

## A Path to Liberation The Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez

When Karl Marx first began publishing his critiques of religion in the middle of the nineteenth century, it became clear that in his mind religion must be eliminated in order to create a just society. For Marx, religion was the root cause of all social inequality and the primary means for maintaining unjust hierarchical structures within a society. Marx, a professed atheist, condemned religion in all forms, particularly Christianity, and refused to believe that a society could function if such traditions and beliefs existed. In twentieth-century Latin America, the same socio-economic inequalities that Marx was so critical of were visible all over the continent. While almost all of the wealth and power in Latin America was in the hands of the few, the vast majority of the population lived in extreme poverty. Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian Catholic priest, experienced this oppression firsthand and drew from the critiques of religion and society that Marx had made in order to formulate his own critical theology. For Gutiérrez, the socio-economic system of the time simply wasn't working, and any system that left so many of his people in suffering had to be changed. Unlike Marx, however, Gutiérrez's did not arrive at the conclusion that religion must be eliminated altogether, but rather argued that a change in religion and in Christian's daily lives could be the key for positive social change. The Second Vatican Council of 1962-65 had further established that the focus of the Church should be on the poor of the world. Unfortunately for Gutiérrez, the Catholic Church, represented by the Vatican, was just as critical of Marx as Marx was of the Church. Wary of the anti-religious sentiments of Marxism as well as the totalitarian governments

that arose from it in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the Vatican, and Pope John Paul II in particular, refused to accept that Marxism could be a part of the Christian faith. It was these criticisms that prevented the seemingly progressive movement of the Church through Vatican II from attacking the social structures that maintained poverty, focusing instead on condemning poverty in general. However, the Bible's call for solidarity with the poor was something that could not be ignored, and Gustavo Gutiérrez was able to look past the anti-religious aspect of Marxism and apply its social criticisms to the situation of his people in Latin America. The Church, though skeptical of his philosophies at first, eventually started to accept the importance of Gutiérrez's position—namely, that Christians could be Marxist, and that a theology of liberation based on the message of the Bible and the principles of Marxism could exist.

### **A Socio-Economic Outline of Twentieth Century Peru**

In the past three hundred years, the end of colonialism has brought forth immense change in the political and economic landscape of our planet. As nations in North America, South America, Africa, and Asia all claimed their independence, they were faced with the tasks of forging their own identities and creating their own roles in the world. After centuries of colonial oppression, this was not an easy task. New governments, with no experience in having full control of a country, were left with the job of running these new nations. In order to succeed, however, these governments needed to be sympathetic to the wishes of the most powerful of the country's citizens, the already instituted elite class. Often put in place by the colonial powers themselves, these social oligarchies were in control of most of the colonies' wealth and political power. When countries gained independence, that power structure did not change.

While the early nineteenth century saw the vast majority of Latin American countries achieve independence from European powers, that tradition of imperialism had yet to be broken. These countries may have seen the removal of European crowns from their governments, but that colonial imperialism had been replaced by economic imperialism, and Peru was no different. In the decade leading up to the publication of Gustavo Gutiérrez's *Theology of Liberation*, the 1960s, the living conditions faced by the people of Peru illustrate the dire circumstances caused by such a hierarchical and unequal economic system.

The Peruvian economy at the time was described as being “unbalanced in every respect” with an “imbalance between the inferior standard of living of the great masses and the provocatively superior standard of the minority.”<sup>1</sup> During the twentieth century, as colonial imperialism had given way to economic imperialism, the colonial ruling class had evolved and taken the shape of an economic ruling class. In this instance, the oligarchy in power was no longer appointed by the King of Spain or Portugal, but by wealth, and as imperialist domination increased, the internal contradictions only sharpened. At the apex of the system there existed “an immensely rich oligarchy, closely linked to the imperialist consortiums through a multitude of investments and businesses.” Meanwhile, the majority of the people lived at the base in incredible poverty. The wealth of the country was so concentrated that forty-five families, in association with the U.S. monopolies, had concentrated most of the political and economic power in their hands.<sup>2</sup> This disproportion of power had led to an extreme inequality of wealth in the country.

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<sup>1</sup>Alba, Víctor. *Peru*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1977. 101.

<sup>2</sup> Béjar, Héctor. *Peru 1965: Notes on a Guerrilla Experience*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970. 27.

According to official statistics, 24,000 privileged individuals had an income of 2.5 million soles (about \$62,500) per year, while 11,976,000 Peruvians were barely able to survive on 6,310 soles (about \$157) a year.<sup>3</sup>

Such unequal distribution of power and wealth had much to do with the similarly unequal distribution of land. Being a developing country, Peru was ripe with opportunities for foreign businesses. Without a fully formed economy of their own, Peruvians were vulnerable to the economic interests of the United States and Europe. Low labor and startup costs along with minimal business regulations made Peru a perfect place for foreign multinational companies to establish themselves. Functioning much like colonists, foreign companies could come in with startup capital unrivaled within the country and send the majority of the profits abroad. Even the structure of land ownership established by the colonial powers had been upheld by the economic imperialism of the United States and Europe, maintaining a disproportionate appropriation of land and power. Throughout its history, the Peruvian landscape had been comprised of large land holdings, which were minimally cultivated and tended to. Meanwhile, the peasant communities living in close proximity to this unused land were not given the opportunity to farm it. Eventually, the imperialism of the twentieth century had guaranteed that this system of misused land and unemployed farmers would continue.<sup>4</sup> Such a system had led to inefficient use of arable land in the country: with the minority of the population controlling almost all of the land, Peru was left with unused farmland and unemployed farmers. This problem was manifested in the fact that Peru looked very much like a country full of idle and unplowed land; it simply wasn't being used. The root cause of

