

**A Critical Study of the Liberating  
God in the Theology of  
Gustavo Gutierrez.**

by Rev. Danilo A. Borlado

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## Introduction

It is a task of theology to articulate an understanding of God that is meaningfully related to the existential questions and deep longings of humanity. It is also crucial that theology should speak intelligibly about the nature, presence, and activity of God in the world. One distinctive and contemporary articulation of God is that of *liberation theology*. It is a theology done by 'critical reflection on praxis' in the context of poverty, injustice, and human suffering.

In this theology God is distinctively understood as *historical* and *liberating*, i.e., God is actively present in history liberating humanity from its sinful and scandalous condition.<sup>1</sup> The idea of a liberating God is the main focus and central category upon which the theology of liberation operates and is grounded. God in Christ *is* Liberator of humanity from sin and all its socio-economic and political manifestations. The liberating God is on the process of liberating humanity and creation here and now.

Liberation theology was born, at least, out of three main re-discoveries or realizations. First is the *re-discovery of the liberating and historical nature of God through praxis*. Liberation theology affirms the presence of God in history in and through the faith and praxis of the faith community. The presence and activity of faith (praxis) point to the presence and activity of God in the world. Praxis presupposes faith and faith is evidenced by praxis. Faith and praxis are inseparably and dynamically linked to each other. In other words, God is here and now liberating humanity and the cosmos to its fullness in Christ.

Liberation theology is a reaction against unrelated western theological formulations including an other-worldly understanding of God. Since Latin American theology has been dominated by western thinking for many centuries most concepts are not meaningfully related with their context. Liberation theologians are keen to point out that western Christianity or theology addresses a different set of concerns. Whereas liberation theology is primarily concerned with the questions of oppression, injustice,

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<sup>1</sup> L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology of Our Time*, Great Britain: SPCK, 1980, p. 240.

and human suffering European theology is grappling with issues such as secularization, atheism and the meaning of being. Hence, there is a need to indigenize or contextualize Christianity (theology) in Latin America. Whereas the west understood God as "The Wholly Other," "The Absolute," "The Unmoved Mover," "The Power of Being," etc., there is a need to ponder God in relation to the struggles and deep aspirations of the Latin American people. Liberation theologians suggest that in the light of the struggle against poverty, exploitation, dehumanization and death, the struggle for life and liberation, God should be understood as *el Dios que libere, el Dios de la vida y la liberacion*.<sup>2</sup>

Second is the *re-discovery of and renewed emphasis on the socio-economic and political aspects of salvation*. It flows out of the idea of God as historical and liberating. It is argued that the historical and liberating God is concerned not only for the souls of people but of the total person. Salvation is not only freedom from hell and being assured of heaven. It is freedom from sin understood as oppression and injustice, exploitation and domination, and anything that hinders humanity from reaching its fullness in Christ.

Here biblical themes such as creation, exodus, the ministry of the prophets, the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus serve as the critical basis for the affirmation and emphasis on the wholistic understanding of salvation. On these grounds liberation theology argues that God's liberation includes the socio-economic and political aspects of human existence. In other words, the humanization of humanity is part of being saved the reason why the biblical writers painstakingly elaborated and emphasized the above themes especially the Christ event.

The third foundational factor in the emergence of liberation theology is *the realization of the nature and primary function of theology as critical reflection on praxis*. Theology, it is argued, must not be preoccupied with the formulation of eternal truths into doctrines. As a discourse about God its primary function is to reflect

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<sup>2</sup> This Spanish phrases means the God who liberates, the God of life and of liberation.

critically on the praxis of the community of faith in response to the existing historical questions in the light of the Word. As such theology is the "second act." It does not produce faith but critically and systematically reflects on the practice of faith, on the historical commitments of the people of God.

There is then a radical change in the method of theological reflection. The shift is in the area of emphasis: from orthodoxy to orthopraxis. What matters now is not only what is believed but the transformation of the world. The main concern is no longer merely to understand the world but the construction of a new and transformed society, a society where the weak are empowered, the poor are given justice, the marginalized are included.

Such a theology would be an excellent contribution to the long and costly journey of my own nation, the Filipino people, in their ongoing struggle for justice, life and liberation. Like Latin America, the Philippines has been under the domination of foreign powers for many years. Its theology is likewise dominated by western categories. For us, too, there is a need to emphasize the socio-economic and political aspects of liberation, as 44 millions (70%) of the 62 millions population are living in abject poverty, living in shanties, as squatters in their own country. There is an abysmal gap between the rich and the poor. These appalling realities are seen to be the root of the 23 year old insurgency problem.

This poverty stricken condition of the Filipino people gives rise to the alarming relationship breakdown among thousands of families. Today more than 500,000 Filipinos are overseas leaving their families behind, many of whom are women professionals (about 30% are married with children) working either as contract workers or domestic helpers in Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Hongkong, Saudi Arabia, Europe, Canada and the United States. In the light of this context and the Philippines being a predominantly Christian country (85%) there is a need to articulate an understanding of God, as in Latin America, that is meaningfully related to the ongoing protest against a dehumanized existence and struggle for a humane life. There is a need

for the liberation of theology as most part of the Philippine church is dependent on western and mostly unrelated understanding of God and biblical interpretations. This context and need provides a background and motivation for this essay.

More specifically, this study is about the Liberating God in the theology of Gustavo Gutierrez. It is an attempt to contribute to the ongoing theological dialogue in the search for a meaningful and related understanding of God in support of the Filipino struggle. I am embarking into this study with the following goals in mind: a) to develop a good grasp of the distinctive idea of God as historical and liberating; b) to understand the method of liberation theology particularly that of Gutierrez in arriving into such and understanding of God; c) to clarify some ethical demands of a theology that ponders God as Liberator; and d) to make some critical evaluation on some issues arising from the discussions.

Chapter 1 deals with the nature and identity of God while Chapter 2 examines the centrality of praxis as a way of locating, knowing, encountering, and following God in the world. Chapter 3 brings out some critical points and discussions on some selected issues emerging from the whole discussion.