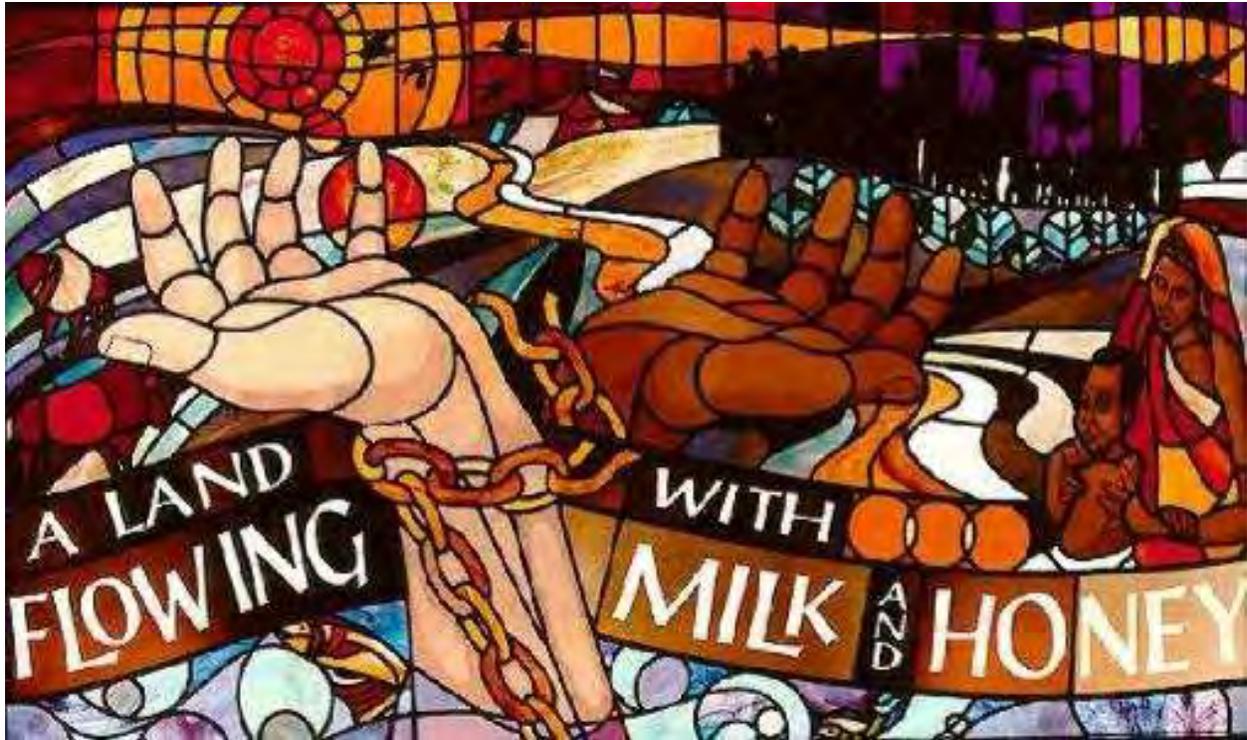


Liberation Theology - Jesus: the Liberator?

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The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.... "(Luke 4:18)

To some Christian theologians today, these words prove that Jesus Christ was a "criminal revolutionary," as Episcopal lay theologian William Stringfellow called him, while Harvey Cox, former Harvard professor of divinity, commented that Jesus "died the death resented for those guilt) of insurrection."

In Spain, a Catholic priest active in protest against the Franco regime asserted, "I am a Marxist. I believe Christianity must be revolutionary if it is to survive, and we priests must become engaged in the struggle for freedom on the side of the most need) classes."

What did Jesus mean by his words? How are we to take them today? What relationship is there, or should there be, between Christianity and Marxism today? In view of the increasing trend towards the so-called "theology of liberation," these are questions which it is necessary to define and examine very closely. The very future of Christianity itself may be at stake.

Are organized churches being sucked into a trap, perhaps because of a nagging feeling that they have not done all they could in the past to put their faith into action? Let us look at the assumptions of the "liberation theology" and at the tenets of Christian faith.

Last summer, some 200 Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians, social scientists and activists gathered in Detroit for a conference on Christian responses to the inequities in modern society.

The World Council of Churches reported that the conference reached two major conclusions: Marxist or class analysis can be useful in uncovering the nature of oppression; and, while both racism and sexism are chronologically older than capitalism, today they are reinforced by a global system of capitalism and imperialism. To analyze them properly requires class analysis.

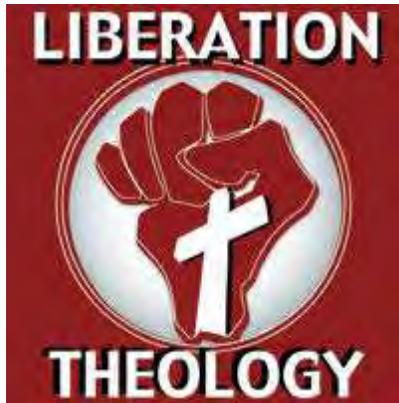
While not a majority of Christians accept these views, their influence is widespread. At the recent Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi, Kenya, the keynote speech by Dr. Robert McAfee Brown called attention to the role of Jesus the Liberator. Dr. Brown said, he frees us "from the false securities by which we try to make our lives secure" and "for the possibility of seeing the world through eyes other than our own."

"For our time," he said, "to see the world through eyes other than our own has simply got to mean seeking it through the eyes of the poor and dispossessed." Noting that the cry of the hungry and of the politically and economically exploited is overwhelming, he added, "For this time and this place, the claim of Jesus to bring freedom, and the cry of oppressed peoples for freedom converge and cannot be separated." And Dr. Brown went on to quote Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, author of the movement's most

influential text, *A Theology of Liberation*.