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<sup>3</sup> Béjar, *Peru 1965*, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Béjar, *Peru 1965*, 23.

such a misuse of land was not a shortage of farmers, but rather the creation of land monopolies, putting the majority of the land in the hands of the few who, instead of allowing it to be farmed by peasants, allowed it to lay fallow.<sup>5</sup> This was very much a case of the very few having more than they needed while the majority had barely anything at all. While this statement may seem a little like a bit of an over-exaggeration, when presented with the facts, the truth proves to be even more shocking; one percent of all agricultural and cattle raising units occupied 75 percent of the land involved in agriculture; 0.1 percent of the total number of landowners held 60.9 percent of the land which was being utilized. Of the 17 million hectares of arable soil, 10 million were part of the 1,000 great landholdings, and only 1,933,000 were in the hands of peasant communities.<sup>6</sup> So here existed a country in which the extreme minority of the population constituted an oligarchy, empowered by imperialist institutions, that was in control of almost all of the country's land and wealth, while the extreme majority of the population was left powerless and in poverty. This oligarchy of land and wealth comprised less than five percent of the population at the time, while the lower class made up seventy percent.<sup>7</sup>

Although by Peruvian standards they were doing quite well, even the country's elite were victims of an unequal economic system. While the oligarchy inside the country had withheld power and wealth from the rest of society, the U.S. and European countries were sapping the wealth of the country as a whole. The large amount of U.S. investments in the country had turned Peru into a consumer industry which was very dependent on foreign imports. This vulnerability proved to be a hindrance for Peru to

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<sup>5</sup> Béjar, *Peru 1965*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Béjar, *Peru 1965*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Alba, *Peru*, 75.

develop its own economy; of all products made within the country, for example, forty-eight percent of the materials had to be imported from the United States and Europe.<sup>8</sup> The creation of such an import dependent consumer-based economy had caused Peruvians to lose control over the goods they bought and how they bought them. Not only that, but the money with which they bought such products wasn't even under Peruvian control, because just like corporations, banks too had fallen to imperialist powers. At the time, there were almost no Peruvian banks that were not linked to or controlled by foreign capital in some way.<sup>9</sup> But what is also important to note is the fact that foreign powers were not only in control of Peruvian money within the country, but the large amount of Peruvian money that was being taken out. The flow of capital out of the country was described as "alarming." From 1960-1965 imperialist consortiums had taken \$347 million out of Peru while they had invested only \$58 million.<sup>10</sup> So while Peruvian society was subjected to socio-economic hierarchy within its borders, the country as a whole fell victim to the very same structure as it existed internationally.

Such trends of wealth inequality show that this hierarchy was so deeply entrenched in Peruvian society that a system of exploitation and suffering extended to a global scale as well, making the Peruvian poor part of the truly impoverished people of the world. This institutionalized hierarchy and oppression of the massively disproportionate lower class is clearly shown through the living conditions of Peruvian society in the 1960s. Half of the population of Lima was said to have lived in unhealthy

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<sup>8</sup> Béjar, *Peru 1965*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Béjar, *Peru 1965*, 224.

<sup>10</sup> Béjar, *Peru 1965*, 26-27.

slums of one or two rooms which did not have running water or any hygienic facilities.<sup>11</sup> While the government had made small attempts at correcting the housing problem, building some low-rent houses in various areas, it remained a serious issue for the country's poor. All but the extremely wealthy were subjected to these unfit living conditions.<sup>12</sup> This overwhelming poverty had a large impact on the health of the Peruvian people as well, and many of the country's citizens were left to suffer from lack of food as well as sickness. Malnutrition in particular posed a large problem for the country's population, leading to an infant mortality rate which at the time was 97 per 1,000 in Peru, significantly lower than the 80 per 1,000 in Latin America as a whole. It was also why a child under one year of age died every ten minutes from diseases which at that point were mostly curable.<sup>13</sup> And as is common in conditions of dire poverty, increases in crime were sure to follow. This proved to be all too true in 1960s Peruvian society. From 1960-1965, crime had increased as much as 75 to 85 percent while a robbery occurred every sixty minutes in the capital and at least two armed robberies happened every twenty-four hours.<sup>14</sup> Peruvian society, one that had the money and agency to combat such problems, but which had seen such resources hoarded by the elite few, found the majority of its people living without food, clean living conditions, and healthcare. These conditions were the result of an incredible gap in wealth and influence in Peru, and there was no middle-class to bridge the gap between rich and poor at the

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<sup>11</sup> Béjar, *Peru 1965*, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Owens, Ronald J. *Peru*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1963. 79.

<sup>13</sup> Owens, *Peru*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Béjar, *Peru 1965*, 32.

time, nor had the working class successfully organized and emerged as a force politically.<sup>15</sup>

### **Gutiérrez's Response**

This was the reality in which Gustavo Gutiérrez lived. His country was incredibly impoverished due to an unequal system of hierarchy that shaped every facet of Peruvian life. Such conditions, however, were not just limited to Gutiérrez's native Peru, but all of Latin America as well. The lasting effects of colonialism and the struggles faced by developing countries in a hierarchical international market were felt by the entire continent. These conditions were pointed out at the Latin American Episcopal Conferences of Medellín, Colombia in 1968 and Puebla, Mexico in 1979. The abject poverty of many Latin Americans was described at these conferences as being shown through the faces of those affected by it: the children who were struck down by poverty before they were even born, the young people unable to find their place in society, the marginalized indigenous people of the country, the peasants who had no land to work on, the laborers who were subjected to low wages and little opportunity for organization, the urban dwellers forced to live in overcrowded streets, and the unemployed for whom the future looked incredibly bleak.<sup>16</sup>

