
Two Liberation Theologians in Vignette

by Derek Winter

The bus ride from Lima to Rimac, one of the poorer suburbs of the city, is mercifully short. If you go to the end of the line, you find yourself on the slopes of a hill, up which the shanty town sprawls, over-spilling from Rimac itself. One of the best views of these slums is afforded from the flat roof of an unremarkable three-story building in the center of Rimac, where Gustavo Gutiérrez lives.

Gutiérrez is a short, stockily built man with broad mestizo features, who talks volubly and with great nervous energy. He walks with a pronounced limp, the legacy of a bone disease which he contracted at the age of 12. For six years, when most youngsters of his age would be at school, he had to stay in bed, and it was during this period that he began his studies in humanities. When he was 19, he entered San Marcos University in Lima to study medicine, and at the same time began his studies in philosophy at the Catholic University. He still had plans to become a psychiatrist when, four years later, he left Peru to study psychology at Louvain University in Belgium. Here he met Camilo Torres. Camilo, later to achieve fame as the revolutionary priest who was killed in a guerrilla action in Colombia in 1966, and Gustavo, today a leading exponent of Latin American theology of liberation, became firm friends.

“He arrived in Louvain in 1953, when I’d already been there two years,” Gustavo reminisces. “We were the same age, although he was

Editor’s Note: This article, which is taken from a longer manuscript, affords our readers a close-up view of two of the major representatives of the liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Rubem Alves. The writer, who is a graduate student at the University of Birmingham in England, has toured Latin America extensively, and in the course of his travels has sought out the more prominent figures in the revolutionary theology which has developed in this area. The reader will, upon reading these combined biographies and personal observations, have a clearer understanding of the theological ferment which is being produced in our neighboring lands to the South.

already a priest and I a *seminarista*. He was an unassuming man, without an overpowering personality, but very lively, very open, and basically very straightforward. It was Camilo who taught me to drink wine,” he added with a grin.

Gustavo then went to Lyons to study theology for four years, but on his return to Latin America in 1960 he resumed contact with Camilo, and from time to time during the next five years they worked together teaching in seminars on sociology and theology. But Gutiérrez rejects the suggestion that his social concern stems from his Louvain period or his association with Camilo – it has its roots in his student days in Lima, when he played an active part in socialist politics. And for the past 15 years, his chief work as a priest has been as advisor to student/worker groups. To earn his living, he teaches theology at the Catholic University, but his contacts with people in the *barriadas* are as strong as with university students. It is from his involvement in Catholic groups dedicated to social action that his book *Teología de la Liberación* has emerged.

Was he surprised that it had been translated into five languages and published in so many countries?

“Yes, indeed, because I was thinking of a readership in Peru and in a few other groups in Latin America,” he comments. It says much for the book’s potentially explosive quality, that it was violently attacked in an article published in Chile’s leading newspaper *El Mercurio* in May – but in spite of this, some copies were still to be had under the counter in Santiago; while in Brazil the new Portuguese translation was freely available in bookshops in Rio, Sao Paulo, and Curitiba.

Why had it become a theological best-seller? Was it, as Gustavo claimed, a new way of doing theology? Or was he simply using new terminology for old concepts that were only now being rediscovered?

“Well,” he replied, “I’d say first that what one is after in theological work isn’t necessarily something new, but something useful for the life of the Christian community. And maybe the first new thing is that this theology seems useful. Originality isn’t something you seek. You find it. But there’s something important in the desire that theology should be useful, and this is something I *do* seek. Speaking from this perspective, I said very hesitantly (and I confess that this is a phrase I crossed out several times in the manuscript, because it seemed pretentious, but in the end, on the advice of friends, I left it in) that perhaps we are on the brink of a *new way* of doing theology. However, if there *is* something new, it’s the intention of taking praxis as the clear point of de-

Two Liberation Theologians

parture. You can always find precedence, as with any important idea. If anyone states it clearly, you can always say, 'This has been said before.' But if it wasn't stated with clarity, it doesn't seem that it was said before."

