

***AN EXCERPT OF “DEVELOPMENT AND LIBERATION IN THEOLOGY OF
LIBERATION BY GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ***

PRESTON FIRESTONE

This is an excerpt from an assignment for Mario Aguilar’s module DI4824 on Latin American Theology. The topic of the paper was ‘development and liberation in *Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutiérrez’. In order to quickly orient the reader to Gutiérrez, it is good to begin with his retelling of the Exodus in *Theology of Liberation*:

The liberation of Israel is a political action. It is the breaking away from a situation of despoliation and misery and the beginning of the construction of a just and comradely society....[In Egypt, Israel experienced] repression, alienated work, humiliations, [and an] enforced birth control policy. Yahweh then [awoke] the vocation of liberator: Moses...[, who] began a long, hard struggle for the liberation of the people. The alienation of the children of Israel was such that at first “they did not listen to him” (Ex. 6:9)...and in the midst of the desert, faced with the first difficulties, they told him that they preferred the security of slavery...to the uncertainties of a liberation in progress....A gradual pedagogy of successes and failures would be necessary for the Jewish people to become aware of the roots of their oppression, to struggle against it, and to perceive the profound sense of liberation to which they were called.¹

The alienation experienced by Israel in Egypt has a political origin; when Yahweh liberated Israel from it, Israel experienced a political liberation. In the Hebrew scripture, this historical liberation is identified as an act of salvation and of creation: according to Gutiérrez, creation, liberation, and salvation form a complex in the bible.² Thus, political liberation cannot be disentangled from spiritual salvation, nor can it be separated from the Israelites’ growing awareness of their self-mastery. Gutiérrez is neatly folding together the narrative of the Exodus with present hopes for future liberation: he sees hope for his people (and for all people) in the

¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, rev. ed., SCM Classics (London: SCM Press, 2001), 154. It is important not to over-emphasize the place that the Exodus narrative has in Gutiérrez’s reading of the bible. Other biblical themes for liberation theology include poverty, justice, and people of god. However, this essay is too short to cover the breadth of Gutiérrez’s use of the bible and will restrict itself to this one example. For more biblical analysis, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), chap. 1; Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987); Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, chaps 9 & 10.

² Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 151-58.

story of Israel's liberation from Egypt. The Kingdom's coming is a process which occurs 'historically *in* liberation'.³ The height of this encounter is the incarnation: 'in Christ the all-comprehensiveness of the liberating process reaches its fullest sense'.⁴

The essay collection *The Future of Liberation Theology* contains several personal sketches of Gutiérrez by his friends and colleagues. Gutiérrez's personality and humour shine through these essays in his honour. As Leonardo Boff puts it in his inimitably precise way, 'in Gutiérrez we cannot separate personal and community life from theology. He is an activist before he is a professor, committed to the fate of the oppressed'.⁵ Frei Betto describes Gutiérrez as someone who moves 'like an Amerindian slipping through trees and leaves, observing without being observed' and adds that 'this ancestral gift enables him to master a new language [or] a new field of knowledge'.⁶ Teresa Okure recalls how Gutiérrez and Boff, when they arrived late to the Second General Assembly of EATWOT, snuck in to the back of the room unobtrusively. When the chairperson interrupted the session to announce that they had arrived, Okure records the impression that they were 'embarrassed' at the recognition.⁷ Curt Cadorette describes the origins of Gutiérrez's theology in the 'human crucible' of Rimac, the working-class part of Lima where Gutiérrez lived.⁸ All of these accounts present a mosaic of a man who is dedicated to the poor, not only intellectually, but with his whole being. He truly lives the life of the ones for whom he advocates, the 'little ones' of history.

Theology of Liberation and all liberation theology pass through the Medellín conference. The Latin American bishops met at Medellín in 1968 to respond to the call issued by the Second

³ Gutiérrez, 175. Italics original.

⁴ Gutiérrez, 176.

⁵ Leonardo Boff, 'The Originality of the Theology of Liberation', in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, trans. Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 47.

⁶ Frei Betto, 'Gustavo Gutiérrez—A Friendly Profile', in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, trans. Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 33.

⁷ Teresa Okure, 'Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Person and the Message: Memories of an Encounter', in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 85.

⁸ Curt Cadorette, 'Peru and the Mystery of Liberation: The Nexus and the Logic of Gustavo Gutiérrez's Theology', in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 50.