In accordance with the popular opinion of Latin American priests at the time, Gutiérrez was also convinced that the poverty plaguing the continent was systemic in cause and saw this as the main reason for the vast gap in income equality on the continent. "Praise for the increased production rate observed in Latin America is

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<sup>15</sup> Owens, *Peru*, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983. 134.



followed by the affirmation that “*unfortunately*” we have not yet arrived at a more equitable distribution of income; emphasis has been placed on the increase of production, “*neglecting*” its adequate distribution. In reality, we all know that this does not happen “*unfortunately,*” but that it is the fault of the system itself, due not to “neglect” but to the very logic of the system.”<sup>17</sup> The system which he is talking about is the capitalist economic system. In the way this system existed in Peru, the primary focus was put on production, where producing more was better and producing the most was the ultimate goal. For Gutiérrez, problems arose when production and success became the only things that mattered, and whatever casualties felt by the working class because of that path to success were not considered as important as the progress that was being made. These priorities were what caused such a large gap between the rich and the poor of Peru and made its effects on the poor so overwhelming.

This understanding of capitalism, arrived at through his experience with the gravity of what such a system can mean for the lower class, was what sparked Gutiérrez’s desire to change it. In the process of critiquing the economic situation in Latin America, he drew from the work of Karl Marx, a man who saw a similar gap in socio-economic status arise out of the Industrial Revolution in Europe and created his own philosophy in an attempt to break it as well.

### **The Philosophies of Marx**

Marx, however, was not a fellow priest, nor was he even religious. Marx was a professed atheist and in actuality very anti-religion. While like Gutiérrez he too spoke of the evils of capitalism, Marx saw religion as the prime culprit for the creation of a society

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<sup>17</sup> Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 117.

in which such evils could flourish. “Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.”<sup>18</sup> Marx saw religion as an endless cycle of distress, with people turning to religion in response to their problems on Earth without realizing that religion was in fact the root cause of them all. Marx saw capitalism as creating two classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the bourgeoisie being the “ruling class” comprising the top of the socio-economic ladder and the proletariat being the massive working class. In a capitalist system, the bourgeoisie systematically maintains their elite status at the expense of keeping the proletariat oppressed, and Marx viewed religion as the key method of maintaining such a structure. In his critique of religion Marx states,

The basis of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. In other words, religion is the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is *the world of man*, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, a *reversed world-consciousness*, because they are a *reversed world*. Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasim, its moral sanction, its solemn completion, its universal ground for consolation and justification.<sup>19</sup>

By making this claim, Marx is refuting the belief that man and religion are two separate entities. When the two are separated, it can then be argued that society exists in response to religion, with societal norms and practices being justified by their accordance with religious beliefs. But Marx is asserting the claim that religion is a human construction, that man and society as a whole in fact create religion. So therefore it is no longer society needing to meet the standards set forth by religion, but religion that is

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<sup>18</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion*. New York: Schocken Books, 1964. 42.

<sup>19</sup> Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, 41.

fulfilling the needs of society. As a human construction religion can therefore function to serve human needs, and in the case of the bourgeoisie that means maintaining the status quo that benefits them so much. This is accomplished through the use of religion to justify both the elite status of the dominant class as well as the suffering of the workers.

According to Marx, the dominant class is able to use religion as an ideology to reinforce their status by claiming that they are in a position of power due to God's grace and divine will. A monarchy is established through the will of God, and people are made wealthy by the grace of God, therefore who would dare question such a status? Religion can even operate in this way without its benefactors even being fully aware of what is going on; while it is quite possible that religion is exploited in such a way by capitalist leaders to maintain their status, it is impossible to completely disregard the fact that they may truly believe they have been sanctioned by God. Therefore, the ruler of a country or the head of an industry may not only view exercising his power to fit the standards of the time as his divine right, but also view it as his responsibility to do so. Either way, according to Marx religion operates as a sanction for the dominant class and a means for maintaining their elite status and place atop society. Such a sanction is achieved by continuing the pattern of religion functioning to serve society. If, as Marx argues, the relationship between religion and society is reversed in this way, the leaders of a society can fill their need for justification by pointing to religion as the grounds for their status.

For Marx, religion also upholds the status of the dominant class by maintaining the status of the working class. By establishing the much greater importance of the next life in comparison to this one, religion is able to operate not only as a justification for suffering, but as a reason *not* to change it. With the expectation that paradise awaits

someone for all eternity, it would appear to be a fickle matter to complain about suffering for just a lifetime. The problem though is that such thinking guarantees that suffering for the entire lifetime as well as for the lives of those who follow.

Marx applies these critiques more specifically to Christianity as a means of justifying social order. For Marx, Christianity has always functioned to uphold the status of the ruling class and justify the suffering of the workers. He makes the claim that throughout history Christianity has justified slavery, serfdom, and the oppression of the proletariat. It also requires the establishment of an unequal social order; “The social principles of Christianity preach the necessity of a ruling class and an oppressed class, and all they have for the latter is the pious wish the former will be charitable.”<sup>20</sup> In Marx’s experience, Christianity had operated in exactly that way. Throughout history both Christianity and religion as a whole had served as the root cause of socio-economic inequality. By existing to serve the needs of society and being the principle authority which the proletariat turns to, a hierarchical social structure is then established and enforced. When the ruling class finds justification for its status and the working class sees no reason to change things, then religion becomes the basis by which this structure is maintained. This understanding of Christianity led Marx to come to the following conclusion; “The social principles of Christianity declare all vile acts of the oppressors against the oppressed to be either the just punishment of original sin and other sins or trials that the Lord in his infinite wisdom imposes on those redeemed.”<sup>21</sup> Like Gutiérrez, Marx believed that on the path to progress in the capitalist society there were those who suffered and those who benefitted from this suffering. With religion as a way of

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<sup>20</sup> Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, 83.

