in developments such as the growth of the popular movements, in

an intensification of the struggle for justice, in an increase in expectations, in the emergence of new social and political organisations, in a greater awareness of personal dignity and in the rights of the old indigenous peoples, in attempts by those in power to undertake meaningful social reforms, and even – in some cases – in unfruitful outbreaks of guerrilla violence. All of which brought in response new types of authoritarian and repressive governments, in a world still characterised by the cold war.

The facts are complex, and not free of ambivalence. However, we are on the threshold of something challenging and hopeful, which has meant that the poor begin to see themselves as subjects of their own history, as being able to take their destiny in their own hands. This is clearly a crucial discovery and a profound conviction, replete with social and pastoral implications. It is a case of what today is known as ‘self image’ and of the appearance of new social and pastoral actors. It has left a decisive mark both on the nature of the political task in Latin American society, as well as on the activity of the Church.

The challenge becomes even more dramatic for the task of evangelisation if we bear in mind that the people who erupted on to the historical scene are at the same time both poor and Christian. Their Christian faith affects in many different ways their experience of poverty and oppression, and this experience of poverty and oppression makes its mark on their experience of the gospel.

A new social awareness

For a long time we Latin Americans have lived in great ignorance about the reality of our countries. Occasional voices – some of which were certainly very authoritative – alerted us in the past to the problems created by enormous social divides. But often they were rendered ineffectual by indifference and the lack of sensitivity to the marginalisation of the poor. During the 1950s various international factors led to a concern for what came to be called development, both social and economic. In the wake of the Bandung Conference (1955), such terminology came to express the aspirations of backward countries which sought to achieve more humane living conditions. Developmentalist policies came to be applied at this time in Latin America and the Caribbean with a view to rescuing these countries from their backwardness. But the initial optimism in such policies soon gave way to disillusion.

Confronting developmentalism – not development itself which is a technical concept and a necessity for all countries – there emerged dependency theory. This received its initial elaboration in the neo-structuralist domain of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), a UN body. This

perspective gradually gained substance through contributions from various aspects of the social sciences, both with and without the influence of Marxist analysis. Unlike developmentalism, dependency theory involves acute and sustained study of the causes of poverty in Latin America and places it in an international context. It also seeks – a key point – to concentrate on the process which has led up to this state of affairs, stressing the view that nations form part of a history which is increasingly universal. A fundamental requirement for this perspective, therefore, is to look for ways to break the dependency on the main centres of power.

This last point, coupled with the analysis of the causes of poverty, linked this approach with the path opened up by the increased awareness of the poverty in which the majority of Latin Americans lived, and also with the new pastoral and spiritual paths that stemmed from it. In this way, dependency theory – which was at its peak in the 1960s and 1970s – became a crucial tool for understanding the socio-economic reality of Latin America. It made possible a structural analysis of the evils present in this reality, and suggested courses for remedying them.

Without any doubt this theory represented a qualitative step forward in efforts to understand the Latin American situation. Its presence in the framework for liberation theology (and in the Medellín documents) derives precisely from its contribution to social analysis. In this way dependency theory fulfils a role as a tool of understanding those aspects of the socio-economic reality for which it was designed. Its contribution was significant during the first few years of the development of the theology of liberation in Latin America. This is clear and a well-known fact. However, as always in the history of theology, the understanding of faith is not necessarily identified with the intellectual path taken to understand a specific aspect of existence, in this case the socio-economic dimension. This should not be taken to mean that the use of social analysis, by giving a better picture of the challenges that the social and economic dimensions of society pose to faith, does not help to establish priorities which leave a mark on theological reflection oriented to transforming society, so long as this coincides with the task of evangelisation. It is important to be clear about connections and distinctions to be drawn on such matters.

Like any theory, dependency theory necessarily advances and adapts in the light of changes in the situation it seeks to understand. Indeed, the tools of social analysis vary with time, according to their ability to explain the phenomena to which they relate, and in accordance with the efficacy of the solutions they propose. What characterises science is its capacity to be critical about its own presuppositions and its own results; scientific knowledge advances permanently by means of new interpretative hypotheses.

A variety of learned studies in more recent years have aimed to critique dependency theory. For many today it represents – without denying its contribution at a specific moment – an instrument that fails to explain the complexity of the present situation. Indeed, in retrospect, the limitations it always had have become clearer (for example, its excessive emphasis on external factors in explaining underdevelopment). This is normal. It is always the case with attempts to understand terrain such as ours where the surface soil is sandy and shifting. The same happens in human sciences (social and psychological). Time is implacably relentless in such attempts at understanding.

