

Gustavo Gutierrez: Utopian Theologian of Liberation

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In this comprehensive three-part article, Fr. Berbusse analyses the liberation theology of Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez. Although the author's primary focus is on the impact of Fr. Gutierrez's thought on the Catholic Church in Latin America, his treatment gives clear insight into the nature of an important trend in contemporary theology with which all Christians ought to be concerned.

Gustavo Gutierrez is widely recognized as a penetrating analyst of the socio-economic scene in Latin America. As a theologian he is attempting to foresee and plan a radical change in the theology of the Church, in order to accomplish the emancipation of the underprivileged masses from a capitalist structure for which he asserts the Church shares much blame. He says that the Latin American Church must "criticize every sacralization of oppressive structures to which the Church itself might have contributed." In his role of critic, he advances the idea of a Utopia which is neither an illusion nor unrealistic; rather, it is a denunciation of the existing order, a revolution against it, and a forecast of a new society.¹ The realization of the Utopia comes through liberation, and so, believing that the Church is partly responsible for present conditions, he proposes a "theology of liberation" which has its own social, philosophical and theological antecedents. The purpose of this article is to summarize the thought of Father Gutierrez, to identify the sources of his ideas, and to indicate both his valuable insights and his deviant conclusions within his theological system.

I. GUTIERREZ: THE PROBLEM OF THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

Father Gutierrez, in reviewing the deficiencies of the development programs proposed to poor countries, tells us that the term *development (desarrollo)* is rejected by Latin America. This *developmentalism* – also called reformism and modernization – is said to be ineffective, to be a promotion of structures that favor the developed countries and continue the economic, social and political subjugation of underdeveloped peoples. From such structures, he says, there must be *liberation*:

Only a radical break from the status quo, that is, a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution that would break this dependence would allow for the change to a new society, a socialist society.²

After this statement of his thesis Gutierrez searches for the roots of a *dynamic liberty*. In Descartes' philosophical reflection, which stresses the primacy of thought and the creative aspects of human subjectivity, he finds a foundation. Kant is then drawn upon for his argument that objects must conform to subjective conceptions: "we only cognize in things *a priori* that which we ourselves place in them." Turning to Hegel (whose dialectical process is a major influence on Gutierrez) he asserts that the historical event proclaims "the right of every man to participate in the direction of the society to which he belongs." He sees man as gradually fashioning his own destiny:

Through the dialectical process man constructs himself and attains a real awareness of his own being; he liberates himself in the acquisition of genuine freedom which through work transforms the world and educates man.

This dimension in the philosophy of man produces social criticism. In this Gutierrez draws on Karl Marx who who formed his synthesis from a materialism that posits the objectivity of the external

world and an idealism that upholds man's ability to transform the world through work. Marx would have liberated exploited man from the external pressures of the capitalist dynasty, by working for the change from a capitalistic to a socialistic mode of production. But Gutierrez also points out the need for liberation from interior pressures, referring to Freud's analysis of the unconscious determinants of human behavior. He believes that a psychological process "ought also to lead to a fuller liberation of man." In an attempt to draw together the process of liberating man from both class repression and psychological inhibition, Father Gutierrez calls upon Marcuse's "psychoanalytical categories for social criticism." Marcuse denounces the over-repressive character of the affluent society – capitalistic or socialistic – and urges a revolution to abolish poverty and misery.³

Gutierrez does not endorse every aspect of these developing ideas, but selects from them two basic themes: active presence in history (praxis) and socio-cultural realities. He wants a social revolution, but beyond this he demands nothing less than a "continuous creation . . . of a new way to be a man, a permanent cultural revolution." Finally, Gutierrez cites Teilhard de Chardin with approval for his search for a unity between Christian faith and a religion of the world, but rejects his politically neutral view and insists that the interests of the Third World revolve around an "oppression-liberation axis," which has produced a will to revolution.⁴ Thus, again, liberation becomes the cornerstone of Gutierrez's thought.

In his treatment of liberation, Gutierrez turns to Church documents, both papal and conciliar, to show the importance of eliminating existing injustices and of gearing economic development to the service of man. He quotes from *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II to advance his own thesis that there must be a genuine and total liberation of man and his societies from existing injustices. But he fails to see that the ultimate conclusions from his principles lead to what the Conciliar Fathers warn against:

Many look forward to a genuine and total emancipation of humanity wrought solely by human effort. They are convinced that the future rule of man over the earth will satisfy every desire of his heart.⁵

In a later discussion of Gutierrez's idea of politicizing the Church, and of making her an institution of social criticism in the service of man's liberation, the true secularism of this priest's position will become clear. He finds Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* a merely transitional document which, although it denounces the national and international imperialism of money and speaks of "building a world where every man . . . can live a fully human life," fails in developing such ideas far enough. He believes that his idea of liberation was more completely discussed at the 1968 General Conference of Latin American Bishops (Medellin), where the focus was centered on the anguish and aspirations of the Third World countries. Finally, Father Gutierrez sees in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians ("For freedom Christ has set us free" 5:1) a liberation from sin which causes the poverty, injustice and oppression in which men live. For such a freedom, the structures that support selfishness must be broken down.⁶

Gustavo Gutierrez is sincerely interested in the construction of a just society for Latin America, with liberation expressing his profound aspirations. "Man," he says, "transforms himself by conquering his liberty throughout his existence and his history." For him, liberation is a single salvific process. Therefore the theological meaning of liberation raises important questions concerning the nature of Christianity and the mission of the Church.⁷