<sup>21</sup> Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, 84.

supporting the exploitation of the working class as a way of providing retribution for sins, then the proletariat can make no claim against them. Little did Marx know however, that just over a hundred years in the future, Gustavo Gutiérrez would himself critique such an understanding of Christianity on his way towards creating a new way of talking about God, and establishing Christianity not as the cause for inequality, but as the driving force for changing the system that creates it.

### **Gutiérrez On Job**

When discussing the situation of the poor of Latin America, Gustavo Gutiérrez likens their struggle to that of the biblical character Job. In the Book of Job, God boasts to Satan how upright and just a man Job is, how he praises God every day and lives free from serious sin. In response, Satan proclaims that Job only praises God because of what God has given him: a large house, a loving family, lots of money, and good health. Satan makes a wager with God, suggesting that if those things were taken away from Job, he would curse God. Taking part in this wager, God proceeds to strip Job of everything he has -- money, family, and health, and yet Job continues to praise God. He does not, however, repent or ask for God's forgiveness for the sins he must have committed (1.1-2.9).<sup>22</sup>

What is unique here is that this reaction by Job goes against the popular theological doctrine of his time, the doctrine of temporal retribution. The idea behind such a doctrine is that people are rewarded for their just behavior and are likewise

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<sup>22</sup> Coogan, Michael David, Marc Zvi Brettler, and PHEME PERKINS. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*. Fully rev 4th ed. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

punished for their sins. In this example, Job has committed no sin, certainly not one serious enough to warrant the suffering he must endure, and yet he suffers all the same. He is aware of this and it deeply troubles him. When three of Job's friends come to visit him and comfort him during these trying times, they are all learned theologians who are faithful to God, but they believe in the doctrine of temporal retribution. So when they come to see Job, they can understand his suffering only in the context that he has committed some atrocious sin. It is their belief that bad things happen to people who deserve them, and by this logic Job must have done something awful. According to his friends, the only way for Job to remedy the situation is to make his peace with God and ask for forgiveness for the sins he has committed (4.1-8.22).

Job, however, knows in his heart that he has not committed such a sin, and begins to argue both with his friends and with God. His friends are shocked to hear this and are unable to comprehend how Job could do such a thing.

The three men are scandalized by what they have heard. Job (they think) is delirious; he has spoken out of the bitterness caused by his suffering and without repentance for his sin. Yet, that he is himself responsible for his plight is evident to these friendly theologians who now begin to argue along this line. The doctrinal context in which they think is that of temporal retribution.<sup>23</sup>

This is where Job's beliefs begin to shift. Just as aware of the doctrine of temporal retribution as his friends are, he understands that there is no logical explanation for the suffering he is facing. He has been a good man with too much trust in God to believe that such sorrow could be inflicted upon him. "Job has the same theoretical point of reference, but his experience and his faith in God have finally shattered this theology for

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<sup>23</sup> Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987. 21.

him. His consciousness of his own integrity is incompatible with it. He begins to glimpse a way, a method, for speaking of God.”<sup>24</sup>

This is where Job begins to understand that such a realization is not just applicable to his own situation, but the situation of all of God’s children who are suffering, most notably, the poor of the world. Job realizes that in the same way that he is not responsible for his own suffering, neither are the poor of the world responsible for the suffering they endure. Job comes to the conclusion that to truly live for God is to cast his lot with the poor. “The question he asks of God ceases to be a purely personal one and takes concrete form in the suffering of the poor in the world. The answer he seeks will not come except through commitment to them and by following the road -- which God alone knows -- that leads to wisdom.”<sup>25</sup>

In the Book of Job, the theology of the three friends represents all the critiques of religion that Marx expressed. By following a doctrine of temporal retribution, the unjust relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is maintained. If God rewards the just and punishes the wicked, then there is complete justification for an elite class holding the majority of wealth and power while a working class is left to suffer. Judgment has been made regarding each person’s morality and therefore one’s social standing has been given by divine power. By this definition there is no reason to question the structure of society, no matter how unequal such a structure may be. The arguments made by Job’s three friends are precisely what Marx would define as the capitalist’s logic, a divine justification for the status quo and for unjust suffering.

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<sup>24</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 31.

But, as is made clear by Gutiérrez, temporal retribution is not the complete story of Job. The key to the story is in fact the condemnation of such a doctrine. In Job's arguments with God as well as his three friends, it becomes clear that this doctrine is incompatible with the God Job knows to be loving and favorable to those who suffer. It is through this understanding that Gutiérrez is able to make the same critiques of religion that Marx did, that the popular theology practiced by society enabled great social injustices and inequalities. Both Marx and Gutiérrez witnessed incredible suffering at the hand of capitalism, and each were able to see how religion likewise enabled that suffering. The difference between Marx and Gutiérrez is that where Marx saw reason to do away with religion altogether, Gutiérrez saw a shift in theology as the means to provide a driving force to change that society.

