



Is liberation theology Christian?

An old saying has it that the mountain heaved ... and brought forth a mouse!

Can man redeem himself?

Both Marxism and Liberation Theology (hereafter LT) think so. And both agree that to make himself "new" man must engage in revolutionary struggle to attain full stature in freedom. We can illumine the parallel by two quotations.

- The first is from Georgi V. Plekhanov (1856-1918) earliest of the Russian Marxists and considered by some as ablest of Marx's first generation disciples.

In his most popular work, *The Development of The Monist View of History*, Plekhanov thus summarizes the contribution of Marx to social theory:

"The great scientific service rendered by Marx lies in this ... that he regarded man's nature itself as the eternally changing result of historical progress...: 'acting on the external world, man changes his own nature.' In these few words is contained the essence of the whole historical theory of Marx..." (pp. 153-154).

Man can redeem himself, and this option is, for Marx, the significance of time and history.

- Gutierrez echoes precisely the same Marxist theory:

"Liberation ... emphasizes that man transforms himself by conquering his liberty throughout his existence and his history" (Intro., p. x).

For LT, too, man can redeem himself, becoming "new" through historical conquest.

It is obvious that — on LT's grounds — either Marx indulged in "theological reflection" (how he would have scoffed at that suggestion!) or — as is the case — LT is Marxist to the core!

LT and the Bible

What remains to be seen is how LT, as represented by Gustavo Gutierrez, whose "classic" *A Theology of Liberation* (Orbis, 1973) adapts the Bible to the Marxism which LT so warmly embraces. What one wonders as he peruses Gutierrez' work, and that of other theological liberationists, is why LT cares about wheedling lame support out of a Bible it shreds to suit its purposes. Is that to fool the trusting? The gullible? To wrap the mantle of the Church about Marxism's shoulders? Is it, perhaps, to keep Liberation Theologians in board and keep at the Church's expense until the revolution gives them political prerogatives?

Whatever the reason, LT ignores in the Bible whatever resists adaptation to Marxism, while squeezing a trickle of presumably holy water out of isolated sections of Holy Writ wherewith to baptize a Marxist revolution.

Consider, for example, the biblical:

Doctrine of the Fall

One searches in vain through *A Theology of Revolution* for any recognition of the biblical doctrine of man's Fall! It's not mentioned! Of course not! If man is to redeem himself, according to Marxist

prescription, the biblical doctrine of an innate depravity inherited from the first Adam must be abandoned. So LT quietly drops the Fall out of its "theological reflection!"

Marx of course dismissed the Fall (though he knew the Old Testament well enough — in Hebrew!) for at least two reasons (both applicable to LT):

1. If mankind does indeed suffer inherent corruption from Adam's sin, then man would be forever incapable of making himself "new" — which, as Plekhanov says, is the basic goal of Marxism. The biblical doctrine of the Fall robs history of precisely the redemptive capacity which Marx must attribute to it. Marx was well aware of that, and bluntly rejected the Bible along with the God of the Bible. From time to time he twitted the Church for, in practice, also ignoring the Bible it claimed to honor and the God it claimed to serve. He would, of course, make the same critique of LT.

For LT, although claiming to be a "theology," in fact follows Marx — and not the Bible — in holding that through revolution man can redeem himself. But what, then, does LT do with the biblical doctrine of the Fall? LT, we repeat, pays no attention to it! The Fall has no place in LT's expurgated Scriptures! LT acknowledges no First Adam, no Eve, no Eden, no serpent, no probationary command, no Fall, no primal promise of vicarious redemption — all are blotted out of LT's version of the Scriptures. Why? So that LT can endorse the Marxist recipe of redemption through violent revolution! The LT Bible bends as the Marxist wind blows! Search as he may, the reader will find that the fact of the Fall which, with its consequences, plays so large a role in the Scriptures, has no role at all in the "theological reflection" of LT a la Gutierrez.

2. Marx no doubt rejected the doctrine of man's Fall on another ground. How could the Marxist presume to diagnose and prescribe a cure for human ills if the Marxist, too, were corrupted by inherited depravity? From whom would mankind get the liberating "word" if the Marxist prophets were tainted out of Adam? So Adam and his Fall must go! "Physician, cure thyself" plays no role in Marx's *Capital*.