While it would be a serious error not to acknowledge the contribution of this theory, it would be worse to remain tied to a tool which clearly no longer responds adequately to the diversity of the present situation, and which pays no heed to new aspects. Many such changes are the product of important changes on the international scene. They also arise from different perceptions of elements which, while they may have long formed part of the social framework in Latin America, now help provide a better picture of its contours.

The current situation

First we need to remind ourselves that poverty has increased dramatically. The gap between the rich and poor nations is today wider than two decades ago. The same is the case within each Latin American country. This has led to the virtual disappearance of sectors of the middle class which have been plunged into poverty. It has given rise to what has been called ‘neo-dualism’: the population is ever increasingly polarised at the two extremes of the social and economic spectrum. In this context, the 1980s is often referred to as a ‘lost decade’, although for some countries the period has in fact been much longer. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in this period those countries have managed to improve their strategies to alleviate or even solve their problems.

Many things have also changed in the international arena. Following the collapse of the authoritarian socialism of the Eastern European countries – which neither respected the basic rights nor took into account the diversity of aspirations of their citizens – we have moved from a bipolar world to one in which in political and military terms there is but one pole, although in the economic sphere the situation is more complex. This collapse has also led to a reaffirmation of market economics, even though these cannot work properly except within parameters which reflect concern for social and human inequality. The technological revolution in the sphere of knowledge has radically transformed the process of accumulation and reduced

the role played by the raw materials that poor countries produce. This has rendered redundant a number of the analytical concepts which were used previously. The burden of debt has distorted the economies of the poor countries, while the rigidity of international organisations on this issue has acted as a straitjacket limiting the possibilities for responding to the needs of the poorest.

All this has brought new forms of interchange between North and South. In many cases, the inequalities have become more marked, these deep chasms at times posing a threat to world peace, even if we believe that economic and military might can control the situation at the moment.

Neo-liberal ideology (one of its main texts proclaims, not without unconscious humour, 'the end of history') rereads in its own fashion the historical evolution of humanity. In this way it deprives the poor nations of their history and disguises those economic and social processes which have increased the asymmetries mentioned above. All this leads to a concentration of power in certain sectors of society that reduces the ways out available to poor nations, and to the poor living in them. The signs of exhaustion implicit in neo-liberalism are already beginning to appear and they may change the picture in the future, although the present trends are clear enough.

On the other hand, the passage of time has helped us to understand better the concrete situation facing the poor and oppressed in Latin America. From the beginning, from the perspective of the theology of liberation, we spoke of subjugated peoples, exploited classes, despised races, and marginalised cultures. Then, there was expressed a concern for the discrimination against women, an attitude frequently hidden that becomes a daily habit, a cultural tradition, even though for that no less persistent and unhealthy. But what is clear is that these different aspects did not take on their most strident and demanding form until solidarity with the world of the poor became deeper in the last few years. Factors of race, culture and gender have become increasingly important in helping to draw a more accurate picture of the condition of the poor in Latin America. Thanks to such commitment we became more aware that ultimately – without omitting of course its social and economic dimensions – poverty means death, unjust and premature death.

From this arises the reaffirmation of life as the prime human right, and, from the Christian viewpoint, as a gift of God that we must defend. This became the hallmark of our experience and reflection at the end of the 1970s (for example, in Peru and Central America), and has become the catalyst for our endeavour and commitment. It helped us recover an evangelical perspective (so present in men like Las Casas in the sixteenth

century) on the idolatrous character of profit propagated by a 'savage capitalism' that crushes the dignity of human beings under foot, turning them into the victims of a cruel and sacrilegious cult.

At the same time it is important to understand that poverty is not only about deficiencies. The poor person is someone brimming over with capacities and possibilities, whose culture has its own values, derived from racial background, history and language. Such energies have been revealed throughout Latin America by women's organisations fighting for life, in their creativity and originality which challenges, in spite of everything, the so-called 'crisis of paradigms' which we hear so much of today. We are talking about poor people who, despite the way they have been affected by circumstances (often seriously), resist all attempts to mutilate or manipulate their hopes for the future.