### **Systemic Sin**

A core principle for Gutiérrez's shift in theology was the way in which Christians approached the concept of sin. Just like in the Book of Job, under the doctrine of temporal retribution sin was purely a personal matter. It was a person who committed a sin, and it was that person's responsibility to fix the problem or face the consequences. With Gutiérrez there came an understanding that sin can also be systemic in nature: it does not have to be a person who sins, but rather an entire structure of society that can be sinful. This is where Marx's philosophy was so important for Gutiérrez. For Marx, religion was the oppressive system in which all other systems operated. Religion provided a cyclical pattern of upholding the elite class and keeping the poor oppressed. Again, the difference between the two philosophies is related to the future of this system. While Marx saw getting rid of religion as the key to eliminating all other oppressive



systems, Gutiérrez believed that *changing* religion was the key to correcting the oppressive systems plaguing society. Much in the same way that a man who sins can repent and change his ways, so too can a system of sin be changed in a positive direction.

The first step in accomplishing such a task is simply to accept the fact that a problem exists. As Gutiérrez claims, “The first step toward authentic resolution of social confrontations resulting from an unjust socio-economic system is not to hide them.”<sup>26</sup> For Gutiérrez, citizens of the world needed to accept that these systems were unjust before they could take the steps to fix them. This proved to be difficult, as the people with the power to do so had no reason to change things while the people who had been oppressed for so long had no ability to make their voices heard. Gutiérrez called then for Christians to change the way they lived their faith. He asked, “How are Christians to live their faith, their hope, and their love amid a conflict that takes the form of class struggle? If I want to be faithful to the gospel, I cannot disregard reality, however harsh and conflictual it may be.”<sup>27</sup> Gutiérrez called for people to think not of how they could bring crosses down for their fellow man, but rather how they were in fact keeping those crosses up. A charitable donation is all well and good, but is merely a band-aid on the problem as a whole. The problem is that such an act is the easiest thing to do, and one feels a sense of communion by giving to the poor, but is unaware that the system that allows them to do such a charitable act is what is really keeping his neighbor poor in the first place. And a system which, according to Marx, leaves the poor with only the hope for the rich to be

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<sup>26</sup> Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983. 155.

<sup>27</sup> Gutiérrez, Gustavo, and James B Nickoloff. *Essential Writings*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996. 118.

charitable is one that has made no progress at all towards the creation of a more equal society.

For Gutiérrez, the path to God was through the poor, and he used the liberating messages of the Bible itself to prove that such a preferential option for the poor existed. “The obligation to care for the poor means that the poor are not persons being punished by God (as the doctrine of temporal retribution implicitly asserts), but are rather God’s friends.” If the poor are taken care of as God wishes, then there ceases to be such a gap of wealth and power in society, much in the way Marx intended for things to be. To give to the needy is therefore to give to God: “He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord” (Prov. 19:17), and conversely, “He who oppresses a poor man insults his Maker” (Prov. 14:31).”<sup>28</sup> In the Bible, there is a direct call to communion with the poor, and that was the message Gutiérrez made clear in his use of Christianity as a force for liberation. This is not a communion defined simply by charitable acts, but by developing an actual sense of community within society, by ceasing to define the poor of the world as “other” and acknowledging that all are brothers and sisters in the family of the Lord. Giving to the needy should not consist then of the rich giving part of their share of material wealth to the poor, further maintaining the gap between them, but rather giving them the opportunity to rise out of poverty themselves by no longer perpetuating the systems that oppress them. Gutiérrez thus took Marx’s critique of religion a step further, applying it to his own understanding of the way Christianity should function in a society. He saw the same evils in capitalism that Marx did--the socio-economic inequality that devastated his country and continent--but the fundamental difference was that Gutiérrez was able to

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<sup>28</sup> Gutiérrez and Nickoloff, *Essential Writings*, 40.

detach the Marxist condemnation of religion in society, and instead used religion to help create a better one.

## **The Impact of Vatican II**

It was at this time that the Catholic Church all over the world was beginning to see the importance of the poor in Christian faith. In addition to the conferences occurring amongst the clergy in Latin America, Vatican City held one of the most influential councils in history, Vatican II. From 1962-1965 the leaders of the Church discussed a new direction for Catholicism, addressing a number of social issues. Perhaps the most significant of these new doctrines was that of the Church's preferential option for the poor: "It will be illuminating and helpful to present the Church in the under-developed countries as the Church of all, and *especially of the poor*."<sup>29</sup> The Second Vatican Council greatly understood the importance of a just distribution of wealth in society, and such an understanding was made clear in the Church's declaration of the communion in which all its members must share: "Hence, it is the duty of those who are possessed of a large share of the good things in life to be generous in giving of their surplus to good causes."<sup>30</sup> This call for charity, while a push in a positive direction, was not supportive of the social change that Marx and Gutiérrez advocated; it was instead simply promoting Christian charity within the capitalist system and was in fact the same form of charity that Marx condemned. This same concept of charity was illustrated in the way Vatican II shaped

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<sup>29</sup> Hastings, Adrian. *Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After*. London: Oxford University Press, 1991. 30.

<sup>30</sup> Charles, Rodger, and Drostan MacLaren. *The Social Teaching of Vatican II, its Origin and Development: Catholic Social Ethics, an Historical and Comparative Study*. Oxford: Plater Publications, 1982. 306.

the new role for the Catholic Church in the world. For the problem of economic inequality to be fixed, the Church needed to establish itself as an international presence in support of justice and peace: “The duties of Christians in all this is related to the international presence of the Church as support, guide and inspiration in the development of a truly just and peaceful political and economic order. As earnest of this commitment, it is proposed that an international Catholic Church agency be established ‘for the worldwide promotion of justice for the poor.’”<sup>31</sup> While the Catholic Church acknowledged the suffering and injustice faced by the poor, their response was simply a restatement of the fact that the poor were dependent on the rich for their charity. For Marx and Gutiérrez this simply was not enough; there needed to be a change in the system that enabled such inequality to happen in the first place.