In studying the relationship between theology and liberation, Gutierrez begins by discussing the classical theology that first concentrated on wisdom. This was a meditation on Holy Scripture in order to achieve spiritual growth; it stressed the transcendence of an Absolute and the contingency of the present life. Next he suggests that after theology became a science in the twelfth century, St. Thomas Aquinas developed it in the thirteenth century into a synthesis wherein "theology is not only a science, but also wisdom flowing from the charity which unites man to God." Unfortunately, says Gutierrez, scholastic theology gradually became an ancillary discipline to the magisterium of the Church – especially after the Council of Trent – with functions of defining doctrine, condemning false teachings and authoritatively proclaiming revealed truths. He believes that this development of theology's role is partially deformative and must be corrected by a theology "as critical reflection on *praxis* [active presence]." It must look to

“the signs of the times and the demands with which they challenge the Christian community.” Departing from a traditional essentialist approach, he sees a new “existential and active aspect of the Christian life.” With charity in the center, love becomes the foundation of the *praxis* of the Christian, of his active presence in history, and not just a simple affirmation of truths.

He then alleges a parallel development in Christian spirituality: first, in the early centuries, a contemplative, monastic life which was characterized by withdrawal from the world; in the twelfth century a combining of preaching with contemplation; in the sixteenth century the Ignatian combination of contemplation and action; today, a study in the religious value of the profane. He states that “today there is a greater sensitivity to the anthropological aspects of revelation.” He cites Karl Barth to the effect that “Man is the measure of all things, since God became man” and concludes that this “has caused the reevaluation of the presence and the activity of man in the world, especially in relation to other men.”⁸

In his analysis of these historical shifts in religious consciousness, Father Gutierrez has unfortunately liberated himself from much of the fact of history. To offer but one example, his generalization on the spirituality of the monastic period gives the impression that contemplative prayer was an escape from the action of good works. The opposite was true. Pope Gregory I (590-604), a man who loved the monastic life, assumed the Chair of Peter in an age of almost universal European disorder consequent upon the barbarian invasions, and took the title *Servus Servorum Dei*. This role of Servant of the People of God was filled not only by a teaching of the pure message of Christ and a leniency in the administration of correction, but also by an immersion in the works of charity to all men. One historian tells us that:

Despite all his duties, Gregory found time to investigate needy cases, secure lists of poor and sick, distribute food and clothing, and establish and support hospitals and asylums. On occasion he sold sacred vessels to ransom captives. He sent money for the poor in Sicily; ordered patrimonial officials to pay in full legacies entrusted to the Church for monasteries and the needy. . . . Jews on patrimonial lands and wherever in Italy the Pope was virtually political ruler were regarded by him as ‘living under Roman law.’ He therefore guarded them from molestation and upheld their claim to worship freely.

To generalize on monasticism, we can say that it accomplished a double purpose: first, the spiritual renewal of those who followed its rule of life as well as those who felt its influence; and second, the social uplifting – in the spirit of Christianity – of an age that suffered from political, economic, social and cultural chaos.⁹ To quote a phrase from Gutierrez, we can say that the age of monasticism very deeply exerted a “spirituality of the activity of the Christian in the world.” A careful study of the other historical periods clearly reveals a vigorous effort on the part of the Church to face the specific problems of each age and to foster the teachings and charity of Christ within it. To say that there are periods of decay is merely to announce the human condition. The new theology of Gutierrez, however, is such an immersion in the secular that it runs the risk of not knowing the spiritual needs of man and of divorcing him from faith. To the tempter’s message, “If you are the Son of God, command that this stone become bread,” Christ answered: “Not by bread alone shall man live, but by every word of God” (Lk. 4:3-4).

In the further development of his thesis Gustavo Gutierrez quotes with approval the assertion of the Fathers of Vatican II:

It is the task of the entire People of God . . . to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word.

He says that it is “a step beyond narrow ecclesial limits,” and calls it “a theology of the signs of the times.” He recommends a reflection by man on the meaning of the transformation of this world, and in this theological thought is to be aided by Marxism. He poses a balance between orthodoxy and *orthopraxis* (valid action), and invites us “to reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness which doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life. He would:

modify the emphasis, often obsessive, upon the attainment of an orthodoxy which is often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation. In a more positive vein, the intention is to recognize the work and importance of concrete behavior, of deeds, of action, of *praxis* in the Christian life.

For this idea he bases his argumentation on Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. who allegedly states that “the Church has for centuries devoted her attention to formulating truths and meanwhile did almost nothing to better the world.”¹⁰ These easy generalizations cannot be founded on fact, and leave their expositors open to the charge of falsifying history.

The primary function of the Church is to teach the Word of God, and to bring into action the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. This the Church has done in an amazingly great degree, considering the obstacles coming from such widespread doctrines as Liberalism and Socialism which have systematically oppressed the Church both culturally and politically. It is, also, an obvious fact of history that the Church has neither had the capital nor the primary role of technologically converting the material forces of nature. Of course it is the concern of the Church to bring the light of the Gospel to the social questions of the times, but it is not a political role that she must play. As Paul VI teaches:

The Church clearly states that the two realms [church and state] are distinct, just as the two powers, ecclesiastical and civil, are supreme, each in its own domain.