"Here's a comparison which isn't a good one, because my work is more modest than the case I'm discussing, but I recall an instance from another field of thought, a discussion between Freud and Pierre Janet, a French psychologist. When Freud began writing his material on psychoanalysis in 1893, Pierre Janet, who had written a book in 1889, when psychoanalysis was already being developed, said, 'These are ideas that I have written about before.' and Freud replied, 'The person who achieves something is the one who realizes what he has found – not the one who just finds it, but the one who knows how to make use of it.'

"So I believe that praxis as the point of reference is a principle that goes a long way back – for example, in the English writer Duns Scotus, who said that God is the object of practical knowledge, not of theoretical knowledge. This is a tradition we can trace through the 'practical reason' of Kant, through Marx, and so on. If this theology has something of a distinctive flavor, it is this new way of seeing the theory/*praxis nexus*. This for me is central."

"But perhaps the most important thing about this theology is that people who read it say, 'Yes, this is something for me.' In Latin America, theology hasn't been discussed since the sixteenth century, the time of Bartolome de las Casas. But more recently in Latin America, theology is giving rise to controversy. There are some people who write articles saying that it's no longer theology . . . but at least it's creating interest!"

So at least it seemed to José María Arguedas, the Peruvian novelist whom Gustavo had come to know personally during the last year of his life and to whom he dedicated his book.

Gustavo spoke of him with affection. "He was an Indian, a man who felt keenly the culture shock between indigenous and western tradition. His work had a peculiarly national flavor. He died in December 1969, but a year before, when he was in Chimbote working on his last novel, a friend lent him the text of a talk of mine on theology of liberation – the first outline I wrote in July 1968. When he had read it, he asked this friend to introduce us. So one day we had a meal together, and he said that the paper had greatly impressed him – that he had always considered himself an atheist – but not in relation to the God of whom

I had written. For him, this was something new, a new world, and he hadn't read anything with such attention and interest since he read the works of Lenin forty years ago.

"Hearing Arguedas say this impressed me. I felt and still feel very small compared to him. Then he read to me some of the text of his book *Todas las Sangres*, which I quoted in my book, and said, 'I think I have said in my book what you are saying, that there's one God of the oppressed and another of the oppressors; as the sacristan says to the priest: "The God of the bosses isn't the same as the God in whom I believe."' And Arguedas added, 'Now that I've read your paper, I understand better what I have written. In my heart, I always believed in this liberating God, but I didn't know him.' "

This solidarity with the poor is a key feature of Gutiérrez's thought. He traces the Biblical concept of poverty, from the literal meaning of material deprivation, to the spiritual concept of "poverty of spirit." Poverty as deprivation is, in the Bible, invariably seen as a scandalous condition, an offense abhorrent to God. Poverty contradicts the meaning of the Exodus, which was a liberation from exploitation and injustice. It contradicts the mandate of Genesis, where man is set the task of transforming nature and through his work realizing his creative freedom, whereas the poverty that has its roots in exploited labor implies work that alienates man instead of fulfilling him. And finally, poverty is an offense to God, since man is the sacrament of God, who is present in the poor and needy. "To oppress the poor is to offend God himself; to know God is to work justice among men."¹

Hence the real, material poverty of deprivation and misery can never be exalted into a Christian ideal. Just as Christ, though rich, "became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich," so the concept of Christian poverty must mean solidarity with the poor and a protest against poverty. "It is a poverty which means taking on the sinful condition of man to liberate him from sin and all its consequences."²

Gutiérrez rejects any dichotomy between redemption from sin and liberation from the social expressions of sin, just as he rejects the dualism of "sacred history" and secular history. His definition of liberation embraces (1) "the aspirations of oppressed peoples and social classes" to be free from exploitation and injustice; (2) the creative historical process through which mankind gradually realizes its true humanity; and (3) the redemption by Christ from sin "which is the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression."³

Two Liberation Theologians

Only by holding together these aspects of a single complex process can we avoid on the one hand a false spiritualization that is blind to the harsh realities of the world, and on the other, “shallow analyses and programs of short term effect” which may meet immediate needs, but which fail to tackle the deep-rooted problems of man in society.