Now it is clear that the middle of the twentieth century was a period of progressive change within the Catholic Church. Not just Latin American churches but the Vatican itself developed new doctrines condemning the suffering of the poor and calling for a worldwide solidarity with the victims of economic injustice. It would seem that this new direction of the Catholic Church would be very receptive to the theologies of Gustavo Gutiérrez. Both the Vatican and Gutiérrez were, in fact, proclaiming the same thing, that the socio-economic injustices of the world were not supported by the Christian faith and that it was the responsibility of Catholics worldwide to help put an end to them. Where the Vatican took issue with Gutiérrez’s theology was not the doctrine of solidarity with the poor, but rather the influences that he drew from. During the Second Vatican Council, Marxism was also addressed, and unfortunately for

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<sup>31</sup> Hastings, 109.

Gutiérrez, the Marxist roots that were so fundamental in the development of his theology of liberation were the same roots that prevented its acceptance by the Catholic Church. This is because while the Church was in favor of supporting the poor, it was not advocating social change in the way Marx and Gutiérrez were. For Marx and Gutiérrez, basic charity was not enough.

The Second Vatican Council took issue with Marxism due to the way it had been implemented in Europe at that point. In the mind of the Vatican, any benefits the social ideals of Marxism provided were outweighed by the tyrannical actions of communist leaders in Russia and Eastern Europe. While the initial intentions of Marxism may have been valuable in the eyes of the Church, it simply could not reconcile the fact that these ideals had led to the creation of totalitarian governments that the Church viewed as sinful and unjust.<sup>32</sup> So when Gutiérrez started drawing from Marxist critiques and philosophies, the Vatican did not receive him well. In the opinion of the Church, Marxism at that point had failed, and there was no foreseeable scenario in which it would succeed: “But there is no evidence that the Marxist will be able to achieve his ideal—certainly on the evidence so far, he has hardly succeeded.”<sup>33</sup> Because of the condemnation of his Marxist influences, Gutiérrez was unable to get the support necessary from the Vatican, a problem that he would continue to face even as Liberation Theology grew more popular and gained more momentum in the churches of Latin America. While Vatican II had stated “The Church, the People of God, was the People of the Poor” and “the poor themselves the Church,”<sup>34</sup> it was still not a Church that could support Marxism. That the

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<sup>32</sup> Charles and MacLaren, 275.

<sup>33</sup> Charles and MacLaren, 301.

<sup>34</sup> Hastings, 322.

Church saw the implementation of Marxism on a national scale as an evil greater than its social message was a hindrance to accepting those social ideals in the first place.

But while many of the sources he drew from were considered radical, in his own mind Gustavo Gutiérrez was simply adding to the natural progression of the practice of theology. He made no attempt to erase past philosophies or condemn those who created them, he was instead creating a new way of talking about God and the Christian faith based on his own situation and personal experiences.

Theological study has fulfilled different functions throughout the history of the Christian community, but this does not necessarily mean that any of these different approaches has today been definitively superseded. Although expressed in different ways, the essential effort to understand the faith has remained. Moreover, the more penetrating and serious efforts have yielded decisive gains, opening paths along which all subsequent theological reflection must travel.<sup>35</sup>

Coming to existence during the counter-reformation (the Catholic Church's response to the Protestant Reformation in Europe), the Catholic Church in Latin America was forced to make strong decisions and enact strict orders. This was a time in which the doctrines of the Catholic faith were under scrutiny and questioning worldwide, and the Church needed to re-establish itself as the world's predominant Christian church. To avoid any hostility or backlash that might resemble another Protestant Reformation in Latin America, it aligned itself with the economic and social elite of the continent.

Gutiérrez states

This hostility led the Church to seek the support of the established order and economically powerful groups in order to face its adversaries and assure for itself what it believed to be an opportunity to preach the Gospel peacefully. But for some time now, we have been witnessing a great effort by the Church to rise out

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<sup>35</sup> Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Revised With New Introduction. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988. 3.

of this ghetto power and mentality and to shake off the ambiguous protection provided by the beneficiaries of the unjust order which prevails on the continent.<sup>36</sup>

But even given the Church's history of aligning itself with the social and economic elite of Latin America, Gutiérrez acknowledged that progress had been made in the mindset of the Church, that the unjust order which had prevailed for so long was no longer acceptable. While for centuries it had supported the hierarchical structure of society in order to maintain its own status at the top of the religious order there was a change in the way the Catholic Church saw itself in relation to its people. It was no longer appropriate for the Church to only focus on those from whom it could benefit, but instead time to give the Church's attention to those who needed it most.

The different sectors of the People of God are gradually committing themselves in different ways to the process of liberation. They are becoming aware that this liberation implies a break with the status quo, that it calls for a social revolution. In relation to the entire Latin American Christian community it must be acknowledged that the number of persons involved is small. But the numbers are growing and active and every day they are acquiring a larger hearing both inside and outside the Church.<sup>37</sup>

While the goal of the Church after Vatican II may not have been to overthrow the unjust systems that caused suffering for the poor, Gutiérrez took the Church's acknowledgement and condemnation of this suffering as more evidence that it was time for a change. The Vatican had accepted that the Church should cast its lot with the poor, but it was Gutiérrez who envisioned the means to accomplish this liberation. "Vatican Council II has strongly reaffirmed the idea of a Church of service and not of power. This is a Church which is not centered upon itself and which does not "find itself" except when it "loses itself," when it lives "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of

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<sup>36</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 58.