The Pontiff stresses the urgency of the task of producing an integral development “of every man and of the whole man.” With a global vision of man, the Church states the personal and communal responsibility of man in society, rejects Liberal capitalism that assumes no duty of social obligation, denies a type of revolutionary uprising that “produces new injustices,” and warns against social action that “is based upon a materialistic and atheistic philosophy, which respects neither the religious orientation of life to its final end, nor human freedom and dignity.”¹¹

Having pinpointed the essential difference between the Church’s interpretation of its role and the ideas of Gutierrez, it remains to investigate his notion of theology as “critical reflection.” De-emphasizing the role of Divine Revelation and the Church’s teaching authority which are the framework within which theologians conduct their investigations, Gutierrez tells us:

Theology must be man’s critical reflection on himself, on his own basic principles. . . . We are not referring exclusively to this epistemological aspect . . . [but] to a clear and critical attitude regarding economic and socio-cultural issues. . . . Theological reflection would then necessarily be a criticism of society and the Church insofar as they are called and addressed by the Word of God.

Lest one misinterpret Gutierrez’s real meaning, he repeats that “theology is reflection, a critical attitude.” And so “the pastoral activity of the Church does not flow as a conclusion from theological premises. Rather, theology reflects upon life, is open to the world and attentive to its historical transformations.” This type of theological reflection

fulfills a liberating function for man and the Christian community. . . . [It] has a necessary and permanent role in the liberation from every form of religious alienation which is often fostered by the ecclesiastical institution itself when it impedes an authentic approach to the Word of the Lord.¹²

From this it seems apparent that true (authentic) theology is the theologian’s reflection on man, and so anthropocentric. He is convinced that “henceforth, wisdom and rational knowledge will more explicitly have ecclesiastical *praxis* as their point of departure and their context.” The theologian looks to “the present in the *praxis* of liberation . . . [which] is pregnant with the future.” Here he leans on Harvey Cox, who has been described as the most eloquent prophet of secularization in America, and who has

erased the distinction between the sacred and profane. For Gutierrez the theologian's task is to "penetrate the present reality, the movement of history . . . sinking roots where the pulse of history is beating at this moment."¹³ Traces of Hegelian thought are here apparent. Gutierrez appears, like Hegel, to go beyond Christianity through a dialectically evolving Revelation which is fashioned by a reflection that continues through human history. To hold this is to maintain that neo-Christianity is an invention of man, or at least a discovery by man wrapped in the act of critical reflection.

Christian faith is no critical reflection expressed in philosophical exposition. It is a listening to and submission to the Word of God. Vatican I has, of course, in its explanation of Romans I, made definite that "God's invisible Being, His eternal power and Godhead can be recognized since the creation of the world through reflection upon created beings," but God speaks more clearly and fully through direct Revelation which remains in the care of the Church as founded on Christ and protected from error by the Holy Spirit. To make critical reflection more fundamental and authentic than the Church's teaching is to make Revelation into a merely human construction and the Word of God an ever-changing doctrine relevant to the times.

Indeed, the ideas of Gutierrez have significant similarities to the tenets of Modernism which were condemned by Pius X in 1907. The Modernists denied the possibility of dogmas containing absolute truth, suggesting that at best they are symbols of truth, and must therefore be adapted to man in his continually changing relationship to the religious sense. In Vatican I these errors were already condemned:

The doctrine of the faith which God has revealed has not been proposed to human intelligences to be perfected by them as if it were a philosophical system, but as a divine deposit entrusted to the Spouse of Christ to be faithfully guarded and infallibly interpreted. Hence also that sense of the sacred dogmas is to be perpetually retained which our Holy Mother the Church has once declared, nor is this sense ever to be abandoned on plea or pretext of a more profound comprehension of the truth.¹⁴

Gutierrez, with his own modifications, is following the same erroneous paths of the Modernists. He has made of his "critical reflection" a "liberating function" from the ecclesiastical institution. His act of reflection is not dissimilar to the Modernist's "religious consciousness." Both are placed on an equal footing with Revelation, and to both the supreme authority of the Church must submit.

II. SOLVING THE PROBLEM: THE CALL TO LIBERATION

Having evaluated Father Gutierrez's history of theologies and the Modernist tendencies of his basic theology of critical reflection, we now turn to a critique of his theology of liberation in its political implications. In dealing with the classical question of the relation between faith and political action, Gutierrez considers the texts and spirit of Vatican II as "points of reference;" he quotes Karl Rahner to the effect that "the ideas explicitly considered during Vatican II do not actually represent the central problems of the post-conciliar Church." He looks to contemporary man who is "ever more articulate in the face of social injustice," seeing him partially as a product of the "great social revolutions, the French and the Russian." In Latin America he finds people seeking liberation by new paths; human reason has "become political reason." By this he means that man has a profound aspiration to be "the artisan of his own destiny;" and it is always in the political environment that a person emerges as a free and responsible being. Social *praxis* (active presence) in Latin America is becoming increasingly radical, and seeks the abolition of the *status quo* by supporting revolution. Gutierrez calls for confrontation, "in which different kinds of violence are present," and rejects what he terms a "low-cost conciliation." He charges previous theological thought with not sufficiently taking into account the political dimension of social *praxis*. He insists that the Church must involve itself in the political dimension.¹⁵