And this is why Marxism, though born of great genius and immense learning, though inspired by the vision of a new humanity creating a boundlessly progressive society, always gives rise to the dull, gray brutalism of the totalitarian state. The Communist societies born out of Marxism bear testimony to the world that the Marxist "prophets" too are corrupt at the heart. When the "old" man, fallen in the First Adam, seizes dictatorial power for making other men "new," his inherited depravity is soon writ large in the horrors of totalitarianism. (Which is why Calvin favored democracy!) Whatever may have been the chains and slavery of the pre-Marxist society — in Russia, China, Cuba or Vietnam the shackles that Communism forges are more thorough, more absolute, more deadly and more comprehensive than the world has ever seen. So it will be if Marxism takes over in Latin America! Unhappily all this historical evidence is lost on LT.

For there is no evidence that the Liberation Theologian acknowledges the biblical doctrine of his own depravity either. Here too he fits the Bible into the Marxist pattern, and probably for the same reason: the Liberation Theologian also presumes to diagnose (through Marxist lenses) the Latin American socio-economic situation, and to prescribe a (Marxist) cure: violent revolution. Committed to Marxism, LT finds the Fall only an encumbrance. It disappears from the LT version of the Bible!

Let us see how:

LT very selectively reads the Bible to leap from creation to the Exodus. Just to look ahead, LT's version of the Scriptures highlights like this: in the creation, God sets man on the route of self-redemption through struggle; this route is illumined by the Exodus, and climaxed when Jesus Christ sets Himself in the vanguard of revolution, and man now redeems himself through revolt. In short, LT makes the Bible a footnote to Marxism.

Gutierrez puts it this way: *"The creation of the world initiates history, the human struggle, and the salvific adventure of Yahweh"* (p. 154). Note that *"struggle"* begins at once. Man is made to win his own freedom along Marxist lines. As for the melodramatic flourish, this *"salvific adventure of Yahweh,"* precisely what that means remains obscure. We derive from it, however, the impression that God may have been, so far as LT is concerned, the first Marxist he kicks off the class struggle so man can, in history, redeem himself while Yahweh goes along for the ride!

Again, Gutierrez writes: *"Creation is presented in the Bible, not as a stage previous to salvation, but as a part of the salvific process"* (p. 154).

More: *"The Bible establishes a close link between creation and salvation. But the link is based on the historical and liberating experience of the Exodus"* (p. 153).

However, the Bible sets between creation and the Exodus a decisive link which LT blithely ignores, the key biblical teaching of the Fall and its momentous consequences, the basic doctrine of the First (implying the Second) Adam on which the Bible is structured. Observe, then, that to adapt the Bible to Marxism, LT wilfully shreds the divine Word of whatever fails to support the Marxist conception of history as self-redemption through struggle. For, once more: *"creation and liberation from Egypt are but one salvific act"* (p. 155) with the Fall squeezed out a la Marx. (If you have already grown weary of "salvific," try the book sometime!) No room, in this "one salvific act," for the event which made the Atonement necessary. But then, as we shall see, LT has no room for the doctrine of the atonement either! Another score for Marx!

LT and Jesus Christ

When the First Adam goes, the biblical context for the Second Adam is destroyed. Indeed the whole biblical structure is shattered! For Marx this was no problem. By inheritance a Jew, though briefly a member by baptism (at age 7) of the Lutheran Church, and author of an interesting school graduation essay at age 17 on "The Union of the Faithful with Christ," based on John 15:1-14, Marx felt no attraction for the idea of the vicarious atonement. Neither, with his usual deference to Marxism, does Gutierrez.

Again, one searches his "classic" in vain for any concern with the doctrine so central to Christianity and the Bible: the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ. Purged, for Marxist purposes, of the doctrine of the First Adam, the LT Bible is stripped of the doctrine of the Second Adam also.

What role, then, does Gutierrez assign to Jesus? Listen:

"The God who makes the cosmos from chaos is the same God who leads Israel from alienation to liberation ... The work of Christ forms a part of this movement and brings it to complete fulfillment. The work of Christ is the new creation. Consequently, when we assert that man fulfills himself by continuing the work of creation by means of his labor, we are saying that he places himself, by this very fact, within an all-embracing salvific process. To work, to transform this world, is to become a man and to build the human community; it is also to save" (pp. 158-159).