<sup>37</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 59.

persons of this age.”<sup>38</sup> While Vatican II had re-established the importance of the poor, without the Marxist critique of capitalism implemented by Gutiérrez it would be unable to truly liberate them. Charity in a purely material sense was all well and good, but without full systemic change the cycles of oppression and suffering would continue to operate. The type of charity advocated by Gustavo Gutiérrez was a charity that took hold at the very center of Christian life, it was not a single action done but rather a constant way of doing things, an approach to all facets of one’s life that ensured trust and solidarity with God’s family. It was “a commitment to God and neighbor, a relationship with others.”<sup>39</sup> This was not, of course, the same form of charity that Marx had been so critical of, a charity of convenience so to speak, but rather charity as the primary function of faith itself “The Christian community professes a ‘faith which works through charity.’ It is—at least ought to be—real charity, action, and commitment to the service of others.”<sup>40</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez took the Church’s call to charity and redefined it to serve a purpose of liberation. Charity was no longer giving part of your share to someone else, but living your life and acting on your faith in a way that enabled all people to achieve their own.

### **The Vatican’s Response to Liberation Theology**

As Liberation Theology picked up more and more steam in Latin America, with its promotion by the Medellín Council and a rising number of bishops and priests advocating it and publishing works supporting it, the Vatican had no choice but to respond. Unfortunately for liberation theologians, this often took the form of

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<sup>38</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 9.



condemnation and silencing. Pope John Paul II, still just a bishop in the Catholic Church at the time Gutiérrez was developing his theology, was a man of Polish descent. But in 1978, just a year after renowned liberation theologian and martyr Oscar Romero was named Archbishop of El Salvador, John Paul II became the leader of the Catholic Church. At that point John Paul II's experience with communism had been Eastern European, and he had seen the devastating effects of the militant atheism practiced by the Soviet Union that sanctioned the oppression and murder of priests and Christian believers. Unable to separate the Marxist critique of society from its condemnation of religion and the totalitarian Soviet and Eastern European examples he had experienced, John Paul II was unable to see communism as an avenue for positive social change in society. For John Paul II, communism was a direct threat to Christianity, not a path for the salvation of its people. Considered instrumental in the dismantling of communism in Europe, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev claimed that the fall of the Iron Curtain would not have been possible without John Paul II. He was even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for his role in combating communist oppression and bringing peace to Europe. Pope John Paul II had seen what communist regimes had done to the people of his native Poland and across Europe, so when it came time to address issues in Latin America, he was unable to see communism as bringing anything but evil. So for a man who had become famous for his opposition to communism, it was impossible for him to accept it, especially its existence within the very church that he led.

As revolutions and civil wars were breaking out in Latin America, there were many socialist movements fighting for social and economic reform. When these movements began to arise, the governments they opposed responded with violence. This

violence was something that the churches in Latin America would not tolerate, and priests across the continent spoke out against such actions. The Vatican, however, was not in agreement. When Archbishop Romero went to the Vatican to call for a condemnation for the militant regime in El Salvador at the time, the Church made no such declaration. When John Paul II visited Nicaragua in 1983, he spoke harshly of priests in support of the leftist Sandinista party, a political party very much connected to socialism. The open and public support of a communist party by clergymen was something that the Pope would not stand for. And so the priests in favor of the Sandinistas were condemned for their political involvement. Even the ecclesial base communities, so popular in Latin America at the time, were unable to gain his support. Too greatly influenced by his experience with communist regimes in Europe, Pope John Paul II was unable to support, and more frequently condemned, socialist tendencies of the churches in Latin America.

During his seven-day tour of Mexico in 1979, the Pope made his feelings about Marxism incredibly clear.

John Paul, who rose to eminence in Communist Poland, made clear his urgent desire to eliminate priestly activism based upon Marxist dogma. The Pope emphatically rejected liberation theology, without ever using that phrase. Repeatedly emphasizing the value of each person before God, and the need for spiritual freedom, he used the term liberation in a Christianized context. To the Pope, "atheistic humanism" holds out to mankind only a half liberation, because it bases everything on economic determinism and ignores spiritual dynamics. The result, he said, is that man's very being is "reduced in the worst way." Today, he said, "human values are trampled on as never before." Implicit in his statements was a basic judgment: the tactics of Marxist revolution, based as they are on class conflict, violate the most profound Christian teaching.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Time Magazine. "Religion: John Paul vs. Liberation Theology." February 12, 1979, accessed February 1, 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,920117-1,00.html>. 2.

For John Paul II, the Christian teachings of loving one's neighbor and doing good works were nonexistent in Marxist governments. Instead of focusing on the basic philosophies that Marx had laid out, the Pope was only able to see the atrocities and devaluing of human life that were carried out by the regimes influenced by him.

The Pope again made his opinions regarding the political action of priests known, stating that they should "be priests, not social workers or political leaders or functionaries of a temporal power."<sup>42</sup> Pope John Paul II believed that the principle responsibility of the clergy was to the Church, not politics, even when involvement in politics was the best way to serve their people. This contradicts the belief of liberation theologians that the responsibility of the clergy lay with the people of the Church, and if necessary, to take whatever means deemed fit to protect them, even if that meant being politically active. The Pope also rejected a politicized Jesus Christ: "People claim to show Jesus as politically committed, as one who fought against Roman oppression and the authorities and also as one involved in the class struggle," said the Pope. "This idea of Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive man from Nazareth, does not tally with the church's catechesis."<sup>43</sup> The problem here for the believers of liberation theology is that for them, Jesus Christ very much fit this description. According to their reading of the gospel, liberation theologians saw Jesus as a man who cast his lot with the sufferers of the world, and stood up against the oppressive society that caused their pain.