Vatican Council. Their topic was ‘The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council’. The final documents of the Medellín conference clearly state that sin is ‘evident in unjust structures’ and that ‘hunger, misery, oppression, and ignorance’ all have their origin in ‘human selfishness’.⁹ The incarnate God, Jesus Christ, ‘liberates all people from the slavery to which sin has subjected them’.¹⁰ In Christ, God fashions us into a ‘new creature’: divine salvation is an action of ‘integral human development and liberation’.¹¹ The Latin American bishops cite *Populorum Progressio*’s description of development as a movement from less human to more human conditions.¹² They also repeat the encyclical’s critique of the global economic order that hinders the development and liberation of Latin American countries.¹³

Rafael Luciani’s article “Medellín Fifty Years Later” gives a clear overview of how the themes which I discussed above appear in other Latin American theologians such as Hugo Assmann, Hélder Câmara, and Manuel Larraín Errazuriz.¹⁴ This is how Luciani summarizes the Medellín conference’s conclusions:

[the bishops advanced] a theory of liberation, which supposes not only a mere transformation of society through [the action of] political and economic elites, but a process of radical change of the system from the base to the elites, considering the poor as subjects and protagonists of their history, not passive recipients of historical forces.¹⁵

The Medellín conference’s conclusions mirror those reached by Gutiérrez in *Theology of Liberation* and are a distillation of the transformation of theology that was taking place in Latin America.

⁹ Second General Conference of Latin America Bishops, ‘Document on Justice’, in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), secs 2-3.

¹⁰ Second General Conference of Latin America Bishops, sec. 3.

¹¹ Second General Conference of Latin America Bishops, sec. 4.

¹² Second General Conference of Latin America Bishops, ‘Introduction to the Final Documents’, in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), sec. 6.

¹³ Second General Conference of Latin America Bishops, ‘Document on Peace’, in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), sec. 9.

¹⁴ Rafael Luciani, ‘Medellín Fifty Years Later: From Development to Liberation’, *Theological Studies* 79, no. 3 (September 2018): 569-72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563918784765>.

¹⁵ Luciani, 568.

This transformation is expressed in Gutiérrez's method: he does theology from the 'underside of history', from the perspective of the poor and marginalized. This shift in perspective is called the 'irruption of the poor'. In *The Power of the Poor in History*, a collection of essays released eight years after *Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez describes this irruption thus:

Recent years in Latin America have been marked by an increased awareness of the world of the 'other'—of the poor, the oppressed, the exploited class. In a social order drawn up economically, politically, and ideologically for the benefit of the few, the 'others'—the exploited classes, oppressed cultures, and ethnic groups that suffer discrimination—have begun to make their own voice heard.¹⁶

Historically, the poor and oppressed did not participate in theology; in fact, their voices were excluded from all 'polite' discourse. In post-WWII Latin America, the climate began to change. Liberation theology is the 'organic'¹⁷ result of theological reflection on the ongoing process of liberation. Gutiérrez says that liberation theology 'could not have come to be before the popular movement itself and its concrete, historical liberation praxis had achieved a certain degree of development and maturity'.¹⁸ The theology was enabled by the historical praxis of non-Christian liberation movements: it is not their motivation or origin. Nevertheless, some Christians always advocated for the poor and oppressed.¹⁹ Liberation theology is the theology that results from this praxis. Liberation theology springs from Latin American Christians' encounters with popular movements, which are the 'the locus of a new way of being men and women in Latin America, and thereby as well of a new manner of living the faith, a new mode of encounter with the Father and with one's sisters and brothers'.²⁰

Gutiérrez's theology is convincing because he authentically speaks for the poor and marginalized. His perspective from the underside of history gives his theological reflections an incisive clarity, so that they cut to the core of the current situation. Ultimately, his goal is not to convince the great ones of the world to change. Rather, he aims to foster the mass of humanity's rising awareness that it is the master of its own destiny. His theology is not the product of *a priori* reasoning but is an authentic articulation of the indomitable hope of the people.

¹⁶ Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 190.

¹⁷ Gutiérrez borrows the term 'organic intellectual' from Antonio Gramsci to describe the place of the theologian: theology arises from the social context of the theologian and must speak vernacularly to that context.

¹⁸ Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 191.

¹⁹ Gutiérrez cites Bartolomé de Las Casas as a 16th century precedent. See Gutiérrez, 194-97.

²⁰ Gutiérrez, 191.