Poverty and theological reflection

At around the middle of the twentieth century, a number of developments helped to revive and to relaunch the theme of poverty within the universal Church. There was a demand for a radical and authentic witness of poverty arising from new religious communities. This came from among those concerned with the growing estrangement from faith evident among the labour movement, in the development of the social teaching of the Church and in some spiritual and pastoral tendencies, especially in Europe. This concern was categorically and prophetically expressed by Pope John XXIII at the Vatican Council: in the call for the Church to become the Church of all, and in particular the Church of the poor (11 September 1962).

Vatican II, for reasons that are well known and easy to understand, did not fully take up John XXIII's proposal, even though this concern was at the fore during much of the work of the Council. However, it was heard, in large measure because of the developments we have already touched upon (albeit not without some reservations and vacillation), where the great majority is both poor and Christian: in Latin America. Alongside the fact of the new presence of the poor, the idea of a Church of the poor stimulated considerable theological reflection.

That is why in around July 1967, a distinction was made between three concepts of poverty:

- (1) Real poverty (frequently called material poverty), defined as the lack of those goods required to satisfy the most basic needs of human beings. This poverty is an outrage in terms of the message of the Bible. It is a situation wholly contrary to the will of God.

- (2) Spiritual poverty. This is not primarily the putting aside of worldly goods; it is rather an attitude of openness and acceptance towards the will of God. The gospel also calls this spiritual childhood, of which the renunciation of worldly goods is a consequence.
- (3) Poverty as a commitment to be assumed by all Christians, which expresses itself in solidarity with the poor and in protest against poverty. Jesus assumes the sins of humanity in this way, both out of love for the sinner and in rejection of sin.¹

Such an approach presupposes a particular analysis of poverty and its causes. It also implies a biblical foundation both in relation to a rejection of this inhuman situation as well as towards an understanding of spiritual poverty. Finally it sets out the reasons – leaving aside all idealism – for Christian commitment in this field. This contribution was taken up a year later at Medellín in August and September 1968, and helped clarify the commitment which many Christians had begun to assume.²

Closely linked to the theme of poverty emanating from a situation of injustice, a little before Medellín there emerged the theme of liberation, which embodies a number of perspectives. Although the term liberation exists also in the social and political spheres, it comes from a very ancient biblical and theological tradition. It was within this tradition that we sought to locate the term from the beginning. In using the word ‘liberation’ we distinguished between:

- (1) Political and social liberation, which points towards the elimination of the immediate causes of poverty and injustice, especially with regard to socio-economic structures. On this basis, an attempt can be made to construct a society based on respect for the other, and especially for the weakest and the insignificant;
- (2) human liberation, meaning that, although aware that changing social structures is important, we need to go deeper. It means liberating human beings of all those things – not just in the social sphere – that limit their capacity to develop themselves freely and in dignity. Here we are speaking of what Vatican II called a ‘new humanism’ (cf. *GS* 55);
- (3) and, crucially, liberation from selfishness and sin. In the analysis of faith, this is the last root of injustice that has to be eliminated. Overcoming this leads to re-establishing friendship with God and with other people (cf. *Lumen Gentium* n. 1). It is clear that only the grace of God, the redeeming work of Christ, can overcome sin.

Divergent, but at the same time linked, these three dimensions of liberation portray a radical and integral reality, a broad process whose meaning is

ultimately to be found in the salvation of Christ. This provides the concept of liberation with its permanent relevance and the demanding appeal, as well as the context for dealing with the issue of poverty.

From the distinctions noted above between notions of poverty, the expression 'preferential option for the poor' emerged from within Christian communities, between the time of the conferences of Medellín and Puebla (1979). Here, the three notions of poverty are bound together with one another, and are made dynamic. *Poor*, here refers to victims of material poverty; *preferential* is inspired by the notion of spiritual childhood or the capacity to accept the will of God in our lives; and *option* relates to the idea of commitment that – as we have suggested – means solidarity with the poor and rejection of poverty as something contrary to the will of God. This option, adopted at the Bishops' conference at Puebla,³ represents today a point of orientation for the pastoral activities of the Church and an important guideline for being a Christian – in other words, what we call spirituality, one of the fundamental concerns of liberation theology. As is well known, this is a perspective which is widely accepted in the teaching of the universal Church.