Man, that is, sets himself on the road to salvation by *"continuing the work of creation."* Christ merely points the way: *"The life and preaching of Jesus postulate the unceasing search for the new kind of man in a qualitatively different society"* (p. 231). Jesus calls us to class struggle! But, *"Christ is not a private individual ... We find the Lord in our encounters with men, especially the poor, marginated, and exploited ones"* (pp. 201-202). The route to the Christ is via revolution! *"There is only one history a 'Christo-finalized' history"* (p. 153). Like Yahweh's salvific "adventure," a "Christo-finalized" history is a rhetorical flourish devoid of content. But it is evident that in the LT Bible the Lord is found in the exploited and with them mounts the barricades, waving a red flag and shouting Marxist slogans! Calvary, displaced by violent revolution, disappears, not unnaturally, with the Fall.

How remote all this is from the Bible need hardly be specified, but it is obvious that, again, cardinal biblical teaching is warped to the convenience of Marxist theorizing.

LT and conversion/salvation

The biblical doctrines of conversion and salvation now fall into (the Marxist) line. Gutierrez says:

"To be converted is to commit oneself to the process of liberation of the poor and the oppressed, to commit oneself lucidly, realistically, and concretely ... with an analysis of the situation and a strategy of action" (p. 205).

Marxism defines "conversion," too! What that "analysis of the situation" is, we already know: it is Marx's. What that "strategy of action" involves, we also know: violent revolution designed to undo the private property system. For LT, the "Christian" has converted to Marxism, and not the other way round! Or, if you prefer, for LT Marx is canonized as the first Liberation Theologian!

Being mutually engaged in class struggle and violence, Marxists and Christians — according to LT — thus share a common salvation; writes Gutierrez: *"Man is saved if he opens himself to God and to others, even if he is not clearly aware of doing so. This is valid for Christians and non-Christians alike — for all people" (p. 151).* When revolution is the key, such details as repentance, confession, contrition and baptism can be ignored. Marxism will set the standards for "Church" membership.

LT and sin

Having purged the Bible of the Fall, of original sin, of the vicarious atonement, to accommodate Marxism, it is inevitable that LT will take what it says about "sin" from its Marxist "analysis of the situation." And so it does: *"Sin is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of man by men, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races and social classes. Sin demands a radical liberation, which in turn necessarily implies a political liberation. This radical liberation is the gift which Christ offers us" (p. 176).* If God, for LT, be the first Marxist, Christ is the second! The gift of salvation in Christ comes — for LT — with strings attached: it is only for those who engage in the struggle for political liberation. Christ, too, becomes tail for the Marxist kite!

Says Gutierrez: *"In the liberation approach, sin is not considered as an individual, private, or merely interior reality — asserted just enough to necessitate a 'spiritual' redemption which does not change the order in which we live. Sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood and love in relationships among men" (p. 176).*

It is clearly of no concern to LT how "sin" is "considered" by the Bible. What matters is how "sin" is "regarded" in LT "reflection."

Gutierrez is not modest about that: *"The approach we have been considering opens up for us — and this is of utmost importance — unforeseen vistas on the problem of sin. An unjust situation does not happen by chance; it is not something branded by a fatal destiny; there is human responsibility behind it" (p.175).*

In short, LT follows Marx in finding the bourgeoisie the sinners who must be despoiled of their property. But in doing so, LT might, were it honest, face an interesting question:

Did Christ come for sinners?

Marxism divides the capitalist society neatly into sinners and potential saints. The exploiting bourgeoisie are the sinners; the exploited proletariat are the potential saints. Comes the revolutionary judgment day, the proletariat will rise in bloody judgment upon the bourgeoisie. Justice will at last have its due. For Marxism, the sinned-against redeem themselves by the violent undoing of the sinners.

LT takes over this Marxist schema. For LT, too, the exploiters are the sinners; the exploited are the sinned-against. The Christ of LT "reflection" leads the sinned-against to eventual judgment upon the sinners via violent revolution.

Unhappily for this proselytized Marxism, the true Bible (not the expurgated version formulated out of "theological reflection") teaches that Jesus Christ specifically came *to save sinners!*

Reflect, now, who are — according to LT — the "sinners"? On both Marxist and LT grounds (not on Bible's!) sinners are the bourgeoisie! If this were so, then the Christ of the Scriptures came to save ... the bourgeoisie! And then the biblical Christ, far from leading the sinned-against in revolt, would have come for the salvation of just those "sinners" Marx and LT want to destroy. To avoid this obvious contradiction, the LT version of the Scriptures contains nothing about Christ's atoning death for the redemption of sinners. The LT Christ leads the sinned-against into violent revolution! Clearly, the Christ of LT's "theological reflection" is a stranger to the Christ of the Scriptures!