In the same way, there are not two histories, one sacred and the other profane. “Rather, there is only one human destiny, irreversibly assumed by Christ, the Lord of history.” And in an eloquent passage, he counters those who see liberation theology as an expression of the “social gospel,” which attenuates the real meaning of Christian faith.

Nothing is outside the pale of the action of Christ and the gift of the Spirit. This gives human history its profound unity. Those who reduce the work of salvation are indeed those who limit it to the strictly religious sphere, and are not aware of the universality of the process. It is those who think that the work of Christ touches the social order in which we live only indirectly or tangentially, and not in its roots and basic structure. It is those who in order to protect salvation (or to protect their interests) lift salvation from the midst of history, where men and social classes struggle to liberate themselves from the slavery and oppression to which other men and social classes have subjected them. It is those who refuse to see that the salvation of Christ is a radical liberation from all misery, all despoliation, all alienation. It is those who by trying to ‘save’ the work of Christ will ‘lose’ it.⁴

Rubem Alves’ home is a pleasant suburban villa not far from the Castelo, a landmark of Campinas, and just a block away from the Presbyterian Seminary where he once studied. It is one of the ironies of the present theological climate of Brazil that a man who is probably the ablest theologian in his country, and who would be glad to lecture free of charge in his old seminary, is not welcome there.

When I rang, he answered the door – an athletic figure in yellow T-shirt and rust colored jeans, with patrician features, expressive and mobile, framed with curly greying hair and sideburns. The only other occupant of the room where he welcomed me was a small cocker spaniel.

“I bought him from an American missionary,” he volunteered. Lighting his pipe, he settled into an armchair. “What would you like to know?”

He told me first about his spiritual pilgrimage, which typifies the experience of many of his contemporaries. He spent his childhood in a small town in the Brazilian interior, but when he was 11, the family moved to the city. At once he found himself in a strange and threatening world, and as a “country boy” in a city school, he found it difficult to make friends. During his teens, he took refuge in a fundamentalist expression of Christian faith, and as a result of a “revival” mission, applied to the Presbyterian Seminary in Campinas, with the ideal of becoming a sort of Brazilian Billy Graham.

But at the seminary, he rediscovered the experience of community lost since those small town days of his early childhood. And the fundamentalist language he had adopted as a refuge against the harsh reality of loneliness suddenly become superfluous and obsolete. Here was a group of people prepared to share their questions and their weaknesses, a fellowship that held you together when the foundation of certainties that had seemed unassailable began to crumble.

The other main factor in the shift to perspective was the birth of awareness of the social, political and economic realities of the country.

“A fundamentalist mentality,” remarks Alves, “does not have the capacity to process this data.”

But this awakening to the realities of the Brazilian situation coincided with the arrival at the seminary of teachers well qualified to interpret this reality to their students. In 1953, Richard Shaull, who had just been thrown out of Colombia, joined the staff. He provided Rubem and his fellow students with the theological instruments to help them understand the social responsibility of the Christian, to realize that being a Christian and being responsible in society are related. At the same time, Alves experienced a rejection of the traditional type of Brazilian Protestantism which seeks to save man out of this world. Bonhoeffer’s “holy worldliness” spoke powerfully to him as he began to understand the Bible as “an unfaltering celebration of life and its goodness,” and the world itself as the object of the church’s redemptive task.⁵

It seemed to him, in the enthusiasm of a young man leaving the seminary for his first pastorate, that no one could fail to understand and share this perspective. But during his early ministry, in a Presbyterian church in the interior of the state of Minas Gerais, he discovered

Two Liberation Theologians

that the strength of the institutional church to defend its traditional interpretation of the Gospel was greater than he had realized. The older generation of pastors branded men like Alves not only as religious heretics, but as political subversives as well. The community of freedom and love, the church they looked for, could not be identified with the institutional church, which had grown too much like a dinosaur for adaptation and change.