All this provides the approach which has become the central plank in the evangelising mission of the contemporary Church in Latin America. It combines a profound sense of the gratuitous love of God with the urgency of solidarity with the 'little ones' of history. These are the two elements, the two pillars of what we call liberation theology. The theme of encounter with our Lord in the suffering faces of the dispossessed and despised of our continent beautifully and concisely expresses a process which has been under way for some years now. It is evident even from the very dawn of Latin American theological reflection inspired by the gospel. We refer to the reflections of the Peruvian Indian Felipe Huamán Poma de Ayala at the beginning of the seventeenth century; to the ideas we find a little earlier in the writing of Bartolomé de Las Casas. Both illustrated their Christian understanding of the cruel predicament facing the Indians through reference to chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel. This is a text which occupies a central place in the theology of liberation as well, being taken up both in Puebla (1979) and Santo Domingo (1992).

Theology as critical reflection

The theology of liberation is reflection on practice in the light of faith. In order to understand the scope of such an affirmation, it is helpful to examine the question posed at the outset of this discourse on faith, to see

how in this perspective theological method and spirituality interrelate closely; and finally we can set out the present challenges.

A point of departure

A good part of contemporary theology, since the Age of Enlightenment, appears to take as a point of departure the challenge raised by the (often unbelieving) modern spirit. The modern mentality questions the religious world and demands of it a purification and renewal. Bonhoeffer takes up this challenge and incisively formulates the question that lies at the roots of much contemporary theology: 'how to announce God in a world that has come of age (*mündig*)?'

But in a continent like Latin America and the Caribbean, the challenge comes not in the first instance from the non-believer, but from the 'non-persons', those who are not recognised as people by the existing social order: the poor, the exploited, those systematically and legally deprived of their status as human beings, those who barely realise what it is to be a human being. The 'non-person' questions not so much our religious universe but above all our economic, social, political and cultural order, calling for a transformation of the very foundations of a dehumanising society.

The question we face, therefore, is not so much how to talk of God in a world come of age, but how to proclaim God as Father in an inhuman world? How do we tell the 'non-persons' that they are the sons and daughters of God? These are the key questions for a theology that emerges from Latin America, and doubtless for other parts of the world in similar situations. These were the questions which, in a way, Bartolomé de Las Casas and many others posed in the sixteenth century following their encounter with the indigenous population of America.

This does not mean that the questions posed by modernity are irrelevant for us. It is a question of emphasis, and in this light, poverty without doubt is the most important challenge.

Reflection on praxis

How to find a way to talk about a God who reveals Himself to us as love in a reality characterised by poverty and oppression? From the perspective of the theology of liberation, it is argued that the first step is to contemplate God and put God's will into practice; and only in a second moment can we think about God. What we mean to say by this is that the veneration of God and the doing of God's will are the necessary conditions for reflection on Him. In fact, only as a consequence of prayer and commitment is it possible to work out an authentic and respectful discourse

about God. Through commitment, concretely commitment towards the poor, do we find the Lord (cf. Matt. 25.31–46); but at the same time this discovery deepens and renders more genuine our solidarity with the poor. Contemplation and commitment in human history are fundamental dimensions of Christian existence; in consequence, they cannot be avoided in the understanding of faith. The mystery is revealed through contemplation and solidarity with the poor; it is what we call the *first act*, Christian life, practice. Only thereafter can this life inspire reasoning: that is the *second act*.

Theology, as a critical reflection in the light of the Word adopted through faith on the presence of Christians in a tumultuous world, should help us to understand the relationship between the life of faith and the urgent need to build a society that is humane and just. It is called upon to make explicit the values of faith, hope and charity that that commitment involves. But it also helps to correct possible deviations, as well as to recall some aspects of the Christian life which risk being forgotten in view of immediate political priorities, however charitable those may be. This is the function of critical reflection which, by definition, should not be a Christian justification *a posteriori*. In essence, theology helps the commitment to liberation to be more evangelical, more concrete, more effective. Theology is at the service of the Church's task of evangelisation; it arises out of it as an ecclesial function.⁴

The starting point for all theology is to be found in the act of faith. However, rather than being an intellectual adherence to the message, it should be a vital embracing of the gift of the Word as heard in the ecclesial community, as an encounter with God, and as love of one's brother and sister. It is about existence in its totality. To receive the Word, to give it life, to make it a concrete gesture; this is where understanding of faith begins. This is the meaning of Saint Anselm's *credo ut intelligam*. The primacy of the love of God and the grace of faith give theology its *raison d'être*. Authentic theology is always spiritual, as was understood by the Fathers of the Church. All this means that the life of faith is not only a starting point, it is also the goal of theological reflection. To believe (life) and to understand (reflection) are therefore always part of a circular relationship.