Gutierrez analyzes the different historical responses to the relationship between the Church and the world. In propounding his own liberation theology, he criticizes the current “distinction of planes” theory which clearly separates the temporal from the spiritual order but gives primacy to the spiritual. He also criticizes what he calls the old “Christendom mentality” as well as the “New Christendom” of Jacques Maritain. It is impossible in this brief article to fully document the historical inaccuracies and easy generalizations that characterize Gutierrez’s writing on this matter. In a few pages he dismisses with brusque criticism the centuries of the Church’s struggle and her contribution to the history of man’s institutional and religious growth. Moreover, he praises the French and Russian revolutions with little historical awareness. Both revolutions left terrible and irradicable scars upon the religious, political and socio-economic life of Europe. The French Revolution, as well as that of Russia, was accomplished with a degree of violence and injustice that left little positive good. It destroyed an autocratic and repressive class and replaced it with another. Class harmony and cooperation were not engendered. If anything of worth was achieved it was the breaking of a repressive mold of socio-political life; but this was accomplished in a way that intensified hatreds. The Communist revolution was no mild development of the sane Kerensky revolt, but a horrible massacre of millions of dissenting peoples – not only of the Russian people, but also of other peoples who were repressed and enslaved. An awareness of the sufferings of the Polish, Hungarian, Lithuanian, and East German peoples, to mention but a few, is a refutation of Gutierrez’s easy generalizations. Apart from this unreal history of the ‘reform’ accomplished by violent revolution, he sees a constant dialectic of liberation being accomplished by revolution. This endless process of violence will not liberate man but, rather, intensify hatred, keeping man in a state of warfare and making the achievement of peace impossible.

Whatever the historical facts of Church-State relations, Vatican II – while developing the different ways in which Christian and non-Christian peoples can share in God’s universal salvific will – insisted that it is the Church’s role “to reveal the mystery of God,” and to open up to man at the same time “the meaning of his own existence, that is, the innermost truth about himself.”¹⁶ The Church, moreover, is necessary for salvation in the sense that it was specifically entrusted with this role by Christ, with the sacraments of salvation given into its care. Gutierrez reads into the documents of Vatican II a lack of clear distinction between the temporal and spiritual roles. The Fathers of the Council, however, were quite clear:

Christ, to be sure, gave His Church no proper mission in the political, economic or social order. The purpose which He set before her is a religious one. But out of this religious mission itself comes a function, a light and an energy which can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine law. . . . The force which the Church can inject into the modern society of man consists in that faith and charity put into vital practice, not in any external dominion exercised by merely human means.

In accord with this teaching, the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM) in 1966 made clear that, “though it was not within the competence of the Church to promote temporal processes, it was incumbent upon it to orient them toward the advancement of all peoples in all their dimensions and for the complete integration of all marginal peoples.” In the same spirit and clarity of distinction, the Synod of bishops, in 1971, and with the approbation of Paul VI, asserted:

Of itself it does not belong to the Church, insofar as she is a religious and hierarchical community, to offer concrete solutions in the social, economic and political spheres for justice in the world. Her mission involves defending and promoting the dignity and fundamental rights of the human person.

The clarity of distinction of the two roles is again manifest in the Apostolic Letter of Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, in 1971, when he reiterated his stand in *Populorum Progressio* (1967):

Laymen should take up as their own proper task the renewal of the temporal order. If the role of the hierarchy is to teach and to interpret authentically the norms of morality to be followed in this matter, it belongs to the laity, without waiting passively for orders and directives, to take the initiatives freely and to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the community in which they live.¹⁷

Gutierrez believes that the concern with the anguish of the Third World countries evidenced by the Latin American bishops at Medellin (1968) requires new theological foundations. He believes that the Church has come to accept a degree of autonomy on the part of the world, that is secularization – a breaking away from the tutelage of religion, a desacralization. He describes the process in the words of Harvey Cox's *Secular City*: "the liberation of man from religious and metaphysical tutelage, the turning of his attention away from other worlds and toward this one." He sees an anthropological vision, in which man is creative, more fully human. Worldliness is a necessary condition for an authentic relationship between man and nature, among men, and between God and man. Instead of defining the world in relation to religion, it is religion that must be re-defined in relation to the profane. And so he quotes Bonhoeffer who speaks of a world come of age, and who asks "how can we speak about God in this adult world?" Gutierrez concludes:

Secularization poses a serious challenge to the Christian community. In the future it will have to live and celebrate its faith in a *non-religious world*, which the faith itself has helped create. It becomes ever more urgent that it re-define the formulation of its faith, its insertion in the dynamics of history, its morality, its life-style, the language of its preaching, and its worship.

He now clearly states his thesis, the elimination of any distinction between the natural and supernatural, and censures the Church for holding during many centuries a belief that the supernatural was fundamentally alien to man, a perfection that was superimposed upon him. Gutierrez says that "the frontiers between the life of faith and temporal works, between the Church and the world, become more fluid," and he quotes Johannes B. Metz's *Theology of the World*: "The Church is of the world: in a certain sense the Church is the world: the Church is not Non-World." And so the process of liberation is in a sense a salvific work. This conclusion eradicates any serious claim to relevance of the distinction of planes idea. It is, we are told, "a burnt-out model."¹⁸

In direct opposition to the ideas of Father Gutierrez, the Fathers of Vatican II make a clear distinction of nature and purpose between the Church and the political community:

The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. . . . The Church and the political community in their own fields are autonomous and independent from each other. Yet both, under different titles, are devoted to the personal and social vocation of the same men. . . . For man's horizons are not limited only to the temporal order; while living in the context of human history, he preserves intact his eternal vocation.

