The theology of liberation in Latin America reflects a growing impatience with social injustice. In view of the intense dehumanizing poverty in Latin America, along with the failure of the theory of development advocated by the United Nations since the 1950’s and the breakdown of democratic processes, a theology of liberation has emerged which is bold, provocative, and radical. Taking as its cue statements from Vatican II and from the Second General Conference of Bishops of the Latin American Church (1968) on the problem of social injustice in the Third World, liberation theology has moved into an offensive position to do something about it. Its motto is orthopraxis, not orthodoxy. For the most part, liberation theology is a Roman Catholic phenomenon, though the hierarchy clearly disapproves of the excesses to which the movement is believed to have gone. Despite opposition by the Church hierarchy and government officials, priests and laymen espousing liberation theology show no signs of retrenchment.

In view of “the dehumanizing effects of capitalistic exploitation” in Latin America, liberation theologians have turned to Marxist ideology in the hope of finding some solution to their deteriorating socioeconomic situation. What Plato was for Augustinian theology, Aristotle for Thomist theology, Heidegger for existentialist theology, and Whitehead for process theology, Marx has become for liberation theology.

The theology of liberation has thus become a politicizing of faith. Historical materialism, class struggle, economic determinism — these are the Marxist categories theology must allegedly employ if orthodoxy is to become orthopraxis. In this respect, the task of theology is understood to be to change the world, whereas in the past traditional

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theology has supposedly been content with merely interpreting the world.

This radical understanding of theology means that outmoded concepts like personal evangelism must be replaced with new concepts like “politicizing through evangelism.” The eschatological future must be de-ideologized since the coming Kingdom of God (i.e., the creation of a New Man) is to be realized in and through the political-historical process. The idea of a future transcendent return of Jesus Christ into history is looked upon as an ideological device intended to perpetuate present abuses by offering to the oppressed the hope of “pie in the sky by and by.” The thing of being a Christian is not an individualistic notion of freedom from personal sins; rather, sin is primarily a social reality which is to be reckoned with in the political process of creating a just society. The Church is not an institution of believers who have experienced personal salvation from eternal perdition. Such a concept is considered to be an ideological cover to justify the present socioeconomic situation. Rather, the Church is made up of those who take the lead in changing the world through participating in the political process of creating the New Man. In this respect, everyone already is in the Kingdom of God, though not in the Church.

This radical new understanding of theology does not mean that the proponents of liberation theology intend to leave the established Church. Quite the contrary, their hope is to change the established Church through conscientization, i.e., informing the conscience of Latin Americans of the realities of their socioeconomic situation and the responsibility that they must take themselves for bringing about a just society.

The critics of liberation theology have not been few. Its sociological analyses have been accused of naiveté. Its Marxist categories have been assailed as anti-Christian, since Marxist ideology seems incompatible with charity, reconciliation, peace, and human freedom. Its concept of the Church has been called elitist. Its commitment to revolution has been considered reckless. Its demand for a politicizing of faith smacks of a new kind of works-righteousness. Its universalism is exegetically indefensible. Its utopian idealism cannot come to terms with the stark reality of human depravity.

Though liberation theology intends to be a Christian theology with a commitment to the Biblical revelation, its critics think liberation theology is only trying to reinforce its politico-theological commitments through a question-begging kind of exegesis. The two main
Liberation (?) of Theology


Segundo attacks traditional "academic theology" which stays in the realm of abstract ideas divorced from the existing social situation. His proposal for doing theology involves a hermeneutical circle in which one's interpretation of the Bible is "dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality" (p. 8). What is demanded is a de-ideologizing of the Bible. To be sure, Segundo does not imply that he has no ideological commitments of his own. In fact, he insists that the hermeneutical circle "always presupposes a profound human commitment, a partiality that is consciously accepted" (p. 13). What he specifically attacks in this regard is the so-called ideological neutrality of academic theology. He insists the Biblical exegete always begin with some pre-understanding. Hence, Segundo, like Bultmann, is concerned with a Fragestellung. Like Bultmann, faith is absolute, but what is revealed in faith is "nothing" (p. 108). What Segundo thus lays out as the basic methodological approach is a de-ideologizing exegesis of Holy Scripture. Hence, he is highly critical of Bultmann's demythologizing exegesis which fails to do justice to historical reality because of its type of existentialist and individualistic preunderstanding (Fragestellung). For Segundo, faith is always acted out in history as history. He will tolerate no divorce between faith and history.

Segundo explains his de-ideologizing exegesis by means of a communications theory which distinguishes between proto-learning (the imparting of factual information), and deutero-learning (learning how to learn). The specific content of Scripture is ideology, i.e., the application of faith to a historical situation. Deutero-learning is learning how to apply faith to new situations through the ideologies in Scripture (p. 179). Hence, faith is the ability to discern how to act, but this faith is not bound to any ideology in Scripture. "That is why we hold a Christian faith but a Marxist ideology" (p. 103). This means the objective content in Holy Scripture is pedagogical in the sense that it teaches us how to relate faith to the present. The Decalogue, as well as the Sermon on the Mount, contains ideologies which must be desacralized (p. 167). Only faith activated by love revealed in Jesus Christ is our guide for life. In this respect, Segundo says there is no escape
from epistemological relativism and "situation ethics" (p. 167).

It could be thought at this point that The Liberation of Theology has become a liberation from theology. By its very nature, theology is ontological. It focuses upon the reality of God, the reality of man, and the reality of salvation. If all objective content in Scripture is ideology, and if contentless faith is the only absolute, reason is then unduly limited to a pragmatic function. However, is it not a practical requirement for man to have some understanding of reality itself? And is it not of the essence of Christian faith that ultimate reality is revealed and is to some degree intelligible to the mind? In this respect, the Apostles’ Creed is one of the earliest attempts to articulate what is believed. Among its emphases are the sovereignty of God, not man, over the world; the need for personal salvation; and the transcendent breaking in of Jesus Christ into the world. These are themes which liberation theologians have “relativized.”

It is not at all clear just how far Segundo means to follow through with his de-ideologizing exegesis; but it is quite clearly impossible for him to relativize all objective truth without at the same time undermining the validity of his own methodological theory. By definition, it would involve itself in a self-cancellation.

Perhaps it would not be unfair to suggest that the de-ideologizing exegesis of Segundo is dictated by a pragmatic need to justify Christian involvement in revolution. After all, Latin America is the only Third World continent where 90 percent of the population claims to be Christian (p. 127). If there is to be a liberation from oppression in Latin America, then it is Christians who must be “mobilized.” Yet, Segundo admits it is indeed difficult to justify violence and revolution based on a literal interpretation of the New Testament, nor is it realistic to appeal to the Exodus event as a paradigm (pp.111,118). He says: “The one and only thing that can maintain the liberative character of any theology is not its content but its methodology” (pp. 39-40).

It is undeniable that Latin America needs a theology of liberation which attacks forthrightly widespread social abuse and injustice and which shames Christian leaders out of their sense of complacency. That liberation theology has so completely identified itself with the poor is unmistakably a Biblical stance. However, if the theology of liberation intends in its methodology to stress orthopraxis at the expense of orthodoxy, could it not well lead to heteropraxis and heterodoxy? The political and theological consequences of a relativistic-subjectivistic methodology could prove to be counterproductive, and even more devastating, for the poor and marginalized persons of Latin America.