A way of living and thinking

The distinction between the two moments (first and second acts) is a crucial point in the method of liberation theology; in other words, the process (method, *hodos*, the way) that should be followed for reflection

in the light of the faith. This is indeed more traditional than many think, but what we need to underline here is that it is not only a question of theological methodology, rather it implies a lifestyle, a way of being, and of becoming a disciple of Jesus.

In the book which tells of the Acts of the first Christian communities, this is given a particular and original name: 'the way'. The term is used frequently in an absolute way without qualification. To follow the Way implies a pattern of conduct; the Hebrew word *derek*, which translates into Greek as *hodos*, in fact means both things at the same time: the way and conduct. Christians were characterised by their conduct and by their lifestyle. This is what distinguished the Christian communities in their early years in the Jewish and pagan world in which they lived and bore witness. Such conduct is a way of thinking and behaving, 'of walking according to the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 8.4).

Following Jesus defines the Christian. It is a journey which, according to biblical sources, is a communitarian experience, because it is indeed a people that is on the move. The poor in Latin America have started to move in the struggle to affirm their human dignity and their status as sons and daughters of God. This movement embodies a spiritual experience. In other words, this is the place and the moment of an encounter with the Lord; it represents a way of following Jesus Christ.

This is a fundamental point of reference for the theological reflection taking place in Latin America. It is aware that it is preceded by the spiritual experience of Christians committed to the process of liberation. This encounter with God and the discipleship of the Lord – sometimes extending to surrendering one's life, to martyrdom – has been made more urgent and fruitful by the events of recent years. In the context of the struggle for liberation motivated by love and justice for all, there has possibly opened up a new way of following Jesus in Latin America. There is a new spirituality which, for this very reason, resists clear definition and any attempt to imprison it in description, but which nevertheless is no less real or full of potential.

Following Jesus Christ is the basis of the direction that is adopted for doing theology. For this reason, it could be said that our methodology is our spirituality (in other words, a way of being Christian). Reflection on the mystery of God can only be undertaken if we follow in the steps of Jesus. Only if we walk in the way of the Spirit is it possible to understand and announce the gratuitous love of the Father for all people. Perhaps it is because of this relationship between Christian life and theological method that the Base Ecclesial Communities in Latin America are becoming ever more the agents of such theological reflection.

A continent of all bloods

From the outset, Latin American theological reflection raised the question of the 'other' in our society. The inadequacy, and indeed the errors, in the concentration on the reality of poverty adopted at that time made it necessary to analyse first the social and economic reasons for the marginalisation suffered by different categories of the poor (social class, culture, ethnicity and gender). Indeed, although a description of poverty is important, so long as its causes are not identified we are unable to do anything about it, or we are limited to trying to heal social rifts that require much deeper and broader solutions. Many of those causes – although not all – are social and economic. These are most unsettling for the power groups within Latin America and beyond, because they remind them of their responsibility for the conditions in which the majorities live. For this reason, they continually try to ascribe the differences to factors that mask the degree of social injustice. We should not forget this when with the best will in the world – and to some extent correctly – we are sensitive to certain aspects such as the race, culture and gender of the heterogeneous population of Latin America. We need to be clear about the different facets of the problem.

To adopt this perspective, to embark on a structural analysis, was one of the novelties of Medellín. Many of the positions taken in recent years reveal the extent to which this approach has been engraved on the Latin American mind, and has been constantly reworked. At the same time, these positions show with great clarity the need to immerse ourselves in the multifaceted world of the poor, remaining attentive to its cultural and racial dimensions.

Although a longstanding concern, the last few decades have allowed us to become more deeply involved in this complexity. The year 1992 stimulated the need to undertake a critical evaluation of the last 500 years of the continent's history, and helped give more attention to the predicament of the various indigenous nations and to the black population which have been violently incorporated into our world. In many ways we have been witnesses over this period to the force given by the voices of these peoples; they remind us that the expression used by the Peruvian writer José María Arguedas to describe Peru as a country 'of all bloods' can be applied to the whole continent.

All this affects the way of living and announcing the gospel, and certainly the theological reflection that accompanies it. The emphasis that these types of theology adopt, depending on which angle of poverty is the starting point, should not make us lose sight of the global dimension of the issue, nor to forget the horizon of understanding of our languages about

God: the language of the marginalised and oppressed, the language of their liberation and the language of the gospel of Jesus.