By making a salvific work of socio-economic and political liberation, Gutierrez has reduced the eternal vocation into a temporal and essentially human construction; by fusing the natural and the supernatural reality into one reality, he has confused grace and human labor; by making the Church "of the world," he has left no room for it to be, as Christ was and ever will be, a sign of contradiction to the false spirit of the world. In his eschatology of man, he makes the Church so much a relevant construction to man in his time, that its teaching as to the resurrection and the future life is left unclear. Paul VI, in a Message of May 22, 1974, touched upon this modern error:

Everything possible is being done . . . to distract man's mind from the thought of future life, and accustom modern man to a purely temporal, actualistic conception, and to seek the guiding principles of his life within, and not beyond, the horizon of the present.¹⁹

Though Gutierrez does not, to my knowledge, specifically deny the resurrection, his “radical secularism” leaves little room for a teaching Church to stand against man’s “critical reflection on himself” and a theology of liberation from ecclesiastical institution. This is a form of secularization which has been rejected by outstanding theologians such as Hans Urs Von Balthasar, who see in it an antagonism that is impossible to reconcile with a Christianity which holds to an ecclesiastical structure. While forms of Protestantism – separating from Catholic unity – have changed in respect to unity and adopted a secularized form of culture, ethics and religious life, the Catholic Church is more than ever a scandal to the world.²⁰ It will not relativize. When Simeon received the Christ Child into his arms, he uttered the prophetic words: “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel, and for a sign that shall be contradicted” (Lk.2:34). The Church must give the same witness as Christ. She is destined to correct the world’s secularist obsession.

Having established for himself a theology of confluence of the Church and the world, in which the Church loses its institutional character and defining nature, Gutierrez looks to a form of liberation theology that must be adopted by the Latin American Church. This new state of liberation is a state of historical “awareness,” an exercise in man’s “creative potential.”²¹ Since for Gutierrez the Church is an essential part of the political process, it must be committed to liberation. He speaks of groups of priests and religious who, apart from canon law, are committed to the process of liberation, in cooperation with revolutionary groups, and in friction with local bishops and nuncios. They along with some laity have opted for “a radical politicization” by which they stand in a relationship of subversion to the existing social order.

In the Medellin document (1968), the Latin American bishops (citing the exhortation of Paul VI at the Mass in Bogota, on August 23, 1968) insisted that “violence is neither Christian nor evangelical. The Christian is peaceful and is not ashamed of it. He is not simply pacifist, for he is capable of combat. But he prefers peace to war.” The bishops also quoted extensively from Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio*, in which the Pontiff insisted that:

a revolutionary uprising – save where there is manifest, long-standing tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good of the country – produces new injustices, throws more elements out of balance and brings on new disasters. A real evil should not be fought against at the cost of greater misery.

The Pontiff expressed himself in favor of “development [which] demands bold transformations, innovations that go deep.”²²

Father Gutierrez sees in the texts of the Latin American Church a replacement of the theme of development by that of liberation, and quotes from the “Message of the Bishops of the Third World” to prove this. It is to be noted that this message was signed by only eighteen bishops. He then draws from *Populorum Progressio* to prove that both the Pontiff and the bishops of Latin America favor liberation. In Medellin, the bishops called for a “liberating education,” by which they meant self-development of the individual, a development of more human conditions and liberation from slavery. Paul VI is the source of their approach to reform; he urges “a development which is for each and all the transition from less human conditions to those which are more human.” In both of these documents, we find the idea developed in a context of education; neither uses the term liberation in the radical sense of reform by violent upheaval, whereas Gutierrez does.

In a typically subtle way, Gutierrez asserts that Paul VI has initiated a new attitude of openness toward socialism, and cites *Octogesima Adveniens* as proof. Again enthusiasm for his thesis has drawn the Latin American priest to go beyond the evidence. The Pontiff, after delineating “the various levels of expression of socialism,” categorically rejects it:

It would be illusory and dangerous to reach a point of forgetting the intimate link which radically binds them together, to accept the elements of Marxist analysis without recognizing their relationships with ideology, and to enter into the practice of class struggle and its Marxist

interpretations, while failing to note the kind of totalitarian and violent society to which this process leads.

In accord with the Church's traditional teaching, from Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), the Holy Father condemns both the liberal ideology which exalts individual freedom above limitation and Marxist collectivism. Of the latter, he says:

The Christian . . . cannot adhere to Marxist ideology, to its atheistic materialism, to its dialectic of violence and to the way it absorbs individual freedom in the collectivity, at the same time denying all transcendence to man and his personal collective history.²³

Gutierrez's blueprint, on the other hand, includes a revitalizing of "the eschatological values of Christianity" as a result of "close contact with those who see historical development from a Marxist viewpoint." He adds: "We must learn to live and think of peace in conflict and of what is definitive in what is historical."²⁴ Here we have a neat wedding of Hegelian dialectic with Marxian violence.

III. NEW MAN, NEW CHURCH: TOWARD UTOPIA

From Gutierrez's new theology of "critical reflection on historical *praxis*," there is ultimately to be the creation of a new man who will produce an authentic commitment to liberation. Gutierrez attempts to draw his idea of a new man from Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*, where we read: "We are witnesses of the birth of a new humanism, one in which man is defined first of all by his responsibility toward his brothers and toward history." But there is a vast difference between the new man of Gutierrez – who would radically change faith, theology and the means of political reform – and the new humanism of the Council Fathers. The latter, under the light of the Holy Spirit, see a development of the whole human person, "in those duties to whose fulfillment all are called, especially Christians fraternally united in one human family." The Fathers warn against Gutierrez's autonomous humanism, when they reject a "humanism which is merely terrestrial, and even contrary to religion itself."²⁵