That is not to say that John Paul II approved of the hierarchical systems of oppression that existed in Latin America at the time; in fact he was very much opposed to them. "He made a detailed statement against violations of human rights, as he has done

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<sup>42</sup> Time Magazine, "Religion: John Paul vs. Liberation Theology." 3.

<sup>43</sup> Time Magazine, "Religion: John Paul vs. Liberation Theology." 2.

previously. Before the Indian audience in Oaxaca, he uttered a fervent plea for economic justice and redistribution of land. Attacking ‘the powerful— rich classes who often leave untilled the lands in which lay hidden the bread that many families need,’ John Paul cried: ‘It is not just, it is not human, it is not Christian.’<sup>44</sup> But while on the same trip that the Pope saw the need for change in society and condemned the suffering of the continent’s poor as well as the structures which enabled it, he was simply unable to accept that the Church should be a social and political actor in righting these wrongs.

### **The Church’s Acceptance**

Thankfully for Gutiérrez, time has a way of changing things. In the decades since he first proclaimed his theology of liberation, his passion and conviction have remained unchanged. He has recognized that such a philosophy is still new for the Catholic Church, yet it remains equally important. He also acknowledges the importance of its acceptance within the Church’s teachings, and highlights the fact that such a theology is crucial to the heart of the Church itself. In a new introduction to his book *A Theology of Liberation* written in 1988, Gutiérrez states,

Liberation theology is in fact “a new stage” and, as such, strives to be in continuity with the teachings of the church. This theology, in my understanding of it, does indeed seek to be “closely connected” with the church’s teaching. In my opinion, its power and importance are due to *freshness* or newness that derives from attention to the historical vicissitudes of our peoples, for these are authentic signs of the times through which the Lord continually speaks to us. At the same time, its power and importance are due to the *continuity* that leads it to sink its roots deep in scripture, tradition, and the magisterium.<sup>45</sup>

Pope John Paul II, who was initially so critical of liberation theology, has even come to realize its importance over the years.

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<sup>44</sup> Time Magazine. “Religion: John Paul vs. Liberation Theology.” 2.

<sup>45</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xliv.

In his letter to the bishops of Brazil (April 1986) John Paul II said: 'Liberation theology is not only timely but useful and necessary. It should be seen as a new stage, closely connected with earlier ones, in the theological reflection that began with the apostolic tradition and has continued in the great fathers and doctors, the ordinary and extraordinary exercise of the church's teaching office, and, more recently, the rich patrimony of the church's social teachings as set forth in documents from *'Rerum Novarum* to *Laborem Exercens*.'<sup>46</sup>

Since the term Liberation Theology was first coined by Gutiérrez, its importance has remained the same. And while the vocabulary used to describe it, the methods used to enact it, and the voices used to call for it may change over the years, its central message is unwavering. To finish the introduction Gutiérrez remarks,

Allow me to end with a personal story. Some years ago, a journalist asked whether I would write *A Theology of Liberation* today as I had two decades earlier. In answer I said that though the years passed by, the book remained the same, whereas I was alive and therefore changing and moving forward thanks to experiences, to observations made on the book, and to lectures and discussions. When he persisted, I asked whether in a love letter to his wife today he would use the same language he used twenty years ago; he said he would not, but he acknowledged that his love perdured. My book is a love letter to God, to the church, and to the people to which I belong. Love remains alive, but it grows deeper and changes its manner of expression.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

What Gustavo Gutiérrez did when he developed his theology of liberation was create something that Karl Marx would have considered impossible and the Catholic Church refused to accept as a viable option for Christians worldwide. In response to the oppressive society in which he and his fellow Latin Americans lived, Gutiérrez took the societal and religious critiques of an anti-religious atheist and recognized that the way in which Christians lived their lives and spoke of their God needed to be changed. For too long had religion served to maintain hierarchical structures in Latin America, structures

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<sup>46</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xlv.

<sup>47</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xlvi.

that maintained the elite status of those at the top of society and perpetuated the continual oppression of those at the bottom. The true meaning of the Bible's call for communion with the poor had also yet to be pronounced. This was a communion defined not by acts of charity within the old capitalist system, but a communion of solidarity and action in which the old system could be changed. What Gutiérrez accomplished with his theology was to prove that Christians could indeed be Marxist; that the social critiques of the German philosopher could be separated from his condemnation of religion and used instead as a force to change it. Skeptical of its Marxist roots and political undertones, many leaders of the Catholic Church, including Pope John Paul II, condemned liberation theology and did not support its ideals, even though the development of this theology took place at a time when the Catholic Church had aligned itself with the poor through the progressive movements of the Second Vatican Council. While the Church had embraced its new position and preferential option for the poor, it would not act as a liberator. It took Gutiérrez's progression of this understanding to establish how this solidarity needed to operate in order for true liberation to occur. He was not repeating the age-old charitable method of the rich giving to the poor, he was promoting a new society where the poor would no longer be kept in poverty by the structures upheld by the rich, and eventually, the Church came to understand the importance of this message. Like Marx before him, Gutiérrez was calling for a social revolution. A social revolution, that unlike Marx's, saw religion as the focal point. Taking his critiques of society and pointing to the messages of the Bible, Gutiérrez used Christianity as the driving force for liberation. This theology of liberation, born out of the depths of poverty and influenced by perhaps the most famous atheist in modern history, changed the perception of how

Christians should live out their faith and forged a path that could lead to the end of the systems of oppression that had plagued their brothers and sisters for so long.

*On my honor, I have not received any unauthorized aid on this thesis assignment.*

*-Ryan Coyle*

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