It is necessary to avoid the possibility that the deepening of reflection on the suffering of the poor in Latin America transforms itself into fruitless searches for theological spaces, anguishing priorities and misunderstandings – with undisguised (in spite of appearances) intellectualist features – that in the long run only undermine the effort of the ‘little ones’ of history in their struggle for life, justice and the right to be different. We also observe the existence of indigenous groups that are particularly forgotten and excluded. We refer to the aborigines of the Amazon, a region where – as pointed out in one of the texts of the bishops and missionaries – governments are more interested in natural resources than in the inhabitants.⁵ This is also the case of the Kunas of Panama and the Mapuche in Chile, amongst others. The distance we need to cover in order to understand these peoples and to express solidarity with them is still long. Nevertheless, these peoples are beginning to make it clear that they live in lands that have always been theirs. This fact is partly a result of the liberating dimension of the gospel. However, it also constitutes a challenge to Christian faith.

What we have just mentioned continues to provide colour and flavour to the new role of the poor we referred to earlier. It too forms part of the – prolonged and stormy – search for identity in a continent of many colours which still finds difficulty in knowing what it is. For this very reason, the state and values of the poor in general, and of indigenous and black people in particular (and among them the women), constitute a challenge for evangelisation in our countries and a stimulus for different types of theological reflection. We face a real upsurge in fruitful understanding of faith, coming from cultural and human backgrounds of great importance. The initial perception of the other thus turns into a much more precise image, providing invaluable enrichment for the theology of liberation. However, much still needs to be done in this area.

Announcing the gospel of liberation

To know that the Lord loves us, to accept the gratuitous gift of his love, is the profound source of happiness of those who live according to the Word. To communicate this happiness is to evangelise. Such communication is the purpose of the reflection we call liberation theology. It concerns itself with a proclamation which is, in a way, gratuitous, just as the love which motivates it is gratuitous. What is received free, should be given freely, as the Gospel says. In the starting point for evangelisation there is always the experience of the Lord, a living out of the love of the Father that makes us

His sons and daughters, transforming us, making us ever more fully brothers and sisters.

For us, all of this comes together – as we have pointed out – in the question: how to proclaim a God who is revealed as love in a world of poverty and exclusion? How to proclaim the God of life to people who suffer premature and unjust death? How to proclaim the ‘Gospel of liberation’?⁶

A universal call

To proclaim the gospel is to announce the mystery of ‘sonship’ and ‘brotherhood’, a mystery hidden – as Paul says – from the beginning of time and revealed now in Christ dead and resurrected. For this reason, to evangelise is to come together in *ecclesia*, to assemble together. Only in community can faith be lived, celebrated, and deepened, lived out through one act as fidelity to the Lord and solidarity towards all people. To accept the Word is to turn ourselves to ‘the Other’ in others. It is with them that we live the Word. Faith is not to be found in private or in intimacy; faith is the denial of the retreat into ourselves.

‘Make disciples of all the nations’ (Matt. 28.19) is the mission entrusted to his disciples by the resurrected Jesus in Galilee, the very scene of his preaching. The universality of the message bears the mark of that land of Galilee, forgotten and despised. The God announced by Jesus Christ is the God whose call is universal, aimed at all people. However, at the same time it is a God whose preferential love is for the poor and dispossessed. The universality of God’s call not only does not contradict that preference (which is not exclusivity) but demands it to give meaning to this universality. The preference lies in the call of God to every human being.

This double requisite of universality and preference is a challenge to the community of the Lord’s disciples. This is explicitly and authentically the place that John XXIII calls the ‘Church of the poor’, the vocation of the whole Church, afterwards insisted upon by Medellín, Puebla and John Paul II. This is also the framework for the preferential option for the poor, the central point of liberation theology, the axis for the task of evangelisation of the Church in Latin America and beyond.

This leads us to the very heart of the gospel message, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. This was the purpose of Jesus, according to the Gospels. The Kingdom expresses the Father’s will for life and love. This will of God comes to us through the saving and liberating actions of Jesus.

The growth of the Kingdom is a process that takes place historically through liberation, in as much as this is taken to mean the fulfilment of the human being in a new and fraternal society. But we cannot identify the Kingdom with the forms of its presence in human history. The Kingdom

manifests itself in historical deeds that lead towards liberation. It decries their limitations and ambiguities, announces its fulfilment and pushes these events towards complete communion. Without historical moments of liberation, the Kingdom does not grow, but the process of liberation will not destroy the roots of oppression, of exploitation amongst human beings, unless the advent of the Kingdom is above all a grace, a gift.