Father Gutierrez attempts to explain the relation between liberation and salvation. Both are "directed toward complete communion of men with God and of men among themselves . . . ; without liberating historical events, there would be no growth of the Kingdom." The historical, political liberating event, he says, "is the growth of the Kingdom and is a salvific event; but it is . . . not *all* of salvation." He asserts that "salvation is not something other-worldly, in regard to which the present life is merely a test." It is, rather, "something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ." Again, "building the temporal city . . . is to become part of a saving process which embraces the whole of man and all human history." He derides the "Western dualistic thought [matter/spirit] . . . a disincarnate 'spiritual' scornfully superior to all earthly realities."²⁶ In this he seems to superimpose Manichean thought upon the Church. He ignores, in his usual faulty history, the Church's recognition of the intrinsic goodness of spirit and matter. However, the Church has ever warned that man's building of the temporal city may endanger man's salvation. The neo-paganism of today is a testimonial to modern man's immersion in the material, to the forgetting of his spiritual destiny. Gutierrez scores the evils of Liberal capitalism and Communist collectivism; but, in his utopian theorizing, he fails to note the same evil that is harbored within his "critical reflection on historical *praxis*." He has not told us how his existentialist view of reality will effect "a gratuitous communion with God" and "intra-historical salvation."

Gutierrez sees his new trend in *Populorum Progressio* where the Pontiff urges "conditions that, finally and above all, are *more human*." He believes that *more human* is a replacement for *supernatural*, that there is a unity between faith and the "religion of the world," an affirmation of the single vocation to the grace of communion with God. But the Pontiff's teaching is diametrically opposed to that of Gutierrez. Paul VI states:

The Church, without attempting to interfere in any way in the politics of States, ‘seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ Himself under the lead of the befriending Spirit. . . .’ Founded to establish on earth the Kingdom of heaven and not to conquer any earthly power, the Church clearly states that the two realms are distinct, just as the two powers, ecclesiastical and civil, are supreme, each in its own domain.²⁷

Paul VI draws upon *Gaudium et Spes* and the encyclical *Immortale Dei* of Leo XIII as the sources of his statement. There is no trend in the direction of Gutierrez’s thinking.

Though one cannot but be impressed by the subtle development of Gutierrez’s ideas, the error of his leading ideas must be acknowledged. His attempt to fuse the Church into the evolutionary process of the world can only result in making it an instrument in the dialectic toward his great absolute, “the liberation of man.” The Latin American bishops at Medellin (1968), while stating that earthly progress can contribute to the better ordering of human society and is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God, insisted that “earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ’s kingdom.” Gutierrez has overemphasized the injustice that is found in the structure of political society. The bishops at Medellin, in search of a kingdom of justice, love and peace, have stressed the heart of the matter – a need for reform in the heart of each man:

The origin of all under-valuation of man, of all injustice, must be sought in the interior disorder of human liberty, which will always need in history the permanent labor of rectification. The originality of the Christian message does not directly consist in the assertion of the need of a change of structures, but in the insistence on the conversion of man who then demands change.²⁸

Jesus taught men to love the life of spiritual freedom that could only come from being sons of God, and this meant personal reform, an emancipation from the enslavement of sin. His message is neither utopian nor evolutionist in the Teilhardian sense of inevitable advance to the Omega-point. Man is a free agent of his own determinations – towards good or evil; and only in obedience to the Father through Christ can he come to justice: “If you love Me, keep My commandments.”

While Christ’s teaching has all the reality of the Divine knowledge of man, Gutierrez’s suffers from a theorizing based on his own theological reflection and the dogma of a dialectic that is inexorably projecting with hope into the future while revolting against the present. His utopia is to be built on revolution. His subjective dogmatism states that we must “go beyond the borders of the institutional Church. . . . A radical revision of what the Church has been and what it now is has become necessary.”²⁹

The life of the Church will persist, Gutierrez tells us, “only if there is a substantial transformation.” The task of the Church must be re-defined in such a way that intra-ecclesial problems will take second place. “The purpose of the Church is not to save in the sense of ‘guaranteeing heaven.’” The Church “must cease considering itself as the exclusive place of salvation and orient itself towards a new and radical service of people.” He says that the Church has discarded the teaching that “outside the Church there is no salvation.” He believes that the Church’s teaching, in the *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, “implies a change of position with regard to deep theological questions having to do with the role of the Church in the encounter between God and man.” Here Father Gutierrez has distorted the real meaning of the Declaration, which was written to establish “the right of the person and of communities to social and civil freedom in matters religious.” The Council Fathers stated:

Religious freedom . . . which men demand as necessary to fulfill their duty to worship God, has to do with *immunity from coercion in civil society*. Therefore it leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ.³⁰

The true and consistent teaching of the Church is, as the Council Fathers repeat, that “the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation.”³¹

Gutierrez attempts to emphasize the nature of the Church as “sacrament,” rather than as “ecclesio-centric” in order to leave it open to radical change through theological reflection on *praxis*, after having been “evangelized by the world.” This is reductively a destruction of the Church, since it becomes a pawn in the hand of his dialectic. He argues that:

The Church must allow itself to be inhabited and evangelized by the world. . . . A theology of the Church in the world should be complemented by ‘a theology of the world in the Church.’ This dialectical relationship is implied in the emphasis on the Church as sacrament. . . . The Church is humanity itself attentive to the Word.