The new standard for a saint has become, as Father Reilly wrote in America, "men and women who are working lovingly, faithfully and hopefully to change the structures and institutions of our world that are dehumanizing the majority of the human family."

But is this truly what Jesus meant by his words? What did he really mean when he said that he would free the captives and the oppressed and give sight to the blind? In fact, when we go back to the Bible, we see that Jesus did not only mean these words literally. Those who are oppressed and in captivity are those who, do not know God, for he said, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires." (John 8:44).



Peter, in Acts 10:38, says that Jesus "went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil." Paul, too, hoped that the Christians' opponents "may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will." (2 Tim. 2:26) In Romans 7:23, Paul also says, "I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members."

Blindness, too, refers to those who are blind to the knowledge of the Lord. The prophecies of Isaiah are full of such references: "In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see." (29: 18) "I am the Lord... I have given you as... a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." (42:6-7) "The watchmen are blind, they are all without knowledge." (56:10) Jesus, too, described the Pharisees who ridiculed him as "blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." (Matt. 15:14) Paul later said, "the god of this world has, blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." (2 Cor. 4:4)

And so we see that there are two types of oppression. What is the relationship between them? What is their cause? Those Christians who would have us believe that the capitalistic system or any other existing institution is the source of all the evil in the world today are deluding themselves and us. The source of evil, of oppression, must be sought at the beginning of man's history, for that history has been filled with oppression.

It is man's separation from God that has brought injustice, hate, and suffering into the world, not just capitalism or imperialism, as Marxists would have us believe. When the theologians meet to discuss the nature of oppression, let them look into their own hearts and into their capacity to do both good and evil in their lives. For truly, as Paul said, we serve two minds, that which seeks to follow God and do good, and that which makes us "captive to the law of sin..."

Indeed, we do need a revolution, but not the kind of revolution that the liberation theologians are talking about. Rev. Sun Myung Moon has said, "We must revolutionize ourselves before being able to revolutionize our nation and the world.... Only if individuals are good, can the society be good."

This can be even more of a challenge than changing the institutions of society. Commented one participant in the Detroit conference, "The liberal in me wants a different world, but the liberal in me also wants that world without changing myself, and without pain."

This is not to say that the Christian should turn his back on the world and forget his obligations to his fellow men. But if we are engaged in a battle, let us at least recognize our true enemy as Satan, who works through man's fallen nature, not just the capitalistic system. All men have a fallen nature, not just capitalists. Our selfish desires, our greed, our self-centeredness are manifestations of man's fallen nature. Their solution lies not in toppling one system or another, but in overcoming man's capacity to do evil and restoring his original mind which seeks to do good.

The Uruguayan Jesuit Juan Luis Segundo, author of one of the new movement's key works, *A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*, warned that the church, if it is to have any validity, "must become a function of liberation." But what do they mean by liberation? A recent WCC report on the status of the Methodist Church in Cuba stated that the Church was learning to accommodate itself to the Revolution. "The Cuban Methodist Church is just beginning, perhaps in a timid, gradual and subtle way, to achieve a very different faith from the bourgeois faith of fifteen years ago." The Church is accepting the situation that exists there as a "God-given opportunity," and is helping with aid to North Vietnam's reconstruction, for example.

To accept Communism cannot be a "God-given opportunity" when Marxism totally rejects the existence

of God and has as its stated aim the extermination of such beliefs. Is this what is meant by liberation? God would never accept such a definition. We are only truly liberated when we are freed from our bondage to Satan, "the ruler of this world."

Marxism also teaches that progress comes about through conflict and class struggle. Thus, they provoke hatred, conflict, even violence, wherever they can, whether in the jungles of Angola, on campuses, or city streets. But this is not the way God's principle works. God has a loving concern for all mankind, including, even especially, those who are suffering. But that love can only be expressed through unity, not through division. God cannot come among men when they are fighting one another, but He is present where there is unity-between two individuals or two nations.

As Rev. Moon explains it, "There must be unity on the horizontal level between two elements. Then God can become one with that unit. You can have both a horizontal relationship and a vertical relationship, and those three will be put together with perfect love. They will be in ideal harmony throughout all eternity...

Everything must be unity first, and then love and harmony, and then the ideal."

Does unity come about through accusation and violence, or through humility and love? Even on an individual level, if you've done something wrong and another person comes up to you and accuses you, makes you feel terrible, you don't feel like loving that person. But if he serves you and loves you, then you cannot help but be won over and first unity and then love will prevail. In that situation, real change can come about.

Those Christians who profess to be doing Christ's work in promulgating Marxist ideas are tragically mistaken. They do not understand God's ideal. God has promised us that His kingdom will be established on earth, a kingdom where all men will live in peace and love as well as material prosperity. But that kingdom will not come through taking up the red flag, only by going the difficult and challenging path of bringing Christ's love into our hearts and living by his standard: you must be perfect as your Father is perfect.

It is only because Christianity has failed to fulfill its mission to bring Christ's teachings alive, has become more interested in individual salvation than world salvation, self-perpetuation rather than self-sacrifice, that this radical trend has emerged today. Liberation theology summons us to a deep re-evaluation of how we are directing our lives: are we living for ourselves or for others? If capitalism has failed to bring prosperity to the world, then we must look deeper into the causes than just to accuse the institution. As individuals, we have failed to live up to Christianity's highest ideals. So the institutions we have erected reflect our own self-centeredness, and this is the area where change must occur.