We may add that, in ways which Marxism rejects and LT ignores, the biblical Christ in fact calls both exploiters and exploited to repentance and salvations! And all sinners exploiter, exploited, Marxists, Liberation Theologians and all mankind — who recognize themselves as sinners — receive, rather than win, true liberation in Him! But this biblical conception of Jesus the Christ is precluded by LT's manipulation of the Bible in the interests of Marxism. The LT Christ gives conversion and salvation only to those who redeem themselves through Marxist-fomented revolution against the sinners!

Loving enemies

It will illustrate, finally, what we have been saying to observe how Gutierrez twists a biblical command which he at least pretends to take seriously to adapt that command to the Marxist analysis of social evil. We will divide his devious "exegesis" into a series of steps for the sake of clarity.

1. Gutierrez acknowledges that, *"The Gospel announces the love of God for all people and calls us to love as he loves"* (this and the following quotes all from pp. 275-276).

So the Gospel does.

How will LT fit this biblical injunction into the Marxist scheme of class struggle and violent revolution?

LT will pervert the text into supporting Marxism. Listen:

2. *"But to accept class struggle means to decide for some people and against others."* (Marx is already taking over!)
3. *"To love all men does not mean avoiding confrontations; it does not mean preserving a fictitious harmony."* (Thus saith Gutierrez; how do you suppose he knows that? And where does the Gospel teach it — or does Marxism now exegete the Bible?)
4. *"Universal love is that which in solidarity with the oppressed seeks also to liberate the oppressors from their own power, from their ambition, and from their selfishness ... One loves the oppressors by liberating them from their inhuman condition as oppressors, by liberating them from themselves."* (A more cynical subversion of the text would be hard to conceive. The Gospel command to love comes entirely under the sway of the Marxist command to enter class struggle and promote violent revolution. LT makes class struggle into an exercise in altruistic love, no less! What but "theological reflection" could produce so wild a fancy?)
5. Hear further: *"But this cannot be achieved except by resolutely opting for the oppressed, that is, by combatting the oppressive class. It must be real and effective combat, not hate..."* (I don't hate you; I just intend, if necessary, to kill you! Can such "reflection" be serious? And what by now has become of that Gospel mandate to "love"? — We know, really, LT has completely subverted the biblical concept of "love.")
6. Still more: *"In the context of the class struggle today, to love one's enemies presupposes recognizing and accepting that one has class enemies and that it is necessary to combat them."* (Now this is plain enough: we must read the Bible in the context of class struggle, and juggle our exegesis accordingly!)

7. *"Love does not mean that the oppressors are no longer enemies, nor does it eliminate the radicalness of the combat against them..." ("Love" as defined in the "catechism" of the Communist Manifesto!)*
8. And, finally, just to make doubly sure that Marx prevails: *"Our love is not authentic if it does not take the path of class solidarity and social struggle. To participate in class struggle 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. In dialectical thinking, reconciliation is the overcoming of conflict."* (Ah, there's the key, "dialectical thinking" — that is Marxist thinking — twists those parts of the Bible which LT does recognize into Marxist auxiliaries! In the murky realm of such "thinking" the word "love" implies combat and class struggle embodies charity.)

Given the capacity for such shamelessly perverse "exegesis," it really does not matter whether or not LT takes the Bible in whole or in part; "dialectical thinking" has the last word anyhow.

More, rather a good deal more, might be instanced to illustrate LT's abuse of the Bible to serve Marxist purposes, taken not only from Gutierrez but also from his equally devious colleagues in LT "theological reflection." But enough has been provided to answer our initial question:

Is, then, Liberation Theology "Christian"?

Not if "Christian" means what the Bible, the Church, the creeds and nineteen centuries of tradition teach that it means. No, indeed!

LT is not "Christian," nor is it liberating, nor is it theology; and its handling of the Bible betrays a shocking absence of moral and intellectual integrity.

It is long past time that all those who have a concern for the Word, for the Church, and for the real redemption of mankind took a long look at LT and examined its deceits.

The tawdry theological garb in which LT masquerades sheer Marxism need fool no one who cares to see, as with the eyes of the child in the fable, that this late-born emperor of "reflection" wears tawdry Marxist hand-me-downs, and ill-fitting ones at that!

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