He insists that the Church arrives at truth through “mediation of the consciousness of the world.” In the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (Vatican II), the Fathers deny any such change, insisting that, in unfolding more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission, the Council “intends to follow faithfully the teaching of previous councils.” In response to Gutierrez’s heterodox position on the Church, many questions can be raised. Most importantly, it might be asked who the mediator of the consciousness of the world is. Presumably the answer is found “in the realm of a certain theological reflection.”³² One finds here a new priesthood of gnostics whose neo-Modernism looks for truth to the world, its ever-changing history, and a dialectic of awareness taught by Gutierrez himself.

The Church has nothing of this confusion and secularism in its structure and in its sacramental life. Jesus said to Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would have fought that I might not be delivered to the Jews” (Jn.18:36). The Church’s apostolate is not political, nor is it violent. At the arrest of Jesus, one of His disciples drew a sword and cut off the ear of a servant of the high priest. Jesus reproved him, saying: “Put back your sword into its place; for all those who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Mt.26:51). In the Vatican documents, we find constant insistence on the Church’s role of being loyal to the Word of God, which encompasses both faith and morality. The teaching authority is not to be found in any theological reflection upon “the consciousness of the world.” The teaching authority is in the magisterium which was given to Peter and the Apostles and was handed down to their successors, the bishops in union with the Supreme Pontiff.

Another facile generalization of Gutierrez is that the Eucharist is “an empty action” if the participants are “without a real commitment against exploitation and alienation and for a society of solidarity and justice.” The Church, he says, must participate in the struggle, be committed to economic and political liberation.³³ The amazing ease with which Father Gutierrez enunciates these generalizations makes one wonder if, in his intellectualistic pursuit of his thesis, he has not lost sight of the amazing differences that exist among people. Obviously, those who consciously and maliciously exploit their neighbor cannot approach the Altar without purpose of amendment and restitution of the order of justice. There are, however, those who believe in the capitalistic structure – not in the form of *laissez-faire* Liberalism which has been consistently condemned by the Church – but as an order of social justice that relates the proper role of labor, capitalist and capital. Such persons use the means at hand to correct the abuses, but often the means of correction are beyond their control. Certainly, they can approach the Eucharist with honest conscience.

The solution offered by Gutierrez is an appeal to utopia. This mentality is well censured by Paul VI, in his *Otogesima Adveniens*:

The appeal to a utopia is often a convenient excuse for those who wish to escape from concrete tasks in order to take refuge in an imaginary world. To live in a hypothetical future is a facile alibi for rejecting immediate responsibilities.

The Pontiff does not deny the need for criticism of existing society, noting that it is a part of the social dynamism. But, in the building up of the human city, “the dynamism of Christian faith [must] triumph

over the narrow calculations of egoism.” It must be “peaceful, just and fraternal and acceptable as an offering to God.”³⁴

Seeking to get the Church involved in a political role, Gutierrez next asserts that “the class struggle is part of our economic, social, political, cultural and religious reality,” that “to build a just society today necessarily implies the active and conscious participation in the class struggle,” that “neutrality is impossible,” and that “when the Church rejects the class struggle, it is objectively operating as a part of the prevailing system.” In a footnote, Gutierrez shows that the origin and pattern of his thought is Marxist. He quotes Marx who asserted that class struggle necessarily leads to dictatorship of the proletariat, and that this dictatorship is but a transition to the abolition of all classes. Finally, Gutierrez concludes that:

to participate in class struggle not only is not opposed to universal love; this commitment is today the necessary and inescapable means of making this love concrete. For this participation is what leads to a classless society without owners and dispossessed, without oppressors and oppressed.³⁵

His proposals are impossible. They are so first because to bring the Church into political combat is to make it a partisan of hatreds. The Church’s pontiffs have “never relaxed their paternal solicitude and pastoral constancy, particularly in defense of the poor and the weak” but the Church must not use the means of temporal conflict. It is to teach men in the words of Christ, to reprove evil, and exhort to social justice, not to take the temporal sword into spiritual hands. Second, Gutierrez takes on Marxian utopianism when he opts for a classless society. Almost eighty years ago, Leo XIII put this myth to rest:

Humanity must remain as it is. It is impossible to reduce human society to a level. The *Socialists* may do their utmost, but all striving against nature is vain. There naturally exists among mankind innumerable differences of the most important kind; people differ in capability, in diligence, in health, and in strength; and unequal fortune is a necessary result of inequality in condition.³⁶

The pontiffs look at the world as it really is, simultaneously looking to social justice in the relation between classes. The Church knows too well that class conflict cannot be cured by Marxian violence, but can be healed by personal reform and renewal in the spirit of Christ which is that of love, not hate.

Gutierrez’s theology of liberation rejects a change of structure by cooperation and dialogue among the classes. His dialectic of violence is a pathway to utopia that aims at a classless society, realized by hope in the future and violence in the present. He fails to see that the new elite, the Socialists, have failed in freedom and entrenched themselves in a structure of oppression. Even his third world thinking offers no intrinsic assurance of tolerance toward the innocent of the capitalist and socialist world. His means beget continual suffering and hatred, and his ultimate goal is unrealizable. For Gutierrez, violence becomes institutionalized.

Gutierrez’s interpretation of the Christian Gospel is very subjective. In his emphasis on active presence in the world (*praxis*) he sees the world and the Church in an Hegelian relation of conflict in which the valid action (*orthopraxis*) is to be discovered by “theological reflection.” He sees no real division between natural and supernatural; the truths of religion are placed on the same plane as secular knowledge. Revelation is an on-going process which is only meaningful when it serves the immediate need of the justice of liberation. It is only valid when it is found to be responsive to the pulse of history. Theology has a role in world change only to the degree that it accepts a liberation that is ready to use violence. Otherwise, it is considered repressive, and its Church is labeled un-Christian.