Moreover, we could even say that the historical moment of liberation is itself an expression of the growth of the Kingdom, to some extent a moment of salvation, although not the advent of the Kingdom itself or of complete salvation. It is a realisation of the Kingdom in history, and as such an announcement of the fullness of the Kingdom which is beyond history.

Proclamation and martyrdom

The path of the solidarity with the oppressed and dispossessed, the announcement of the gospel in the here and now in Latin America, is plagued with difficulties. Since the end of the 1960s there have been cases of Christians killed because of their evangelical witness.⁷ Such painful events became more frequent and threatening in the following years. The murder of Mons. Oscar Romero (Archbishop of San Salvador who was brutally assassinated in 1980) tolled like a bell, loud enough to awaken the most indifferent to such events. Surrender to death – unsought but serenely accepted – has been a sign of many from within the Christian community in Latin America.

Spirituality, the way of being Christian that has emerged in Latin America, carries with it now the mark of martyrdom. It is not an attitude of complacency towards that which causes it, something which we have no alternative but to reject, but – painful as it is – it is also an enrichment of the life of the Christian community. Indeed, the same route followed by many Christians (catechists, peasants, religious, urban dwellers, priests and bishops) to martyrdom is still followed by many others still alive. Not because they search or hope for death, but because of their fidelity to the God of life and to solidarity with the poor. There may have been moments of rest on the way, occasional deviations to avoid stumbling blocks, slowness in the way forward, but it is not possible to turn back from the road which defines us as the followers of Jesus.

The type of news that the media tend to prefer when it comes to the Church are specific conflicts, authoritarian and abrupt changes of direction, the intellectual brilliance of some which leaves others in the shadows. These tend to downgrade what is most valuable about the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean. Humbly, without seeking to feature on the

covers of the newspapers, situated in different corners of the continent, there are people who every day give up their lives, their energy, their time, their affection for those who are oppressed or marginalised for the love of the gospel. To speak of a spirituality of martyrdom goes beyond the reality of bloody and violent loss of life. Everyday commitment, generous, disinterested, undertaken at very high personal cost but in a spirit of joy and peace, in the midst of profound threats and rewards, of suspicions (even within the Church itself) and fraternal support, all are part of the 'martyred' following of Jesus along the highways and byways of Latin America.

According to a traditional affirmation, which derives from historical experience, the Church is born from the blood of martyrs. Something similar is happening to us today, the Church is renewing its presence in this continent in the radical witness (martyrdom) of many of its members. These lives, taken by those who refuse to recognise the rights of all people to a just and human existence, are profound expressions of the solidarity and sad reminders that Christians ought to be, like the God in whom we believe, 'friends of life'. In this way is formed an ecclesial community, capable of stubbornly sustaining the hope of the dispossessed.

The horizon of creation

The Latin American experience of these years has enlarged the perspectives for social solidarity. This has to take into account also a respectful bond with nature. The question of ecology is not posed solely to those countries that most destroy the natural human habitat. It is something which affects the whole of humanity. As is frequently said when these issues arise, the planet earth is a great ship on which all of us find ourselves. This is very true. However, the same image can help to remind us that on this ship not all of us travel in the same class. There are those who travel first class, with wonderful food, ballrooms and swimming pools; and there are those who make the crossing in third class, if not in the hold. No one can escape the task of avoiding the destruction of our environment, but we in this continent should be particularly attentive to the situation facing the weakest in humanity. We must avoid, for example, becoming the rubbish tip of the industrialised countries.

On the other hand, this is an area in which much can be learnt from the ancient peoples of our continent. Throughout their long period of survival, they knew how to make these lands their home, they tamed its high altitudes, its excesses, its rainfall and its deserts. They did so with deep respect for the land that gave them life. Without falling into the facile romanticism which is common among members of the urban and industrialised countries when they consider simple people attuned to their natural environment,

it is true that there are important lessons to be learned from ancestral wisdom. Consequently, in defending their rights and in proclaiming respect for life, indigenous peoples make an important contribution for the rest of us.