“The fifties were a very traumatic experience for the church, for various reasons,” he explained.

One reason was the appearance of a new generation, which began to say different things. They were represented not only by men who had been through the seminary, but by the powerful lay movement of young Presbyterians. They were very critical of the church, and one of the criticisms was that the leaders of the church were in no state to speak about what was happening in the world, because they had no training for it. They were only trained to visit church members, to pray, to preach on Sundays, and they had never bothered to understand politics or economics or sociology.

All this posed a threat to the older generation, who organized themselves to eliminate the situation, and when the crunch came, the young people’s movement was suppressed. This was in 1957. Since then the church has gone through a series of purges, the inquisitors of the previous purge becoming in their turn the victims of the next witch-hunt.

Not surprisingly, many young pastors left the church in sheer frustration. As Alves puts it, “Our ecclesiastical frustration produced a secular humanism. Instead of theology – sociology. Instead of the church – the world. Instead of God – man.”

It was toward the end of this period that Alves went to Princeton to study for his doctor’s degree, and when he returned from the United States, he broke with the organized church.

“I’d reached the conclusion that I wanted to earn my living like any other person. I didn’t want to be dependent on the church, because I realized that if I did so, I would completely lose my ability to think and write.” He relates, “The ideal of the full-time minister is a total disaster, because the pastor becomes domesticated by the institutional realities of the church, because he is dominated financially.”

This shift of activity from the pastorate to teaching, from theology to sociology (he teaches sociology at the University of Campinas) brought with it a new interest in politics. “Our gods died; and they were exchanged for heroes. Politics became our religion . . . but our

heroes died also," he says.

Alves is understandably reticent about this aspect of his pilgrimage, but one is left to infer that the political climate of Brazil from 1964 onwards left no room for maneuver here either. In the face of ecclesiastical reaction and political repression, the only option left seemed a withdrawal into the private world of home, family, friends, work, and leisure.

In this situation, the one virtue that must be preserved at all costs is hope, as a bulwark against meaninglessness and despair. This is the basic theme of his two main published works, *A Theology of Human Hope*, and *Tomorrow's Child*.

In a foreward to *A Theology of Human Hope*, Harvey Cox hails Alves as the voice of the Third World of enforced poverty, hunger, powerlessness and growing rage. But the situation from which he writes is very different from that of Gutiérrez.

In spite of its cost in terms of political repression and the domination of foreign investment, the Brazilian economic miracle has achieved an affluent standard of living for millions (even if still a minority of the Brazilian population), raising the kind of problems for which Marcuse has a greater relevance than Marx. The possibility of human freedom and creativity in a technological and consumer-oriented society (policed, to be sure, by a ruthless apparatus of terror) is the question Alves poses.

"The concrete problem that each one faced today in Brazil in urban zones," he says, "isn't liberation, but how to make more money! In other words, the pattern of the capitalist society of the United States and Europe is already our pattern. I see one of the urgent tasks of preaching as precisely the criticism of this pattern of affluence that is establishing itself."

His preoccupation is with Paul Lehmann's question: "What does it take to make and to keep human life human in the world?"⁶ Hope is the question mark that the community of faith places over against the inhumanity of our present society. It is a hope that can be characterized as "messianic humanism," a hope which recognizes the humanizing intervention of God in history, and which sees the present, however unpromising conditions may appear, as pregnant with a better tomorrow.

Alves would agree with Emilio Castro's way of putting it: "Even when our human eyes cannot see the way out of the maze, we are sure there *is* a way out, and that the moment will come when we leave our

Two Liberation Theologians

exile and set out for the promised land.”

This understanding of Biblical history is in contrast to the political humanism he defines as: “humanistic messianism,” the action of man within history to achieve his liberation by his own power. This hope is not for a *Deus ex machina*, a liberation that breaks in from beyond, but a liberation achieved through man’s action in protest against the slavery of the present. *A Theology of Human Hope* is an attempt at synthesis.