The Christian solution to injustice in the world is contradictory to that of Gutierrez; it espouses class cooperation and mutual charity. The Church offers the all-saving means of Divine grace, and urges men to resolve their differences by means of justice and charity. The Church favors the poor with special love, because they suffer in Christ and need special care. But the Church does not take into its own hands the temporal role of changing temporal structures. Its God-given commission, while preaching a Gospel

of justice, is to give the supernatural means of grace to man who is destined to begin the life of the Kingdom of heaven here on earth, and to achieve its fullness in the Eternal City. The teachings of the Church – in Conciliar Constitutions, Papal encyclicals and episcopal letters – could, if followed, bring reform. But unfortunately, many members of the Church, many Christians and non-Christians have adopted the egotistical attitudes of secularist thinking. The selfish blindness of modern man has made the reform of society most difficult. If the Church were to take the type of political role urged by Gutierrez it would find itself endlessly involved in the strifes and hatreds of classes fighting for a selfish victory in the temporal arena.

NOTES

¹Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973. Transl. by Sr. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson. Originally published as *Theologia de la liberacion, Perspectivas* by CEP, Lima, Peru, 1971. Pp. 232-33. (Hereafter, *T.L.* will be used.)

²*T.L.*, 25-27.

³*T.L.*, 28-31.

⁴*T.L.*, 32-33; 173-74.

⁵*Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II, no. 10.

⁶*T.L.*, 34-36.

⁷*T.L.*, ix-xi.

⁸*T.L.*, 4-6. His reference is to *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 1.

⁹J. O'Sullivan and J.F. Burns, *Medieval Europe*, New York: Crofts, 1946, 255-259; 292.

¹⁰*T. L.*, 10.

¹¹*Populorum Progressio*, Paul VI, March 26, 1967, nos. 2, 12, 16-17, 23, 26, 31, 39.

¹²*T.L.*, 11-13.

¹³*T.L.*, 13-15. Also, Vincent P. Miceli, S.J., *The Gods of Atheism*, New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1971, 375.

¹⁴Romans 1:20. Denzinger, 1785, 1806. *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, no. 13, 28. Also, Vat. Conc. I, *Constitutio Dei Filius*, chap. 4.

¹⁵*T. L.*, 45-50.

¹⁶*T.L.*, 53-54. Also, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 41.

¹⁷*T.L.*, 54-58. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 42. *Justice in the World*, Nov. 1971 (Synod of Bishops, Rome). *Octogesima Adveniens*, May 14, 1971. Also, CELAM, *Presencia activa de la iglesia en el desarrollo y en la integracion de America Latina*, Bogota, Colombia, 1967, p.21. The original in Spanish reads: "aunque no sea de competencia de la Iglesia promover estos procesos temporales, sin embargo, es incumbencia suya orientarlos hacia una promocion de las personas humanas en todas sus dimensiones y hacia una integracion complete de las poblaciones marginales."

¹⁸*T.L.*, 64-72. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, New York, 1965, 17.

¹⁹*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 76. Paul VI, *A Future Life Awaits Us* in *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 6, 1974.

²⁰Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *El problema de Dios en el hombre actual*, Madrid: Guadarrama, 1960, 175-180. Transl. from German, *Glaubhaft is nur Liebe*, Johannes Verlag.

²¹*T.L.*, 89-92.

²²*T.L.*, 101ff. *Conclusiones de la Segunda conferencia general del Episcopado Latinoamericano*, (Medellin) 1968. CELAM (Bogota, 1971), *Paz*, no. 1416. The Bishops' document in the original reads: "La violencia no es ni cristiana ni evangelica. El cristiano es pacifico y no se ruboriza de ello. No es simplemente pacifista, porque es capaz de combatir. Pero prefiere la paz a la guerra." Also, *Pop. Progr.*, no. 30-31.

²³*T.L.*, 109-111. Also, Medellin, no. 8. Also, *Pop. Progr.*, no. 20, 15. In *T.L.*, the reference to Paul VI is in footnote no. 57, p. 128. Also, *Octo. Adven.*, 31-34, 26.

²⁴*T. L.*, 133-39.

²⁵*T.L.*, 145-146. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 55-56.

²⁶*T.L.*, 177, 151-66.

²⁷*T.L.*, 170-71; 173. Here he praises Teilhard de Chardin who “contributed most to a search for a unity between faith and the ‘religion of the world,’ but he does so from a scientific point of view.” Yet, he adds, “the questions of social justice, of the exploitation of man by man, do not occupy an important place in the concerns of the illustrious Jesuit.” Also, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 39. And *Pop. Progr.*, no. 21, 13.

²⁸Medellin, *Justice*, 3-5.

²⁹*T.L.*, 233-38; 251-53.

³⁰*T.L.*, 252, 255-58. *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, Vat. Conc. II, no. 1, 10. Also Urs Von Balthasar, *Love Alone*, New York: Herder, 1969, 122.

³¹*Lumen Gentium*, no. 14, 16.

³²*T.L.*, 259-262. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 1, 48. Emphasis added.

³³*T.L.*, 265-70.

³⁴*Octo. Adven.*, no. 37.

³⁵*T.L.*, 273-77. Also, footnote no. 51, p. 284; and no. 60, p. 285.

³⁶*Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 18. Also, *Rerum Novarum*, no. 14.