The ecological perspective can draw strength from the corrections that the Bible itself makes to an abusive interpretation of the phrase 'dominate the earth' which we find in the book of Genesis. For instance, those ideas found in the book of Job, whose author seeks to convince us that it is not the human being, rather the gratuitous love of God, which is the heart and meaning of all creation. This emphasis can be used to provide oxygen in the struggle for justice, and to widen our horizons. It reminds us as well of the aesthetic dimensions of a process of liberation which seeks to take into account all aspects of what it is to be human; the right to beauty is an expression (more pressing than some suppose) of the right to life.

At the crossroads of two languages

From the perspective of theological reflection, within the framework of liberation, the challenge in Latin America is to find a language about God which arises out of the situation created by the injustice and poverty in which the great majority live, whether they be disparaged races, exploited classes, excluded cultures or women who suffer discrimination. At the same time, it has to be a discourse nourished by the hopes of a people who seek liberation. In that context of suffering and joy, uncertainty and conviction, generous commitment and ambiguity, our understanding of the faith should continually shine through.

Indeed, we believe that a prophetic and mystical language about God is being born in these lands of exploitation and hope. It is a question of talking of God – just as in the book of Job – from the suffering of the innocent. The language of contemplation recognises that all stems from the gratuitous love of the Father. The language of prophecy denounces the situation (and its structural causes) of injustice and exploitation, as lived by the poor of Latin America. In this respect, Puebla speaks of knowing how to discover 'the suffering features of Christ the Lord in the faces' furrowed by the pain of an oppressed people (nn. 31–9; a text taken up and developed at Santo Domingo).

Without prophecy, the language of contemplation risks not involving itself in the history in which God acts and where we find him. Without the mystical dimension, the language of prophecy can narrow the vision, and weaken the understanding, of Him who makes all things new. 'Sing to Yahweh, praise Yahweh, for he has liberated the poor from the hands of evil men' (Jer. 20.13). Sing and liberate, the act of thanksgiving and the demand for justice.

Between thanksgiving and demand runs Christian existence. In the beginning, and enveloping all is the free and gratuitous love of God. But this gift requires behaviour which translates into acts of love towards our neighbour, and especially the weakest among them. This is the challenge of Christian life, which seeks (beyond all possible spiritual evasion and political reductionism) to be faithful to the God of Jesus Christ.

These two languages try to communicate the gift of the Kingdom of God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the heart of the message that we go on rediscovering from our own reality. It is this that brings us together as a community, as a Church, within which we try to think through our faith. Theology is done in a Church which must provide in human history the testimony to a life victorious over death. To be a witness to the resurrection means choosing life, life in all its forms, since nothing escapes the universality of the Kingdom of God. This testimony of life (material and spiritual life, personal and social life, life present and future) assumes particular importance in a continent characterised by premature and unjust death, and also by the struggle for freedom from oppression. This reality of death and sin is a negation of the resurrection. For this reason, the witness of the resurrection is he who can always ask ironically (according to Scripture) 'Death, where is your victory?'

This life we celebrate in the Eucharist, the first duty of the ecclesial community. In sharing bread, we remember the love and trust of Jesus who was taken to His death, and the confirmation of His mission towards the poor through the resurrection. The breaking of bread is both the point of departure and the destination of the Christian community. This act represents the profound communion with human suffering caused in many cases by the lack of bread, and it is the recognition, in joy, of the Resurrected Jesus who gives life and lifts the hopes of the people brought together by his acts and his word.

The theology of liberation tries – in ecclesial communion – to be a language about God. It is an attempt to make present in this world of oppression, injustice and death, the Word of life.

NOTES

- 1 I highlighted this distinction in a course in Lima, a little later, on 'Church and Poverty'. The course was also given at the University of Montreal University on the date mentioned.
- 2 Cf. the document *Pobreza de la Iglesia*, in the conclusions of Medellín.
- 3 Cf. the document *Opción Preferencial por los Pobres*. This option was endorsed at the Bishops' conference at Santo Domingo (1992).

- 4 G. Gutiérrez, 'La teología: una función eclesial', in *Páginas* (Lima, 1994), pp. 10-17 n. 130.
- 5 A meeting in Melgar (April 1968), which drew attention to the values of these peoples, provided one of the most vivid memories in the preparations for Medellín. This was also an element in a similar meeting in Iquitos, Peru (1971).
- 6 John Paul II, *Letter to the bishops of Brazil* (April 1986).
- 7 One of the first was Henrique Antonio Pereira Neto, a black priest from Recife (Brazil), cruelly murdered in May 1969. My first book *Teología de la Liberación* was dedicated to him and to the Peruvian writer on indigenous culture, José María Arguedas.