Since writing his first book, however, a shift has occurred in Alves’ thought. “Theology of liberation was written when we thought that we were in an Exodus situation,” he said. “I don’t believe we are in such a situation. We’re in a situation of captivity.”

And in *Tomorrow’s Child*, he confesses his pessimism about ever seeing the promised land. But “we must live by the love of what we will never see.” And this means continuing to nourish the seeds of hope in community.

I asked him where he saw signs of these genuine communities of hope in Brazil. “You’ve probably heard of what’s happening in the Catholic church,” he replied. “The grass roots communities. These represent an attempt to break with the traditional model of the church which administers the sacraments for a future life, in favor of a church in which communities address themselves to the very concrete problems of their situation. They are discovering tactics of action which only *can* be discovered by the local group.”

“There’s a curious paradox in life in Brazil today. On the one hand, because of the pressures of modern life, and conditions of work, the experience of community encounter is becoming increasingly difficult. People are not available for community encounter because they are so tired from their function in the system that when they have spare time they want to remain on their own. On the other hand, a tremendous nostalgia for community is being created. So you get a series of experiments – for example the ‘*cursillo*’ type of revival in the Catholic church – it’s scientifically programmed but theologically and politically very conservative – yet it expresses a nostalgia for togetherness and the need for a meaningful community as a point of reference.”

What of the role of the Protestant churches within this pattern? In Alves’ view, the Protestant presence in Latin America had a particular relevance at a time when the Catholic church was characterized by paganism, superstition, and support for the status quo. But even in this period, conversion to Protestantism involved a heavy price in terms

of cultural uprooting. “The Brazilian who became a Protestant ceased to be a Brazilian. The aesthetic pattern changed – instead of the Samba, he sang those hymns of Sankey to organ accompaniment.” Alves regards this process of alienation from Brazilian culture as a serious matter.

But even if formerly this was a price worth paying, can it be justified today? Why did Protestantism come to Brazil? To be sure, there were economic reasons – imperialism, expansion, and the missionary expansion went hand in hand with imperialist and colonial expansion. But from the point of view of the church, the missionaries came to convert the Catholic pagans. To win Brazil for Christ meant to de-Catholicize Brazil – to Protestantize Brazil.

Today, the same situation just doesn’t exist. Says Alves, “The Catholic church today is much more Protestant than the Protestant churches. There’s much more liberty, a more critical spirit – more akin to the Protestant spirit of Paul Tillich. Seeing what the Holy Spirit is doing with the Catholic church, I ask myself, have I the right to quarrel with the Holy Spirit – to insist on my Protestantism? So for some people, Protestantism has no further mission to fulfill; or if it has, it is one not of polemics, but of service, in a supporting role to the Catholic church; not looking for the growth of the Protestant churches, but to help the Catholic church to become more Christian, more open.

“This may appear a great scandal to some Protestants! But so far as I’m concerned, when I speak of the possibilities of renewal and of sowing seeds of hope, I’m not interested in sowing in the Protestant churches. I’m not saying it’s not important, but it’s not for me personally. This ground is too full of stones. In fact I haven’t made the choice, it’s been made for me.”

He spelled out what he meant. “There’s a congregation near here, and the members are mostly people I knew when I was a theological student. Occasionally I go to church. I find it gives them great pleasure when I go: ‘Rubem Alves is coming back to the church.’ But there’s something else. They want my presence – but they don’t want me to say anything. My talk is disturbing. What they would like is the silent presence of Rubem Alves. So the church has already made the choice for me. I can’t choose not to speak.”

FOOTNOTES

¹G. Gutiérrez. *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 295.

²*Ibid.*, p. 301.

³*Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁵cf. Julio De Santa Ana. "The Influence of Bonhoeffer on the Theology of Liberation," *The Ecumenical Review*, April 1976, pp. 188-197.

⁶P. Lehmann. *The Transfiguration of Politics*, xi and passim.

⁷R. Alves. *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 204.